

Jacob's Final Request — Some Mystical Insights

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Va-y'chi* (Gen. 47:28–50:26)

By Frank Holtzman

“Vayechi Ya'akov b'erets Mitsrayim sh'va esrei shanah....”
“Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years....”

Then he instructed them, saying to them, “I am about to be gathered to my kin. Bury me with my fathers in the cave which is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave which is in the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre, in the land of Canaan, the field that Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site.” – Gen. 49:29-30

Jacob's final request was that his body should be taken back to the land of Canaan and buried in the cave in the field of Machpelah that his grandfather Abraham had purchased from Ephron the Hittite. Why would he make such a request in view of the distance and difficulties that would be encountered to fulfill it? He certainly was aware that, as the father of Joseph, he would have been given a state burial with all the honors Egypt could bestow upon a person of elevated status.

The Zohar explains that the Cave of Machpelah is much more than a family burial plot. The mystics believe that the cave also is the burial place of Adam and Eve. Furthermore, the cave will lead the righteous souls of the departed out of this world and into the heavenly Garden of Eden. There is a story in the Zohar about Abraham discovering this for himself when, in searching for a suitable burial site for Sarah, he could smell the fragrance of paradise wafting across the field of Machpelah. Being curious, he entered the cave, where he encountered the forms of Adam and Eve, and learned from them the truth about where he was. The heavenly fragrance even permeated his clothing.

“Come and behold: When Abraham entered the cave for the first time, he saw a light. The dust was removed from before him revealing two graves. Adam rose from his grave in his rightful form, saw Abraham, and laughed. By that, Abraham knew that he was destined to be buried there.”¹

Ephron the Hittite, not being as spiritually advanced as Abraham, could detect nothing unusual about this property. The Zohar states that Ephron saw only darkness in the cave. And so, being willing to sell the property, it passed into the hands of those for whom it was ultimately intended.

Turning to Jacob's experience in the Cave, the Zohar states: “Come and behold: When Jacob entered the cave, all the perfumes of the Garden of Eden filled it. The cave was a light for a candle burned [there]. When the Patriarchs came to Jacob in Egypt to be with him, the candlelight was gone

[from the cave]. When Jacob came into the cave, the candle returned. The cave was then perfected in all its needs.”

“Never has the cave received any other man: and never will it. The souls of the righteous pass [after their demise] before [the Fathers] inside the cave, so that they will awake and behold the seed they left in the world, and rejoice before the Holy One, blessed be he.”²

The Zohar goes on to explain that when Jacob resided in Egypt, the land was blessed, water flowed, famine ceased. While Jacob was alive in this physical world, no nation, how ever well versed in magic, could rule over Israel. Now it is known that the Egyptians practiced the black arts and sorcery. Upon Jacob’s passing from this physical world, the Egyptians realized that judgment would eventually rain down upon them. This is an allusion to the catastrophe of the ten plagues, which devastated the land and almost destroyed Egypt for some hundred years later.

The relevance of all this is that our connection to Jacob helps ensure that Light flows into our lives even during times of great Judgment and negativity.³ Even those who have no genuine merit of their own, will be permitted to receive a spiritual blessing in this world and be given a portion in the world to come.

¹ The Zohar by Rav Shimon bar Yochai, with commentary by Rav Yehuda Ashlag, published by the Kabbalah Centre International Inc. Compiled and edited by Rabbi Michael Berg, © 2003, Vol. 4, p. 67.

² Ibid., Vol. 7, pp. 457-458.

³ Ibid., Vol. 7, Pg. 436.