



Tikkun Leil Shavuot: A Torah Study Resource for Shavuot from ARZA

ARZA is the national membership organization connecting American Reform Jews and Israel through education, advocacy and travel
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In the Torah, the festival of *Shavuot* is known only as the festival of First Fruits, the celebration of the first produce of the agricultural year. It was observed by bringing a portion of the first yield of the land to the Temple. In this respect it is unlike *Pesach*, which, from its very first appearance, combined agricultural significance with deep historical meaning (the departure from Egypt), and even *Sukkot*, which, while primarily agricultural in nature, does include an element of historical commemoration (see Leviticus 23:43 – “For I caused the Israelites to dwell in *sukkot*...”). It was only in the post-biblical period that *Shavuot* began to be identified as *zman matan Torateinu* – the time of the giving of our Torah (see Jubilees 6:17-19 and *Bavli, Pesachim* 68b). In the centuries following the destruction of the Temple, this understanding of the significance of *Shavuot* grew in importance, and became the major focus of attention with the medieval institution of the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, a late-night or all-night Torah study marathon meant to recapture, in some small measure, the experience of receiving Torah at Mount Sinai. In recent years, the *Tikkun* has gained popularity in all sorts of congregations, and growing numbers of teens and adults spend most or all of the night engaged in study of a wide range of topics. Usually these topics reflect “Torah” understood most broadly, that is to say, as any sort of Jewish learning.

This year for *Shavuot*, ARZA is pleased to provide you with the following Torah study resource to use at your *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. It consists of six passages from the Torah, all of which address, in some manner, a question about the Land of Israel. Each text is accompanied by some discussion questions to help guide your study, though the questions included here are intended merely to get you started. We hope that they will lead to many more questions, and to a spirited discussion of how Israel fits into our contemporary sense of Jewish identity.

We have selected five Torah texts that demonstrate a connection to the land of Israel.

What is your connection?

- Sarah’s Burial Site
- Jacob’s Burial Request
- Joseph’s Burial Request
- Do Not Defile the Land
- Reporting about Zion
- The Death of Moses



Sarah's Burial Site

According to the Torah, Abraham was 75 years old when God first told him to go to the "land which I shall show you." From then on, Abraham and his family lived in the land of Canaan, mostly in the south near Beer Sheva. Although God had promised to give the land to Abraham's offspring, the text describes Abraham as a semi-nomad, living in a tent and occasionally "pulling up stakes" to move to a different area. His relationship to the land seems to have taken a turn, however, with the death of Sarah.

Genesis 23:1-20

Sarah's lifetime – the span of Sarah's life - came to one hundred and twenty-seven years. Sarah died in *Kiriath-arba*, now *Hebron*, in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her. Then Abraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the *Hittites*, saying, "I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial." And the *Hittites* replied to Abraham, saying to him, "Hear us, my lord: you are the elect of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold his burial place from you for burying your dead." There upon Abraham bowed low to the people of the land, the *Hittites*, and he said to them "If it is your wish that I remove my dead for burial, you must agree to intercede for me with *Ephron* son of *Zohar*. Let him sell me the cave of *Machpelah* which he owns, which is at the edge of his land. Let him sell it to me, at the full price, for a burial site in your midst."

Ephron was present among the *Hittites*; so *Ephron* the *Hittite* answered Abraham in the hearing of the *Hittites*, all who entered the gate of his town, saying, "No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field and I give you the care that is in it; I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead." There Abraham bowed low before the people of the land, and spoke to *Ephron* in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "If only you would hear me out! Let me pay the price of the land; accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there." And *Ephron* replied to Abraham, saying to him, "My lord do hear me! A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver – what is that between you and me? Go and bury your dead." Abraham accepted *Ephron's* terms. Abraham paid out to *Ephron* the money that he had named in the hearing of the *Hittites* – four hundred shekels of silver at the going merchant's rate.

So *Ephron's* land in *Machpelah*, near *Mamre* – the field with its cave and all the trees anywhere within the confines of the field – passed to Abraham as his possession, in the presence of the *Hittites*, of all who entered the gate of his town. And then Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field of *Machpelah*, facing *Mamre* – now *Hebron* – in the land of Canaan. Thus the field with its cave passed from the *Hittites* to Abraham, a burial site.

