

Parashat Vayechi 5771, 2010:

*Understanding Middah K'neged Middah*

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The concluding *pasukim* (verses) of our *parasha* contain Yosef's final words to his brothers, and depict his death:

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am going to die; G-d will surely remember you and take you up out of this land to the land that He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." And Joseph adjured the children of Israel, saying, "G-d will surely remember you, and you shall take up my bones out of here." And Joseph died at the age of one hundred ten years, and they embalmed him and he was placed into the coffin in Egypt. (This and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Herein, Yosef reveals the extent of his faith and belief in Hashem and twice declares, "G-d will surely remember you," and asserts that *b'nai Yisrael* will eventually leave Egypt and return to their promised land. Within this context, he placed an oath (*shavuah*) upon his brothers – and their future children - to transport his bones with them and ultimately bury him in Israel. As Rashi (1040-1105) explains: "**and you shall bring up my bones from here with you:** He [Joseph] made his brothers swear in this manner." (*Sefer Shemot* 13:19) In doing so, he emulated his father, *Yaakov Avinu* (our Patriarch Yaakov), who insisted upon Yosef taking a *shavuah* stating that he would not bury him in Egypt, but rather with his forefathers in Israel. (*Sefer Bereishit* 47: 29-31). Thus, a straightforward reading of our passage clearly indicates that the obligation to transport Yosef's bones from Egypt and to rebury him in Israel devolved upon the entire Jewish people.

*Sefer Shemot* 13:19, however, tells a different tale. Moshe, and not the entire Jewish people, gathered up Yosef's remains and began the long process of reinterring him in Israel: "Moses took Joseph's bones with him, for he [Joseph] had adjured the sons of Israel, saying, G-d will surely remember you, and you shall bring up my bones from here with you." The first chapter of *Mishnah Sotah* (7 and 9) utilizes this unexpected action to teach us a crucial lesson about how our present behaviors portend the manner in which we will ultimately be treated - by both man and the *Ribono shel Olam* (the Master of the Universe):

According to the manner in which a person acts, others [man and G-d] will act toward him... This [general rule] is in effect when it comes to matters of a positive nature as well... Yosef merited the right to bury his father [Yaakov], and there was no one among his brothers who was greater than he. As the Torah states: "So Joseph went up to bury his father... And chariots and horsemen also went up with him, and the camp was very numerous." (*Sefer Bereishit* 50: 7, 9). Whom do we have that deserved to be buried with greater respect than Yosef? Therefore, the only one who could possibly render him the proper respect was Moshe. Moshe merited the right to bury Yosef, and there was no one among his brothers who was greater than he. As the Torah states: "Moses took Joseph's bones with him." Whom do we have that deserved to be buried with greater respect than Moshe? Therefore, only the Omnipresent (*Hamakom*) Himself was fitting to be involved with Moshe's burial. As the Torah states: "And He buried him in the depression in the land of Moab..." (*Sefer Devarim* 34:6, *Mishnah* translation and brackets my own)

The operating principle in the above-cited *mishnaiot* is the well-known concept of *middah k'neged middah* (according to the manner in which a person acts, others – namely, man and G-d - will act toward him). This naturally leads us to ask, "What should our criterion be for determining those actions that best represent the moral and ethical gesture?" We are fortunate in that Judaism provides us with a clear and direct answer to this question: "*V'halachta b'drachov*" ("And you should walk in His path," *Sefer Devarim* 28:9). This commandment is explicated in a famous passage in *Talmud Bavli*, *Sotah* 14a:

Just as Hashem clothed the naked [in the case of Adam and Chava]... so, too, should you clothe the naked. Just as Hashem visited the sick [in the case of Avraham after his *brit milah*]...so, too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He comforted the mourners [in the case of Yitzhak after Avraham's passing]...so, too, should you comfort the mourners. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He buried the dead [in the case of Moshe *Rabbeinu*]...so, too, should you bury the dead. (Translation, my own)

Stated quite simply, our goal is to emulate the Almighty's actions in each of our deeds.

The 13<sup>th</sup> century anonymous Sephardic work, known as the *Sefer Hachinuch*, introduces *halachata b'drachov* (Mitzvah 611) in the following manner:

We were commanded to perform all our actions in a way of honesty and goodness with all our power, and to channel all our matters that are between us and others in a way of kindness and compassion – as we know from our Torah that this is the way of the Eternal L-rd, and this is His desire from His human beings, in order that they should merit to attain His good reward, *because He delights in loving-kindness* (Michah 7:18). About this it is stated, “*and you shall walk in His ways*” (Deuteronomy 28:9). (Translation, Charles Wengrov)

As my rebbi and mentor Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) noted on many occasions, *halachta b'drachov* emerges as the fundamental underpinning of the entire ethical structure of Judaism. By emulating the actions of Holy One blessed be He, we create substantive changes in ourselves, and positively impact those with whom we interact. In this sense, we can truly be “partners with Hashem in creating the world” (“*shutfim im Hashem b'maaseh Bereishit*”). Indeed, Rashi hints at this concept in his comment on *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 133b, when he explains “*v'avnahu*,” in *Sefer Shemot* 15:2, as a contraction of “*Ani*” (“I”) and “*Hu*” (“Him” = G-d). In other words, when we walk in G-d's ways we become His partners in creating the world anew according to His divine blueprint.

May we find the strength of character within ourselves to join *Av Harachamim* (our Compassionate Father) in making the world a better and nobler place. In this way, may

we be *zocheh* (merit) to fulfill the phrase that is found in the second paragraph of the *Aleinu*: “*L’takane olam b’malchut Shakai*” (“to perfect the world through the Almighty’s sovereignty”). *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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[http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat\\_hashavuah/index.html](http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html).

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email: [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).