

## Shemot Rabbah

"Mosheh took the bones of Yosef" – this is the referent of Scripture "The wise heart will take mitzvoth"

as all Israel were engaged with silver and gold, but Mosheh was engaged with Joseph's bones, as Scripture says "Mosheh took the bones etc.",

The Holy Blessed One said to Mosheh: About you is fulfilled "The wise heart will take mitzvoth" –

Yosef was obligated to bury his father because he was his son,  
but you are neither his son nor his grandson, and you were not obligated to engage with him, and nonetheless you buried him;  
so too I, Who is not obligated to any created being -  
I will take care of your need and bury you,  
as Scripture writes "and He buried him in the valley".

How did Mosheh know where Yosef was buried?

Some say:

Serach bat Asher showed him. He was buried in the Nile.

What did Mosheh do? Etc.

But some say:

He was buried in a ?pyramid?, in the way that kings are buried,  
and the Egyptians made dogs of gold via magic, that if a person would come there, they would bark, and their voices would traverse the whole land of Egypt, a 40 day walk,  
but Mosheh silenced them,

as Scripture says "and for all the Children of Israel no dog moved his tongue".

Mosheh began to shout: "Yosef, Yosef! The time has come that you stated "Surely Elokim will redeem you!"

Immediately the ark containing Joseph's body stirred, and Mosheh took it,

as Scripture says ""Mosheh took the bones etc.",

and Yosef's bones travelled with them in the Wilderness for forty years.

The Holy Blessed One said to Yosef: You said to your brothers "I will sustain you" – by your life!

You will die, and your bones will travel with them in the Wilderness for forty years,

as Scripture says: "There were people who were *tamei* via the *nefesh* of an *adam* – the word *adam* refers to Yosef,

as Scripture says: "[and He abandoned the Tabernacle in Shiloh,] the Tent that He made dwell with *adam*"

and Scripture says: "And He rejected the tent of Yosef",

in your merit they will make the remedial Passover.

"For he *hashbeia hishbia* the children of Israel" – why is the verb for swearing repeated twice?

He swore to them that his heart held nothing against them, and they swore to him that their hearts held nothing against him.

Why "and you must take my bones up from this with you"?

Said R. Levi: A parable – to what is this similar? To a person who put his wine into a cellar.

Thieves came and took the barrels, went their way and drank them. The owner of the wine came and found them having stolen the barrel. He said to them: "You drank the wine – return the barrel to its place".

So too, Yosef's brothers stole him from Shekhem and sold him, and when he was near death he made them swear, saying to them: "I ask of you, my brothers – from Shekhem you stole me when I was alive, return my bones to Shekhem".

Thus Scripture says "And the bones of Yosef which the Children of Israel hand taken up from Egypt they buried in Shekhem."

## שמות רבה (וילנא) פרשה כ

"ויקח משה את עצמות יוסף" – עהכ"א (משלי י) "חכם לבב יקח מצות",  
שכל ישראל היו עסוקים בכסף וזהב, ומשה היה עסוק בעצמות יוסף,  
שנאמר "ויקח משה את עצמות וגו'".

אמר הקב"ה למשה: עליך נתקיים "חכם לב יקח מצות" –  
יוסף היה חייב לאביו לקברו מפני שהוא בנו,  
ואתה לא בנו ולא בן בנו ולא היית חייב לעסוק בו, וקברת אותו,  
וכן אני, שאיני חייב לבריה,  
אני מטפל בכך ואקברך,  
שנאמר (דברים לד) "ויקבור אותו בגי'".

ומנין היה משה ידע היכן היה יוסף קבור?

י"א: סרה בת אשר הראה אותו, והיה קבור בנילוס.

מה עשה משה וכו'?

וי"א: בתוך הפלטרין היה קבור, כדרך שהמלכים קבורים,

ועשו מצרים כלבים של זהב בכשפים, שאם יבא אדם לשם, יהיו נובחים וקולן הולך בכל ארץ מצרים מהלך  
מ' יום,

ושתקן משה,

שנאמר (שמות יא) "ולכל בני ישראל לא יחרץ כלב לשונו",

התחיל משה צווח "יוסף, יוסף! הגיע השעה שאמרת (בראשית נ) 'פקוד יפקוד א-להים אתכם!'"  
מיד נתנדנד הארון ונטלו משה,

שנאמר "ויקח משה את עצמות יוסף",

והיו עצמותיו של יוסף מחזרין עמהם במדבר מ' שנה.

