



DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

Parashat Vayigash 5773

Joseph and Food Aid: Motivations and Impact

December 22, 2012

This Dvar Tzedek Text Study is part of AJWS's [Reverse Hunger](http://www.ajws.org/reversehunger) campaign, which is tackling the root causes of global hunger through political advocacy in the United States. To learn more about Reverse Hunger, visit www.ajws.org/reversehunger.

You can use this *Dvar Tzedek* Text Study in any of the following ways:

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

Please take two minutes to [provide us with feedback](#) on this piece.

Introduction

In *Parashat Vayigash*, Joseph has risen from slavery to become Pharaoh's second in command. Newly appointed to his role, he is put in charge of designing and administering a system for responding to the famine he predicted through interpreting Pharaoh's dreams. Joseph's solution is to store grain during the seven years of plenty in order to distribute it during the seven years of famine. The following is a description of how he implements this plan:

Genesis 47:13-22

There was no food, however, in the whole region because the famine was severe; both Egypt and Canaan wasted away because of the famine. Joseph collected all the money that was to be found in Egypt and Canaan in payment for the grain they were buying, and he brought it to Pharaoh's palace.

When the money of the people of Egypt and Canaan was gone, all Egypt came to Joseph and said, "Give us food. Why should we die before your eyes? Our money is all gone." "Then bring your livestock," said Joseph. "I will sell you food in exchange for your livestock, since your money is gone." So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and he gave them food in exchange for their horses, their sheep

בראשית מז:יא-לה

וְלֶחֶם אֵין בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ, כִּי-כָבַד הָרָעַב מְאֹד; וַתֵּלֶךְ אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, וְאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן, מִפְּנֵי הָרָעַב וַיִּלְקַט יוֹסֵף, אֶת-כָּל-הַכֶּסֶף הַנִּמְצָא בְּאֶרֶץ-מִצְרַיִם וּבְאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן, בְּשֹׂבֵר, אֲשֶׁר-הֵם שֹׂבְרִים; וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת-הַכֶּסֶף, בֵּיתָה פְּרֹעָה.

וַיְהִי הַכֶּסֶף, מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּמֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן, וַיָּבֵאוּ כָל-מִצְרַיִם אֶל-יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר הִבֵּה-לָנוּ לֶחֶם, וְלָמָּה נָמוּת נִגְדָּד: כִּי אָפֶס, כֶּסֶף וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף הֲבִי מִקְנֵיכֶם, וְאֶתְנֶה לָכֶם בְּמִקְנֵיכֶם--אִם-אָפֶס, כֶּסֶף וַיָּבֵאוּ אֶת-מִקְנֵיהֶם, אֶל-יוֹסֵף, וַיִּתֵּן לָהֶם

and goats, their cattle and donkeys. And he brought them through that year with food in exchange for all their livestock.

When that year was over, they came to him the following year and said, "We cannot hide from our lord the fact that since our money is gone and our livestock belongs to you, there is nothing left for our lord except our bodies and our land. Why should we perish before your eyes—we and our land as well? Buy us and our land in exchange for food, and we with our land will be in bondage to Pharaoh. Give us seed so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate." So Joseph bought all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. The Egyptians, one and all, sold their fields, because the famine was too severe for them. The land became Pharaoh's,

And Joseph reduced the people to servitude, from one end of Egypt to the other.

יוסף לקחם בסוסים ובמקנה הצאן ובמקנה הבקר, ובחמרים; ויגהלם בלקחם בכל-מקנהם, בשנה ההוא.

ותתם, השנה ההוא, ויבאו אליו בשנה השנית ויאמרו לו לא-נכחד מאדני, כי אם-תם הכסף ומקנה הבהמה אל-אדני: לא נשאר לפני אדני, בלתי אם-גוינתנו ואדמתנו. למה נמות לעיניך, גם-אנחנו גם אדמתנו--קנה-אתנו ואת-אדמתנו, בלקחם; ונהיה אנחנו ואדמתנו, עבדים לפרעה, ותן-זרע ונהיה ולא נמות, והאדמה לא תשם, ויקן יוסף את-כל-אדמת מצרים, לפרעה, כי-מכרו מצרים איש שדהו, כי-חזק עליהם הרעב; ותהי הארץ, לפרעה.

ואת-העם--העביר אתו, לערים: מקצה גבול-מצרים, ועד-קצהו.

1. What happens in this story? How does Joseph implement his program?
2. What do you believe are Joseph's motivations? How does that affect your understanding of the story?
3. What is the impact of Joseph's system on the Egyptians? On Pharaoh?

Contemporary Solutions to Hunger

Like Joseph's ancient system, the current U.S. food aid system also saves millions of lives. But it also has flaws. Current law requires that our government ship the majority of our food aid from the U.S., rather than buying food from local farmers in the countries we're helping and then distributing it to people who need it. Here, one Haitian farmer describes the impact of this system on his livelihood:

Jonas Deronzil, Haitian rice farmer.¹

"We were already in a black misery after the earthquake of January 12. But the rice they're dumping on us, it's competing with ours and soon we're going to fall in a deep hole," said Jonas Deronzil, who has farmed rice and corn in Haiti's fertile Artibonite Valley since 1974. "When they don't give it to us anymore, are we all going to die?"

1. How does is this response to hunger similar to Joseph's? How is it different?
2. What are some of the unintended short-term consequences of this type of response to hunger?
3. What could be the long-term consequences?

Conclusion

Joseph's food aid system has many important positive impacts. It saves the lives of the Egyptian people, and helps the country to make it through the terrible time of famine. However, it also has some extremely negative impacts, whether or not they were intended. Joseph's system of collecting food and then selling it back to the people of Egypt during the famine results in them becoming much more vulnerable and dependent, to the point that they must sell all of their capitol and finally offer themselves as slaves to Pharaoh.

¹ <http://www.otherworldsarepossible.org/another-haiti-possible/miami-rice-business-disaster-haiti>

This biblical situation has many parallels to modern food aid systems. Just like Joseph's plan, U.S. Food Aid is a crucial program, especially in times of famine and conflict, which saves millions of lives around the world. But like the food aid system in our *parashah*, contemporary U.S. Food Aid also has some serious negative consequences.

Current U.S. food aid policies require that food aid come in the form of actual grain, shipped to countries in need from America. In addition to being inefficiently slow and expensive, dumping free grain on troubled foreign markets often has the effect of putting local farmers—who can no longer sell their own products—out of business. This means that local communities, like the people of Egypt, are unable to grow their own food and thus become even more vulnerable and dependent on future aid.

AJWS is working for changes to U.S. food aid policy that would make it a more flexible system, allowing for shipping U.S. food in some situations and buying food locally, in others. Join us: for more information about how you can get involved in this work, visit www.ajws.org/reversehunger.