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Parshat Vayigash 5779

פרשת ויגש sees the epic story of Yosef reach its zenith. The breath-taking event of Yosef's revealing himself to his brothers; the exultation of Yaakov's spirit as he hears that Yosef is indeed alive and the almost unbearable poignancy of his reunion with his beloved son are well known. In contrast, the last section of the פרשה seems very removed in its focus from the rest of the great narrative of this early peak in Jewish history. The חומש tells us (בראשית מז:יד) וילקט יוסף את כל הכסף הנמצא בארץ מצרים...ויבא יוסף את הכסף ביתה פרעה. *Yosef gathered all the money that was in the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan through the provisions that they were purchasing and Yosef brought all the money to the House of פרעה.*

The entire nation came to Yosef at the end of that year, bemoaning the fact that they had spent all their cash savings. He then instructed them to pay for the coming year's provisions with their livestock. But the famine persisted, harsh and unremitting. The following year the people had nothing to offer but themselves and their land. למה נמות לעיניך - why should we and our land perish before you? Acquire us and our land for bread and we and our land will be slaves to פרעה... And the response?.... ויקן יוסף את כל אדמת מצרים לפרעה.. ואת העם העביר אתו לערים, רק אדמת הכהנים לא קנה. *Yosef acquired the land of Egypt for פרעה and he led the people into the cities....but he did not acquire the land of the Priests...*

Whilst an impressive exercise in political economics - the first planned command economy in recorded history, along with the introduction a formal 20% income tax, this seems a bit out of place when we note that the תורה is not a history book but is more focused on our individual and national spiritual journey.

However, a little consideration shows that Yosef - whose destiny was to display dazzling talent in whatever he undertook - was also continuing his core trait of being a leader who was an outstanding צדיק. A crucial part of that צדקות was to care. This had always been in evidence, even if previously misunderstood. Yosef had an overwhelming urge to look out for his brothers - את אחי אנכי מבקש. In his youth it was expressed - perhaps less than deftly - in conveying accounts of their shortcomings to his father. In his middle years, up to and at the reunion with his brothers, it was to push them towards תשובה for his sale into slavery. But, as Rav JB Soloveitchik has observed, Yosef had a keen grasp of the future; he now took a very long view and for the sake of his family, Egypt was to be completely reconfigured as a society.

The מדרש רבה suggests that פרעה withheld the nation's food and sought entirely to enslave the whole people. But Yosef, as described by the משך חכמה, was very against enslaving people, opting for a more flexible and dynamic model. According to the רמב"ן, the people was not acquired entirely, but rather they had to commit always to working the land and never to leave it desolate. The נצי"ב notes that if the entire people had been enslaved, then פרעה and the State would have been obliged to feed them and support them whether they contributed to the economy or not. As רמב"ן writes, Yosef established the people as אריסי בתי אבות, sharecroppers, with a strong interest in making the land successful. Moreover, this status was also demonstrated in the share of the profits given to them. In those times, the King, as freeholder, would have been entitled to take 80% and to give the sharecroppers only 20%. With Yosef's approach, they were incentivised to a much higher degree. The אברבנאל notes that a) this was the same proportion that they had already become used to surrendering during the years of plenty; and b) he also sees it as a double of the מעשר that the בני ישראל would later be obliged to donate. But for the future of the Jewish people this seismic political and macro-economic shift was crucial. R' Kamenetzky, in אמת ליעקב, observes how Yosef - besides demonstrating scrupulous honesty (ויבא יוסף את הכסף ביתה פרעה), was all the time planning for the segregation of the Jewish people (to avoid acculturation into Egyptian Society), as well as removing the Egyptians' attachment to their local land, moving them into cities, so that they would not be able to lord it over his 'immigrant' relatives (as רש"י has it שלא יהו קורין אותם גולים'). The נצי"ב also observes that this would have more easily opened up גושן for settlement by the בני ישראל.

Rav Kamenetsky also looks at the specific issue of protecting the entitlements of the Egyptian priestly caste. This might seem to be the part of the פרשה of least relevance to the nascent Jewish nation, but it is most important. It was the prototype for leaving a whole section of the nation free from the work and burdens of the rest of the group. For the Egyptians this was the priests and for Israel, שבט לוי. This perspective is similar to that of the חתם סופר, although the latter applied it to legitimate the freedom from work of the whole of בני ישראל, at least in their early years in Egypt.

In all his endeavours Yosef worked for the greater interests of his father's house, but taking the long view. He prepared for the dark days to come, but promised that they would emerge ultimately into brilliant light.

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