א"ל הקב"ה: אתה אמרת לאחריך (שם/בראשית נ/) "אנכי אכלכל אתכם" - חייך אתה נפטר ויהיו עצמותיך  
מחזרין עמהם במדבר מ' שנה,

שנאמר (במדבר ט) "ויהי אנשים אשר היו טמאים לנפש אדם" –

ואין אדם אלא יוסף,

שנאמר (תהלים עח) "אהל שכן באדם",

וכתיב (שם/תהלים ע"ח/) "וימאס באהל יוסף",

בזכות עצמותיך הם עושים פסח קטן.

"כי השבע השביע את בני ישראל" - למה שני פעמים?

אלא הוא נשבע להם שאין בלבו עליהם, והם נשבעים לו שאין בלבם עליו.

למה "והעליתם את עצמותי מזה אתכם"?

א"ר לוי: משל למה"ד? לאדם שהכניס יינו במרתף. נכנסו הגנבים ונטלו החביות והלכו להם ושתו אותו, ובא

בעל היין ומצא אותם שגנבו החבית. אמר להם: 'שתיתם היין - החזירו החבית למקומו'.

כך משכם גנבו אחיו של יוסף אותו ומכרו אותו, וכשבא ליפטר מן העולם השביע אותם:

אמר להם: בבקשה מכם אחי, משכם גנבתם אותי חי, החזירו את עצמותי לשכם.

לכך נאמר (יהושע כד) "ואת עצמות יוסף אשר העלו בני ישראל ממצרים קברו בשכם".

## Talmud Sotah 13a

A beraita:

Come see how dear mitzvot were to Mosheh Rabbeinu – all of Israel were engaged with spoils, and he was engaged with mitzvot,

as Scripture says: “The wise heart will take mitzvot”.

How did Mosheh know where Yosef was buried?

They said:

Serach bat Asher was left over from that generation.

Mosheh went to her and said: “Where is Yosef buried?”

She said to him: “The Egyptians made him a metal ark and fixed it in the Nile River so that its waters would be blessed”.

Mosheh went and stood on the bank of the Nile and said to him: “Yosef, Yosef, the time has come, for G-d has sworn “I am redeeming you”, so the oath that you made Israel swear is now in force. If you show yourself – excellent; but if not, behold we are cleared of your oath!”

Immediately, Yosef’s ark floated.

Don’t be astonished that iron floated, as Scripture writes: “One of them was chopping down a beam, when the iron fell toward the water . . .

‘Alas, my lord, it is borrowed!’

The man of Elokim said: “Where did it fall?”

He showed him the place, so he cut off a branch and threw it there, and the iron floated”-

The matter is a kal vachomer:

If iron floated for Elisha, who was the student of Eliyahu, who was the student of Mosheh, how much more so for Mosheh Rabbeinu himself!

Rabbi Natan said: He was buried in the royal mausoleum.

Mosheh went and stood by the royal mausoleum, and said: “Yosef, Yosef, the time has come, for G-d has sworn “I am redeeming you”, so the oath that you made Israel swear is now in force. If you show yourself – excellent; but if not, behold we are cleared of your oath!”

:At that moment the ark of Yosef trembled. Mosheh went and took it.

All ths years that Israel were in the Wilderness, these two arks – one of the dead, and one of the Divine Presence – would travel together.

Passers by would say: “What is the nature of those two arks?”

They would reply: “One of the dead, and one of the Divine Presence.”

“Do the dead generally go together with the Divine Presence?”

They said: “This one fulfilled all that was written in that one.”

Had Mosheh not engaged with him, all of Israel would not have?! But Scripture writes: “And the Bones of Yosef which the Children of Israel brought up, they buried in Shekhem”!?

Furthermore, if Israel hadn’t engaged with him, his children would not have?! But Scripture writes: “And they became a legacy for the Children of Yosef”!

The tribes of Yosef said: “Leave him be – he is more honored being dealt with by many than by few”, and then the other tribes said: “Leave him be – he is more honored being dealt with by the great than by the small”.

“They buried in Shekhem” – why Shekhem?

Said R. Chama bar Chanina: They stole him from Shekhem, and to Shekhem we will return his loss”.

Don’t these verses contradict – “Mosheh took the bones of Yosef with him”, vs. “And the Bones of Yosef which the Children of Israel brought up”!?

Said R. Chama bar Chanina . . .

## סוטה יג.

ת"ר:

בא וראה כמה חביבות מצות על משה רבינו, שכל ישראל כולן נתעסקו בביזה, והוא נתעסק במצות, שנאמר (משלי י) "חכם לב יקח מצות וגו'".

