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Yaakov Avinu is Alive in Each of Us

A Perplexing Midrash

Yaakov Avinu, lying on his deathbed, had one concern to attend to before his death. He called his beloved son Yosef and requested that he be buried not in Egypt, but in Eretz Yisroel. Yosef answered, 'I will do as you say'.

The Midrash interprets Yosef's answer as following: 'I, [too,] will have done to myself as you say should be done to you'.

According to the interpretation of this Midrash, Yosef's answer seems quite callous. His aged father, lying on his deathbed, finds no peace. He is disturbed that he will be buried in a pagan, immoral environment. Decency dictates that Yosef reassure him, 'Absolutely, father, rest assured. I will ensure that you will be buried in Eretz Yisroel'. Instead, Yosef diverted the topic to a private matter and started discussing his own burial plans.

Indeed, before he died, Yosef asked his brothers to take his bones out of Egypt and bury them in Eretz Yisroel¹. This, too, seems strange. A man usually leaves his final wishes to his sons to fulfill - because they are obligated to honor him - not to his brothers.

Furthermore, Yosef made his brothers promise that they, too, would have their children bury them in Eretz Yisroel². Why was it of such importance to Yosef to have his brothers buried in Eretz Yisroel - to the point that he had them swear to arrange it? To be buried in Eretz Yisroel is a voluntary act of piety; there is no commandment to do so. As such, Yosef should have left it to their discretion to decide if they do, or don't, want to be buried in the Holy Land.

Another difficulty with Yosef's request is: He asked that his bones be taken out of Egypt, insinuating that his body would decay and that only his bones would be left over. We have accounts of tzaddikim (righteous people) of much lesser status than Yosef HaTzaddik whose bodies were found completely intact many decades after their passing. Yosef certainly knew that his body would not decay after his passing, so why did he say, 'Take *my bones* out' instead of 'Take *me* out of Egypt'?

Resolving the Difficulties of the Midrash

The Gemara teaches that there are three partners in the creation of a person: Hashem, his father and mother. Hashem gives him his soul, his father the bones, and his mother gives him his flesh.

From here we infer that a person's bones contain the life-force of his father. Thereby, a son is an extension of his father. After a man's death, he will - to a degree - live on in the bones of his child.

This Gemara clarifies the difficulties we enumerated above.

When Yosef replied that he would arrange himself to be buried in Eretz Yisroel, he was not diverting the focus off his father's request and thinking about his own needs. Exactly the opposite! Due to his great love of his father, Yosef wished to fulfill his father's will to the utmost. What he said to him was, 'Father, I see it is so important to you that you be buried in Eretz Yisroel, that it is occupying your mind in your last moments. Therefore, I will ensure that not only your body will be buried in Eretz Yisroel, but even my body - which is an extension of you - will be buried in Eretz Yisroel'.

This also explains why Yosef commanded his brothers rather than his sons, Menashe and Ephraim that he be buried in Eretz Yisroel. Yosef's request was not a personal one; rather, he wished to fulfill the final wish of his father to its utmost extent, and have – not only Yaakov himself – but also his extension, Yosef, buried in Eretz Yisroel. His brothers, as sons of Yaakov, are more obligated to honor Yaakov than are Menashe and Ephraim who are merely grandsons³. Therefore, *they* should tend to the honor of their father by ensuring that Yosef be buried in Eretz Yisroel.

This is also the reason why Yosef had his brothers swear to arrange that they, too, be buried in Eretz Yisroel. They, like himself, are sons of Yaakov and should also be buried in Eretz Yisroel as an extension of Yaakov.

Yosef specifically requested that his *bones* be taken out of Egypt because that is the part of himself which is an extension of his father. He cared not so much that his flesh be taken up to Eretz Yisroel, although since he definitely remained whole, it too was buried in Eretz Yisroel. The chief concern of Yosef, in requesting burial in Eretz Yisroel, was that his bones - as an extension of his father - be buried there.

The Depth of Yosef's Honor for his Father

The Midrash says that due to the fact that Yosef did not protest when his brothers referred to his father as 'Your servant, our father', he was referred to as mere bones during his lifetime. This was when he told his brothers to take his bones out of Egypt.

