OLD AMMUNITION FOR TODAY: JOSEPH'S LEGACY AS A SOURCE OF SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE

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An unusual juxtaposition appears in Exodus 13, where two verses describing the final acts of the exodus appear. They seemingly have no connection with each other, *The Israelites went up from the land of Egypt armed* (Ex. 13:18) and immediately afterward, *Moses took the bones of Joseph with him* (Ex. 13:19). This textual proximity presents an interpretive challenge which would have appeared to have received limited direct attention from classical commentators.

TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATIONS

On the other hand, biblical commentators have grappled extensively with the meaning of the term "armed" (*chamushim*). Rashi on Exodus 13:18 offers two interpretations: "armed with weapons", as seen also in Joshua 1:14, *Let your wives, children, and livestock remain in the land that Moses assigned to you on this side of the Jordan; but every one of your fighting men shall go across armed* (*chamushim*) *before your kindred. And you shall assist them*. Rashi also brings the midrashic interpretation found in the *Mekhilta*, "only one-fifth left," suggesting that just a fifth of the Israelite population departed Egypt. Targum Onkelos renders it as "prepared" or "equipped." Nachmanides on Exodus 13:18 connects the term to mental and spiritual readiness, beyond merely carrying weapons.[1] All of the non midrashic interpretations point to the comprehensive preparation – physical, mental, and spiritual – required for the Exodus.

Regarding the specific issue of juxtaposition, the *Mekhilta* on these verses explains that it shows “the wisdom and saintliness of Moses. While all of Israel were busy collecting spoils, Moses was busy fulfilling the command to take Joseph’s bones.” This midrash seems to also be based on contrasting physical and spiritual wealth, similar to the concept illustrated in Nachmanides’ explanation of *chamushim*.

R. S.R. Hirsch on Exodus 13:19 appears uniquely attentive to this textual arrangement. He asks the logical question, "It might be worth considering

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why this fact was reported here and not above regarding the first departure from Raameses. Is it perhaps meant to emphasize the contrast? Six hundred thousand armed men lacked the confidence in the fulfillment of God's promise, and the true Jew, like Joseph, looks even beyond his death with confidence to the fulfillment of divine promises and is not disappointed." Furthermore, he argues that Joseph's bones served as "the most explicit rebuke concerning the people's lack of faith" that resulted in the forty-year journey.

JOSEPH'S BONES AS SPIRITUAL AMMUNITION

Building on these traditional interpretations, this article proposes an additional dimension to this juxtaposition, that Joseph's remains served as a kind of spiritual preparation, another kind of *chamushim*, beyond being armed with weapons of war.

Although some see Joseph's bones as a source of passive protection – the merit of the righteous for example – one can also view them as a source of active strength: spiritual ammunition of commitment to tradition, and gratitude. The very act of his brothers' descendants carrying Joseph's remains more than two hundred years after his death expresses the power of gratitude transmitted through generations. They not only remembered the man who had saved their family from famine but also the brother who chose forgiveness over revenge.

Joseph's genius is revealed in his long-term vision and profound understanding of his historical role. When he made his brothers swear, *you shall carry my bones from here* (Gen. 50:25), he created a multi-generational mechanism which ensured not only his own burial but the continuity of family and national tradition.

Joseph's use of an oath to ensure the carrying of his bones demonstrated an understanding of the mechanisms for religious memory transmission. Netziv in his *Ha'amek Davar* on Genesis 50:25 observed that Joseph employed a formal oath rather than a mere request, thereby binding future generations to this obligation. The full oath would be of greater effect as Joseph was a man familiar with legal procedures through his presence in the royal court, not to mention his involvement in legal transactions, and he would known that such an oath required either writing or witnesses. Therefore this ritual would be more likely to ensure onward transmission of the obligation. The Talmud

notes that Joseph's oath was binding on all Israel, not merely on his immediate family, thereby creating a national obligation.[1] This legal mechanism, transforming a family obligation into a collective responsibility, ensured the preservation of memory beyond immediate descendants.

