

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

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Chapter XII: Vavechi (Gen. 47:28–50:26)

Essay 15. Jacob is alive

After they had eaten, [Rabbi Yitzchak] said to [Rav Nachman] that Rabbi Yochanan said as follows: Our patriarch Jacob did not die. [Rav Nachman] asked him: And was it for naught that the eulogizers eulogized him and the embalmers embalmed him and the buriers buried him? [Rabbi Yitzchak] replied to [Rav Nachman]: I am interpreting a verse, as it is stated: “Therefore do not fear, Jacob My servant, says the L-rd, neither be dismayed, Israel, for I will save you from afar, and your seed from the land of their captivity” (Jer. 30:10). This verse juxtaposes Jacob to his seed: Just as his seed is alive when redeemed, so too, Jacob himself is alive.

-Ta’anit 5b

Abarbanel’s explanation is that the saying “Our patriarch Jacob did not die” is allegorical, meaning that Jacob’s legacy continues, with his descendants still bearing his name, Israel, and following his teachings.

גמרא דסוטה פֿרק קמָא (דף י"ג ע"א) תנא כולם למלחמה באו כיון שראו כתריו של יוסף תלוי בארוננו של יעקב נטלו כולם כתריהם וכו'. קשה אם היתה פוננתם לבוא למלחמה כדי לעכב קבורתו של יעקב באותה המערה כמו שכתב מהרש"א ועיי"ש, איך בשביל זה נהפכה דעתם ממה שהיתה בתחלה?

There is a **Gemara in Sotah**, in the **first chapter** (13a): “**There is a Baraita: [The Canaanites] all came to [wage] war [with the family of Jacob], but when they saw the crown of Joseph [the viceroy of Egypt], hanging on the casket of Jacob, they all took their crowns and hung them on the casket of Jacob. There is [another] Baraita: Thirty-six crowns were hung on the casket of Jacob.**” **It is difficult to understand: If their intent was to [wage] war in order to prevent the burial of Jacob in the same cave as his ancestors—as the Maharsha wrote, and see there¹—how is it that because of this action on the part of Joseph that they changed their minds from what [they were thinking] in the beginning?**

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¹ Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Eidels (1555–1631), Polish rabbi famous for his Talmud commentaries. In Chiddushei Halachot for Sotah 13a, he writes that the Canaanites came for war so that Jacob would not be buried in the Cave of

וַיִּשַׁר לֵאמֹר דְּבַלְאוּ הַכִּי קִשָּׁה עַל יוֹסֵף לְמַה הַנִּיחַ כְּתָרוֹ בְּאֲרוֹנוֹ שֶׁל יַעֲקֹב, וְהָא כְּתִיב "וַאֲיִן שְׁלֹטוֹן בְּיוֹם הַמָּוֶת". וְצָרִיךְ לֵאמֹר שֶׁרָצָה לְהַנִּיחַ כְּתָרוֹ עַל אֲרוֹנוֹ כְּדֵי לְרַמֹּז שֶׁיַּעֲקֹב אָבִינוּ לֹא מָת, וְזֶה הוּא סִימָן מוֹבְהָק שֶׁדְּנָקָא הוּא רְאוּי לִיקָבֵר בְּמַעְרַת הַמַּכְפֵּלָה וְלֹא עָשׂוּ. וְכִינּוּן שְׂאוֹתָם הַמְּלָכִים רְאוּ זֶה הַבִּינּוּ בְּעֵצָמָם הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה שֶׁיַּעֲקֹב עֲדֵינּוּ הוּא חַי וְנִתְיָרָאוּ, וּמִשׁוֹם הַכִּי נִהְפְּכָה דַעְתָּם מִמָּה שֶׁהָיָה בְּתַחֲלָה שֶׁהָיוּ סְבוּרִים שְׂמַת יַעֲקֹב.

It can be said that otherwise it is difficult to understand as to why Joseph placed his crown on the casket of Jacob, and it is written, “No man has authority over the lifebreath—to hold back the lifebreath; there is no authority over the day of death” (Eccl. 8:8). In other words, a dead man does not need a crown, as he wields no authority. It must be said that [Joseph] wanted to place a crown on [Jacob’s] casket to hint that our father Jacob was not dead, and this is a clear sign that he particularly deserved to be buried in the Cave of Machpelah with the other patriarchs, and this was not deserved by Esau. As the same kings saw [Joseph’s action], they themselves understood this matter, that Jacob was still alive, and they were afraid, as they understood that G-d was still with Jacob and his people, and because of this, their thinking reversed from what it was originally, when their opinion was that Jacob was dead.

וְהַטַּעַם הוּא שֶׁהָרִי הַשְּׁלִישָׁה אָבוֹת תִּיקְנוּ הַפְּגָם שֶׁעָשָׂה אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן בְּעִבּוּדָה זָרָה, גִּילּוּי עֲרִיוֹת, וְשִׁפְיֻכוֹת דָּמִים, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב בְּעֵשְׂרָה מְאָמְרוֹת (מְאָמֵר חִיקוּר דִּין, חֶלֶק ג' פְּרָשַׁת י"ז) וְעֵי"ש. וְשִׁבְחָן שֶׁל אָבוֹת הוּא יַעֲקֹב כְּדֵי אֵתָא בְּזוּהָר בְּכַמְּה מְקוֹמוֹת, וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָּא שְׂאָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן הִבִּיא אֵילָנָא דְמוֹתָא לְעֵלְמָא, וְיַעֲקֹב תַּפְּס בְּאֵילָנָא דְחַיִּי, מִשׁוֹם אֵיתָא בְּזוּהָר (פְּרָשַׁת וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּף קס"ח) דְּמֵאֵן דְּחַזִּי יַעֲקֹב בְּחֵלְמָא חַיִּין מִיתוּסְפֹן לִיה וְעֵי"ש.

