

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [80]

And Should I Also Request Dissolution for the Oath That I Took for Your Benefit?

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Sotah 36b



Joseph receiving Pharaoh's Ring - Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (Between 1773-75)

Background to Our Story

Joseph (son of Jacob)



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_\(son_of_Jacob\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_(son_of_Jacob))

Joseph or **Yosef** (Hebrew: יוֹסֵף) was the eleventh of *Jacob's* twelve sons in the *Hebrew Bible*. Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, but rose to become the most powerful man in *Egypt* after Pharaoh. He then brought his entire family down to Egypt, where they were settled in the land of *Goshen*.

Genesis 39: 1

1. And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the hands of the Ishmaelites, who had brought him down there.

Genesis 41: 33-41

33. Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man discreet and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt.

34. Let Pharaoh do this, and let him appoint officers over the land, and take up the fifth part of the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty.

35. And let them gather all the food of those good years that come, and lay up grain under the hand of Pharaoh, and let them keep food in the cities.

36. And that food shall be for store to the land against the seven years of famine, which shall be in the land of Egypt; that the land perish not through the famine.

37. And the thing was good in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of all his servants.

38. And Pharaoh said to his servants, Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the spirit of God is?

39. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, For as much as God has shown you all this, there is none so discreet and wise as you are;

40. You shall be over my house, and according to your word shall all my people be ruled; only in the throne will I be greater than you.

41. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.

42. And Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph's hand, and arrayed him in cloaks of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck;

43. And he made him to ride in his second chariot; and they cried before him, Bow the knee; and he made him ruler over all the land of Egypt.

44. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, I am Pharaoh, and without you shall no man lift up his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.

Genesis 47: 29-31

29. And the time drew nearer that Israel must die; and he called his son Joseph, and said to him, If now I have found grace in your sight, put, I beg you, your hand under my thigh, and deal kindly and truly with me; bury me not, I beg you, in Egypt;

30. But I will lie with my fathers, and you shall carry me out of Egypt, and bury me in their burying place. And he said, I will do as you have said.


31. And he said, Swear to me. And he swore to him. And Israel bowed himself upon the bed's head.

Genesis 50: 4-6

4. And when the days of his mourning were past, Joseph spoke to the house of Pharaoh, saying, If now I have found grace in your eyes, speak, I beg you, in the ears of Pharaoh, saying,

5. My father made me swear, saying, Behold, I die; in my grave which I have dug for me in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me. Now therefore let me go up, I beg you, and bury my father, and I will return.

6. And Pharaoh said, Go up, and bury your father, according as he made you swear.

Extra Bonus  Why was it necessary for Joseph to ask permission from Pharaoh to leave Egypt in order to bury his father?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Psalms 81:6

6. This he ordained in Joseph **ביהוסף** for a testimony, when he went out through the land of Egypt. I heard the language of one whom I had not known,

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sotah 36b

אמר רבי תיבא בר אבא אמר רבי יוחנן, בשעה שאמר לו פרעה ליוסף: "ובלעדי לא ירים איש את ידו" וגו', אמרו איצטגניני פרעה: עבד שלקחו רבו בעשרים פסח תמשילוהו עלינו?

אמר להן: גנוני מלכות אני רואה בו.

אמרו לו: אם כן, יהא יודע בשבעים לשון!

בא גבריאל ולימדו שבעים לשון. לא הוה קגמר, הוסיף לו אות אחת משמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא ולמד, שונאמר: "עדות ביהוסף שמו בצאתו על ארץ מצרים, שפת לא ידעתי אשמע". ולמחר, כל לישנא

דאישמעני פרעה בהדיה אהדר ליה. אישמעני איהו בלשון הקדש, לא הוה קא ידע מאי הוה אמר.

אמר ליה: אגמרי!

אגמריה ולא גמר.

אמר ליה: אישתבע לי דלא מגלית. אישתבע לו.
 פי אמר ליה: "אבי השביעני לאמר", אמר ליה: זיל איתשיל אשבועתך.
 אמר ליה: ואיתשלי נמי אדיך!
 ואף על גב דלא ניתא ליה, אמר ליה: "עלה וקבר את אביך כאשר השביעך".

Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba says that Rabbi Yoḥanan says: When Pharaoh said to Joseph: "And without you no man shall lift up his hand or his foot in all the land of Egypt" (Genesis 41:44), Pharaoh's astrologers said: You will appoint a slave whose master bought him for twenty silver coins to rule over us?

He [Pharaoh] said to them: I perceive royal attributes in him.

They [Pharaoh's astrologers] said to him: If so, he should know the seventy languages that all kings' children learn.

The angel Gabriel then came and taught him the seventy languages, but he [Joseph] could not learn all of them. Gabriel then added one letter (the letter *ו*, to Joseph's name) from the name of the Holy One, Blessed be He, and then he [Joseph] was able to learn the languages, as it is stated: "He appointed it in Joseph [בִּיהוֹסֵף] for a testimony, when he went forth against the land of Egypt, the speech of one that I did not know I heard" (Psalms 81:6).

