

## Parshas Vayechi

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"And Pharaoh said, 'Go up and bury your father as he made you swear'." (Genesis 50, 6)

The Talmud (Sotah 36b) recounts a seemingly bizarre dialogue that took place between Joseph and Pharaoh leading up to Pharaoh's acquiescence. Initially Pharaoh urged Joseph to renege upon his oath and bury Jacob in Egypt. Joseph responded that if he broke the oath that he made to Jacob to bury him in Israel he will also break the oath he made to Pharaoh many years prior that he would not reveal that Pharaoh did not speak Hebrew and was thus ineligible to be king. After this apparent threat Pharaoh relented saying, 'Go up and bury your father as he made you swear'.

Joseph's threat to publicly shame Pharaoh if he forces him to bury Jacob in Egypt is puzzling. After all, Joseph was only second in command to the king and subservient to him. It is highly inappropriate to lobby a king with intimidation. What is the meaning behind this interaction?

The Steipler Gaon explains that Joseph was in fact not intimidating Pharaoh that he would reveal that Pharaoh did not speak Hebrew. Rather, Joseph explained to Pharaoh that he is a man of truth, and is unaccustomed to breaking promises. However if he were to breach his commitment even once it would become likely that he will do so again. If Pharaoh compelled him to break his promise to Jacob he would lose a bit of his sensitivity to the severity and importance of always staying true to one's words and begin to slide down the spiritual slippery slope, and eventually he would expose Pharaoh's secret in violation of his other promise.

This principle is found in the Talmud

(Kiddushin 40a): Rav Huna said: Once a person transgresses and repeats [the transgression], it becomes as if it is permitted to him. A person may indeed have a strong determination not to sin, but if he commits that sin twice, indeed even once - the likelihood he will sin again increases dramatically. As it is taught "A sin begets a sin" (Pirkei Avos 4:2).

Pharaoh recognized this danger and therefore allowed him to bury his father in Israel "as he made you swear".

A parallel idea can be drawn from the first Rashi in this week's parsha: "Why is this parsha "closed" (i.e. there is no break between Vayigash and Vayechi in a Torah scroll), because once Jacob died the eyes and hearts of Israel "closed"

were only redeemed from Egypt because they did not alter their "language, dress and names". There is a direct corollary between the enslavement and its undoing. The resistance to complete assimilation to the Egyptian way of life ensured that Children of Israel will ultimately be saved.

These principles provide valuable lessons to us. We tend to underestimate the deleterious effects that exposure to sin, unrefined character, undignified language and heretical beliefs have on our Jewish outlook, life and practice. We may be righteous and unfalteringly averse to sin like Joseph and be complacently assured that things will never change. In truth, we ought never to be secure in our spiri-

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from the suffering of the slavery." Rashi points to the death of Jacob as the starting point of the slavery. Many of the commentaries note a contradiction with Rashi in Exodus (6, 15) where he writes that the death of Levi marked the beginning of slavery. A widely accepted answer is that the servitude in Egypt was twofold: a spiritual subservience that began with the passing of Jacob and a physical subjugation that only started with the death of Levi.

Though they were not yet physically enslaved, after the death of Jacob the Jews began to feel the impact that exposure to their Egyptian neighbors was having on their outlook, life perspective and behaviors. Attitudes, ideologies and mannerisms that are anathema to the Jewish way of life began to permeate their world. The clutches of spiritual enslavement began to ensnare them.

Interestingly, we are told that the Jews

tual standing until the day that we die. All it takes is dipping our toe once or twice into those forbidden waters and we descend down the slippery slope towards losing that sensitivity. Moreover, being exposed to a secular environment that denigrates Torah values and morals can negatively influence our outlook and priorities.

One of the greatest challenges of modern Jewish life is the harmful exposure to secular society and its impact on our way of living. It is exceedingly difficult to live in an environment that is in conflict with the Jewish value system and to be shielded entirely from any consequences. To live in the United States and yet not be subjected to the American variety of spiritual enslavement is almost an impossibility. However, by combating total acculturation and mitigating the damage, we too are contributing to the redemption from all kinds of servitude, may it come speedily in our days. ♦