

# CONNECTING WITH THE AVOS - ONE FOOT IN THE GRAVE

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

When Yaakov finds out that Yosef is alive in Egypt, he is tempted to join him there. "And Yisrael said, 'Great - my son Yosef still lives. I shall go and see him before I die. (45:28)' Still, there seems to be some apprehension, because that same night Hashem appears to Yaakov and tells him, "Have no fear of going down to Egypt - I shall descend with you to Egypt, and I shall surely bring you back up. Yosef will place his hand on your eyes. (46:3-4)"

There seems to be an inherent contradiction in Hashem's promises: On the one hand, Yosef will place his hand on Yaakov's eyes - an idiomatic expression referring to closing the eyes of the dead; i.e. Yosef will be present and supervise at the time of his death. Yet Hashem promises Yaakov, "I will surely bring you back up!" Rashi understands this as a promise that while Yaakov will die in Egypt, he will be buried in Israel. If Yaakov was in such fear of his impending journey to Egypt, how comforting is it to be told that he will indeed never return, at least not alive? It seems Yaakov's fear was not for his own safety - but for what?

Also, what does it mean when Hashem says He will descend with Yaakov to Egypt - isn't Hashem everywhere at every time? And how is Yaakov to find comfort in the bitter slavery his offspring will suffer in Egypt because Hashem will be there with them - does that ease the suffering? And what is the significance of Yosef "placing his hand" on Yaakov's eyes?

On a sheirut (shared taxi ride) in Eretz Yisroel a few years after the passing of the Chazon Ish, R' Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz zt"l (1878-1953), two religious people in the back of the cab were talking to each other. "You know, Bnei Brak just isn't the same since the Chazon Ish passed away." "Yes," agreed his friend, "we need needs more Torah giants like him."

Listening attentively from his seat in the front was the cab driver, Natan, a non-observant Jew. He was dressed differently from his Orthodox passengers in the back. He wore no kippah, and sported an open khaki shirt over a pair of Bermuda shorts. Natan turned to the fellow sitting on his right. "Did you hear what the men in the back said? They said that the Chazon Ish is gone. They're wrong - they don't know what they're talking about!"

Surprised that the obviously irreligious cab driver would even know who the Chazon Ish was, one of them retorted, "Well, maybe you haven't heard, but the Chazon Ish passed away a few years ago."

"No, you are wrong," said Natan emphatically, "the Chazon Ish is still around - and I can prove it."

By now, all ears were listening to the cantankerous cab driver. Once he had their attention he of course offered to prove he was right. They all agreed to listen, and the cab driver began his story:

"My daughter was going through complicated labour. She had been rushed to the hospital in Tel Aviv, and the doctors had been dealing with her for many hours. She was in agony, yet the doctors seemed helpless, and told me there was nothing they could do.

"At some point an old nurse came over to me and said, 'Why don't you go to the Chazon Ish?'

"The who?' I asked. 'What is the Chazon Ish?'

"He is a great rabbi,' the nurse said. 'People go to him for advice, and to pray for them.'

"At my wit's end, I asked her, 'Where does he live?' She told me, 'Just go to Bnei Brak. Once you get there, any child in the street will be able to direct you to his home.'

"I got into my cab and raced to Bnei Brak. In no time I was at the Chazon Ish's house. It was late at night, but he answered my knock himself. In a quiet and friendly manner he asked how he could help me. I told him about my daughter's difficulties, and how the doctors were unable to help her. He looked at me, smiled, and said, 'You can go back to the hospital - the child was just born.' He shook my hand and wished me mazel tov. My heart leaped with joy, but I could not believe him. I dashed back to the hospital and when I got there, sure enough, the child had already been born, exactly as he said."

In the sheirut all that listened to Natan's tale were spellbound. But Natan was not finished. He went on:

"Two years later my daughter was again expecting a child. Once again she had extreme difficulties in labour. And once again the doctors despaired of a healthy birth. This time I didn't wait for the old nurse. I got into my cab, rushed to Bnei Brak, and went to the Chazon Ish. I came to the corner where I thought I remembered he lived, and just to be sure I asked a passer-by, 'Is this the home of the Chazon Ish?' The man looked at me as if I had lost my mind. 'What's the matter with you? Don't you know that the Chazon Ish passed away last year?'

