

## Parshat Vayigash

# Economics and Morals

This week we will study the Parsha that deals with Yoseph's economic policy both during the years of plenty and during the seven years of famine. Yoseph leads the country of Egypt during these years. It is a time of national crisis. We will have to ask ourselves about the way that he forms his policies in these troubled and pressurised circumstances. Is he motivated by a spirit that would befit the son of Jacob? Does he show moral values and human sensitivity in his decisions. Do we learn from his policies, something about Yoseph that adds to his leadership profile?

## Chavruta

1. Study the central passage on this issue : Bereshit 47:13-27  
\* Do we see qualities in Yoseph that tend towards the ethical or are there some problematic sides of Yoseph's famine policy?
2. See verse 20 and verse 23. Did Yoseph buy the people as slaves?  
See the Ramban on v.19 . What is his view on this question?
3. Why does Yoseph move the people around the country (v.21)?  
See the 1. Rashbam, 2. the Ibn Ezra 3. Rashi  
How do each of their opinions differ? What textual support can you find for Rashi's unusual approach?
4. See the beginning of the famine : Bereshit 41:47-49;55-57  
How does Yoseph store the grain in a special way?
5. The Midrash Hagadol brings the following Midrash.

“At the time these laws were introduced, any Egyptians went and associated themselves with the priests, proclaiming ‘We are priests’. What did Yoseph do? He went to the archive and took out the records of families and noted to which family everyone belonged. He then wrote his findings to each person. This is what it says (v.26) ‘...with the exception of only the lands of the priests , did not become Pharaoh’s.’”

Look into the chumash and explain what textual difficulty found in our parsha the midrash is trying to solve.

## Shiur:

The Torah measures its words using language with precision and exactitude. It is for this reason that the rabbinic literature can demonstrate a heightened sensitivity to a phrase out of place, an unusual word, an extra letter learning new insights into details that in any other literary work, would go by overlooked. Here - in the concluding section of our Parsha - we have an entire section which describes Yoseph's economic policies in Egypt during the seven years of famine. What are we to learn from these details? Is it important for us to know every stage, every development, of the Egyptian home policy during Yoseph's years of power?

Our assumption is that there is something in Yoseph's famine management from which we can learn; maybe an ethic of leadership, a system of social welfare during troubled times. But, if only on a first reading this is far from the case. Yoseph comes over in these stories not as a moral example but rather something of an despotic opportunist. Look at the evidence: First he the people hand over all their money, their livestock is

next, then their land, and finally the people themselves become his slaves. He has enslaved the entire nation! The population is in crisis, people are starving, resources are scarce. And what of Yoseph? He is interested in making a quick buck for the treasury! Manipulating a national emergency to gain greater central control of the country for Pharaoh, he appears to be a heartless leader taking advantage of a nation in distress. Where is the humanitarian relief? What about human compassion? This account does not reveal the compassionate disposition that we expect from a Yoseph! Where is his heart?

In this shiur, we shall see that despite first impressions; many of Yoseph's policies at this time were devised with the specific aim of preserving human dignity. There is there more to this Parsha than meets the eye.

## THE FOOD STORES

This saga begins many years in advance of famine. Yoseph has a master plan which he puts into action during the seven "years of plenty" which will ensure the steady supply of food , and thus, the financial security and prosperity of Egypt throughout the seven famine years. In Chapter 41 we read of Yoseph's preparations during the seven plentiful years.

“(47) During the seven plentiful years the land produced in abundance.(48) And he gathered all the food for seven years.... and stored it in the cities; **he put in each city the food produced by the local fields.** (49) Yoseph collected produce in immense quantities, like the sands of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.... ” (41:47-49)

Seven years of extraordinary plenty are utilised to the full by Yoseph. But it is in the fine details of this story that we really see Yoseph's genius. One significant point that is noted by the Nachmanides is the regional strategy used in the grain collection and storage: “...he put in each city the food produced by the local fields”. Why is the location of the food stores an important detail worth mentioning? According to some, the importance of storing the grain locally was to ensure that people would not have to travel great distances for food once the famine arrived.

