

# Studies in Bereshit (Genesis)

In the Context of Ancient and Modern Jewish  
Bible Commentary

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**עיונים בספר בראשית**

**בעקבות פרשנינו הראשונים והאחרונים**

**מאת**

**נחמה ליבוביץ**

**מהדורה אנגלית תורגמה ועובדה ע"י אריה ניומן**

JACOB'S TESTAMENT

Before his death, the Patriarch imparted a last wish to his favourite son Joseph. This wish Joseph divulged to Pharaoh, after Jacob's death. Let us compare Jacob's wording of his own dying wish to Joseph, and the latter's reporting of it to Pharaoh:

<i>Jacob's testament to Joseph</i>	<i>As reported to Pharaoh by Joseph</i>
If now I have found grace in thy sight,	-----
put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh	My father made me swear, saying,
and deal kindly and truly with me;	-----
bury me not in Egypt, I pray thee:	-----
But I will lie with my fathers,	Lo I die
And thou shalt carry me out of Egypt,	
And bury me in their burying-place.	In my grave which I have digged for me in the land of Canaan, there thou shalt bury me.
(Genesis 47, 29-30)	(Gen. 50, 5)

The reason for the variations are abundantly clear. Joseph is cautious in his approach to Pharaoh. As a foreigner in Egypt he

did not want to offend the susceptibilities of his host. Jacob, however, as the sturdy opponent of the idolatrous world and Egyptian abominations did not want to be buried in Egypt and said so quite bluntly to Joseph:

אל-נא תקברני במצרים.  
והשאתני ממצרים.

Bury me not, I pray thee, in Egypt,  
Thou shalt carry me out of Egypt...

These statements are not, of course, reproduced by Joseph, in reporting his father's wish to Pharaoh. Let us now follow Jacob's request and the form of oath with which he adjures Joseph:

אם-נא מצאתי חן בעיניך  
שים-נא ידך תחת ירכי  
ועשית עמדי חסד ואמת -

If now, I have found grace in thy sight  
Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh  
And deal kindly and truly with me...

The above sentiments were naturally not meant for foreign consumption and were addressed privately to Joseph. He therefore omitted them in his interview with Pharaoh. On the other hand, Joseph understood how to influence the king and persuade him to give the necessary permission for burying such an important personage outside the country, and allow the vice-regent of the realm accompany the cortege.

Joseph substituted the following wording for what Jacob had actually said:

בקברי אשר פרייתי לי בארץ כנען שמה תקברני.

In my grave which I have digged for me in the land of Canaan, there thou shalt bury me.

The reference here is, of course, to the cave of Machpelah which Jacob had not himself dug. Joseph, however, was well acquainted with Egyptian custom. An Egyptian nobleman always prepared in his lifetime his own grave, and only there would he be buried. Pharaoh would therefore appreciate the force of Joseph's request.

It is quite clear, therefore, that the variations, the omissions and insertions made by Joseph were not accidental.

Another point worth examining is the conversation between Jacob and Joseph regarding the taking of an oath. Jacob opened with a request that Joseph take an oath to carry out his last wish:

**If now I have found grace in thy sight,  
Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh.**

Joseph had not immediately acceded to his father's request by taking the oath but answered in a general way:

**And he said, I will do as thou hast said.**

Our commentators express surprise at the fact that Joseph did not immediately take the oath as requested by his father, and only did so after being pressed a second time:

**And he said, Swear unto me. And he swore unto him.**

His behaviour contrasted with that of Abraham's servant who was similarly asked by his master to swear, which he readily did:

**And Abraham said to his eldest servant,  
Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh.  
And I will make thee swear by the Lord, God of heaven . . .**  
(24, 2)

Forthwith, the servant acceded to his master's request:

**And the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham  
his master . . .**  
(ibid. 9)

The Midrash aptly explains the difference between Joseph's behaviour and that of Abraham's servant:

אמר ר' יצחק: העבד עשה כעבודתו וכן חורין עשה כחירותו. העבד עשה כעבודתו, שנאמר (בראשית כד, ט): "וישם העבד את ידו . . ."; וכן חורין עשה כחירותו: "ויאמר: אנכי אעשה כדברך".

Said Rabbi Isaac: The servant acted servilely and the freeman as a free agent. The servant acted servilely, as it is said: "And the servant put his hand . . ." Whilst the freeman acted as a free agent: "And he said, I will do as thou hast said".

