

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

GRAVE DIFFERENCES Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Bereishit ends in the way all blockbusters should – with a death for closure, and a promise of redemption as teaser for the sequel. Just to add to the suspense, there is something odd about the burial. Yoseph's embalmed body is placed "in the *aron*, in Egypt." No previous burial in Torah, including Yaakov's, has involved an **aron** – what is it, and why is it important?

The simplest reading is that Yoseph was buried as an Egyptian noble, whereas his father was buried as a Jew. Yoseph's burial symbolizes the way in which his apparent rulership over Egypt was actually subtle enslavement.

Bekhor Shor adds a subtlety. In the penultimate verse, Yoseph makes his brothers swear that when the Exodus comes, they will take his body with them to Israel. Bekhor Shor suggests that Yoseph was afraid that while it was obvious that the brothers wished to be disinterred and brought to Israel, his honored burial in Egypt would make the Jews suspect that he preferred to be left where he was. In other words, to the very end Yoseph had not convinced his brothers that he fully identified with their family destiny.

A midrash takes an essentially opposite approach. Yoseph was stored in a watertight container that was sunk in the Nile to prevent the Egyptians from turning his pyramid into a shrine, and thus to ensure that he could eventually be removed without specific objection. In a more elaborate version, Yoseph is sunk so deep that it takes supernatural means to retrieve him (which explains why the Egyptians never could do so).

Rashbam in his customary fashion flattens the narrative. Had Yoseph been buried in the earth, his body might have

decomposed to the point that it could not be recovered for reburial, so he was placed in a casket instead. No symbolism, no evidence of character, no cultural implications, and no miracles. Perhaps the point is that Yoseph understood not only that slavery was coming, but that it would last a very long time.

Chaim Paltiel (1240-c.1300 Ashkenaz) asks: Why does Yoseph merit being buried in Israel, and Mosheh Rabbeinu does not? His answer is provocative:

וי"ל

דמשה כפר לשונו כשישב על הבאר

ובאו בנות יתרו ודברו לשון מצרית

אבל יוסף לא כפר לשונו

דכתיב "כי גונוב גונבתי מארץ העברים"

One can respond

*that Mosheh denied his lashon when he settled by the well
and the daughters of Yitro came and spoke the Egyptian lashon,
whereas Yoseph did not deny his lashon,
as Scripture writes "For verily I was stolen from the land of the
Ivrim."*

Paltiel's question is grounded in Mosheh's personal attention to the disinterment of Yoseph. In the ordinary Rabbinic way of things, we would expect him to be rewarded by having his bones similarly cared for, and it is striking that Mosheh is excluded from Israel even after death. R. Paltiel, following the general approach of Ramban to such matters, is willing to attribute sins to the greatest of men rather than having their Scripturally reported suffering seem unjustified.

The sin he attributes to Mosheh stands in ironic counterpoise to the people Mosheh redeemed, who famously

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never changed their lashon – everyone still knows them as *ivrim* – which the well-known midrash sees as one of the virtues for which they merited redemption.

But this seems unfair to Moshe, who had just barely discovered his *ivri* identity when *ivrim* betrayed him to Pharaoh. I prefer a different irony – Moshe’s merit was his willingness to shift his identity from Egyptian to Hebrew, whereas the Hebrews themselves are praised for their stubborn adherence to their *ivri* identity. This is a conundrum I often pose to conversion candidates, who as a result of radically shifting their identities must commit to raising their children as unshakably identified Jews.

Paltiel’s question draws our attention to the similarities between the endings of Bereishit and Torah. Torah also ends with a burial and death, at the very border of redemption. This parallel allows us to offer a perhaps new explanation for why Moshe’s grave is unfindable – it is to prevent the Jews from disinterring him and bringing his remains to Israel. But why does G-d think it important to prevent this? In other words, why is the story of Mosheh’s burial written to prevent rather than encourage sequels?

Here I think another of Ramban’s contributions can be helpful. Ramban used the principle מעשה אבות סימן לבנים = the deeds of the ancestors foreshadow those of the

descendants to mean that Bereishit is about people whose every action is symbolic. The great people of later generations, such as Mosheh, sometimes acted symbolically, but they were not symbols. And the Jewish people as a whole impacted the future not by determining it, but rather by making commitments.

In other words, there is a sense in which the rest of Torah is merely playing out a drama whose contours are determined in Bereishit. No one need pretend that there is any chance that Yoseph’s body will stay in Egypt. But the rest of history is not determined by Torah; rather, Torah gives meaning to the genuine choices human beings face for the rest of history.

Mordechai Ben David sings:

*Someday we will all be together . . .
Mosheh Rabbeinu will lead us once again
In Yerushalayim b’ezrat Hashem.*

I have long wondered whether the lyricist realized that Mosheh Rabbeinu could not lead us again in Yerushalayim. But my suggestion is that the intuition expressed by the song is fundamentally correct; for Mosheh to lead us in Israel, history must end. Until then his gravesite cannot be known, and we should not waste our time searching for it. It is for us the living, rather, to dedicate ourselves to the unfinished work which he so nobly advanced. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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