

# Torah Table Talk

## The Mitzvah of Burying the Dead



Parshat Vayechi

Genesis, Chapter 47:28 – 50:26

Genesis concludes with the final years in the life of Jacob. From his sick bed, our forefather offers his children “a blessing.” The blessing, however, is not a true blessing. It was more of a critique of their life experiences and their basic character. In addition to his blessing, Jacob arranges for his burial by asking Joseph to bury him along side his father and grandfather. This passage is the basis for the Mitzvah of personally seeing to the burial of our loved ones. This is called an act of *Hesed shel emet*, an act of true loving kindness based on the words which Jacob uses when he talks to Joseph.

### Genesis 47:29-30

And when the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him: “Do me a favor, place your hand under my thigh and show me true loving kindness: please do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my fathers, take me up from Egypt and bury me in their burial place.” And he answered: “I will do as you have spoken.” And he said: “Swear unto me.” And he swore to him...

1. Jacob goes to great trouble to make Joseph swear that he will bury him in the land of Israel. Why? What concerns did Jacob have about Joseph’s ability to fulfill this promise?
2. What is the symbolism of placing the hand under the thigh as an act of taking an oath?

### Genesis Rabbah 96

“And show me true loving kindness:” The love shown to me after death is true. A person sometimes honors his father through fear or shame, but this love after death is a true love. ‘You owe this to me,’ [said Jacob to Joseph], ‘by the word of Scripture, “Honor your father and thy mother” (Ex. 20:12)....

You owe this to me by the word of the Holy One, blessed be He: “But the Lord, God is the true God” (Jeremiah 10:10) - and He told me, “And Joseph shall put his hands over your eyes” (Genesis 46:4).

R. Isaac commented: Jacob, for whose sake the world was created, had to say, “And show me true loving kindness:” This proves that even a king, when in an inn, needs love.

1. What ulterior motives might there be for the way we treat our parents? How does the burial of one’s parents transcend all possible ulterior motives? Why do the rabbis consider the act of burying the dead an act of unconditional love?
2. The second explanation offered in this Midrash is that Jacob told Joseph that he had to bury him because God had made this a commandment. What is the difference between an act performed out of a sense of obligation and one performed out of a sense of love and devotion? Do you consider one better than the other? Why?
3. Rabbi Isaac teaches us something important about the nature of acts of Hesed, loving kindness. How is an act of Hesed different from an act of Tzedakah or charity?
4. This Midrash offers three explanations for seeing to the burial of the dead. What are they and how are they different from one another? Which one do you find most convincing and why?

### **From The Web Site of ZAKA**

Jewish tradition places great importance on treating the deceased with utmost dignity, the body being G-d's creation and the soul's dwelling. Taking care of the dead is known in Hebrew as "Chesed shel emet" an altruistic kindness that the beneficiary cannot repay. Preparing the dead for burial by the *Chevra Kadisha* burial society is no easy task, even under normal circumstances, certainly not under the extreme and horrific conditions of brutal terrorist attacks or gruesome accident. Unfortunately, a highly dedicated organization in Israel is all too familiar with the job. Formed in 1995, ZAKA is a Hebrew acronym for "Identification of Victims of Disaster." They are often seen wearing neon yellow vests in the aftermath of an attack, at Tel Aviv's Dolphin-arium, at Jerusalem Sbarro, at Netanya's Park Hotel, painstakingly searching through the devastation and gathering shreds of human remains. Terrorism has proven the mettle of the ZAKA emergency medical organization. *ZAKA's U.S. address: ZAKA Rescue & Recovery, 500 8th Avenue, Suite 905, NY, NY, 10018. Tel: 212-868-2960, Ext. 104 Fax: 212-868-0389. Donations are tax-deductible.*

1. In what sense is the work of ZAKA an act of *Hesed shel Emet*? How is the explanation that this passage gives for this work different from the ones above?
2. How can we perform acts of *Hesed shel Emet* in seeing to the needs of the deceased? Today most of the needs of the deceased are taken care of by professionals in the funeral parlor? What responsibilities do we have to the deceased?
3. The people who work with ZAKA are all volunteers. Why would someone be willing to do the gruesome work of this organization? Can you imagine yourself doing such work? Why or why not?

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### ***How to use Torah Table Talk***

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind  
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

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