Questions

1. Why did Sarah's death change Abraham's relationship to the land?
2. Why was Abraham not willing to accept the burial site as a gift?
3. What can we learn from this text about Abraham's complicated relationship with the inhabitants of the land?



Jacob's Burial Request

Toward the end of the book of Genesis is the story of Joseph, Jacob's next-to-youngest son. His older brothers, consumed by jealousy, sell him into Egyptian slavery, but he rises to a position of importance and power in Egypt. Eventually, famine in the land of Israel drives his brothers and his father Jacob to move to Egypt where food was available. When Jacob is near death, he blesses each of his sons, and then gives them the following special instructions regarding his burial.

Genesis 49:29-50:14

Then he instructed them, saying to them, "I am about to be gathered to my kin. Bury me with my father in the cave which is in the field of *Ephron the Hittite*, the cave which is in the field of *Machpelah*, facing *Mamre*, in the land of *Canaan*, the field that Abraham bought from *Ephron the Hittite* for a burial site – there Abraham and Sarah were buried; there *Isaac* and his wife *Rebekah* were buried; and there I buried *Leah* – the field and the cave in it, bought from the *Hittites*." When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people.

Joseph flung himself upon his father's face and wept over him and kissed him. Then Joseph ordered the physicians in his service to embalm his father, and the physicians embalmed Israel. It required forty days, for such is the full period of embalming. The Egyptians bewailed him seventy days; and when the wailing period was over, Joseph spoke to Pharaoh's court, saying, "Do me this favor, and lay this appeal before Pharaoh: My father made me swear, saying 'I am about to die. Be sure to bury me in the grave which I made ready for myself in the land of *Canaan*.' Now, therefore, let me go up and bury my father; then I shall return." And Pharaoh said, "Go up and bury your father, as he made you promise on oath."

So Joseph went up to bury his father; and with him went up all the officials of Pharaoh, the senior members of his court, and all of Egypt's dignitaries, together with all of Joseph's household, his brothers, and his father's household; only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the region of *Goshen*. Chariots, too, and horsemen went up with him; it was a large troop.

When they came to *Goren ha-Atad*, which is beyond the Jordan, they held there a very great and solemn lamentation; and he observed a mourning period of seven days for his father. And when the Canaanite inhabitants of the land saw the mourning at *Goren ha-Atad*, they said, "This is a solemn mourning on the part of the Egyptians." That is why it was named *Abel-mizraim* [literally: mourning of Egypt], which is beyond the Jordan. Thus his sons did for him as he had instructed them. His sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the field of *Machpelah*, the field near *Mamre*, which Abraham had bought for a burial site from *Ephron the Hittite*. After burying his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father.

Questions

1. Is Jacob's motivation different from Abraham's (see Text I.)? If so, how might we understand the differences?
2. What do you make of the relationship between Joseph and his brothers and the two lands that figure prominently in the story, i.e., the land of Egypt and the land of Israel? Where is "home" for these men?
3. What do you imagine Joseph and his brothers chatted about as they returned to Egypt after burying their father in Canaan? (This question might be addressed by role-playing.)



Joseph's Burial Request

Almost immediately after the account of Jacob's death and burial, we have a similar, but not identical, account of the end of Joseph's life.

Genesis 50:24-26

At length, Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here." Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Exodus 13:18-19

So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds. Now the Israelites went up armed out of the land of Egypt. And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying "God will be sure to take notice of you: then you shall carry up my bones from here with you."

Questions

1. What are the differences between Joseph's burial request and Jacob's burial request? What is the significance of these differences?
2. How does Jacob's relationship to the land of Israel differ from Joseph's?
3. In these three stories of burial (of Sarah, of Jacob, and of Joseph) we see a wide range of relationships to the land of Canaan/Israel. Where does your own relationship to the land of Israel fit in this spectrum?



Do Not Defile the Land

The book of Leviticus is concerned primarily with laws of ritual purity and defilement that must be followed if the Israelites are to maintain their status of holiness. Chapter 18 contains a long list of (mostly) sexual sins.

