

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



DID PHARAOH DREAM OF POWER?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Very few leaders are great both in times of plenty and in times of scarcity¹. We mistakenly assume that spending money is emotionally easier than cutting expenses, when it really depends on character. Savers experience resource management as a fraught zero-sum game. Every dollar spent today is eaten cake that you won't have tomorrow when you might need it more.

Yosef's dreams apparently recommend him to Pharaoh for leadership in times of plenty and of scarcity. But he does not have a growth mindset, economically speaking. He persuades Pharaoh and coerces Egypt into storing grain during the years of plenty rather than consuming them, so that they will have enough when famine comes. But he does not invest in developing new ways to grow or obtain food.

I'm being descriptive rather than prescriptive. We don't know what would have happened if Yosef had instead persuaded Pharaoh to invest in agricultural innovation. That would certainly have been a riskier strategy if adopted exclusively; for every Norman Borlaug there is a Trofim Lysenko, not to mention a sea of mediocrities. Austerity might have been the best plan for an inevitable seven years of famine.

But what if they weren't inevitable? What if, in fact, they didn't happen?

During the seven years of plenty, Yosef taxes the surplus to create a reserve under his exclusive control. He sells that reserve at a price that bankrupts everyone else in Egypt; when the money runs out, he takes their livestock instead. The next year, the populace asks him:

Why should we die before your eyes, ourselves and our land?
Acquire us and our land in exchange for bread, and we and our
land will become slaves to Pharaoh;
and give seed, and we will live and not die, and the land will not
become desolate.

The need for public austerity is often a core justification of authoritarianism. But the Torah does not so far as I

can tell suggest that Yosef needed more power in Year 3 than Year 1 because, despite his best efforts, more severe rationing would be necessary over the next five years. Or for any other reason.

Rather, one close Rabbinic reading of our verse indicates that Yosef seized this power despite the fact that austerity was no longer necessary. Rashi comments:

and give seed – to sow the land. Even though Yosef said: *and there are yet five more years in which there will be no plowing or harvest*, once Yaakov came to Egypt – blessing accompanied him, and they began to sow, and the famine ended. So we have learned in Tosefta Sotah.

According to Rashi, both Yosef and the Egyptians knew that the land was fertile again after Yaakov's arrival. But the Egyptians needed to survive until the next harvest, and fertility does not solve a famine unless grain is sown. The enslavement of Egypt had no economic justification; it was just an application of monopoly power. The government had all the seed.

Here we learn that Yosef apparently also saw politics as a zero-sum game. Acting in Pharaoh's interest required reducing all Egyptians (except priests) to landless serfdom, just as fulfilling his dreams required making his family bow to him.

Moreover, we learn that Yosef's interpretations of dreams do not necessarily become reality. He declared seven years, but only two happened. Thus we cannot use Pharaoh's dreams as proof that agricultural innovations would have failed. (Note: This doesn't mean that Yosef's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams was wrong. He just failed to account for Yaakov's arrival. Yoda is correct that "Always in motion is the future".)

The line of interpretation above troubles some commentators, for good and sufficient reason. They offer alternatives at every level.

First, perhaps the famine actually did last for seven years. When 47:18 says *they came to him in the second year*, Sekhel

¹I am grateful to Rabbi Michael Broyde for this insight.

Tov quotes “some of my teachers” as saying this means that the Egyptians came to Yosef in the year following his purchase of their livestock, not in the second year of famine. Yosef actually bought the livestock in the sixth year, and the land in the seventh year.

Second, perhaps the Egyptians offered to enslave themselves because they thought that’s what Yosef wanted, but he turned them down. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch argues that Yosef’s motive for eliminating private ownership of land was to prevent serfdom, in the way that some argue that socialism is necessary to prevent a dictatorship of capital.

Third, perhaps this form of slavery gave the Egyptians a degree of economic security by making it Pharaoh’s direct responsibility to feed them. This is suggested by Malbim, who agrees with Rav Hirsch that Yosef resisted the Egyptians’ desire to become royal property so far as he could.

I am cheered by all these disagreements, which fundamentally acknowledge that the Torah cannot be on the side of enslavers rather than of the enslaved, and in Malbim’s case further recognizes that human freedom/autonomy is a moral good.

However, none of them account well for Yosef exercising his monopoly power even after the need for austerity was past, when the Nile rose at Yaakov’s presence and the fields could be sown productively. The only way to reconcile that with our values is to acknowledge that Yosef did not always live up to those values, or if you prefer, that Yosef challenges our values.

In my essay “Joseph the Righteous . . . Bureaucrat?” I offered two complementary strategies for maintaining Yosef’s status as a *tzadik* without sugarcoating the implications of his policies. The first was to view his actions through the lens of character. Yosef was a status-quo thinker, never thinking outside the box of established power dynamics. Thus he always sought to increase the power of whomever was in charge, whether that was his father, his owner, his gaoler, or his Pharaoh. The second was to say that Yosef ultimately realized the wrongness of this approach, and repented.

In this essay, I’m suggesting a modification of the character approach. The moral blind spot in Yosef’s leadership is not status-quo thinking but rather instinctively having a zero-sum approach. Like doggedly in-the-box thinking, this may be a virtue in some

economic circumstances and with regard to some economic issues, and a vice in others.

In economics, zero-sum thinking can prevent imbalances and injustices, for example by exposing scams in which some people get money up front and others are promised that the benefits will trickle down to them (not that all such policies are scams). These scams have political parallels.

On the other hand, zero-sum thinking can unnecessarily lock people, and peoples, into adversarial relationships, both economically and politically.

On the third hand, people who reject zero-sum thinking often make the error of assuming that the alternative is win-win. But that is patently not the case. Very often, the alternative to zero-summing is small or moderate growth, so that one side cannot achieve its full ambitions without capping the other.

The question even in non-zero sum cases is whether the cost of competition ends up making cooperation more cost-effective for everyone. Consider that many ‘winners’ in divorce cases spend far more in legal fees than they would have given up in a mediated settlement. Consider the same regarding “winners” of military conflicts.

A second issue, raised early and often by Rabbi Sacks in the context of globalization, is that economic uncertainty and dislocation should be accounted as a cost even when individuals will on average do better. A political parallel is that we may undervalue the importance that people give to feeling safe. Consider the frequent disconnect between the objective crime rate and the public’s impression of how well crime is being contained.

Yosef provided economic security, and to do that, he also seized, or thought he had seized, secure political authority. The first proved unnecessary, and the second impossible to maintain. He and we might have been better off had he considered alternate political models. Note that the Pharaoh who knew Yosef never dreamed about himself or his own power.

Shabbat shalom!