**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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PARASHAT VAYIGASH

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Dedicated by the Etshalom and Wise families in memory of

Mrs. Miriam Wise z"l, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah, 9 Tevet.

Yehi Zikhra Barukh

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**The Years of Famine in Egypt**

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

Once the seven years of famine begin, the biblical narrative divides into two parallel stories.

The first story relates to the famine in the land of Canaan and to the family of Yaakov. This story deals primarily with the brothers' two trips to Egypt (the first without Binyamin and the second with him), Yosef's revealing himself to his brothers, Yaakov's journey to Egypt and his reuniting with his son Yosef. The second story relates to the famine in the land of Egypt and the fate of the Egyptian people. The Torah opens at length with the first story (*Bereishit* 42:1-47:12) and concludes briefly with the second story (ibid. 47:13-26).

We will begin with the second story, and for this purpose we will skip to the following passage:

And there was no bread in all the land; for the famine was very sore, so that the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished by reason of the famine. And Yosef gathered up all the money that was found in the land of Egypt, and in the land of Canaan, for the corn which they bought; and Yosef brought the money into Pharaoh's house. And when the money was all spent in the land of Egypt, and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came unto Yosef, and said: “Give us bread; for why should we die in your presence? For our money fails.”

And Yosef said: “Give your cattle, and I will give you [bread] for your cattle, if money fail.” And they brought their cattle unto Yosef. And Yosef gave them bread in exchange for the horses, and for the flocks, and for the herds, and for the asses; and he fed them with bread in exchange for all their cattle for that year.

And when that year was ended, they came unto him the second year, and said unto him: “We will not hide from my lord, how that our money is all spent; and the herds of cattle are my lord's; there is nothing left in the sight of my lord, but our bodies, and our lands. Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for bread, and we and our land will be bondmen unto Pharaoh; and give us seed, that we may live, and not die, and that the land be not desolate.”

So Yosef bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh; for the Egyptians sold every man his field, because the famine was sore upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. And as for the people, he removed them city by city, from one end of the border of Egypt even to the other end thereof. Only the land of the priests bought he not, for the priests had a portion from Pharaoh, and did eat their portion which Pharaoh gave them; therefore they sold not their land. 

Then Yosef said unto the people: “Behold, I have bought you this day and your land for Pharaoh. Lo, here is seed for you, and you shall sow the land. And it shall come to pass at the ingatherings, that you shall give a fifth unto Pharaoh, and four parts shall be your own, for seed of the field, and for your food, and for them of your households, and for food for your little ones.”

And they said: “You have saved our lives. Let us find favor in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh's bondmen.” And Yosef made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt unto this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth; only the land of the priests alone became not Pharaoh's. (*Bereishit* 47:13-26)

The leading commentators disagree about the number of years of famine that are described in this passage. Rashi[[1]](#footnote-1) maintains that this text refers to only two years of famine, the first two years, and that when Yaakov comes to Egypt, the Nile is blessed on his account, and the years of plenty return. According to this, Yosef's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream as referring to seven years of famine is not fully realized. The Ramban (v. 18), on the other hand, understands that our verses describe seven years, and that the Egyptians' money and cattle are not spent immediately, but only after six years.

The Ramban greatly praises the deal that Yosef makes with the Egyptians:

“And Yosef gathered up all the money” — The Torah relates all of this in order to inform us of Yosef's qualities of wisdom, understanding and intelligence, and that he was a trustworthy man who brought all of the money to the house of Pharaoh, and did not establish for himself hidden treasures of money in the land of Egypt or send money to the land of Canaan. Rather he handed over all of the money to the king who trusted him, and bought for him the land and even bodies. In this way he found favor also in the eyes of the people, for God brings success to those who fear Him. (*Bereishit* 47:14)

The deal, however, appears strange, and many in our generation have found fault with it. After all, Yosef collects all of the surplus grain from the fields of Egypt during the seven years of plenty. By what right then does he sell the grain back to the Egyptians during the years of famine, in exchange for their money, their cattle, their land, and even their bodies — grain which he had taken from them during the years of plenty? Many see this as an act of tyranny carried out by the kingdom against its citizens, accuse Yosef of turning the Egyptian people into Pharaoh's slaves, and see this as justification for the enslavement of Israel in Egypt after a new dynasty arises[[2]](#footnote-2) in revenge for Yosef's actions.

