Jacob lived seventeen years in the land of Egypt, so that the span of Jacob’s life came to one hundred and forty-seven years. 29 And when the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, “Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty: please do not bury me in Egypt. 30 When I lie down with my fathers, take me up from Egypt and bury me in their burial-place.” He replied, “I will do as you have spoken.” 31 And he said, “Swear to me.” And he swore to him. Then Israel bowed at the head of the bed.

Jacob is aware that he will die outside the Land of Israel. Burial in his ancestral grave, in accordance with his wishes, will involve a major effort and elaborate arrangements, all of which must be carefully described.

28. seventeeen years The Patriarch had thought that his time with Joseph would be brief. Instead, he has enjoyed many more years, precisely as many years as Joseph had lived with his father in Canaan (37:2). There was a similar pattern for Abraham, who lived exactly as many years in his father’s home (12:4) as in the lifetime of his son Isaac (21:5, 25:7).

29. place your hand See Comment to 24:2.

do not bury me in Egypt Similarly, Joseph later requests of his brothers that they rebury him in the land of Canaan (50:25). The deathbed requests are bound up with the divine promise of redemption and nationhood in the Land of Israel (48:21, 50:24ff.).

30. When I lie down with my fathers An idiomatic expression for death, not burial, and analogous to “going to one’s fathers” or being “gathered to one’s kin.” See Comment to 15:15 and 25:8.

in their burial-place The cave of Machpeleh.

31. Swear to me Jacob exacts this solemn oath, in addition to a promise, to bolster Joseph’s position when he will request the royal authorization needed to fulfill the difficult task of reinterment.

bowed at the head of the bed The aged Patriarch, being an invalid, can make only some bodily gesture symbolic of bowing, either as a

This final parashah of Genesis brings to a close the age of the Patriarchs. Jacob dies after blessing his sons. Some years later, Joseph dies. Genesis ends on that note. In contrast, Exodus will not deal with a family, but with a nation.

The account of Jacob’s death begins with “Jacob lived” (va’yih), from which the parashah derives its name. The achievements of Jacob’s life are emphasized, not the fact of his death.

28. Jacob lived He spent his last years in honor and dignity, rather than simply waiting to die.

29. do me this favor We sense the poignancy of the role reversal, as an aging parent becomes dependent on his adult child.

steadfast loyalty In later Hebrew, the words for this phrase come to mean “true kindness” (hesed v’emet). Jewish tradition defines “true kindness” as a good deed for which no reciprocal favor can be anticipated, such as tending to the needs of the dead. Adherence to this sacred practice is one reason why the volunteer burial society in a community is known as hevra kaddisha, the sacred society.

do not bury me in Egypt For Jacob, as for many others, Egypt was a land of graves, domi-
Some time afterward, Joseph was told, “Your father is ill.” So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. When Jacob was told, “Your son Joseph has come to see you,” Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed.

And Jacob said to Joseph, “El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and He blessed me, and said to me, ‘I will make you fertile and numerous, making of you a community of peoples; and I will assign this token of gratitude to Joseph or as an expression of thanks and praise to God.

**EPHRAIM AND MANASSEH** (48:1–20)

Joseph’s two sons are elevated to the status of Israelite tribes, retaining the number 12 for the landed tribes when Levi is not assigned any territory. Ephraim’s elevation in status over Manasseh reflects the political realities of later Israel.

**THE ADOPTION** (vv. 1–12)

1. **Some time afterward** That is, following the oath ceremony described in the preceding four verses and within the final year of Jacob’s life.

So he took with him The narrative leaves the destination and arrival to the reader’s imagination. The ancient Greek translation (Septuagint) adds, “He came to Jacob.”

2. **sat up** Out of respect for the office that Joseph represented.

3. **El Shaddai** See Comment to 17:1.

4. **and said to me** Jacob now establishes the legal basis for his subsequent actions. As heir to the blessings, Jacob has the sole right to decide who is to be included in the “community of peoples” that will be known as Israel. Only the one who receives the divine blessing directly has the right to bestow it on another. Hence, Jo-

nated by the pyramids and by the cult of the dead. Jacob fears that Egypt will become a graveyard for the vision and special purpose of the line of Abraham.

**CHAPTER 48**

1. **Joseph was told, “Your father is ill.”** Was Joseph too busy with his responsibilities to be aware of his father’s failing health? Or was he still ambivalent about his feelings toward his father? Or, as a midrash suggests, was he avoiding his father so that Jacob would not ask him how he came to be in Egypt in the first place (Pes. R.)? The Talmud notes that Jacob is the first person in the Bible to be described as ill. Previously, the Sages imagine, people simply grew older and one day died. They picture Jacob praying for a sign about the number of his days, so that he would have time to bless his children and grandchildren, reflect on the lessons of his life, and articulate his hopes and wishes for his family’s future (BT BM 87a).

2. **Joseph has come to see you** One should never enter the room of a sick or elderly person unannounced, lest they be embarrassed, indisposed, or not fit to receive visitors.

3–7. Jacob on his deathbed remembers two incidents from his long and full life: When he was young, God appeared to him and told him that he would become a special person; and Rachel, the woman he loved, died young. Ramban and Ibn Ezra understand the reference to Rachel’s burial on the road to Ephrath as an apology to Joseph for not having buried his mother in the family crypt at Machpelah. Jacob fears that Joseph, resenting the treatment of his mother, will not honor his own request to be
land to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession. 5Now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, shall be mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon. 6But progeny born to you after them shall be yours; they shall be recorded instead of their brothers in their inheritance. 7I [do this because], when I was returning from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, while I was journeying in the land of Canaan, when still some distance short of Ephrat; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrat”—now Bethlehem.

