

Template of the Diaspora

By Rav Tamir Granot

A. Introduction – Yosef's activities in Egypt

The Torah devotes some fourteen verses in chapter 47 (vv. 13-26) to a description of Yosef's economic stewardship of Egypt during the years of famine: he purchases tracts of land - and eventually also the people — as servants to Pharaoh, he oversees a resettlement project, etc. It is difficult to understand how this description contributes anything to our understanding of the order of events, either in terms of the internal relations amongst Ya'akov's household, or from the point of view of the historical developments that lead to the Egyptians' enslavement of the Jews and everything that follows. We could read the Torah (and in particular, the end of Sefer Bereishit) quite well without this section about Yosef; indeed, for many people – including, most likely, some of the readers of this shiur – this section is not regarded as a dominant element in our traditional collective perception of Sefer Bereishit and the history of Israel. What is the Torah's point in telling us this story in such painstaking detail?

- Some commentators (e.g., the Ramban) view this passage as presenting a sterling example of economic planning during a crisis, and they suggest that it comes to teach us the extent of Yosef's wisdom. However, the Torah does not usually devote attention to challenges or issues that lie outside of the realms of either morality, divine commandments, or history, and it is difficult to imagine that an exceptional situation such as this one can serve as an example for inspiration and imitation.
- Other commentators (see Nechama Leibowitz's study on this passage) emphasize the special treatment accorded to the Egyptian priesthood (*kohanim*), highlighting the contrast between its status (v. 22: "Only the land of the priests he did not buy, for this was a statute for the priests from Pharaoh...") and that of the *kohanim* amongst *Am Yisra'el*, concerning whom we are told ([Devarim 18:2](#)): "They shall have no inheritance among their brethren; God is their inheritance..." In other words, the Egyptian priest enjoys preferential status with respect to his inheritance, while an Israelite *kohen* – since he is a servant of God – may own no inheritance, so that his status as a Temple worker will not help to create an economic elite and open the door to corruption.
- Still others (e.g., the Radak) have underlined Yosef's loyalty to Pharaoh, based on the textual confirmation, over and over, that Yosef collects all the profits "for Pharaoh's house," taking nothing for himself. This may quite conceivably be one of the messages that we should learn from the section, but it would appear not to be the main one.

I believe that a more thorough examination of the passage in question, against the background of its location and the adjacent sections, may lead us to a different conclusion as to the purpose of the documentation of Yosef's activities in Egypt. Let us first look at this passage in context, analyzing it without judging it or jumping to conclusions as to its message. Once we have a literary analysis to work with, we may move on to deciding on the message of the story as a unit. Our passage is presented in bold, while the preceding (46:28, 47:1-6, 11-12) and succeeding (47:27) sections are in italics.

And he sent Yehuda ahead of him, to Yosef, to show the way before him to Goshen, and they came to the land of Goshen...

Yosef came and told Pharaoh, and he said: "My father and my brothers, with their flocks and their cattle and all that is theirs, have come from the land of Kena'an, and behold: they are in the land of Goshen." And he took some of his brothers – five men – and presented them before Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to his brothers, "What is your occupation?" and they answered Pharaoh, "Your servants are shepherds; both we and our fathers." They said to Pharaoh: "We have come to sojourn in the land, for there is no pasture for the flocks that your servants possess, for the famine is severe in the land of Kena'an; and now, please allow your servants to dwell in the land of Goshen." Pharaoh said to Yosef, saying: "Your father and your brothers have come to you. The land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land, let them settle in the land of Goshen. And if you know of any capable men among them, you shall make them officers over my flocks..."

Yosef settled his father and his brothers, giving them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land – in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded. And Yosefnourished his father and his brothers, and everyone of his father's household, with bread – according to their children.

