

VAYECHI (GENESIS 47:28-50:26)

Teach Your Children/Parents Well...

2013 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Jacob had business to attend to.

Seventeen years after settling in Egypt, Jacob knew that his life was coming to a close. The first order of business was arranging his funeral. Jacob knew that the Egyptians respected him as a holy man. One thing he did NOT want was end up under a pyramid!

The time approached for Israel to die, so he called for his son Joseph, and said to him, "... please do not bury me in Egypt! I will lie down with my fathers; take me out of Egypt and bury me in their tomb."
(Genesis, 47:29-30)

The Tribes of Israel were not fully set up, and Joseph's sons had not yet received their grandfather's blessings. Joseph was told that his father was sick, and he came with Ephraim and Menasseh. Jacob informed them that the Twelve Tribes of Israel would be expanded to thirteen. The Tribe of Joseph would now become the two Tribes of Ephraim and Menasseh. Jacob went on to bless his two grandsons, and predict greatness for both of them, especially Ephraim, the younger one.

The rest of Jacobs's sons had not yet received their blessings and prophecies for the future. Jacob summoned them and took care of business. He blessed those who needed blessings, and he reprimanded those who needed reprimands.

Jacob reiterated his request to be buried in the family plot. Then he closed his eyes and was gone.

Every Torah Portion has a name; it usually comes from the first word or words of the Portion. This one is called "*Vayechi – And he lived*", from the words *Vayechi Yaakov – And Jacob lived in Egypt for seventeen years... The time approached for Israel to die ...*(Ibid, 47:28-29)

Isn't it ironic that the Torah Portion "And he lived" is all about Jacob's death?

The National Association of Chevra Kadisha has requested rabbis all over the country to dedicate this Shabbos to speaking and teaching about final preparations. No, it's not a pleasant topic, but it's an essential one. You may find some of what I write upsetting. If so, all the better!

CHEVRA KADISHA

The Chevra Kadisha (Sacred Society) is a group that exists in every Jewish community to take care of the final arrangements when someone passes away.

Contrast these two scenes.

A funeral director, soft spoken and respectful in front of the family, goes downstairs to “work on the body.” Away from the customer, he can be his gruff self. While chatting with co-workers about sports, politics, or an off-color joke he just heard, he punctures, drains, and performs various other indignities to the undressed departed. The funeral director can be a different gender than the departed. They lift the body and dump it into the casket. Did they bang the departed’s head against the side? So what? He doesn’t know the difference! Time to dress the departed in his favorite suit. Cut the pants in half and lay them over the top. Who cares about the bottom?

(Have I exaggerated in describing this scene? In some cases, yes. In some cases, no. Some funeral directors are genuinely respectful people, in public and in private. But I’ve been behind the scenes, and spoken with others who have been as well. Trust me, this stuff happens. And worse. Much worse.)

Now, for the Chevra Kadisha. Not just anyone gets into the Chevra Kadisha; they must be people with sterling reputations, known to be pious people. Men attend to men, and women attend to women. This preparation is known as a “*Taharah – Purification*.” They recite prayers before they begin to prepare the departed for his final journey. The only conversation permitted is discussion necessary for accomplishing the Mitzvah at hand. The body is washed, using water that is neither too hot nor too cold to make a living person uncomfortable. The departed’s private parts are kept covered at all times. Various verses are recited as the members of the Chevra Kadisha reverently dress the departed in a simple white shroud, the design of which is based upon the garments that the High Priest in the Temple used to wear on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year. Every Jew, learned or simple, pauper or king, is holy, and buried in the same white shroud. In death, we are all equal.

When they complete their holy work, they address the departed by his/her Hebrew name, and ask the departed for forgiveness if they failed somehow in providing the highest manifestation of honor and dignity for the departed.

Which way do YOU prefer?

(For more information about the sacred work of the Chevra Kadisha, [click here](#).)

CREMATION

It is strictly forbidden to cremate a body; it needs to be buried in the ground. Some people find the concept of having their ashes scattered to the wind to be somehow romantic and poetic. I've got news for you; there often aren't any ashes at all. The flames are so hot, that often the organs and skin are totally vaporized. Sometimes all that remain are teeth and bones, which then go into a grinder to be pulverized into the coarse grit that people call ashes. Still sound romantic?

(For more information on the Jewish View of Cremation, see "The Cremation Challenge.")

Larry (not his real name) grew up in a traditional Jewish family. But when he got older, he got away from religion, and decided that he wanted to be cremated. When he passed away, his wife asked me if there was any type of ceremony that I could do to accompany the cremation. In fact, Judaism is so adamantly opposed to cremation that we do not allow cremated remains to be interred in a cemetery. We want families to know in advance that it will not be permitted.

I told Larry's wife that we believe that the soul lives on after death, and that the soul is very much aware of what is going on. I told her that I believe that if G-d would allow Larry to communicate with us now, he would beg us to ignore his mistaken request to be cremated.

