

# The CEO of Pfizer & the CEO of Egypt

*Who is the head of Pfizer? And who is the pharaoh of the Bible? A few fascinating discoveries.*

## Jerusalem of the Balkans

Several months ago, when the coronavirus vaccine began to take shape, Israel signed a contract with Moderna to purchase several million doses of the Covid-19 vaccine for Israeli citizens. Then, when Pfizer was first to announce its vaccine, Israel went into a panic. Everyone accused Netanyahu of “betting” on the wrong company, and he was showered with criticism from all sides.

Trying to rectify the situation, Netanyahu immediately reached out to the CEO of Pfizer, a fellow named Albert Bourla. As it turns out, he is a Jew, who hails from Salonika, Greece.

Salonika (or in its current name, Thessaloniki) is the second largest city in Greece and has one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world. After the Spanish expulsion in 1492, thousands of Jews found refuge in the—then small—community and helped build it into one of the largest and most influential Sephardic communities in the world. It was known as the “Jerusalem in the Balkans.”

The Jews of Salonika were heavily involved in every aspect of life in the city. There was even a time when the Salonika port

was closed on Shabbat because so much of the business was owned by Jews.

Before World War II, more than sixty thousand Jews lived in the city. When the Nazis came to Greece, they sent all the Jews directly to Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen, where ninety-six percent of the community perished.

## **A Modern-Day Joseph**

Albert Bourla was born in 1961 to two Holocaust survivors who remained in Salonika. He married his wife, Miriam, and had two children. Many years ago, he joined Pfizer, and climbed the rungs of the company until he became the chairman and CEO in 2019.

When COVID began to spread its mayhem around the world, he decided to make every effort to produce a vaccine. He focused all the company's personnel and financial resources towards that goal, and they worked day and night to make the vaccine a reality.

It is no surprise that Prime Minister Netanyahu and the CEO had a warm conversation. Mr. Bourla proudly shared that he had been married in a synagogue and that he was a proud Jew. In fact, many of Mr. Bourla's friends will attest to the fact he is a warm and fine person, and his successful career had no negative affect on his character. He is the same nice Jewish kid they knew fifty years ago.

It is quite amazing. The son of Holocaust survivors is saving the entire world from a terrible illness that has already caused the

deaths of close to two million people.

It reminds us of the story of Joseph, a young Hebrew sold into slavery in Egypt and then thrown in prison on a false accusation, who then saves the entire Egypt - and the entire ancient, civilized world - from drought and famine.

Joseph didn't bear a grudge against Egypt and its leaders. Although it would have been perfectly reasonable for him to remain upset at Potiphar and all his friends at Pharaoh's court, he took them under his wing and quite literally saved their lives.

This young boy of Holocaust survivors didn't bear a grudge either. He brought in a German company, BioNTech, to join the efforts and create the vaccine that was so needed for the world.

Why was Joseph so forgiving? The Rebbe once said that his good-heartedness was in his genes, because he was a grandson of Abraham, who left a legacy for his children to do kindness and justice in the world.

## **A Father to Pharaoh**

This brings us to this week's Parsha, where we read how Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and turns to them with those famous words, "*Ani Yosef, ha'od avi chai*, I am Joseph, is my father still alive."

After they recover from the initial shock, he tells them not to worry about retribution. "You didn't send me here. It was G-d who sent me to be a father to Pharaoh, a master to all his house, and a ruler throughout the land." It was all orchestrated by G-d.

When you take a closer look at the verse, one phrase jumps out as strange. Joseph says, "*Vayisimainy l'av liparo*, G-d made me a father to Pharaoh." The Targum translates it literally, that he became an "abba" to Pharaoh.

Why did Joseph describe himself as Pharaoh's proverbial father? In their first meeting, Pharaoh had clearly set out the boundaries of their relationship: "You will lead the entire nation, and *only my chair will be superior to yours*." He made it very clear to Joseph that although he was Prime Minister, he should not forget for a moment who the real boss was. So why was Joseph suddenly calling himself Pharaoh's father?

A new book was recently published, called "Pharaoh: Biblical History, Egypt, And the Missing Millennium." The author investigates Egyptian history and compares it to the stories of the Torah, trying to ascertain who were the pharaohs of the bible. He comes to some very fascinating conclusions, and one of his findings explains the question we just asked.

According to a Jewish tradition cited in Seder Olam, on the day Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream he also predicted that a boy would be born to him that day.

According to findings of the new book, this coincides with a fascinating tidbit of Egyptian history. According to ancient Egyptian records, Egypt had a king who reigned for ninety-six years, apparently being appointed monarch when he was only six years old (a common event in antiquity—according to the bible, King Jehoash of Judah was appointed at age seven).

According to his calculations, these two stories match quite

well. Apparently, Joseph's king and benefactor died six years after his dream, and his six-year-old son was appointed to take his place. Joseph, as the second-to-the-king, or Prime Minister, served as the young child's patron, protecting him and preserving his kingdom until he was old enough to rule. It is quite likely that the old Pharaoh trusted a foreigner to protect his son more than a local politician who had his own interests. So, when Joseph spoke with his brothers, he indeed was the pharaoh's adopted father.

This explains another surprising fact. When the famine began and the people of Egypt came to Pharaoh for food, he told them "Go to Joseph and do whatever he asks of you." It seems a bit odd, as if Joseph was more powerful than the king himself!

But now that we know that the king was a young child, everything falls into place. He may have been the monarch, but Joseph was the real boss.

## **A Blessing from Jacob**

Through ancient history, most kings did not die in their beds. Their lives typically ended by war or assassination and this is true about ancient Egypt too. No other king is recorded to have ruled for ninety-six years. How did this king manage to do it?

The answer lies in this week's Parsha. When Jacob came down into Egypt, Joseph took him to meet the pharaoh. The Torah tells us that Jacob blessed him twice, once upon entering and another time before he left. According to some commentators, he blessed him with long life, just as Jews have always prayed for the health and longevity of their rulers.

And when you receive a double blessing from a Tzadik, no surprise that you live a long life....