This Midrash requires explanation. It is only insulting to be referred to as bones by someone else, but if one refers to oneself as bones, it is not an insult. Furthermore, Yosef was compelled to keep silent when his brothers referred to his father as 'your servant' - because he was playing the role of the ruler of Egypt and could not reveal his identity to the tribes. We do not find that the tribes are criticized for referring to their father as 'your servant', because proper etiquette dictates that when speaking before a king, one refers even to one's father as such. (The reasons why Yosef had to hide his identity are explained by the classic commentators.)

Nevertheless, even though Yosef was forced to remain silent while hearing his father referred to as 'Your servant', it was still considered a slight blemish on his account.

This is similar to a nazir - a person who vows to abstain from wine and haircuts in order to subdue his immoral drives. This person was correct in becoming a nazir. However, he is obligated to bring a sacrifice as penitence. This is because of the slight blemish of abstaining – despite the fact that it was for a very good reason - from the goodness of G-d's world.

The slight blemish on the part of Yosef, due to hearing his father referred to as 'Your servant' - although it was the correct thing to do at the time - was mitigated by his being called 'bones' during his lifetime.

Moreover, based on our earlier explanation, we can understand the Midrash as follows: Because of this tiny blemish of Yosef's in not protesting the honor of his father, he referred to himself as 'bones', to emphasize the tremendous respect he had for his father. He valued his father's wishes so much, that not only did he do as he was asked and bury his father in Eretz Yisroel, he went further to ensure that even his own bones - which are an extension of his father - were also interred in the Holy land.

The Jewish People will Eventually Return to Eretz Yisroel

Yaakov Avinu merited being buried in Eretz Yisroel right away. Yosef, although an extension of him, was removed from him to a degree. He was eventually buried in Eretz Yisroel, but was first placed in a casket in the Nile for many years.

Of the Jewish People, who are descendants of Yaakov, many are presently buried in the impure lands of the nations. However, this is not forever. Eventually, at the resurrection of the dead, their dead bodies will roll in underground tunnels until they reach Eretz Yisroel where they will come alive⁴. All the extensions of Yaakov will eventually return to Eretz Yisroel as Yaakov had desired.

Yaakov Avinu (the patriarch) is Alive in all of us

We are all extensions of Yaakov Avinu. A spark of his life-force radiates within all of our bones. There is no doubt that our being exiled in impure lands causes great pain for Yaakov Avinu.

The Gemara⁵ quotes Rabbi Yochanan who says that Yaakov Avinu never died. Rabbi Yochanan was asked 'was Yaakov eulogized, preserved and buried in vain?' Rabbi Yochanan replied, 'Nevertheless, I'm interpreting a verse in Yirmiyahu⁶; "Do not fear, my servant Yaakov... I will help you and your children from afar. From the land where they were captured, Yaakov will return..." In this verse, Yaakov Avinu is interchanged with his children. Therefore, just as his children - the Jewish People - are alive; so, too, is *he* alive.

The Jewish People - the extensions of Yaakov Avinu are eternal. Indeed, Yaakov Avinu never died; he lives on in each of us.

Appropriately, the verse from which we learn that Yaakov never died because he is eternalized in his children, discusses our eventual return to Eretz Yisroel. Just as Yaakov was returned to Eretz Yisroel, every single Jew, his extensions, will also be.

A Tremendous Fortitude

Knowing that we have a spark of Yaakov Avinu within ourselves is a tremendous source of fortitude.

The tree of Yaakov branches out further and further. However, even the most distant twig is still connected to the essence of our patriarch and derives his vitality from the body of the tree. As the generations continue, we branch out further and further away from Yaakov, but are never cut off.

We are all still an extension of Yaakov Avinu.

אשרי שא-ל יעקב בעזרו

How fortunate are those who are supported by the G-d of Yaakov

¹ בראשית נ:כה, שמות יג:יט

² רש"י שם

³ רש"י בראשית מו:א, ביו"ד ר"מ סכ"ד

⁴ רש"י ריש פ' ויהי

⁵ תענית דף ה' ע' ב'

⁶ ירמיהו ל:י