

LIVING AND DYING IN ANCIENT TIMES

DEATH, BURIAL, AND MOURNING
IN BIBLICAL TRADITION



Simcha Paull Raphael

Foreword by Shaul Magid



Jewish Life, Death, and Transition Series

Living and Dying
in Ancient Times

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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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eschatology, and Jewish ritual practices on death, burial and mourning are all inter-woven. The story of Jacob's death in Egypt and burial at Machpelah is a multi-textured tradition and provides much opportunity for learning and exploration.

Joseph's Bones

Another motif associated with burial in Jewish tradition is that of "Joseph's bones." After returning home from burying his father in Canaan, and subsequently attempting to make peace with his brothers, we read of Joseph's dying request:

I am dying, but God will take account of you, and will bring you up from this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Joseph had the Children of Israel swear, saying: When God takes account of you, bring my bones up from here. And Joseph died, being a hundred and ten years old. (Gen. 50:24 -25)

After an enigmatic life-journey of trauma, tribulation and adventure, the days of Joseph the dreamer, Jacob's beloved son and the esteemed advisor to the Egyptian Pharaoh, finally come to an end. However, unlike his father Jacob, Joseph does not ask his surviving kinfolk to transport him to

Canaan immediately after death. Instead, on his deathbed he speaks of a future era when God will bring all the Hebrews out of Egypt. When that redemption takes place, he says to his brothers, “you shall carry up my bones up from here” (Gen. 50:25) to Canaan, land of his birth. This is Joseph’s end-of-life entreaty, one final petition to his brothers with whom he had a complex relationship and destiny. Subsequently, with Joseph dead and his body mummified and encased in an Egyptian coffin, the Book of Genesis reaches its grand finale (Gen. 50:26) and the Patriarchal era of Biblical history comes to an end.

However, the motif of “Joseph’s bones” continues for centuries in Biblical tradition. It appears twice more in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, and is explored extensively in Midrash. In the Book of Exodus we once again hear of “Joseph’s bones.” After suffering the hardships of slavery under “the king who knew not Joseph” (Ex. 1:8), the Israelites are eventually freed from the grasp of Egyptian oppression. Amidst the chaos of moving a wild and wooly slave nation out of Egypt, their charismatic leader Moses “had taken Joseph’s bones with him; for he had made the Children of Israel swear, yes swear, saying ... bring my bones up from here with you.” (Ex. 13:19)

Throughout the ensuing forty years of desert wandering, nothing more is said in the Biblical text about “Joseph’s bones.” Eventually, after

Moses' death, Joshua leads the Israelite military conquest of Canaan; subsequently, Joshua dies, and only then do "Joseph's bones" reappear for the third and final time. Joshua 24:31 informs us that "the elders who outlived Joshua" attend to the Joseph's final burial in Shechem:

And the bones of Joseph, which the Children of Israel brought out of Egypt, they buried in Shechem, in a parcel of ground which Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of silver; and it became the inheritance of the sons of Joseph. (Josh. 24:32)

The nature of Midrash is that it clarifies contradictions in the Biblical text and also seeks to provide answers to confusing or unknown dimensions of Torah narratives. With regard to Joseph's bones, Midrashic tradition elaborates extensively upon the Biblical material, addressing two central questions: first of all, where exactly were "Joseph's bones" during the centuries of slavery in Egypt? And secondly, how was Moses able to find the location where Joseph's coffin had been placed?

Regarding the whereabouts of "Joseph's bones" (according to Deut. R. 11:7), Joseph's coffin had been hidden by the Egyptians in order to prevent the Hebrews from leaving Egypt. However, like a

mythic character on the Hero's Quest, needing to overcome unending trials and tribulations, Moses fervently searches for Joseph's coffin and the bones hidden therein.

