

PARASHAT VAYIGASH

Genesis 44:18–47:27

Vayigash, which means “and he approached him,” begins with the confrontation between Judah and Joseph, whose identity is still unknown to his brothers. Judah tells Joseph that, if he refuses to allow Benjamin to return to his father, the old man will die. He pleads with Joseph to take him as a slave in place of Benjamin. Joseph hears Judah and then dramatically reveals his identity to his brothers. He instructs them to bring Jacob to Egypt and to settle there in Goshen. Pharaoh also invites Joseph’s family “to live off the fat of the land.” Jacob arrives in Egypt for an emotional reunion with Joseph and is welcomed as well by Pharaoh. The famine continues, and Joseph arranges for people to exchange livestock for food and, then, land for food. Controlling the land for Pharaoh, Joseph distributes seed for planting with the agreement that the people will give one-fifth to Pharaoh and keep four-fifths for themselves. Meanwhile, Jacob and his family increase in numbers and wealth in the area of Goshen.

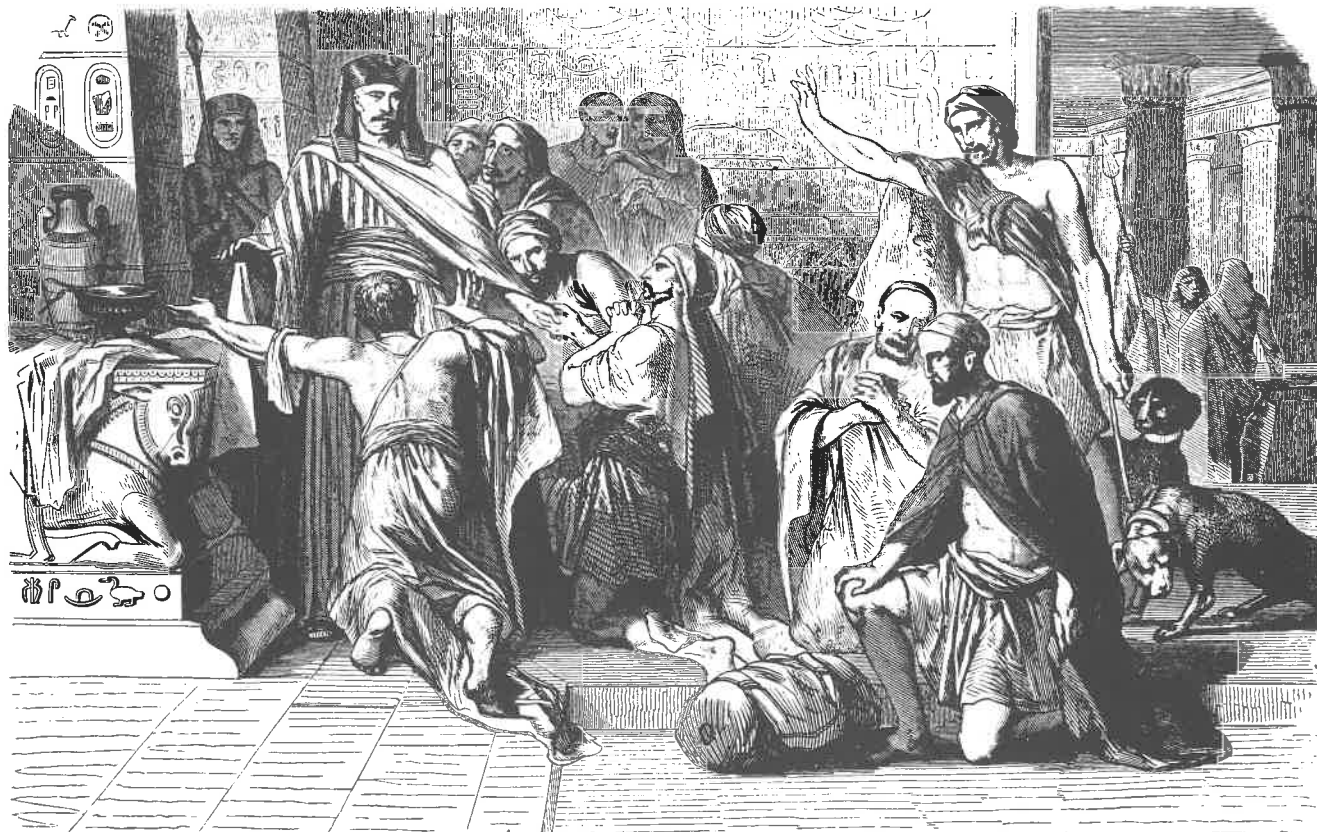
OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

