

# After Jacob Dies

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

What if?

As soon as Jacob dies the brothers panic. They thought "What if Joseph really hates us and will now take revenge upon us?" In a way, it was natural that the guilty consciences of the brothers would fester and lead them to worry. Perhaps Joseph was only concerned with avoiding conflict and revenge while his father was alive.

But the question is whether Joseph ever did anything to make them think he was continuing to bear them a grudge? In fact, if you look at the text, there is nothing there that even hints at this possibility. But Rashi the great commentator suggests, basing himself on the Midrash, that for as long as Jacob was alive they all came together to eat but now that he had died Joseph stopped coming. And in a way, you might think this was just human nature. Perhaps his obligations became more burdensome as the famine got worse. Perhaps he really did not have time or maybe he had other priorities?

Jewish parents usually want their children to come around on Friday evenings to eat together and be together and most children do try to oblige if it's at all possible. But sometimes they have other obligations. And later, slowly they may drift away and establish their own families and have their own friends around. That's what Rashi, suggests happened here. But it does seem to be speculative. Why did he suggest it?

The Midrash also says that Joseph kept away for another reason. He said that he was embarrassed that because of his political power Jacob always sat him next to him at the top of the table and above the older brothers. Joseph himself felt uncomfortable about this and thought it would just make the brothers feel even more insecure. While his father ordered it, out of respect he did not demur. But after he had died he thought he was being tactful. He stayed away to avoid hurting the brothers' feelings.

Both ideas carry with them an important lesson. We need to be transparent otherwise people can get the wrong impression. If you want to excuse yourself from some event you should explain why otherwise people may think it is for some other reason and may be offended. And if you are offended you also need to talk it out, to go and have a friendly chat and then you might discover no offense was intended.

Too many family arguments are based on misunderstandings and too many misunderstandings are caused by people not being honest about what they really feel and why.