And the next day, when he appeared before Pharaoh, in every language that Pharaoh spoke with him, he [Joseph] answered him.

Joseph then spoke in the sacred tongue, Hebrew, and Pharaoh did not know what he was saying. Pharaoh said to him: Teach me that language. He [Joseph] taught him, but he could not learn it.

Pharaoh said to him: Take an oath for my benefit that you will not reveal that I do not know this language. He [Joseph] took an oath for his benefit.

Years later, when Joseph said to Pharaoh: "My father made me swear, saying" (Genesis 50:5) that I would bury him in the Land of Canaan, Pharaoh said to him: Go request the dissolution of your oath.

Joseph said to him: And should I also request dissolution for the oath that I took for your benefit?

And consequently, even though he [Pharaoh] was not amenable to letting Joseph go, he said to him: "Go up and bury your father according to what he made you swear" (Genesis 50:6).



Explaining the Story

What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why didn't the astrologers want Joseph to be appointed as a ruler over them? What was their claim?

? Why did Pharaoh want to appoint Joseph as a ruler over Egypt?

? What did the astrologers want Joseph to do to prove his worthiness?

Bonus ? Why did Pharaoh agree to the astrologers' request?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Extra Bonus ? How do we know that the astrologers' request wasn't far-fetched?

? Why wasn't Joseph able to master the 70 languages overnight even with the help of the angel Gabriel?

Why didn't Pharaoh understand Joseph when he spoke to him in Hebrew?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Why was Pharaoh so eager to learn Hebrew?

Extra Bonus ? Why was Joseph willing to teach him?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

? Why wasn't Pharaoh able to grasp Hebrew?

Bonus ? Why did Pharaoh make Joseph swear that he wouldn't reveal to anybody that Pharaoh didn't know Hebrew?'

Extra Bonus ? Why did Joseph acquiesce to Pharaoh's request?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

? Why didn't Pharaoh want to allow Joseph to go to Canaan and bury his father?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

Answer 5 _____

? What solution did Pharaoh suggest to circumvent Joseph's promise to his father?

? Why didn't Pharaoh have a choice but to allow Joseph to go to Canaan and bury his father?

More Analysis Questions

? According to our story, what was of the utmost importance for Joseph?

? According to our story, what was of the utmost importance for Pharaoh?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

- ! Negotiate your priorities.
- ! "Knowledge is power," and power is more important than what you think it is.
- ! "In time of plenty prepare for want" doesn't apply only to food.



Our talmudic story presents us a typical example of what Professor Jonah Frankel calls a *Biblical hero "dressed" in exegetical garments* – הגיבור המקראי בלבושו הדרשני.

In our story, Joseph, aware of Pharaoh's weakness and priorities, navigates a complex scenario to achieve his priority: to honor his father's wishes to be buried in the Land of Israel.

Our made-by-the-Sages-story reminds us of the importance of knowledge, power, and wits, to thrive (or survive), in unfavorable circumstances; and reminds us that planning for want in time of plenty doesn't apply only to food or money.

Professor Jonah Frankel



Jonah Frankel (1928–2012) was an author, Hebrew literature professor and Israel Prize laureate.

Jonah Frankel was born in Munich in 1928 and emigrated to Israel in 1937 to escape the Nazis.

In high school, he studied at the Yeshiva of Kfar Haroeh. He then went on to study Hebrew Literature and Talmud at the Hebrew University, and in 1968, he completed his PhD in Talmud. He was a Professor Emeritus of Aggadah and Midrash in the Department of Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He has been described as "an expert in the study of Midrashic Aggadah".

Professor Frankel's main contribution to research was the innovative approach he introduced to the study of the Aggadot of the Talmud. Until his time, these stories were typically viewed either as historical sources or as folklore. Frankel established a new school of thought, treating the Talmudic Aggadah through the methods of literary criticism, independent of the historical or cultural context in which they were written.

He focused on the idea and message behind each Aggadah, conducting a scholarly comparison of different versions of Aggadic texts found in various sources. His influence has been immense, and to this day, Talmudic Aggadot are studied in literature departments at universities.

He was also a scholar of piyyut, and he continued the project of the Goldschmidt-Fraenkel Machzor, started by his father-in-law, Professor Daniel Goldschmidt.

Published works

Darkhei Ha-Aggadah VeHa-Midrash (The Ways of the Midrash and the Aggadah), a two volume set, is an encyclopedic guide to the study of Midrash and Aggadah in broader Jewish culture.

Time and its role in the aggadic story (Jewish civilization university series).

Awards and honors

In 1993, Jonah Frankel received the Bialik Prize for significant accomplishments in Hebrew literature.

In 2000, Jonah Frankel won the Israel Prize in Talmudic research, for his work on interpreting midrash and aggada.

In 2006, Magnes Press published a volume of studies in honor of Jonah Frankel, titled *Higayon L'Yona: New Aspects in the Study of Midrash, Aggadah and Piyut, In Honor of Professor Yona Fraenkel*. The book Edited by Galit Hasan-Rokem and others, and features contributions from prominent scholars, including Daniel Boyarin, Ezra Fleischer, Moshe Halbertal and others.