Joseph arranges to have his goblet placed in Benjamin’s sack and then arrests his brothers for stealing. His identity is still unknown to them. Now they appear before him falsely accused of a crime, fearful that he will enslave Benjamin. They know that, if they return without their

youngest brother, the loss will kill their father, Jacob.

Judah approaches Joseph, reminding him of a previous conversation in which Judah told Joseph that, if the brothers returned without Benjamin, their father would die of sorrow. He pleads with Joseph to enslave him rather than Benjamin. “For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the sorrow that would overtake my father.”



Joseph is moved and tells his attendants to leave the room. He then reveals his identity. "I am Joseph," he tells his brothers. "Is my father still well [alive]?" His weeping is so loud that the Egyptians in his house hear him and pass the news about his brothers to Pharaoh's court.

The brothers are stunned and afraid. Joseph assures them that, although they sold him into slavery, all has turned out well. "God," he explains, "has sent me ahead of you to insure your survival on earth and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance."

He tells them to hurry back to their father and to bring the entire family to Egypt. He promises to provide for them in the fertile region of Goshen, which is located today in the area between Port Said and the Suez. "You must tell my father everything about my high station in Egypt and all that you have seen; and bring my father here with all speed."

When Pharaoh and his court hear about Joseph's brothers, they are pleased. Pharaoh offers

the brothers wagons with which to bring their households to Egypt and promises to give them "the best of the land of Egypt" as a place to dwell. They return to Canaan with bread, grain, and the fruits of Egypt, and they report to their father: "Joseph is still alive; yes, he is ruler over the whole land of Egypt."

Jacob is overjoyed with the news. He declares: "My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die."

· 2 ·

Soon afterwards, they all set out for Egypt. Jacob travels to Beer-sheba where he encounters God in a night vision. God promises to be with him in Egypt—and that his people will become "a great nation."

Joseph and Jacob meet in Goshen. The old man embraces his long lost son. "Now I can die," he says, "having seen for myself that you are still alive."

· 3 ·

Joseph explains to his brothers that the Egyptians hate shepherds but that he has arranged for them to dwell in the area of Goshen where they can care for their livestock. Preparing them for a meeting with Pharaoh, Joseph counsels them that the Egyptian ruler will ask them, "What is your occupation?" He tells them to answer that they have been shepherds as their fathers before them were shepherds.

When Pharaoh meets with them and hears their response, he assures them of their safety. Pharaoh tells Joseph: "The land of Egypt is open before you . . . let them stay in the region of Goshen. And, if you know any capable men among them, put them in charge of my livestock."

After a conversation between Pharaoh and Jacob, the family settles in Goshen. Joseph cares for them, providing food for all. Through the years

the family increases greatly in both numbers and wealth.

· 4 ·

With the famine increasing and the people without money to buy food, Joseph designs a plan, enabling the population of Egypt to purchase provisions in exchange for livestock. After the people have sold all their livestock, Joseph allows the people to trade their land for food.

Having gained control of all the land for Pharaoh, Joseph then offers the people a plan for production and taxation. At harvest time, they will pay Pharaoh with one-fifth of their produce and keep the remainder to feed themselves and their families. Only Pharaoh's priests are excluded from this arrangement since they already receive special payment from the Egyptian ruler.

THEMES

Parashat Vayigash contains four important themes:

1. The importance of speaking out for justice.
2. The difficulty and importance of achieving reconciliation.
3. Fear of the stranger.
4. Economic planning and justice.

PEREK ALEF: *Judah's Speech—A Plea for Justice*

Parashat Vayigash begins with Judah's plea for justice before the Egyptian head of state who has announced his intention to make a slave of Benjamin. The brothers are still unaware that it is Joseph with whom they are dealing, but they know that, if they return to Canaan without Benjamin, the loss will kill their father. As Judah steps forward, he realizes that everything now depends upon what he will say.

