

THE HARRY H. BEREN TORAH WEEKLY

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Parshas Vayechi

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A Taste of Torah Wrapping Things Up

by Rabbi Shmuel Halpern

This week's parsha contains a very puzzling episode, the embalming of Yaakov. "And Yosef commanded his servants, the doctors, to embalm his father, and the doctors embalmed Yisrael." (Vayechi 50:2) The preservation of the human body after death isn't a very Jewish custom. In Judaism, a great emphasis is placed upon the dignity of the dead, and a significant aspect of that is the prompt burial of the body. The burial is a sort of "planting" of the body, as expressed by the verse (Tehillim 72:15) "They will sprout from the city like the grass of the earth," which, says the Talmud (Sanhedrin 90b), is a reference to the time when Hashem will bring the dead back to life. That being the case, why, in fact, did Yosef embalm his father?

Rabbi Meir Leibush Wisser (1809-1879) (better known as the Malbim, the acronym of his full Hebrew name), in his commentary on the Torah, offers a beautiful explanation. He explains that the human being can be divided into three elements. The body (or *nefesh*, sometimes referred to as the life force), the *ruach*, and the *neshama*. While the *neshama* is an extremely lofty spiritual entity, the *ruach* is a spiritual entity that is connected and intertwined with the body. In a sense, it is the bridge between body and *neshama*. Upon death, the *neshama* departs from the body. For the vast majority of people, the *ruach* remains somewhat joined to the body. This because a person's general mission on this earth is to sublimate and elevate the *ruach*, which is accomplished through

Torah study and mitzvah observance. In an ideal situation, all the physical and material aspects of the world serve as a means to enable a person to live in accordance with the dictates of the Torah. As a result, the *ruach* serves as the bridge between body and *neshama*, and, having achieved its purpose, rises and joins the *neshama* immediately upon death.

For most people, however, the mission of fully elevating the *ruach* on this earth is not fully completed during a lifetime, and the *ruach* remains connected with the body even after death. Mitzvah performance, when done with some degree of ulterior motive, is rendered part physical and part spiritual, and so the *ruach* remains part physical, as well. While the spiritual aspects rise and join the *neshama*, the material aspects remain connected to the body. The burial and decomposition of the body serve the function of separating the leftover elements of *ruach* from the body, allowing them to become sublimated and to return to their proper spiritual state.

This reality is true for the majority of humankind. There are some very righteous people, however, who achieve such a high degree of perfection in their lifetimes that all of their endeavors are solely for the sake of heaven. The physical actions of this world, channeled through the *ruach*, were one hundred percent connected to the *neshama*. Our forefather Yaakov was such an individual. At the moment of death, Yaakov's *ruach* and *neshama* separated from his body and rose together to their Creator,

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Because Torah Is for Every Jew

Stories for the Soul

Looking Forward

Rabbi Yisrael Spira (1889-1989), the Bluzhever Rebbe, lost his wife and children during the Holocaust. He survived, immigrated to America, remarried, and was one of the leading Torah figures in America as Torah Jewry rebuilt following the destruction. Rabbi Spira spoke often about his horrifying experiences during the Holocaust.

Many people would attend the Rebbe's Chanuka menorah lighting. After he would kindle the lamps, those in attendance would line up to receive a blessing from him.

On one such occasion, a young man came before Rabbi Spira, and handed a camera to his friend so that he could take a picture of the event. Rabbi Spira motioned that the camera be put away. He then said to the fellow, "*Bachur'l* (a diminutive term for a young, unmarried man), you probably want to get a picture so that you will have a connection to Jewish life as it existed in Europe before the Holocaust. While this is important, it should not be your main focus. You must focus on the future, on building the Jewish People for coming generations!"

On his deathbed, Yaakov blessed his twelve sons, revealing to each child his unique role in building the Jewish Nation, even as their exile in Egypt was getting underway. Although one era was coming to a close, Yaakov encouraged his children to look forward and focus on success in the future.

