



DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

Parashat Miketz 5773

December 15, 2012

This week's Dvar Tzedek takes the form of an interactive text study. We hope that you'll use this text study to actively engage with the *parshah* and contemporary global justice issues.

Consider using this text study in any of the following ways:

- Learn collectively. Discuss it with friends, family or colleagues. Try using it as a conversation-starter at your Shabbat table.
- Enrich your own learning. Read it as you would a regular Dvar Tzedek and reflect on the questions it raises.
- Teach. Use the ideas and reactions it sparks in you as the basis for your own *dvar Torah*.

Please take two minutes to share your thoughts on this piece by completing this [feedback form](#).

Introduction

Parashat Miketz opens with Joseph's dramatic interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams as omens of a devastating famine that will destroy the land of Egypt. Immediately after predicting such doom, Joseph offers a solution, suggesting that despite the challenges that lie ahead, advanced planning can help avert total disaster. Today, as famines, hurricanes, earthquakes and other natural disasters affect millions, Joseph's response to the impending famine in Egypt can help shed light on how we might better prevent the humanitarian crises of our day.

After interpreting each detail of Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph suggests a plan of action, which is executed as follows:

Genesis 41:48-49, 53-57

And he (Joseph) 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. . . . The seven years of abundance that the land of Egypt enjoyed, came to an end. And the seven years of famine set in, just as Joseph had foretold; there was famine in all lands, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. And when all the land of Egypt felt the hunger, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do." Accordingly, when the famine became severe in the land of Egypt, Joseph laid open all that was within, and rationed out grain to the Egyptians; the famine, however, spread over the whole world. So all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to procure rations, for the famine had become severe throughout the world.

בראשית מא:מח-מט, נג-נז

וַיִּקְבֹּץ אֶת-כָּל-אֲכָל שְׁבַע שָׁנִים, אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, וַיִּתֵּן-אֹכֶל, בְּעָרִים: אֹכֶל שְׂדֵה-הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹתֶיהָ, נָתַן בְּתוֹכָהּ. וַיַּצְבֵּר יוֹסֵף בָּר כָּחֹל הַיָּם, הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד-- עַד כִּי-חָדַל לִסְפֹּר, כִּי-אֵין מִסְפָּר. . . . וַתִּחְלֶינָה, שְׁבַע שָׁנֵי הַשָּׁבַע, אֲשֶׁר הָיָה, בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם. וַתִּחְלֶינָה שְׁבַע שָׁנֵי הַרְעָב, לָבוֹא, בְּאֶשֶׁר, אָמַר יוֹסֵף; וַיְהִי רָעַב בְּכָל-הָאֲרָצוֹת, וּבְכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הָיָה לֶחֶם. וַתִּרְעַב כָּל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, וַיִּצְעַק הָעָם אֶל-פְּרֹעֹה לֵלְחֵם; וַיֹּאמֶר פְּרֹעֹה לְכָל-מִצְרַיִם לָכוּ אֶל-יוֹסֵף, אֲשֶׁר-יֹאמַר לָכֶם תַּעֲשׂוּ. וַהֲרַעַב הָיָה, עַל כָּל-פְּנֵי הָאָרֶץ; וַיִּפְתַּח יוֹסֵף אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר בָּהֶם, וַיִּשְׁבֵּר לְמִצְרַיִם, וַיַּחֲזֹק הַרְעָב, בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם. וְכָל-הָאָרֶץ בָּאוּ מִצְרַיִמָּה, לְשִׁבֹר אֶל-יוֹסֵף: כִּי-חָזַק הַרְעָב, בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ.



DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

- What do you think are the benefits of Joseph's plan? What might be the pitfalls of his plan?
- If you had to devise a plan to respond to a famine that was predicted to occur, what would your plan be?
- What contemporary examples can you identify of advanced planning to pre-empt natural disaster, or at least mitigate its effects? What missed opportunities can you identify?

Joseph understood that if Egypt was to survive the predicted famine, it could not afford to simply wait for the famine to occur and then respond. The leaders needed to take action in the present in order to prepare for the future. While this principle seems relatively obvious, unfortunately, contemporary leaders all too often fail to follow it. Particularly in the field of humanitarian aid, many problems are only tackled once they become emergencies. The following excerpt is from a review of *The Cost of Inaction*, a new book on development economics released in October.

"The cost of doing nothing: A dollar now or a hundred dollars later," *Feast and Famine*. 30 October, 2012.¹

The "cost-of-inaction" calculus is something that aid too often fails to take into account, since much of it is geared to emergency relief. "Why wait until it's going to cost more? We ask that every day," says Susan Bissell, the chief of child-protection programmes at UNICEF, the UN's agency for children. She notes that in the wake of the earthquake UNICEF's budget for child protection in Haiti went from roughly \$1m to more than \$10m, despite the fact that "everything that was broken [about the child social-welfare system] after the earthquake was broken before."

In the case of crises in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, donors waited until the famine was full blown before scaling up their aid. Finance ministers and aid officials say they want to be sure that things are really exceptionally bad before they spend scarce resources. But it costs far more to treat a starving child in an aid camp than it does to spend money on preventative measures such as cash transfers and supplementary feeding. And the true cost of treating a severely malnourished child lies not only in the food but the child's curtailed future.

- According to the text above, why do aid agencies wait until disasters are full blown before increasing aid? What do you think about these reasons? Can you think of other reasons?
- In your own giving, how likely are you to give "preventive *tzedakah*" vs. giving in response to full-blown disasters? Why? If you were to align your actions with the idea that preventive measures cost less than emergency relief, what might your giving look like?
- The text above is focused on donors and aid organizations providing funding in response to humanitarian disasters. How could the principle of "the cost of inaction" inform public policy and legislation as well?

Conclusion

Despite the overwhelming evidence that acting to prevent disaster is sound policy, it seems to be a principle that is hard to adopt in practice. Perhaps this was true in Joseph's day as well, which may explain the curious detail that Pharaoh's dream repeats itself, once with cows and once with corn. Joseph explains the repetition to mean that "the matter is ready to emanate from God and God is hastening to execute it."² In this way, Joseph communicates the urgency of the situation as something that demands Pharaoh's attention despite the fact that the current situation is far from disastrous. As we read *Parashat Miketz*, may we learn from Joseph's planning and pre-emptive action and commit ourselves to working to prevent humanitarian disasters rather than simply responding to alleviate their devastating consequences.

¹ <http://www.economist.com/blogs/feastandfamine/2012/10/cost-doing-nothing>

² Genesis 41:32.