

Jacob's and Joseph's Jewish Funerals

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This week's Torah portion is called *Vayechi*, meaning, "He lived." That Hebrew title of the portion, *Vayechi*, is based on the root, *chai*, meaning "life." Rule of thumb: If a portion has the word "life" in the title, it's largely about somebody's death – in this case, two deaths, Jacob's and Joseph's.

We just heard the very last words of the portion, in which we are told that Joseph is embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt, to be buried back in the Land of Israel later, when the Children of Israel are delivered from bondage. That procedure doesn't sound very Jewish: Jews don't traditionally embalm our dead, or hold them in coffins for an indefinite period of time before interment. We bury promptly, in plain wooden caskets, facilitating fulfillment of the biblical injunction: "Dust thou art, and to dust shall you return."

Jacob's death, earlier in the chapter, is met with similar ritual. Also embalmed, Jacob is buried back in Canaan more quickly than Joseph, but only after forty days of mourning and a funeral procession all the way from Egypt. Again, these rites don't sound very Jewish!

Traditional Jewish funeral customs are based on sound principles. Everybody is equal in death: The caskets of the rich and powerful are supposed to be the same as those of the humble poor. We don't deny the harsh reality of death. We avoid makeup and hair styling for public viewings, at which people politely proclaim, "Oh, doesn't she look peaceful? Just like she's sleeping!" No, our caskets are closed, the body now hidden from human sight, as will be the case forever more.

We proceed to burial with alacrity. Judaism enjoins two obligations upon a person's passing: honoring the dead and comforting the mourners. Our tradition teaches that mourners are not open to comfort "while their dead lie before them." Until the funeral rituals are complete, mourners are anxious about details and arrangements, airport runs and meals, not to mention concern about how they're going to hold up at the service.

We lovingly place the coffin into the Earth, and we use our hands or shovels to fill the grave. That "thud" on the casket lid is hard to hear, but it is also an

important first step in healing, as Jewish ritual brings us face-to-face with the harsh reality of death's finality.

How, then, could Jacob, the man known as Israel himself, be embalmed, with a forty day period of mourning and long journey preceding his burial? How could Joseph instruct that his body be carried out of Egypt in the presumably distant future?

The answer may be simple: Jewish funeral tradition hasn't yet been established. The rabbis codified those rituals I described, which are not laid out in the Torah itself. *Etz Hayim*, the Torah Commentary of Conservative Judaism, rationalizes: "It is well known that mummification was bound up with the Egyptian worship of Osiris and conceptions of the afterlife. The embalming of Jacob and Joseph, however, was a purely practical measure, for Jacob is to be buried far from his place of death, and Joseph is to be reinterred many years later." We should not be surprised, then, that the Law Committee of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly, generally prohibits embalming, except "when civil law requires it or when it is necessary to protect the body from offensive odors while being moved long distances for burial."

The truth is likely simpler. Jacob, Joseph and family adopt the customs of the people among whom they live. No, we needn't imagine that they embalm in service of Osiris. Instead, like American Jewish children trick-or-treating or American Jewish men removing their hats for the national anthem, Israel and his children adopt the secular ways of their neighbors while remaining true to their faith.

For me, traditional Jewish funeral ritual is deeply meaningful. When my time comes, I hope that my body will be simply prepared for burial, with loved ones filling the grave, tucking me in for my eternal rest. I advocate fidelity to the traditions our people have long observed, particularly when there's no moral or ethical reason to deviate from time-honored custom.

At the same time, I respect the reality that different people, equally faithful to Judaism, make a variety of choices. In a previous generation, southern Reform Jews were routinely embalmed, even holding public viewings, though I'm grateful that practice has faded. Some still prefer embalming and perhaps a private viewing for family, with entombment following in a mausoleum or in a sealed in-ground vault. Others choose cremation. A few are motivated to donate their bodies to UAMS to enable medical education. I condemn none of those choices,

and readily officiate at our members' Jewish funeral services, whatever physical rituals they prefer.

But how can those funerals be Jewish, if the rituals are so alien to our tradition? The answer may be as simple as a rhetorical question: "If Jacob and Joseph were embalmed; why should modern Jews not choose whatever rites they or their families personally prefer?" However, a better response is found, perhaps obscured, in the words and in the very name of this week's portion, *Vayechi*.

Jacob's actual funeral takes place on the banks of the Jordan River, just as Joseph, his brothers, and his entourage are about to enter the Holy Land with Israel's remains. There, Torah says, "they held a great and solemn lamentation." The Hebrew word for "lamentation" there is *misped*, based on the same root as *hesped*, which means "eulogy."

Some of my Christian colleagues complain about eulogies, modern additions to their funeral services, which some clergy regard as distracting from the religious message that their faith intends for those rites. Jews, who don't share or even particularly understand that Christian faith, often leave those funerals feeling cold, crudely joking that they feel like they've been at "Jesus's funeral," not a remembrance of their friend or loved one.

For Judaism, though, the eulogy is the essential element of the funeral service, and has been for at least 2000 years – perhaps even longer, dating back to Jacob. We eulogize our dead to honor them, to extol the ways they have lived their lives. We eulogize our dead to remind ourselves that we can emulate their finest qualities. We eulogize our loved ones to affirm that their lives meaningfully transcend their days on Earth, assuring their immortality.

Perhaps, then, Jacob's really is the first Jewish funeral, whatever the burial rites. With a eulogy, the *mitzvah* is observed, the mourners honor their dead, and can then get on with the serious business of mourning.

Perhaps that's why this Torah portion is called *Vayechi*, "he lived;" and not *Vayamot*, "he died." Yes, the portion is about the deaths of two patriarchs; but those deaths, like the end of each human life, present opportunities to reflect upon life and celebrate it.

When we complete the reading of a Book of the Torah, as we do tonight, we exclaim, *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek*; "Be strong, strong, and let us strengthen ourselves." When we mark the end of a life, let us uphold the eulogy's rightful

place as the focal point of our funeral ritual, extolling the good and great characteristics of the person we mourn. Then, let us be emboldened by our memories and recollections, strengthening one another as we move forward, in life.

Amen.