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Jacob Breathed His Last and Was Gathered to His People

49:29 to 50:3

Jacob breathed his last and was gathered to his people DIG: Why is it so important to Ya'akov that he be buried in Canaan (46:1-4; 47:29-31)? What does this say about Jacob's faith in God's promises?

REFLECT: What arrangements have you made for your death? Is there someone you need to reconcile with before they die? Before you die? Do you have the assurance that you will see your loved ones again after they have passed away? Do you see death as an active foe or a conquered enemy?



Jacob had previously made **Joseph** swear that **he** would not bury **his father** permanently in the land of Egypt, but return **his** body to **Canaan (47:29-31)**. Now **Jacob** repeats that command to all **his sons** in order to ensure that **his** instructions would be carried out.⁸⁰⁶

Then he gives them these instructions, “I am about to be gathered to my people.” This phrase is a single word in Hebrew and is a synonym for *died*. It is also used in the passive voice which meant that **Jacob** recognized that someone besides **himself** was in control of **his** life, and that **he** could do nothing about it. Who was it that was in control of **his** life? In **Jacob’s** own words: **El Shaddai appeared to me at Bethel, in the land of Canaan, and there He blessed me (48:3)**. Here, **Jacob** confirms that **he** had enjoyed a personal relationship with **El Shaddai, the God of Abraham and his father Isaac**. It was **YHVH** who was the absolute sovereign in **Jacob’s** life. **He** alone is **the Giver and Taker** of life. There is no better preparation for death than this. This is the same **God** about whom **Job** spoke, when **he** said that **he “knows his Redeemer lives and that in the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:25-26)**.

It was the same **God** who sent **Messiah**, who was **the Word made flesh (Jn 1:14)**. **Yeshua** said that **He is the resurrection and the life, no one comes to the Father except through Him (Jn 11:25)**. All this is to emphasize that we must have a personal relationship with **the Eternal One** in order to face **death** properly. **Jacob** had that personal relationship. This is why **he** was able to face **death** with the hope of the resurrection of **Messiah**.

In addition to the spiritual preparation necessary for facing **death**, there are practical earthly matters to which one should attend as well. **Jacob** already had **his** place of **burial** planned. This decision was not left to the last moment, to be decided by **his** grief-stricken children. **He** did this years before. In **Jacob’s** case, **he** intended to be **buried** in the family **burial** site in Hebron. **Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite, along with the field” (49:29-30)**.

There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried, and there I buried Leah. The fact that **Rebekah** and **Leah** had been buried in **the cave of Machpelah** is only mentioned here in the Bible. This demonstrates that **the field and the cave that were bought from the Hittites** had truly become the family **burial** grounds **(49:31-32)**.⁸⁰⁷ It is ironic that **Leah**, and not Rachel, was buried with **Jacob**. **She** achieved in death, what **she** was unable to achieve in life, to be close to the one **she** loved.

When Ya’akov had finished giving instructions to his sons, he summoned all

of **his** remaining strength and **drew his feet up into his bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people** in Sheol (**49:33**). **He died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side (Luke 16:22)**, awaiting the coming **Messiah** and the great resurrection day.

While **his** brothers and sons stood there watching, it was **Joseph** who **threw himself upon his father and wept over him and kissed him (50:1)**. Even though **Yosef** knew **he** would see **his father** again, there was still a void and **he** grieved the loss. Death is the great enemy (**First Corinthians 15:26**), and will be conquered in the future (**Revelation 21:4**). However, for the present, death causes sorrow. After a while, **Yosef** composed himself and proceeded with the necessary duties for the dead. As **God** had promised, **Joseph's own hand** closed **Ya'akov's eyes (46:4)**, and **he** died content (**45:28; 46:30**).⁸⁰⁸

*For the unbeliever, death is a curse, or a penalty for sin. For although death does not bring about extinction or the end of existence, it cuts one off from any opportunity of obtaining eternal life. Looking at death as an enemy, the unbeliever sees nothing positive in it and recoils from it in fear. However, for those who believe in Christ, and as a result are righteous, death has a different character. The believer undergoes physical death, but its curse is gone because Christ became a curse for us by dying on the cross (**Galatians 3:13**). Therefore, for the believer, death is no longer an active enemy, but a conquered enemy who now serves not to condemn and destroy, but to free us from the dreadful conditions which sin has introduced.*⁸⁰⁹

It was customary in Egypt to **embalm** the dead, so **Joseph directed the physicians in his service to embalm his father Isra'el**. They used an elaborate process that assured that **his** remains would remain preserved almost indefinitely. For **Yosef**, it was a practical solution to the difficult problem of how to preserve **his father's** body until **he** was returned to Canaan for **burial**. **He** used **his** own personal **physicians** and not professional embalmers so as to avoid the magic and mysticism practiced by the embalmers. Some of the remains were dedicated to the spirits of the underworld. **So Joseph's physicians embalmed him, taking a full forty days, for that was the time required for embalming. And** because **he** became known as a true man of **God** during the seventeen years that **he** had lived in **their** country, **the Egyptians** themselves **mourned for him seventy days (50:2-3)**.⁸¹⁰ The mourning period for a Pharaoh was seventy-two days. Thus, **he** was highly respected as the **father** of **Joseph**.

