

**Yosef feeds Egypt – A Matter of Perspective**

At the beginning of Parashat Mikeitz, (**Bereishit 41**), we learn of Pharaoh's dreams about the robust and healthy cows and grains being consumed by the gaunt and unhealthy ones. The gaunt cows and shrivelled grains remained unaffected after their consumption of their healthy counterparts. At this point Yosef, who had been languishing in prison, is brought to Pharaoh to interpret these dreams, having gained a reputation for accurately deciphering the dreams of his fellow inmates. Yosef tells Pharaoh that there will be seven years of plentiful crops in Egypt followed by a seven-year period of severe famine, during which the good years will be forgotten. Yosef then proceeds to advise Pharaoh that "forewarned is forearmed", as the saying goes, and that it was possible to save Egypt by collecting a fifth of everyone's produce over the next seven years and storing it so that it could be distributed during the years of famine. Part of Yosef's advice was to appoint a minister to oversee and enforce this effort, a position that he ended up filling himself. Although Yosef's dream interpretation and prophecy only mentioned Egypt, we know - from the story arc of Mikeitz and Vayigash – that the famine affected the lands of Canaan too.

Now let's look at this week's seventh portion (**Bereishit 47:11-27**), where we learn how Yosef's plan was executed during the famine. In the first year of the famine, Yosef sells food and supplies to the Egyptians and Canaanites, but, at some point during that year, the money runs out. The citizens of Egypt and Canaan had by now turned over all their money to Pharaoh's coffers, but they still need food. Turning to Yosef, they beg "Please give us bread. Why should we die before you, simply for lack of money?" Yosef then instructs them to turn over their livestock to the crown in exchange for their sustenance. As the second year of the famine comes along, the Egyptians turn to Yosef and say, "We have nothing left save for our land and ourselves, buy us and our lands in exchange for grain and seeds." Yosef buys both the people and their lands, then engages in a massive resettlement scheme, displacing groups of people to different parts of the country. He also institutes a tax whereby a fifth of each person's produce must be given to Pharaoh's court. The priest class are exempt both from the resettlement and from tithing their produce, as both are considered gifts to them from Pharaoh.

Yaacov and his family arrive in Egypt during the second year of the famine and are settled in the district of Goshen, one of the best parcels of land in Egypt. Although when the brothers initially came down to Egypt during the first years of the famine to buy food, they had to pay for it just like everyone else, by the time Yosef and Pharaoh invite them to emigrate with their aging father and family, they are being lavished with gifts, transport and land. Like the priests, they seem to be exempt from tithing their produce. Additionally, they are given pasture for their flocks, even though shepherding is taboo in Egypt. Yaacov's settling in Egypt brought the famine to an end, allowing the Egyptians to work the land and grow their own food with the seeds and grain that Yosef had sold them. They were still displaced from their homes and obliged to give a fifth of their produce to the crown.

Yosef's plan, when initially delivered to Pharaoh, was to use a tithing system to create a large store of food capable of both sustaining the nation during seven years of famine and giving them something of value to trade with others in the region. However, when the famine began to affect the nation, rather than simply distributing food around the country from a store that had been filled by the people themselves, Yosef sold it to them for the highest price. In fact, the price was so high that the civilian cash flow in both Egypt and Canaan had run dry before the end of the first year. The Egyptians then had to surrender their livestock and work animals, their land and even themselves to Pharaoh and Yosef's

administration, so that they could feed themselves. Worse, they are all displaced, moved from lands and neighbourhoods they are familiar with to other parts of the country, essentially making them strangers in their own homeland. I know very little about farming, but one thing that I picked up from various TV programmes is that farmers know how to get the best out of their own land. This is especially true of homesteads that have been in a family for a few generations, where each generation builds on the secrets of their predecessors, getting the best yield of land in all conditions. Forcibly relocating people to unfamiliar territory during a famine, when the land is already almost unworkable, not only breaks their morale, but likely makes it even more difficult for them to produce food by themselves. Don't forget that one fifth of any food or crop that they are able to produce must be turned over to Pharaoh's estate too.

The grand plan to feed the nation during a time of crisis, a plan to which all citizens of Egypt happily contributed, and which solidified Yosef's reputation as a kind and just ruler, became a scheme that ensnared Egypt's civilian population, stripping them of everything they knew. By the end of the second year of the famine, they all had no money, no animals, no land and no dignity. They were reduced from landowners to tenants of the crown in an unfamiliar place. While most of Egypt was ravaged by the famine, Yosef and Pharaoh filled the state coffers by trading with others in the region, especially from neighbouring Canaan, which was also affected by the famine. When Pharaoh realized that one group of Canaanite traders were in fact Yosef's brothers and that his father was still alive, they were cordially invited to emigrate to Egypt and settle in the best part of the land. From the text, it seems that Yosef's family were living freely in a tax haven, as were the priests who were exempt from the measures that had been required of other citizens. In short, this story shows manipulation and nepotism in a time of national crisis. All these actions are attributed to Yosef; however, he was acting as Pharaoh's representative and may not have had complete control over how his plan was executed in practice. In any case, the saving grace seems to have been the end of the famine following Yaacov's arrival in Egypt. The way the food distribution was handled was not sustainable for the forecasted seven years of famine. Did they have a seven-year plan or were they simply relying on a miracle?

As we know, future generations of Yaacov's progeny, who became known as the Israelites, were enslaved by Pharaoh for nearly 200 years before Moshe led them out to freedom. Sh'mot 1:8 says, "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Yosef." The S'forno asserts that there must have been a record of Yosef's leadership in saving them from famine and enriching Pharaoh's estate, but the new king didn't think that should have any effect on how he would treat the current generation of Israelites living on his land. It seems that his countrymen went along with this, possibly because they too had forgotten Yosef's leadership, or maybe it was because they remembered it and what it was like for the regular folk.

Most of the traditional commentaries do not address the injustice and inequality displayed by Yosef and Pharaoh during the famine. Professor Arnold M Eisen (*JTS*, 2017) suggests that the reason for this is the enslavement of the Israelites by the Egyptians only a generation later. I'd like to add another thought here about the silence of our commentators - it is more difficult to call out injustice and inequality when you are part of the benefitting party. There is one aspect that is addressed – the relocation of all the people across the country and I think that the explanation lends itself to my conclusion. Rashi (*on Gen. 47:21*) says that this is included in the story to demonstrate Yosef's care towards his brothers – he moved all the people from their homes so that everybody would now be exiled, and his brothers could not be singled out or bullied because of that status (*based on Talmud Bavli Chullin*). The Emek Davar adds to this that the Egyptians were moved by city, so that friends and neighbours were still together, but no one was on their own land. In this scenario, both the Egyptians and the Israelites were strangers to the land they were

occupying but at least they were among familiar people. This is the only comment on the way the Egyptians were treated in this story and this explanation highlights the lens through which this story is being viewed. When read through the lens of what was happening to Yaacov and his family, it is easier to gloss over the injustices here. It's the story of how they escaped famine in the land of Canaan and found refuge in neighbouring Egypt. However, from an Egyptian civilian's point of view, it's the story of how they contributed to a national disaster protection plan and then ended up enslaved to the rulers who had pledged to protect them.

In an essay titled *In Pharaoh's Court* (JTS, 2017), Arnold M. Eisen says the following: "The Torah always works on the principle of measure for measure. What goes around comes around. Joseph, for reasons beyond his control, had been complicit in the enslavement of Egypt. His descendants—for reasons beyond their control—will one day be enslaved by those same Egyptians (the Hebrew word is the same in both cases). Pharaoh thinks he is in control of policy, and so of history, but is actually subservient to a Higher Power. Jacob recognizes this in the blessing he bestows on Joseph in next week's portion (Gen. 48:15-16), and we, the readers of Torah, are reminded of it again and again. Human beings have a measure of freedom, which we are called to use in the service (a third use of ת.ב.נ., the word for serf and slave) of God. The natural human tendency is to focus on events of a scale we can comprehend and even shape: family relations, communal affairs, local politics, the news today and what we can expect tomorrow. But the Torah makes it clear that our private circumstances are directly impacted by the story of our people. We are connected to a past and future much larger and grander than we can know."

The idea of measure for measure is one that features a lot in the stories of the Israelites' enslavement in, and exodus from, Egypt. In *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, it is taught that the assets taken from the Egyptians during the Exodus were ultimately returned to Egypt in a battle in the time of King Jeroboam (Kings 1 14:25-6). While this idea does fit into the story line and may explain why the injustices committed during the famine are glossed over, looking at it from the relative safety of the modern day, it looks like a vicious cycle of people turning a blind eye to injustice because they themselves suffered too. At some point we need to hold up our hands and say, "This stops here, we are part of a bigger picture, and we are going to brighten it for everybody."

In recent times we have seen the frustration and anger that people feel when those in power enact and enforce laws, including those aimed at protecting the public, but are then seen to be flouting their own rules or rewriting processes to keep their own off the hook. Talk shows debate the issues and often there are calls for the resignation of ranking officials. I would imagine that, had they been living in a democracy, many Egyptians would have protested about Pharaoh's and Yosef's behaviour during their national crisis. Their monarch was the supreme leader and had a god-like status; Yosef was his second in command. Questioning them was likely not a real option. Yaacov and his sons had Yosef's ear. Could they have protested? Of course, we'll never know, but we can examine the way in which we teach these stories. We can point out the injustices and look at the bigger picture. We can be the voice for those who are not able to use their own, and, maybe, in so doing we can break that vicious cycle and create a just and equal world for all.

## Maya Brooks

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- **S'forno** – Rabbi Ovadiah ben Yaacov S'forno, Italy, 1470 – 1550.
- **Emek Davar** – Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Berlin, Russia/Poland, 1816 – 1893.
- **Avot d'Rabbi Natan** – written in the period of the Geonim, 700-900 CE; similar style to Pirkei Avot and Midrashic texts.