8Noticing Joseph’s sons, Israel asked, “Who are these?” 9And Joseph said to his father, “They are my sons, whom God has given me here.” “Bring them up to me,” he said, “that I may bless them.”

6. born to you The verb holad’it means, literally, “you have begotten.” The past tense of this verb is confirmed by the word meaning “who were born” (ha-noladim) in verse 5. It appears that we have here a fragment of a lost tradition, not otherwise referred to in the Bible, concerning other children born to Joseph, i.e., clans who adhered to the “House of Joseph.”

shall be yours They shall not constitute separate tribal entities, but shall share the inheritance of either Manasseh or Ephraim.

7. Rachel died On her deathbed, Jacob recalls his beloved wife, who died so young and for whom he endured so much.

Paddan The full place-name is Paddan-aram, as in 25:20, 35:9.

8. Israel This name, rather than Jacob, is used hereafter until the end of the chapter to reflect the change of name (35:10) on which

buried in Machpelah. Sforno imagines Jacob pleading that he was too overcome with grief to make proper burial arrangements for Rachel, whom he loved so desperately, and stating that he has felt guilty about it ever since.

8. Who are these? Jacob, who has just spoken so extravagantly about his closeness to Ephraim and Manasseh (v. 5), does not recognize them. Has his vision begun to fail, as happened to his father, Isaac, in similar circumstances? Or did he fail to recognize Ephraim and Manasseh because, having been born and raised in Egypt, they were indistinguishable from Egyptian youths? Tradition has it that they reassured him by reciting the Sh’ma—“Hear, O Israel” (i.e., Jacob)—we may look like Egyptians but we affirm the same God as our father and grandfather.
may bless them.”  

10 Now Israel’s eyes were dim with age; he could not see. So [Joseph] brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them.  

11 And Israel said to Joseph, “I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well.”

12 Joseph then removed them from his knees, and bowed low with his face to the ground.  

13 Joseph took the two of them, Ephraim with his right hand—to Israel’s left—and Manasseh with his left hand—to Israel’s right—and brought them close to him.  

14 But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim’s head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh’s head—thus crossing his hands—although Manasseh was the first-born.  

15 And he blessed Joseph, saying, “The God in whose ways my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, 

The God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day—

this episode depends. Furthermore, the name Israel is more appropriate because the narrative concludes with tribal history.

10. Israel’s eyes The statement explains Joseph’s reaction in the following scene. He attributes his father’s unusual act to his impaired vision.

12. from his knees The knees of Jacob, on or between which the two boys were placed. This is another symbolic gesture that marks acceptance and legitimation as son and heir. See Comment to 30:3.

and bowed low The Hebrew verb is singular and refers to Joseph.

THE GRANDFATHER’S BLESSING (vv. 13–16)

13. Joseph took the two of them Joseph positions the boys before their grandfather in such a way as to ensure that Jacob’s right hand, the symbol of action and power, will naturally rest on Manasseh, the firstborn.

14. on Ephraim’s head Placing the hand on the head establishes physical contact between the parties to the blessing, heightening the sense of intimacy and communication.

15. he blessed Joseph The mention of Joseph is surprising because the blessing is directed entirely to the grandsons. The Septuagint reads “he blessed them,” and the Latin reads “the sons of Joseph.”

my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked Jacob, out of modesty, does not include himself.

my shepherd The image for the deity as a shepherd, common throughout ancient Near Eastern literature and found frequently in the Bible, expresses the idea of God as guide, provider, and protector (see Ps. 23).

14. crossing his hands Onkelos translates the verb for “crossing” [sīkkel] as “acting wisely,” acting with seikhel, “good sense.” We are reminded of the lengths which Jacob himself went to in moving the patriarchal blessing from the older to the younger brother. Throughout the Torah, there is a preference for younger brothers over older ones. This is a way of saying that eminence is a function of individual character rather than birth order.

15. he blessed Joseph One blesses people best by blessing their children [Zohar I:227b].

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16. In them may my name be recalled. “May my name be perpetuated through Ephraim and Manasseh.” That is, may they ever be part of the Israelite tribal confederation, identifying themselves with the history, traditions, and values of their Patriarchs.

17. Be thought it wrong. That is, to disregard the status of the firstborn. He attributes the “error” to his father’s failing eyesight (v. 10).

19. I know. I know who is the real firstborn and how you placed your two sons before me. **shall be greater than he.** Moses’ farewell address (Deut. 33:17) reflects the numerical superiority of Ephraim.

**plentiful enough for nations.** Jacob transfers to Ephraim the contents of the blessing that he himself had received (48:4, 35:11).

20. Be blessed them. Jacob’s blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh (v. 16), interrupted by Joseph, is now resumed.

**Israel.** See Comment to 47:27.
and Manasseh.” Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh.

21 Then Israel said to Joseph, “I am about to die; but God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers. 22 And now, I assign to you one portion more than to your brothers, which I wrested from the Amorites with my sword and bow.”

49 And Jacob called his sons and said, “Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in days to come.

A GIFT TO JOSEPH (vv. 21–22)

21. I am about to die; but God will be with you These apparently unrelated clauses allude to the contrast between the present situation that permits Jacob to be buried in the Promised Land and the impending bondage in Egypt. Yet future redemption is ensured, because God wills it.

with you The Hebrew pronoun for “you” is in the plural. Jacob speaks through Joseph to the entire people.