Interpreters of Judah's speech to Joseph call attention not only to the fact that it is the longest oration in Genesis but that Judah carefully calculates his arguments and even his tone of voice. His is not a spontaneous presentation. He is pleading for the life of his brother and father. Therefore, he measures every word, every gesture, every inflection.

Imagining Judah standing in Joseph's lavish court, the commentators provide us with a col-

orful portrait of their confrontation. Rabbi Onkelos, known as "the convert," who taught during the end of the first and the beginning of the second century, suggests that "Judah spoke with a pure, clear logic." Every point he made to Joseph was supported by facts and was impossible to refute. Another rabbi, perhaps a colleague of Onkelos, says that Judah diplomatically emphasized his concerns, arguing with Joseph until he was certain that he had penetrated his heart and turned his anger into compassion. (*Genesis Rabbah* 93:3-4)

What were the arguments Judah might have used in his plea for justice? How did he compel Joseph to reveal his identity and release Benjamin?

Hirsch



Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch believes that Judah decided to defend himself against Joseph's

anger by flattering him. So he told him: "May that which I want to say not excite your sensitiveness for, see, you are as Pharaoh. I honor you as a pharaoh so, if anything that I say does not please you, do not think that I do it from lack of honor. What I say to you I would also say to Pharaoh." (On Genesis 44:18)

Rashi



Rashi speculates that Judah used a different approach. Rather than flattering Joseph, Judah attacked him. He told him: "You are as unreliable as Pharaoh. Just as he issues promises and does not carry them out, so do you. You promised that you only wanted 'to see' our youngest brother. Now you are making him your slave." In Rashi's view, Judah exposes Joseph's callousness. He tells him that he cannot be trusted, that he is a liar. (On Genesis 44:18)

Other interpreters say that Judah accused Joseph, not only of lying to them, but also of breaking Egyptian law. They explain that Judah confronted him with the fact that Egyptian law allows you to take from a thief everything he owns but does not permit you to make him your slave. "You are breaking your own laws," Judah complained to him. (*Midrash Tanchuma, Vayigash*; also Ba'al Ha-Turim on Genesis 44:18)

Abravanel



What Judah did not say

Abravanel asks: "Why is it that Judah did not criticize Joseph for falsely accusing him and his brothers of being spies?" Answering the question, Abravanel writes: "He did not mention it because he did not wish to give Joseph an opportunity to return, once again, to that subject."

Ramban (Nachmanides)



What really moved Joseph

Nachmanides suggests that it was not just Judah's speech that moved Joseph. "There were many people present in Pharaoh's house and other Egyptians pleading with Joseph to pardon Benjamin. Their compassion had been deeply stirred by Judah's plea, and Joseph could not overcome them all." (Nachmanides on Genesis 45:1)

Judah's offer

With Judah's selfless offer of himself as a substitute for Benjamin, Joseph finally had irrefutable proof of change in his brothers' old attitudes. Judah exemplified their devotion to Jacob, their love for Benjamin, and their sincere repentance for their crime against Joseph himself." Convinced of their love, Joseph reveals himself to them. (Meir Zlotowitz, trans., Bereishis, Vol. VI, Art Scroll Tanach Series, New Mesorah Publications Ltd., 1981, p. 1958)

Rabbi Judah comments that "Judah approached Joseph to do battle with him." Other interpreters agree, pointing out that Judah criticized Joseph for wrongly accusing him and his brothers of being spies. He also complained that Joseph had singled them out at the border for special questioning and harassment. "Thousands of others have come here seeking grain," Judah told Joseph. "Not once have you cross-examined any of them. So why did you treat us so meanly?"

Some commentators say that Judah became enraged as he spoke to Joseph. Shaking a finger at him, Judah declared: "If you do not release Benjamin, we will paint Egypt in blood. We will destroy its markets and cities."

Others say that Judah tried another tactic. Because he wanted to frighten Joseph, he told him that his father, Jacob, possessed the deadly power of cursing others. "If I return to him without Benjamin, he will lay a curse of destruction not only upon Egypt but also upon you." Joseph be-

came terrified and immediately revealed himself to his brothers. (*Tze'edah u-Re'edah, Vayigash, Genesis 44:19*)

Other interpreters disagree. It was neither Judah's threat of violence against Egypt nor a curse by Jacob that persuaded Joseph to reveal himself to his brothers. Instead, it was Judah's willingness to offer himself as a slave in place of Benjamin, together with his plea for consideration of their father's feelings.

Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi of Yanof, the author of *Tze'edah u-Re'edah*, explains that Judah approached Joseph and said to him: "Take me instead of Benjamin. For I have guaranteed his life to my father. I have promised to bring him back home." Judah hoped to appeal to the Egyptian leader's sense of compassion. He wished to convince Joseph of his genuine concern for his brother and father.

Leibowitz

Modern commentator Nehama Leibowitz points out that Judah uses the word "father" fourteen times in his speech to Joseph. The repetition, Leibowitz believes, is not accidental. It "is calculated to arouse compassion in the hardest of hearts, appealing to the most elemental of affections—parental love." Judah, Leibowitz argues, hoped that, by repeating the word "father," his plea for justice might touch the heart of the Egyptian leader with a sense of the pain that a loss of a child might bring to a parent.

The interpreters of Judah's plea for justice suggest a wide range of reasons that may account for Joseph finally revealing himself to his brothers: Judah's flattery of him, his attack upon him, his threat of Jacob's curse upon him, or his willingness to sacrifice his own life for Benjamin's. As with many interpretations of Torah, the challenge to uncover the reason—or combination of reasons—remains.

PEREK BET: *The Hard Way of Reconciliation*

The scene in which Joseph reveals himself to his brothers is a memorable and emotional one. Over-

come with tears, he tells his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still well?" His brothers are astonished; they are speechless. So he says to them: "Come forward to me. I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt." He then explains to them that God sent him to Egypt to save them, and he instructs them to return to Canaan to bring their father, Jacob, and the rest of the family down to Egypt to settle in Goshen.

For many centuries, Torah interpreters have wondered about how these brothers who hated one another could undergo such "dramatic" reconciliation. They had a long history of bitterness and suspicion to repair. Suddenly the man who treated them like spies, arrested them, and jailed them reveals that he is the brother they sold into slavery. How could they build trust and faith in one another? How would they be able to overcome the hostility between them?

Peli



Modern commentator Pinchas Peli believes that Joseph acted wisely in asking everyone to leave the court so that he and his brothers could be alone when he revealed his identity to them. Peli explains: "It was one of those moments when no outsider should be present, when deep feelings should be confined to the inner circle of the close family. Only there may one voice the grievances that demand expression."

Peli may be correct. The fact that Joseph chose to be alone with his brothers so that they could privately voice their accusations and hostility may have helped to speed their reconciliation. But was it enough? Might it even have been dangerous?

Two of the ancient commentators have a serious disagreement about how wise it was for Joseph to tell all of his servants to leave the court so that he could be alone with his brothers. Rabbi Hama ben Hanina believed that it was a serious mistake. "Joseph did not act carefully," he argues. "After all, the brothers could have attacked and killed him."

Rabbi Samuel Nachmani claims that Joseph acted with great sensitivity and wisdom. He did not fear his brothers. After overhearing them speaking to one another, he knew that they felt

very guilty for selling him into slavery. Seeing how much they regretted what they had done to him, and how they feared now for the welfare of both Benjamin and their father, he was right to trust them. (*Genesis Rabbah* 93:9)

A later interpreter adds to Rabbi Samuel's argument. He explains that Joseph insisted on being alone with his brothers for two other reasons. First, he did not want them publicly humiliated at the moment when he revealed that he was the brother they had sold into slavery. It was now a private matter between them. Second, he was afraid that, if the Egyptians found out that his brothers had sold him into slavery, the Egyptians might never trust them or allow Joseph to settle them in Egypt. (*Tze'edah u-Re'edah, Vayigash*)

Other commentators speculate on additional factors that helped the brothers reconcile after years of hostility and separation. Some claim that, when Joseph asked his brothers to approach him, he opened his garment and showed them that he was circumcised. Seeking to prove that he was one of them, he also addressed them in Hebrew. Others add that he spoke to each of them, showing no preference between them and thus convincing them that he bore no grudge toward any one of them. (*Genesis Rabbah* 93:10; *Tze'edah u Re'edah* on Genesis 45:12)

Be forgiving

Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel taught: "Each night before going to sleep, forgive whomever wronged you." (Hanhaga, c. 1320)

Raba taught: "He who forgives . . . will himself be forgiven." (Yoma 23a)

The poet Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) commented: "Since I myself stand in need of God's forgiveness, I grant forgiveness to all who have wronged me."

