

Parsha Ponders

Vayechi | Dec 28, 2023 | 17 Teves 5784

Donations, lifespans, and mummies¹

ויצו יוסף את-עבדיו את-הרפאים לחנט את-אביו ויחנטו הרפאים את-ישראל

Yosef commanded his servants, the doctors, to mummify his father. The doctors mummified Israel²

The Torah tells us something, which to our 21st century eyes is quite surprising. Yosef commanded the Egyptians³ to mummify his father, Yaakov. We view mummification as an ancient tribal ritual of the Egyptians; not something that Judaism usually promotes. In fact, our Sages⁴ say that Yosef was punished for mummifying his father. Even though he was one of the youngest in his family⁵, he died before all of them. This seems like a rather harsh punishment. Why was this considered to be such a terrible crime, worthy of premature death⁶?

The famous King David also lived a somewhat short lifespan, one of only seventy years. Surprisingly, our sources⁷ tell us he wasn't supposed to live at all. The seventy years he lived were somehow "donated" to him to give him the opportunity of life. Who donated these years? One opinion is Adam, the first man. He was supposed to live 1000 years, but he only lived 930 years, having given 70 to David. Another opinion⁸ is that it was the forefathers, Avraham and Yaakov, together with Yosef. Yitzchak lived 180 years, but his father Avraham only lived 175. This 5-year discrepancy was donated to David by Avraham. Yaakov lived only 147 years, 28 years less than Avraham, which was also donated. Finally, Yosef donated 37 years, having lived only 110, and not 147 like Yaakov.

¹ Based on [Chanukas HaTorah parshas Vayechi](#) § 50

² [Genesis](#) 50:2

³ [Bereishis Rabbah](#) 90:11 brings an interesting dispute if the doctors of Egypt mummified him, as the verse says, or if the sons of Yaakov mummified him

⁴ [Bereishis Rabbah](#) 90:3; [Midrash HaGadol](#) *ad. loc.* For some reason the [Chanukas HaTorah](#) cites the [Chizkuni](#) for this idea, but I couldn't find it. This *Midrash* is also brought by the [Mesillas Yesharim](#) Chapter 4

⁵ [Yefeh Toar](#) *ad. loc.*

⁶ According to the [Meillas Yesharim](#) *loc. cit.*, it's not such a question. It's an example of how strict Hashem judges the righteous.

The way the [Chanukas HaTorah](#) puts it, this was considered an act of honoring his father, similar to how kings are treated after death. His comment implies he views this act was totally fine. This is similar to the questioner to [Nodah B'Yehudah](#) YD 2:210, who assumes that since this was for a productive purpose (honoring the dead), it's permitted. See [Teshuvos Chasam Sofer](#) § 336, who cites his [Toras Moshe](#) *ad. loc.*, where he brings an interpretation that they didn't literally operate on Yaakov, which would have disgraced his corpse (although, he rejects it)

⁷ [Zohar I parshas Vayishlach](#) p. 168a

⁸ The [Chanukas HaTorah](#) assumes these two opinions to be in conflict. Indeed, seemingly they can't both be true, as Yosef lived 70 years, not 140. However, some suggest that there is no dispute. [Ohr HaChamah Bereishis](#) p. 168a quotes [Rav Avraham Galante](#) (16th century Italian Kabbalist) as suggesting that Adam planned on donating 70 years, but that was before he sinned with the Tree of Knowledge. After the sin, those years he donated became spoiled, and the forefathers had to step in. The [Ben Yehoyada](#) to [Shabbos](#) 30a s.v. הודעני says that Adam intended on giving 70 years, but then changed his mind. The [Shela HaKadosh](#) in his commentary on the *siddur* also says this, and uses this to explain the phrase אל תבטחו בנדיבים (Psalms 146:3) (although, in the end he concedes Adam was convinced to donate the years). The [Chida](#) in [Yosef Tehillos](#) 42:9 and [Midbar Kadeimos Daled](#) § 6 says that David barely slept at night (as he was busy studying Torah), so it was as if he lived 140 years. He also cites [Rav Avraham Galante](#). For a fourth approach, see [Derech Mitzvosecha Minui Melech](#)

There's a surprising opinion brought in the Talmud⁹. It says that Yaakov, our father, never died. The Talmud retorts that if so, what does it mean that they mummified him? The response is that we have a textual derivation which shows that he didn't die. This is hard to understand¹⁰. Nevertheless, we can suggest that these two opinions about who donated to David are based on these two opinions in the Talmud.

If we were to say that Yaakov didn't die, then we're left with the question of why did Yosef die before his time¹¹? It can't be because he donated of his lifespan to David, as that only works if Yaakov did as well. And yet, Yaakov didn't die. Rather, it's like the Talmud asks, what does it mean that they mummified Yaakov? Meaning, the fact that Yosef mummified Yaakov, means that indeed, Yaakov died. We're then forced to say that Yosef, together with Yaakov, donated some of their life to David¹². So it's not that David was punished for mummifying his father by having his lifespan shortened. Rather, it's only *because* he mummified his father that he shortened his lifespan, donating it to David.

Good Shabbos

⁹ Ta'anis 5b

¹⁰ See Chanukas HaTorah *loc. cit.* § 48, 49 for attempts to address this *gemarra*

¹¹ The *Midrashim* bring other reasons: positions of authority can drain a person of their life force, or it was because, when he was hiding his identity, he heard his brothers refer to Yaakov as "your servant", and he didn't protest

¹² I'm not entirely sure why we have to say this. Just because the opinion that David got his years from Avraham, Yaakov, and Yosef, has to hold that Yaakov died, the converse isn't necessarily true. As in, it doesn't necessarily follow that the opinion that held that Yaakov died held must hold that they all donated years to David. Even that opinion could hold that Adam donated them