

# Joseph and Levi Carry Me Through ALS

By Yitzi Hurwitz

My family has been suffering for years now, not knowing what tomorrow may bring. We experience all of the struggles that come with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease), not being able to live a normal life.

My wife, Dina, is challenged with not having a husband who can do normal husband things. On top of that, there is so much that has fallen on her shoulders because of my illness and because I can't do the things I used to do. My children live with not having a father who can hug them, and do the things that a father does for and with his children.

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A mosaic depicting the Hebrew signs of the zodiac, associated with the 12 Tribes of Israel.

Harder than all that is the uncertainty, the not knowing, the not being able to breathe, or the possibility that at any moment there could, G-d forbid, be a scare that will knock you off your feet, or even worse... How am I to comfort and reassure my wife and children? How can I give them some stability? It is heartbreaking when I think of what they must be going through. It is so difficult to deal with these questions and I will not always succeed, but I have to try.

In the portion of Vayechi, we read how Jacob passed away and had his sons carry him to Israel, burying him in Hebron. Rashi<sup>1</sup> tells us how his casket was carried: three sons on each side, in the same order as their descendants (the 12 Tribes of Israel) would later camp in the desert. Rashi continues to say that "Levi didn't carry [Jacob] because he would later carry the Ark [of the Covenant], and Joseph didn't carry because he was a king. Menashe and Ephraim [carried] in their stead."

It would seem that even though Joseph was a king, he still should have carried his father because he is the one who Jacob swear that, "you will carry me from Egypt."<sup>2</sup> Why was Joseph excluded from bearing Jacob's casket?

Levi was not to carry it because he was going to carry the Ark. This is also problematic because he himself wouldn't carry the Ark; his descendants would do so hundreds of years in the future. In fact, when it came to the Exodus, Moses himself, who was from the tribe of Levi, carried Joseph's bones out of Egypt.<sup>3</sup> It, therefore, begs

the question: why was Levi excluded from bearing Jacob's casket? And if there was a good reason for Levi not to carry it, why did Moses make a point to carry Joseph's bones?

Another question: Rashi explains that "Menashe and Ephraim [carried] in their stead." If Joseph and Levi weren't allowed to carry, why did they need others to carry in their stead?

And finally, it makes sense to have Menashe or Ephraim carry on behalf of Joseph because children stand in for their father. But what connection is there between Levi and Joseph's children?

Jacob's passing allowed for the exile in Egypt, as Rashi<sup>4</sup> tells us that "When Jacob our patriarch passed ... the servitude began." Not that it actually began with his passing, but that it allowed for it because, as long as Jacob was alive and in Egypt, no exile could exist. Jacob was above exile. Taking Jacob out of Egypt signaled the start of the Egyptian exile. Both Joseph and Levi could have no part in the commencement of the Egyptian exile, as we will explain.

Concerning Joseph, the Torah says, "These are the children of Jacob, Joseph..."<sup>5</sup> and it doesn't continue to list the other brothers. It is telling us that Joseph was exactly like Jacob, above exile. This is symbolized by the idea of a king, who is above it all. That is why the Midrash<sup>6</sup> tells us that "As long as Joseph was alive, they didn't have the burden of Egypt." Because Joseph, like Jacob, was above exile.

The Ark had in it the Ten Commandments. Carrying the Ark symbolized carrying the Torah, as it was the tribe of Levi that were the teachers of Torah throughout the Egyptian exile. This began with Levi himself. Since they took on the burden of Torah, the burden of the exile was removed from them, as the tribe of Levi was never forced into servitude. So, in a way, they were above the exile as well. Levi himself was completely above the exile, as Rashi<sup>7</sup> says, "Why does it recount the [number of] years of Levi's life?... Because as long as one of the brothers was alive, there was no servitude... And Levi outlived them all."

Later, during the Exodus, by taking Joseph's bones out of Egypt, it signaled the redemption, the opposite of Jacob's departure from Egypt. It was specifically done by the tribe of Levi, the head of the tribe, and by the redeemer himself, Moses.

