

This week's parashah, Vayiggash, contains the tearful reunion of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt. This is a poignant story, the first generation of the patriarchs in which the rift between siblings is overcome, and the succession, as it were, goes to all of the children rather than just one favored child. So there is much that I could drash on about the unity of people Israel.

But in the light of the anti-Semitism hate crimes that occurred over the last two years, I wanted to explore a narrative passage that has always troubled me. It occurs in this parasha, *after* Joseph reunites with his brothers, his father comes and his family settles in Egypt.

For those who need a reminder of the biblical narrative, this is during 7 years of famine that Joseph accurately predicted based on Pharaoh's dream in the beginning of last week's parashah, Miketz. Pharaoh had assigned Joseph as his viceroy during the seven years of plenty that preceded the famine, and Joseph prepared by taxing and storing grain for the 7 years of famine. It is that same famine and those storehouses that brought Joseph's brother's journeying to Egypt.

In Chapter 47, it says, starting in verse 13:

Now there was no bread in all the world, for the famine was very severe; both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine.

Joseph gathered in all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, as payment for the rations that were being procured, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's palace.

And when the money gave out in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us bread, lest we die before your very eyes; for the money is gone!"

And Joseph said, "Bring your livestock, and I will sell to you against your livestock, if the money is gone."

So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them bread in exchange for the horses, for the stocks of sheep and cattle, and the asses; thus he provided them with bread that year in exchange for all their livestock.

And when that year was ended, they came to him the next year and said to him, "We cannot hide from my lord that, with all the money and animal stocks consigned to my lord, nothing is left at my lord's disposal save our persons and our farmland.

Let us not perish before your eyes, both we and our land. Take us and our land in exchange for bread, and we with our land will be serfs to Pharaoh; provide the seed, that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become a waste."

So Joseph gained possession of all the farm land of Egypt for Pharaoh, every Egyptian having sold his field because the famine was too much for them; thus the land passed over to Pharaoh.

And he removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt's border to the other.

There are so many things that trouble me about this. Joseph taxed the people for this grain during the years of plenty, and now he is selling it back to them. He is selling it to them even when they have nothing left to pay for it, even when all they can offer is their land, and ultimately their bodies as laborers on the land. The transfer of wealth from, presumably, the people to Pharaoh, is vast.

The traditional commentators are quick to point out that the Egyptian people themselves suggest the sharecropping arrangement, and that they express gratitude for it. In a time of uncertainty, knowing that someone else was responsible for providing all the food was likely a relief.

And this also shows Joseph's administrative prowess – after all, he did not work for the Egyptian people; he worked for Pharaoh. And his behavior kept the Egyptian people fed, appeased and got a great deal of wealth for his boss. Joseph was excellent at doing his job.

Joseph is, I would suggest, the first recorded “middle agent,” or Court Jew, who does the dirty work and is the public face of the ruler in power – and Joseph is a great illustration of the costs of playing that role. For when a new king arises at the beginning of Exodus who does not recognize Joseph, he is easily able to stoke fear of the Israelites among the Egyptian people. Joseph's siblings and descendants, who receive such preferential treatment during Joseph's lifetime, will themselves become enslaved.

As Rabbi Shai Held puts it in his commentary on the parashah, “The ironic turns in the text are intense and powerful and thus require explanation: Brought to Egypt as a slave, Joseph now becomes Egypt's enslaver.

“And soon enough, a new Pharaoh rises and “the House of Israel [finds] themselves once again on the wrong end of the enslavement process.” Joseph displays remarkable administrative prowess, but he unleashes forces that eventually end up oppressing and degrading his own people. It is hard to imagine that the Torah makes no moral judgment at all on Joseph’s setting this destructive process in motion. Likewise, Rashbam suggests that in verse 21, “And he removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt’s border to the other.” “The purpose behind this was to prevent uprisings by populations who had no roots in their countries and therefore had no good reason to start a rebellion.” Pharaoh will later use the same rationale to oppress the Israelite people, lest they rise up against him.

Rashi says, “that he intended thereby to remove a reproach from his brothers because, since the Egyptians were themselves strangers in the various cities where they then dwelt, they could not call them (Joseph’s brethren) strangers ([Chullin 60b](#)).”

Joseph is afraid that that his family will be oppressed for their difference, so Rashi suggests, he enacts it on others. But in fact, the Israelites are still other, still different.

Joseph and his siblings, like so many of their descendants, wound up in the position of first being useful to the ruling powers by helping subjugate the masses, and a convenient scapegoat for those powers, an “other,” against which the masses could be deployed.

Joseph was also doing his best to take care of his family, and take care of the Egyptian people in the time he was in with the tools he had. But I am sure people confused him for Pharaoh, and there will always be people who confuse Jews who serve the powerful with the actual holders of power, and who assume that all Jews secretly hold power and that fighting against Jews is fighting for liberation for others.

It is my hope that someday, our community will learn the lesson of Joseph – that our safety and security will not ultimately lie in receiving protection from the ruling powers, especially if it requires that we collude in the oppression of others. It is our job not to be confused, even when others are. It is our job to work for liberation, a liberation that includes Jews and all others.