

Jacob Makes Joseph Swear an Oath

<p>וַיִּקְרָבוּ יַמֵּי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמוֹת וַיִּקְרָא לְבְנוֹ לְיוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִם-נָא מָצָאתִי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ שְׂוִים-נָא יָדְךָ תַּחַת רִגְלִי וְעָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת אֲלֵ-נָא תִקְבְּרֵנִי בְּמִצְרָיִם: וְשִׁכַבְתִּי עִם-אֲבֹתַי וְגִשְׂתֵּנִי מִמִּצְרָיִם וְקִבְרֵנִי בְּקִבְרֵתָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֲעֲשֶׂה כְּדָבָרְךָ: וַיֹּאמֶר הֲשָׁבְעָה לִּי וַיִּשָּׁבַע לוֹ וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל-רֹאשׁ הַמִּטָּה: מִזֶּ-כֵּת-לֹא</p>	<p><i>Yisrael's days drew near to death, so he called his son Yosef and said to him:</i> <i>Pray, if I have found favor in your eyes, pray put your hand under my thigh— deal with me in loyalty and faithfulness: pray do not bury me in Egypt!</i> <i>[When] I lie down with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt, and bury me in their burial-site!</i> <i>He said:</i> <i>I will do according to your words.</i> <i>But he said:</i> <i>Swear to me!</i> <i>So he swore to him.</i> <i>Then Yisrael bowed, at the head of the bed.</i> <i>47:29-31</i></p>
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What does this moment tell us about the relationship between Joseph and Jacob? Jacob wants a formal *put-your-hand-under-my-thigh* oath<sup>1</sup> from Joseph, to guaranty that he will be buried in Israel. But when Joseph says, אֲנֹכִי אֲעֲשֶׂה כְּדָבָרְךָ - *I will do according to your words*, Joseph is rejecting the *hand-under-the-thigh* procedure.<sup>2</sup> He is saying: *Don't worry, Father. You can rely on me. I, have power here in Egypt. I can do whatever I want. I'm going to give you my word that I will fulfill what you have said in your words. I don't need to resort to formal Hebrew oaths.* But Jacob, makes Joseph swear.<sup>3</sup> Does he not trust Joseph? Perhaps not. But perhaps he is saying to him: *Joseph, I see things differently. On the one hand, I see that Pharaoh needs you, that you are indeed indispensable to him. But on other*

*hand, I see that you are subordinate to him and that he can destroy your life with the snap of his fingers. You think you are free, but you're really not free. Trust me, I've been on both sides of the deception game. You don't have as much power as you think. I trust you when say you will bury me in Hebron, but I also know, that if you swear an oath to me, you will fortify your position when you eventually have to ask his permission to take my body back to Hebron. And trust me, you will have to ask his permission. I see how things work here in Egypt. You are not free to come and go as you please.* Fast forward. Jacob dies. Joseph has him embalmed for 40 days and the Egyptians lament him for 70 days (50:3). Then, afraid to petition Pharaoh directly, Joseph turns to the royal household and asks them to petition Pharaoh on his behalf. In his petition, he relates the oath he made with his father. *This fortifies his request.* Pharaoh is now in a bind. He has to find a way of maintaining his honorability as someone who honors oaths. By making Joseph swear, Jacob was doing him a favor and strengthening his hand before Pharaoh.

<p>דְּבָרַי-נָא בְּאָזְנֵי פַרְעֹה לֵאמֹר: אָבִי הֲשָׁבְעָנִי לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי מֹת בְּקִבְרֵי אֲשֶׁר קָרִיתִי לִי בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן שָׁמָּה תִקְבְּרֵנִי וְעַתָּה אֲעֹלֶה-נָא וְאֶקְבְּרָה אֶת-אָבִי וְאֲשׁוּבָה: וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה עֹלָה וְקַבֵּר אֶת-אָבִיךָ כְּאֲשֶׁר הֲשָׁבְעָה: נ-ד-ו</p>	<p><i>Pray speak in the ears of Pharaoh, saying: My father had me swear, saying: Here, I am dying—in my burial-site which I dug for myself<sup>f</sup> in the land of Canaan, there you are to bury me!</i> <i>So now, pray let me go up, bury my father, and return.</i> <i>Pharaoh said:</i> <i>Go up and bury your father, as he had you swear.</i> <i>50:4-6</i></p>
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<sup>1</sup> Abraham uses this oath formula when he made his servant swear that he would not marry Isaac off to a Canaanite. Gen. 24:2-3.  
<sup>2</sup> One commentator writes that Joseph thought this procedure was beneath his dignity (He'amek Davar). Others suggest that Joseph wants to prove that he will bury his father in Hebron out of his own desire to fulfill his father's wishes not because he is compelled by an oath (Malbim, R. Hananel). Speculation: Perhaps Joseph was just trying to avoid the Egyptian oath-formula. In Egypt, oaths are sworn *by the life of Pharaoh*. Already, on two occasions, we have seen Joseph use that formula when he was disguising himself as an Egyptian in front of his brothers. (*By the life of Pharaoh! You shall not depart from this [place] unless your youngest brother comes here!... By the life of Pharaoh, indeed, you are spies!* 42:15, 16). Joseph is in a prickly situation. Not wanting to swear an oath by the life of Pharaoh before his father, he offers his word instead. But Jacob is not having any of this. He needs an oath, and he needs it his way. The Hebrew way. Hands-under-thighs. Swearing by the God of his fathers. Not by the life of his Pharaoh.  
<sup>3</sup> When Jacob has Esau renounce his claim to the birthright, he makes Esau swear using the same language as he does here - *הֲשָׁבְעָה לִי* - *swear to me* (Gen. 25:33) but without the *hand-under-the-thigh* business.

