

These Are Old Problems:

Scarcity and Plenty in Joseph's Egypt and Nehemiah's Israel

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I. Joseph

1. Bereshit 41:33-36, 47-49

“Accordingly, let Pharaoh find a man of discernment and wisdom, and set him over the land of Egypt.

And let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers over the land, and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty.

Let all the food of these good years that are coming be gathered, and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh's authority as food to be stored in the cities.

Let that food be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will come upon the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish in the famine.”

...

During the seven years of plenty, the land produced in abundance.

And he gathered all the grain of the seven years that the land of Egypt was enjoying, and stored the grain in the cities; he put in each city the grain of the fields around it.

So Joseph collected produce in very large quantity, like the sands of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.

בראשית מא:לג-לו, מז-מט

וְעַתָּה יִרְא פַרְעֹה אִישׁ נָבוֹן וְחָכֵם וְיִשִּׁיתָהוּ
עַל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

וַיַּעַשׂ פַּרְעֹה וַיִּפְקֹד פְּקֻדִים עַל־הָאָרֶץ וְחִמְשׁ
אֶת־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשִׁבַע שָׁנֵי הַשָּׁבַע:

וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת־כָּל־אֹכֶל הַשָּׁנִים הַטֹּבֹת הַבָּאֹת
הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּצְבְּרוּ בְרֹתְחַת יַד־פַּרְעֹה אֹכֶל

בְּעָרִים וּשְׁמָרוּ:

וְהָיָה הָאֹכֶל לְפִקְדוֹן לְאֶרֶץ לְשִׁבַע שָׁנֵי הָרָעָב
אֲשֶׁר תֵּהְיֶינָּה בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְלֹא־תִכָּרֵת הָאֶרֶץ

בְּרָעָב:

...

וַתַּעַשׂ הָאָרֶץ בְּשִׁבַע שָׁנֵי הַשָּׁבַע לְקַמְצִים:

וַיִּקְבֹּץ אֶת־כָּל־אֹכֶל אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַע שָׁנֵי יָמִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ
בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּתֵּן אֹכֶל בְּעָרִים אֹכֶל

שְׂדֵה־הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר סָבִיבֶיהָ נֹתֵן בְּתוֹכָהּ:

וַיִּצְבֹּר יוֹסֵף בָּר כַּחֹזֶל הַיָּם הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד עַד
כִּי־חָדַל לִסְפֹּר כִּי־אֵין מִסְפָּר:

2. Bereshit 47:13

Now 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.

Joseph 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 that were being procured, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's palace.

And when the money gave out in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, “Give us bread, lest we die before your very eyes; for the money is gone!”

And Joseph said, “Bring your livestock, and I will sell to you against

בראשית מז: יג-כו

וְלֶחֶם אֵין בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ כִּי־כָבַד הָרָעָב מְאֹד
וַיָּתֵלָה אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן כֹּנֵעַן מִפְּנֵי הָרָעָב:

וַיִּלְקֹט יוֹסֵף אֶת־כָּל־הַכֶּסֶף הַנִּמְצָא

בְּאֶרֶץ־מִצְרַיִם וּבְאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן בְּשִׁבְרֵי אֲשֶׁר־הֵם
שִׁבְרִים וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת־הַכֶּסֶף בֵּיתֵה פַרְעֹה:

וַיִּתֵּם הַכֶּסֶף מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּמֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן

וַיָּבֹאוּ כָל־מִצְרַיִם אֶל־יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר הִבֵּה־לָנוּ

לֶחֶם וְלָמָּה נָמוֹת נִגְדָךְ כִּי אָפְסָ כֶּסֶף:

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף הֲבֵנו מְקַנְיֶיכֶם וְאַתְּנָה לָכֶם

בְּמִקְנֵיכֶם אִם־אָפְסָ כֶּסֶף:

וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת־מִקְנֵיהֶם אֶל־יוֹסֵף וַיִּתֵּן לָהֶם יוֹסֵף

your livestock, if the money is gone.”
 So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them bread in exchange for the horses, for the stocks of sheep and cattle, and the asses; thus he provided them with bread that year in exchange for all their livestock.
 And when that year was ended, they came to him the next year and said to him, “We cannot hide from my lord that, with all the money and animal stocks consigned to my lord, nothing is left at my lord’s disposal save our persons and our farmland.
 Let us not perish before your eyes, both we and our land. Take us and our land in exchange for bread, and we with our land will be serfs to Pharaoh; provide the seed, that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become a waste.”
 So Joseph gained possession of all the farm land of Egypt for Pharaoh, every Egyptian having sold his field because the famine was too much for them; thus the land passed over to Pharaoh. And he removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt’s border to the other.
 Only the land of the priests he did not take over, for the priests had an allotment from Pharaoh, and they lived off the allotment which Pharaoh had made to them; therefore they did not sell their land. Then Joseph said to the people, “Whereas I have this day acquired you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed for you to sow the land. And when harvest comes, you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be yours as seed for the fields and as food for you and those in your households, and as nourishment for your children.”
 And they said, “You have saved our lives! We are grateful to my lord, and we shall be serfs to Pharaoh.”
 And Joseph made it into a land law in Egypt, which is still valid, that a fifth should be Pharaoh’s; only the land of the priests did not become Pharaoh’s.

לָחֶם בְּסוֹסִים וּבַמִּקְנֵה הַצֹּאן וּבַמִּקְנֵה הַבְּקָר
 וּבַחֲמֹרִים וַיְנַהֲלֵם בַּלֶּחֶם בְּכָל־מִקְנֵהֶם בַּשָּׁנָה
 הַהוּא:
 וַיָּתֵנוּ הַשָּׁנָה הַהוּא וַיָּבֹאוּ אֵלָיו בַּשָּׁנָה
 הַשֵּׁנִי יַת וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ לֹא־נִכְחַד מֵאֲדָנִי כִּי
 אִם־תָּם הַכֶּסֶף וּמִקְנֵה הַבְּהֵמָה אֶל־אֲדָנִי לֹא
 נִשְׂאֵר לִפְנֵי אֲדָנִי בְּלִתִּי אִם־גּוֹיֵתָנוּ וְאֲדַמְתָּנוּ:
 לְמָה נָמוֹת לַעֲיֹנֵי יָךְ גַּם־אֲנַחְנוּ גַּם אֲדַמְתָּנוּ
 קִנְיָה־אֶתָּנוּ וְאֶת־אֲדַמְתָּנוּ בַּלֶּחֶם וְנָהִי־הָ אֲנַחְנוּ
 וְאֲדַמְתָּנוּ עֲבָדִים לְפָרְעָה וְתִזְרַע וְנַחֲיָהּ
 וְלֹא נָמוֹת וְהִאֲדַמָּה לֹא תִשֶּׁם:
 וַיִּקֶן יוֹסֵף אֶת־כָּל־אֲדַמַּת מִצְרַיִם לְפָרְעָה
 כִּי־מָכְרוּ מִצְרַיִם אִישׁ שְׂדֵהוּ כִּי־חִזַּק עֲלֵהֶם
 הָרָעַב וַתְּהִי הָאָרֶץ לְפָרְעָה:
 וְאֶת־הָעָם הֶעֱבִיר אֹתוֹ לְעָרִים מִקְצֵה
 גְּבוּל־מִצְרַיִם וְעַד־קֶצֶהוּ:
 רַק אֲדַמַּת הַכֹּהֲנִים לֹא קִנְיָה כִּי חֵק לְכֹהֲנִים
 מֵאֵת פְּרַעֲה וְאָכְלוּ אֶת־חֻקֵּם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָהֶם
 פְּרַעֲה עַל־כֵּן לֹא מָכְרוּ אֶת־אֲדַמְתָּם:
 וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־הָעָם הֵן קִנִּיתִי אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם
 וְאֶת־אֲדַמְתְּכֶם לְפָרְעָה הֲאֵלֶכֶם זָרַע
 וְזָרַעְתֶּם אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה:
 וְהָיָה בַּתְּבוּאֹת וּנְתַתֶּם חֲמִישִׁית לְפָרְעָה
 וְאַרְבַּע הַיְדִית יִהְיֶה לְכֶם לְזָרַע הַשָּׂדֶה
 וְלֶאֱכֹלְכֶם וְלֹאֲשֶׁר בְּבֵתֵיכֶם וְלֶאֱכֹל לְטַפְכֶם:
 וַיֹּאמְרוּ הַחַיִּיתָנוּ נִמְצָא־חַן בְּעֵינֵי אֲדָנִי וְהָיִינוּ
 עֲבָדִים לְפָרְעָה:
 וַיִּשֶׂם אֹתָהּ יוֹסֵף לְחֵק עַד־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה
 עַל־אֲדַמַּת מִצְרַיִם לְפָרְעָה לְחֹמֶשׁ רַק אֲדַמַּת
 הַכֹּהֲנִים לִבְדָּם לֹא הָיְתָה לְפָרְעָה:

