

# JOSEPH AND THE ENSLAVEMENT OF THE EGYPTIANS

MOSHE SOLLER

“We have all thoughtfully – or unthoughtfully – read the pathetic story of the years of plenty and the years of famine in Egypt, and how Joseph, with that opportunity made a corner in broken hearts, and the crusts of the poor, and human liberty – a corner where he took a nation’s money all away, to the last penny; took a nation’s land away, to the last acre; then took the nation itself, buying it for bread, man by man, woman by woman, child by child, till all were slaves; a corner which took everything, left nothing.”<sup>1</sup>

A very strong indictment, and one that corresponds more or less to the general impression of Joseph’s actions in this regard. But is it justified? A close reading of the text gives a very different picture. Consider first, Joseph’s original proposal to Pharaoh.

*Now therefore let Pharaoh look out a man of discernment and wisdom, and set him over the land of Egypt. And let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers (V'Yafked P'kidim) over the land, and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. Let all the food of these good years that are coming be gathered, and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh's authority as food to be stored in the cities. Let that food be a reserve (L'Pikadon) for the land for the seven years of famine, which will come upon the land of Egypt; that the land may not perish in the famine (Gen. 41:33-36).*

The key word here is *pikadon*. This always refers to a deposit given to be held in trust, and to be returned when requested. For example, *When a person sins and commits a trespass against the LORD by dealing deceitfully with his fellow in the matter of a deposit (b'pikadon) or a pledge, or through robbery, or by defrauding his fellow (Lev. 5: 21)*. It can also be used in a more abstract sense, As in Joseph’s to his brothers before his death: Joseph said to his brothers, *I am about to die, God will surely take notice of you (pakod yifkod)*

*Dr. Moshe Soller is Prof. of Genetics (emeritus) at the Silverman Life Sciences Institute, Edmond J. Safra Campus of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. He is a graduate of Rutgers University and of Teachers Institute of Yeshiva University and studied with Rav Dovid Lifshitz at RIETS, and Rav Chaim David Regensberg at HTC. For his work in Agricultural Genetics he received Israel EMET Prize and honorary doctorates from Iowa State University and University of Liege,*

*and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob'* (Gen. 50: 24). Here, the metaphor is of the Children of Israel as a deposit that God has left with the Egyptians and which he now comes to repossess. In all cases, the deposit is left with the receiver to be held in trust, and to be returned on demand. No fee or payment is involved on the part of the depositor to retrieve his deposit. Thus, it is clear from the text that the original intent of Joseph was that the grain be deposited in trust for the people, to be returned to them, without payment, when the need arose.

Nevertheless, when we first hear of the onset of the famine, we are told: *Accordingly, when the famine became severe in the land of Egypt; and Joseph opened (vayiftah Yosef) all that had within (asher bahem)* (Gen. 41:56). Implied is that Joseph opened the granaries within which the grain was stored, but this is not stated specifically in the text. In any event, the root *p'th* is often found in the sense of providing free entry or providing liberally without payment. For example, *And it shall be if it make the answer of peace and open (p'tah) unto thee* (Deut. 20:11); *The gates of thy land are set wide open (pato'ah nif'tihu) unto thine enemies* (Nah 3:13). The implication is that they will enter and freely take all that they find. *Thou shalt surely open (patoah tiftah) thy hand unto thy poor and needy brother in thy land* (Deut.15:11); and most famously: *Thou openest (poteah) thy hand and satisfiest every living thing with favor* (Ps. 145:16). Thus, if Genesis 46:51 stood alone, we would reasonably understand it to imply that Joseph opened the granaries for all to enter; and provided the food freely, according to need, and at no cost to the Egyptians who had given it for storage.

Immediately following the phrase "and Joseph opened" comes the phrase *vayishbor l'Mitzraim*. The key word is *vayishbor*. Based on the events related later on, *And Joseph gathered up all the money that was in the Land of Egypt and the Land of Canaan for the corn which they bought (bashever asher haim shovrim)* (Gen. 47: 14), this is translated as "sold". However, taken as it stands the verbal form is clearly derived from the noun *shever*, which means provisions *And Jacob saw that there were provisions (shever) in Egypt* (Gen. 42:1). Thus, based on usual behavior of the Hebrew language, the verbal form would mean "to provision". Indeed, in all contexts in which it is used *shever* does not mean "sell", but rather "to obtain or provide for", as in *Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope (shivro) is in the*

*Lord his God* (Ps. 146: 5). Thus, this verse could equally be translated: “and Joseph opened all the storehouses, and provisioned the Egyptians without demanding payment”. At this point, there is no mention of payment of any sort. And if it were not for the subsequent story and details, this is how the verse would have been understood.

This initial introduction of the famine as it affected the Egyptians is interrupted by the long story of how the famine affected the Israelites, beginning with Joseph's meeting with his brothers, culminating in Jacob and this entire family going down to Egypt. The story of the famine in its Egyptian aspect then recommences, and now come the details of the progressive impoverishment of the Egyptians (Gen. 47:13-26) culminating in their enslavement to Pharaoh. We will return later to the question of the extent to which the Egyptians were actually enslaved.

#### PHAROAH AS MICROMANAGER

But first, what happened between the first “opening” of the storehouses and free provision of the corn as described in Gen. 41: 56; and the later sale of the corn against money, livestock, land and person as described in Gen. 47: 13-26? Our assignment of responsibility to Joseph is biased in that we view Pharaoh in his relation to Joseph through the spectacles of Joseph's previous relationships with Potiphar and the Chief Jailer. Truly, in these cases the master indeed gave over all decisions relating to the running of the household to Joseph. *He [Potiphar] left all that he had in Joseph's hand; and with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate* (Gen. 39: 6); and *The chief jailer put in Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were in that prison, and he was the one to carry out everything that was done there. The chief jailer did not supervise anything that was in Joseph's charge* (Gen. 39:22-23).

Consequently, when we read: *and Pharaoh said to all of the Egyptians: 'Go unto Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do'* (Gen. 41: 55), we read this with the previous relationships in mind and take it for granted that Pharaoh is giving Joseph *carte blanche* to manage the entire matter; and whatever Joseph will do, will be endorsed by Pharaoh. This, however, completely misreads the personality of Pharaoh and the relationship of Pharaoh to Joseph. Pharaoh chooses a name and a wife for Joseph: *Pharaoh*

then gave Joseph the name *Zaphenath paneah*; and he gave him for a wife *Asenath* daughter of *Potiphera*, priest of *On* (Gen. 41: 45). Pharaoh manages Joseph's relations with his brothers and father to the last detail: And Pharaoh said to Joseph:

*'Say to your brothers. 'Do as follows: load up your beasts and go at once to the land of Canaan. Take your father and your households, and come to me; I will give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you shall live off the fat of the land'. And you are bidden. Do as follows: take from the land of Egypt wagons for your children and your wives, and bring your father here. And; never mind your belongings (notice the level of detail, and the way Pharaoh puts the actual words in Joseph's mouth.); for the best of all the land of Egypt shall be yours'. The sons of Israel did so; and Joseph gave them wagons, as Pharaoh had commanded (al pi Pharaoh) (Gen. 45:17-21).*

The biblical idiom "*al pi*" means do exactly as you are told: *You shall act in accordance with the instructions (Al Pi HaTorah) given you and the ruling handed down to you; you must not deviate from the verdict that they announce to you either to the right or to the left* (Deut. 17:11). Again, when Joseph brings his brothers before Pharaoh, we hear: *And if you know any capable men among them, put them in charge of my livestock* (Gen. 47: 6). Pharaoh is concerned about overseers for his cattle!

It is clear from all of the above that Pharaoh did not leave even minor details to the discretion of Joseph. From this it follows, that he certainly did not leave the disposition of the stored grain to Joseph's discretion. To take advantage of the "corner on the market" in order to sell dearly, did not take the genius of Joseph, but the wickedness of Pharaoh. Thus, my contention is that between the first and later descriptions of the provisioning of the Egyptians, Pharaoh intervened; and the later sale of the provisions, which was contrary to the original plan and spirit of Joseph, was mandated by Pharaoh, acting through Joseph as his intermediary. In this, Joseph played the not uncommon role of the Jews as surrogate tax collectors throughout history. This role would focus any resentment, against Joseph the stranger, and enable Pharaoh to scapegoat Joseph if there were any serious opposition to Pharaoh's plan. Pharaoh was holding Joseph in reserve to deflect possible

outrage of the populace against the injustice of selling back to them, what was originally theirs. The direct collector of the money, livestock, land and person was Joseph, not Pharaoh. If there was widespread popular resistance, Pharaoh could then hide behind Joseph, and say - "It was his idea, not mine! Go after him, not me!"

