

Since we are in chag, we divert from our regular Torah reading to revisit the experience of *yetziat Mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt. Our reading for this week, opens with the Israelites setting out, and in the second and third verse of the portion, we read:

Exodus 13:19: And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying, "God will be sure to take notice of you: then you shall carry up my bones from here with you."

When I first looked at this passage, I was quite enamored of the image of Moshe taking the bones of Joseph out of Egypt. These bones are mentioned only twice in Torah, 3 times total in Tanakh, the Hebrew bible. The first time is the very last three verses of Genesis, chapter 50:24-6: At length, Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here." Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

In this way, Genesis closes by reminding us that the "happy ending" of the family reunited in Egypt is not really an ending at all; that there will be more to the journey. But also, Rabbi Tali Adler, in her article "Ghosts in the Haggadah," points out: "We did not end up in Egypt by accident. We were there because of a tragedy precipitated by unthinkable hatred: Yosef's brothers selling him into slavery and deceiving their father, Ya'akov, into thinking that Yosef was dead. We were in Egypt because we were a family torn apart. . ." Even though the family has been reconciled, they have not fully undone the harm of sending Joseph to Egypt; ultimately it will be upon his descendants to bring his bones back.

So when Moshe goes to collect Joseph's bones as we leave Egypt, Rabbi Adler suggests, "It is a doubled experience: redemption side-by-side with atonement, bones and unbaked bread, together, making the exit from the land of Jewish sin and Jewish slavery. The story of life and freedom is twinned with a ghost story, a story of a people haunted by their greatest sin, and accompanied for forty years by the bones of the man they sinned against.

This story, the one in which מצרים יציאת /the Exodus is, at least in part, a long march to atonement, does not end until Yosef is finally buried in Shekhem, the place, Rashi points out, from which his brothers sold him all those years ago."

Joseph's bones are carried, silently, throughout the 40 years of wandering. They are only mentioned one more time, again at the very end of something, this time at the end of the book of Joshua, which follows Deuteronomy; when the Israelite conquest of Canaan is complete and the Israelites are ready to settle in their land, Joshua, who has led the conquest since the death of Moshe dies, and only then do the Israelites bury Joseph's bones, as it is written (Joshua23:32): The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought for a hundred kesitahs from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, and which had become a heritage of the Josephites.

In this way, the Torah narrative does affirm Rabbi Adler's suggestion – Joseph's final burial and the Israelite's ability to rest and settle in their land occur at the same time. And I am struck by this notion that inherent to the liberation is the carrying of Joseph's bones; that a true liberation must involve us releasing the skeletons, so to speak, locked up in our closet – or wherever they have been locked – and bearing them along our journey until we find an honorable place to lay them to rest.

When I shared this teaching last night with our Board, one of our members pointed out that to the extent that Joseph's bones are a metaphor for ancestral sins and traumas we carry, we may not ever be able to lay them to rest. And upon further reflection, I realize that Torah reflects that truth as well.

Because in our liturgical cycle, we don't read that final rest in Joshua. The Torah reading cycle ends at the end of Deuteronomy, with the people across the river from the land of Israel, poised to enter, and then picks back up with the creation of the world. Even in our haftarah cycle, the prophetic readings assigned to each Torah reading, we never read the very end of Joshua; though we read excerpts from the final chapter at various points in the year, those final verses in which Joseph is buried and the people settle on their allotments are left unread.

So for our liturgical purposes, we are always carrying Joseph's bones, silently. Perhaps this can help us conceive of our tasks as Jews in America the 21st century, in the waning days of CoVID: to unearth the mistakes and harms that we and those who came before committed; to lift them up to the light, and to embrace them as a burden that must be carried, a reminder of the work that must be done to make restitution.

As I was studying about this, I found a midrash in the Talmud, in Masechet Sotah, which imagines that throughout the 40 years of wandering, Joseph's bones were carried in an identical structure to the ark of the covenant that carried the tablets of the Torah.

Page 13a of Masechet Sotah says, **“all those years that the Jewish people were in the wilderness, these two arks, one a casket of a dead man, and one the Ark of the Divine Presence, were traveling together, and passersby would say: What is the nature of these two arks? They responded: One is of a dead person and one is of the Divine Presence. The passersby would ask: And in how is it fitting for a dead person to travel with the Divine Presence? They said: This one, i.e., the deceased Joseph, fulfilled all that is written in this.**

An ancient skeleton, an object that is by its nature is considered impure, is carried alongside the holiest object of the Jewish people. The Talmud imagines this to be the case, and justifies it by the righteousness of Joseph when he was living.

I, too, imagine those two boxes carried side-by-side. I imagine that the task justifies itself, however – that the work of bearing our ancestors' burdens and atoning for our ancestors' sins is as honorable, daresay even as holy, as the work of carrying the Divine Presence. That, in fact, to do the one is to do the other. And that none of us are called to do this work; to bear this burden, alone.

So as we celebrate these final chag days of Pesach, as we count our way towards redemption, let us let the skeletons out of the closet. Let us carry the bones as long as we need to, knowing that the act of bearing these burdens itself is holy service.