II. Critique of Joseph?

3. Devarim 15:12-15
 If a fellow Hebrew, man or woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall set him free.

דברים טו:יב-טו
 כִּי־יִמְכַר לָךְ אַחִיךָ הָעִבְרָיִי אוֹ הָעִבְרָיָה
 וְעַבְדְּךָ שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים וּבַשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִת תְּשַׁלְּחֶנּוּ

<p>When you set him free, do not let him go empty-handed: Furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor, and vat, with which the LORD your God has blessed you. Bear in mind that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I enjoin this commandment upon you today.</p>	<p>חֲפָשִׁי מֵעִמָּךְ: וְכִי־תִשְׁלַחְנוּ חֲפָשִׁי מֵעִמָּךְ לֹא תִשְׁלַחְנוּ רִיקִים: הָעֵבֶיךָ תִּעְנִיךָ לֹא מִצֹּאֲנֶךָ וּמִגֶּרְנֶךָ וּמִיִּקְבֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַכְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ תַתֵּן־לוֹ: זְכֹרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיַּפְדֶּךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל־כֵּן אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ אֶת־הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה הַיּוֹם:</p>
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4. Dr. Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary on Bereishit 47:13-26
It...supplies an explanation for the extraordinary contrast between the Egyptian system, which concentrated land ownership in the hands of the state, and the Israelite ideal of private ownership of property. It is also likely that the Narrator wishes to emphasize the great benefits that Joseph brought to the crown, thus accentuating the base ingratitude of a later Pharaoh “who did not know Joseph.”

5. Rabbi Shai Held, The Heart of the Torah, Va-yiggash #2
Joseph does save countless lives in a disastrous time and thus brings abundant blessing to the Egyptians. And yet he exacts too high a price from themoo everything they have, including their very freedom-- and insists on making what should have been at best a temporary arrangement permanent. With those decisions he plays with fire, and that fire will eventually wound his own family in unspeakable ways.

III. Nehemiah

<p>6. Nehemiah 5:1-13 There was a great outcry by the common folk and their wives against their brother Jews. Some said, “Our sons and daughters are numerous; we must get grain to eat in order that we may live!” Others said, “We must pawn our fields, our vineyards, and our homes to get grain to stave off hunger.” Yet others said, “We have borrowed money against our fields and vineyards to pay the king’s tax. Now we are as good as our brothers, and our children as good as theirs; yet here we are subjecting our sons and daughters to slavery—some of our daughters are already subjected—and we are powerless, while our fields and vineyards belong to others.” It angered me very much to hear their outcry and these complaints. After pondering the matter carefully, I censured the nobles and the</p>	<p>נַחְמִיָּה הֵאֱיָג וַתְּהִי צַעֲקַת הָעָם וּנְשֵׁיהֶם גְּדוֹלָה אֶל־אֲחֵיהֶם הַיְהוּדִים: וַיֵּשׁ אֲשֶׁר אָמְרִים בְּנֵינוּ וּבְנֹתֵינוּ אֲנַחְנוּ רַבִּים וְנִקְחָה דָגָן וְנֹאכְלָה וְנָחֶה: וַיֵּשׁ אֲשֶׁר אָמְרִים שְׂדֵתֵינוּ וּכְרָמֵינוּ וּבֵתֵינוּ אֲנַחְנוּ עֹרְבִים וְנִקְחָה דָגָן בְּרַעֲב: וַיֵּשׁ אֲשֶׁר אָמְרִים לֵוֵינוּ כֶּסֶף לְמַדַּת הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׂדֵתֵינוּ וּכְרָמֵינוּ: וְעַתָּה כַּבָּשָׂר אֲחֵינוּ בְּשָׂרֵנוּ כַּבְּנֵיהֶם בְּנֵינוּ וְהִנֵּה אֲנַחְנוּ כְּבָשִׂים אֶת־בְּנֵינוּ וְאֶת־בְּנֹתֵינוּ לְעֶבֶד יָם וַיֵּשׁ מִבְּנֹתֵינוּ נִכְבָּשׁוֹת וְאִין לְאֵל יְדֵנוּ וּשְׂדֵתֵינוּ וּכְרָמֵינוּ לְאַחֲרִים: וַיַּחַר לִי מְאֹד כַּאֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת־זַעֲקֹתָם וְאֶת הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה:</p>
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prefects, saying, “Are you pressing claims on loans made to your brothers?” Then I raised a large crowd against them and said to them, “We have done our best to buy back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; will you now sell your brothers so that they must be sold [back] to us?” They kept silent, for they found nothing to answer.

