

HOW DEEP CAN YOU DIG?

PARSHAS VAYECHI

The year was 1970. It was game 7 of the NBA finals between Los Angeles Lakers and New York Knicks. The Knicks captain and center, Willis Reed, had suffered a torn thigh muscle in Game 5. Because of that he sat out Game 6. As the teams were warming up for the final game, Reed hobbled onto the basketball court. The crowd at Madison Square Garden erupted and the Lakers stopped warming up to stare at Reed. Even Reed's own teammates did not know that he was going to play. His action gave his teammates an emotional rush and they won the game.

Our forefather, Yaakov, passed away while in Egypt. Yosef received permission from Pharaoh to bring his father's body to Eretz Yisroel for burial. The procession that escorted Yaakov's body was enormous (Bereishis 50:7-9). Yosef and his brothers went, together with Yosef's household and his brothers' household. All Pharaoh's servant's, the elders of Pharaoh's house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt also went. Chariots and horsemen joined them. **Sforno** says that they went as a tribute to Yaakov. **Ramban** says that they came at Yosef's request to protect them from an anticipated battle. Yosef was concerned that Esav would bring an army to prevent Yaakov from being buried in the Cave of Machpaleh. Indeed, Yosef assumed correctly. **Sforno** says that the Egyptian wise men also joined the procession. **Ibn Ezra** says that all the Egyptian people came. **Rabbeinu Bachya** says that angels also came to protect Yaakov and escort him to

*"Yosef returned to Egypt, he and his brothers, and all those who went with him, to bury his father...."
(Bereishis 50:14)*

his burial place. One can only imagine the size of the group that escorted Yaakov's body.

The group reached a threshing floor called *Goren HaAtad*. **Haamek Davar** says that there, they held very lengthy and

imposing eulogies.

Why was the place where they stopped to eulogize Yaakov called *Goren HaAtad*? The **Talmud** (Sotah 13A) explains that it was because of an incident that occurred there. The **Talmud** says that the word "*atad*" means a thorn bush. Thorns are not collected and eaten. What does a thorn bush have to do with a threshing floor? Rabbi Avahu says that the children of Esav, the children of Ishmael and the children of Keturah all came to Yaakov's burial to wage war with Yaakov's family. However, once they saw the crown of Yosef, the viceroy of Egypt, hanging on Yaakov's coffin, they all took their crowns and hung them there. The casket became surrounded with crowns, like a threshing floor

that is surrounded with thorns. Including Yosef's crown, there were thirty-six crowns on Yaakov's coffin. This was a great honor which was accorded to Yaakov's family.

After the eulogies, Yaakov's sons carried the coffin and buried Yaakov in the Cave of *Machpalah*, in *Chevron*. After the burial, the **Torah** says (50:14), "*Yosef returned to Egypt, he and his brothers, and all those who went with him, to bury his father....*" **Rashi** comments that when they were returning to Egypt, Yosef's brothers were at the head of the procession, in front of the Egyptians who went. However, initially, when they left Egypt to bury Yaakov, the Egyptians went first, before Yosef's brothers. Why was the order different on the return trip? **Rashi** quotes the **Talmud** (Sotah 13A). Rav Yochanan says that the Egyptians saw how much respect the kings of Canaan paid to Yaakov by hanging their crowns on his casket. As a result of that, now, on the return trip, they treated Yaakov's sons with more respect and gave them precedence, allowing them to go first.

It seems that the Egyptians initially had some respect for Yaakov. After seeing the princes of Yishmael and Esav hang their crowns on Yaakov's casket, the Egyptians felt more respect for Yaakov and that is why they respectfully let Yaakov's sons go first.

Ben Yehoyada (Sotah 13A) says that the princes did not hang their crowns on Yaakov's casket in Yaakov's honor. Rather, it was in Yosef's honor. They did so after seeing that he had placed his own crown there. **Iyun Yaakov** says that they humbled themselves before Yosef because he

sustained them during the years of famine. If their action was done in Yosef's honor why would that cause the Egyptians to show more respect to Yosef's brothers? **Ben Yehoyada** answers that the Egyptians misunderstood and thought that the princes of Esav and Yishmael were honoring Yaakov, demonstrating that Yaakov was greater than they. Apparently, before this demonstration, the Egyptians thought that Yaakov and his family were the "black sheeps" of Avraham's family. After all, Yishmael and Esav's families were kings whereas Yaakov and his family were strangers in a foreign land. That is why they did not show respect to Yaakov's sons. The act of placing the crowns showed that they considered Yaakov, and therefore his sons as well, to be greater. Thus, the Egyptians showed Yaakov's sons more respect.

I would have thought that even before the crowns were placed on Yaakov's coffin, the Egyptians would have held Yaakov and his sons in very high regard. Therefore, they should have respectfully allowed Yaakov's sons to lead the funeral procession as it left Egypt.

All the Egyptians followed the funeral procession, paying respect to Yaakov, after mourning for him in Egypt for 70 days! **Sifsei Chachamim** says that the tears were sincere and heartfelt. **Rashi** (Bereishis 50:3) explains that the Egyptians cried for Yaakov for so many days because upon Yaakov's arrival in Egypt, they were blessed. The famine stopped 5 years before it was supposed to, and the waters of the Nile increased, once again. According to **Targum**

Yonasan ben Uziel, the famine was supposed to last for 42 Years! Yaakov's arrival caused the famine to end 40 years early! The Egyptians understood that the famine ended in the merit of Yaakov. **Sforno** says that the Egyptians revered Yaakov. Yaakov knew that he was revered. That is one of the reasons that he told Yosef not to bury him in Egypt. As **Rashi** explains, Yaakov was concerned lest the Egyptians make his tomb the object of idolatrous worship (47:29).

Thus, it seems that Yaakov was revered and held in very high esteem by all the Egyptians. Why would the sight of 36 crowns hanging on Yaakov's coffin make a difference? Why would that make them revere Yaakov even more than they already had?

Perhaps you can say that there are different levels of respect and reverence. The Egyptians felt the **greatest** respect and reverence for Yaakov. However, after seeing the crowns on Yaakov's coffin, their respect and reverence was

raised to an **even greater** level. When it reached that higher level, at that point they were able to show more respect to Yaakov's children.

This idea can apply to us, as well. **No matter how excellent we are in a particular area, we can always do a little better, "dig a little deeper" within ourselves, raising the bar and raising ourselves to the next level.** For example, we may daven with passion and with our full heart, yet there is still room to increase our passion and daven with even more depth of our heart. We may have tremendous faith in Hashem, yet there is still room to increase our faith. We may be the kindest person, but we can always "dig deeper". There is a story about a rebbe who disbursed tzedakah to needy people. One day, after disbursing much tzedakah, another very needy person knocked on his door. The rebbe had no money left to give. He thought about how he could help. He thought more and "dug deeper" inside himself. Then he took a valuable item from his home and gave it to the impoverished person.

This is how we must grow in our relations with others and in our relationship with Hashem.

We must strive to do better and better.

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Rabbi Yaakov Finestone is the director of JEP Queens. For almost 50 years JEP Queens has been in the forefront of kiruv. JEP has changed the lives of thousands of Jewish children enrolled in public schools and kiruv schools. Many are shomrei Torah and mitzvos today because of JEP.

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