

Vayigash 5786

Rabbi Shai Held, Saving and Enslaving: The Complexity of Joseph

But faithful service to Pharaoh does not necessarily righteousness make. What of Joseph's treatment of the Egyptian people? Joseph does indeed save lives—no small feat in the midst of a widespread famine (42:57). And yet the reader is left to wonder just how many of the steps Joseph takes are really necessary. Feeding the Egyptians is one thing, but progressively stripping them of everything they have is seemingly another. In what is perhaps another irony, the Israelites themselves will soon find out that being fed by one's owner creates an unhealthy and undignified sense of dependence, keeping one bound to one's oppressor (Exodus 16:2-3). Assume for a moment that Joseph's actions at the moment of crisis itself are defensible. It is nevertheless difficult to understand why he makes the serfdom of the Egyptians permanent, "to this very day" (Genesis 47:26). When the Torah imagines Israel's life in the land, it prohibits the permanent selling of land (Leviticus 25:23); more generally, biblical texts insist that land is a heritage rather than a commodity to bought and sold—let alone for all time. Deuteronomy is especially emphatic that, when the people arrive in the land, debt must be "rob[bed] of its tyrannical power" in order to "limit human misery." In particular, slavery must have a built-in limit of six years (Deuteronomy 15:12); permanent enslavement is unthinkable. In other words, the Torah passionately prohibits the Israelites from doing to one another what Joseph does to the Egyptian people as a whole.

Rabbi Yitzchak b'Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi, Paneiach Raza, Parshat Vayigash

And Rabbi Yaakov of Orleans asked: It is written, "For a portion of the priests came from Pharaoh, etc.," indicating that it was so from before, and not that Yosef exempted them! And one could say that this is what it means: He did not acquire the land of the priests, for he enacted and created a law for the priests, etc. He worked to bring this to Pharaoh.

Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, HaKtav v'haKabbalah on Genesis 47:22

It appears to me that with this he intended a great benefit for his father's house, for by moving the nation into cities, so that no one remained in possession of his own land, and [Yosef] also removed the residents of Goshen to another land, and put his father's entire house there. And still, his father's house resembled the other residents, giving

one-fifth to Pharaoh. Therefore he developed a strategy such that the priests would eat their portion as given to them, and their land would not be sold to Pharaoh, and they would not have the burden of giving one-fifth. Through this, his brothers would also be free of the one-fifth tax, as shepherds of the sheep which were so important to the Egyptians, raising the animals which they worshipped, as has been explained previously, thereby resembling their priests, servants of their god. And just as these were exempt from paying the one-fifth, so too these who sustained them. Therefore it said, "And they settled in it," for Goshen was a portion for them, without any tax on it, the opposite of the other residents who owned no portion and therefore were obligated in the one-fifth tax.

Targum Yonatan on Genesis 47:22

Only the land of the priests he did not purchase, because he saw merit for him when his master wished to kill him, and they saved him from execution. But because he said to give them a portion from Pharaoh, and they ate their portion which Pharaoh gave them, therefore they did not sell their land.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on Genesis 47:22

Here we see the exact opposite of that hypothesis regarding "Moshe's mission," whereby Moshe allegedly learned his political and religious "wisdom" from the Egyptians. Here we see that Moshe's supposed teachers, the Egyptian priests, were landowners; moreover, after the change in Yosef's time, they were the sole true landowners; in addition, they had a fixed state income. Our כהנים, by contrast, were landless, and they had no assured income from state funds. Their whole existence depended on the goodwill and respect of private individuals.

Exodus Rabbah 5:14

"The king of Egypt said to them: Why, Moses and Aaron, do you disturb the people from their work? Go to your burdens" (Exodus 5:4).

"The king of Egypt said to them: Why, Moses and Aaron" – what is why [*ama*]? He said to them: 'What are you, and what are these matters?'

"Go to your burdens" – Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: The tribe of Levi was unencumbered with the backbreaking labor. Pharaoh said to them: 'Because you are unencumbered you say: "Let us go and sacrifice to our God" (Exodus 5:8); "go to your burdens."'

Ramban on Exodus 5:4

GET YOU TO YOUR BURDENS. If we follow the simple interpretation of Scripture, reference here is to the work for the king, since Moses and Aaron were part of the [Hebrew] people for at this time they came before him with all the people. But he did not listen to them and commanded them: "Return you all to the work." Later when Moses and Aaron returned before Pharaoh and he said to them, *Show a wonder for you*, and they did so, they appeared to him like the magicians, sorcerers, and wise men, and he showed them respect. Still later, when the plagues began coming upon him, he was in dread fear of them.

It appears furthermore that not all the children of Israel worked all the time for Pharaoh *in mortar and in brick*, for in that case they would have filled the whole land of Egypt with cities.

Zohar: Volume II: 11b

The tribe of Levi was not enslaved in harsh labor, and remained in holiness.

Rabbeinu Bachye on Genesis 49:7

The dispersal of the Levites was to prove especially beneficial as it helped fulfill Moses' blessing in Deut. 33,10 that the Levites were to disseminate Torah knowledge throughout the land of Israel.