



# Rabbi Alan Lewis

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## CLOSED OFF

### When and how did Golus Mitzrayim begin?

#### “And Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt”

Rashi asks the famous question that relates to these opening words of our Parsha. Why is this Parsha ‘closed off’? Why are there no new lines or gaps in the narrative for the beginning of the Sedra of Vayechi?

Rashi answers that this is because with the advent of the passing away of Yaakov Avinu, the eyes and hearts of Israel were closed off from the distress of being subjugated to Egyptian servitude.

These words seem to be in contradiction to a Rashi in Parshas Vaera where the commentator brings to our notice that while any of the sons of Yaakov were still alive there was no servitude in Egypt.

In order to resolve these contradictory comments of Rashi, we have to comprehend the manner in which Yosef conducted himself after Yaakov Avinu died.

After 40 days of embalming and 30 days of mourning, the Torah tell us that Yosef spoke to the house of Pharaoh saying, “Please if I have found favour in your eyes, please speak into the ears of Pharaoh”.

Chazal tell us that it seems that Yosef first spoke appealingly to the queen who then in turn spoke to Pharaoh.

The Midrash then asks why didn’t Yosef himself go to see Pharaoh? Rabbi Yehoshua answers in the name of Rabbi Shmuel that it is not correct for an Avel (a mourner) to enter a king’s palace especially in a disheveled state of appearance.

On this particular point Rav Shimon Schwab ז”ל in his sefer ‘Ma’ayan Beis Hashoiva’,

inquires how can it be possible that Yosef, the ruler over all of Egypt, to whom no one could raise a hand of opposition, had to resort to the services of a number of intermediaries to approach Pharaoh in a pleading manner to allow his father leave of passage to be buried in the Land of Israel?

Another point which Rav Shimon Schwab raises is why was there this edict of Mitzrayim, that an Avel can’t come into the palace of a king? Surely this is because after 70 days of mourning an Avel will have a somewhat scruffy appearance. However, if as we said before, Yosef was truly the ruler over Egypt and could do whatever he desired, then why didn’t he approach Pharaoh directly, as soon as Yaakov had died and inform Pharaoh of the will and testimony of his father?

It must be that in reality, as Chazal express at the beginning of the Parsha, that with the death of Yaakov the period of Egyptian subjugation actually began and in its earliest form it manifested itself as a loss of political clout that Yosef could wield in Mitzrayim. If anything, Yosef was merely an honoured, wise and wealthy man who had no real favour or direct influence upon Pharaoh. According to this reasoning we can now understand why Yosef didn’t go straight to Pharaoh when Yaakov died and when he did make contact with Pharaoh it was only after 70 days. Consequently, after being in a state of mourning for such a lengthy period of time it would not have been honourable for Yosef to stand in front of Pharaoh in such a unkempt state, and as a result he would have to send beseeching messages to Pharaoh through

various agents. This whole matter of Yosef’s lowliness would only have been at the beginning of the subjugation and the rest of the Bnei Yisrael would not have felt it.

The beginning of the Parsha is ‘closed off’ in order that one who is reading from an actual Sefer Torah will not feel that this is the start of a new Parsha. Similarly, the beginning of the Golus (the exile) of Mitzrayim wasn’t really experienced by any of the tribes of Israel other than Yosef.

Hence the words of Rashi ‘The eyes and hearts of Israel were closed,’ that is to say as a result of a life of wealth, prosperity and calm in the land of Goshen in Egypt, the eyes of Israel did not see, and the hearts of Israel did not discern or feel the onset of any servitude.

At the time Yaakov departed from this world, Yosef began to be afraid of approaching Pharaoh in the direct manner that he had been accustomed to.

We can now also understand that when Yaakov commanded Yosef not to bury him in Mitzrayim, Yosef’s response was **“I will do according to your word”**, to which Yaakov replied **“swear to me (that you will bury me in the land of Israel)”**. From Yosef’s initial answer there is the clear implication that he still had the power of rule and could do whatever he wanted. However, when Yaakov said, **“swear to me”**, Yosef knew instinctively that with the passing of his father his governance over Mitzrayim and his influence would stop, and that he would have to come to Pharaoh with only the justification that ‘my father made me swear’ that I should bury him in the Land of Israel.

## Parshah

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2. (48:20) Yaakov says that the Jews will bless their sons to be like Efrayim and Menashe. Why do we bless our children to be like them more than any of the other shevatim?