Given this, we can now ask a somewhat different question – was it appropriate for Joseph to cooperate with Pharaoh and serve as Pharaoh's executive officer assisting him to implement his (i.e., Pharaoh's) plan; in this way, transforming Joseph's original benevolent plan for the succor of Egypt into a scheme for the massive transfer of wealth and power from the Egyptian people to Pharaoh? Here, I believe we can best regard Joseph as seeing his role as one of attempting to mitigate the evil. Indeed, when all the rhetorical declarations are set aside, the net result was a 20% flat tax to Pharaoh: *And Joseph made it into a land law in Egypt, which is still valid, that a fifth should be Pharaoh's* (Gen. 47:26) – not the best form of taxation perhaps, but at least equal for all. Certainly, this is a level of taxation that we would be happy to live with. The Egyptian people remained each on their own land, with their cattle and property; they did not become impoverished slaves of Pharaoh; but only had to pay reasonable taxes to the crown.

But didn't the Egyptians sell themselves to Pharaoh? Indeed, they propose: *Take us and our land in exchange for bread, and we with our land will be serfs to Pharaoh* (Gen. 47:19). But Joseph apparently did not accept the offer: *So Joseph gained possession of all the farm land of Egypt for Pharaoh* (Gen. 47: 20). There is no mention of slavery or serfdom in this verse. Later, however, he says to the people *Whereas I have this day acquired you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed for you to sow the land* (Gen. 47: 23). I propose to read this as a rhetorical rather than legal statement. Note that this is immediately followed by giving them seed and imposing a tax. Thus, the buying of the people does not seem to be a buying into slavery but a hiring as a sharecropper. If they were slaves, all they produce would belong to the master and they would not have any claim to the produce; certainly not 80%. Also, it appears from the beginning of Exodus that the Egyptians are not slaves. So even if there was a period of time when they were enslaved to Pharaoh it was probably short-lived.

But didn't Joseph transfer them from their own lands from one end of Egypt to the other so that they would lose their attachment to their ancestral lands? This is based on a misinterpretation of the verse: *And he removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt's border to the other* (Gen. 47: 21). The text does not read "town by town", but *he moved them to the cities* (*he'evir oto learim*). That is, he moved them to the cities (from their fields and villages). This makes sense. The food was in the storehouses of the cities: *And he gathered up all the grain of the seven years that the land of Egypt were enjoying, and stored the grain in the cities; he put in each city, the grain of the fields around it* (Gen. 41: 48). Once the famine struck, the most sensible thing to do logistically was to move the people from the fields and villages to the cities for distribution of the food. Then it could be distributed equitably to all. Getting the food out of the storehouses to all the countryside would have been a much more difficult task, open to all sorts of abuses. That is why refugees of war and natural disasters are kept in camps, until things settle down. While the famine was on we can imagine that the women children and older folks remained in the cities while the men went out to work the fields, returning periodically to their families. Once the famine was over, the Egyptians populace returned to their individual lands and homes. Thus, the only residue of the entire episode was the 20% flat tax. If the mass of Egyptians lost some gold and silver to Pharaoh, they were yet able to accumulate a sufficiency such that the trinkets of the neighbors and lodgers of the Israelites (surely not the wealthiest of the Egyptians!), were enough to enrich the departing Israelites 280 years later: *Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor, and the lodger in her house, objects of silver and gold and clothing* (Ex. 3: 22).

#### NOTES

1. Concerning the Jews, In: *Essays and Sketches of Mark Twain*, Barnes and Noble Books, N.Y. 1995, p. 178).

*Dedicated to the memory of our beloved niece, Tiferet Tratner. Killed by a mortar shell in her home in Neveh Dekalim Erev Yom Kippur 5765, HY"D.*