Thinking about a Midrash: Thoughts for Parashat Vayhi, January 3, 2015

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As Jacob neared his death, he instructed his son Joseph: “please do not bury me in Egypt” (Bereishith 47:29). Joseph was compelled to take an oath to bring Jacob’s body to the burial place of his fathers in the land of Canaan.

Rashi, citing the Midrash on this verse, offers several reasons for Jacob’s insistence on not being interred in Egypt. One of them has Jacob worrying “lest Egypt will make me into [a shrine] of idolatry.”

What exactly does this mean? Did Jacob really think that the Egyptians had such a high opinion of him that they would want to idolize him or worship their gods at his grave? This would be a highly far-fetched possibility. After all, Jacob was a foreigner living outside the mainstream of Egyptian society. He was head of a family of shepherds, an occupation despised by the Egyptians. Why would the Egyptians want to venerate his grave in any way?

So then, what might the Midrash have had in mind?

Jacob and his family constituted a tiny percentage of the Egyptian population. Whereas the vast and powerful Egyptian civilization was mired in idolatry, the small group of Israelites was faithful to One God, Creator of heaven and earth, the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca. As he neared his death, Jacob was fearful lest the faith of Israel would be extinguished. Once he died, who would have the authority to keep the growing family true to their religious ideology? Would the faith of Israel disintegrate in the face of the much larger Egyptian culture?

Jacob wanted to be buried in the family’s ancestral grave in Canaan, to serve as a reminder to his family of their roots. If he would be buried in Egypt, his grave would soon blend in with the Egyptian civilization. His own family would eventually treat his grave as other Egyptians treated the graves of their idolatrous ancestors. Jacob wasn’t worried that Egyptians would make his grave into an idolatrous shrine: he was worried that his own descendants would do so,

succumbing to the overwhelming power of the Egyptian mainstream.

Jacob wanted his children and grandchildren to remember that his final resting place was in Canaan, alongside the spiritual founders of the Israelite faith. As long as his descendants were conscious of their physical and spiritual origins, Jacob was hopeful that they would be able to avoid assimilation into Egyptian society.

Midrashim often include comments that seem strange. In the introduction to his commentary on Perek Helek, Rambam provides a sound approach for dealing with such Midrashim. One should not take them literally but should seek to discover the underlying message being taught by our sages. Rambam criticizes those who insist on the literal meaning of Midrashim, even when they contradict reason. He writes that the literalists “are poor in knowledge. One can only regret their folly. Their very effort to honor and to exalt the sages in accordance with their own meager understanding actually humiliates [the sages]. As God lives, this group destroys the glory of the Torah and extinguishes its light, for they make the Torah of God say the opposite of what is intended.”

So when we come across Midrashim that appear to be strange, far-fetched or irrational, we need to think about them carefully so that we can discover what our sages may really have had in mind. They often spoke in parables, used hyperbole, and couched important truths in enigmatic phrases that catch our attention.

Many important truths and ideas are conveyed obliquely. We may learn many things by paying close attention

Angel for Shabbat