And there was no bread throughout the land, for the famine was most severe, and the land of Egypt and the land of Kena'an languished because of the famine. So Yosef collected all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Kena'an, for the corn which they bought, and Yosef brought the money to Pharaoh's house. And when the monies of the land of Egypt and the land of Kena'an were finished, all the Egyptians came to Yosef, saying: "Give us bread; why shall we die in your presence, for the money has run out?" Then Yosef said, "Bring your flocks, and I shall give to you in return for your flocks, if the money has run out." So they brought their flocks to Yosef and Yosef gave them bread for the horses and sheep and cattle and donkeys; he fed them with bread in return for all their livestock during that year. Then that year ended, and they came to him in the second

year and said to him, "We shall not hide from my lord that the money is spent, and my master possesses the flocks and the livestock; nothing is left before my lord except for our bodies and our land. Why shall we die before you, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for bread, and we and our land shall be servants to Pharaoh; give us seed that we may live and not die, and that the land not be desolate." So Yosef bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, for the Egyptians had sold each man his field, because the famine prevailed over them; and the land became Pharaoh's. And as for the people, he moved them to cities, from one end of Egypt's borders to the other. Only the land of the priests he did not buy, for it was assigned to the priests by Pharaoh, and they ate their portion which Pharaoh gave them; therefore, they did not sell their land. Then Yosef said to the people: "Behold, I have bought you this day, and your land, for Pharaoh. Here is grain for you; you shall sow the land. When it comes to harvesting, you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh, and four parts shall remain to you for sowing the field and for food, and for those of your households, and for food for your children." And they said, "You have saved our lives; let us find favor in the eyes of my master, and we shall be servants to Pharaoh." So Yosef made it a statute over the land of Egypt to this day, that a fifth should be for Pharaoh; only the land of the priests did not become Pharaoh's.

So Israel dwelled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen, and they took possession of it and grew and multiplied greatly...

Let us now pay attention to the verses that form the "framework" in the above presentation. The section preceding the detailed description of Yosef's economic policies concerns Yosef's tending to his brothers and his father's household in Egypt, and his exploitation of his special status for their benefit vis-à-vis Pharaoh. Verse 27, which concludes this section, speaks of the family of Israel taking possession of the land of Goshen, and their multiplying. There can be no doubt that the framework is created intentionally, because this verse could have followed immediately after verses 11-12, which describe Yosef's activities on behalf of his family. The fact that this verse is placed after the description of what Yosef does for Egypt, serves to create an intentional framework. Thus, we must look at Yosef's politico-economic administration within the context of his actions towards his family.

B. Yosef's policies concerning the Egyptians

What are the various stages of Yosef's activities? The following progression may be discerned:

1. As a first stage, the Egyptians buy produce for money – the profits from the years of plenty.

2. Then, they buy produce in return for their livestock. In other words, Pharaoh's first dream (41:1-4) is fulfilled within the second (ibid., vv. 5-7), as it were, for the lean ears of corn have caused the disappearance of both the fat ears (those of the years of plenty, as well as those that were converted into money, with which produce could later be bought) and of the fat cows – i.e., their own cattle.

3. As a third stage, Yosef buys up their land and thereby also the independence of the Egyptians, who are now converted from property-owners to lease-holders of the kingdom (in their words, "servants"; in Hebrew, "*avadim*" can also mean "slaves"); in other words, the agreement forced upon them by Yosef meant that landowners lost their rights to their land, and henceforth worked the land as laborers who were paid for their labor. Thus, all the land became Pharaoh's property, and his power was greatly augmented. Yosef's proposal appears generous, since it leaves the Egyptian sharecroppers with 80% of the produce, but in truth the real profits were obviously much lower, since a large portion of the produce simply covered the laborexpenses and served as the farmers' source of sustenance.

