

LIVING AND DYING IN ANCIENT TIMES

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DEATH, BURIAL, AND MOURNING
IN BIBLICAL TRADITION



Simcha Paull Raphael

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Foreword by Shaul Magid



Jewish Life, Death, and Transition Series

Living and Dying
in Ancient Times

Death, Burial, and Mourning
in Biblical Tradition

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*“The old shall be renewed,
and the new shall be made holy.”*

— Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook

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*This book is dedicated to
Dr. Jean Ouellette
Professor, Études Juives
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my first professor of Biblical Studies at
Sir George Williams University
Montreal, Canada
who opened my mind to the world of
Biblical scholarship and study*

IMAGES AND MOTIFS OF BURIAL

Sarah's Death and the Cave at Machpelah

GENESIS CHAPTER 23 PRESENTS the first and most elaborate description of the purchase of a burial plot found in the Hebrew Bible. The chapter begins with news of Sarah's death in "*Kiriath-Arba*; which is Hebron in the land of Canaan" at 127 years of age. The text then tells us that "Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her." (Gen. 23:2) What follows in the remainder of the chapter is a description of Abraham's focused effort to purchase land for Sarah's burial. We read about his deliberations with the Hittites requesting of them to:

... entreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar. That he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he has, which is in the end of his field; for as much money as it is worth he shall give it me as a possession of a burying place amongst you. (Gen. 23:8-9)

The recently bereaved Abraham and Ephron the Hittite enter into financial negotiations with Abraham weighing out four hundred shekels of silver in return for a burial plot for his deceased wife Sarah. The result, an honorable resting place for Sarah, and a burial site which forever remains a noted location in Jewish history and experience:

And the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field, and the cave which was in it, and all the trees that were in the field, that were in all the borders around, were made over to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the Hittites, before all who went in at the gate of his city. And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre; the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan. And the field, and the cave that is in it, were made over to Abraham for a possession of a burying place by the Hittites. (Gen. 23:17-20)

An imperative for burial in the Cave of Machpelah remains central throughout subsequent death narratives in Genesis. At the time of Abraham's death, described as being "gathered to his people," we are once again reminded of Abraham's initial purchase of Machpelah, and informed that:

... his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre; the field which Abraham purchased from the Hittites; there was Abraham buried, and Sarah his wife. (Gen. 25:9-10)

When Isaac dies, he is living at Hebron, and although the text does not specifically say where he is buried, we can assume it is at Machpelah where “his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.” (Gen. 35:29)

Before Jacob dies, he gathers together his children, and as part of his end-of-life closure reiterates for them the history of the purchase of the Cave of Machpelah:

And he charged them, and said to them, I am to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field of Ephron the Hittite for a possession of a burying place. There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife; there they buried Isaac and Rebecca his wife; and there I buried Leah. The purchase of the field and of the cave that is in it was from the Hittites. (Gen. 49:29-32)

We can imagine the scene here of Jacob, surrounded by members of his family-clan—children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and daughters-in-law—all present, paying attention to the final words of the dying old man. Fully lucid and with deliberate clarity, Jacob asserts the importance of his being buried in the ancestral family tomb at Machpelah, and names specifically all of his ancestors already buried there.

We glean from Jacob's words of farewell that he is saying much more than: "Children, please note, this is where I own a burial plot!" We know decent burial was of great importance in the Ancient Near East and Mesopotamia, with people dreading the thought of lying unburied in the harsh desert sun. But in the above passage from the final chapters of Genesis, Jacob's parting words to his family are not only a functional request, but also a spiritual one. For Jacob, burial at Machpelah, in essence, meant entering the ancestral realm of the family tomb upon departing this world. As noted in the previous chapter, in being "gathered to his people," one would be reunited with previously deceased ancestral family members.