ומנין היה יודע משה רבינו היכן יוסף קבור?

אמרו:

סרה בת אשר נשתיירה מאותו הדור. הלך משה אצלה. אמר לה: "כלום את יודעת היכן יוסף קבור?" אמרה לו: ארון של מתכת עשו לו מצרים, וקבעוהו בנילוס הנהר, כדי שיתברכו מימיו. הלך משה ועמד על שפת נילוס. אמר לו: "יוסף, יוסף! הגיע העת שנשבע הקב"ה שאני גואל אתכם, והגיעה השבועה שהשבעת את ישראל. אם אתה מראה עצמך – מוטב; אם לאו – הרי אנו מנוקין משבועתך!" מיד צף ארונו של יוסף.

ואל תתמה היאך ברזל צף, שהרי כתיב (מלכים ב' ו) "ויהי האחד מפיל הקורה ואת הברזל נפל אל המים וגו' אהה אדוני והוא שאול ויאמר איש האלקים: 'אנה נפל?' ויראהו את המקום ויקצב עץ וישלך שמה ויצף הברזל", והלא דברים ק"ו: ומה אלישע תלמידו של אליהו, ואליהו תלמידו של משה, צף ברזל מפניו, מפני משה רבינו, על אחת כמה וכמה!?

רבי נתן אומר:

בקברניט של מלכים היה קבור.

הלך משה ועמד על קברניט של מלכים. אמר: "יוסף, הגיע עת שנשבע הקב"ה שאני גואל אתכם, והגיעה שבועה שהשבעת את ישראל. אם אתה מראה עצמך – מוטב; ואם לאו – הרי אנו מנוקין משבועתך!" באותה שעה נזדעזע ארונו של יוסף. נטלו משה והביאו אצלו. וכל אותן שנים שהיו ישראל במדבר. היו שני ארונות הללו. אחד של מת ואחד של שכינה. מהלכין זה עם זה. והיו עוברין ושבין אומרים: "מה טיבן של שני ארונות הללו?" אמרו: "אחד של מת ואחד של שכינה". "וכי מה דרכו של מת להלך עם שכינה?" אמרו: "קיים זה כל מה שכתוב בזה".

ואי לא עסיק ביה משה, ישראל לא הוו מיעסקי ביה?! והכתיב (יהושע כד) "ואת עצמות יוסף אשר העלו בני ישראל ממצרים קברו בשכם"?!?

ותו - אי לא איעסקו ביה ישראל, בניו לא הוו מיעסקי ביה?! והכתיב (יהושע כד) "ויהיו לבני יוסף לנחלה"?! אמרו: "הניחו לו - כבודו במרובים יותר מבמועטין". ותו אמרו: "הניחו לו - כבודו בגדולים יותר מבקטנים".

"קברו בשכם" - מאי שנא בשכם?

אמר ר' חמא בר' חנינא: משכם גנבוהו, ולשכם נחזיר אבידתו.

קשו קראי אהדדי –

כתיב (שמות יג) "ויקח משה את עצמות יוסף עמו", וכתיב "ואת עצמות יוסף אשר העלו בני ישראל וגו'!" א"ר חמא בר' חנינא: כל העושה דבר ולא גמרו ובא אחר וגמרו, מעלה עליו הכתוב על שגמרו כאילו עשאו. רבי אלעזר אומר: אף מורידין אותו מגדולתו . . .

Last week's devar Torah ended with the following sentence: "It may also be worth exploring whether Rav Yochanan's and Resh Lakish's positions here are reflective of their characters, of their communal roles, their politics, or of the role of authority in their own relationship; however, if it is discovered that they are, this must not yield the conclusion that their interpretations here are eisegetic impositions rather than exegetical outcomes." In response, Elliot Dine (SBM 2010) sent a wonderful article by Reuven Kimmelman that in fact connects their positions to their communal roles and politics. I stand by my argument, however, as you can read in more detail in a LookJed posting [here](#).

(This may be a good time to mention that Ernest Mandel and Andrew Warshall both caught a very likely error in the devar Torah addressed to Rav Dov Linzer two weeks ago; I thank them and look forward to Rav Linzer's response, which will likely include their critique.)

The LookJed posting cited above continues my dialogue with Dr. Avi Walfish as to whether we can usefully speak of Chazal's interpretive methodology. I contend that we should not equate Chazal's method of reading with the content that is explicit in collections of midrashim, among other reasons because those midrashim may represent end-product public performances rather than the way Chazal read for themselves. Can we recover Chazal's mode of reading, as opposed to their way of teaching from, the text? I'll try this week to continue developing the resources necessary to answer that question in the affirmative.