The sense is that the three patriarchs corrected the defect made by the first man in idol worship, sexual immorality, and bloodshed, as [Rabbi Menachem Azaria da Fano]² wrote in *Asara Ma'amarot* (in the article *Chikur Din*, part 3, section 17) and see there.³ The most praiseworthy of the patriarchs is Jacob, as is written in the Zohar in a few places, and not only that, but the first man brought a tree of eternal death,⁴ while Jacob grabbed the tree

Machpelah, but when they saw the crown of Joseph [that he placed on Jacob’s casket], they also removed the crowns from their heads and gave a eulogy.

² Rabbi Menachem Azaria da Fano (“Rema M’Pano”) (1548–1620), Italian Kabbalist and commentator on the Talmud.

³ While the *mitzvot* (commandments) are extremely important to an observant Jew, so that he will, for example, be willing to lose a job rather than work on the Sabbath, he should be willing to violate most of the mitzvot if it is a matter of life and death. G-d said: “You shall keep My laws and My rules, by the pursuit of which man shall live” (Ex. 18:5). The Talmud interprets: “[Man] shall live by them, and not die by them” (Sanhedrin 27b). Thus, for example, if one is seriously ill on the Sabbath, someone should pick up the telephone and call an ambulance. But there are three prohibitions for which one is even commanded to die rather than to violate them: the prohibition against idol worship, murder, and types of sexual immorality. As is explained in the next sentence and footnote, by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam set in motion Man’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, which led to the other sins: bloodshed with Cain killing Abel, and idolatry from Adam’s grandson Enosh, according to the Rambam.

⁴ G-d told Adam that he could eat from any tree in the Garden of Eden except for the Tree of Knowledge, “but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die” (Gen. 2:17). Adam violated this order, and ate from the Tree of Knowledge. Before he could “take also from the Tree of Life and eat, and live forever” (Gen. 3:22), G-d banished him from the Garden. If Adam had listened to G-d, he would have gained immortality, but instead he violated G-d’s command, leading to his mankind experiencing death.

of life, because it is brought in the Zohar (parsha Vayishlach, page 168b) that Rabbi Yeisa says that **one who sees Jacob in a dream has his life lengthened.**

ומעתה הואיל שהאבות תיקנו הפגמים של אדם הראשון, מן הראוי הוא שיהיו נקברים אצלו במערה, לא כן עשו שאדרבא קלקל ולא תיקן פלום. ועיקר השבח של יעקב היינו לפי שהיתה מטתו שלימה שלא היה שום דופי בבניו כמו שאר האבות, ומשום הכי אמרו בפרק קמא דמעניית, מה זרעו בחיים אף הוא בחיים. ועוד לפי שהוא גמר התיקון, מה שאין כן אברהם ויצחק שלא תיקנו אלא עבודה זרה ושפיכות דמים ועדיין נשאר לתקן גלוי עריות. ובהכי ניחא מה שכתב העיון יעקב שהשלושים ושש פתרים הם לרמוז שג' פעמים ח"י ח"י, בעולם הזה ובעולם הבא.

Henceforth, since the patriarchs repaired the defects of the first man, it is fitting that they should be buried with [Adam] in the cave of Machpelah,⁵ which is not the case for Esau, who to the contrary spoiled things and did not repair anything. The main praise of Jacob is that his bed was intact, for there was no blemish in his sons as with the other patriarchs, as Abraham's lineage is blemished by Ishmael, and as Isaac's lineage is blemished by Esau. Because of this, [Rabbi Yitzchak told Rabbi Nachman] in the first chapter of tractate Taanit (5b), "Just as his offspring is alive, so too, [Jacob] is alive." Furthermore, Jacob is praised because he completed the repair of the defects that had existed from Adam, which is not the case with Abraham and Isaac, who only corrected the sins of idol worship and bloodshed, but there was still the need to repair sexual immorality.⁶ Thus it's convenient what the *Iyyun Yaakov*⁷ wrote, that the thirty-six crowns hung on the casket of Jacob are to hint at two times *chai* (ח"י) (life), which has a Gematria of eighteen, signifying a good life in this world and in the World to Come.

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⁵ Eruvin 53a: Rabbi Yitzchak said that Kiryat Arba ("the city of four"), an alternate name for Hebron, is called thus because there are four couples buried there: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah.

⁶ We understand that Abraham was born and raised in a time of great idolatry, and he recognized that idols were nonsense and he "discovered" the One, True G-d, and that his teachings can be said to have repaired the defect of idolatry. The translator does not know the source for the fact that Abraham and Isaac cured the defect of bloodshed, and that Jacob cured the defect of sexual immorality.

⁷ Rabbi Jacob ben Joseph Reischer (Bechofen) (1661–1733), Austrian rabbi born in Prague. His sefer, *Iyyun Yaakov* (Wilmersdorf, 1729), is a commentary on the 16th Century compilation of Aggadah, *Ein Yaakov*.