

Jacob administered an oath to his son Joseph that he must bury his father in the Land of Israel. Why did Jacob require Joseph to take an oath to bury him in Canaan? The classical answer is that Jacob knew the oath would blunt any attempt by Pharaoh to prevent the transfer of Jacob's remains to the Land of Israel. The oath would provide an alibi for Joseph and enable him to fulfill his father's wishes (see Masechet Sotah for a discussion of this topic).

To fully understand this story, we must read between the lines. As Egyptian Viceroy, Joseph attained the highest political level in Egypt. Pharaoh himself demonstrated his trust in Joseph and admiration for his intellect when he instructed the starving Egyptians to turn to Joseph for food and do whatever he required of them. If Joseph was at such a high level with virtually unlimited power, why did Jacob feel the need for Joseph to take an oath? Surely he had the ability to fulfill his father's wish to be buried in Israel without an oath. Also, Pharaoh had great respect for Jacob and Joseph's family. He commanded Joseph to inform his family that Egypt was open before them and to settle in the finest parts of the land. Pharaoh was pre-disposed to looking favorably at Joseph and his family. Why did Jacob and Joseph feel the need to apply pressure to Pharaoh to force him to accede to Jacob's burial in Canaan?

Edmund Rothchild, the well-known philanthropist passed away around the time of the 1948 War of Independence. He expressed a desire to be buried in Israel but because of the war his remains could not be transported to the Holy Land and he was interred in France. When conditions permitted interment in Israel, his children requested permission from the interior ministry to exhume his remains and send them to Israel. After some time passed without a reply, they inquired and were told that President De Gaulle himself was holding up their request. They wondered why De Gaulle himself would be interested in this matter.

When asked, De Gaulle responded that he was troubled by the request. He had always thought of Rothchild as a French citizen first and foremost. A French citizen is defined as a person who is born, lives, dies and is buried on French soil. He could not understand why Rothchild would want his remains removed to non-French soil. Such a request would imply that he was not a true French citizen. Eventually De Gaulle gave in and allowed the exhumation and removal to the Land of Israel; however his opinion of the family Rothchild as loyal French citizens was changed.

This was Joseph's dilemma. He had spent so many years as the Egyptian Viceroy. Joseph was considered Egyptian to the core by Pharaoh and all of Egypt. One could well imagine, that Joseph had his enemies and detractors in Pharaoh's court

who were constantly insinuating he was not a loyal Egyptian. Pharaoh believed in Joseph and disregarded those anti-Joseph voices. However, by requesting on his own that his father be buried outside of Egypt, Pharaoh might begin to doubt Joseph's loyalty to Egypt. How could Joseph, the most powerful person in Egypt after Pharaoh, prefer to have his father buried in a foreign land, especially after Egypt and her people were so accepting of him and his family in time of need? Perhaps Joseph considered Egypt as simply another country that he passed through and he still considered a foreign land, Canaan, his true home. Joseph feared that Pharaoh might reconsider his decision to grant him so much power.

Jacob's oath facilitated an avenue for Joseph to apply pressure to Pharaoh without jeopardizing his own position by saying that it was his father's wish to be buried in Egypt, not Joseph's. He wanted to reassure Pharaoh that his trust in him was well placed. He was able to convince Pharaoh that he indeed considered Egypt as his home. However in this case he was now powerless to change his father's burial place, having taken an oath to bury him in Canaan. Pharaoh had no choice but to relent, though perhaps the incident left a lasting impression on Pharaoh and his subsequent treatment of the Jews as foreigners and a potential threat to his kingdom, as described in the beginning of the Book of Exodus.

We now understand why Joseph was so sensitive and careful in how he phrased the request to bury his father in Canaan to Pharaoh. He sent messengers to Pharaoh to ask in a roundabout way, saying that he himself is acting as an agent of his father who requested to be buried in Canaan. Joseph wanted to stress that he was not rejecting his status as an Egyptian. He acted in order to preserve his status of Egyptian Royalty and ensure the survival of the children of Israel as they embarked on a path to become a great nation born in Egyptian exile.

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