Parashat Vayehi: Palaces in the Sea

Rabbi Joshua Rabin, Astoria Center of Israel, Astoria, New York[1]

Bereishit 50:6	
וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה עֲלֵה וּקְבֹר אֶת־אָבִיךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר הִשְׁבִּיעֶךָ׃	And Pharaoh said, “Go up and bury your father, as he made you promise on oath.”

1. **Pharoah Doesn’t Know Hebrew**

Bavli Sotah 36b	
אָמַר רַבִּי חִיָּיא בַּר אַבָּא אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁאָמַר לוֹ פַּרְעֹה לְיוֹסֵף ״וּבִלְעָדֶיךָ לֹא יָרִים אִישׁ אֶת יָדוֹ וְגוֹ׳״, אָמְרוּ אִיצְטַגְנִינֵי פַּרְעֹה: עֶבֶד שֶׁלְּקָחוֹ רַבּוֹ בְּעֶשְׂרִים כֶּסֶף תַּמְשִׁילֵהוּ עָלֵינוּ? אָמַר לָהֶן: גִּנּוּנֵי מַלְכוּת אֲנִי רוֹאֶה בּוֹ.	**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” (Bereishit 41:44), **Pharaoh’s astrologers said: You will appoint a slave whose master bought him for twenty silver** coins **to rule over us? He said to them: I perceive royal characteristics [*ginnunei malkhut*] in him** and see that he was not initially a slave.
אָמְרוּ לוֹ: אִם כֵּן, יְהֵא יוֹדֵעַ בְּשִׁבְעִים לְשׁוֹן! בָּא גַּבְרִיאֵל וְלִימְּדוֹ שִׁבְעִים לְשׁוֹן. לָא הֲוָה קָגָמַר. הוֹסִיף לוֹ אוֹת אַחַת מִשְּׁמוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא וְלָמַד, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ״עֵדוּת בִּיהוֹסֵף שָׂמוֹ בְּצֵאתוֹ עַל אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם שְׂפַת לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶשְׁמָע״. וּלְמָחָר, כֹּל לִישָׁנָא דְּאִישְׁתַּעִי פַּרְעֹה בַּהֲדֵיהּ, אַהְדַּר לֵיהּ.	**They said to him: If** that is **so** and he is a child of royalty, **he should know** the **seventy languages** that all kings’ children learn. The angel **Gabriel** then **came and taught him** the **seventy languages,** but **he could not learn** all of them. Gabriel then **added one letter,** the letter *heh*, to Joseph’s name **from the name of the Holy One, Blessed be He, and** then **he** was able to **learn** the languages, **as it is stated: “He appointed it in Joseph [*Yehosef*] 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 answered him.**
אִישְׁתַּעִי אִיהוּ בִּלְשׁוֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ, לָא הֲוָה קָא יָדַע מַאי הֲוָה אָמַר. אֲמַר לֵיהּ: אַגְמְרֵי. אַגְמְרֵיהּ וְלָא גְּמַר. אֲמַר לֵיהּ: אִישְׁתְּבַע לִי דְּלָא מְגַלֵּית. אִישְׁתְּבַע לוֹ.	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 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 took an oath for his** benefit.
כִּי אֲמַר לֵיהּ ״אָבִי הִשְׁבִּיעַנִי לֵאמֹר״, אֲמַר לֵיהּ: זִיל אִיתְּשִׁיל אַשְׁבוּעָתָךְ. אֲמַר לֵיהּ: וְאִיתְּשִׁיל נָמֵי	Years later, **when** Joseph **said to** Pharaoh: **“My father made me swear, saying”** (Bereishit 50:5) that I would bury him in Eretz Yisrael, Pharaoh **said to him: Go**

[1] All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

אַדִּידָךְ. וְאַף עַל גַּב דְּלָא נִיחָא לֵיהּ, אֲמַר לֵיהּ: ״עֲלֵה וּקְבֹר אֶת אָבִיךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר הִשְׁבִּיעֶךָ״.	**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** Pharaoh **was not amenable** to letting Joseph go, he worried that Joseph would then request dissolution for the oath that he had taken for his benefit, and Pharaoh therefore **said to him: "Go up and bury your father according to what he made you swear"** (Bereishit 50:6).

Rashi on Bereishit 50:6	
כאשר השביעך. וְאִם לֹא בִּשְׁבִיל הַשְּׁבוּעָה לֹא הָיִיתִי מַנִּיחָךְ, אֲבָל יָרֵא לוֹמַר עֲבֹר עַל הַשְּׁבוּעָה שֶׁלֹּא יֹאמַר אִם כֵּן אֶעֱבֹר עַל הַשְּׁבוּעָה שֶׁנִּשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְךָ, שֶׁלֹּא אֲגַלֶּה עַל לְשׁוֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ שֶׁאֲנִי מַכִּיר עוֹדֵף עַל ע' לְשׁוֹן, וְאַתָּה אֵינְךָ מַכִּיר בּוֹ, כְּדְאִיתָא בְּמַסֶּכֶת סוֹטָה:	**כאשר השביעך—** For except for that oath I would not permit you to do so. He did not dare, however, to say to Joseph, "Break the oath", lest he might retort, "Then, I, too, may break the oath I made you that I will never reveal that secret about the Sacred Tongue, viz., that I possess a knowledge of it in addition to the seventy languages which you also understand but of which you have no knowledge at all — as related in Sotah 36b.

Tze'enah Ure'enah,[2] Parashat Vayehi
Pharaoh said to Joseph. Go and bury your father because he made you promise. Had he not made you promise, I would not have let you go. Pharaoh said: I should not order you to transgress your oath, since you should also not transgress your oath to me that you swore not to reveal that I do not know how to speak the *Holy Tongue.* Whoever does not know all the *languages*, he cannot be king in Egypt. Therefore, Joseph swore that he would not reveal that Pharoah did not know the *Holy Tongue.* Therefore, Pharaoh said: I must allow you to fulfill your oath.

2. Palaces in the Sea

Midrash Tanhuma Bereishit 7:12	
בּוֹא וּרְאֵה, כָּל מִי שֶׁבִּקֵּשׁ לַעֲשׂוֹת עַצְמוֹ אֱלוֹהַּ, בּוֹנֶה לוֹ פַּלְטְרִין בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם. פַּרְעֹה בָּנָה לוֹ פַּלְטְרִין בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם וְסָתַם מֵי נִילוּס שֶׁלֹּא יֵרְדוּ לְתוֹךְ הַיָּם, וְהָיוּ הַמַּיִם מִתְגַּבְּרִין וְתוֹלְין הַפַּלְטְרִין וְהִגְבִּיהוּ אוֹתוֹ וּנְשָׂאוּהוּ לְמַעְלָה…	Observe that everyone who desired to be worshipped as a divine being constructed a palace for himself in the sea. Pharaoh erected a palace in the midst of the water and dammed up the water of the Nile to keep it from flowing into the Mediterranean. However, the water rose, undermined the foundations of the palace, lifted it up, and bore it away…

Edgar and Peter Schein, *Humble Inquiry*, 60
…deep down, many of us believe that if you are not winning, you are losing. If you don't tell first, someone else will tell and get the brownie points.

Big Question: How does the personality of the Pharoah in this commentary foreshadow the "new" Pharoah we will meet in the story of the Exodus?

[2] **Sefaria Summary:** Tze'enah URe'enah ("Go Forth and See," a quote from Song of Songs 3:11) is an early 17th-century work compiled in Yiddish by Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi.