

RACHEL'S BURIAL

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As Jacob's life draws to a close, he blesses Joseph's two sons, claiming them as his own. Then suddenly he says: *'When I was returning from Padan, Rachel died 'alai while I was journeying the land of Canaan on the road, when still some distance short of Ephrath, and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath – now Bethlehem'* (Genesis 48:7). This was, in many ways, an enigmatic declaration. Joseph, no doubt, already knew this family history and the reader had been told of it as it happened.

Robert Alter comments: "At first glance, Jacob's comment about the death of his beloved Rachel in the midst of blessing his grandsons seems a non sequitur. It is, however, a loss to which he has never been reconciled (witness his extravagant favoritism toward Rachel's firstborn). His vivid sense of anguish, after all these decades, is registered in the single word *'alai* ("to my grief," but literally, "on me," the same word he uses in 42:36, when he says that all the burden of bereavement is on him), and this loss is surely uppermost in his mind when he tells Pharaoh that his days have been few and evil. On his deathbed, then, Jacob, reverts obsessively to the loss of Rachel, who perished in childbirth leaving behind only two sons, and his impulse to adopt Rachel's two grandsons by her firstborn expresses a desire to compensate, symbolically and legally, for the additional sons she did not live to bear."¹

For Alter, Jacob's comment about Rachel is, in a sense, a coda to a great Biblical love story, an expression of Jacob's continuing obsession with the unexpected death of his first love, an outburst of what was always on his mind, brought to expression as he sees Rachel's grandsons born to his favorite son, first-born of his favorite wife. Rashi, however, has a different perspective. He sees this as part of Jacob's attempt to make peace with Joseph as he requests that he not be buried in Egypt: "I trouble you to bring me to burial in the Land of Canaan even though I did not do the same for your mother . . . And I know there is [resentment] in your heart towards me".

There is no textual suggestion of Joseph's resentment, but we might well understand how Jacob could fear such an attitude. Jacob arrives in Egypt and

to his great joy finds his son alive. As time goes on, he realizes that had Joseph wished to quietly check on his family in Canaan he could have done so, as he had at his disposal the resources of a great state. Yet, he had decided to “forget his father’s house.” Why did he let his father suffer bereavement all these years? Was their current warm relationship masking ill-will? Jacob might then fear that his son must have come to resent the fact that his mother was buried on the road while her rival was buried in the family burial grounds – this despite the fact that Jacob had most probably tried to explain his decision to his teen-age son years ago.

Moreover, Jacob surely realized that Joseph, a high ranking Egyptian official, would be put in an embarrassing position of explaining to Pharaoh why his father would want to be buried outside of his adopted land. No doubt Jacob had to explain to Joseph how important it was to be buried in the family plot alongside his grandparents and parents. Jacob’s explanation might naturally trigger resentment in Joseph: If being buried in the family plot is really so important, why did Jacob not extend this honor to his mother. The perceived slight would be compounded by the fact that Leah, his supposedly less-loved wife, was buried in Machpela.

If Jacob was trying to make peace with Joseph, there would be no better time than when he had blessed Ephraim and Manasseh, thereby establishing Joseph’s rights of primogeniture by awarding him (not Reuben) a double portion of tribal inheritance. Having demonstrated his love for Rachel’s son, an apology would certainly be accepted, as Rav Shmuel David Luzato points out (Shadal, Commentary to Genesis 48:7).

Rashi refers to *Pesikta Rabbati* 3:4, which has Jacob explaining why he had acted as he did: "But you should know that I buried her there by the word of God, that she might help her children when Nebuzaradan would exile them:² For when they passed along that road, Rachel came forth from her grave and stood by her tomb beseeching mercy for them, as it is said, *A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children* (Jer. 31:14)."

Of course, the explanation is not fully satisfactory: not all of the future exiles passed by this particular road and, conversely, many exiles surely passed by the road along the Machpela burial grounds! Recognizing the weakness of such characterization of Jacob’s rationale, Ramban states that “these are but

words of apology as Joseph already knew that Rachel died on the road and was buried in the Land, and that honor was paid to her when she died” (Commentary to Genesis 48:7).

Ramban’s own explanation of why Jacob rejected laying Rachel to rest in the family plot – offered here instead of when we originally read of her burial – allows us to see Jacob’s recollection as neither apology nor non sequitur. He presents his thesis in the context of the tradition that while the Torah had not yet been revealed, the Patriarchs nonetheless observed the ethos of the mitzvot if not the mitzvot themselves. In particular, the underlying ethic of not marrying two sisters would have been intuited by the Patriarchs. Since Jacob had married Rachel while already married to Leah, the marriage would have been forbidden according to the Torah’s later prohibition. “The reason Jacob did not transport Rachel to the cave of Machpela,” proposes Ramban, “was so that he should not bury two sisters there, for he would be embarrassed before his ancestors.” “Flaunting,” so to speak, his decision to ignore what would be the Torah ethic would be disrespectful to his parents and grandparents.

It is not surprising that Ramban would be willing to charge a patriarch with behavior that might be unacceptable. He notes, for example, that Abraham had “sinned a great sin” in leaving Canaan for Egypt (Commentary to Genesis 12:10). R. Samson R. Hirsch observed that “our Sages never objected to draw attention to the small and great mistakes and weaknesses in the history of our great forefathers” (Commentary to 12:10).

Jacob had married Rachel at an early stage in his life, when he was impulsive and confident. Did he not kiss Rachel on meeting her and break into tears (Gen. 29:11)? For Ramban, then, the explanation for Jacob’s willingness to marry Rachel was obvious: “He married Rachel out of his love for her and because of the vow he made to her.” Decades later, after further spiritual growth, he realized that such decisions have natural consequences. Rachel could not be buried in the family plot, and, notes Shadal in his comments on Genesis 48:7, *kibbud Avot* would require that he not later be buried with her instead of with his ancestors, as it would seem disrespectful to choose her over them.

Now, as Jacob contemplates his own burial, he looks at his favorite son and his grandsons and recalls the price he had to pay for the moment: God had

appeared to me at Luz and blessed me with the Patriarchal blessings, he re-counts. Then Rachel died and I buried her on the road (48:5-7). Now he will be buried without her at his side, but his great love had produced two tribes for the nation he fathered.

It was indeed a coda to a great Biblical love story.

NOTES

1. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (NY: Norton, 1996), p. 288, commentary to Genesis 48:7.
2. Chief general of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who destroyed the city of Jerusalem, burned the Temple, and led the people into captivity (II Kgs 25:8-21).



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