Advice to the ones left behind: Having pointed out several words of wisdom

from **Genesis** concerning people who are facing **death**, consideration needs to be given to the survivors of a loved one.

1. Reconcile fully with the dying person: The survivors are the ones who must live with any potential guilt from a deteriorated relationship. We see an example of this principle in the account of the relationship between **Joseph** and **his brothers** in **Chapter 50**. After **Jacob died**, **the brothers** started worrying whether or not **Joseph** really forgave **them (50:15)**. This showed that a reconciliation needed to take place. The issue was not whether **Joseph** or **the brothers** were right or wrong. The point is that more needed to be taken care of before anyone else **died!** In the end, **Joseph** told **his brothers** the same thing **he** told **them** when **he** first revealed **himself** to them in **Chapter 45**. **He** said that it was really the will of **God** that **he** endured the past trials and experiences. Then, as **he** had done before, **he cried** with **them (50:17-19)**. Through **Joseph's** relationship with **his brothers**, we can see how important it is to heal relationships when a wrong (or even a perceived wrong) has been done.

2. Respect the wishes of the deceased: The greatest form of **loving-kindness** (see the commentary on **Ruth Af - The Concept of Chesed**) is the **kindness** shown to one who is **dead**. It is a form of respect. This is why **Jacob's** and **Joseph's** requests were diligently followed after **their deaths**. Both requested to be **buried** in **the Land of Isra'el** rather than **Egypt**, the place of **their deaths**. For **Joseph** and **Jacob**, **their** requests were an encouragement to **their** families that **they** fully believed in the promises **God** made to **their** forefathers. For **their** survivors, it was an opportunity to show respect by following **their** requests.

3. Fully mourn and grieve: The patriarchs had little trouble expressing emotions. When it was time to laugh, **Abraham** laughed. When it was time to cry, there was great weeping. This becomes especially evident at the funeral of **Jacob**. There was a funeral entourage from **Egypt** to **Hebron** (see **Ls - So Joseph Went Up to Bury His Father**). When this entourage was observed by **the Canaanites** they said: **How bitterly the Egyptians are mourning**. We see from Scripture the intense **mourning** which was experienced by **the sons of Jacob**.

4. Cry! Cry! Cry some more: How was this mourning handled? For one thing, there were lots of tears. More specifically, it the Bible says: **Then Joseph fell upon his father's face; he wept over him and kissed him (50:1)**. **Joseph**, like others of **his** generation, was not afraid to express outwardly **his** emotion of grief over a loved one who **passed away**. But how often in modern western cultures

does one hear, “Oh, don’t **cry**. Be strong. It will be alright.” Or perhaps worse, “Don’t **cry**. Just trust **God**.” We must realize why **ADONAI** made **tears** anyway. Some physicians will tell us that the tears of grief are actually healing **tears** designed by **God** to begin to wash out some of the toxins created in the body because of the stress of internal emotional grief. There have been studies done which will indicate that the best and most lasting healing of a grief-stricken person occurs when that person expresses grief openly, especially by **crying**.

5. Take your time: Another way to express grief in a healthy way is to take the time necessary for the required emotional healing. The Bible describes how there were several time periods devoted for **mourning** after **Jacob’s death**. It says, for example, that **the Egyptians mourned for Jacob seventy days (50:3)**. Again, it says that after **Jacob’s funeral Joseph mourned for his father seven days (50:10)**. **The seven-day mourning period mentioned here provides the basis for the traditional Jewish custom of mourning for a seven-day period (or shiva) after a funeral. The shiva is a time when the whole community bands together and makes it physically possible for the grieving family to take time to begin the healing process necessary as the result of the trauma of losing a loved one.** Just as one would not think it was healthy to walk on a broken bone, so likewise, it is not healthy to walk on a broken spirit. When the bone cries out, “Pain! Pain!” we rush to its aid and provide the necessary relief. It should be the same for the hurting mourner. Too often society judges strength by how soon the mourner can come back to work. But the real strength comes when, by the grace of God, one takes time out to nurture the deep wounds of the missing loved one.

6. Be strong: The patriarchs knew a secret, which is; taking time to live life and to **mourn death. As this parashah ends, the rabbis have inserted the following words at the end of the text (as is the case for the end of all the five books of Moshe): “Be strong! Be Strong? And may we be strengthened!”** This can only happen when we take the necessary time to follow **the Lord** according to **His Word**, and letting **the Lord** minister to us in life’s most difficult moments, such as **death**. When we learn how to do this, then we can say: **For to me, life is Messiah, and death is gain (Phil 1:21). Whether we live or die we belong to the Lord (Romans 14:8).**