

Davar Torah – Dec. 4, 2021
Shabbat Mikketz/Chanukah/Rosh Hodesh
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Shabbat shalom.

I want to talk about how you use your power in times of need and what power can do to a person.

The tradition says that Joseph was Ha tzaddik, which means a righteous person, but was that really true?

After interpreting dreams for fellow prisoners and then for Pharaoh, Joseph goes from being a lowly prisoner to one of the most powerful men in Egypt. Believing Joseph's predictions of the years of plenty followed by famine, Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of planning food storage and distribution. And Joseph comes up with a plan to take the wheat from Egyptian farmers in the first seven years of plenty, store it, and save it for people to eat during the famine. On the surface it doesn't seem like such a bad plan. In fact, it is often said that Joseph acted smartly and saved thousands of lives with his actions.

But while he did save a lot of lives, the full story is more complicated.

First, about Joseph's approach to taking wheat from the farmers during the good years: We don't actually know if he paid them for it. The text says that Joseph "gathered" the grain *vayikbotz et kol ochel* with no mention of payment. A literal reading of the text makes it

seem that the grain was just taken from the Egyptian farmers without them being paid for it.

While that approach might have been for the good of the country, a few years later when those same farmers were starving to death during the famine, the Torah says that Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold unto the Egyptians the food. He actually SOLD the wheat back to the starving people--they had to buy back the grain they had grown themselves! To me it seems kind of cruel to charge the farmers to buy the wheat that they had originally produced and given away for Joseph to store.

Things look even worse in the next parsha - Vayigash. The Egyptians have run out of money buying grain, but are still starving. So they come to Joseph asking for food, saying they will die without it. And he replies he will sell it to them in exchange for their livestock, which they agree to do. The next year they're starving again, so they sell him their land in exchange for grain... and within a few years he has transferred all of the wealth into the hands of Pharaoh. The Torah even says that Joseph moved the people from their land. The Egyptians said: buy us and our land in exchange for food and we will be slaves to Pharaoh! How desperate do people have to be to sell themselves into slavery?

This makes me think that Joseph doesn't really care about the lives of the people. A good leader would know that it's not a good idea to let their people sell themselves into slavery. I worry that the commentators are letting Joseph off the hook too easily here--they make it sound like it's not that bad, like it was a good idea and even was smart resource planning. But really what he was doing was not ok.

Leon Kass in *The Beginning of Wisdom* says about Joseph's decision to make starving people pay for food that while Joseph may be saving lives, he's also making Pharaoh rich and all powerful... and while we might applaud Joseph's forethought, which does make sure there's grain for people to eat during the famine, we are made uneasy by this man who profits from exercising his godlike power over life and death.

Shai Held says (quote) "Joseph provides short-term relief in the midst of a ghastly famine, but he also systematically and relentlessly strips the people bare." Joseph was a good administrator but he seemed more concerned with food than with people's feelings.

Even if we want to see our leaders as heroes, it's important to be honest about the moments when they're not acting heroic. Otherwise how can we learn from their mistakes? And maybe the Torah wants us to learn from Joseph's mistakes here.

This whole story teaches me that power is hard to handle. Sometimes people with power can make decisions that both help people and can also--at the very same time--be cruel. This should teach people who want to be in positions of power how important it is to understand the feelings and points of views of those that you are leading.