22. one portion This translation of šb’khem, which agrees with many ancient versions, is accepted by traditional Jewish commentators. It means that Jacob is giving Joseph a double share, thus elevating him to the status of firstborn. It is likely, however, that šb’khem here does not mean “portion” but is connected with the city of Shechem, a place closely associated with Jacob and Joseph (Gen. 33:18ff.; Josh. 24:32). In that understanding, the passage refers to some tradition in the life of Jacob (other than the one in chapter 34) concerning his participation in a war against Shechem, which the Bible has not otherwise preserved. The Book of Joshua contains no report of the conquest of that city, although Joshua delivered his farewell address and conducted a covenant ceremony there. It is likely, therefore, that there was a pre-Mosaic Israelite conquest of Shechem. Possibly the city was razed in such a conquest and remained largely in ruins until it was reoccupied by Joshua without a fight.

from the Amorites This is a generic name for the pre-Israelite peoples of Canaan.

THE TESTAMENT OF JACOB (49:1–33)

Jacob summons his sons to his bedside to hear his farewell words. He addresses each son individually in poetic form. Traditional Jewish commentators treated these blessings and curses as prophetic. Modern scholars view them as reflections of later historical reality.

A PROSE INTRODUCTION (v. 1)

1. called That is, he sent for his sons.

what is to befall you This refers to the distant future. Jacob is speaking to the individual tribes personified as his sons.

bless their sons, “May God make you as Ephraim and Manasseh.” Why Ephraim and Manasseh? Perhaps because they were the first children who had to maintain their identity in a foreign land. Or perhaps because they were the first brothers in the Bible to get along peaceably, after the conflicts that marred the lives of Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers. Now that siblings have learned to get along, the story of the Jewish people can move to the next stage.

CHAPTER 49

1. Jacob summons his children, promising to tell them what will happen to them in the future. Instead, he speaks to each of his sons...
2Assemble and hearken, O sons of Jacob;  
Hearken to Israel your father:

3Reuben, you are my first-born,  
My might and first fruit of my vigor,  
Exceeding in rank  
And exceeding in honor.  
4Unstable as water, you shall excel no longer;  
For when you mounted your father’s bed,  
You brought disgrace—my couch he mounted!

—in days to come  The phrase b’aharit ha-yamim means simply “in the future,” a time without precise definition.

THE POEM  (vv. 2–27)

2. hearken . . . Hearken  The repetition of a word at the beginning of two parallel clauses is a feature of biblical Hebrew poetry.

REUBEN  (vv. 3–4)
Reuben is censured for the flaws in his character and for his moral failing (see Comment to verse 4). Reuben’s place at the head of the tribal lists in the Bible must echo the actual state of affairs that existed in dim antiquity. Behind Reuben’s loss of his firstborn status is a legal reality during an early period of Israelite history when it still was possible for a father to annul the birthright of his firstborn son, in contrast to the later legislation of Deut. 21:15–17.

3. My might  That is, “my virility.”  
my vigor  The Hebrew word on refers here to the powers of procreation.  
Exceeding  The literal meaning of the word translated as “exceeding” (yeter) is “excellence.”

The meaning: Being the firstborn, you should have pre-eminence over your brothers.

4. Unstable as water  Jacob censures Reuben for acting irresponsibly and impetuously, with no moral restraint, just as a torrent of water rushes along wildly.

shall excel no longer  You have lost your pre-eminence.

mounted . . . bed  This refers to Reuben’s act of incest, recorded in 35:22 and mentioned again in 1 Chron. 5:1.

bed  The word translated here as “bed” ( mishkav) is plural, always so used in the context of carnal relations (see Lev. 18:22, 20:13). Here the phrase “your father’s bed” stands for “the bed of your father’s wife.”

You brought disgrace  The Hebrew stem l’h’la “to pollute, defile, profane,” is used in connection with sexual depravity, as in Lev. 19:29 and 21:9.

my couch be mounted  This is an aside addressed to the assembled sons.

SIMEON AND LEVI  (vv. 5–7)
These two brothers are strongly censured for acts of cruelty and violence, alluding to their attack about that son’s character and special gifts. The Midrash suggests that this is because the spirit of prophecy departed from Jacob (Gen. R. 98:2). Perhaps we are not meant to know the future lest it lead us to despair or complacency. Perhaps, when Jacob looked into the future, he saw the quarreling and bloodshed that would befall his descendants, and the spirit of prophecy cannot abide where there is grief and sadness (Natali of Ropshitz). The modern reader may understand the passage to mean that a person’s future depends on his or her character. There is no preordained script that we are fated to follow.

4. You brought disgrace  What sort of blessing is this? Perhaps the greatest blessing is to have someone who cares about you point out your faults.
5 Simeon and Levi are a pair; Their weapons are tools of lawlessness. 
6 Let not my person be included in their council, Let not my being be counted in their assembly.
For when angry they slay men, And when pleased they maim oxen.
7 Cursed be their anger so fierce, And their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, Scatter them in Israel.

8 You, O Judah, your brothers shall praise; Your hand shall be on the nape of your foes;
Your father’s sons shall bow low to you.
9Judeh is a lion’s whelp;
On prey, my son, have you grown.
He crouches, lies down like a lion,
Like the king of beasts—who dare rouse him?
10The scepter shall not depart from Judeh,
Nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet;
So that tribute shall come to him
And the homage of peoples be his.