The first issue I want to raise is whether and how one can tell that an element of a Rabbinic interpretation is derived from the text, rather than assumed to precede the text. I regularly quote the work of Professor Kugel in this regard, who argues convincingly that some "midrashic narrative expansions" are at least as old as the literary form of the narratives they expand, but now I want to cite Rambam to make a broader point.

Rambam's definition of Halakhah leMosheh miSinai, as I understand it, is that the Torah was given in language to a specific culture, and therefore that the meanings of the words, and their specific cultural referents, were part of the general cultural knowledge of the Jew to whom it was given. The original "Oral Torah", in other words, did not need to be given – it preceded Sinai.

With this in mind, we can understand that the Torah's retelling of the Exodus, for its original audience, was more a matter of selecting information than of providing new information, and that there are references in the Torah that presume popular knowledge of facts not mentioned in the text.

One other way of approaching the same information: Jeff Spitzer argued to me a few weeks ago that visual art necessarily addresses questions that verbal description can ignore, for example whether Akeidat Yitzchak took place during the day or rather at night. In fiction, this means that readers can form their own mental assumptions of when an event happened. Sometimes, the Torah may be deliberately ambiguous to allow for such personal constructions, but at other times, it may simply assume that readers know what happened.

In the attached midrashim, the apparently generative interpretive questions are:

- a) Why is Mosheh described as personally bringing along Yosef's bones, especially as elsewhere in Tanakh this action is credited to all Benei Yisroel?
- b) How did Mosheh know where Yosef was buried?
- c) Where were Yosef's bones kept during the years in the Wilderness?

The Rabbinic answers to these questions – all of which are found essentially unchanged in a broad range of Rabbinic materials – involve a number of narrative elements that cannot be directly derived from the text of Exodus. Some but not all elements are common to all answers. In all versions, Mosheh is required to summon Yosef’s ark verbally via a formal invocation of the oath his brothers swore to him, and Yosef’s ark is carried in procession together with the Ark of the Covenant during the Wilderness years. But there seems to be controversy as to whether Mosheh took personal responsibility for Yosef’s bones because he was the only one willing to (everyone else focused on looting Egypt), or rather because everyone else thought that Yosef would be most honored that way, and Joseph’s coffin may have been in the Nile or else in a royal mausoleum. Serach bat Asher apparently shows Mosheh the location only if that location is the Nile. Where do these elements come from, and how do they relate to the task of interpretation?

One aspect we should acknowledge up front is the formulaic. The procession of arks is framed by the sentence “This one fulfilled all written in that”, which, according to Bava Kama 17a, is a standard funeral pronouncement, and the invocation of the oath feels very much like a standard ritual.

Seeing the invocation as formula means that the scene is not in fact an interpretation – one cannot, for instance, derive from it that Yosef was reluctant to leave. It is simply filling in the standard scenery for this type of event, like describing the Great Seal in a report on a presidential press conference. The funeral pronouncement may be a very creative response to the question of how the coffin could be left unburied for forty years without dishonoring Yosef - he was essentially eulogized for forty years straight. But here again, no work of textual interpretation is happening – any scenario that preserved Yosef’s honor would be acceptable.

The answers to where Yosef was buried are not about the meaning of this text, and I contend they are not really about the meaning of the outside prooftexts cited, either. Rather, they are attempts to explain why Yosef’s bones could not leave Egypt before then. They agree that it was because the Egyptians had secured the coffin, whether naturally or magically; in this they follow the rabbinic understanding of why Yaakov needed to make Yosef swear to remove his body to Canaan. My point is that the details are irrelevant to the interpretation. Magical lions would do as well as dogs, and burying him in a trackless desert would do as well as burying him in the Nile. Serach bat Asher similarly could be replaced by an anonymous informant, or an encoded book, or a magical map.

Saying that Mosheh handled Yosef personally so as to honor him is a very straightforward claim, likely drawn from contemporary funeral practice. The claim that only Mosheh was willing to is a more creative interpretation which rests on a broader ambivalence built on the narrative arc connecting the gold of Egypt to the Golden Calf.

Here’s my bottom line for the week: Midrash is often more a work of retelling than of interpretation. All retellings involve interpretation, of course, but that interpretation is often of a whole book rather than of any specific episode, and sometimes merely involves filling in boilerplate background. The particular set of retelling elements in the attached midrashim tell us very little directly about how the rabbis read (although they do suggest some interesting things indirectly). It would be a serious error to see the narrative expansions per se as representing the rabbinic mode of reading.