Leviticus 18:24-30

Do not defile yourselves in any of the ways, for it is by such that the nations which I am casting out before you defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I called it to account for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you must keep My laws and My rules, and you must not do any of the those abhorrent things, neither the citizen nor the stranger who resides among you, for all those abhorrent things were done by the people who were in the land before you, and the land became defiled. So let not the land vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nations that came before you. All who do any of those abhorrent things – such persons shall be cut off from their people. You shall keep My charge not to engage in any of the abhorrent practices that were carried out on before you, and you shall not defile yourselves through them: I the Eternal am your God.

Questions

1. What is the relationship between the quality of the behavior of the Israelites and the "health" of the land?
2. How does God's relationship with the land differ from God's relationship with the people?
3. According to this text, what is the nature of the Israelites' presence in the land? Is it a right? A privilege? A circumstance of history?
4. What questions does this text raise about the modern state of Israel?



Reporting about Zion

Numbers 13: (Selected Excerpts)

The Eternal said to Moses: "Send people to scout the land of Canaan which I am giving to the people of Israel." Moses sent them from the wilderness of *Paran* as the Eternal had commanded - they were all leaders of the community..... He said to them, "Go and see what kind of country it is. Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak? Few or many? Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified? Is the soil rich or poor? And take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land."

They went up and scouted the land from the wilderness of *Tzin* to *Rehov levo-Hamat*. They went to the *Negev* and came to *Hebron*. They reached *Wadi Eshkol* and cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes - it had to be carried on a pole by two of them - and some pomegranates and figs.

At the end of 40 days they returned from scouting the land. They went straight to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community and reported to them. "We came to the land you sent us to, and it is indeed flowing with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who inhabit the land are powerful and the cities are fortified and very large. We saw the *Anakites* there! We looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them!"

Questions

1. What was the mission of the 12 scouts? Did they fulfill it?
2. Many people assume that the Israelites were made to wander in the desert for forty years before entering the land of Canaan because of the sin of the Golden Calf. But in fact, it was this incident in Numbers 13 that the Torah identifies as the reason for the long delay. Why was this incident seen as being so serious? How would you evaluate its seriousness in comparison to that of the Golden Calf?



The Death of Moses

After leading the people for many decades in their journey towards the Land of Canaan, Moses dies before entering the Land. His death in the wilderness raises numerous questions.

Deuteronomy 31:1

Moses went and spoke these things to all Israel. He said to them: "I am now one hundred and twenty years old, I can no longer be active. Moreover, the Eternal has said to me, 'You shall not go across yonder Jordan.' The Eternal your God Himself will cross over at your head; and He will wipe out those nations from your path and you shall dispossess them - Joshua is the one who shall cross at your head, as the Eternal has spoken."

Deuteronomy 32:48

That very day the Eternal spoke to Moses: "Ascend these heights of *Abraim* to *Mount Nebo*, which is in the land of *Moab* facing *Jericho*, and view the land of *Canaan* which I am giving the Israelites as their holding. You shall die on the mountain that you are about to ascend, and shall be gathered to your kin, as your brother Aaron died on *Mount Hor* and was gathered to his kin; for you both broke faith with Me among the Israelite people, at the Waters of *Meribath-kadesh* in the wilderness of *Zin*, by failing to uphold My sanctity among the Israelite people. You may view the land from a distance, but you shall not enter it - the land that I am giving to the Israelite people."

Deuteronomy 34:1

Moses went up from the steps of *Moab* to *Mount Nebo*, to the summit of *Pisgah*, opposite *Jericho*, and the Eternal showed him the whole land: *Gilead* as far as *Dan*; all *Naphtali*; the land of *Ephraim* and *Manasseh*; the whole land of *Judah* as far as the Western Sea; the *Negeb*; and the Plain – the valley of *Jericho*, the city of palm trees – as far as *Zoar*. And the Eternal said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, ‘I will give it to your offspring.’ I have let you see it with our own eyes, but you shall not cross there.” So Moses the servant of the Eternal died there, in the land of *Moab*, at the command of the Eternal. He buried him in the valley in the land of *Moab*, near *Beth-peor*; and no one knows his burial place to this day.

Questions

1. Why did Moses not lead the people into the Land?
2. Why, unlike Jacob and Joseph, was he not buried in the Land? Is this divine punishment, or is something else going on?
3. What, for you, is the difference between living in the Land of Israel and dying (or being buried) there?