11He tethers his ass to a vine,
His ass’s foal to a choice vine;
He washes his garment in wine,
His robe in blood of grapes.
12His eyes are darker than wine;
His teeth are whiter than milk.

people
Either the other tribes (i.e., “kinsmen”) or an allusion to foreign peoples conquered by David.

11. He tethers This is an exaggerated image of the fertility of the tribal territory of Judeh.

choice vine The Hebrew word is “sorekha.” A place named Wadi Sorek, in the territory of Judeh, is located in Timnah, a region rich in vineyards.

He washes his garment in wine Either this is another exaggerated image for the abundance of wine or it may poetically relate to the stained garments of those engaged in the manufacture of wine, as mentioned in Isa. 63:2ff.

blood of grapes A poetic term for wine.
12. darker than wine . . . whiter than milk The phrases express an ideal of beauty: sparkling eyes and shining white teeth.

mentator interprets his words to mean, “May they be unsuccessful in their anger and violence. May such behavior not prove effective, so that they not be encouraged to use it” [Hizz-kuni].

10. So that tribute shall come to him Sforno understands Shiloh as related to shalom, so that the verse would mean “till the time of total peace arrives.” The Midrash and Rashi take the verse as a reference to the Messianic Era, when nations will pay tribute to the ruler from the seed of Judeh.
13 Zebulun shall dwell by the seashore; 
He shall be a haven for ships, 
And his flank shall rest on Sidon.

14 Issachar is a strong-boned ass, 
Crouching among the sheepfolds.

15 When he saw how good was security, 
And how pleasant was the country, 
He bent his shoulder to the burden, 
And became a toiling serf.

16 Dan shall govern his people, 
As one of the tribes of Israel.

ZEBULUN (v. 13)
The usual order, Issachar—Zebulun, is here reversed, very likely reflecting a time when the tribe of Zebulun was in the ascendency.

13. the seashore  The Mediterranean.

Sidon  A port city in Phoenicia, about 25 miles (40 km) north of Tyre. See 2 Sam. 24:6, according to which this was the northernmost limit of David’s empire.

ISSACHAR (vv. 14–15)
The tribe is not even mentioned in the list of Judges, 1, which indicates that it played an insignificant role in the conquest of the Land of Israel. Here it is chided for passively submitting to servitude as the price of peace with its Canaanite neighbors.

14. a strong-boned ass  The idiom for this (hamor gerem) appears only here. This translation implies a criticism of the tribe for placing its strength at the service of the Canaanites.

Crouching among the sheepfolds  That is, inactive, content to enjoy its safety at the expense of its freedom.

15. security  The word m’nuhah means “resting place” and is used here in the sense of “haven, settled home.”

good . . . pleasant  The territory of the tribe lay in a fertile plateau in Lower Galilee.

16. shall govern  The tribe of Dan will maintain its independence, despite its tribulations and failures.

the tribes of Israel  This is the first use of the phrase.

DAN (vv. 16–17)
Dan is the first of the tribes descended from concubines to be addressed. During the settlement period, it was a small tribe in a precarious position. All attempts on the part of the Danites to settle in their originally assigned territory were unsuccessful, and they migrated northward (see Judges 18:1ff.). The testament of Jacob is referring either to the premigration period or to events after the settlement in the north.

16. shall govern  The tribe of Dan will maintain its independence, despite its tribulations and failures.

the tribes of Israel  This is the first use of the phrase.

13–14. There is a rabbinic tradition that members of the tribe of Zebulun were prosperous merchants who subsidized the members of the tribe of Issachar, enabling them to engage in study. Jacob gives precedence to Zebulun (another younger brother favored over an older one) as a way of commending them for their actions (Gen. R. 99:9). Similarly, at the end of the Torah, Moses in his farewell address blesses “Zebulun in your excursions and Issachar in your tents” (Deut. 33:18).
17. **viper** The image may allude to the form of guerrilla warfare to which the tribe of Dan was forced to resort in its struggle for survival against its neighbors during the period of settlement.

**horse’s...rider** The word for “rider” (rokhet) can also be used of a charioteer, as in Exod. 15:2 and Jer. 51:21. Hence the likely reference here is to Canaanite chariots, which for a long time constituted the primary obstacle to Israelite penetration into the lowlands and caused the migration of the Danites (Josh. 17:18; Judg. 1:19, 4:3).

**A PRAYER** (v. 18)

**18. I wait for Your deliverance** Most likely, this is a prayer invoked by Jacob for the tribe of Dan in its desperate struggle for a territorial foothold in the land of Canaan. It also could be a prayer uttered by Jacob who, in a sudden moment of weakness, calls for strength to finish the testament.

**GAD** (v. 19)

This tribe’s territory was east of the Jordan. Gad was engaged in a series of wars with its neighbors—Ammonites, Moabites, and Arameans—for most of its history. No particular historic situation can be pinpointed as the background to this aphorism.

**19. Gad...raided** The Hebrew contains a play on the name: Gad is associated with g’dud, “a troop,” and the verb formed from it, y’giden-nu, “shall be raided.”

**ASHER** (v. 20)

This tribe settled in western Galilee between Carmel and Phoenicia (Josh. 19:24–31), an area famed for its fertility, and inside the Canaanite–Phoenician sphere of political and commercial activity. Asher, which did not succeed in capturing the most important cities in its allotted territory, seems to have thrown in its lot with the local city-states from which it derived its prosperity. The testament thus refers to the period of the Judges, before the final defeat of the Canaanites in the north under Deborah’s leadership.

