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The Lower East Side
Parshat HaShavua sheet

*A collection of Divrei Torah
from around the Internet*

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Parshat Vayechi
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Latest time for Kriyat Sh'ma – 9:41

HOPE IN A BOX

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

“And Yoseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years and they put him in a coffin in Egypt.” (Genesis 50:26) Thus ends the Book of Genesis. With those words the entire congregation rises in unison and shouts, “*Chazak! Chazak! V’nischazeck!*” Be strong! Be strong! And may we all be strengthened!

It is troubling. First, *Sefer Bereishis* (Genesis) ends in a state of limbo. Yoseph is not even buried; he lies dormant in a box through the entire ensuing exile. He asks his children to remember him and eventually bury his bones with them upon their exodus. Why does he not seek immediate burial in Canaan like his father Yaakov?

Second, the entire juxtaposition seems inappropriate. After we end *Sefer Bereishis* and declare that “Yoseph was put in a box in Egypt,” we all shout almost as in a cheer, “Be Strong and be strengthened.” Are those somber words a proper lead-in to the shouts of *Chazak*?

Would it not have been more fitting to end the book of Genesis with the passing of Jacob, his burial in Israel, and the reconciliation of Yoseph and his brothers? That would have been a morally uplifting ending and would have left the congregation with a sense of closure. Yet, it seems that there is a definitive purpose in ending Genesis with Yoseph’s state of limbo. What is it?

Alexander the Great (356-322 B.C.E.), king of Macedonia, and ruler of most of the civilized world, died at a young age. Before he embarked on his conquest of Asia, he inquired into the welfare and stability of his loyal followers, lest their dependents fall destitute during the long battle. After assessing their needs he disbursed nearly all his royal resources amongst his faithful.. His friend General Perdiccas was surprised.

“What have you reserved for yourself?” he asked the mighty ruler.

“Hope,” answered the king. “There is always hope.”

“In that case,” replied his followers, “we who share in your labor shall share in your hope.”

With that they refused the wealth that Alexander allotted them.

Perhaps there is great meaning behind the Torah’s abrupt conclusion leaving a congregation to ponder as they hear the words “and he was put in a box in Egypt” juxtaposed with shouts of rejuvenation.

Yoseph’s quest was to leave this world with more than memories. He wanted to declare to his survivors that he, too, would not find his final rest during their tenure of suffering. Yoseph, the first of the sons of Yaakov to die in a foreign land, understood that with his passing, the long exile would slowly emerge. The children of Jacob would slowly and painfully transform from saviors to visitors, and then from visitors to strangers. Finally they would be considered by their hosts as intruders worthy of enslavement. But Yoseph also knew that one day the exile would end and that his people would once again be free. By remaining in a box, Yoseph concurrently declared his message of hope and solidarity to the multitudes that simultaneously awaited his final burial and their redemption. Silently, in an unburied box, he waited with them as the echoes of his pact rang in their memories. “When G-d will indeed remember you, then you must bring my bones up with you.” It is a message for all generations. It is a message for all times. When we see the bones of Yoseph, unburied and in a box — “we must not see a box of bones — see the hope that lies therein.” We see the hope and faith that the patriarch declared to his children. “Do not bury me now, as you surely will be remembered one day. My hope is your hope.”

And as the congregation finishes the *Bereishis* on that unfinished note, they stand up and shout in unison, “*Chazak! Chazak! V’nischazeck!*” Be strong! Be strong! May we all be strengthened!” For one day we will *all* be free.

Jacob, wouldn't be caught dead in Egypt

By Dovi Scheiner

Jacob wants out. The moment Jacob arrives in Egypt, he quickly departs to his gated community in Goshen, where he leads his life at a distance from the corrupt Egyptian society. Now, as Jacob prepares to die, he summons his son Joseph and pleads: "Please do not bury me in Egypt . . . Take me out of Egypt!" To ensure that not even his remains will remain in Egypt, Jacob feels he needs more than Joseph's word. "Swear to me," he asks of Joseph. And Joseph does.

Where results are essential, a vow is a powerful tool, as it binds the committed party to fulfill its duties under all circumstances. Still, why was a vow necessary in this story? Was Joseph's word to his dying father insufficient?

