

Drash on Parashat Vayegash

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Parashat Vayegash is found near the end of the first Book of the Torah, Beresheet (Genesis in English). The Hebrew name of the book means *In The Beginning* and the English name of the book means *origin or mode of formation*, in this case, of the Universe as well as the Jewish people.

The name of this parashat is derived from the first Hebrew word which means *and he drew near*, he being Judah. As usual, I quote Wikipedia to provide the summation of this portion:

In the parashah, [Judah](#) pleads on behalf of his brother [Benjamin](#), [Joseph](#) reveals himself to his brothers, [Jacob](#) comes down to [Egypt](#), and Joseph's administration of Egypt saves lives but transforms all the Egyptians into bondmen.

The **LORD** quickly directed me to focus on that last point.

Yah-a-mod, Karen bat George.

Karen will bless us with the Hebrew of Genesis 47:13-15 and the English of Genesis 47:13-26 (TLV):

¹³ Now there was no food in all the land because the famine was very severe. Both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. ¹⁴ Joseph collected all the money that could be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan for the grain that they bought, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁵ Then the money of the land of Egypt and of the land of Canaan ran out and all of Egypt came to Joseph saying, "Give us food. Why should we die in front of you because the money is gone?"

¹⁶ Joseph said, "Give your livestock and I'll give it to you for your livestock, if the money is gone." ¹⁷ So they brought their livestock to Joseph and Joseph gave them food in exchange for horses, for flocks of sheep, for herds of cattle and for donkeys. He provided them with food in exchange for all their livestock that year. ¹⁸ When that year came to an end, they came to him in the second year and said to him, "We won't hide from my lord that the money has run out and the livestock and the domestic animals are my lord's. There is nothing left in my lord's sight except our bodies and our land. ¹⁹ Why should we die before your eyes—both we and our land? Buy us and our land for food—we and our land will become Pharaoh's slaves. Provide seed so that we may live and not die, and the land won't be deserted."

²⁰ So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh because the Egyptians, each one, sold his field, for the famine overcame them.

Thus the land became Pharaoh's. ²¹ He made the people slaves from one end of Egypt's border to the other. ²² Only he did not buy the land belonging to the priests, because the priests had an allotment from Pharaoh, and they ate their allotment that Pharaoh gave them. Therefore they did not sell their land.

²³ Then Joseph said to the people, "Behold, I have bought you and your land today for Pharaoh. Here is seed for you, so that you can sow the land. ²⁴ During the harvest you must give a fifth part to Pharaoh and four-fifths will be for you, for seed for the field and for your food, and for those in your houses, and for food for your little ones."

²⁵ "You've saved our lives," they said. "We find favor in the eyes of my lord, and we'll be Pharaoh's slaves." ²⁶ So Joseph set it as a statute until this very day concerning the land of Egypt: a fifth-part goes to Pharaoh. Only the priests' land did not become Pharaoh's.

Last week, you probably read, following the revelation of the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams:

^{41:39} Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one as discerning and wise as you.

The Wikipedia article on today's parashat underscores this:

Joseph is the only one of Israel's ancestors [*i.e., the only person from Adam up to Moses*] whom the Torah [...] calls "wise" (חָכָם, chacham) – the same word as "sage" in Hebrew. Specialties of ancient Near Eastern sages included advising the king and interpreting dreams and other signs – just as Joseph did. Joseph displayed the cardinal sagely virtue of patience, which sages had because they believed that everything happens according to the Divine plan and would turn out for the best.

Whether or not Joseph fits within the mold of a "Near Eastern sage", we should accept the account Karen read for us as an application of wisdom by Joseph. But what he did made Pharaoh a one-per-center, if not a point-one-per-center or even a point-zero-zero-zero-one-per-center! We the people are not conditioned to think that is wise, and *many* are those who will cite this account to fuel anti-Semitism. Benjamin Franklin went on record during the Constitutional Convention with an uncomplimentary view of Joseph's wisdom:

"There is scarce a king in a hundred who would not, if he could, follow the example of pharaoh, get first all the peoples money, then all their lands, and then make them and their children servants for ever."

