

Zera Shimshon

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

Essay 6. Joseph's participation in Jacob's burial

סוֹטָה פֶּרֶק קמ"א יוסף נָכַח לְקַבֵּר אֶת אָבִיו. וּפְרִיָדָה בְּגִמְרָא: וְאִי לָא הָוּה אֵינְעִסְק בֵּיהּ יוֹסֵף אֶחָיו מִי לָא הָוּה מֵעֲסָקִי בֵּיהּ וְהָא כְּתִיב "וַיִּשָּׂאוּ אֹתוֹ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתִּירָץ הַנְּיָחוּ לוֹ כְּבוֹדוֹ בְּגְדוּלִים וְכוּ'. מִקְשִׁים הָעוֹלָם דְּמֵאֵי פְרִיָדָה, וְאֵימָא הִכָּא נָמִי דְבִנְדָאֵי אִי לָא הָוּה מֵעֲסָקִי בֵּיהּ יוֹסֵף הָוּה אֵינְהוּ מֵעֲסָקִי בֵּיהּ, וְאֵיָדָה הָוּה סְלֵקָא דְעֵתָא לְהַמְקַשְׁןָ בְּהַפְדָּר דְּאֶחָיו לָא הָוּה מֵעֲסָקִי בֵּיהּ.

In the Mishnah of **Sotah**, the **first chapter**, we read: “**Joseph merited to bury his father, and there were none among his brethren greater than him.**”¹

This is refuted in the Gemara:

Is it then possible that if Joseph would not have attended to the burial of his father, that his brothers would not have done it? For it is written, “His sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the field of Machpelah, the field near Mamre, which Abraham had bought for a burial site from Ephron the Hittite.”²

...

[The solution is:] Let [the one being buried] be honored by [one of] the great [men] rather than by lesser ones.³

- Sotah 13a–b

Everyone asks what does [the Gemara] refute? It also said here that certainly if Joseph had not attended to the burial, they would have attended to it? How does it enter the mind of the questioner that to the contrary, the brothers would not have attended to it? In other words, why point out the obvious, that if Joseph had not attended to the burial of his father, his brothers would have done so?

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¹ Mishnah Sotah 1:9; Sotah 13a.

² Gen. 50:13.

³ An alternative view said the opposite, that one being buried would be more honored to be buried by many, rather than by a few.

וגיש לומר דהנה מצינו בפתוב "ויצל יוסף לקבר את־אביו" וכו', "אחרי קברו את־אביו", דמשמע מנה שיוסף לבדו קבר את אביו. ועוד פתיב "וישאאו אתו בניו" וכו' "ויקברו אתו", דמשמע שכולם נתעסקו בקבורתו, ונדרבא משמע שאותם שנישאאו ונקא הם שקברו ויוסף שלא נשא לא קבר. וליכא למימר שמה שפרט את יוסף הוא משום שהיה לו ציווי פרטי מאביו לקברו, דנה אינו שהרי לא נצטנה אלא שלא יקברהו במצרים, שבה נקא היה ספק בינד יוסף לעשותו ולא בינד אחיו. אבל לשאת אותו ולקוברו לא היה לו בנה שום ציווי פרטי, דסברא היא שבקבורה יהיו כולם שוים בה שהרי גיש ספק בינד כולם לעשות.

It can be said that here we find in Scripture: “So Joseph went up to bury his father,”⁴ and also, “after he had buried his father,”⁵ both of which have the meaning that Joseph alone buried his father.

But it is also written, “His sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him,”⁶ which has the meaning that all of them were engaged in his burial. And to the contrary of what we wrote above, it means that those who carried him were specifically the ones that buried him—and Joseph, who did not carry him (as will be explained below), did not bury him.

Scripture is not saying that the reason why Joseph was singled out in the verses “So Joseph went up to bury his father” and “after he had buried his father” was because he had a private command from his father to bury him. This is not the case. He was commanded only that they should not bury him in Egypt, as Joseph especially had the power to do this, as he was viceroy. His brothers were not commanded regarding this, as they had no standing to prevent burial in Egypt. But to carry him from Egypt and to bury him, there was no private command, and the logical reasoning is that in the burial they would all be equal, as they all had the power to do this.

