



Vayhi 5776: Mother Earth

'Where we love is home — home that our feet may leave, but not our hearts.'
— *Oliver Wendell Holmes*

It is not a very popular topic of conversation but every now and then we find ourselves discussing where we wish to be buried. Sometimes people want to be buried in the place of their forebears, some want to be buried in a place they love, and there are even those who want to be buried where there is a nice view! Our ancestors took burial seriously; of the 86 verses in this short parasha, 25 discuss burial places, promises and processes.

Yaakob demands that his son Yoseph swears to bury him in Canaan¹, his homeland and what will later become the land of Israel. Yoseph demands the same of his entire family before he dies².

It is easier for us, with a perspective of 3,000 years of history, to assume that the land of Israel was dear to Yaakob and Yoseph and that if they couldn't live there they would at least wish to be buried there. However, there is also substantial evidence to imply that they valued living outside of Canaan. Yaakob lived the best and most peaceful years of his life in Egypt. He chose his grandchildren, Ephraim and Menashe -- the only ones that we read of who were born, lived and died in Egypt -- as the essential role models for his descendants³.

Rather than moving back home after his major work with the famine was complete, Yoseph spent 80 years of his life as an iconic leader in Egypt. It is not to be taken for granted that their years in Egypt were filled with longing to return to Canaan, which makes their unequivocal demands for burial there more curious.

Was it simply an act of patriotism? The requests made by our forefathers in the parasha suggest that it runs deeper than that.

¹ 47:29-31

² 50:25

³ 48:5; 49:20



He called to his son, to Yoseph, and he said to him: 'If I have found favour in your eyes...do with me kindness and truth, please do not bury me in Egypt! I shall lie with my fathers and you shall take me out from Egypt and bury me in their burial place'. [Yoseph] said: 'I will do as you say'. He said: 'Swear to me'! and he swore to him. (47:29-31)

Yoseph said to his brothers: I am about to die. G-d will surely remember you and raise you out of this land to the land that he swore to [give] to Abraham, Yitshak and Yaakob. And Yoseph made the Children of Israel swear saying: 'G-d will surely remember you and you shall raise my bones from here. (50:24-25)

Yaakob and Yoseph understood that to be a partner with G-d in developing the world, it might require involvement with lands and peoples that lie beyond one's home. For the nation of Israel, most of our history has been spent away from home investing in countries and communities that are not primarily our own. It is for this reason that Ephraim and Menashe are Yaakob's chosen models for Israel. They were essentially 'sons of Egypt' yet maintained a full identity as members of Israel.

Yaakob and Yoseph did not question which place they called 'home'. They understood profoundly and insisted that rather than having their final resting place at their 'job site', where they lived most of their lives, and possibly their best years, they instead insisted that they would be buried in their 'mother earth'-- their homeland.

Throughout the generations Jews from around the world, although living their entire lives away from it, would request to be buried in Israel recognising that it is, even after centuries of living abroad, our home. So valuable is this ideal that in our Spanish and Portuguese community when people are buried here in London it is customary to add *terra santa*, 'holy earth', which is taken from the Holy Land to the grave.

The Midrash tells us that our *hakhamim* would kiss the ground and the stones of Israel out of their great love for it⁴. For a member of Israel to faithfully work and live abroad and seek prosperity and comfort there, whilst

⁴ Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim, 102; Cf. Ketubot, 112b



at the same time knowing that home is a little strip of earth between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, is an important aspect of our individual and national identity.

Before we were a religion we were a nation. As Jews, beyond questioning what our religion means to us, we must ask what our nation and the land of Israel means to us? It is a question that runs beyond religion and one that today is fraught with controversy and emotion; but it is a question as old as the man who first held the name Israel and asked to be buried in that land.

Parasha Perspectives

XII Vayhi

37d Ya'akov and family in Egypt (46:28-47:31)

Continues from Vayigash (46:28-47:27)

Yosef makes promise to his father (47:28-31)

38 Ya'akov blesses Ephraim and Menashe (48:1-22)

39 Blessing for Reuven (49:1-4)

40 Curse for Shimon and Levi (49:5-7)

41 Blessing for Yehuda (49:8-12)

42 Blessing for Zevulun (49:13)

43a Blessing for Yissachar (49:14-15)

43b Blessing for Dan (48:16-18)

43c Blessing for Gad (49:19)

43d Blessing for Asher (49:20)

43e Blessing for Naphtali (49:21)

43f Blessing for Yosef (49:22-26)

44 Death of Ya'akov and Yosef (49:27-50:26)

Blessing for Binyamin (49:27);

After blessing his sons, Ya'akov dies (49:28-33);

Ya'akov's burial (50:1-13);

Brothers reconciled, Yosef dies (50:14-26)