The Abarabanel however, sees this policy as having a significant role in other areas:

“He acted with honesty and fairness. The produce of a city was stored in that very city and nowhere else. The verse also stresses, “the local fields” indicating that produce from the fields close to the city were stored in the city but the fields deep into the countryside were transported to central warehouses, to the stores of the king. That is where Yoseph sold grain to non-Egyptians.”

This explanation reads the verses carefully. It sees verse 48 and verse 49 talking about different collections of food. One store was a local town storehouse and another was the national grain store. The stress on the first is its proximity to the people who had worked the land. The stress on the second is the sheer quantities of grain which became incalculable.

## PEACE OF MIND

Why split the grain into local and national storage? Over and above the accuracy of the Abarabanel's textual reading, he tells us an important psychological point. That even if there was a need for a national reserve of grain, it was also crucial for the local population to know that their grain - the food that they themselves had produced over the previous seven years - would be put at THEIR disposal once the famine struck. It was vital that they recognise the fairness and even-handedness in the food procurement and rationing policy.

We are not told precisely how Yoseph collected this grain. Various suggestions have been proposed. Possibly there was a tax of grain during the seven years of abundance. Alternatively, Yoseph - always the entrepreneur- bought up immense quantities of grain at low cost when supply was in excess during the plenty years. He then sold at high price during the famine years. Others suggest that ALL grain produced in Egypt was requisitioned during these seven good years and it was rationed out to ensure that it was not wasted. Whichever suggestion you take, Yoseph's policy of saving local grain for the mouths of those who grew it was an expert psychological move. During the plenty years they did not resent what they lost to the storehouse, and during the famine, they knew that they were not losing their hard-earned grain to anyone else.

Famines by their very nature have the potential to breed panic and hysteria. Yoseph - throughout his management of the food situation - shows an ability to calm the starving masses even once the famine has begun. The verses state:

“And when the famine became severe in the land of Egypt, Yoseph laid open all that was within and rationed out grain to the Egyptians (41: 56)”

The Or Hachayim [R.Chayim Ibn Attar 1696-1743. Moroccan Jewish kabbalist and talmudist. Led his community in Morocco to Israel - set up a shul in the city of Jerusalem,] is bothered by the use of phraseology here. If Yoseph “laid open all that was within (the storehouses)”, then what does it mean that he “rationed out grain”? The first phrase indicates plentiful distribution whereas the second phrase indicates restrictions in supply. He explains:

“He opened all the stores in each district to public view ... When the local people saw the enormous volume of grain, they became less hungry. Hunger enters the heart of a person when he feels that he lacks something. When the people saw all the stores their burning psychological feeling of hunger dissipated.”

The Or Hachayim is sensitive to the psychological factors involved in informing the public as to the state of the nation's food reserves. Opening the granaries was a PR move that boosted public morale instilling confidence to starving unemployed farmers and their families. They knew that rationing still had to continue, but at least the sense of imminent collapse, of living on the brink of disaster would no longer need to be felt. The nation had hope and reassurance that they would survive the famine.

## EMPLOYMENT OR SLAVERY?

This clearly brings us into the Parsha with which we opened. The central question that we raised initially relates to Yoseph's policies, his harsh treatment and apparent exploitation of a nation in crisis. Once the famine caused real hardship, we would hope that he would help the poor and starving. Instead he seems to ensure that the entire populace becomes penniless and he then enslaves them all. It seems that he has the process all pre-planned : money - livestock - land - persons. . We might want to ask the moral questions here - Is there an ethical justification? What was Yoseph aiming at?

One important detail which is frequently passed over, will provide the key to our approach. Read through the pesukim. Note there (v.19) how the Egyptians themselves request that they be enslaved! Now this is quite amazing. What is even more remarkable is that Yoseph refused to accede to their request. Yoseph never agrees to their request of enslavement. Why? Might we suggest a moral argument here. Yoseph will utilise this famine crisis to enhance Pharaoh's rule gaining tighter central governmental control of the country. But Yoseph has certain red lines which cannot be crossed. Even in a delicate national emergency there is a moral way and an immoral way. Slavery of an entire nation is out of the question.

We can see this point emphasised by the Ramban (12-13th

Cent Spain - Israel) in his commentary:

“ BUY US AND OUR LAND: They said to Yoseph that he should buy their very bodies - that they be slaves to Pharaoh.... the verse states that ‘YOSEPH GAINED POSSESSION OF ALL THE FARM LAND.’ and it does NOT say that he bought THEM (as slaves), only their land. **They said that they wished to be purchased as slaves to the king** to be treated as he saw fit. But Yoseph wanted to buy ONLY the land and stipulated that they would be perpetual leaseholders or tenants of Pharaoh.

When Yoseph told them (v.23) ‘I have this day acquired you and your land for Pharaoh’, he means NOT that **he has acquired them as slaves** but rather that through their farmland they will serve him. **In truth the king should take 80% of the income and leave you only with 20%, but, says Yoseph, I will be kind. You will take the (80%) share due to the landowner** and Pharaoh will take the (20%) due to the tenant farmer. But you will be ‘owned’ by Pharaoh in that you may not abandon working your fields of your own volition.”

The Meshech Chochma (19C - Dvinsk) adds:

“Yoseph hated the institution of slavery - the mastery over a person - which always works to the detriment of the enslaved. This is why Yoseph said that **he would purchase the land of Egypt but not the people as slaves**. The land would be owned by Pharaoh and they would be his property in that they would work for Pharaoh for their very food as labourers.”

Yoseph seems unprepared to take any person's autonomous freedom. A person's freedom is the basis of his dignity. Yoseph knew this from his scarred personal experience. Yoseph would not, and did not take this basic right from the Egyptian people. Instead, he put the entire nation under State employment. We will have to examine why this was done and how it affected Egypt. The Ramban's support for this theory: If this was a slave state then everything produced by the slave would belong to his master save his daily bread. But this is far from what happened in reality.

The people of Egypt requested slavery. Yoseph gives them employment. Why did they want to become slaves? And what was the purpose of Yoseph's plan?

## A LESSON IN FAMINE SOCIO-ECONOMICS

The socio-political situation of a famine is fragile and potentially explosive. Famine presents fertile ground for social unrest, communal collapse and even revolution. People are out of work, bored. They will sit around, hungry, complaining, with their needy families around them, demanding, crying, hungry and frustrated. An atmosphere of extreme depression and suffering prevails. Depression leads to despondence, frustration, anger. The tendency is to blame someone. Who? - the government, other ethnic groups, anyone. The danger of chaotic unrest, a breakdown of law and order and even possible political revolution, is a real possibility.

Yoseph with his shrewd political brain and deep psychological insight, understands what is going on. First, the government cannot fall, must not fall. This might be because he is working for Pharaoh himself; but there are additional reasons. The central powers are the only ones who can ensure that the food stores will last the full duration of the famine. If the mobs seize the food stocks, the danger is that the food will be squandered and certainly not last for the long-term. In addition, the mob will just take over the food supplies for its own benefit. It will certainly not be transported to the starving masses living at the periphery of the country.

Yoseph must ensure that national morale is maintained, at the same time as a certain control over the people. A most

important ingredient in this control is to have people occupied with their work rather than sitting around aimlessly. To this end, Yoseph buys all the land and OBLIGATES the entire nation to work in return for the grain they are given. They get 80% of everything they produce. They have an incentive to be productive because almost all of what they grow, they keep. In this way, people remain at work, the economy does not grind to a halt. The country can remain stable despite the difficult times.

The people request slavery. A slave has no worries, he can throw all his needs onto his owner. In a time of crisis they wanted to pass their problems on to someone else. They wanted Yoseph to do their worrying for them. Now, had the nation become slaves in the simple sense of the word, they would have had no desire to work, no personal ambition, no dreams and no feeling of future. A slave has no vision, no future. He will remain what he is; his life is not his own. Yoseph chooses instead to hand responsibility over to the people. He helps them to their feet by retaining their dignity and spurring on the economy through a work plan.

## POPULATION TRANSFER

Part of Yoseph's famine-austerity-rehabilitation plan is mass population transfer from place to place around the country. What is the purpose behind this movement of families and communities?

Most commentators (Radak, Sephorno) suggest that the reason the people were transferred to new towns and territories was to fortify Pharaoh's position as landowner of all Egypt. If Pharaoh purchased the land but every farmer remained on his land, then the sale would not take effect in real terms. By taking people away from their ancestral lands, the people lost their claim on those lands and Pharaoh enforced his position of ownership.

Another approach sees this transfer from one place to another as a measure to destabilize the population and prevent resistance to the government. A people in a new place will have lost their organizational base and will feel collectively insecure thus minimising the likelihood of an uprising. (Rashbam notes another Biblical example of this policy. In Kings II 17:24 and 18:32 we hear of the policy of Shalmaneser, the Assyrian king who exiled the ten tribes of Israel and replaced them with other nations. It is apparent that this was his standard strategy. He would move vanquished populations around his empire to lessen the national confidence of those nations and consequently eliminate the chance of an uprising.)

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes how, despite the inherent destabilizing nature of this forced population move, Yoseph once again attempted to salvage the human dimension. His aim would seem to have been the retention of human dignity amidst the difficult but necessary measures taken to ensure stability. This is Rabbi Hirsch's comment:

"HE REMOVED THE POPULATION TOWN BY TOWN: ... the inhabitants of one whole city all together to another city. The whole land had become state property, and to make this newly acquired right completely actual, every owner had to leave property that had hitherto been his own and move to another district, so that a general evacuation took place. But Yoseph's wisdom tempered the edict by arranging that the residents who had always lived together remained together and found themselves still together with their friends but only in a fresh environment. So that the old social and communal conditions remained the same."

## PRIESTLY RIGHTS

One further discussion which relates to this story is worth mentioning. Many have noted a parallel between the role of priests in ancient Egypt and the position of the priests (Kohanim) in the Jewish religion. A special arrangement is made for the priestly class that their land will not be owned by the king nor will they pay the taxes to him. There are those who

have suggested that the Torah bases its priestly laws on the Egyptian model.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Egyptian account of priestly rights makes one point clear. The priests enjoy special conditions from the king and are exempt from selling their land to Pharaoh. Judaism has a very different system. In the mechanism set down by the Torah, the priests are NOT ALLOWED to hold land. For us, the aim of the priesthood is service of God and the role of the priesthood is not to be occupying oneself with agriculture but rather to be spreading God's teachings and practice amongst the people.

Here we read:

"Only the land of the priests he did not take over, for the priests had an allotment from Pharaoh and they lived off the allotment which Pharaoh had made to them; THEREFORE they did not sell their land."

But about our priests we read (Deuteronomy 10:8-9)

"At that time, the Lord separated the tribe of Levi ... to stand before God, to serve Him and to bless in His name ... THEREFORE Levi has no portion or inheritance with his brethren. THE LORD IS HIS INHERITANCE."

In Egypt Pharaoh is the controller of the priests. They answer to him. They belong to him and thus they have special royal perks and benefits. Since they are part of the Pharaoh's estate, they are not subject to the regular laws. In Judaism, God is the inheritance of the priests. God is who controls them and they answer only to him. As opposed to the priests of Egypt, they have NO land. The priests have to be dedicated to God. They have no time or energy for the mundane occupations of farming and statesmanship. The two institutions - Egyptian and Jewish - are vastly different.

## IN CONCLUSION

We have studied together the passages in the Torah relating to Yoseph's economic control in respect to the great famine of seven years. We have noted how Yoseph adopts harsh far-reaching methods. The times demand no less. But we have demonstrated how Yoseph always aims to preserve the dignity and well being of the individual. He will not let a person become vulnerable and dependent. He will not enslave the nation. It is here that we see the Jewish notion - far advanced for its time - of the basic dignity of human life. We might add a second lesson. That even in the harshest of situations, if there is a will, there is always a moral way.

Shabbat Shalom.

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