So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. You ought to act in a God-fearing way so as not to give our enemies, the nations, room to reproach us.

I, my brothers, and my servants also have claims of money and grain against them; let us now abandon those claims! Give back at once their fields, their vineyards, their olive trees, and their homes, and [abandon] the claims for the hundred pieces of silver, the grain, the wine, and the oil that you have been pressing against them!”

They replied, “We shall give them back, and not demand anything of them; we shall do just as you say.” Summoning the priests, I put them under oath to keep this promise.

I also shook out the bosom of my garment and said, “So may God shake free of his household and property any man who fails to keep this promise; may he be thus shaken out and stripped.” All the assembled answered, “Amen,” and praised the LORD. The people kept this promise.

וַיִּמְלֹךְ לְבִי עָלַי וְאַרְבֵּה אֶת־הַחֲרִים
וְאֶת־הַסִּגְנִים וְאִמְרָה לָהֶם מִשָּׂא אִישׁ־בְּאָחִיו
אֲתֶם נְשָׂאִים [נְשָׂאִים] וְאַתֶּן עֲלֵיהֶם קִהְלָה
גְּדוּלָה:
וְאִמְרָה לָהֶם אֲנַחְנוּ קִנִּינוּ אֶת־אֲחֵינוּ
הַיְהוּדִים הַנִּמְכָּרִים לְגוֹיִם כְּדִי בְנוּ וְגַם־אֲתֶם
תִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת־אֲחֵיכֶם וְנִמְכְּרוּ־לָנוּ וַיַּחְרִישׁוּ וְלֹא
מָצְאוּ דָבָר: (ס)
וַיֹּאמֶר [וְאוֹמֵר] לֹא־טוֹב הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר־אֲתֶם
עוֹשִׂים הַלֹּא בִּירְאֵת אֱלֹהֵינוּ תִּלְכוּ מִחֲרַפַּת
הַגּוֹיִם אוֹיְבֵינוּ:
וְגַם־אֲנִי אֲחִי וְנַעֲרֵי נְשִׂים בְּהֶם כֶּסֶף וְדָגָן
נַעֲזְבָה נָא אֶת־הַמִּשָּׂא הַזֶּה:
הַשִּׁיבוּ נָא לָהֶם כְּהִי' וּמִשְׁדֹּתֵיהֶם כְּרִמְיָהֶם
זִיתֵיהֶם וּבְתֵיהֶם וּמֵאֵת הַכֶּסֶף וְהַדָּגָן
הַתִּירוֹשׁ וְהַיֶּצֶהֶר אֲשֶׁר אֲתֶם נְשִׂים בְּהֶם:
וַיֹּאמְרוּ נְשִׂיב וּמֵהֶם לֹא נִבְקֶשׁ כֵּן נַעֲשֶׂה
כְּאֲשֶׁר אַתָּה אוֹמֵר וְאֶקְרָא אֶת־הַכֹּהֲנִים
וְאֲשַׁבְּעֵם לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּדָבָר הַזֶּה:
גַּם־חֲצֹנֵי נַעֲרֹתַי וְאִמְרָה כִּכְהָ יִנְעַר הָאֱלֹהִים
אֶת־כָּל־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִקְוֶה אֶת־הַדְּבָר
הַזֶּה מִבֵּיתוֹ וּמִיָּגְעוֹ וְכִכְהָ יִהְיֶה נַעֲוֹר וְרָקַק
וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל־הַקָּהָל אָמֵן וַיְהַלְלוּ אֶת־יְהוָה
וַיַּעַשׂ הָעָם כְּדָבָר הַזֶּה:

IV. Prophetic Ideal

7. Yishayahu 55:1
Ho, all who are thirsty, Come for water, Even if you have no money;
Come, buy food and eat: Buy food without money, Wine and milk
without cost.

ישעיהו נה:א
הוֹי כָּל־צִמְאֹל לִכְוֹ לָמַיִם וְאֲשֶׁר אֵין־לוֹ כֶּסֶף לְכוּ
שִׁבְרוּ וְאָכְלוּ וּלְכוּ שִׁבְרוּ וּבְלֹא־כֶסֶף וּבְלֹא
מַחִיר יֵין וְחֶלֶב: