

Burials

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

When Jacob dies, in this week's Sedra, he is embalmed by the Egyptians who were experts in mummification. We are naturally surprised. According to the Jewish tradition one does not mummify a body or put it on display after death. Rather we bury it as soon as possible. This looks like a massive concession to Egyptian culture or perhaps a sign of how assimilated the children of Jacob had become. Joseph had risen to the very top of Egyptian society. We know he looked and lived like an Egyptian and that was why the brothers could not recognize him. And so perhaps there was pressure for him to do what all good Egyptians did.

Yet he did not put Jacob in a pyramid. He did follow his dying wish to be taken to the family tomb in the cave of Mahpelah. And there he was buried. But to get there his body had to travel for weeks through very hot barren territory. Perhaps the mummification was not after all a concession to Egyptian culture, just a very practical way of preserving the body for its long journey in this world. It took forty days to mummify the body. Then they had an official period of mourning in Egypt but we are not told how long for. After that there was a kind of State Funeral and the court as well as the family journeyed up to Goren HaAtad in Transjordan where they had another seven days of mourning and finally the body was carried into the cave. Was all that Israelite custom of Egyptian.

Interestingly Joseph himself did not allow his body to be put in a mausoleum and there's no mention of mummification. Instead he was put in a box ready to move when his people did.

The lesson is clear. We all make some concessions to the dominant non-Jewish society we live in, in our clothes, customs even attitudes. Later, the great Shmuel in Babylonia will declare that "The Law of the Land is the Law." We respect local laws when they do not conflict with our religious obligations. At different times in our lives we are less religious and at other times more. But it is the final impression we leave behind, the impact we have on the next generation that matters. And Jacob finally buried in the Cave of Mahpelah is the ultimate symbol of his belonging to us, his descendants. And our connection with the land that we as a people originated from.