**20. Asher** The name, which means “fortune, happiness” (Gen. 30:13), contains an allusion to the prosperity of the tribe.

**bread** The word translated as “bread” (lehem) can mean food in general. This is its meaning in Arabic, where it often refers to meat.

**royal dainties** The phrase may either be figurative, “delicacies fit for a king,” or literal—i.e., Asher serviced the petty Canaanite kingdoms with gifts of oil.

**NAPHTALI** (v. 21)

The territory of this tribe lay in Upper Galilee and ran parallel to the Jordan from the south shore of the Sea of Galilee to an unspecified line in the north beyond Lake Huleh, with its western boundary bordering on Asher (Josh. 19:27–30).
21Naphtali is a hind let loose,  
Which yields lovely fawns.
22Joseph is a wild ass,  
A wild ass by a spring  
—Wild colts on a hillside.
23Archers bitterly assailed him;  
They shot at him and harried him.
24Yet his bow stayed taut,  
And his arms were made firm  
By the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob—  
There, the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel—
25The God of your father who helps you,  
And Shaddai who blesses you  
With blessings of heaven above,  
Blessings of the deep that couches below,

19:32–39). It played a glorious role in the war against the Canaanites.

21. a bind  The word ayyalah, a symbol of beauty, also typifies fleet-footedness.
   let loose  The literal meaning of the word sh’luhah is “unrestrained.”
   lovely fawns  Perhaps a reference to the beauty, openness, and fruitfulness of its tribal territory.

JOSEPH  (vv. 22–26)
Lavish blessing is showered upon Joseph in a passage of exceptional length, equaled only by that to Judah.

22. Joseph  The name “Joseph” is here used for the two tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Such usage is rare. Normally, “Joseph” designates the entire northern kingdom of ancient Israel, and the two tribes are known as “the House of Joseph” or “the sons of Joseph.”
   wild ass  This may allude to the freedom and independence of the Joseph tribes, which occupied an area that had been sparsely populated (see Josh. 17:14–18).

23. Archers  The Bible nowhere else records attacks by archers on Joseph. This may refer to some unreported episode in his life or to attacks on Ephraim and Manasseh by neighboring tribes or Canaanite armies.

24. his bow stayed taut  Joseph remained steadfast in the face of adversity and drew his strength from God, who championed his cause.

Mighty One of Jacob  The phrase “Avir Yaakov” is a rare title for God. It corresponds to the Akkadian divine title bel abari, “endowed with strength.”

Jacob . . . Israel  Do these refer to the Patriarch—or to the people Israel? The ambiguity is probably deliberate. The Patriarch and the people are now as one.

There  The Hebrew vocalization mi-sham (literally, “from there”) may be a scribal error for the word mi-shem (literally, “by the name of”).

the Shepherd  For the image of God as a shepherd, see Comment to 48:15.

the Rock of Israel  This image expresses strength, permanence, and protection.

25. The God of your father  This title stresses the continuity of the generations, the unbroken chain of religious tradition that alone makes the dying Patriarch’s blessing meaningful and effective. The testament to Joseph now shifts from the miseries of the past to the promise of the future.

blessings  These consist of rain and dew and abundance of water resources, all of which symbolize fruitfulness of the soil and the fecundity of animals and humans.

the deep that couches below  The Hebrew word translated as “the deep” (t’hom) refers to
Blessings of the breast and womb.

26. The blessings of your father

Surpass the blessings of my ancestors,
To the utmost bounds of the eternal hills.

May they rest on the head of Joseph,
On the brow of the elect of his brothers.

27. Benjamin is a ravenous wolf;

In the morning he consumes the foe,
And in the evening he divides the spoil.”

28. All these were the tribes of Israel, twelve in number, and this is what their father said to them as he bade them farewell, addressing to each a parting word appropriate to him.

29. Then he instructed them, saying to them,

“I am about to be gathered to my kin. Bury me

the ancient notion of the subterranean source of uncontrollable waters that rise to the earth’s surface (see Gen. 1:2).

26. Surpass Joseph is assured that the blessings he is receiving from his father exceed the blessings his father received from his own forebears.

BENJAMIN (v. 27)
The image of Benjamin as a warrior and a predator is that of a tribe, not an individual. The belligerence of the Benjaminites resulted from their geographic situation: a narrow strip of land so strategically located that the important north–south central highway, as well as a main east–west road leading to Transjordan, passed through it. As a result, the territory of Benjamin became an arena for wars. The testament of Jacob reflects this general historical situation. (See the anti-Benjamin war in Judg. 20–21.)

27. morning... evening The two contrasting terms express continual action. They could also describe the wolf as prowling among the sheep at night, snatching its prey and returning to its lair to share it with its young, with enough left over for the morning.

PROSE EPILOGUE: THE DEATH OF JACOB (vv. 28–33)

28. the tribes of Israel See Comment to verse 16. The phrase expresses the collective awareness of a national unity and common identity that is “Israel,” even though each tribe is individually addressed in the testament and regarded as an autonomous entity.

twelve in number This is the first reference in the Bible to the 12 tribes of Israel, a number that is maintained in all tribal lists.

as be bade them farewell The Hebrew verb va-y’arekh, usually understood as “bless,” here is rendered “bade farewell” because not all the tribes received blessings.

29. Bury me Jacob imposes on all his sons the obligation to bury him in Canaan, but he does not make them swear to that effect, as he did with Joseph (47:29–31), because only Jo-
with my fathers in the cave which is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, 30 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—31 there Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried; there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried; and there I buried Leah—32 the field and the cave in it, bought from the Hittites.”