Over and over, in Torah and later Biblical writings, great importance is placed upon being buried along with one's family members. All of Jacob's ancestors, as well as his first wife Leah were buried in the family tomb at Machpelah.¹⁸ Similarly, King David was laid to rest in the Citadel of David, a

family tomb (1 Kings 2:10) and the Book of Kings documents how the later Kings of Judah were buried with their ancestors, in the Davidic family tomb,¹⁹ including Rehoboam (14:31); Asa (15:24); Jehoshaphat (22:51); Uzziah (2 Kings 15:7); Jotham (15:38); and Ahaz (16:20). Saul, the first King of Israel, and his son Jonathan were buried in the tomb of Saul's father, Kish. (2 Sam. 21:1-14)

As an Ancient Near Eastern civilization, Biblical Judaism was tribal in nature, and the central social organism was the family clan. Like the wandering Bedouins of today, the early Hebrews traversed the ancient deserts in large extended families—men, women and children; sheep, goats and camels—living, working and worshipping together. And as they lived, so they died—in the company of all family members—and were buried in family tombs.

In the worldview of the Ancient Near East, burial in the family grave serves to re-connect the spirit of the departed one with a realm of previously dead ancestors. This realm of departed beings was believed to exist within the region of the tomb itself or surrounding locality.²⁰ Given this assumption of postmortem existence, death was not regarded as an end point or cessation of existence. On the contrary, being gathered to one's ancestors implied a transition to another realm, one in which deceased family resided and activities of kith and kin continued within the

sacred ancestral society of the family tomb. It is this understanding of the nature of death and the world beyond that inspires and drives the desire to be buried at Machpelah.²¹ As Herbert Chanan Brichto suggests:

[it is] not mere sentimental respect for the physical remains [that is] ... the motivation for the practice, but rather an assumed connection between proper sepulture and the condition of happiness of the deceased in the afterlife.²²

Rachel's Death and the Transformation of a Symbol

Another Biblical motif of burial is found in the tale of Rachel's death. After a difficult, fatal childbirth, the Book of Genesis tells us: "Rachel died, and was buried on the way to Ephrath, which is Beth-Lehem. And Jacob set a pillar—*matzevah*—upon her grave, that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. (Gen. 35:19-20).

This is the first instance in Biblical tradition of a formal grave-stone marker on someone's burial site. The word here, *matzevah*, is still used today when speaking of a cemetery tombstone. Erection of a pillar at Rachel's burial place has become the paradigm for the contemporary practice of

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In this brilliantly researched and clearly articulated treatise, Simcha Paull Raphael takes us on a journey into our ancient past and gives us back our instinctual capacity to understand and do honor to end of life experience and practice. This is one aspect of the human experience which does not beg to be improved upon with technological advances, but rather to be restored to the realms of mystery and intuition.

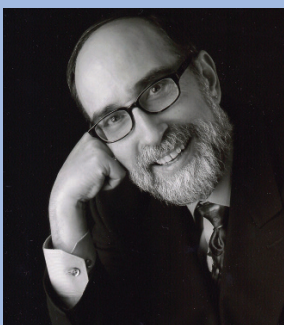
— Rabbi Nadya Gross, Co-Director of Programs, Aleph: Alliance for Jewish Renewal

Simcha Paull Raphael combines over three decades of therapeutic experience with careful readings of biblical texts to produce a well-crafted book that brings ancient insights into our own contemporary questions about death and dying.

— Tamar Kamionkowski, Ph.D., Professor of Biblical Studies, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Those already familiar with Simcha Paull Raphael's classic study Jewish Views of the Afterlife will welcome this insightful essay that almost reads as a prerequisite to his previous work. Here the author presents a dual perspective, both historical and contemporary, and guides the reader through a fascinating maze of biblical and midrashic texts rigorously scrutinized and analysed. Living and Dying in Ancient Times demonstrates that the ancient texts of Biblical tradition provide a valuable source of reflection on the reality of death and dying in our own world.

— Jean Ouellette, Ph.D., Études Juives, Université de Montréal



Reb Simcha Paull Raphael, Ph.D. is Founding Director of the DA'AT Institute for Death Awareness, Advocacy and Training (www.daatinstitute.net). He received his doctorate in Psychology from the California Institute of Integral Studies and was ordained as a Rabbinic Pastor by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. He is Adjunct Professor in Religion at Temple University and LaSalle University, works as a psychotherapist and spiritual director in Philadelphia and is a Fellow of the Rabbis Without Borders

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