

The Beginning of the End
Parashat Vayigash
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We're just about at **the beginning of the end** of the Joseph story. To remind us: after being named viceroy of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh, Joseph gathers in all the excess grain during the seven years of plenty so that, during the seven years of famine, there would be enough food to go around. Joseph settles his father and his brothers down in Goshen, and there they reside, fairly comfortably, despite the famine.

But then something happens that we don't usually focus on:

The famine continues. Things are not comfortable for the people of Egypt. As it says in the Torah, *"There was no bread in all the world, for the famine was very severe. Both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine."* (47:13)

What does Joseph do? The text tells us that he *"gathered in all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, as payment for the rations, ... and brought the money into Pharaoh's palace."* (v. 14) People, in other words, had to pay for the food they were getting from the storehouses that Joseph had set up.

And when their money gave out, the Egyptians came to him and said, *"Give us bread, lest we die before your very eyes; for the money is gone!"* So he told them to bring him their livestock. That helped them out for a while.



But then, eventually, even their livestock was gone! So what did Joseph do then? On behalf of Pharaoh, he took their land in exchange for food. Their land became the property of Pharaoh. (*V't'hi ha-aretz l'Pharaoh; Ibid., v.20.*)

And as for the people? Joseph resettled them, and gave them seeds for them to sow the land. And he told them: when the harvest comes, they could keep $\frac{4}{5}$ of it, but they had to give $\frac{1}{5}$ of the value of their crop to Pharaoh.

The people, we are told, were grateful. After all, Joseph had saved their lives. "*He-khyi-tanu!*" "You have saved our lives," they said to Joseph. "We are grateful to my lord, and we shall become serfs to Pharaoh! (*"V'hayinu avadim l'Pharaoh!"*)

In essence, through the way he managed the distribution of food, Joseph turned the people into tenant farmers. That's a nice way to put it. A different, less charitable way to put it is to say that he turned them into serfs. After all, that's the word they used themselves. They became AVADIM l'PHARAOH!!! -- serfs -- or, we might say, given how we usually translate the word -- slaves, to Pharaoh.

That's how our parashah ends, with the entire population in Egypt (except for the priests) essentially tenant farmers on land not theirs, land which now belongs to Pharaoh.

What that means is that, even after conditions eased up in Egypt, even after the famine came to an end, the people of Egypt *remained* serfs or slaves to Pharaoh.

We don't learn anything more about the consequences of this, but the rabbis tell us that, notwithstanding the people's effusive expressions of gratitude, the Egyptians weren't entirely pleased with the arrangement. They blamed Joseph for it, and they neither forgot nor forgave what Joseph had done to them.

According to one midrash, the Israelites themselves ultimately became enslaved to Pharaoh as payback for what their ancestor, Joseph, had done to the Egyptians.

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We too are at the very beginning of the end of a calamity: in our case, the COVID-19 pandemic. It has wreaked havoc on our country. Had our country had the benefit of someone with the wisdom and the foresight of Joseph, whom we trusted, and to whom we listened, we might have been better prepared for the calamity. The virus might have killed far fewer people.

But that's water under the bridge.

And yet, further challenges lie ahead. In addition to getting many people sick and killing many of them, one other thing that has happened: many, many people have suffered economically.

Not everyone, of course. Some people have managed to move through this pandemic fairly unscathed financially. But the most vulnerable ones among us -- the folks whose jobs disappeared during the pandemic, the folks barely able to pay rent, buy food, or clothe themselves and their families -- those folks are doing badly. Even after they receive their checks -- should the so-called "rescue package" that Congress passed be signed into law -- many Americans -- *millions* of Americans -- will be suffering.

And the question is: what will happen **after** the virus is thwarted; **after** the pandemic disappears; **after** enough people have been vaccinated that the economy begins to recover. What will happen then?

Several economists have expressed concern about that.

Not about the economy as a whole. On the whole, we'll do fine. The economy will recover.

But many individual people will remain out of work, unable to find jobs. Many people will remain homeless. Many people will remain hungry. What about them?

As we saw in our parashah, Joseph, who'd contributed so much to assure that not only Egypt but Canaan would survive the famine -- Joseph didn't have that concern on his radar screen. As brilliant as he obviously was, he didn't succeed at preserving the people's economic independence.

My question is: such a concern on our radar screen?

What can we do to help those whose jobs won't be coming back? What can we do to help those who will remain hungry, or homeless or out of work -- or all three -- after herd immunity has kicked in?

I heard a distressing story on the radio the other day: Apparently, the distribution of the vaccine in a certain hospital in New York was handled so poorly that individual doctors, nurses and other health care workers started fighting with one another to get the vaccine.

Their approach was: everyone is in it for themselves.

Is that how we're going to handle the economic recovery? Are we going to handle it as a Hobbesian struggle amongst ourselves? Or are we going to take the approach that we are all in this together?

We should take our cue from the first key word of this week's *parashah*: "**VAYIGASH**:" "And he approached." The word appears in that dramatic scene in which Joseph tells his brothers that they may return to the Land of Canaan, but insists on keeping Benjamin with him as a slave. Rather than desert his brother, Judah steps forward and **approaches** Joseph to put forth his plea on Benjamin's behalf. It's an unusual word, so the rabbis invest it with much significance.

They see it as critical in determining what followed. Had Judah not approached Joseph, none of what we read today might have happened. It was only by ***approaching*** and *pleading* with Joseph that reconciliation was possible. It was only by Judah realizing that he not only had to promise his father -- as he had previously done -- that he was going to take responsibility for protecting his brother Benjamin; he also had to actually take responsibility. He had to step up to the plate. **He had to be the brother he should have been years earlier when all the brothers ganged up on Joseph and threw him into the pit.**

Judah's approaching Joseph is a key turning point in the story. It taught, one would think, an important lesson to the brothers; namely, that it is only by relating to one another as members of a family that they could get themselves out of their mess, that they could possibly succeed.

The same is true of all of us. As this pandemic is about to conclude, we have an opportunity in front of us, and that is: to decide what kind of society we really are. Are we a "dog eat dog" society?

Actually, I have never liked that expression. It does a disservice to dogs! It suggests that at heart dogs are fierce, cruel, self-centered creatures. I personally don't know of any dog who would want to behave that way toward other dogs.

I did a little research and I learned that the expression is apparently based on an old Latin expression that "dogs do *not* eat dogs." In other words, even dogs don't behave that way!

But do ***we***? Is ***ours*** that kind of society?

Or is ours a society that cares for the most marginal, the most vulnerable among us?

That choice lies before us. Do we want to treat the poorest among us as our nation's serfs? Or do we seek to eliminate involuntary servitude, and provide for others as we would wish to be provided for?

By the way, I want to remind us of something: When Judah approached Joseph, he was approaching a stranger.

Judah reached out to a stranger -- only to discover that he was his brother.

We, who call ourselves "Jews" in honor of our ancestor Judah, should remember that.

When we encounter people who inhabit a different economic level than our own, we often think of them as strangers. Can we possibly be open, as Judah was, to thinking of them as our brothers, our sisters?

What will we do? Will we push the vulnerable out of our hearts and minds and consciousness, and focus on our own recovery? Or will we approach, come close, and be the brothers and sisters we were intended to be?

Our behavior during these next six months will be critical to answering these questions.

Shabbat shalom!