

DEATH IN THE BIBLE

JACOB CHINITZ

In the two genealogies, each of 10 generations, between Adam and Noah and between Noah and Abraham, the Torah text merely records begettings and births by the single term *vayoled* [*and he had a child*] and deaths by the single term *vayamot* [*and he died*]. Subsequently, however, the Bible uses five different expressions in connection with dying: "*vayigva* [*perished, expired*]," "*vayeasef el amav* [*and he was gathered unto his people*]," "*vayishkav im avotav* [*and he lay with his fathers*]," "*vaye'esaf raglav el hamita* [*he gathered his legs into the bed*]," and "*betzeit nafshah* [*as her life was leaving her*]."

Indeed, two or even three of them may be used in the text to relate the same incident. Are these expressions meant to be taken literally, or symbolically with embedded meanings beyond the literal?

VAYIGVA [וַיִּגְוָה] – PERISHED, EXPIRED

The first use of this term occurs in Genesis 7:21: *And all flesh that stirred on earth perished – birds, cattle, beasts, and all the things that swarmed upon the earth, and all mankind.* The use of "*vayigva*" in this verse connotes simply losing life. However, the very next verse elaborates upon it: All in whose nostrils was the merest "*breath of life*," all that was on dry land, died. This phrase goes back to the creation of Adam, when the Lord blew breath into his nostrils (Gen. 2:7). Here it includes all living animals, not only man, which raises a philosophical problem that cannot be discussed here. We will encounter below a form of this phrase, but in relation to a human being only. In any case, simply, when the breath of life leaves the body, death occurs. Incidentally, the Hebrew for "corpse" is *gviyah*.

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VAYEASEF EL AMAV [וַיִּגְבַּח אֶל עַמּוּוֹ] – AND HE WAS GATHERED UNTO HIS PEOPLE

The Bible's report of the death of Abraham includes this expression in Genesis 25:8: *Vayigva va'yamat Avraham b'seiva tova, zaken v'saveah va'yneasaf el amav*. The JPS translators had a difficult time with this verse. In 1916, they translated the "*vayigva va'yamat*" as "*he expired and died.*" In 1986, they mistranslated "*vayigva*" as "*breathed his last,*" which, as we will see, translates a different term entirely. We can sympathize with them because it is difficult to perceive a difference between the first two terms. Perhaps in this instance "*vayigva*" was expanded to mean a stage of clinical death, and "*vayamat*" to the actual collapse of the body.

If the phrase "*vayeasef el-amav [and he was gathered to his people]*" signifies something physical, such as a family tomb, or is a metaphor for joining the spirits of Abraham's family, it would be difficult to see the cogency of this phrase with regard to Abraham. He was not buried in his family's tomb, but in the Cave of Machpelah, the Double Cave that he had purchased for the burial of his wife Sarah. Perhaps we ought to understand "*amav* [lit. *his people*]" as referring to that cave? That would be a difficult hypothesis to uphold. Nor is a satisfactory solution explaining the phrase to mean joining the spirits of his people back in Mesopotamia. The Torah had stressed the separation of Abraham from both his family and birthplace.

It has been suggested that perhaps there is a hint here that Abraham was establishing a spiritual home for his future lineage after their deaths. It has also been suggested that the Torah is implying that even though Abraham was radically separated in life and destiny from his family, yet he is connected with humanity, in the sense that David indicated on his deathbed: *'I go the way of all the earth'* (I Kg. 2:2).

I find both suggestions a little too far-fetched for plausibility. Perhaps the best we can do is to assume that the expression, which popularly may have originally referred to an actual family tomb, here takes on an existence of its own in linguistic terms, and is used with regard to the incidence of death itself, and not to burial at all.

The phrase as used again in Deuteronomy, in God's telling Moses about his impending demise, may help us: *'[And you] shall die on the mountain where you are going up and you will be gathered into your people, as your brother Aaron died on Hor Ha'har and was gathered into his people'* (Deut. 32:50).

Both Moses and Aaron passed away and were buried in the desert, far from any family sepulcher in Canaan. Thus, the repetition of the expression here – for Moses, in the future tense, for Aaron, in the past tense – would seem to support the concept of the metaphor being used to convey the idea of entering a spiritual realm of his people, regardless of the actual place of burial. The idea of a spiritual ingathering becomes imperative.

VAYISHKAV IM AVOTAV [וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִם־אֲבוֹתָיו] – AND HE LAY WITH HIS FATHERS

A phrase similar to the one immediately above: *And God said to Moses, 'Behold, you are going to lie with your fathers'. . .* (Deut. 31:16), intoned by God before He used *'and you will be gathered to your people'* in the next chapter, is more graphic and carries more of a sense of burial. We know, of course, that Moses does not lie with his fathers, but was buried in an unknown grave on the Plains of Moab.

That this phrase, too, is not intended to signify burial but a spiritually-endowed death we can see clearly in the verse about the death of King David: *And David lay with his fathers and was buried in the city of David* (I Kg. 2:10). David had time to plan the transfer of the crown to his son Solomon, and to instruct him in the political moves he must make in order to secure his kingdom. He died in deliberate and orderly fashion. For his death, the text reverts to the concept of lying with his fathers. "Lying" precedes the burial, which demonstrates that the expression has been freed from literal meaning, and became a metaphor for a death which involves joining the forebears spiritually.