Chizkuni on Genesis 50:25 offers an intriguing perspective on why Joseph felt entitled to impose this oath on his brothers; Since the brothers had kidnapped Joseph, it was only fitting that they should return him to Shechem for burial. The act of betrayal was thereby transformed into an act of rectification. This interpretation adds a dimension of poetic justice to Joseph's request, illustrating how the oath served not only religious purposes but also brought closure to the family's troubled history.

Joseph's wisdom is thus seen in several dimensions: His ability to see beyond his lifespan and plan for future generations: His understanding that his remains would serve as a spiritual anchor connecting generations and his foresight in creating a mechanism obligating future generations to remember and transmit the family tradition

Joseph's request to be buried in Canaan, appearing in the final three verses of Genesis, reveals foresight beyond mere adherence to tradition. When Joseph died, his family was well-settled and prosperous in Egypt. Why, then, this insistence on eventual burial elsewhere? His vision likely stemmed from two sources: not only unwavering faith in God's promise to Abraham but astute political analysis. Joseph would have observed how Egypt, a mighty empire, had systematically enslaved other peoples they had captured – Nubians, Sea Peoples, and possibly the Hyksos. He may have concluded that the Hebrews would eventually face a similar fate – an ironic reversal of history's familiar pattern "first they came for the Jews..."

Furthermore, the Pharaoh who elevated Joseph was the same ruler depicted in the butler and baker episode; therefore, Joseph would have been keenly aware of that ruler's instability. The text provides no explanation as to why one servant was spared and the other executed, and commentators do not suggest that Joseph himself understood the reason. This arbitrariness would have put him on guard, especially knowing the Egyptians' inherent aversion to Hebrews, as evidenced by their unwillingness even to eat with Joseph (Genesis 43:32). His request thus reflects not only spiritual commitment but political prescience.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION

A similar concept of patriarchal foresight is found in Midrash *Tanchuma*, which describes how Jacob, through divine inspiration, anticipated that his descendants would build a Tabernacle in the wilderness. In preparation, he brought cedar trees to Egypt, planted them, and instructed his sons to take them when leaving Egypt. Rabbi Emanuel Bernstein comments that "Jacob was apprehensive that as time went on . . . his descendants may lose hope in the idea of redemption and lose sight of their unique identity and destiny. . . . therefore he planted cedar trees in order that they would have a tangible entity to point to."[2] In this midrash, Jacob provides a tangible aide memoire for future generations, something hinted in the plain meaning of the text regarding Joseph's remains, a tangible connection for the Israelites to their heritage and promises of future redemption.

JUDAISM'S DISTINCTIVE APPROACH TO SACRED OBJECTS

The Jewish approach, as exemplified by Joseph's bones (and in the midrash by Jacob's trees), differs fundamentally from that of many other religions. Objects themselves are not intended for veneration but serve instead as connective mechanisms – physical reminders of spiritual commitments and historical promises. Objects serve as means rather than ends, tools for transmission rather than objects of worship. This distinction has remained central to Judaism's approach to physical objects in religious practice. Even the most sacred Jewish ritual objects – Torah scrolls, tefillin, mezuzot – derive their primary importance from their function in connecting the practitioner to Torah values and divine service, rather than intrinsic sanctity.

In many traditions, the physical remains or possessions of revered figures become objects of veneration in themselves – saint's bones, fragments of "the true cross," or Buddha's tooth, relics that are treated as inherently holy, often attributed with miraculous powers, and become centers of pilgrimage and devotion. In contrast, in normative Judaism, graves of the righteous are not considered inherently miraculous. The visit is primarily to honor the memory and emulate the virtues of the deceased, or to pray in a place where one feels inspired by their example. The prayer is directed to God, not to the deceased.[3] Throughout Jewish history, there has been ongoing rabbinic debate about

certain customs precisely because they can blur this critical distinction. Many authorities have set boundaries to prevent these practices from crossing into what would be considered idolatry. This principle helps explain why Judaism has survived despite the destruction of its central sanctuary and the loss of many sacred artifacts—its essence was never located primarily in objects but in the covenantal relationships those objects signified.

