

We Do Not Leave Our Dead Behind

Passover is the time of storytelling. The time of remembering. The time of passing down what must never be forgotten.

We sit around the seder table. Children ask, parents answer. Generation after generation, we tell the same story—the story of our people walking out of slavery, out of Egypt, out of the darkness of the past and into the light of a future we still fight to protect.

But this year, as we approach Passover, the story feels different. Not distant, not symbolic, but present. Urgent. Raw.

Because this year, we are still trying to bring our people home.

Some are alive—held hostage beneath the ground in Gaza. Some are dead—murdered, their bodies stolen, hidden, desecrated. Some—we still do not know.

And yet we carry them, in our hearts, our prayers, our decisions. In the price we are willing to pay—because we do pay it, again and again, to bring our people home.

This year, with Gaza just beyond the Egypt of old, the Exodus feels close again—too close.

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There's a verse we read every year that is quiet, almost hidden. Buried in the rush of escape and the rising urgency to leave.

“And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him; for he had made

the children of Israel swear, saying: God will surely remember you, and you shall carry up my bones from here with you" (Exod. 13:19).

I've read it countless times. But this year, this year of tunnels and silence and waiting, it landed differently. Because Moses was committed to not leaving Joseph behind – to keeping the promise to bury Joseph in Israel.

And so we carried him. Through the Red Sea. Through the sandstorms. Through 40 years of wandering.

Even at the very moment we became a free people, we carried our dead, not just our children and our flocks. Not just our dough that hadn't had time to rise. But a coffin. Because this is what we do. We carry.

Even when it was heavy, even when it slowed us down, we carried him. And this year, I understand why.

Why do we carry the dead? Why does it matter to hold onto what's already gone?

Because when we carry the dead, we are saying that dignity does not expire with breath– that what we do with the dead is how we declare the value of the living. When we carry the dead, we are telling the living: You are not alone, not in life, not in death. Not ever.

And when we stop carrying– when we begin to leave people behind– we are not just letting go of them. We are letting go of ourselves.

A people who stops carrying its dead will soon stop carrying its living. And we– we are not that people.

I lost my father six years ago. And I carry him still. I carry him in the values I hold dear, in the principles I live by, in the love I give, in the family I care for. He's in what I expect of myself, in what I teach my children, in what I

refuse to compromise.

He is not gone. He is not past. He is not buried—he is carried. And if that's true for one man, for one family, how much more so for a people.

Six million of our people were murdered in the Holocaust. Many were burned. Many were left with no graves, no bodies, no names. For so many there was nothing left. No body. No grave. No marker.

Whole families vanished. Entire communities reduced to ash. There was no way to bring them home. No way even to know where to begin. But we did not forget them. And we did not stop carrying them.

We carried them in the silence that followed. In the names held quietly for years, then spoken aloud. In the promise: Never again. We carried them in testimony. In prayer. In books. In songs.

We even carried them in trees.

On the hills outside Jerusalem there are four and a half million pine trees for the adults, one and a half million cypress trees for the children. Because when there was nothing left, we made something that would grow. Something that would stand. Something that would say: They were here.

We could not bring them home. But we would not let them vanish. And we carry them still.

I stood in Netiv HaAsara a few days after October 7, 2023, in the ruins of a home that had been turned to ash. An elderly couple had built it with their own hands. They had filled it

with wood and warmth and quiet. A home made for peace.

The terrorists came for them first. They set the house ablaze with the couple inside because they knew the fire would bring others running. First responders. Neighbors. Security forces.

But the trap was understood. No one came, and the house burned. And with it, everything inside.

For weeks, Israel searched through the ashes. There was nothing left, no DNA, no trace. But we did not stop. And then—a single fragment. A rib. The only piece of the man that remained. His wife—nothing. That rib was buried with full dignity, as if it were the whole man himself.

Because we are the people who search through fire and ruin, who do not stop digging even when there is nothing left to find. Because if we abandon even one, we abandon ourselves.

Just as we carried Joseph through the desert. Just as we carried the memory of six million across generations. We carried him because he was ours. Because that is what loyalty looks like. Because we do not leave anyone behind. We carry.

So many people ask me: Why does Israel release live terrorists in exchange for bodies? Why pay such a steep price for someone who is already gone? Because Joseph made us swear: “Do not leave me here.” Because Moses kept that promise. Because in Netiv HaAsara, we searched for weeks to recover a single rib. We carried him when there was nothing left. Because this is who we are.

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We carry the hostages in our hearts. The living, waiting in darkness. The dead, still stolen, still hidden, still ours.

This Passover, our freedom is far from complete. My family

will set an empty chair at our seder meal, and carry in our hearts the hostages still in Gaza.

We will pray for the redemption of the living. We will vow never to give up on the dead—still stolen, still hidden, still ours— who deserve to have their bones brought home for burial, just as Moses did for Joseph.

As we eat the matzah and taste the bitter maror, we will carry it all: The pain of the families who wake each day not knowing the fate of their loved ones. The names of the fallen, who will never be forgotten. The silent scream in every Jewish heart. The heavy cost of freedom.

On October 7, they tried to break us. Not only by killing— but by desecrating.

By burning bodies until there was nothing left, by taking bodies, knowing we would never leave them behind. By wiping out families, leaving no one left to say Kaddish. And as a people too familiar with trauma and tragedy, we did what we always do. We searched. We gathered. We carried. Because that is what we do. We carry one another.

And we will carry them— our brothers and sisters held hostage in Gaza— every second of every day, until they are finally brought home.

And this year, “Next year in Jerusalem” means something different. It means: Let them come home. Let them come home to life. Or let them come home to rest. But let them come home.

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