"My heart fell. I felt as if I had lost my best friend. Illogically, I began pleading with this total stranger. 'Please, I came to speak to him; it's an emergency. To whom should I go now?'

"People go to his kever (grave site) and pray there,' he told me. I queried as to its location, and the

man pointed me in the right direction. I ran there at breakneck speed and jumped over a fence to catch some people who might be able to tell me where he was buried. They pointed to a grave that was covered with stones and pebbles. When I saw his name I fell on the grave and began crying uncontrollably. I begged the Chazon Ish to pray for my daughter. 'You saved my daughter once before,' I pleaded, 'please pray for her again.'

"I was there a short time. Suddenly, just as I sit here now, I saw his face with that same smile. I heard him say to me, 'Mazel tov! You can go back to the hospital; the child has been born.' Startled, I got up, ran to my cab, and rushed back to the hospital. When I got there, they told me that my second grandchild had indeed been born. Then the cab driver turned to the man sitting next to him and said, "And these people in the back say the Chazon Ish is gone!" (Adapted from The Maggid Speaks p. 194)

When the Torah describes the death of Rachel, it says, "Yaakov set up a monument over her grave; it is the monument of Rochel's tomb until this day. (Bereishis/Genesis 35:20)." Why does the Torah go out of its way to mention that the monument stands to this very day - something to which history does an ample job of attesting? The Gemara says that the righteous, even in death, are called "alive." They are alive, because their legacy lives on long after their bodily functions cease. We visit their grave sites, asking them for their intercession. We consult their teachings, looking for wisdom and advice. And we ask ourselves, "How would my teacher have acted in such a scenario?" Their memories, teachings, and spirit take on a vibrant life of their own, perhaps in some ways more significant than when they were alive in a physical sense. Every time a Jew visits kever Rochel, and beseeches our Matriarch to arouse Hashem's mercy on His children, Rachel lives.

This, says R' Yechezkel Abramsky, is the significance of Yosef, "placing his hands on Yaakov's eyes." It symbolizes Yosef continuing to seek the wisdom and "foresight" of Yaakov after he dies. Yaakov may die, yet his vision will live on, perpetuated by Yosef and future generations after him.

It was not for fear of physical hardship that Yaakov dreaded Egypt. Yaakov was concerned for the spiritual challenges Egypt would thrust on his family - would they be able to remain steadfast in their commitment to the Patriarchal vision and the legacy began by his grandfather Avraham and his father Yitzchak? "I will come down with you to Egypt," Hashem promises - just like now, upon your descent, your offspring know and perpetuate the vision of One G-d, so too "I will bring you up," more than two hundred years later, Hashem promises Yaakov that He will be with the Jews when they leave; they will not sever their bond with the Almighty. How indeed? "Yosef will place his hand on your eyes." Yosef, who will inherit the mantle of leadership, will do so not as a daring rebel determined to make his own mark on history, but rather as the trusted custodian of Yaakov's legacy. It is in this sense, says R' Abramsky, that Chazal state emphatically, "Our father Yaakov never died. (Ta'anis 5b)" Yosef made sure of that.

Ever since Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge, man has sought the secret to eternal life. It is not to be found in some hidden fountain of youth, nor in the dusty annals of a forgotten medical journal. Eternal life exists for those who live a life worth perpetuating. By clinging to the Ways of the Fathers, we become a further link in the chain that stretches all the way back to the faint beginnings of a nation.

*Have a good Shabbos.*

\*\*\*\*\* In loving memory of R' Chaim ben R' Moshe Yechiel Uhr, and R' Chaim Tzvi ben R' Yehoshua. By Mr. and Mrs. S. Farkas. \*\*\*\*\* Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann and **Torah.org**