

## Death Teaches Us about Life

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Decades ago, early in my rabbinate, I was privileged to attend a lecture about *tahara*, the ritual preparation and purification of the dead for burial. The speaker, an Orthodox rabbi, asserted that, if we treat the bodies of the deceased with respect, we will be even more vigilant in our comportment toward the living.

I was not convinced. While I had no quibble with traditional Jewish burial customs, I thought that a concentration on preparation of corpses might have no relationship to the way that one treats others in life.

I was wrong.

The very title of this week's Torah portion suggests that events and rituals surrounding death make a significant impact on the living. After all, the portion is called *Vayechi*, meaning, "and he lived." The "he" in this case is Jacob, and the full reading for this week goes on to describe the deaths of both Jacob and his beloved son Joseph.

More than once in this week's portion, Jacob emphatically communicates his wishes regarding his burial. First, he makes Joseph swear that, when he dies, Joseph will not bury him in Egypt, but rather in Hebron, in the family plot.<sup>i</sup> Later, after blessing all of his sons, immediately before his death, Jacob's very last words are: "Bury me with my ancestors in the cave which is in the ... field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site – there Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah."<sup>ii</sup>

Medieval Torah commentators disagree about why Jacob instructs all of his sons, having already secured Joseph's oath that he would be true to his father's wishes. Does he doubt that Joseph will follow his directive, and therefore feel the need for all the brothers to hear it together? Is he eager, as Ibn Ezra argues, to assure that Joseph not go alone, wanting all of his sons to accompany his remains to Canaan?<sup>iii</sup> Does he worry, in the words of *Tur HaAroch*, "that perhaps Pharaoh would not give Joseph permission to leave the country personally,"<sup>iv</sup> and therefore need to share his directions with the sons who may be in a better position to fulfill them?

Each of these theories has merit. Here's mine: Jacob instructs Joseph, because Joseph is the one with the authority to get the job done. He repeats his wishes to all of his sons, because he wants them all to participate with Joseph.

Torah goes on to tell us that the brothers do carry out Jacob's directive together, embellished with tremendous ceremony made possible by Pharaoh's largesse.<sup>v</sup>

What happens next is instructive. With Jacob dead, Joseph's brothers fear that he will now, at long last, punish them harshly for their earlier mistreatment of him, casting him into a pit and then selling him into slavery. They even claim that, before his death, Jacob had told them to admonish Joseph, in Jacob's name, that he should forgive his brothers.<sup>vi</sup> There's only one problem: Jacob never said any such thing, at least not recorded in the Torah. Rashi, citing the Talmud, says, "They altered the facts for the sake of peace, for Jacob had given them no such command." After all, the commentator reminds us, Jacob had no knowledge of their misdeed!<sup>vii</sup>

I wonder whether the visit back to Canaan, together with Joseph, triggered anxiety in the brothers. After all, they had not been in the land of their childhood together with Joseph since selling him into bondage. This family would not be the first, and certainly not the last, to resurrect old wounds and resentments during time spent together tending to a dying parent and laying him to rest.

Joseph's response is magnanimous. First, he says, "Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God?"<sup>viii</sup> The last part, that rhetorical question, may be ominous, suggesting that the brothers' comeuppance may be delivered in the form of Divine punishment, not Joseph's. A commentator named *Da'at Zkenim*, though, views the matter differently: "When Joseph realized his brothers' fear that he would now take revenge on them, he was broken-hearted, telling them that he was too God-fearing to act in such a manner."<sup>ix</sup> Joseph wants his brothers to understand that he is not the type to bear such a grudge, or at least that he wouldn't act on it.

Next, Joseph repeats a sentiment he first uttered in response to the brothers' terror when he first identified himself to them in last week's portion: "Although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result – the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children."<sup>x</sup> Joseph comforts his brothers: Even your wickedness has turned out to be a good thing in the end.

The *mitzvah* of seeing to the proper burial of a loved one is called *chesed shel emet*, the true lovingkindness. “True,” because we cannot have any ulterior motive, expecting that the deceased can repay the good deed to us. I have often wondered, though, if we don’t receive some this-worldly reward for helping our friends to bury their loved ones. After all, the mourners go on living, and may have the opportunity to help us fulfill our final obligations to our own loved ones. Those mourners may even lift the shovel to help tuck us in for our eternal rest one day.

Perhaps we may regard Joseph’s response to his brothers as *chesed*, lovingkindness that they don’t deserve based on their treatment of him. Instead, we may see his forgiveness as a form of repayment for their role, joining him to bury their father. Yes, Jacob was their father, too. However, the brothers might naturally resent not only Joseph but also Jacob, because of his favoritism for the one son to whom he gave a coat of many colors. Joseph may understand that his brothers have had to overcome tremendous, even understandable, envy, to journey as unfavored sons back to the land where the conflict began, with roles secondary to Joseph’s even at the time of Jacob’s death.

The way that Joseph and his brothers come together to discharge their father’s final arrangements positively impacts their relationship going forward. Theirs wouldn’t be the first family, and thankfully not the last, in which estranged siblings reconcile as they care for a dying parent together and find a way to cooperate in honoring the parent’s final wishes.

Remember that Orthodox rabbi, lecturing about Jewish burial traditions? Remember my skepticism? Now, twenty or more years later, I see that he might right: Done right, our care for the dead may indeed have a positive impact on how we treat the living.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 47:29-30.

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 49:29-32.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibn Ezra to Genesis 49:29.

<sup>iv</sup> Tur HaAroch to Genesis 49:29.

<sup>v</sup> Genesis 50:4-13.

<sup>vi</sup> Genesis 50:15-17.

<sup>vii</sup> Rashi to Genesis 50:16, citing BT Yevamot 65b.

<sup>viii</sup> Genesis 50:19.

<sup>ix</sup> Da’at Zkenim to Genesis 50:19.

<sup>x</sup> Genesis 50:20-21.