

Parasha VaYechi:

The Bones of Joseph

By Harlen Wall

This week's bible portion is known as the "portion of life," and yet at the same time, it's a "closed" portion; that is to say, there is no space in the Torah Scroll between last week's portion and this week's.

The title of our weekly parasha is VaYechi, which means "and he lived," indicating the actual years of Jacob's life. The Sages of Israel and the ancient Jewish commentaries, reveal that this particular portion is closed because the eyes of Jacob will soon close, marking the end of his life.

This portion might also be closed to foreshadow Jacob's prophesy of the End of Days, which will remain closed to him and his children. This blocked vision is one of the mysteries that we must unravel.

Yet, perhaps the greatest mystery of this closed portion is the final verse, which seems almost mundane. "Joseph died at the age of 110. He was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt." Gen. 50:26

What does the death of Joseph have to do with this portion of life? And why is such an insignificant verse used to seal up the Book of Genesis, the foundation of the Torah? Could it be that this seemingly insignificant verse is one of the most important in all of the Torah? To answer this question, however, we must first confront the mystery of two passages that appear at the beginning of the parasha (portion).

Before his death, Jacob will bless his grandchild, Ephraim, saying: "I know my son. I know. The older one will also become a nation. He too will attain greatness, but his younger brother will become even greater and his descendants will become the "meloah hagoyim."

Meloah hagoyim is translated as "fullness of the Gentiles."

A close look at the original Hebrew text, has already produced a rather shocking piece of information. What many thinks of as a New Testament term, related to Gentiles, is actually an ancient Hebrew blessing.

Jacob will bestow an important prophesy in the form of a blessing to his grandchild, Ephraim, in Egypt. The blessing will only make sense centuries later, after the death of King Solomon, when the northern kingdom of Israel (also called Ephraim or The 10 Lost Tribes) will be exiled and scattered around the world.

The House of Israel (Ephraim) will be dispersed to all corners of the globe and eventually become the Fullness of the Gentiles. After forty years of wandering in the desert, Moses will tell

the children of Israel that they'll be scattered across the earth, but G-d will gather them together at the End of Days.

This brings us to the next mystery. After blessing Joseph's children, Jacob will bless his own children. Before the blessing, however, he says that he wants to share his vision of the End of Days.

"Jacob called his sons. He said assemble and I will tell you what will happen at the End of Days. Gather and listen sons of Jacob; listen to your father Israel." Gen. 49:1

After expressing a desire to share an important vision or prophesy with his children about the End of Days, the aged Patriarch is noticeably silent. He says nothing and merely proceeds to dispense a series of blessings to his children.

Would Jacob really tease his children? And would G-d tease us?

A closer look at the cryptic Hebrew text reveals another piece of the biblical puzzle, as we move closer to answering the ultimate question about the meaning of the last verse that seals the Book of Genesis.

Once again, the treasure is buried beneath the surface of the text and we are called to turn over this spiritual topsoil again and again until we meet our Creator and His Truth hidden in His Word.

The answer can be found in the Hebrew word he-kav-tzu, which means "to gather." Jacob first tells his children hay-us-fu (assemble) and then he repeats himself but this time he uses a different word, telling them to gather.

The Sages of Israel teach that the secret to the End of Days is the gathering together of all ISRAEL. We must understand the difference between the Hebrew words for assemble and gather.

To assemble, in Hebraic thinking, means to unite those who are close or near to each other (Jacob's children were told to assemble around his bed). The concept of gathering means to unite those who are distant or far away.

So, Jacob was not as silent as we initially thought. Our investigation and close look at the text has uncovered another clue to solving the mystery. Implicit in Jacob's dramatic call to his children, is the answer.

He didn't need to say more.

The End of Days is hinted at through the blessing given to Ephraim; that his descendants would become the "fullness of the Gentiles." And from the words of Jacob to his children, we know that his vision of the End of Days, involves, at least to a great extent, the in(gathering) of those who are lost and far away.

The Lost Sheep of Israel.

When the net is extended to gather in the House of Israel (also called Ephraim) all human beings are welcome to enter into a covenant-relationship with the G-d of Israel (the last two thousand years millions of Gentiles have come to believe in the G-d of Israel).

This was the meaning of the blessing Jacob gave to Ephraim; that his descendants would become “the fullness of the nations or Gentiles.”

OK, we can now look at the last verse of the Torah portion and tie everything together. We are told that Joseph died and was placed in a coffin in Egypt. So, why is it important that Joseph remain in Egypt? And why did Joseph make his people promise to take his bones out of Egypt when they leave?

To answer this question, we need to look at an important event in the life of Joseph. When Aishet Potiphar (Potiphar’s wife) tried to seduce Joseph, he managed to rise above the temptation. It was an almost impossible test for a man to pass. In his victory over lust, he rose above his own nature.

In Psalm 144, the Psalmist writes about the exodus from Egypt and says “what ails you oh sea that you flee.” The Midrash (ancient Jewish commentary on the Torah) teaches that it was the bones of Joseph that caused the Sea to split (at least one factor).

Of course, in His mercy, the LORD wanted to save Israel. But it was also the merit of Joseph and his victory over his own nature (lust and base desires of the flesh) that caused the sea to split. Now we can answer the question of why the last verse of the Book of Genesis tells us that Joseph was placed in a coffin in Egypt. What seems insignificant to human beings is often sacred and holy to the LORD.

In the merit of the righteous Joseph, who maintained his purity and holiness in exile, Israel was able to cross the Red Sea. If a mortal man, of dust of the earth, could overcome his own nature, then a giant sea could part and overcome its own nature. When the sea saw the bones of Joseph and the wooden coffin that the children of Israel were carrying, it fled (as the Psalmist wrote). Without the bones of Joseph, the children of Israel might not have crossed the sea, and without crossing the sea, there would be no Torah and no Messiah and ultimately no gathering of Israel from the corners of the earth in the End of Days.

The ultimate redemption of Israel (and the world) would not be possible without Joseph. And there is the story of life. Joseph’s family looked upon him as the source of their trouble when all along he was the source of their salvation. He saved them during his life and after. Even his bones cried out for mercy to save his people.

And as the mighty waters of the Red Sea parted in one of the greatest miracles of all time, and the children of Israel carried the wooden coffin across the dry bed, perhaps only then could they understand who Joseph really was.

It might seem strange to us that a box of dry bones could cause an entire sea to split but it wasn’t only the bones that cried out. The soul of Joseph cried out from heaven to save his people.

It was only the cry of a man who had endured unspeakable pain so that others could live; a man who had maintained his purity and holiness during the long and dark night of exile, who could cry out one last time: Ani Yosef.

I am Joseph.