4. "And as for the people, he moved them to the cities, from one end of Egypt's borders to the other" – Yosef undertakes a resettlement project. What does this mean? There are two ways of understanding this tactic:

a. Yosef built cities, or neighborhoods in cities, and settled the people there at the expense of rural settlement. If this is the case, this represents a continuation of Yosef's policy of centralization and an expression of the trend towards severing landowners from their land.

b. Alternatively, we may posit that Yosef resettled the Egyptians through an act of population exchange. According to this explanation, the expression "from one end of Egypt's borders to the other" refers to the settlement itself, i.e., people moved from one place of habitation to another, from one end of Egypt to the other. The purpose of this would obviously be the physical complement to the formal law. A landowner who has lost his formal rights still feels some connection towards his land; once he moves elsewhere he is completely severed from it, as though he were a stranger in his own land.

We may summarize the results of Yosef's actions as being based on the following principles:

- a. Centralization
- b. Loss of independence for landowners
- c. Creation of complete dependence on the central government

- d. Nomadic uprootedness

C. Yosef's actions towards his brothers:

Ya'akov and his sons arrive in Egypt devoid of any rights. They are "strangers." The status of a stranger, in the ancient world, was problematic. We may point to Avraham, who arrives in Eretz Kena'an as a stranger and finds himself (Chapter 23) lacking a burial place for his wife and unable, save for the locals' magnanimity, to purchase one: this is a civic right that a stranger, who is 'dispossessed' (in the sense of lacking any fixed possession), simply lacks. The fact that the brothers enjoy the benefits of their proximity to Yosef and of Pharaoh's protection facilitates their survival for the short term; for the longer term, it is clear to Yosef that this will not suffice. He will die; or Pharaoh will die, or may change his views, or may demote Yosef – and then they will be left with nothing. Yosef understands that he must anchor his brothers' status, both legally and practically. In his cunning, he achieves this in several stages:

1. First, he sends his family to the land of Goshen, without asking Pharaoh. (It must be remembered that Pharaoh did promise, in 45:18, "I shall give you the goodness of the land of Egypt," but gave no indication of any specific region.)
2. Then, Yosef prepares his brothers (46:31-34) for the request that they must make of Pharaoh; it must come from them.
3. As a third stage, he tells Pharaoh that his family has arrived, and mentions – quite 'innocently' – that "they are in the land of Goshen."
4. Lastly, he presents five men – "some of his brothers" – who tell Pharaoh about their occupation as shepherds and request that they be allowed to live in the land of Goshen, which is suitable for pasture. Obviously, Pharaoh is quite well aware that the separation between Goshen and central Egypt is also convenient since (46:34) "Any shepherd is an abomination to Egypt."

Now, Pharaoh is left with no alternative but to draw the obvious conclusion arising from his own promise and from the request by Yosef and his brothers: "Settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land; let them settle in the land of Goshen..." The words "in the best of the land" refer back to his promise, "I shall give you *the goodness of the land of Egypt*" [emphasis added], which – thanks to Yosef's cunning – has been interpreted to mean the land of Goshen. Yosef himself also wants a part of the land that possesses a measure of independence with respect to the central kingdom.

However, these steps facilitate only the brothers' settlement; their naturalization and success are not yet assured. These aims are achieved at the height of the years of famine, when Yosef takes care of his family's sustenance. From the Egyptians he takes money – all their money, but when it comes to his family, "Yosef nourished... everyone of his father's household with bread" – in other words, he demands no payment from them. Attention should be paid to the fact that the textual description creates a synchronicity between Yosef's concern for his brothers and the suffering caused by the famine. Verse 13, following on from verse 12 quoted above, reads as follows: "And" — or "But" — "there was no bread throughout the land... and the land of Egypt languished..." In other words, the "and"/ "but" renders the phrase in the present tense: the time that is being referred to is the same as in the previous description, in verse 12, describing Yosef's concern for his brothers. Therefore the significance of these two verses and the relationship between them may be understood as meaning: "Yosef sustained his family with bread... and" — *at the same time* — "there was no bread in Egypt" because of the famine. Yosef does not provide his brothers with unlimited quantities of bread; there is a well-defined quota, as the Torah takes pains to emphasize ("according to the children"), but they are not included within the overall plan for Egypt's economic restructuring.