She agreed. Other times, I haven't been as successful. One woman, a Holocaust survivor, wanted to go up in smoke the way her relatives did. Her daughter insisted on fulfilling that request.

I received a call from Linda, whose father was dying. He had made it clear that he wanted his organs donated for research, with rest of his remains to be cremated. As strongly as Linda opposed this desecration of her father's body, she was helpless to do anything about it. Her father was in a coma, so she couldn't discuss it with him. Her brother had Power of Attorney, and he insisted on cutting and incinerating his father.

STARVATION

Sadie contacted me to discuss her funeral. She wasn't ill, but she was an older lady, and wanted to make sure that her desires were known. "Rabbi," she said, "when my time comes to go, I want you to officiate at my funeral."

As uncomfortable as it was to have this conversation, I agreed. I read over and approved her pre-arrangement contract with the funeral home. Yes, the Chevra Kadisha would perform the Taharah and dress her in shrouds. Yes, she would be placed into a plain wood casket. Everything was in order. Or, so I thought.

A few years later, Sadie went into the hospital. One day, her daughter called me to remind me about the prearrangements. "Mom is going," she told me. "Could you come to see her?"

I went to visit Sadie in the hospital. Although she didn't communicate, her smile told me that she recognized me. She didn't appear to be uncomfortable. I prayed for her and told her that she should pray too, in any way she could, and that G-d would hear her prayers. Sadie's daughter thanked me for my visit, and told me she'd be in touch.

Later that evening I received a call from a rabbi who had just visited her. "Are you aware," he asked, "that Sadie has been disconnected from all life support, including nutrition and hydration?"

"Impossible!" I responded. "I was there a few hours ago. She has several tubes going into her."

"Not anymore," he responded. "I was just there!"

It just couldn't be, I thought. I called the daughter. "Is your mother receiving nutrition and hydration?" I asked.

That's when I was read the Riot Act. The daughter was the designated Power of Attorney, and she read me the paperwork that legally authorized her to starve her mother to death. There was absolutely nothing I could do to stop it. At least, not anymore.

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN

Moshe was dying. He was not communicating. His daughter called me to discuss his funeral.

"Does he have a burial plot?" I asked.

No.

"Do you know where he would want to be buried?"

No.

During the last several years, she had occasionally tried to move the conversation to discuss it. But he always changed the subject. So now she didn't know. If only he had told her!

Sadie, the lady whose daughter removed her from life support. She DID tell her daughter what she wanted. She made it very clear that she wanted to be buried according to Jewish law, and she got it. But she never told her daughter that she also wanted to die according to Jewish Law, so her daughter didn't know to accommodate it.

TEACH YOUR PARENTS

Sometimes children (or rabbis!) have to teach parents what they need to know. Moshe's daughter should have pushed him to tell her where he wanted to be buried. When Sadie asked me to officiate at her funeral, I should have used that opportunity to make sure she had a Halachic Living Will that would

authorize an Orthodox rabbi to make end-of-life decisions in accordance with Jewish Law on her behalf, rather than leaving her daughter to make a cruel mistake.

If only Linda had been able to convince her father, while he was well, that cremation is wrong, she could have avoided the tragedy of her well-meaning brother authorizing this desecration.

PROTECT YOURSELF LEGALLY

Health care in the United States is becoming more complex each day. As costs continue to rise and we move closer to the European model of health care, many things we took for granted are quickly changing. Laws being passed state-by-state and protocols adopted by hospitals give doctors and hospitals greater power to make medical decisions for you. These decisions may be contrary to your wishes and in violation of Jewish Law. The need for every Jew to have a Halachic Living Will and/or a Health Care Proxy is vital.

This is a serious life and death issue. The time to act is now. Every Jew needs to begin thinking seriously about an appropriate agent, an alternate and a Rabbi for their Proxy and Will.

The National Association of Chevra Kadisha has created the Emergency Medical Education and Signup (“EMES”) Campaign and the EMES card. The EMES card is designed to fit in a sleeve with your Driver License or ID so that it is seen by emergency medical responders at a time of emergency. The card is specifically designed to help ensure that Jewish Law is followed when the agent cannot be located. It also clearly states your objection to autopsy and cremation in cases of sudden death.

You can find more information on the EMES card, as well as links to help you set up a Halachic Living Will and Health Care Proxy [here](#).

You can make your burial wishes known with this form.

It is not pleasant to talk about dying. But it is even more unpleasant to allow tragic mistakes to take place because parents (and children) never told their children (and parents) what they needed to know.

I pointed out above that this week’s Torah Portion is called “*Vayechi – And he Lived*,” even though it talks about Jacob’s death. Our Sages make the comment that “Our father Jacob didn’t die,” which the Talmud then follows up with the obvious question that the Torah tells us that he did die, and that he was buried. So what is meant by the statement that Jacob didn’t die?

By making sure that his children knew his desires, intended to follow his directions, and would live their lives according to his values, Jacob insured that his memory and his legacy would live on forever.

We can, and we must, do the same.

Have a good Shabbos.

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