

Parshah Miketz
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At the end of last weeks Sidrah we were left with a bit of a cliffhanger. Joseph had interpreted the dreams of the Butler and the Baker, but whilst the butler had been restored to Pharaoh's household, Joseph was forgotten and languished in jail. "Poor Poor Joseph" as the song goes.

In Parshah Miketz and then Vayigash next week, Joseph takes centre stage, both in terms of his family and the national life of Egypt.

Miketz starts two years later with Joseph still in jail and with Pharaoh having his dreams.

He saw Seven cows, handsome and sturdy came out of the River Nile, and they grazed in the reed grass. They were followed by ugly gaunt cows that ate them up, but remained just as thin. Pharaoh woke up disturbed by what he had dreamed.

He fell asleep and dreamed a second time: He saw Seven ears of grain, solid and healthy, close behind them sprouted seven ears, "thin and scorched by the east wind."
And the thin ears swallowed up the seven solid and full ears. Then Pharaoh awoke: it was another dream!

None of the magicians or sages of Egypt could interpret the dreams for Pharaoh. The butler recalled his encounter with Joseph, He was rushed from the dungeon or pit, given a bit of a wash and brush up and brought to Pharaoh. Pharaoh asked him – So you interpret dreams? Joseph answered "Not I! God will see to Pharaoh's welfare."

The description of the dreams were repeated for Joseph, and we then hear from Joseph - "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same: Pharaoh has been told what God is about to do."

Immediately ahead are seven years of great abundance in Egypt. After them will come seven years of famine, with all the abundance forgotten. As the land is ravaged by famine, no trace of the abundance will be left in the land.

Joseph then tells Pharaoh that he will need to appoint an understanding and wise man to administer the entire land, and he in turn will appoint overseers under him who will go through the land and gather all the food.

Of course Joseph is putting himself forward for this role, and Yes – he gets the job- and the rewards of status that go with it! Joseph becomes and behaves like an Egyptian noble- with consequences later.

During the years of plenty 20% of the land was devoted to the long terms plan. Joseph gathered all the food of Egypt was enjoying, with each city storing their local produce. The quantities were described as "like the sands of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.

The years of plenty ended and the famine started. In the early stages there was still bread in Egypt. As the first years passed, the famine became severe in the land of Egypt, so Joseph rationed out grain to the Egyptians. But the extent of the famine went beyond Egypt “to the whole world”, so all came to Joseph in Egypt to procure rations.

Amongst those feeling the effects of the famine was Jacob and his remaining sons in Canaan. He has ‘seen’ and heard that there is food in Egypt, yet his sons have done nothing yet to go and seek it out. The Parshah now continues with the journeys of Jacobs brothers to Egypt. Firstly they go without Benjamin, and appear before Joseph. He recognises them, but of course they see a high Egyptian noble, not the boy they sold years before. Accused by Joseph of being spies, they are harshly questioned. Leaving Simeon behind as a hostage, they are allowed to go with grain for their families, subject to returning with Benjamin. Despite strong objection from Jacob they do return to Egypt with Benjamin. After several twists and turns involving bags of money and a silver goblet, we again end the Parshah on a cliffhanger, with Joseph demanding the Benjamin alone stays behind and the others depart.

I am not going to dwell on the family dynamics that comes in here, fascinating as it is! – I am sure James next week will have something to say on this.

But I do want to follow through into next weeks Parshah and the continuing famine.

Only 2 years of the famine had passed, with 5 years still to go.

We are told that both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. So, Joseph gathered in all the money in Egypt and in Canaan, as payment for the rations that were being procured, and brought the money into Pharaoh’s palace.

When the money ran out, they had to barter their livestock for bread. The next year, they had no livestock, so had to sell their fields, and finally the people of Egypt became serfs under Pharaoh and were forced to move from the cities. Only the priesthood retained their lands.

In exchange they were given seed to sow the land, and had to pay a tithe of one-fifth of their produce, with the rest to plant again and feed their families.

So Pharaoh and his court grew rich and pretty much everyone else was reduced to subsistence conditions.

We are not told how the famine ended or its consequences. We are told that over time Jacob and his family prospered in the land of Goshen.

Can we learn anything from this that is useful today – after all famine and food scarcity are all too common in the 21st Century, and maybe set to get worse.

It turns out that there are many examples of best and worst practice in this Sidrah, which we can see in play at the moment and which have wider implications in a changing world.

Pharaoh's dreams, and Joseph's interpretation – can be seen as the Recognition of agricultural and environmental Cycles: Seeing that there will be good and bad periods for crops. Now driven by forecasting, rather than by divinely inspired dreams, it still remains a major challenge.

Jacob's initial plan to store and save during the good years – shows Long-Term Vision

There is Proactive planning for famine, and the creation of Strategic food reserves for timely response. Devoting part of the land for the reserve was an example of Maximization of food production during favourable conditions, to allow for demands during the lean years.

Pharaoh had leadership part in this: Seeking discerning and wise leaders during crises, and then giving them the authority to act without political interference. -Of course he didn't have to worry about elections every few years...

Rambam in his Torah commentary asks why does it say understanding **and** wise –

Understanding to appreciate the needs of the people, and to support them as well as those who will come from other lands with famine.

And wise? – to understand the technical need to build and then keep stocks of grain, and methods to preserve them for the many years required.

When coupled with Effective Oversight: through the appointment of overseers and organization for efficient governance, Joseph had the tools to manage the economy over the 14 year period required.

During the famine, the solutions got increasingly drastic with negative effects that are seen in similar situations today.

One can see that there was Economic Exploitation with the people having to exchange valuable possessions for food during famine, and then selling assets and abandoning livelihoods due to food shortages, and forced migration from the cities to the country.

The increasing centralisation of resources, and concentration of power with an elite is too often seen, in this case with Pharaoh ultimately owning everything, and everyone.

The limited autonomy and Inequitable Distribution of assets that arise from this are still too common.

Just two weeks ago, we heard from Laura Hendy of World Jewish Relief about how they are working across the world with partners in local communities to address many of these issues, gives me hope that the positive elements of hunger relief are being addressed.

For famine, one could easily substitute, pandemic, climate crisis or environmental disaster, which face humanity at the moment.

So if today's Pharaohs, (and Josephs) learnt and followed the lessons of Miketz, our world could be a much better place.

Shabbat shalom.

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Understanding to appreciate the needs of the people, and to support them as well as those who will come from other lands with famine.

And wise? – to understand the need to build and then keep stocks of grain, and methods to preserve them for the many years required, not an easy task even now – managing the supply side.