

THE RIGHTEOUS IN DEATH ARE CALLED LIVING

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher

In parsha Vayechi we read, “And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt 17 years. . . . And the days of Israel drew near [for him] to die; and he called his son Joseph and said to him: . . . bury me not, I pray you, in Egypt.” So Jacob asked Joseph to swear that he would not bury him in Egypt. He wanted to be buried with his ancestors in the cave at Machpelah.

Rabbeinu Bachya teaches that Jacob did not want to be buried in Egypt because he feared the Egyptians would deify him after death. If this was Jacob’s concern, it suggests that he was interested in more than his own future in *olam habah*. He was also interested in how his spirit would be treated after his death, and the effect that treatment would have in *olam hazeh*, for those who remained after him.

Why should Jacob want to be buried in the Holy Land?

The Akeidat Yitzhak teaches that the place of burial was believed to facilitate the ascent of one’s spiritual qualities. From Rabbeinu Bachya we learn that the preference for burial in the Holy Land was because, “the nature of the land helps those buried there to obtain atonement for their sins.” And according to Rashi, those buried outside of the Holy Land would only be resurrected “after the agony of rolling through cavities (in the earth until they reach Israel, finally to be resurrected there).”

These traditional beliefs raise more questions than answers. What does it mean to be resurrected? What are we to make of the idea of atonement after death? And how are we to understand facilitating the ascent of one spiritual qualities after death?

Taking a cue from Jacob’s concern about being deified after death, we may ask: Who is to be served by these beliefs—the dead or the living? For example, one of our traditional practices is gathering *shomrim* to remain with a deceased person until the time of burial. The job of a *shomer* is to sit with the deceased and read psalms. My experience in asking people to be *shomrim* is that they feel honored and privileged. Several have told me afterwards that the experience was surprisingly meaningful for them. Needless to say, they didn’t regard themselves as protecting the deceased from ghosts and goblins. They saw the experience as a two-fold opportunity for themselves: to meditate on the life of the deceased, meditation that was potentiated by the presence of the deceased; and to do a *mitzvah* that helped to relieve some of the pain and suffering of the surviving mourners and others who loved the deceased. *Shomrim* often learn that it’s a comfort to those who are grieving to know that the deceased is not “alone” in the cold room where the body is prepared for burial, but instead is “accompanied” by a friend or loved one who is reading psalms.

But if it’s true that our tradition’s practices for dealing with death are designed to affirm life, how are we to make sense out of resurrection and spiritual ascent after death?

Resurrection is the belief that the dead will be revived in their bodies and live again on earth. The tradition, however, has had a long-standing series of disputes about how much the dead know of the world they leave behind. There is a wide range of rabbinic opinion on the condition of the soul after death. Not surprisingly, the normative understanding is that “none but God can have a conception of the matter” (i.e., “Eye has not seen, O God, beside You”—Isaiah 64:3).

It reminds me of what a rabbi told me when I was about 18 and asked what we Jews believe happens to us after death. He answered that the same God who created life and maintains the creation in motion, also governs that which follows this life, which is not for us to understand.

Possibly, however, we can understand resurrection in two ways. Just as every molecule of matter on this planet, including those that comprise our bodies, was once part of a distant star, we too will live again in the future in ways that are not for us to comprehend in this incarnation. And in ways that elude the limitations of scientific method, our spirit—long after we're gone—can animate and uplift life.

Which raises the question, what can be meant by the ascent of one's spiritual qualities after death? If we believe, as many modern Jews do, that the dead have no consciousness, the ascent of the spirit after death must refer to the effect of one's spiritual qualities on the living—the spirit is raised up in the consciousness of the living. So burial practices and locations can make a difference for the living.

Not too long ago a congregant called me seeking advice about whether or not to disinter and rebury her husband. She had learned that the plot adjoining her husband's, which they had purchased for her, had inadvertently been deeded to another party, so that she and her husband would not be buried together. She was distraught knowing that after she died she would not be buried with her husband. She imagined the pain her children would suffer when visiting their father's grave in a section of the cemetery occupied by members of the family who had treated them with unkindness and disrespect.

It is precisely because the traditional reasons given for Jacob's desire to be buried in Eretz Yisrael are at first blush mostly incomprehensible to the modern mind that makes these verses important. To the extent that we can no longer make sense of Torah, we increasingly rationalize our indifference to it. To the extent that we're indifferent to Torah, its vision and values cease, as a practical matter, to guide our day-to-day lives. To the extent that we become alienated from Torah wisdom in our day-to-day lives, our children and their children become increasingly vulnerable to the poisoned and perverted values of the larger materialistic society and culture. And to the extent that materialism becomes the hallmark of our children's lives, the likelihood of them finding long-lasting happiness and fulfillment declines—as it has for us.

Our belief that “after-life” is an oxymoron is a reflection of how our society and culture glorify death in life. We see that those who, instead, glorify life, they live on in spirit after their deaths for those they leave behind. They are not simply models in the behavioral sense, that is, individuals we can learn from by observing them. They are often our inspiration, imbuing us with courage, vision, and commitment. But we live in a society in which death has become a profitable commodity. I'm not referring to the funeral industry, but the many conglomerate media empires that grow fat on music videos, computer games, and films that are saturated with and glorify deadly violence.

We are the unwitting beneficiaries of ancient Jewish practices. In the ancient world, the perspective on death was different. Instead of imbuing life with death, they imbued death with life. Death was treated in such a way that, long after one had died, the effect of the treatment was to affirm life. In our world we rationalize practices in life and death in which only our own happiness and comfort, or that of our children, need be considered. Ancient culture inculcated a sense of responsibility for the well-being of generations in the far-distant future—making us and our children the beneficiaries. Jacob didn't need to be buried in Eretz Yisrael for himself, but to ensure what he regarded as the sacred destiny of his progeny, Am Yisrael.

How important, potentially, is a burial site? Of course, it depends on how an individual lives his or her life. If we have no spiritual legacy, then it doesn't much matter where or how we're buried—which may partly explain the popularity of cremation. But consider: The cave of Machpelah up to modern times has been a place of pilgrimage for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Isaac and Ishmail came together to bury Abraham there. Yaakov and Eisav met there

to bury Yitzhak. Notwithstanding the current conflict in the region, the spirits of those buried there have demonstrated remarkable peacemaking powers for millennia.

The Talmud (Berachoth 18a-b) relates that Rabbi Hiyya and Rabbi Jonathan were once walking about in a cemetery, and the blue fringe of Rabbi Jonathan was trailing on the ground. Rabbi Hiyya said: "Lift it up, so that they [the dead] should not say: 'Tomorrow they are coming to join us and now they are insulting us!'" Rabbi Jonathan replied: "Do they know so much? Is it not written, 'But the dead know nothing at all?'" (Ecclesiastes 9:5) Rabbi Hiyya answered: ". . . These are the righteous who in their death are called living, as it says: 'Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, the son of a living man from Kabzeel, who had done mighty deeds, he struck down two commanders of Moab; he went down and also killed a lion in the middle of a well on a snowy day.' (II Sam 23:20) 'The son of a living man': are all other people then the sons of dead men? Rather 'the son of a living man' means that even in his death he was called living. . . . 'But the dead know nothing': These are the wicked who in their lifetime are called dead, as it says. 'And you, defiled and wicked one, prince of Israel, whose day has come. . . .' (Ezekiel 21:30)"