The very fray Jacob struggled to remain above, Joseph was very much a part of. Every soul is entrusted with its own mission. Joseph found his calling at the heart of Egyptian society, inside the belly of the beast, where he worked to identify and elevate G-dly sparks wherever they would be found.

Jacob is quick to recognize how Joseph would consider keeping his righteous father close by, even posthumously, as a critical asset in his effort to elevate Egypt. The only way Jacob could rest assured of compliance was through adjuring Joseph to take a vow. If so, why was Jacob so eager to be removed from Egypt? Why not be buried amongst his children, where his presence might help reduce their sense of isolation in exile?

Jacob knew that his children would require help in order to escape the shackles of Egyptian bondage, and felt he would be in the best position to assist them from a distance. To successfully escape from prison, you need someone on the outside pulling for you. So Jacob was transported to the Promised Land, while Joseph returned to the trenches in Egypt. The vow between them served as a bond—which Jacob would tug on when the time came for his children to come home.

One further lesson may be gleaned from our narrative. While living in Goshen, Jacob had prime pastureland for his flocks and a *yeshivah* on the premises—"the best of the land of Egypt" both materially and spiritually. Still he pleaded with Joseph, "Take me out of Egypt." Even under the best of circumstances, exile is no place for a Jew.

Deaf to the World

By Rabbi Eli Scheller

"His sons carried him (Yaakov) to the land of Canaan and they buried him in the cave of Machpelah". ([Gen. 29:13](#))

Eisav interfered with the burial of Yaakov in *Me'aras Hamachpelah*, saying that the remaining space in the cave was reserved for him. Yaakov's sons sent Naftali, who was fleet-footed, to Egypt to fetch the contract which stated that Eisav had sold his spot to Yaakov. Meanwhile, the burial was delayed. When Chushim, the deaf son of Dan, realized what was happening, he became infuriated and shouted, "Shall my grandfather lie here in disgrace until Naftali returns from Egypt!?" Chushim took a club and struck Eisav so hard that he knocked his head off his shoulders. Why didn't Yaakov's sons stand up for their father's honor? Was Chushim the only one who truly cared?

When Eisav interfered the brothers assumed that they would resolve the argument quickly and have Yaakov buried in no time. Then it started dragging out, and in the interim Yaakov was just lying there in disgrace. The brothers soon got used to that, and they did not see it as ignominious anymore. However, Chushim was deaf; he was impervious to outside influences and always saw reality as it was: Eisav was preventing his grandfather from being buried. He did not hear any argument from Eisav that could have made him see things differently, and so he could not get used to the situation as it was. The only way to end this was to kill Eisav.

Rooted inside everyone is the ability to adapt to different situations. Adaptability helps a person get used to difficult and uncomfortable circumstances. The first day at school you may feel out of place and you just want to go home, but a few days later you already feel like you are home! On the other hand, adaptability may weaken a person's motivation to do good. You walk out from a lecture inspired, you're on fire, excited to achieve great things, and then someone tells you, "You have to be realistic" or "You're dreaming." You then procrastinate and second-guess yourself, until the fire gets smaller and smaller until it goes out. One must act immediately and be deaf to the world, ignoring everyone's negative and discouraging remarks.

Chushim Ben Dan: Seeing An Intolerable Situation For What It Is

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The Talmud tells us [Sotah 13a] that when the brothers arrived at the Me'aras HaMachpela [Cave of Machpela] in Chevron to bury Yaakov, Eisav came and protested. There was one remaining plot in the burial cave. The previous burial plots were used for Adam, Chava, Avraham, Sarah, Yitzchak, Rivkah and Leah. Eisav claimed that the remaining plot belonged to him. The sons of Yaakov responded that Eisav forfeited his right to the plot when he sold the birthright. Eisav counter-claimed, however, that he only sold the “double-portion” to which a first born was entitled. However nowhere in the sale was it implicit that he was selling his own burial plot! The brothers responded that it was included in the sale. Eisav demanded that they produce the document of sale.

The brothers claimed that they did have the document, but that they had left it in Egypt. Eisav insisted on delaying the burial until the brothers produced this deed of sale.

Who were the brothers going to send back to Egypt? This was before the days of Federal Express. They sent Naftali, who was well known as the speediest runner among the brothers.