(Bereshit Rabbah 96)

A servant has to do the behest of others. Since he is not a free agent, he must be bound on oath or otherwise compelled, to make sure that he carries out his obligations. It does not matter whether the force applied is moral or physical. A free agent however is only bound by his conscience, and chooses his own actions in accordance with his own freely arrived-at decisions.

Malbim makes a similar distinction. Joseph, Malbim explains, replied to his father that it was better for him not to swear but rather to carry out his obligations as part of his filial duty. It was better for him to do it out of his own free will, rather than be bound on oath. In the latter instance, he could not take the credit for fulfilling his obligations freely.

This explanation may help us understand Biblical and Rabbinic disapproval of vows. Man should rather conduct himself as a free agent rather than be bound by external artificial bonds. Nevertheless, Jacob insisted on Joseph taking an oath:

הִשְׁבַּעָה לִּי

**And he said, Swear unto me.**

The reason for this is quite clear when we recall what we said at the beginning about Joseph's need to placate Pharaoh and approach him diplomatically. On oath: "My father made me swear", Joseph's request would carry greater force in Pharaoh's eyes. Pharaoh's answer indicates the effect Joseph's words had on him:

עָלָה וְקָבַר אֶת אָבִיךָ כְּאֲשֶׁר הִשְׁבִּיעֶךָ.

Go up and bury thy father as he made thee swear.

(50, 6)

### Questions for Further Study

1. Compare Abraham's words to his servant with Jacob's to Joseph in the following excerpt:

"And I (Abraham) will make thee swear by the Lord God of heaven..." (24, 3)

Contrast the above with Jacob's simpler form of adjuration (47, 31):

"Swear unto me"

What is the reason for the difference?

2. הרי כל שבחו של יוסף, שהיה מפליג על כבוד אביו — ולא נכנס אצלו בכל שעה?! שאלולי שבאו אחרים ואמרו לו: אבא חולה, לא היה יודע? אלא להודיעך צדקו, שלא רצה להתייחד עם אביו, שלא יאמר לו: היאך עשו בך אחיך? — ומקללם... לפיכך לא היה הולך אצל אביו כל שעה.

"... One told Joseph, behold thy father is sick" (48, 1). Behold all Joseph's praiseworthiness consisted of the great respect he paid to his father, yet he did not go in to see him every hour!? For were it not for the fact that others came to tell him, "Father is sick", wouldn't he have known? The purpose of this, however, is to make known unto you his righteousness, that he did not want to be alone with his father that he should not say to him: What did your brothers do to you? and he (Jacob) would be prompted to curse them. For this reason he did not visit his father at frequent intervals. (Pesikta Rabbati)

- (a) Can you find in our sidra support for the view that Jacob never knew what the tribes had done to Joseph?
- (b) Cannot the verses 15–16–17 in chapter 50 be considered a contradiction of the opinion of the above-quoted Midrash on this point?

3. Cf. Rashi on Genesis 49, 9 with the *Pesikta* quoted above:

"Judah is a lion's whelp; From the prey, my son, thou art gone up."

"He stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as a lioness; who shall rouse him up?"

"מטרף": ממה שחשדתיך (לו, לג) ב"טרף טרף יוסף, חיה רעה אכלתהו" — וזה יהודה שנמשל לאריה.  
"עלית": סילקת את עצמך ואמרת (לו, כו): "מה בצע כי נהרג את אחינני".

"From the prey"—regarding that which I suspected you (Genesis 37, 33) in respect of: "Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces"; "an evil beast hath devoured him"—alluding to Judah who is likened to a lion. (Rashi)

"Thou art gone up"—thou didst disassociate thyself and say "what profit is it if we slay our brother..." (Genesis 37, 26) (Rashi)

Can you explain this verse differently from Rashi in such a way that it will contain no contradiction to the view expressed in the *Pesikta*?

4. "Then Joseph spoke to the house of Pharaoh saying: if I find favour in your eyes, kindly speak in the ears of Pharaoh..." (50, 4)

On this Sforno comments:

For one must not enter the king's gate dressed in sackcloth.

Can you suggest an alternative to Sforno's answer? Why did Joseph say to Pharaoh: "My father made me swear", rather than: "I swore to my father"?