Perhaps one indication of the relative importance given to the bones themselves versus their symbolic meaning is that after their mention in Exodus 13:19, they are only referenced again in Joshua 24:32, which tells of their burial in the family grave purchased by Jacob in Shechem. This suggests that the significance lay in fulfilling the promise and maintaining awareness of the symbolism rather than in the physical remains themselves.

The Talmud provides further insight into the status of Joseph's remains during Israel's journey. In TB *Sukkah* 25a-b, a discussion arises regarding those who were ritually impure and unable to offer the Passover sacrifice at its appointed time (Numbers 9:6-7). R. Yosef HaGalili identifies these individuals as "the bearers of Joseph's coffin." This teaching reveals a profound theological principle: despite the spiritual importance of carrying Joseph's remains, contact with them still conferred ritual impurity, as the Torah prescribes for all human remains. This highlights the Torah's separation between reverence for ancestors and the objective nature of ritual impurity. The bearers of Joseph's coffin performed a sacred duty while simultaneously becoming temporarily disqualified from certain ritual activities – demonstrating that their mission was valuable not because the remains themselves possessed inherent holiness, but because the act of carrying them fulfilled both an oath and connected the nation to their covenantal history.

THE EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION

The carrying of Joseph's bones served not only as fulfillment of an oath but also as a powerful educational tool for future generations. The physical presence

of Joseph's remains throughout the forty-year journey provided constant opportunities for children to ask questions and for parents to explain who Joseph was, why his remains were being carried, and what promises were being fulfilled. This pedagogical approach of using physical symbols to stimulate questions and discussion became a central feature of Jewish educational methodology. The wisdom of Joseph's request can be seen in how it created not just a one-time fulfillment of his burial wishes but an ongoing, multigenerational conversation about faith, promise, and redemption. In this way, Joseph's bones became not just remains to be transported but a text to be studied and interpreted throughout the journey.

Joseph occupies a unique structural position in the Torah narrative as the bridge between Genesis and Exodus – between family history and national destiny. His death occupies the final three verses of Genesis, the book of the patriarchal family, while the statement *Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph* (Ex. 1:8) essentially initiates the new chapter in Jewish history, the book of the emerging nation. This textual positioning reflects Joseph's pivotal role in transforming Abraham's family into the seedbed of the Israelite people. He stands at the threshold between the intimate family drama of Genesis and the national epic of Exodus, embodying both the conclusion of one era and the necessary precondition for the next. By insisting his bones be carried during the national redemption, Joseph ensured that the familial values of Genesis would be integrated into the national identity formed in Exodus.

CONCLUSION

Joseph's genius was expressed in his ability to create a living tradition that integrates past with future. His remains were not just physical remnants but a symbol of the spiritual strength pulsing in the heart of the people throughout generations. This legacy continues to serve as a compass and source of inspiration in dealing with the eternal question of preserving a unique identity in a changing world.

The juxtaposition of Israel's armed departure and the carrying of Joseph's bones points to a profound truth: a people's strength lies not only in its physical weapons but primarily in its spiritual resources. Joseph's remains represented not just a historical memory but a living tradition, a source of values

and identity that continues to sustain the Jewish people through the vicissitudes of history.

The enduring power of Joseph's legacy reminds us that true resilience comes not from physical strength alone, but from the spiritual ammunition of shared values, intergenerational commitments, and lived tradition. Like the Israelites who carried Joseph's bones through the wilderness, contemporary Jews carry the weight and wisdom of their tradition into an uncertain future – not as a burden, but as their most precious resource for survival and flourishing in a complex world.

NOTES

1. TB *Sotah* 13a. The Talmud states that Joseph's oath was binding on the Children of Israel as a whole, not just his family.

2. R. Emanuel Bernstein, *Dimensions in Chumash*, vol. 1 (Mosaica Press, 2022) p. 463.

3. Note Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Mourning, 4:4, "For the righteous, by contrast, a tombstone is not placed, because their words will cause them to be remembered; a person will not need to visit in the cemeteries."