

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

how Joseph leverages the food stores to take possession of everything, as the people trade all their money, livestock, and eventually land for food. The people are moved to cities, and they work Pharaoh's land as serfs, receiving the seeds from Pharaoh to grow food for themselves, with Pharaoh taking a fifth of everything. In other words, all capital has been concentrated in the hands of the state, and the state makes all resource allocation decisions.

But we would do well to remember that had Joseph not foreseen the seven years of famine, the Egyptians would have starved. The Egyptians themselves recognize this, and express gratitude even as they acknowledge their predicament. In Canaan they did not take such preparations and they paid the price. But Genesis is a world without Torah, and in such a world, Joseph's good intentions greatly magnify Pharaoh's power. Joseph initiated his policies to save people's lives, not to turn them into slaves, but by the end of the seven years of famine, Pharaoh is a totalitarian ruler who can do as he pleases.

A world with Torah, however, answers to a higher cause of goodness. According to Leviticus 25, nobody but God owns the land - not the people, and not their flesh and blood ruler. Only the ultimate ruler, God, has permanent title to the land and thus even when land is "sold" it cannot be sold in perpetuity (Leviticus 25:23). And while in Egypt Pharaoh's ownership of the land leads quickly to slavery, in Leviticus, God's ownership of the land leads to the prohibition of slavery. Human beings cannot enslave one another, because they cannot own one another (25:42). In a world with Torah, temporary inequalities do not become a permanent caste system. Created in the image of God, each and every human being has an equal right to God-owned resources.

One can, I believe, make a Torah-based argument against socialism and communism on pragmatic grounds. After all, Joseph's collectivization of property led to slavery. The Torah may reject absolute notions of private property, but when humankind tries to implement such a system, it deteriorates into all property belonging to the Pharaoh(s) strong enough to grab it and hold on to it.

But the idea that all human beings are born into this world equally, and that the oil in the Middle East, the fish in the Pacific, the abundant good land in North America and other such natural resources, belong to us all, is deeply ingrained in the Torah's vision of the world. The return of young people to the socialist vision of the world is a protest against the type of capitalism that threatens to turn the world into Egypt. Even if those with this vision cannot successfully translate God's rule into the rule of flesh and blood, there is much to admire in their attempt.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayiggash

December 23, 2017 | 5 Tevet 5778

Annual | Genesis 44:18-47:27 (Etz Hayim p. 274-289; Hertz p. 169-177)
 Triennial | Genesis 45:28-46:27 (Etz Hayim p. 279-282; Hertz p. 172-174)
 Haftarah | Ezekiel 37:15-28 (Etz Hayim p. 290-292; Hertz p. 178-179)

Dvar Torah

Dr. Joshua Kulp, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty & Rosh Yeshiva

Joseph, Pharaoh, Bernie & God

The popularity of socialism, the collective ownership of the state's resources, is on the rise. In 2016, Bernie Sanders, an avowed socialist, won more votes from young people in the primaries than Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump combined. In a world in which a smaller and smaller percentage of people increasingly own a larger and larger percentage of the world's wealth and resources, it is not surprising that young people who perceive their chances of financial stability to be diminishing would look to another system to address their increasing sense that capitalism is not working.

It is easy to conflate socialism with communism, a system which in many modern countries inevitably deteriorated into totalitarianism and mass devastation, and dismiss it. But before we do so, we should look at two texts in the Torah: the story of Joseph's collectivization of Egypt's land found in the Book of Genesis, and the laws of land ownership and slavery found in the Book of Leviticus.

Joseph is gifted with the ability to read dreams and see the future. With divine aid he interprets Pharaoh's dream and foresees the famine that would soon follow the seven years of plenty. In Genesis 41:48, Joseph takes possession of all surplus grain and stores it, and in 41:56 begins to ration it out. As the famine worsens, however, things take a more sinister turn. Genesis 47:13-24 explains

Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center for Conservative Judaism

Agron Street 8 • P.O. Box 7456 • Jerusalem, Israel 94265

Tel: 972-2-625-6386 • israel@uscj.org • uscj.org • conservativeyeshiva.org

(Dvar Torah continued on back page...)