33 When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people.

50 Joseph flung himself upon his father’s face and wept over him and kissed him. 3 Then Joseph ordered the physicians in his service to embalm his father, and the physicians embalmed Joseph had the capability, and access to the Egyptian authorities, necessary to implement the Patriarch’s wish.

MOURING AND BURIAL (50:1–14)

1. Joseph flung himself upon his father’s face The usual phrase for such an emotional embrace is “to fall on the neck,” but this would be appropriate only when the parties involved are in an upright position.


3. the physicians in his service The text dissociates the embalming procedure from any connection with pagan rites by having Joseph entrust the task to his own physicians and not to professional mortuary priests.

4. to embalm his father Joseph, too, was embalmed at death (v. 26). Such a practice is never again referred to in the Bible. It is well known that mummification was bound up with the Egyptian worship of Osiris and conceptions of the afterlife. The embalming of Jacob and Jo-

33. he drew his feet into the bed Jacob is described as “lifting his feet” to begin his journey after his dream of the ladder at Bethel [see Comment to 29:1]. His journey will have taken him to three countries. He has loved, he has fought, he has known bereavement. Now, after many years, Jacob can finally stop wandering and struggling. We may see Jacob as perhaps the most fascinating of the Patriarchs. He is many different people in the course of a long and eventful life. He grows and changes over the years, from the “mild man” [Gen. 25:27] who stays home, to Jacob the trickster who deceives and is deceived, and finally to Israel the mortal who struggles with God. He spends much of the last part of his life burdened by grief and perhaps guilt, ending his days as an old man who is dependent on his favorite son. We can see him as the exemplar of the flawed person who can outgrow his flaws. He seeks contentment and
balmed 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 seph, however, was a purely practical measure, for Jacob is to be buried far from his place of death, and Joseph is to be reinterred many years later (v. 25).

3. forty days . . . seventy days Embalming required 40 days, followed by another 30 days of mourning.

4. the wailing period That is, the period fixed by convention.

5. to Pharaoh’s court Joseph does not approach the king directly, probably because a mourner, regarded as unclean, was not permitted into the presence of Pharaoh.

6. I made ready From the verb kariti, “I dug” or “I purchased.” In 2 Chron. 16:14, the Hebrew stem הָרַב has the sense of “to prepare a grave in advance.”

7. all the officials of Pharaoh The elite of the court and the government participate in the funeral procession.

never succeeds in finding it because there is always one more challenge to be overcome. To be a Jew is to be a descendant of Jacob/Israel.

CHAPTER 50

4. lay this appeal before Pharaoh Was Joseph concerned that Pharaoh would not let him leave the country to bury his father? Is that why he emphasizes the solemnity of his father’s deathbed oath and refers to “the grave [he] made ready” (which must have been a telling argument in the land of the pyramids)? Did the large delegation of horsemen and chariots accompany Joseph to protect and honor him or to ensure that he would return from Canaan? And is that why the children and flocks remained behind? Joseph may have been a promi-

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50:2 embalm Rabbinic authorities forbade embalming as an indignity to the dead (niyul ha-met) and an infringement on the honor due the dead (kvod ha-met). However, when civil law requires it or when it is necessary to protect the body from offensive odors while being moved long distances for burial, means necessary to preserve the body may be permitted.
Goshen. 9 Chariots, too, and horsemen went up with him; it was a very large troop.

10 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.

11 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, which is beyond the Jordan. 12 Thus his sons did for him as he had instructed them.

13 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. 14 After burying his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father.

15 When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph still

9. Chariots The charioteers, not usually depicted in Egyptian tomb paintings of such events, are most likely present for security reasons, because the burial is to take place beyond the borders of the land.

10. Goren ha-Atad Probably Tell el-Ajul (Beth Eglaim), situated 4.5 miles (7 km) southwest of Gaza on the eastern Mediterranean coast. A little to the south of the town lies a Late Bronze Age cemetery, which was a burial ground for high-ranking Egyptians serving in Canaan and for Egyptianized Canaanite rulers and dignitaries. That would explain why the cortège halted at Abel-mizraim for public homage to Jacob in his own country.

seven days An ancient custom found as far back as one of the earliest of writings, the Gilgamesh epic.

13. His sons carried him The brothers participated in the fulfillment of their father’s last request (49:29–32) by completing the final segment of the journey to Hebron.

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS: THE FINALE (50:15–21)

Death has removed the commanding presence of the Patriarch. Family cohesion disintegrates as the brothers wait for Joseph to take revenge for the crime they committed against him.

15. When Joseph’s brothers saw When the reality of the situation struck them on their return to Egypt.

What if The brothers tell each other, “If Joseph should harbor a grudge, what would become of us?”

10. seven days From this we see that the Jewish mourning tradition of shivah (literally, seven) has ancient roots.

15. When Joseph’s brothers saw According
bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!” So they sent this message to Joseph, “Before his death your father left this instruction: ‘So shall you say to Joseph, ‘Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.’ Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him.

His brothers went to him themselves, flung themselves before him, and said, “We are prepared to be your slaves.” But Joseph said to them, “Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children.” Thus he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

So Joseph and his father’s household remained in Egypt. Joseph lived one hundred

16. they sent this message Rather than risk a personal confrontation, the brothers send Joseph a message through a third party.

17. God of your father As Abravanel observes, they do not appeal to the claim of brotherliness because they forfeited it by their own actions. Hence they appeal to Joseph's respect and love for his father and to the religion that unites them all.