ואף על פי שפתוב "וינשאאתני ממצרים וקברתני בקברתם", על כרחך לאו ונקא, שאדרבה ציווי יעקב היה שייוסף לא ישא מטתו מפני שהוא מלך כמו שפירש רש"י על פסוק "ויעשו בניו לו". ומד"וינשאאתני" ממצרים לאו ונקא אף "וקברתני" נמי לאו ונקא. ועוד שהיה לו לומר "וישכבתי עם־אבותי" ויעשית עמדי חסד ונאמת אל־נא תקברני" וכו' "וינשאאתני" וכו' "וקברתני" וכו'. אלא נדאי מדהפסיק ב"וישכבתי" בין "ועשית עמדי חסד" ל"וינשאאתני" שמע מינה שציווי יעקב ליוסף בפרט לא היה אלא שלא יקברהו במצרים, שיעשה בהכמתו שפרעה יתן לו רשות להוציאו ממצרים, והדרא קושנין ולדוקתא, למה פרט את יוסף בקבורתו של יעקב כנ"ל.

Even though it is written, “When I lie down with my ancestors, carry me from Egypt and bury me in their burial-place,”⁷ it’s not necessarily so a command for Joseph, for to the contrary, the command of Jacob was that Joseph would not carry his bier, because he was

⁴ Gen. 50:7.

⁵ Gen. 50:14.

⁶ Gen. 50:13.

⁷ Gen. 47:30.

king, i.e., viceroy, **as Rashi explained on the verse, “Thus his sons did for him as he had instructed them.”**⁸ Rashi explained:

What was it that he had commanded them? This you can gather from the next verse [“His sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him”] His sons and not his grandsons. For thus, indeed, he had commanded them: “My bier shall not be borne by an Egyptian, nor by one of your sons because they are children of Canaanite women, but you alone shall bear it. He likewise assigned them their positions, namely, three on the east-side and an equal number on the other three sides of the bier, in the same order in which later on the camps marched through the wilderness bearing their banners.⁹ But the 12 tribes that formed these four divisions did not include Levi or Joseph, for Jacob had said, “Levi shall not carry my bier because he is destined to carry the holy Ark. Joseph shall not carry it because he is a king, but Manasseh and Ephraim shall take their places.” And, it is to this that Scripture refers when it says, “every man [shall pitch] by his own banner according to the signs,”¹⁰ meaning according to the sign [i.e. indication of position] which their father individually gave them with regard to carrying his bier.

- Rashi on Gen. 50:12–13, based on Midrash Tanchuma, Bamidbar 12

And from that statement “carry me” from Egypt it’s not necessarily [a command to Joseph]; or even from the statement “and bury me” it’s also not necessarily [a command to Joseph].

Also, chronologically, he should have said “When I lie down with my ancestors,” “deal kindly and truly with me; please do not bury me in Egypt,”¹¹ “carry me . . . and bury me in their burial-place.” If it had been presented that way, we would have understand that Joseph was not only commanded not to bury Jacob in Egypt, but that he was also commanded to carry him out of Egypt and to bury him. But the statements are not presented in that order. **Rather, certainly from the fact that Jacob interrupted with “when I lie down” between “and deal kindly and truly with me” and “and take me up,” we can hear from this that Jacob commanded Joseph privately only to not bury him in Egypt. Jacob knew that in [Joseph’s] wisdom, he would arrange for Pharaoh to give him permission to remove him from Egypt. Now our difficulty is restored to its original place! Why single out Joseph in the burial of Jacob, as above, in our Mishnah from Sotah?**

⁸ Gen. 50:12.

⁹ Midrash Tanchuma, Bamidbar 12 is discussed further in *Zera Shimshon*, Chapter XXIV, Bamidbar, essay 1.

¹⁰ Num. 2:2.

¹¹ Gen. 47:29.

