JOSEPH'S BONES COME TO LIFE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The era of the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Jewish people ends with this week's Torah reading. There are times when the passing of a generation happens without even notice. But there are other times when even a casual observer of the world scene realizes that the old era has ended and that a new one is about to begin. The passing of Jacob and his children, in the entire generation of the 70 souls that descended into Egypt, was noticed by both their descendants and by the Egyptian government and people as well.

The benevolence extended to Jacob and his family – albeit because of Joseph and his act of saving Egypt from starvation – was to end. The Torah does not expand on this attitude change except to remark the ancient anti-Semitic canard, that there are too many Jews and that they are too influential and not loyal. This excuse would be used to enslave the Jewish people and persecute them.

In history, sometimes things move slowly from one generation to the next whereas at other times they move rapidly and uncomfortably. By ending the book of Bereishith with the death of Jacob and Joseph, the Torah prepares us for the next book which will show the Jewish people in a completely different state of being. It is most interesting that the Torah calls this story of the end of the era by the word that indicates life. Life is always seen as a new beginning and no matter what the changing circumstances may be, Jacob and his descendants will continue to live.

Jacob has his wish fulfilled and is buried with his ancestors in the land of Israel. However, when it came time to bury Joseph, it is obvious that the Pharaoh and the Egyptian people will not allow him, even in death, to leave their borders. But Joseph has a strategy that he knows will outlive the decrees and policies of any of the pharaohs of Egypt. He has his descendants take a solemn oath that they will take his body from the sealed casket of the Nile River and return him to the home of the Jewish people, the land of Israel.

Joseph is confident that this oath and the memory of it within the psyche of the Jewish people will be enough so that even centuries later they will see to it that his body is removed from Egyptian exile and reburied in the land of his fathers, the land of Jewish eternity. After generations of slavery, idolatry and forgetfulness, the Jewish people will be redeemed. When that happens, they will recall the ancient oaths that they took, that they would take Joseph out with them and bring him to the land of Israel. This is a paradigm, an example for all Jewish history and life. Even after centuries of exile, after moments of terrible forgetfulness and confusion, somehow the Jewish people remembered where their true home was, where they would achieve great and mighty

accomplishments against all odds. That is why this holy book describes life itself.
Shabbat shalom
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