

Gen. 50:1 Joseph flung himself upon his father's face and wept over him and kissed him. ² Then Joseph ordered the physicians in his service to embalm his father, and the physicians embalmed Israel. ³ It required forty days, for such is the full period of embalming. The Egyptians bewailed him seventy days; ⁴ and when the wailing period was over, Joseph spoke to Pharaoh's court, saying, "Do me this favor, and lay this appeal before Pharaoh: ⁵ 'My father made me swear, saying, "I am about to die. Be sure to bury me in the grave which I made ready for myself in the land of Canaan." Now, therefore, let me go up and bury my father; then I shall return.'" ⁶ And Pharaoh said, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you promise on oath."

Gen. 50:7 So Joseph went up to bury his father; and with him went up all the officials of Pharaoh, the senior members of his court, and all of Egypt's dignitaries, ⁸ together with all of Joseph's household, his brothers, and his father's household; only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the region of Goshen. ⁹ Chariots, too, and horsemen went up with him; it was a very large troop.

Gen. 50:10 When they came to Goren^a ha-Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they held there a very great and solemn lamentation; and he observed a mourning period of seven days for his father. ¹¹ And when the Canaanite inhabitants of the land saw the mourning at Goren ha-Atad, they said, "This is a solemn mourning on the part of the Egyptians." That is why it was named Abel-mizraim, which is beyond the Jordan. ¹² Thus his sons did for him as he had instructed them. ¹³ His sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the field of Machpelah, the field near Mamre, which Abraham had bought for a burial site from Ephron the Hittite. ¹⁴ After burying his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father.

^a Or "the threshing floor of."

Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary)

3. forty days. . . seventy days It is not clear if the two periods overlap or are consecutive. Detailed information on the embalming process is lacking for the ancient period, but is available from the fifth century B.C.E. and from the late Hellenistic period. Herodotus (Histories 2.86) reports that the body was placed in niter for seventy days. Diodorus of Sicily (Histories 1.91) describes a thirty-day dressing of the corpse with oils and spices and seventy-two days of public mourning for a king. Jacob is apparently being accorded royal honors.

E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible)

3. forty days. According to Diodorus Siculus I 91, the embalming process lasted more than thirty days, while Herodotus speaks of as many as seventy (Dr.); Diodorus also states (I 72) that the Egyptians mourned their kings seventy-two days.

Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*

3. forty full days. A Hebrew formulaic number is used rather than the number of days prescribed by Egyptian practice.

seventy days. Evidently, the Egyptian period of mourning for a royal personage, seventy-two days, has been rounded off to the Hebrew formulaic seventy.

Jon Levenson, "Genesis," *Jewish Study Bible*

50.2-3: The embalming and the periods of mourning follow Egyptian rather than Israelite custom. Jewish law forbids embalming (and cremating). The body must, instead, be interred in such a way that it will "return to the ground from which [it was] taken" (Gen. 3.19).

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RASHI: **It required forty days.** Literally, “forty days were fulfilled for him,” the full complement required for embalming. **The Egyptians bewailed him seventy days.** The 40 days required for the embalming, and afterward the standard 30 days of mourning. For Jacob had brought great blessing to Egypt—the famine had ended on his account, and the waters of the Nile were blessed as well.

KIMHI: **Seventy days.** Counting the 30 days that are spent in mourning any great man, as we find with Aaron and Moses. In their case, however, the 30 days came after the burial, whereas in Jacob’s case they came before the burial, since he was embalmed.

HIZKUNI: **The Egyptians bewailed him seventy days.** Another reading: The “seventy persons ... belonging to Jacob” in Egypt (see 46:26–27) each bewailed him for one day.

ABARBANEL: **The Egyptians bewailed him seventy days.** The text literally reads, “They bewailed him—Egypt—seventy days,” perhaps to be read as “they”—the men of his own household—”bewailed him *in* Egypt for 70 days.” It is implausible that all the Egyptians would mourn for Jacob.

ABARBANEL (to v. 4): **Do me this favor, and lay this appeal before Pharaoh.** Joseph himself could not go; as Esther 4:2 reminds us, “one cannot enter the palace gate wearing sackcloth.”

Joshua Berman, “Identity Politics and the Burial of Jacob (Genesis 50:1-14).” *CBQ* 2006

The statement in v. 3a, “it required forty days, for such is the full period of embalming,” is equally enigmatic. Why has the biblical author included this note? The phrase *כי כן ימלאו ימי החנטים* may be understood in two ways, demonstrating Joseph’s multiple handling of the issue. The note may be seen as neutral in terms of the question of Joseph’s motivation, simply reflecting the author’s desire for verisimilitude. Yet a different connotation may be inferred when the expression is compared with a close parallel, Esth 2: 12: “The turn came for each girl to go in to King Ahasuerus, after twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their cosmetic treatment (*כי כן ימלאו ימי מרוקיהן*), six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics for women” (NRSV). This verse from Esther is the only other biblical occurrence of the phrase *כי כן ימלאו ימי*.

Throughout the burial narrative, Jacob is consistently referred to as “his father” or “your father,” that is, always in relation to Joseph. The lone exception is in 50:2: “and the physicians embalmed Israel.” I understand the reference to “Israel” here, and only in this verse, as a contrast to the “Israel” who asked – nay, pleaded – with Joseph not to be buried in Egypt, and who made Joseph take a vow to this effect (47:29-3 1). On his deathbed, the patriarch is twice referred to as Israel (47:29, 31). Genesis 50:2 may be read, then, as bearing tragic implication. Here is “Israel,” who longed to merit the same ancestral burial as his forebears, now laid out upon the mortuary table of the Egyptian physicians with his innards subjected to Egyptian ritual day after day for forty days, “for such was the custom.”

Conclusion

We have seen how the narratives of Jacob’s death and burial present two paradigms of how the identity politics of Hebrewness are negotiated when marginalized within the foreign culture of Egypt. The first is that of Jacob, the strident patriarch. With the exception of one grudging encounter with Pharaoh (47:8-10), Jacob seems to have no encounter with Egyptian culture, and indeed celebrates his difference as a Hebrew. The other paradigm is that of Joseph, viceroy of Egypt. Joseph all along is acutely aware of the responsibility that rests on his shoulders alone to ensure the welfare of the clan. Throughout his career, Joseph struggles for equilibrium, for the balanced expression of a politically expedient commitment to both host and heritage, to both father and Pharaoh.

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