ועם כן צריך לומר שיוסף מנדבת לבו קבר את אביו אף על פי שלא נשאו, ושאר אחיו היו מתעסקים בקבורתו אגב שפבר נשאוהו. ומשום הכי תלה הכתוב הקבורה בו בפירוט, והן הן דברי המנא, יוסף זכה לקבור את אביו, הואיל שעשה זה מנדבת לבו יש לו זכות גדול מאחיו. ומשום הכי פריד, ואי לא הוה איצסק ביה יוסף אחיו מי לא הוה מעסקי ביה והא כתיב "וישאו" וכו', וכשם שנשאוהו בשביל מצות אביהם כסדר שאמר להם כן היו נמי מטפלים בקבורתו כדרך שאר הבנים. ומירץ, הניחו לו פבדו בגדולים, כלומר מה שאמר המנא יוסף זכה לקבור את אביו, אינו רצה לומר שקנה זה הזכות בשביל שנתעסק בקבורתו. אלא הפונה היא כן, לפי שיוסף הנה לו זכות מוקדם שבשבילו זכה למליכה, הועיל לו שהניחו לו אף זכות זה של קבורת אביהם, ומפל מקום הכתוב אומר "ויקברו אתו" בניו משום המחשבה טובה שהנה להם.

If so, it must be said that Joseph, from his generous heart, buried his father, even though he did not carry him, and the rest of his brothers were engaged in his burial after having carried him. Because of this, Scripture gave the burial with detail, and these are the words of the Tanna,¹² "Joseph merited to bury his father," since he did this from his generous heart, he had greater merit than his brothers.

Because of this, [the Gemara] refuted, "Is it then possible that if Joseph would not have attended to the burial of his father, that his brothers would not have done it? For it is written, 'His sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the field of Machpelah, the field near Mamre, which Abraham had bought for a burial site from Ephron the Hittite.' " Just as they carried him for the sake of the command of their father in the order that he told them, i.e., with three on each side of the bier, they would also have taken care of his burial, in the way that other sons would bury their father.

The solution is: Let [the one being buried] be honored by [one of] the great [men] rather than by lesser ones, as if to say what the Tanna said, that Joseph merited to bury his father. It doesn't mean to say that he acquired the merit because he was engaged in his burial. Rather, the intent is this: As Joseph had the early merit, that because of him, he merited the kingship and was in a position to save everyone from the famine, and in a position to ensure that his father was not buried in Egypt, it benefited him that they gave him even this merit of burying their father. In any case, Scripture says, "and they buried him," referring to his sons, because of the good thought that he had for them.

אבל עדיין קשה והלא אדרבא מצינו שלפי שהיה מלך צנה יעקב שלא ישא מטתו. ויש לומר דקבורה שאני, דעיקר הגמילות חסד שעושים עם המתים היא הקבורה "וישב העפר עליהארץ כשהיה". ויש בענין הקבורה הרבה סודות וכוננות, כמו שקתב המעבר יבק (במאמר ב' פרק כ"ז וכ' ובפרק י' ממאמר ה'), ומשום הכי אמרו אחיו הניחו לו פבדו בגדולים שיודעים לכנין יותר, ויוסף הנה כן זקונים ותרגם אוינקלוס ארי בר חפיים וכו' ופרש רש"י שכל מה שלמד וכו' מסר לו.

But there is still a difficulty, for isn't it to the contrary that as we find that he was king, Jacob commanded him not to carry his bier. Wouldn't Jacob have also held that as viceroy, Joseph shouldn't be involved in the burial?

¹² The author of the Mishnah.

But it can be said that burial is different, for the principal of acts of kindness that one performs for the dead is the burial, as it is written, “And the dust returns to the ground, as it was.”¹³ There are many secrets and intentions in the matter of burial, as the author of *Ma’avor Yavok* wrote (in article 2, chapter 27 and 20, and in chapter 10 of article 5).¹⁴

Because of this, his brothers said, let him be honored by the great ones, who better know how to focus. Also, Joseph was a “child of old age,”¹⁵ and Onkelos translated this into Aramaic: “Israel loved Joseph more than any of his sons, for he was a wise son, and Rashi interprets “child of old age,” based on Gen. Rabbah 84:8, that [Jacob] taught him all that he had learned from the yeshiva of Shem and Eber. Thus, it was not only because of his status as viceroy, but also because of his wisdom, that Joseph was honored with participating in the burial.

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¹³ Eccl. 12:7.

¹⁴ Aaron Berechiah ben Moses ben Nehemiah (d. 1639), Italian Kabbalist who lived in Modena. In 1626, he published *Ma’avor Yavok*, with readings, laws, and customs relating to sickness, deathbed, burial, and mourning rites.

¹⁵ Gen. 37:3.