

Vayigash Davar Torah - Dec. 11, 2021

By Sam Rosen

Imagine yourself in a time in which there is a massive restructuring of society, disruption of the environment threatens people's survival and the migration patterns resulting from this create political turmoil. Those with money, or specialized skills in a few fields are in demand and thrive wherever they go, although most people struggle to get their basic needs met. There is a significant restructuring of society, which creates massive inequality.

I'm talking about the time of the Parsha, of course.

The key passages which describe the rapid transition, within the period of 7 years of famine, and the restructuring of society start in our Parsha at verse 47:15 - edited for brevity.

"When the money gave out in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us bread, lest we die before your very eyes; for the money is gone!" And Joseph said "Bring your livestock, and I will sell to you against your livestock." Thus he provided them with bread that year in exchange for all their livestock.

And in the next year, "With all the money and animal stocks consigned to my lord, nothing is left at our disposal save our persons and our farmland. Let us not perish before your eyes, both we and our land. Take us and our land in exchange for bread, and we with our land will be serfs to Pharaoh; provide the seed, that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become a waste."

The collective effect is described: "So Joseph gained possession of all the farmland of Egypt for Pharaoh, every Egyptian having sold his field because the famine was too much for them; thus the land passed over to Pharaoh. And he removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt's border to the other.

And the Faustian bargain: "Then Joseph said to the people, "Whereas I have this day acquired you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed for you to sow the land. And when harvest comes, you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be yours as feed for the fields and as food for you and those in your households, and as nourishment for your children.

And they said "You have saved our lives! We are grateful to my lord, and we shall be serfs to Pharaoh!"

I spent a lot of time looking to identify the ethics that existed at the time of the Parsha. What assumptions were made about moral obligations?

- First, Power is key - Pharaoh's favor is the key determinant of success. As we learned 2 weeks ago in Vayishev, The cupbearer is restored and the baker is impaled without significant rationale given - only Pharaoh's will. Last week, in Miketz, Joseph's skill at interpretation earns him a seat at the table of power. Pharaoh has an eye for

knowledge & leadership (attributed to G-d), and so Joseph becomes entrenched in power.

- Second, starting last week in Miketz, there is a tale of government related to Joseph & Pharaoh, in that the people of Egypt initially appear to be the beneficiaries of Joseph's foresight. (41:53)
 - "There was famine in all lands, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. And when all the land of Egypt felt the hunger, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do."
 - This passage suggests good government because there was enough food for everyone in Egypt, but we know that the people end up as serfs. So, government appears to be doing its job at the risk of taking away people's liberty or autonomy.
- Third, there is a strong familial bond and obligation - when Joseph brings his family before Pharaoh, they are provided access to land, and the scarce commodities **ahead of** the people of Egypt. Jacob's family was rich enough to have money to buy grain, even when their crops failed, and the ability to travel far away in order to procure food when their local economy collapsed. So it appears unlikely they would have starved even without Joseph's pivotal role. However, they were welcomed into the house of excess even as others lost their land, self-determination and dignity.
- Finally, after attending to the needs of the governed, there is a profit motive - by which Joseph sells excess grain to others to amass wealth and increase the land controlled by Pharaoh. "The famine, however, spread over the whole world. So all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to procure rations, for the famine had become severe throughout the world."

Now, I'll tie the time of the Parsha to modern economic theory before bridging it to the situation we face today.

The roles which play out in the Parsha, compared to our roles today, are that:

- Pharaoh represents both the **government** and the **source of capital** in society. You can call it "old money" or simply "wealth".
- Joseph acts as the **management - forecasting, inventing farming techniques and administering supply chain** by buying and storing the grain. We don't know if he over-stretched the lands in the years of plenty, exacerbating the famine, but it's not far fetched.
- The people of Egypt, of course, are the labor, who go from a free people with ownership of their land to slaves because of this period of environmental and technical disruption.

Today's society and upheavals from COVID, climate change, and a reckoning with our past show similar power structures and similar outcomes - disenfranchisement of the masses while a small majority take most of the benefits. What values do we want today, and how do those diverge from those seen in the Parsha:

- First, domestic government - free market economics teaches that the role of government is to protect national borders, protect private property through a justice system, and enforce the free market.
 - Similar to the time of Joseph, access to information (about the famine) and technology (how to plant effectively) disrupts the balance of power. Restoring that balance in a way that benefits more people may require a trade-off from the free market ideal; typically, in economic theory you want to allow “creative destruction”, while finding ways to spread the benefits from the gain in a way to ease the suffering - i.e. job training programs or stimulus to affected workers. Massive government stimulus like COVID relief, essentially unprecedented in its direct-to-citizen scale - may be a “fair” way to do this. This is balanced against what some believe is a disincentive to work. But
- Second, the corporation, the role of technology, and profit pooling. Theory teaches us that the corporation serves its stakeholders including at minimum investors, employees and customers. I’ve called Pharaoh the investor, Joseph the manager, while the people of Egypt start out as the “customers” but become slaves.
 - The role of corporations today is complex. Many of the big problems today are created by government’s failure to adequately identify and account for costs caused by corporations and paid for by the public - what are called “externalities” - including environmental protections, and business models that provide a significant amount of creative destruction because of their extreme efficiencies (which is a good), **but also** work around labor laws in novel ways (such as hourly or contingent employment) that push costs historically paid by the corporation to society as a whole (which is bad). These show a sign of a government that can’t protect it’s people enough.
- Third, the inclusion of others in society and how that role plays viz-a-viz the *in tribe* - how was it that those affiliated with Pharaoh's household, including Joseph’s birth family, lived richly while others gave up all their possessions. Today, we see billionaires buying yachts, rich people have self-determination and security, and yet so much of society is unable to withstand the costs of a single medical procedure.
 - One approach to consider here is what is the minimum set of rights to which we believe **everyone** is entitled. We all agree that human slavery should be outlawed, but how many rights are people entitled to? I found some models for what “universal rights” may include in the UN Declaration for Human Rights Article 23, section 3, on work and Article 25, section 1, on a minimum standard of living.
 - 23:3 Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
 - 25:1 Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

- Finally, on International cooperation - in the time of Joseph, the famine is described as being international in scale, with the people of Canaan impacted as severely as those of Egypt. Stockpiling of grain, however, does not include communication with the neighboring states to similarly prepare for the devastating time ahead - or does so based on the open market, in which Egypt stockpiles grain from the entire world. Today, we have international structures in place to coordinate health and environment disasters across nations. Yet they suffer from the same problems as those in the time of Joseph - strong nationalist tendencies and protection of our own tribe rather than a recognition that all of humanity is worthy of basic protections.

A few questions I struggle with that I believe are important in approaching a more fair world that we can be proud of include:

- As we consider the impact of technology on our world, how do we see that the benefits are spread more equally among everyone? How do we ensure that the costs of progress are effectively paid by those profiting?
- As we consider the role of access and inclusion in our world, how do we envision the benefits of invention and efficiency shared among those whose work becomes less steady, less dignified or not required?
- And as we open up our world to include the voices of the marginalized, how do we begin to measure our own success by the plight of the least among us, rather than the riches which we have amassed?

Finally, one more troubling thing in the Parsha to me is that I perceive self-congratulatory selective listening on behalf of Joseph, in which the dispossessed said to Joseph, "You have saved our lives! We are grateful to my lord, and we shall be serfs to Pharaoh". Today in this country, we are similarly learning how our documented histories fail to include the voices outside of the dominant tribes, and giving voice to the marginalized. We must listen carefully.

Shabbat Shalom & may we together pursue peace