This expression is used, presumably as a linguistically-transformed metaphoric phrase synonymous with *ingathered to his people*, as in II Kings 24:6. The context there relates that Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem, and Radak explains:

[King of Judah] Jehoiakim lay with his fathers – that is to say: he died. But [as a matter of fact] he was not buried with his fathers, for he was not buried at all as it is written. But [the meaning of this expression] is similar to the expression *he was ingathered with his people*.

Ibn Ezra, on Daniel 1:1, comments similarly:

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Jehoiakim was dragged to the gates of Jerusalem and his corpse was thrown unburied, for so did Jeremiah prophesy. Do not wonder why it is written *And Jehoiakim lay with his fathers*, for is it not written [regarding Moses] *You are going to lie with your fathers* and they died in Egypt?

We have to conclude, then, that the expression *lie with your fathers* became a formula for death, parallel to *ingathered into your people*, separated from the original idea of being buried in the family tomb.

VAYE'ESAF RAGLAV EL HAMITA [ויאסף רגליו אל-החמה] – HE GATHERED HIS LEGS INTO THE BED

And Jacob finished commanding his sons, and gathered his legs into his bed, and he expired, and he was gathered to his people (Gen. 49:33). The double use of the verb *asaf*, one in the active voice and the other in the passive voice, may be an attempt to convey two ideas: the active process of the gradual ebbing of life from the body culminating in the static state of death (expired), and the passive ingathering to his people before the actual burial.

BETZEIT NAFSHAH [בצאת נפשה] – AS HER LIFE WAS LEAVING HER

This description is uniquely reserved for the death of Rachel: *As her life was leaving her, for she was dying, she called his name 'Son of my affliction,' but his father called him Benjamin. Rachel died and was buried on the way to Efrat, which is Bethlehem* (Gen. 35:18-19). In this passage, the Torah deals with the fact of death as a process that lasted longer than a moment. Death and burial are again depicted in simple words: *vatamat* and *vatikaver*. Of Rachel it is not said that she was ingathered to her people, nor that she lay with her fathers. Her people were in Aram and her fathers were not of the patriarchal family. Though these expressions had lost their literal meaning, they were apparently considered inappropriate here. The monument built by Jacob indicates a way of identifying the grave, not a family tomb.

However, the passage specifically refers to an entity called *nefesh* [soul, or life force], which leaves the body in this process. No other individual character in the Bible is accorded this metaphor of dying. Perhaps the poignancy of the image is stressed here because it describes the death of "Rachel our mother" after suffering through a difficult birth.

By contrast, a straightforward non-metaphorical set of words is used with reference to the death and burial of Deborah, the nursemaid of Rebecca: *And Deborah, the nursemaid of Rebecca, died and she was below Beth El, under the tree, and its name was called Tree of Weeping* (Gen. 35:8). The designation of the grave is by way of metaphor, but the act of dying is simply designated by the verb "*vatamat*" and the burial by "*vatikaver*." There are no words signifying the last breath, return to her people, or lying with her fathers, or ingathering of any kind.

All the expressions above deal with the process of dying and the immediacy of the fact of death. Psalm 30 brings us a different vocabulary about death, one that knows not of joining ancestors, or lying with them, but only with the end of life and post-burial deprivation. Though the death here is undoubtedly figurative, the imagery is realistic.

*Oh Lord, you have brought my soul up from Sheol [the nether-world]
Thou kept me alive, that I should not descend into the pit* (v. 4).

*Of what use is my blood when I go down to corruption [i.e., death]?
Shall dust praise Thee? Shall it declare Thy truth?* (v.10)

You have converted my grief into a dance; you have loosed my sackcloth and have girded me with joy (v. 12).

Here the Psalmist considers death not only a threat to life, but also a loss to God, Who will not hear the acknowledgment of the worshipper. Gone are the expressions about a life easing out with the last breath, being ingathered unto one's people, lying with the fathers. Here death is plainly a calamity, an end. Its end is not a tomb but a pit, life has turned to silent dust. The one saved from it is grateful.

As with most biblical concepts, while it is possible to find allusions, connections both linguistic and philosophical among a group of terms, it is difficult, if not impossible, to build up or extract a complete system of attitudes towards death.

It seems obvious that in the cases we examined, there are several disparate notions and processes involved in dying, from the ebbing of the life force, to expiration, the final static state of death, and finally burial – and even thereafter.

The expressions ingathering, lying with the fathers, the leaving of the *nefesh* may or may not have been allusions to separate spiritual existence, or a metaphor for national or family memory. Biblical language is always suggestive, and the language the Bible uses for death is no exception. Thus, for every unpalatable fact, it offers a remedy of easement.

QUESTIONS from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book **TORAH DIALOGUES**

- 1. Which English word is derived from a Hebrew term in Leviticus Chapter 25?**
- 2. Explain the choice in Parshat Bamidbar of the four lead-tribes in the march: Reuben, Judah, Dan and Ephraim.**
- 3. Compare Moses' dramatic reaction to the Israelites' graphic complaints in Numbers 11:11-15 to his responses to the murmurings and rebellions related in Exodus (e.g. 14:13; 15:25; 16:8; 17:4; 32:11-14).**
- 4. The word *kadosh* (holy; plural: *kedoshim*) is repeated at the beginning (Leviticus 19:2), in the middle (20:7) and at the end of Parshat Kedoshim. Judging by the content of these chapters, what meaning do you think the term *kadosh* has?**

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