Chushim ben [the son of] Dan, who was deaf, inquired from someone about the delay and argument in the midst of the burial of his grandfather. Chushim was astounded when he was told what was happening. “Until Naftali returns from Egypt, my grandfather should lie over there in disgrace?” Chushim took a club and hit Eisav over the head and killed him. The Talmud concludes that this was in fulfillment of Rivka’s question, “Why should I lose both of you on one day?” [Bereshis 27:45]. This is an amazing passage. Out of Yaakov’s twelve fine and upstanding children and out of all the wonderful grandchildren, why was it that only Chushim ben Dan was sensitive to the intolerable nature of the situation? And why did the Talmud emphasize the fact that Chushim was deaf?

The Mir Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Chaim Shmulevitz zt”l, explains that this Gemara teaches us a remarkable fact of life. The difference between Chushim and the other children and grandchildren was that the others, unfortunately, became accustomed to the idea that their father would lie there in disgrace until Naftali returned from Egypt. Why?

The answer is that it started gradually. First there was a claim. Then there was a counter-claim. Next came another counter-argument, etc. Everyone else became accustomed to the idea of the negotiations, without stopping to think that the scene was a world class offense to the honor of Yaakov.

Since they all had time to adjust to this slowly developing situation, they gradually became used to the idea. However, Chushim was deaf and was not involved in the whole dialogue. When Chushim asked what was happening, he had not had the time to adjust. All of a sudden, he was hit by the whole terrible travesty of the situation in a single instant, as if he was hit by a load of bricks. Chushim, thank G-d, did not have time to adjust.

We learn from here a powerful insight into human nature. Human beings can become accustomed to anything. This phenomenon is both a blessing and a curse. People could not live without the ability to adjust. Sometimes we find ourselves in terrible situations and we cannot imagine how we will survive. But, thank G-d, people are adaptable and resilient.

However, the terrible downside of this phenomenon is that we can become accustomed to anything — to murder, to violence, to anything. The first time a soldier kills in war he is terribly distraught. But when one kills for long enough and sees death so often — even that can be accommodated.

The lesson is that there are times when a person must say, “I’m not supposed to become accustomed to this. I should always react with disgust and revulsion to certain situations.”

Many students attend my shiur [class] as their ‘last stop’ in the Yeshiva. After my shiur, they often go out into the worlds of their professions. I often meet former students, a year or two later, and inquire, “So, how are things going?” They sometimes respond, “Terrible. I can’t take the office. I can’t take the dirt. I can’t take the lewd language. I can’t take the innuendoes; I can’t take any of it.”

I respond to them with a blessing — “You should always feel like that, because if you become accustomed to it, that is bad.” There are some situations in life to which we must always react with disgust. The acceptance of an intolerable situation is itself, the start of the problem.

“The time approached for Yisrael to die, so he called for his son, for Yosef, and said to him: Please – if I have found favor in your eye, please place your hand under my thigh and do kindness and truth with me - please do not bury me in Egypt” (47:29)

Targum Onkelos translates Yaakov's request as "do not bury me in Egypt now." The Or HaChayim translates his request as "do not bury me in Egypt for a short time." He goes on to explain that Yaakov meant to say that he should not be buried in Egypt at all, not even for a short period of time, or even for a brief stopover. We can learn an important lesson from Yaakov's request. Many times in life, people put themselves in a position that will make things difficult in the future. Yaakov knew that once he was buried in Mitzrayim, it would not be so easy for his sons to gain permission from Pharaoh to remove him to Eretz Yisrael. He therefore urged them to take his body directly to Eretz Yisrael in an expeditious manner. We should not put ourselves in a position where our short-term decisions harm our long-term future. We should act now in a way that we will not be challenged later on. One should try to avoid making a temporary move that will only forestall the problem for a little while.