This entry into slavery was voluntary, unlike the case of the Colonial slaves, but it seems Franklin wasn't thinking about them. Also, the Scripture does not mention the duration of this enslavement, only that the government's 20% share of the

production persisted at least into Moses' time. Be that as it may, we need to uncover this elusive wisdom.

In economic terminology, it is clearly better to own the apparatus of wealth creation than not because the ownership of the wealth created usually goes with that. While a capitalist person or organization (or a socialist government) does not these days generally own the human laborers involved in producing the wealth, these workers merely receive a small portion of the wealth created according to work agreements negotiated with the owners. In addition to the labor costs, owners must cover all other costs of doing business, including raw materials, procurement and maintenance of capital equipment, rent, property upkeep, taxes, legal fees, marketing, advertising, and anything else that must be funded in order to get the products and/or services of the enterprise to the consumers thereof, possibly via third-party distributors and retailers. The owners also take on all risk associated with the enterprise—the laborers get paid even if their handiwork is spoiled by some misfortune, for example.

Times of famine are a risk. These Egyptians petitioning Joseph and Pharaoh for food are described as owners of agricultural product-producing enterprises used to living on a portion of their own produce while selling and profiting from the rest. For whatever reasons, none of them followed the government's example of storing surplus for the coming hard times even though the government was taking just 20% of their extraordinary output. As The Proverbs point out (20:21), a fool devours all that he has. Consequently these foresight-challenged capitalists came to their government for a bailout. Ultimately, just to be able to eat for the duration of the famine, they sold all they had including their personal sovereignty to the only entity in a position to buy it.

We all know the Scriptures do not brand slavery as intrinsically evil, nor even as an inherently ungodly situation to be in. It is allowed as a welfare program and is regulated to prevent abuse of those enslaved whether by choice, as spoils of war, by any form of coercion, or by simply being born into it. Economically speaking, aside from being chattel, the primary difference between a person being free or a slave is who has responsibility for the welfare of the person. If you own an animal, it is not responsible for much, perhaps nothing. You perceive the benefits of owning it outweigh the expense, inconvenience, and risk of owning it.

The failed Egyptian capitalists demonstrated ineptitude for managing risk and irresponsibility for their own welfare, and that had a major ripple effect on the entire economy. This, of course, affected the one-percenters who had responsibility for that economy as well as enlightened self-interest in ensuring it flourished. As the petitioners themselves pointed out, there was a real possibility

that without them the land would become completely unproductive. Joseph's edict transferred responsibility for the welfare of the people to the government and set the former owners up as sharecroppers that would own a whopping 80% of what their efforts produced, the same level of reward they had as freemen. Thus Joseph provided great incentive to maximize production while making more capable people responsible for production and welfare of the dependent families. This was certainly a win-win solution; i.e., wise.

Here are a couple of related closing thoughts to reflect upon.

When Bob Dylan became a believer, and before the anti-missionaries persuaded him to turn from his new faith, he wrote and recorded a song that won the Grammy Award for Best Rock Vocal Performance by a Male in 1979. There are seven verses that describe 41 diverse situations in life, one or more of which will strike close to your home. The chorus emphasizes that, regardless of where or what you are in life, ya gotta serve somebody—it may be the Devil, it may be The **LORD**, but ya gotta serve somebody.

In Exodus 21:2-6, and restated in Deuteronomy 15:12-17, the Torah provides for a Jewish slave, by definition a slave for at most six years, to choose to become a slave for life to a master he deems exceptional and worthy of such a commitment. This person is convinced the master will faithfully provide for his welfare, come what may, and wants to make the master's doings his life work. The master cannot refuse. Have you encountered anyone that so profoundly impacted your entire life that you at least considered making such a commitment? Yeshua has that effect on many people.

The next parashat is *VaYechi* which spans Genesis chapter 47:28 through 50:26.