D. Conclusions

The result of Yosef's actions is obvious: "Israel dwelled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen, and they took possession of it and grew and multiplied greatly." Ya'akov's family undergoes two important processes:

1. Settlement and possession of the region of Goshen
2. Large-scale natural increase.

To fully grasp the importance of Yosef's effort, we need to compare parallel passages about Israel in Goshen in Parashat Vayigash, Parashat VAYECHI, and Parashat Shemot:

Vayigash 47:11-12, 27	Vayechi (50:18-21)	Shemot (1:5-6)
Yosef settled his father and his brothers, and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded. And Yosef nourished his father and brothers and everyone of his father's household with bread, according to the children... And Israel dwelled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen, and they took possession of it and grew and multiplied greatly.	His brothers also fell before him, and said: "Behold, we are servants to you." But Yosef said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in place of God? Although you planned evil against me, God planned it for the good, in order to bring it about this day that the lives of many people should be saved. And now, fear not; I shall sustain you and your children." And he comforted them, and spoke kindly to them.	Yosef died, and all of his brothers, and all of that generation. And the children of Israel grew and swarmed and multiplied and grew exceedingly great, and the land was filled with them."

An uninterrupted reading of these verses creates a picture of clear development which, when viewed only on the basis of the verse in Shemot, as is usually the case, is understood without the benefit of its causes, and is therefore interpreted as a miraculous phenomenon. In fact, the reproductive increase of *Benei Yisra'el* and their naturalization and possession of the land are the direct result of Yosef's actions.

First, Yosef obtains the land of Goshen for his brothers, and, according to the text, "gave them a possession." Thus their status is made equal, at least formally, to that of the Egyptian citizenry, although we may assume that their foreignness still cast something of a shadow on their acceptance. The big change comes about during the years of famine, and here the period of famine assumes a significance that usually passes unnoticed: during these years – a period of destitution and distress for the Egyptians – *Benei Yisra'el* continue to flourish. They possess their portion of land and it becomes their inheritance, at the very same time that the Egyptian citizens lose their possession of the land and become Pharaoh's servants. Thus their status is greatly upgraded, and they in fact become "preferred citizens" – like the priests of Egypt, the only ones who own property. The easy conditions and stability also apparently served as a convenient basis for accelerated natural increase, which stands out all the more prominently against the background of Egyptian constriction. The Torah describes this development through the use of a string of verbs. First, "they dwelled... took possession... and were fruitful and multiplied," specifically, "in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen." Later on, "they increased and swarmed and multiplied and grew exceedingly great, and the land" – meaning, not only the land of Goshen, but all of Egypt — was filled with them."

After Ya'akov's death, the brothers fear Yosef's revenge. This fear is based on the assumption that all of his concern for them arose only from honor for his father. Their proposal is in fact that their status be lowered to equal that of the rest of the Egyptian subject: "Behold, we are your servants." Yosef calms them and renews his commitment, using similar wording: "I shall sustain you and your children."

Let us attempt to summarize and draw some conclusions, in light of our analysis, as to Yosef's aims in his actions in Egypt, and the Torah's objective in recounting this story.

Firstly, it turns out that the famine in Egypt, thanks to Yosef's astute analysis and planning, is actually a source of blessing for Ya'akov's family; in the wake of this period the family indeed turns into a national group: "God planned it for the good, in order to bring it about this day that the lives of many people should be saved." Yosef's actions are a central factor in this process, and thus his leadership becomes the basis for the physical creation of *Am Yisra'el*. Our tradition devotes much attention to the difference between "Mashiach ben Yosef," the messiah who will be descended from Yosef, and "Mashiach ben David;" a prevalent view, developed at length by Rav Kook, is that "Mashiach ben Yosef" will be the source of the physical, national salvation of *Am Yisra'el*. In light of our discussion above, there can be no doubt that the historical Yosef plays a central role in making a nation out of the children of Israel – i.e., creating a large community that lives within its own inheritance (not Eretz Yisra'el, but Eretz Goshen) through his actions that simultaneously benefit Israel and lower the status of the Egyptians.