Kollel Happenings

HACHNASAS SEFER TORAH ON JAN. 19

A Sefer Torah is being dedicated to the Southeast Kollel Torah Center/Ohel Yissachar in memory of Reb Shalom Sommers, father of Kollel Dean Rabbi Shachne Sommers. Dedication opportunities for the Sefer Torah at all price levels are available. A Hachnasas Sefer Torah will take place at Aish of the Rockies on Sun., Jan. 19. For dedication opportunities or more info, visit www.denverkollel.org, email info@denverkollel.org or call 303-820-2855.

LEARN 2 LEARN

You have long dreamed of acquiring the tools to achieve proficiency in learning Gemara on your own. But how? The Denver Community Kollel offers a comprehensive, step-by-step, level-by-level program crafted for people just like you. All you need is the ability to read Hebrew; we will teach you the rest. For more information, contact rmh@denverkollel.org.

BUILD YOUR LEGACY AND SECURE THE FUTURE OF TORAH WITH LIVE ON/LIFE & LEGACY

The Kollel is one of 28 local organizations selected to be part of Rose Community Foundation's Live On/LIFE & LEGACY program, which focuses on creating financial stability for the future through planned giving. Think it's not for you? Think again! Anyone can make a planned gift, no matter the amount. Visit www.denverkollel.org, email rmh@denverkollel.org or call 303-820-2855 for more information.

Parsha Quizzers

The six items below can be found in Rashi's commentary to this week's parsha. Can you figure out where they are? (Answers on bottom)

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| 1) Avoid the tunnel | 4) Scattered scribes |
| 2) Bow to the fox | 5) Blind faith |
| 3) Proof of marriage | 6) Hanging crowns |

Lives of Our Torah Leaders

Rabbi Meir Simcha HaKohen of Dvinsk - Part VII

There is a well-documented story about Reb Meir Simcha miraculously saving the city of Dvinsk from a flood. The story is recorded by Isser Harel (born Halperin), founder and first director of the Shin Bet and first head of the Israeli Mossad (from where he oversaw the capture of Adolf Eichmann) in his book *Security and Democracy*. Harel writes that one year, ice upstream in the Dvina River began melting earlier than usual, while downstream it was still quite cold. This meant the meltwater was blocked by ice dams, causing great flooding and destruction as it made its way downstream. As the water came to Dvinsk, it flowed into Riga Bay, but again was met by snow and icepack, resulting in the water level rising precipitously. Residents feared that the entire city would be washed away.

It was Shabbos morning, and the Jews of Dvinsk were in shul, praying and beseeching the Almighty to spare them the destruction of the rising waters. Suddenly, some Jews ran into shul exclaiming that the water would overrun the city in a matter of minutes. Reb Meir Simcha rose, walked out of shul still wrapped in his *tallis*, and made his way to the dam, which was perilously close to being breached. Reb Meir Simcha climbed upon the dam and continued his prayers. Suddenly, the ice that was blocking the waters cracked and flowed downstream, allowing the flood waters to continue into the bay and away from the city! Everyone in the city, Jew and gentile, recognized the open miracle that had been brought by Reb Meir Simcha, though he himself took no credit and attributed everything to the One above.

A Taste of Torah

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while his body was buried to await the day of the Resurrection. There was no need for his body to decompose and separate the leftover spiritual elements, as they had all been perfected during his lifetime.

We are very distant from the levels of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs, but as their children and heirs, we have the obligation and ability to strive to touch

their lofty ways. There are infinite levels of Torah living, and every step of growth brings us a bit closer to our great forebears. Perhaps it's making a heartfelt blessing on the food we eat, thus elevating the act of eating to an experience of Hashem's great love for us. Whatever the area of growth, as Jews, we all have greatness in our spiritual DNA.

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| 1) Avoid the tunnel 47:29 s.v. <i>al nah</i> | 3) Proof of marriage 48:9 s.v. <i>ba'zeh</i> |
| 2) Bow to the fox 47:31 s.v. <i>vayishtach</i> | 2) Blind faith 49:18 <i>lishu' ascha</i> |
| 1) Scattered scribes 49:7 s.v. <i>achalkem</i> | 3) Hanging crowns 50:10 s.v. <i>goren</i> |

Parsha Quizzers - Answers