Austrian psychiatrist William Stekel (1868–1950) once said: "To be able to forget and forgive is the prerogative of noble souls."

Basing herself on many traditional commentaries, Nehama Leibowitz claims that Joseph smoothed the way to reconciliation between himself and his brothers by offering an explanation for what they

had done and what had happened to him. He told them to think of the "large picture" and to focus on the positive results of selling him into Egyptian slavery. On the surface it might appear as an evil act. Yet, considering the whole picture, their actions led to his becoming second in command in Egypt, a position from which he could save his entire family. Joseph told them: "Now, do not feel bad or guilty because you sold me into slavery. It was actually to save life that God sent me ahead of you."

Leibowitz's argument is that Joseph made the reconciliation possible by offering a new explanation for what had happened between the brothers. It was not the brothers, but rather God, who had directed all the events. Good had resulted from evil. Viewing events on a broader scale helped them heal their hostilities, overcome their guilt, and move on to saving their lives.

Good out of evil

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch comments: "Joseph repeatedly points out to his brothers how this whole chain of events clearly stands out as Divine Management. . . . The great Master of the world achieves everything from the smallest beginnings. . . . God it is who brings everything to service. Without knowing it and without wishing it, folly and sin also are used to serve God's ends." (On Genesis 45:11)

Don Isaac Abravanel strongly disagrees with those who argue that "evil leads to good" or that evil should ever be excused because it led to a positive outcome. He condemns Joseph's brothers. He writes: "The fact that by a fluke the sale turned out well did not lessen their offense. A person is not judged by the accidental results of his deeds but by his intent. The accidental results are irrelevant to the moral dimension."

So far as Abravanel is concerned, offering excuses for the evil the brothers had intended to do—and actually did in selling Joseph into slavery—would not have led to their reconciliation. Instead, it might have brought about more suspicion and fear. They might have wondered: When will he turn the tables on us and pay us back for the suffering we inflicted upon him? In

this regard, it is interesting to note that later, after Jacob dies, the brothers express their fear that Joseph will finally punish them for what they had done to him. (See Genesis 50:15ff.)

Other interpreters, agreeing with Abravanel, hold that Joseph insisted that he be left alone with his brothers because he realized that making peace required honesty. Neither he nor they could pretend that what they had done to him was "good." They had to face one another in the privacy of their family and talk out their differences and their hostility. They had to get rid of their anger and suspicions in order to reach new levels of understanding and commitment.

So, according to one interpreter, when Joseph saw that his brothers were terrified after he told them who he was, he calmed them by saying, "I am *your brother* Joseph." He emphasized the words "*your brother*," making certain that they understood that their family bond made it possible for him to be honest with them and to forgive them.

Other commentators say that Joseph kissed each of the brothers, showing them genuine affection. Then he assured them that they were safe in his house and that he would make sure that they returned unharmed to their father. He comforted them by promising to save them from famine by settling them safely in Goshen. Joseph even pledged to them that he would never tell Jacob that they had sold him into slavery. It was to be their secret, not something he used against them. (*Tze'edah u Re'edah* on Genesis 45:3 and 11)

Jewish commentators through the centuries have tried to figure out Joseph's strategy for reconciling with his brothers. Some of their explanations excuse the evil intentions of the brothers; others describe Joseph as a kind, thoughtful, and caring brother and son. They claim he was a devoted Jew, anxious to forgive his brothers and forget the pain they had caused him. From the varying descriptions and disagreements among those who have studied Joseph's treatment of his brothers, we learn much about the difficulties of forgiveness and reconciliation.

PEREK GIMEL: *Strangers in the Land*

The Torah informs us that, after the brothers reconciled, Pharaoh invited Joseph's family to settle

in Egypt. He sent wagons to Jacob to ease his journey, and he and his heads of state festively greeted Jacob and Joseph's brothers and families upon their arrival. The welcome appears to have been a very warm one. Pharaoh invited them all to settle in Goshen.

