

Jeremy Kelly

It's hard not to think of the late, great, Frank Sinatra's "My Way" as you read this week's Parsha. I am mindful of his lyrics: "...and now the end is near, and I must face the final curtain... but I did it my way...." He could be summarising this week's parsha!

Jacob is on his deathbed; he summons his favourite wife's son, Joseph, and history repeats itself. There's some slick handiwork in swapping blessings for the eldest with the youngest! There's no trading for a lentil stew this time, but the memory of past actions is clearly present.

A brutally honest and sometimes, excoriating character assessment is made of his children. It's a raw and honest reflection on his parenting. It concludes with the usual "gathering unto his people" that describes the passing of our Patriarchs.

Death is a feature of this Parsha – despite its name VaYechi, which means "and he lived." I want to make various observations on the topic as the centre of my drasha.

I learnt about embalming during my research for this parsha. Jacob is embalmed and schlepped back to the Cave of Machpelah. I suspect many of you will be unfamiliar with the custom & practice of embalming; it's not a "Jewish" thing. And yet, Joseph embalms his father and is embalmed himself (before being transported with the exodus back to the home country). And this, despite Jewish law forbidding embalming and cremation – perhaps too close to heathen practice?

Embalming uses solar heat to mummify a corpse. Unsurprisingly, it lends itself to Egyptian burial practices, given the climate in the area. Egyptians buried corpses in the hot desert sands or resorted to more exotic practices of removing the internal organs. Encyclopaedia Judaica does go into detail, but I'll spare you this, mindful of our upcoming kiddush.

There's a curious description of Joseph's physicians taking 40 days to embalm Jacob, but the Egyptians mourned him 70 days – a period that the Grecian author Herodotus (who carries the moniker, the father of history) describes as required for embalming. The more usual customs of Jewish burial are sidestepped for Egyptian customs it seems, but Jacob's corpse is designated for removal, illustrating that you can take the boy out of Canaan.... And yet when the cortege (see below) reaches Goren Ha-Atad, Joseph sits shiva for seven days, observed by the local Canaanites as a solemn mourning by the Egyptians....

Pharaoh's insecurity remains. Despite his vizier enabling avoidance of starvation and the gathering of immense wealth for the monarchy, he's reluctant to let Joseph leave to bury his father. Admittedly, he enables his departure with his brothers, a phalanx of officials, civil servants, and the aristocracy of the time, together with chariots and horsemen – on a side note, I don't think that lot would fit along the Bulls Cross Ride in Cheshunt when I depart, so I've acknowledged this may not be possible for me! But Joseph and his brothers must leave their wives and their kids together with the flocks of cattle back in Egypt. Pharaoh wants to ensure his senior minister has a reason to return.

The juxtaposition of a Canaanite, observed as an Egyptian, burying his Jewish father leads me neatly to my own circumstances. (I never promised you an upbeat drasha, ladies & gentlemen). After all Benjamin Franklin said “nothing is certain except death and taxes.”

As many of us may have already experienced, the Jewish way in death & mourning is highly prescriptive and structured. But what of the non-Jewish way? How does a Jew like me bury his non-Jewish parents (may they live to 120)? What can I do when the time comes?

Some years ago, my wife rather helpfully wrote an essay on the topic as part of her Masters (with a merit, noch!) in Jewish education. And I quote extensively from that paper now: She quotes Rabbi Moses Isserles (16th century) who says: “Should a person be stringent upon himself and mourn someone whom he is not obligated to mourn... we do not deter him.”

The good news is I can mourn; it’s my choice and you, my kehilla, should not deter me. But one must wonder whether this is sympathy for the mourner or a concern how the community might be perceived by the outside world, as opposed to meeting the needs of the mourner.

Mourning is complicated further by the non-Jewish custom to not bury the deceased for some days, unlike Jewish custom that gets you in the ground quickly so you can begin mourning. I’ve always been attracted by the speed of Jewish burial. Waiting nearly two weeks for my maternal grandmother’s cremation was both painful and tortuous. Perhaps, as gruesome is my mother’s subsequent decision to place Gran’s ashes under a rose in a pot that now sits outside the front of the house; she moved with my parents when they downsized a couple of years ago. On the upside, my gran produces a lovely bloom every year!

Rashi & Rabbenu Tam discuss the precise time that mourning starts; inevitably they disagree: Rashi proposes it starts at the point the coffin is sealed. Rabbenu Tam disagrees, except where there’s a delay due to bad weather or the deceased being in another country, where the law follows Rashi.

There are considerable debates about whether a convert can start shiva before the levaya, and when do the shloshim begin? At the conclusion of shiva or after the burial? And can shiva be undertaken before burial? Sadly, for me, there’s no clarity surrounding the start of shiva... I guess I’ll have to make that decision myself.

I shall conclude this debate on death by observing that we’ve reached the end of the beginning. The symmetry of Bereishit with the creating of the world is concluded with the demise of the last patriarch; yet God’s promise to Abraham that the Jewish people will possess the land of Israel is yet unfulfilled.

I love Bereishit. Its stories of familial disfunction are so real; I mean, who hasn’t wanted to slaughter their teenage son?

The book begins with the ultimate act of life giving creating and concludes with death and uncertainty. And just in case you’re wondering: Mum & Dad aren’t going into plant pots!

Shabbat Shalom.

Jeremy