According to Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael (and other *midrashim*) Serah bat Asher, Jacob's granddaughter, the longest-living survivor from Joseph's generation, knew exactly where her Uncle Joseph's coffin had been hidden. According to Midrashic tradition, as a wise old woman, she was able to help Moses discover the specific location where Joseph's bones were to be found, submerged beneath the Nile:

It is told that Serah, the daughter of Asher survived from that generation and she showed Moses the grave of Joseph. She said to him: The Egyptians put him in a small metal coffin which they sunk in the Nile. So Moses went and stood by the Nile. He took a table[t] of gold on which he engraved the Tetragrammaton, and throwing it into the Nile, he cried out and said: "Joseph son of Jacob! The oath to redeem his children, which God swore to our father Abraham, has reached its fulfillment." Immediately Joseph's coffin came up to the surface, and Moses took it. (Mekhilta, Beshalach, 2)

Another Midrashic text, Midrash Ha'Gadol,

delineates a fascinating methodology used by Moses for elevating Joseph's coffin from Nile:

Moses took Joseph's goblet and cut four pieces out of it. On one he drew a lion, on another an ox, on another an eagle, and on another a man. [Then] he stood at the Nile, threw [in] the image of the lion, and said: "Joseph, the time has come for Israel to be redeemed"; but [the coffin] did not rise. He threw in the drawing of the ox, and then of the eagle, but it did not rise. [Finally] he threw in the drawing of the man and said, "Joseph, the time has come." Joseph's coffin immediately floated to the top of the water, and Moses took it. (Midrash Ha'Gadol, end of Genesis)

What is interesting here is the mythic resonance between the Joseph story and the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris. Osiris, an Egyptian deity, connected with the Nile, was a King of Egypt, who ruled with his wife beloved, Isis, as Queen. Killed by his jealous brother Set, Osiris was dismembered and thrown into the river in a coffin. Bereft of her husband, Isis went off in search of Osiris.⁴⁰ Using her magical powers, Isis was able to gather up the fourteen parts of his body from the waters of the Nile, thus resurrecting Osiris—a process quite identical to the one described in Midrash Ha'Gadol, a Midrashic compilation dating from

the 14th century C.E.

Other *midrashim* maintain that because of the loyalty Moses demonstrated in searching for Joseph's bones at the time of the Exodus, he alone merited the unprecedented honor of being buried by God upon his own death. (Deut. 34:6) In the days prior to the departure from Egypt, while the Israelites were greedily gathering booty of silver and gold, Moses would have none of that, and instead embarked upon a passionate search for Joseph's bones. According to Deuteronomy Rabbah:

And while Israel carried the silver and gold which they had taken away from Egypt, Moses was carrying Joseph's coffin. God said to him: "Moses, you say that you have done a small thing; by your life, this act of kindness is a great thing; since as you ignored silver and gold, I too will do unto you this kindness in that I will busy Myself with your burial."
(Deut. R. 11:7)

Once out of Egypt, the Israelites carried Joseph's bones on the trek through Sinai with a reverential sense of the sacred. According to the Babylonian Talmud, both the bones of Joseph, and the Ark of the Covenant were carried by the Israelites side-by-side through the wilderness:

All those years that the Israelites were in the wilderness, those two chests, one of the dead and the other of the Shekhinah, proceeded side by side, and passersby used to ask: “What is the nature of those two chests?” They received the reply: “One is of the dead and the other of the Shekhinah.” “But is it, then, the way of the dead to proceed with the Shekhinah?” They were told, “This one [Joseph] fulfilled all that was written in the other.” (Sotah 13a-13b)

For the Israelites on their forty-year long desert journey, Joseph’s bones are not an after-thought, a residue from ancient days transported with a sense of habituated duty, and nothing more. Instead, just like the Ark of the Covenant and the Ten Commandments contained therein, the ritual carrying of Joseph’s bones are in a sense essential to the spiritual foundation of the nation. In complying with Joseph’s deathbed request to “bring my bones up from here with you” (Ex. 13:19), for the wandering Israelites, the Sinai journey becomes simultaneously both a pilgrimage to freedom, as well as a national funeral procession honoring the dead,⁴ that, at one and the same time, carries forth the legacy of the ancestors.

Eventually, after Moses dies, Joshua and the Israelites traverse the Jordan, and the newly inaugurated Israelite leader is preoccupied with

military and political affairs, and the challenges of settling the land. However, upon Joshua's death, those elders who survive (Josh. 24:31) make arrangements for the final internment of Joseph's bones at Shechem.

And why is Shechem the site of Joseph's final burial asks the Midrash? According to Exodus Rabbah: "it was from Shechem that the brothers of Joseph had [first] stolen him and had him sold" (Ex. R. 20:19). Joseph's life journey comes full circle and, in the end, Joseph's bones are returned to Shechem and to the land of Israel where they are said to remain to this day.