Interpreters of this part of the Joseph story are not satisfied with the Torah's "happy ending." They raise some significant questions: What was it like to be immigrants and strangers in a foreign land? Were Pharaoh and other Egyptians happy about welcoming Jews into their land? What about Jacob and his family? Did they fear being overwhelmed by Egyptian culture?

According to one interpretation, Pharaoh and the other leaders of Egypt were delighted to learn that Joseph—to whom they had given such high office and vast responsibilities—was not a common slave but the son of noble parents. They had been embarrassed by what they believed were his slave origins. In Egypt human beings were not judged by their talents and character but by their place in the social and economic order. Slaves were at the bottom of the society. The knowledge that Joseph was from distinguished parentage actually boosted his status and reputation among the Egyptians. (*Tze'edah u-Re'edah* on Genesis 45:14)

For some commentators that explains why Pharaoh welcomed Jacob so warmly. He considered him a "prince," a leader of another people. So he honored him with transportation, food, hospitality, and the generous offer of settlement in Goshen.

Other interpreters speculate that Pharaoh rushed out to greet Jacob and his family and offered them Goshen because he was afraid of losing Joseph as an advisor. He required Joseph's skills at administering Egypt's successful famine relief program. Joseph's leadership and knowledge were very valuable to the Egyptian ruler. Pharaoh reasoned that, if Joseph's father and brothers settled in Goshen, then Joseph would remain in Egypt. So he offered them the best of his land and assured them his protection. (*Midrash Tanchuma to Vayigash*)

Some commentators, however, do not agree that Pharaoh's welcome of Jacob and his sons was so enthusiastic. They say that many of Pharaoh's ministers complained that Jews, like Joseph, would compete with them for positions of lead-

ership. "When Joseph came to power," they said, "we lost our positions. Now he will give positions to his brothers and make them lords over us." (*Midrash ha-Gadol* on Genesis 45:17)

Abravanel believes that Joseph was also concerned about the negative feelings of Egyptians toward Jews. He wanted it clearly understood that they were not arriving to take other people's positions or to be a burden upon Egyptian society. Abravanel says that Joseph told Pharaoh that his people would never require special support. They would always take care of their own needs.

Abravanel also explains why Joseph deliberately counseled his brothers to say that they were "shepherds." He knew that Pharaoh had a great need for shepherds because most Egyptians were farmers. So he reasoned that other Egyptians would accept them more easily if they seemed unlikely to compete for jobs with them.

Clearly, Abravanel believes that Joseph worried about the Egyptians accepting his family. He feared jealousy or an outbreak of suspicion and prejudice. Joseph sensed that as a minority their situation was precarious, even dangerous.

His family would be strangers in a new land. They would speak Egyptian with an accent; their names would be different. Their clothing and their preference of foods and styles might also be different from the Egyptian lifestyle. Joseph realized that their safety and success would depend upon how the majority population treated them.

Modern commentator Pinchas Peli raises another issue that he believes concerned Joseph. Peli explains that, just before Joseph sent his brothers back to the Land of Israel, he warned them to be very careful about how they treated any Egyptians they might meet on their journey. Joseph told his brothers to avoid all quarrels with the Egyptians and not to act superior because of their special relationship to him.

What Peli seems to be suggesting is that Joseph was worried that his brothers would call attention to themselves, embarrass him, or endanger themselves by arousing resentment. So Peli suggests that Joseph advised them that as strangers they should assume a "low profile." They should call as little attention to themselves as possible by always acting quietly and humbly. (*Torah Today*, pp. 47-48)

At least one commentator stretches this concern

of Joseph for the safety of his family to his land reforms. The author of *Lekach Tov* suggests that, because Joseph worried about the status of his family, he decided to relocate all the Egyptians from one city to another throughout Egypt. In this way, so the argument goes, he made every Egyptian a "stranger." He thought that, if the Egyptians experienced some of the problems and difficulties of starting all over again in a new place with new people, they might have a greater sensitivity to his family who were new settlers in Goshen.