Concerning when the Jewish people left Egypt, we read that they left with great wealth. The tribe of Levi also came out with great wealth. Why, did they deserve this reward, along with the rest of the Jewish people, if they weren't enslaved?

The answer is that, in fact, they were also in the exile. Although they were not slaves, they provided a necessary and vital service to the Jewish people.

The purpose of the exile is not that we should suffer. Rather, that we succeed in taking out of it spiritual and physical benefit, accomplishing for G-d what he put us in the exile to do. But at times, the exile gets unbearably dark and bitter, that we can forget what we are here to do and what our mission is. At these times, we need someone who can see the big picture, someone not stuck in the mire of exile to remind us why we are here and lift our spirits. In this way, they transform the exile into a meaningful, purposeful and positive event. This was the

job of the tribe of Levi. They accomplished this and therefore, rightfully, so, they deserved the reward of leaving Egypt with riches, along with the rest of the multitudes of Jews.

This will now help us understand how Menashe and Ephraim were in the place of Joseph and Levi.

Why did Joseph name his first son Menashe? The Torah writes it was because "G-d has made me forget all my hardships, and all my father's home."<sup>8</sup> Joseph realized that with his success in Egypt, it was possible for him to forget his father's home, where he came from, and what he was all about. He, therefore, named his son Menashe, in order not to forget.

This is one of the goals of every Jew in exile: to ensure that he does not forget where he comes from and what his mission in this world is all about.

And this was the way of Joseph. He set himself up to remember his father's home in every situation, raising him above exile. Menashe, therefore, represented Joseph.

Why did Joseph name his second son Ephraim? The Torah writes it was because "G-d has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering."<sup>9</sup> This is the second goal of every Jew in exile; to realize that there is meaning in exile, finding a way to succeed in his mission, no matter how difficult it may be.

This was the way of Levi: to transform the exile into a meaningful and purposeful event. To succeed in difficult times, we need to turn the darkness itself into light. Ephraim, therefore, represented Levi, as bearer of the coffin.

They needed to both be represented, because, as mentioned above, Jacob being taken out of Egypt signaled the start of the exile. Since both of these dynamics are necessary for the Jewish people in exile, both had to be represented.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps this teaching can help us through our sufferings. If we can recognize that G-d put us in this dark and difficult situation, maybe we can find meaning in it and it will make it easier. Knowing that there is a bigger picture, we can use our situation to succeed in doing what G-d wants.

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Remembering where we come from and who we are will help us rise above the difficulties. I know that it isn't the perfect answer and it won't fix the problems life throws our way, but it can help us somewhat.

It also helps to realize that just as something scary can happen at any moment, something good can happen at any moment, causing us to have a reason to celebrate. In the blink of an eye, G-d will send Moshiach to take us out of this dark and bitter exile and put an end to all the suffering and uncertainty. May he come soon. We all have suffered enough.

*Dedicated to my wife, Dina, and to my children who are amazing, and don't have it easy. I love you all so much. May G-d send us a salvation, His salvation is in the blink of an eye.*

**FOOTNOTES**

1. Rashi to [Genesis 50:13](#).
2. [Genesis 47:30](#).
3. See [Exodus 13:19](#).
4. Rashi to [Genesis 47:28](#).
5. [Genesis 37:2](#).
6. Shemot Rabbah 1:4. Tanchuma Shemot 3.
7. Rashi to [Exodus 6:15](#).
8. [Genesis 41:51](#).
9. Ibid 41:52.
10. Likkutei Sichot volume 20 pp. 235-242.

**By Yitzi Hurwitz**

Rabbi Yitzi Hurwitz—father of seven, husband of Dina, and spiritual leader at Chabad Jewish Center in Temecula, Calif.—has been rendered immobile by ALS (Lou Gehrig’s Disease). Unable to speak or type, he uses his eyes to write heartfelt thoughts on the weekly Torah portion.

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