“But as for me - when I came from Padan, Rachel died on me in the land of Canaan on the road, while there was still some way to go to Efras; and I buried her there on the road to Efras, which is Bais Lechem” (48:7)

Rashi comments that Yaakov told Yosef not to be upset that Rachel was buried outside "the land" [which would seem to refer to Eretz Yisrael] because the Bnei Yisrael would need to daven as they passed by her gravesite when they were exiled after the destruction of the first Bais HaMikdash. He was commanded to do so by Hashem. The Ramban asks: Isn't Rachel actually buried in Eretz Yisrael? The Sifsei Chachamim explains Rashi by explaining that "the land" does not refer to Eretz Yisrael as Rachel is indeed in Eretz Yisrael. What Yaakov was explaining to Yosef was why he buried Rachel on the side of the road rather than in an inhabited area. This was necessary so that her children should have the opportunity to daven hundreds of years later. Based on this explanation, we can truly see the great power of tefilla. Yaakov made a decision to bury Rachel in a specific place in order to facilitate prayers in the future. We must be sure to harness the potential that our prayers have and use them properly.

“Now Yisrael’s eyes were heavy with age, he could not see; so he brought them near him and he kissed to them and hugged to them” (48:10)

This embrace was an expression of Yaakov's love for what Ephraim and Menashe had become and what they had accomplished. He expressed his affection for their way of life and embraced them for their ability to remain committed to Yaakov's way of life even while growing up in Egypt and to resist the influence of the people around them. He was hugging and kissing "to them," to their intangible characteristics which meant so much to him.

“Yaakov called to his sons and said: Gather and let me tell you what will happen to you at the end of days” (49:1)

The word **אָתָה** means "will happen," but it is spelled in a way that usually means "will be called." This reminds us everything which happens in the world is not random. It is called out by Hashem and orchestrated in a very particular way. We can rest assured that Hashem is guiding all of history with a purpose that we will one day be able to recognize and understand.

“Then Yosef adjured the children of Yisrael saying: Hashem will indeed remember you and you must bring my bones up out of here” (50:25)

Why did Yosef say two separate statements in this posuk? He should have said: "When Hashem redeems you, please bring my bones to Eretz Yisrael." Why did he separate the statement about the redemption? Yosef made everyone swear that the redemption would come. It was not enough to say that when the redemption would come, then they would take care of him. The redemption is a fact, not merely something that we hope for in the distant future. Yosef made everyone affirm their belief in the fact that Hashem will redeem them. One of the first questions that a person is asked during his divine judgment after he leaves this world is whether he anticipated the redemption. It is important for each individual to sincerely believe that Moshiach is going to come and can come at any moment, even today.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

"Some are Dead and Some are Living in My Life I've Loved Them All"

By Sheldon Stern

One of the great gifts Hashem has bestowed on the Jewish people is its plethora of Gedolim. Some legendary figures are known by all, but let's not forget that there may be a thousand (probably much more) for every such icon, who if not on that stratosphere, comes mighty close. I'm partial to one such Tzaddik, the Potoker Rov, because I was his dentist. Still, I'd like to speak about a Litivish giant, figuratively and literally (he was very tall) Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld ZTL. My friend and colleague David Sprung became a Baal Tshuvah through the Far Rockaway community in the 1980s. He shared this word from Rabbi Freifeld, " It's not enough to say that the Chafetz Chaim passed away, you must say that such rabbis are extinct." This thought goes a long way in answering a basic difficulty in this, the last Parsha of Sefer Bereishis.

In verse 47:29 we're told that the time came for Israel to die. Our Patriarch then put his house in order by asking Yosef to arrange his funeral and later blesses his children. So far, so good. But then we have 49:33 which says, "When Yaakov had finished giving instructions to his sons he drew his feet up into the bed, he expired and was gathered to his people." To this, Rashi gives us the enigmatic, "He expired, but the word death isn't mentioned, and our Teachers*Taanis 5b added, "Yaakov Avinu isn't dead." So what gives? Did he, or did he not die? This question is a carryover from Parshas Vayishlach in which the Sar Shel Eisav tells Yaakov that he'll no longer be called Yakov. While Yisrael is a glorious name Yaakov is anything but chopped liver and millions of Jews, including yours truly carry it proudly. So we can answer both questions with Rabbi Freifeld's comment. When the Torah tells us that the time of Yisroel's death arrived it's telling us that the period of the Patriarchs ended. The Gemara tells us(Sanhedrin 107A) that King David requested of Hashem that he be accorded the same status as the Avos. Hashem put the Kibosh on that idea. It's not a question of Dovid's greatness, rather it's akin to Halacha Eisav Sonei Yaakov. i.e. the Avos can be viewed as occupying the Mount Rushmore of Judaism and no one else can reach that perch.