Separate occupations

Joseph chose for his brothers a good, upright—but hated—public occupation. Had he wished, he could have appointed them to high positions but, instead, he had them say that they were shepherds. . . . The idea was to segregate them from the Egyptians . . . and to have Pharaoh settle them in Goshen. (Rabbi Isaac Arama)

Separate place

Joseph arranged matters to achieve the goal that they would live separately from the Egyptians in the area of Goshen. While this was contrary to what Pharaoh had wished, it was worth the sacrifice since it meant guaranteeing Israel's identity and traditions. (Rabbi Naphtali Zvi Judah Berlin, Ha-Emek Davar)

Assimilation

Rabbi Bechaye notes that Jacob wanted his sons to stay away from the royal court so that they would not be in danger of achieving high positions. He feared assimilation—that they might trade their loyalty to their people and traditions for the glory of high office.

Both Rabbi Isaac Arama and the modern Zionist writer Rabbi Naphtali Zvi Judah Berlin argue that Joseph was also very concerned with the difficulties of preserving Jewish tradition and culture. He feared that all the temptations of Egyptian life—riches, entertainments, sports, politics, and various religions—would eventually lead to assimilation and the end of Jewish family loyalties. So

he convinced Pharaoh to segregate his people and to restrict them to the region of Goshen.

Rabbi Hizkiyahu ben Manoah, a thirteenth-century commentator who lived in France, also follows this line of reasoning. He explains that it was not only Joseph who worried about preserving Jewish identity. Jacob, he says, was also concerned that life in Egypt would become so comfortable and prosperous that Jews would forget their own history, language, land, and traditions. Therefore he told his son not to appoint his brothers to any high positions of government. He did not want them tempted by honors or by power. Instead, according to Hizkiyahu ben Manoah, Jacob told Joseph to send them off to Goshen where they might live separately and safely within Egyptian culture.

As the commentators point out, living as "strangers" or "immigrants" in a new land presents a number of difficult problems. While often newcomers are welcomed warmly, as Pharaoh greeted Jacob and his family, others in the settled population remain suspicious and hostile to aliens. They fear that their jobs will be taken, their neighborhoods changed, their schools invaded, and their economic situation endangered.

One of the most serious problems facing all immigrant groups is how to hold on to their traditions, language, and group identity. Interpreters of the Joseph story are correct when they point out two responses to the challenge of assimilation. One is to segregate into ghettos, to seal yourself off from the rest of society around you; the other is to participate fully in the society but also to work at retaining your historic traditions.

For centuries, Jews have struggled with the stress and strains of assimilation. In some places, they have flourished, contributing richly to the greater society while also preserving and advancing Jewish culture and faith. At other times, they have suffered the brutality of anti-Semitism or even the rejection and abandonment by some Jews of their own community.

The status of "stranger," "alien," or "newcomer" is a difficult one. Perhaps that is why the Torah constantly emphasizes sensitivity and compassion in our treatment of the stranger. Repeatedly we find the commandment: "You shall

not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

PEREK DALET: *Joseph's Economic Success*

Our Torah portion claims that Joseph not only saved his own family from famine but also brilliantly rescued Egypt from economic ruin. He designed and managed a series of strategies that guided the people through seven years of plenty and sustained them through seven years of famine.

What were these "strategies"? How did Joseph save Egypt and, some say, the entire world from the ravages of famine?

Nachmanides explains that Joseph did not allow individuals to build and operate private silos for food storage. Instead, he created public granaries. "He stored everything," Nachmanides writes, "and divided it out to the people in annual rations." By controlling the supplies, Joseph prevented private profiteering and selfish hoarding. By rationing and distributing foods fairly, he gained the confidence and support of the people.

Furthermore, Nachmanides claims that Joseph gave his own family the same rations as others received. Refusing to take advantage of his position or to grant special favors, he treated everyone equally. Joseph realized that only such fairness would guarantee the trust of those who depended upon him. In the absence of such trust people would begin to cheat and hoard supplies for themselves, and the cooperative effort for saving Egypt would collapse.

The Midrash comments on Joseph's wise policy of locating silos. Rather than putting them in one place, he built them in different cities throughout Egypt. With the distribution centers so near to the population, the people felt secure. They did not have to travel long distances to find food for their families. Nor did they need to stand on long lines to receive their supplies. Joseph's plan was efficient. It promoted confidence in a time of potential panic.