**Who Redeemed Me from all Ill-Fortune:**

When Jacob blesses his grandchildren, Ephraim and Menashe, he is looking back at his life. He recalls the blessing that God gave him in Luz (Bet El) and the death of his beloved Rachel. He says that he never thought he would ever lay eyes on Joseph alive again, and here, he sees Joseph's own children are standing before him! Jacob says: *The God in whose presence my fathers walked, Avraham and Yitzhak* - they walked *with* God, *alongside* God or even sometimes *before* God, but - *the God who has shepherded me* - God always walked *before me*, God was my Shepherd - *ever since I was [born], until this day*—What does he mean when he says, *the angel/messenger who redeemed me from all ill-fortune*? Is he looking back at his life, with its stealth and duplicity, and feeling forgiven? Is he recalling the

הַמַּלְאָךְ  
הַגָּאֵל אֲתֵי  
מִכְּלִי-רָע  
מִחַטָּ:

*the angel/messenger  
who redeemed me  
from all ill-fortune  
48:16*

humiliation that he was subjected to by his father-in-law, Lavan, and thinking that now, as a proud father of a nation, he has been redeemed? Is he reflecting on the terrible misfortunes he has experienced - the death of his beloved wife Rachel, the rape of his daughter Dinah, and the presumed loss of his favorite son Joseph - that now, with grandchildren and great-grandchildren, he has been blessed once and for all? Is he referring to the present moment, in which he knows his death is imminent, and knows that he will be repatriated to his birthplace? Or is this a portent of things to come, as all of his descendants one day, will follow him and they themselves will experience a redemption from Egyptian slavery, and be directed to their land by *an angel-messenger*? Is this joy or melancholy here?

**Don't Do It!**

וַיִּרְא יוֹסֵף כִּי-יָשִׁית אָבִיו נְדִיבֵימִינוֹ עַל-רֹאשׁ אֶפְרַיִם וַיִּרַע בְּעֵינָיו וַיִּתְמַךְ נְדִיבֵימִינוֹ לְהִסִּיר אֹתָהּ מֵעַל רֹאשׁ-אֶפְרַיִם עַל-רֹאשׁ מְנַשֶּׁה: מִחַטָּ:	<i>Now Yosef saw that his father had put his right hand on Ephraim's head, and it was ill in his eyes, so he pushed his father's hand, to turn it from Ephraim's head to Menashe's head. 48:17</i>
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In Delmore Schwartz' great story, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, as the narrator imagines his father proposing to his mother, he shouts, "Don't do it! It's not too late to change your minds, both of you! Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal..." Watching Jacob cross his hands over the boys and elevating the younger over the older, it's hard not to think of that scene. This is exactly what Joseph is saying to his father: *Don't do it! Nothing good will come out of it!* But his father insists. The blessing is done. The younger is elevated over the older and the potential of catastrophe remains in the family like a germ. Why does he do it? The future history of Israel validates this moment: Ephraim will indeed become the greater tribe. The destiny of Menashe will wane. Here though, Jacob is asserting that he has the last word. Joseph is not, and

**Joseph's Bones.** Having learned from his father, the power of an oath, Joseph exercises the same power over his brothers and their descendants by extracting an oath from them to bury **his** bones in the land of Israel. We can interpret this in many ways. Perhaps this is simply an extension of his narcissism. Or perhaps this is an appropriate symmetrical coda to the whole story. He was alive when the brothers sold him as a slave to Egypt, the land of the dead; when he dies, they will bring his bones to Israel, the land of the living. They will never abandon him again.

will never be, a patriarch. That honor is reserved only for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Joseph may think that he ordains history. But he does not. Joseph is part of the larger story of Jacob. He will always be an instrument



in the larger plan. No matter how morally wrong it seems to him, to elevate the younger child over the older, and no matter how much damage it might do to the family, and how it simply replays the old pattern that has been in place since Hevel supplanted Kayin, this is what Jacob wants. And Joseph, once again is overruled by his father.

וַיִּשְׁבַּע יוֹסֵף אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר שָׂקֵד שָׂקֵד אֱלֹהִים אִתְּכֶם וְהָעֵלֶתֶם אֶת-עַצְמוֹתַי מִזֶּה: נִבְיָ:	<i>And Yosef had the Sons of Israel swear, saying: God will take account, yes, account of you; bring my bones up from here! 50:25</i>
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Shabbat Shalom!