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Parshat B'Shalach: Leadership, Redemption, and the Bones of Joseph Rabbanit Amalia Haas

Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2020

“The Exodus would have been impossible if Joseph’s bones had remained behind.”

- Louis Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews

And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him; for he [Joseph] had taken an oath of the children of Israel, saying: ‘God will surely remember you, and you will carry up my bones from here with you.’ (Shemot 13:19)

(יט) ויקח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־עֲצָמוֹת יוֹסֵף עִמּוֹ כִּי הִשְׁבַּע הַשְּׂבִיעַ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר פִּקֹּד אֱלֹהִים אֶתְכֶם וְהֶעֱלִיתֶם אֶת־עֲצָמֹתַי מִזֶּה אִתְּכֶם: (שמות יג:ט)

I will never forget the day when while at home preparing dinner for my family, I found that my keys, wallet and its contents were gone. I knew that they were in the house, and after searching (and searching and searching) I became certain my little one had moved them. Asking him brought no flash of recognition to his eyes. Where would the sweet boy have put them? As that day stretched into a week, then several weeks, I learned to soothe my agitation by breathing and telling myself: they are not stolen, but present... just missing. I gradually accepted that the path of conscious effort would not bear fruit. My lost items were very near; but they were ‘in’ my child’s mind in every way except literally, and I could not see them.

In this week’s parsha, Rashi is troubled by the repetition of the root ש-ב-ע in the words הַשְּׂבִיעַ הַשְּׂבִיעַ translated as “surely sworn,” or “making take an oath.” Why is there this doubling of the verb? Rashi draws from the Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael (13:19:8) and explains, *He had made them swear that they would make their children swear (Rashi, Shmot 13:19).*

Joseph knew that his children would live in a changed world, having neither the power nor mobility he possessed, indeed the opposite. They would be slaves. The Siftei Chachamim on our verse notes that Bnai Yisrael would be in Egypt for at least 210 years, so it would be impossible for Joseph’s generation could bring his bones up. The yet unborn had to be bound by his oath.

The time of the Exodus approaches. Moshe is now the leader of the nation, and the communal obligation of הַשְּׂבִיעַ הַשְּׂבִיעַ falls on *his* shoulders: “Any obligation undertaken communally must be honoured by the *leader* of that community when the time and opportunity presents itself to discharge that obligation (Seforno, Shmot 13:19).”

So how does Moshe fulfill the oath to bring up the bones? And what can his actions teach us about steps of leadership that facilitate redemption? Moshe knew the bones were nearby, but did not know where they were. Moshe accepted guidance from elder females. Midrashim credit either Moshe’s mother Yocheved or Serach bat Asher, the only person still alive from the era of Joseph during the Exodus, with having led him near to Joseph’s bones.

At the recent gathering of the Advanced Kollel Cohort, Rabbi Avi Weiss told us that a key takeaway from his career is that there is no substitute for *showing up*. Here, we see Moshe going to the place where

Joseph's bones, his עצמות - meaning *essence* in Hebrew - are resting. This is an important aspect of leadership, being present.

Moshe cannot see the bones. They are underground or underwater. In a parshah full of miracles and packed with activity, he does not act. He declines to ask for G-d's help. Perhaps he trusts that Joseph's essence can assert itself. He calls out "Joseph, Joseph" echoing the doubling in Joseph's binding oath. The words of Moshe, according to Talmud Sotah (13a.14-13b.6), show him describing the current need of situation: *"Joseph, Joseph, the time has arrived for the Holy One, blessed to He, to redeem his children. The Shekhinah awaits you and Israel..."*

Moshe then presents an ultimatum. He defines achievable terms for release from a contract. Moshe's words to Joseph are, *"If you will make yourself appear, it is good, but if not, we are clear from your oath."* The text continues, *"Immediately, the casket [arose]. Moshe took it and departed* (Talmud Sotah (ibid)."
Moshe leads by fulfilling the oath made by the children of Israel, by keeping the promise.

"During all of the years in the wilderness, the two arks travelled together: the Ark of the Covenant and the Ark containing the bones of Joseph, and people would ask: how it is proper for the Ark of a dead man to be born alongside the Ark of the Divine Presence? They were answered, he who lies in one Ark fulfilled all of the words written in other Ark." (Gemara Sotah, ibid)

And as for my own missing essentials? I led by giving myself an ultimatum: no more searching the house, no harassing myself for being human and having, like everyone else, a limited conscious mind. But I also showed up, I cultivated my presence. When the thought of my missing items would arise, I engaged in intentional slow breathing. I nurtured a gentle, calm, playful curiosity about my quandary, and an openness to my young son's mind. And then it happened. While washing the dishes one day, the 'bones' arose and I knew. Opening the door to our basement playroom, I descended the stairs (yes, going literally underground) and strode across the toy-filled floor to the red and yellow Little Tikes cement truck. I upturned the barrel and my keys, wallet and identity cards fell onto the floor.

We are all sometimes beset by challenges outside of our vision and reach, and buried deep within us. Our aim then, must be twofold. We must be like Moshe, calm and present, fulfilling our obligations and setting limits when needed. And, we must be like Joseph, present in our bones and lifting ourselves up to act for our people and our world when it really counts. Then G-d willing we, too, will pass on the Torat HaShem - the essence of our nation - to our children's children. We will merit that it be said of us that we recognize the devotion and sacrifices of our ancestors and bring them forward with us. In those moments, we will carry forth the Ark of our Past along with the Ark of Hope for our future.



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