In our opinion, the righteous Yosef is innocent of having carried out such a great injustice against the people of Egypt, and we are not at all sure that he would have been able to do so had he wanted to.

It is possible that part of Yosef's plan, which he presents to Pharaoh together with the interpretation of his dreams, is to keep his interpretation of the dreams a state secret that would be known only to Pharaoh and his close advisors, who hear the interpretation from Yosef himself. The years of plenty begin immediately and lead to a sharp drop in the price of grain. The farmers cannot do anything with the grain, and Pharaoh's agents buy it up at a very low price, transport it to Pharaoh's storehouses, and store it away securely until those storehouses are opened in the years of famine. During those years of famine, Yosef sells the grain according to the rules of supply and demand at a high price; in that way, all of Egypt's money is transferred to the house of Pharaoh in accordance with fair and accepted business rules.

Still, why does Yosef act in this manner? Why does he not see fit to publicize his interpretation of the dreams from the very beginning and notify the people of the seven years of famine that are expected to follow the seven years of plenty? In that way, each family can stockpile grain on its own from the years of plenty for the years of famine.

Among the commentators there are those who explain that Yosef does this because he does not want his brothers to feel like strangers in the land, and therefore he uproots all of the Egyptians from their land. This also follows from what is stated in the Talmud:

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: There are many verses which to all appearances ought to be burnt but are really essential elements in the Torah…

In another instance it is written: "And as for the people, he removed them city by city" (*Bereishit* 47:21). In what way does this concern us? So that his brothers not be called strangers. (*Chullin* 60b)

However, this is not a sufficient reason to do such a grievous injustice to the entire Egyptian people. It seems to us that Yosef deliberately directs the entire Egyptian economy in such a way to allow him to nationalize the land and the means of production, and to transfer all of the Egyptians from where they live to other places so that he can bring all of Egypt under a regime of economic emergency run by the government. He does not do this out of lust for power, but rather because he sees this as the only way to run the country in such a manner that would not further enrich the wealthy and cast the poor into deeper poverty.

After all, this is the way of economic shocks and the sharp changes of market fluctuations. The quick, entrepreneurial, and creative-minded people know how to exploit such market fluctuations in their favor. They will store up the grain harvested in the years of plenty in a more efficient manner, and the others, who fail to do this, will eventually find themselves in need of the quick and talented, who will take advantage of the poor and innocent. This is how the invisible hand of the economy works in all places; in difficult times, the rich become richer, and the poor become poorer.

As mentioned above, in order to prevent this, an emergency economic regime is needed, and all the wealth and all means of production have to be concentrated in the hands of the state. Yosef is, in fact, the first Communist. However, in contrast to modern Communist countries, where the wealth is accumulated not by economists, but by party leaders, and they, the party leaders, live in luxury at the expense of the poverty and toil of society, Yosef manages the situation fairly, honestly and equitably.

The Egyptians during the years of famine may be likened to the Israelites who leave Egypt during the years of their wanderings in the wilderness. Their food is the manna that falls from heaven, and no one is permitted to take more than his daily allowance for himself and his family. Everyone eats, as it were, at God's table. No one is permitted to store manna for a time of famine. In this way, complete equality between all people is established in the wilderness with regard to food, an *omer* per person. Otherwise, the rich and talented would have found a way to sustain themselves and at the same time exploit their hunger-stricken friends in the wilderness and take everything they owned in exchange for the crumbs of their own food.

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Proof that Yosef does everything for the benefit of the people and not to exploit them and fill Pharaoh's already full coffers can be adduced from the verses dealing with the division of the grain between Pharaoh, after having acquired ownership of all the land, and the Egyptians, who work his land:

Then Yosef said unto the people: “Behold, I have bought you this day and your land for Pharaoh. Lo, here is seed for you, and you shall sow the land. And it shall come to pass at the ingatherings, that you shall give a fifth unto Pharaoh, and four parts shall be your own, for seed of the field, and for your food, and for them of your households, and for food for your little ones.”

 And they said: “You have saved our lives.”

Both in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages, during the feudal period in Europe, the vast majority of farmers were tenant farmers who worked the land of noble landowners or royal vassals. In all places known to us, the landowner would receive most of the grain, and the tenant farmer who worked his land would receive only a small part of it.

Yosef establishes the opposite situation. The tenant farmer receives four-fifths of the crop, while the landowner receives only one-fifth. Indeed, the people of Egypt are grateful to Yosef for the new law legislated in favor of the tenant farmers, and they say to him: "You have saved our lives."

It is possible that there is a connection between the law enacted by Yosef on Egyptian soil and the law enacted by the Torah on the soil of Israel in the land of God. For regarding the land of Israel as well, it is stated:

And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and settlers with Me. (*Vayikra* 25:23)

In other words, the people of Israel are quasi-tenants in the land of God, and they are obligated to a just division of the produce with God, the owner of the land.

The Torah obligates us to set aside two different tithes: In some years we are obligated to set aside the first tithe (for the Levite) and the second tithe (which is sacred and must be eaten in Jerusalem in a state of ritual purity), and in other years we are obligated to set aside the first tithe and poor-man's tithe. Still, we are always obligated to set aside two different tithes, not one and not three. The two tithes are about a fifth of the produce, and they are given to the landowner, i.e., to God, and we are left with four-fifths of the produce, just like the farmers in Egypt.

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We agree with those who find fault with Yosef on one important point: Several generations later, when a new dynasty arises to rule over Egypt ("Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who knew not Yosef,” *Shemot* 1:8), the story that is adopted by the new king and by the Egyptian masses, is about Yosef, the Hebrew slave who by chance rose to greatness in Egypt, exploiting the distress caused by the famine and enslaving all of the Egyptians and their property to the evil and domineering king. This story is a good reason for Egypt to enslave the people of Israel, and even throw their male children into the Nile.

This is a story with a tendentious and antisemitic interpretation that could, especially in times of (new) distress, replace the true story with all its details. This new interpretation could ignore the problems that Yosef faced when he came to distribute the grain among the hungry masses in a just manner. It could ignore everything that Yosef had done to save Egypt from hunger and disregard the law that Yosef had so generously enacted in favor of the Egyptian tenant-farmers.

Because of such an interpretation of their actions, Jews suffered in many of the lands of their exile. All of their actions to build up their country's economy were forgotten in days of rage. Their actions were interpreted in an unfavorable manner, which brought disasters upon them one after the other, until the God of their fathers had mercy on them, and brought them back to the land of their heritage.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. The same is recorded in *Bereishit Rabba* 89; *Tosefta Sota* 10; and *Sifrei Eikev* 38, though there the Tanna’im disagree as to whether the years of famine return following the death of Yaakov. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The defense of Yosef put forward by the Ramban, that Yosef acts out of loyalty to the king, is important but insufficient. To a certain degree, it brings to mind the story of [Joseph Süß Oppenheimer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_S%C3%BC%C3%9F_Oppenheimer), an 18th-century [court Jew](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Court_Jew) in the employ of Duke [Karl Alexander](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Alexander,_Duke_of_W%C3%BCrttemberg) of [Württemberg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W%C3%BCrttemberg). The duke needed great sums of money to finance his luxurious lifestyle, and his Jewish banker was forced to raise the money for him by collecting taxes from his subjects. Following the prince's death, all of the anger was directed at Oppenheimer, and he was executed in 1738. Shortly before his execution he was given the chance to save himself by converting to Christianity, but he refused, and was put to death as he was reciting the *Shema* and confessing his sins.

   In 1940 Veit Harlan co-wrote and directed the Nazi propaganda film *Jud Süß* at the behest of Joseph Goebbels. It is considered one of the most antisemitic films of all times. Ten million Germans and another twenty million other Europeans saw the movie, and it greatly influenced the rise of antisemitism in Europe. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)