Today, the Cave of Machpelah, Rachel's Tomb and Joseph's Tomb, are all pilgrimage sights in contemporary Israel. They are living symbols and reminders of how Judaism honors the lives and deaths of our Biblical ancestors.

were laid to rest on rock shelves within family burial caves, and later the bones may have been gathered and placed in a collective depository. See Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. II. pp. 213ff.; Eric Meyers, *Jewish Ossuaries: Reburial and Rebirth* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971).

28 Hallote, p. 117ff.

29 Spencer, pp, 112ff.

30 Ibid, p. 120.

31 Schubert Spero, "The Funeral of Jacob: A Joint Hebrew-Egyptian Affair," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 26,1 (Jan-Mar 1998) p. 20.

32 Ibid.

33 Spero suggests that in this period of history, the Hyksos rather than the Egyptian ruled the hill country of Canaan and the lower Negev, requiring an Egyptian travel party to take a longer route to Hebron. Ibid, p. 23-24.

34 See Numbers, Ch. 2.

35 Ibid, p. 24.

36 Spencer, pp. 51-52.

37 Ibid, p. 52.

38 See John F. Sawyer, "Hebrew Words for the Resurrection of the Dead," *Vetus Testamentum*, XXIII, (1973), 218-234.

39 See Raphael, pp. 68-74; 156-160.

40 Jean Houston, *The Passion of Isis and Osiris: A Gateway to Transcendent Love* (New York:

- Random House, 1995).
- 41 Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (eds.), *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: URJ Press, 2008) p. 383.
- 42 Olyan, pp. 30-31.
- 43 Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs. *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907; 1968), p. 704.
- 44 Bar 317-318.
- 45 Olyan, p 31, ft.nt. 11.
- 46 Olyan, p. 35.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Dayan H. Lazarus (trans.), *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud - Moed Katan* (London: The Soncino Press, 1990); and Dov Zlotnick, (trans. and ed.), *The Tractate 'Mourning' - (Semahot)*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966.
- 49 Morris Jastrow, "Dust, Earth and Ashes as Symbols of Mourning Among the Ancient Hebrews" *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. XX (1899) 133-150.
- 50 Olyan, p. 29.
- 51 Bar, p. 333. See also MK 27b, Sem. 9:2.
- 52 See Chaim Denberg (ed.), *Code of Hebrew Law—Shulhan 'Aruk, Yoreh Deah 335-403* (Montreal: Jurisprudence Press, 1954).
- 53 At the time of sitting *Shiva* for both my parents, each time I chose to don a black vest, which was

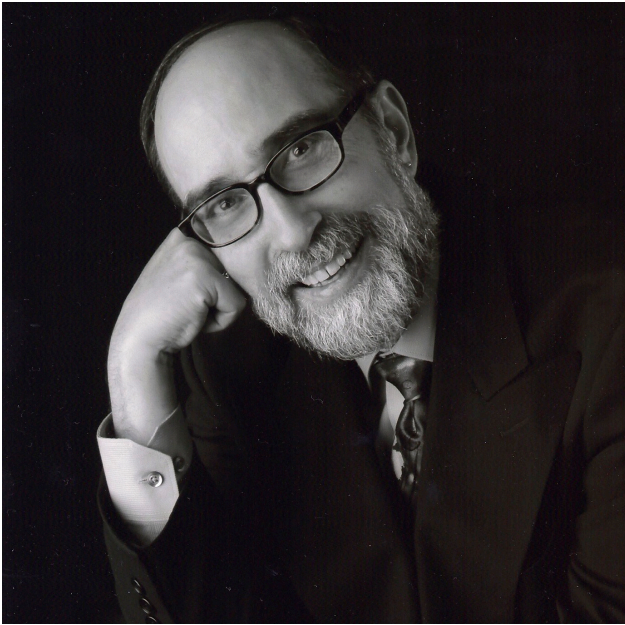


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In this brilliantly researched and clearly articulated treatise, Simcha Paull Raphael takes us on a journey into our ancient past and gives us back our instinctual capacity to understand and do honor to end of life experience and practice. This is 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.

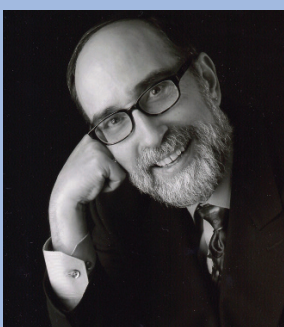
— Rabbi Nadya Gross, Co-Director of Programs, Aleph: Alliance for Jewish Renewal

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



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