

Customs and Laws from the Parsha: Vayechi

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And Joseph commanded the physicians to embalm his father. (Genesis 50:2)

The sages of the Gemara compare the sanctity of a corpse to a Torah scroll (Brachos 18b) and so the proper treatment of the dead is critical in Jewish law. The Torah explicitly forbids the desecration of a body by delaying the burial (Deuteronomy 21:23) and similarly the Gemara forbids an autopsy unless information can be obtained to save the lives of others (Chullin 11b). It is also forbidden to benefit or remove anything from a dead body. Jewellery which is not attached such as rings or watches may be removed (Shulchan Aruch 349:2).

The laws and customs which pertain to Jewish burial reflect the way we view death and the spiritual reality of the soul. Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) describes the difference between the body and soul: 'Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it' (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

Proper Jewish burial allows the soul to be released from the body allowing it to start its journey back to its Source. The process of embalming a body would not only transgress the laws of desecrating the dead but violate this principle. Egyptian embalming reflected their philosophy that immortality was achieved through the preservation of the body, an idea which is anathema to Judaism.

It is therefore perplexing that Jacob was embalmed. Rashi (d. 1105) held that the process was different to Egyptian embalming and only involved the application of aromatic spices (Rashi on Genesis 50:2). Similarly, Ralbag (Rabbi Levi ben Gershon d. 1344) held the process only involved cleansing the intestines by injecting aromatic fluids (Ralbag ibid). According to the late Chief Rabbi J. H. Hertz (d. 1946) the temporary preservation of Jacob's body was only necessary for the long journey to Hebron where he was to be buried (Hertz Chumash p. 188).

Jewish burial is a fundamental tenet which carries deep spiritual meaning. Ultimately it teaches us that immortality cannot be achieved through the preservation of our bodies, but through the positive expressions of our souls.

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