Further to the above, we must go back and revisit Yosef's dreams. His first dream (37:5-8) concerns sheaves of wheat: he sees himself as the economic leader of the family. In his youth, this dream is interpreted as symbolizing Yosef's physical superiority over his brothers. In his maturity, Yosef understands that Divine Providence has created a mission for him specifically in the land of Egypt, as the economic leader of the country, so as to facilitate the growth of the tribes of Israel on the fertile soil of Egypt. The dream told Yosef that a day would come when, from a position of power, he could provide the basis for the growth from a family into a nation. The second dream (37:9-11) set forth Yosef's royal, messianic status throughout the generations, alongside the kingship of Yehuda and the house of David. Yosef's actions in Egypt grant him the status of a sort of "founding king" with respect to the tribes of Israel, as he leads the family through the corridor that lies between the tribal situation and the national state. Thus, Yosef becomes a sort of fourth forefather, or first king, in the history of Israel. Obviously, his special status is given prominent expression in rabbinic and kabbalistic tradition, as he represents one of the *sefirot*, the divine attributes, as well as being one of the seven *ushpizin*, the holy guests we welcome.

However, it is quite possible that the Torah recounts the story for another reason – altogether removed from Yosef's motives. Later on in the story, in Parashat Shemot, we read of the words of the "new king" (1:9): "He said to his nation: Behold, the nation of the children of Israel is more numerous and greater than we..." The words "more numerous and greater" echo the Torah's previous description of how *Benei Yisra'el* "multiplied and grew exceedingly great." In other words, there is a connection between the process that Yosef brings about, and the Egyptian suspicion and hatred. The "success" of Yosef's project was dependent, to a considerable degree, on his own personality and status within Pharaoh's household. The death of both Yosef's Pharaoh and of Yosef himself revealed the situation of *Benei Yisra'el* in Egypt in all its problematic instability. Some commentators maintain that the throne was ascended not only by a new king, but by a new dynasty (the 18th, initiating what historians refer to as Egypt's "New Kingdom"), which

replaced the Hyksos dynasty that had extended support to Yosef and the children of Israel – apparently because of the Semitic origins of the Hyksos. Whether or not this thesis is correct, the syndrome of the development of hatred that is displayed here is clearly archetypal. *Benei Yisra'el* are living in a land that is not theirs; they enjoy a relatively high standard of living and special status thanks to the success of someone among them and his connections with the rulers. Nevertheless, the success and status are only external and formal; the moment that the human factors disappear (through change of attitude, external contingencies or death), their success boomerangs and turns into jealousy. Latent hatred awakens, emanating from the deepest recesses of the soul and of society, becoming a central motive in the ensuing persecution. Obviously, all of this took place through no fault of Yosef, just as it was never the fault of good, successful Jews who helped to establish their brethren's status in the Diaspora over generations, and whose goodness ultimately became a source of jealousy and hatred.

This may be the deeper message of the text in narrating the story of Yosef. If he – whose talent and cunning were certainly extraordinary, whose concern for his family was unstinting, who held almost unlimited power and who succeeded in turning around the economic and civic system to the benefit of his family (according to our thesis) – was unable to prevent or halt the anti-Israelite (or, in today's terms, anti-Semitic) movement that developed in Egypt, then *Am Yisra'el* will not be able to escape the decree of exile and foreignness in other places, in less favorable circumstances. The story of *Am Yisra'el* with Yosef in Egypt is the story of the first Jewish exile, which includes the principal elements of the exiles that were destined to follow.

Translated by Kaeren Fish