According to the rabbis of the Midrash, Joseph also adopted special laws regulating the way in which aid was distributed to foreigners who entered Egypt for help. They were prohibited from

entering without registering their family names. In this way the government could control how many times a foreigner visited the country and requested help. Visitors were also prohibited from entering with more than one donkey. This made certain that no food was later sold for profit and that each visitor received only that which his family required for survival. (*Genesis Rabbah* 91:4)

I'll take care of myself

When the public experiences a disaster, let no person say: "I shall take food and drink for myself. I can't be bothered about others." (Ta'anit 11a)



Joseph could have given the members of his family more than everyone else in Egypt, but he did not. He supplied them with what they needed just as he supplied everyone else. (Sforno on Vayigash)

The most complex aspect of Joseph's economic plan unfolded in the midst of the years of famine. As the people ran out of money with which to purchase their rations, they began to sell off their land and themselves as slaves to Pharaoh. Again, Joseph responded with creative solutions. He moved whole towns of people from one place to another, and he promised the people that they would receive four-fifths of the harvest and Pharaoh would take only one-fifth.



Luzzatto

Commentator Samuel David Luzzatto explains the brilliance of Joseph's tactic. He points out that Joseph did not split the Egyptians into small groups and scatter them among many different cities and populations. Instead, he resettled them "city by city," preserving their bonds of trust, cul-

ture, family, and friendship. They were settled in a new environment, but they were not separated from their families, friends, old neighbors, and important sources of support. In this way, Joseph insured the high morale and positive feelings of the people for him, for Pharaoh, and for the stability of Egypt during difficult times of crisis.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes that Joseph also demonstrated strong leadership when the people became desperate and began offering to sell their lands and themselves as slaves to Pharaoh for continuing rations. Instead of accepting their offer, Joseph rejected it. Hirsch comments that Joseph opposed slavery. Rather than allow the people to sell themselves into bondage, he adopted a policy of purchasing the land for the central government. Then, he leased it back to the people.

The result, as Hirsch explains, was that "the ground belonged to Pharaoh for a fifth of the produce" while the farmer lived on four-fifths of the produce. The one-fifth, or 20 percent, was the citizen's tax to the state. The result of Joseph's plan, as Hirsch interprets it, was that, rather than making the people slaves, they became "tenant farmers." (Commentary on Genesis 47:26)

Hirsch's interpretation is close to an earlier view developed by Nachmanides who believed that Joseph's offer was exceedingly generous. Nachmanides speculates that Joseph told the people: "By rights Pharaoh, as lord of the land, is entitled to four-fifths and you as tenants to one-fifth. But I will treat you generously and give you the landowner's share, and Pharaoh will take the tenant's share." In Nachmanides' view, Joseph's act was a demonstration of generosity, not simply clever economics. (Commentary on Genesis 47:26)

From the viewpoint of most interpreters, Joseph's economic revolution demonstrates sound planning, good management, and justice. At a time when it might have been easy for the rich to look out only for themselves and to profit from the poor, the commentators make clear that Joseph legislated laws guaranteeing equal distribution to all people. He even favored the poor when they lost their land and were about to declare themselves slaves.

Joseph also demonstrates a high level of moral leadership. He refuses to take profits for himself

or offer preferential treatment to his own family.

For all these reasons, Joseph is known in Jewish tradition as a *tzadik*, a “righteous person.”

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. The debate about the best way to achieve justice from individuals or from leaders in political power still remains. What approach should minority groups, such as Jews, take to confront government? Which of Judah’s appeals or arguments might work best?
2. Does good result from evil? Could God have meant to have Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery so that he might later save them from famine?
3. Should there be such things as unforgivable offenses in a family? What might we learn from the story of Joseph and his brothers about reconciliation?
4. Must Jews maintain a “low profile” in order to succeed in societies where they are a minority? Would such a posture have been helpful during the rise of the Nazis in Germany?
5. The ancient rabbis suggest that the Israelites in Egypt prevented assimilation by four means: (1) They avoided sexual promiscuity with Egyptians. (2) They did not gossip about one another. (3) They did not change their names. (4) They did not change their language. Would such remedies work today? What other remedies might you suggest for stopping assimilation and guaranteeing Jewish survival?
6. What solutions for famine relief developed by Joseph might solve some of our modern problems today?