

## Parshas Vayechi – Moshe Dovid Spitzer (reprint)

טז טבת תשע"ז – 14<sup>th</sup> January 2017 – שבת פרשת ויחי

At the end of the week's sedra, we find that Yosef instructed that Yaakov's body be embalmed, and in the last possuk of the sedra Yosef himself was embalmed. Embalming involves treating the body with chemicals in order to preserve the flesh and prevent decomposition. It is done either to preserve the body over the short term (e.g. for the funeral, or transportation to a distant burial site) or for long term/indefinite preservation. It is well known that embalment and mummification were common practices in ancient Egypt. But as we know, it is forbidden by the Torah to desecrate the dead (which is the reason that autopsies and exhumations are forbidden, in most circumstances). For the Ovos to have practised embalment seems very surprising.

### **The halachic view on embalment**

Embalment may be different to autopsies. In fact, that Yaakov and Yosef were embalmed is used as proof by the Rashba (Teshuvos 1:369) and Radvaz (1:484), who write that embalment is permitted when done for the honour of the deceased (e.g. when there is a long distance to the burial site). They even permit making incisions into the body and removing organs (which presumably are to be buried separately), as this is how they assume Yaakov and Yosef were embalmed. However the Chasam Sofer (2:336), quoting the Zohar, writes that Yaakov's embalmers did not remove any organs (which is forbidden) but merely injected spices through the navel. In modern times Rav Wosner of Bnei Brak writes (Shevet Halevi 2:203) that it is permitted to inject chemicals into the blood vessels in order to preserve the body if there is a delay before burial, but notes that each case must be judged on its own merits as sadly many people do not behave with the proper respect due to dead bodies.

Those who permit embalment, allow it only when it honours the dead by preserving the flesh in transit to burial. In other cases it is forbidden to delay decomposition, hence long term preservation or mummification is not allowed (Igros Moshe, Y.D. 3:143). Decomposition is part of the process of atonement undergone by the deceased (Sanhedrin 47b), and it is forbidden to prolong it.

### **Was Yosef right to embalm Yaakov?**

There is disagreement in the medrash as to whether embalming Yaakov was correct. According to one opinion, Yaakov left instructions to be embalmed, implying that embalment is permitted. This can be explained easily: we have seen that embalment is allowed if it is in honour of the deceased. Due to the Egyptian national mourning period of thirty days before burial, and then the long journey to Yaakov's burial site in Chevron, it was permitted to embalm him in order to delay decomposition during this time.

(Another approach is to explain that "embalment" is a mistranslation of the word the Torah uses; what they did to Yaakov was something different. The Daas Zekeinim MiBaalei HaTosfos explains that they merely cleansed his digestive tract, in order to prevent the contents rotting the body, and they then filled it with spices. Abarbanel writes that they removed Yaakov's organs and treated his flesh with oils and spices which gradually corroded the flesh until only the bones remained. The aim was to enhance decomposition; this is considered by some to be desirable, as it shortens the period of transition to the next world.)

Another view in the medrash is that Yosef was punished for embalming Yaakov, by dying at a younger age than his brothers. But what was the problem? As we have seen, there was ample justification for embalming him! An answer is suggested by the Chasam Sofer (Toras Moshe). As we have seen, putrefaction is part of the atonement process for the deceased. Wholly righteous people (who do not need this atonement) do not decompose (Bovo Metzia 84b). Accordingly, Yaakov did not actually need to be embalmed! By embalming him, Yosef showed that he felt Yaakov was not wholly righteous. That is why he was punished.

### **Why was Yosef embalmed?**

There is not much discussion as to why Yosef was embalmed. Although he was to be buried in Egypt (thus discounting the long journey to Canaan as a reason), it is possible that the long period of national mourning before burial would have also meant that it was halachically permissible to embalm him. Alternatively: there is an opinion in the medrash that the Egyptian court physicians embalmed him, suggesting that it was not actually in accordance with the wishes of his brothers, who would have buried him without embalment. The Moshav Zekeinim Mibaalei HaTosfos writes that Yosef was embalmed because he embalmed his father.

Interestingly, in Beshalach (13:19) we are told that "Moshe took Yosef's bones with him" from Egypt, and Ibn Ezra writes that this is to be taken literally: only his bones still existed, but his flesh had decomposed. What happened to Yosef's flesh, if he was embalmed? If the Egyptians embalmed him, clearly something went wrong! (We know that not all mummification was successful.) And what if the brothers embalmed him? We can assume they did not mummify him, for that is not acceptable in halacha. He was only embalmed for the short term, to prevent decomposition until burial. Alternatively: the "embalment" was not actually embalment to preserve the flesh, but to corrode it to speed up decomposition (Abarbanel), so indeed only Yosef's bones remained.