18. His brothers went to him When they learn of Joseph's emotional reaction they feel free to approach him in person.

19. Have no fear Their anxiety is eased at once. Joseph has no interest in seeking revenge; the very idea offends him.

Am I a substitute for God Human beings dare not usurp the prerogative of God, who alone has the right of punitive retaliation (see Lev. 19:18).

22. one hundred and ten years This was to a midrash, when Jacob's body was brought to Hebron for burial, the brothers saw Joseph make a side trip to the pit into which he had been thrown as a child. Joseph went there to reflect on the wondrous deliverance he had experienced since that day, but the brothers feared that he was harboring thoughts of revenge (Tanh. 17).

Before his death We have no reason to believe that Jacob ever learned the truth about how Joseph came to Egypt. If he had, would he not have rebuked them for what they did, as he rebuked Reuben, Simeon, and Levi? Joseph weeps [v. 17] at the discovery that his brothers still do not trust him. Although the brothers might have justified their invention as a white lie in the interests of family peace, even as God misquoted Sarah's words to spare Abraham's feelings [Gen. 18:12–13], their situation is different. They shaded the truth not to spare another's feelings but to protect themselves from the possible consequences of what they had done [Gen. R. 100:8].

21. I will sustain you This can be seen as the brothers’ ultimate punishment. Having hated Joseph for his dreams of lording it over them, they will now depend on him for their daily bread.
and ten years. 23 Joseph lived to see children of the third generation of Ephraim; the children of Machir son of Manasseh were likewise born upon Joseph’s knees. 24 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.” 25 So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here.”

regarded as the ideal life span in ancient Egypt. In Israel it seems to have been 120 years.

23. children of Machir Machir, the most important of the clans of Manasseh, at one time was identified with the tribe as a whole.

24. his brothers “Brothers” here has the same sense as “sons of Israel” in the next verse.

God will surely take notice of you This profession of faith, made 54 years after Jacob’s death, seems to carry with it resonances of a serious deterioration in the circumstances of the Israelites in Egypt. The repetition of the statement in verse 25 heightens its importance. It is used as a rallying cry in Exod. 3:16 when Moses appears as the national savior.

Abraham . . . Isaac . . . Jacob This clustering of the three Patriarchs for the first time sets the pattern for all such subsequent citations in the Torah, which are invariably in a context of the divine promises of national territory for the people Israel.

25. you shall carry up my bones Why Joseph does not request immediate interment in the land of his fathers is not explained; no doubt he knows that present conditions are unfavorable. The oath he extracts was carried out at the time of the Exodus (reported in Exod. 13:19) and he is laid to rest in a plot of land that Jacob once bought in Shechem (see Josh. 24:32; Gen. 33:19).

26. Looking back at Joseph’s long and full life, what are we to make of it? On the surface, it was crowned with success. His childhood dream of having his father and brothers bow down to him was fulfilled. He came to know wealth and power and the satisfaction of having saved many people’s lives. At the same time, though, his success frequently provoked jealousy and resentment, from his brothers and from the Egyptians who had to sell themselves into servitude for food. He prospered as an Israelite in a foreign land, but to what extent did he have to compromise his Israelite identity in the process? Jewish tradition will speak of him as Joseph the tzaddik, the righteous one, because of his moral restraint with Potiphar’s wife and his foregoing revenge against his brothers. Our evaluation may be more ambivalent.

a coffin in Egypt The last words of the Book of Genesis, “a coffin in Egypt,” foreshadow the events of the opening chapter of Exodus, the enslavement of the Hebrews, the killing of the Hebrew babies, and the birth of Moses who will be placed in a coffin-like basket on the Nile. The last words in each of the five books of the Torah, “Egypt, journeys, Sinai, Jericho, Israel,” are a virtual summary of the Torah’s narrative about the people Israel, from slavery to Sinai to the Promised Land.

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50:25 swear The last wishes of the dying must be obeyed as long as they do not contravene Jewish law. Deathbed instructions have the same force as a legal contract duly delivered under Jewish law (BT Git. 13a).
26 Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

**26. a coffin** The use of a coffin is uniquely Egyptian and is never again mentioned in the Bible. In sharp contrast to the honors accorded Jacob, no ritual or time of mourning is recorded with the death of Joseph. The formative period in the history of ancient Israel has come to an end.

**HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH**

50:26 *Joseph died* In accordance with Prov. 10:7, we say of an individual we remember with love and respect, “May his or her memory be a blessing”: Zikrono/Zikronah livrakhah.
This haftarah contains David’s last will and testament to Solomon. The dying king instructs his son and heir about the religious and political pursuits he should follow to be successful (1 Kings 2:1–4, 5–9). A concluding note states that Solomon’s sovereignty was well established (v. 12), even though he had not yet carried out the ruthless acts advised by his father (cf. 2:28–35).

David died in ca. 965 B.C.E. The David portrayed here is both a pious believer in the Law and a shrewd politician who knows what it will take to secure Solomon’s throne, which had just been won through intrigue and duplicity (1 Kings 1).

The aged King David speaks to Solomon in the language of religious rhetoric. The pious speech artfully attributed to him is also reflected in the high style of his learned language. This is illustrated, for example, by citations (“as recorded in the Teaching of Moses,” 1 Kings 2:3) and by motivation clauses (introduced by l’ma’an, “in order that,” vv. 3–4; see Deut. 4:1, 5:16). David, a man of the Covenant, fully versed in the language of Torah, urges Solomon to obey its precepts.