Dvar Haftarah

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Ezekiel was a prophet with utopian yearnings. He prophesied about the restoration of the Jewish people to its homeland, likening them to dry bones which would be revived and reinvigorated. And in this week's haftarah, he foresees the reconciliation of the two biblical Jewish nations, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah under a single Davidic king: "The word of the Lord came to me: 'And you, O mortal, take a stick and write on it, "Of Judah and the Israelites associated with it;" and take another stick and write on it, "Of Joseph – the stick of Ephraim – and all the House of Israel associated with him." Bring them close to each other so that they can become one stick, joined together in your hand.'" (37:17)

Although Ezekiel's parable was intended to represent the future emergence of a united nation, rabbinic interpreters throughout the ages have never felt themselves confined to the plain meaning of the text. Using cues from the text, the Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Berlin, an important 19th century Lithuanian sage, found a different kind of accord in Ezekiel's message, one which spoke to his own audience. Noting that the northern kingdom no longer existed in Ezekiel's times, the Netziv totally reinterprets this prophecy:

'The stick of Judah' represents the strength of Torah and 'the stick of Joseph' represents the strength of acts of lovingkindness (*gemilut chasadim*). The prophet sees as his task to convince people to join together the strength of Torah and that of lovingkindness, making them one; for in this world [namely, our day], few are drawn to the strength of Torah while many are drawn after acts of lovingkindness. This is why it is necessary to join the two." (adapted from Herhav Davar on Genesis 50:23)

Judah, from whose line comes the Davidic monarchy, represents Torah and Jewish national identity. Joseph, who, as Pharaoh's right hand, saved Egypt from famine, represents *gemilut chasadim* and our imperative to help others regardless of national boundaries.

It is likely that the Netziv is talking here about the Eastern European Jews of his day who were drawn to Socialism and Communism, believing their promise to build a utopian society. He does not denigrate the significance of their drive to better the world. He only seeks to remind them that the world they seek to build should not be achieved without Torah and Jewish identification.

The Netziv's interpretation of Ezekiel's prophecy is as fitting today as it was a century ago. Our Jewish impulse to "fix" the world cannot be divorced from our particular Jewish needs or wisdom. We must pursue universal causes AND

make sure Jews everywhere are safe and secure, with excellent and affordable Jewish education. The world need not be, and must not be, rebuilt at the expense of Jews. The Netziv understood that the Torah and Gemilut Hasadim must go hand in hand. So should we.

Table Talk

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This Parasha opens with a great monologue by Judah. Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, the family goes to Egypt, and Joseph helps the Egyptians survive the famine in a manner that makes almost all of them subservient to Pharaoh.

- 1) We open the Parasha with Judah's great monologue before the Egyptian lord (Joseph). He recounts the conversation between the Egyptian lord and the brothers. Look at 44:19-23: How does Judah portray the Egyptian lord, in light of the information the brothers willingly and trustingly shared with him?
- 2) Judah relates the conversation with their father about taking Benjamin to Egypt (a condition for procuring more food). Their father said 'you know that my wife bore me two children' (44:27). What seems wrong with Yaakov's statement? What do you think that we can learn about Yaakov's way of looking at his family?
- 3) Do you think that Judah had any suspicions regarding the identity of the Egyptian standing in front of him? Why?
- 4) After revealing his identity to his brothers Joseph asks them to bring the extended family to Egypt, and to tell their father of his greatness in Egypt (45:9-13). Why do you think that it was important to Joseph that Yaakov will hear about his great position at this point?
- 5) As part of the descent to Egypt, the Torah gives us a list (by name) of all the blood relatives of Yaakov that went to Egypt. What would be the purpose of such a list (rather than a 1 line description)?

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.

We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org