But this leads to an obvious question. Why does the Torah teach that Yaakov didn't die but Yisrael did? Logic dictates the opposite. First, Yisrael represents the apotheosis of our Patriarch so it would seem that he's eternal. Next, we have Samael's statement. i.e. that Yaakov will no longer be called that name. To answer this I'm reminded of something my former Rosh Yeshivah said many years ago, in a Shmuess. He noted that we often have to deal with difficult people and offered the following strategy. When you come across such individuals play a mind game. Tell yourself that 40? years ago he was an innocent, adorable 2-year-old. So Rabbi Friedman added that the 2-year-old is still there, but he's covered over his innocence by making inappropriate choices. One of my early patients said, "Until 30 you have the face G-d gave you, but after 30 you have the face you made for yourself." Along the same line consider the Cheubim. Hashem wants to view us as angelic babies. Let's explain this point. Yisrael represents nobility. Rabbi Friedman is an allergist. He often spoke of a child he treated who was the son of a Rebbe in Boro Park. When he came for treatment he'd proudly announce, "Ich bin ah Rebbe's a kint." Now, he was justifiably proud but at the same time, some responsibilities came with the territory. So Hashem is telling us that he sees us through the lens of Yaakov. He spits up his food. We're His babies and as the virulently anti-Semitic Pink Floyd sang in their classic Mother, "You'll always be baby to me." There is, however, one caveat. The fact that Hashem tries to cut us some slack doesn't mean as some have expressed to wit all sinners have the Din of Tinokos Shenishba. Only Hashem can make that determination. What it means is that Hashem is always waiting for us to do Tshuvah and will accept us no matter how far we've strayed.

Lessons to be Learned from Our Great Ancestors

By Rabbi Berel Wein

The conclusion of the book of Bereshith not only completes for us the picture of the founders of the Jewish people – our fathers and mothers – but to a great extent also concludes the purely narrative portion of the Torah. There are precious few commandments or laws and ritual that emanate from this first book of the Torah.

From now forward the Torah, while continuing to be a narrative of early Jewish existence and life, develops into a law book detailing the commandments of the Creator to the Jewish people. If so, then what is the purpose of this lengthy beginning narrative? This is really the essence of the question that Rashi quotes at the beginning of his commentary to the Torah: “Should not the Torah have begun from the commandment regarding the new moon?”

It is there that Rashi answers why it began with the story of creation but the question remains: Why does the Torah continue the narrative regarding the personal lives of our ancestors? To this question the rabbis responded by stating that the events that occurred to our ancestors are sign posts for the later events that would occur to their descendants.

Since this idea can only be validated in hindsight – only after the event occurs to later generations can it be glimpsed as having been foretold by events that occurred to our ancestors – it still begs the original question somewhat. It is important to know that otherwise inexplicable events somehow fit into a preexisting pattern. But what particular lessons can be learned from the detailed narrative of the lives of our great ancestors?

There are general lessons about Jewish life that can certainly be gleaned from the Torah narrative of Bereshith. And perhaps this idea of general lessons is one of the reasons why the Torah invests so many words and descriptions in this eternal book.

One lesson is that Jewish life is not an easy one. Being a small minority and yet preserving a unique identity is no easy task. The struggle of our ancestors to do so is therefore clearly delineated for us. Another life lesson is that there are no guarantees in life especially as regarding children. Yishmael and Esau are prime examples of this disturbing truth.

Another lesson is that in the absence of tolerance for the differences in personalities and outlooks that will always be part of Jewish life and society, terrible things can happen to the Jewish people as a whole. Witness the narrative regarding Yosef and his brothers. A further lesson is that others will always threaten Jewish survival, often by violence and murderous intent. Nimrod, Abimelech, Pharaoh, Lavan, Shechem, Esau are but a few that illustrate this point.

All of our ancestors were forced to face up to enmity, jealousy and the duplicity of others. Another teaching to us is the power of the individual and the power of an idea. Abraham and Sarah, practically alone, changed the world with their idea and teachings of monotheism. The Torah further informs us that “good” exiles such as Goshen Egypt can eventually turn out to be less good. All of these lessons are essential to Jewish life and its survival. The wise will ponder upon them and apply them well in one’s own life and current society.