The tone and content of the political section of David’s directives, by contrast, is less polished and more in tune with realpolitik. David’s advice to his son is based on personal considerations, and the language he uses recalls private grudges and other matters that the dying king wants his son to know, taking him into his confidence. The king’s tactics are crafty. He simultaneously colludes with Solomon (saying “you know,” vv. 5, 9), appeals to his son’s pride and cleverness (“your wisdom,” “for you are . . . wise,” vv. 6, 9), and lets him know that death in Sheol is the only way to treat dangerous rivals (vv. 6, 9). Moreover, knowing that his son will understand the hint contained in his comment that “I swore” that “I will not put [Shimei] to the sword,” David can die in peace knowing that Solomon will attend to unsavory tasks that David has left for him. And this he does, through the agency of Benaiah (2:46). Significantly, the narrator’s remark about the security of Solomon’s throne in 1 Kings 2:12 recurs in verse 46, just after the murder of Shimei.

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

The parashah and the haftarah both deal with the approaching death of a leader (Jacob and David) and with a final pronouncement delivered to his son(s) (the 12 sons of Jacob, and Solomon). Both episodes begin alike, with the phrase “When [Jacob’s/David’s] life was drawing to a close” (va-yikr’vu yīmei . . . lamut). The technical term “he instructed” (va-y’tzav) also occurs in both instances (Gen. 49:29; 1 Kings 2:1), leading to the final instructions. Jacob requests that he be buried in the family tomb in the cave of Machpelah (Gen. 49:29–32), a request that subsequently is fulfilled (50:12–13).

Joseph’s brothers, fearing that he would take revenge because they had sold him into servitude, “sent this message” (va-y’tzavnu). “Before his death your father left this instruction (tzavah): So shall you say to Joseph, ‘Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly’” (Gen. 50:16–17). Whether this was true or concocted, Joseph accepts their testimony and assures them of his good intentions (50:19–21).

Jacob’s final request of his sons in the parashah repeats the more personal account made to Joseph alone (Gen. 47:29). It is here that the full moral force of being an agent for the dead is articulated. After supplicating the son, the father refers to the burial in Canaan as an act of “stead-
fast loyalty” (ḥesed v’emet). More particularly, it is best understood as an act of gratuitous kindness (ḥesed shel emet; Gen. R. 96:5).

The agency of Solomon in fulfilling David’s last will is more complicated. For David’s requests do not involve what a person never could do for himself (burial), but that which he intentionally delegates. In an effort to give the act of agency moral and legal force, rabbinic tradition articulated the overall principle that “the agent of a person is as himself” (BT Kid. 41b). But in a further attempt to eliminate the double evasion of responsibility, they further stated that “there is no agent for enacting a sin” (BT Kid. 42b). From this perspective, David is culpable for the deaths of Joab and Shimei. Unlike Joseph, he is not magnanimous, but reaches beyond the grave to strike at his enemies.

2 When David’s life was drawing to a close, he instructed his son Solomon as follows: “I am going the way of all the earth; be strong and show yourself a man. 3 Keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in His ways and following His laws, His commandments, His rules, and His admonitions as recorded in the Teaching of Moses, in order that you may succeed in whatever you undertake and wherever you turn. 4 Then the Lord will fulfill the promise that He made concerning me: ‘If your descendants are scrupulous in their conduct, and walk before Me faithfully, with all their heart and soul, your line on the throne of Israel shall never end!’

5 Further, you know what Joab son of Zeruiah did to me, what he did to the two commanders of Israel’s forces, Abner son of Ner and Amasa son of Jether: he killed them, shedding blood of war in peacetime, staining the girdle of his loins and the sandals on his feet.

1 Kings 2:1. be instructed The word translated as “he instructed” (va-yitzav) literally means “he commanded.” The term is used for final pronouncements. As used here, the verb has a double entendre, combining the force of an exhortation (Deut. 31:23) with the urgency of a final request (Gen. 49:29).

3–4. The references to obeying the Torah and commandments interrupt David’s practical and political exhortation. In a similar manner, Josh. 1:7–8 interrupt the exhortation of national courage in vv. 6 and 9. Later notions of Torah piety thus transform older injunctions.

3. Keep the charge of the Lord The word translated as “charge” (mishmeret) is a technical term for observing the Covenant, in the tradition of Deuteronomy. Elsewhere it has the sense of maintaining a watch, especially over priestly objects of sanctity.

4. your line... shall never end The promise that the royal line will not cease, or be cut off, is cited from the divine promise to David in 2 Sam. 7:12–16. Generational continuity is promised “forever” (v. 16).
with blood of war. So act in accordance with your wisdom, and see that his white hair does not go down to Sheol in peace.

7 But deal graciously with the sons of Barzillai the Gileadite, for they befriended me when I fled from your brother Absalom; let them be among those that eat at your table.

8 You must also deal with Shimei son of Gera, the Benjamite from Bahurim. He insulted me outrageously when I was on my way to Mahanaim; but he came down to meet me at the Jordan, and I swore to him by the Lord, ‘I will not put you to the sword.’ 9 So do not let him go unpunished; for you are a wise man and you will know how to deal with him and send his gray hair down to Sheol in blood.”

10 So David slept with his fathers, and he was buried in the City of David. 11 The length of David’s reign over Israel was forty years: he reigned seven years in Hebron, and he reigned thirty-three years in Jerusalem. 12 And Solomon sat upon the throne of his father David, and his rule was firmly established.

12. and his rule was firmly established
This concluding line of the haftarah indicates Solomon’s success.