



# DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

## Parshat Miketz 5772

December 24, 2011

**Something's different!** This week marks the first installment of a new, experimental initiative: the Dvar Tzedek Text Study. Over the next six months, our weekly Torah commentary will periodically take this interactive format. We hope that you'll use our text studies 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 tell us what you think of this experimental format by completing this [feedback form](#).

### Introduction

At the beginning of *Parshat Miketz*, Joseph is brought from prison to the palace in order to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. He explains that the various symbols in the dreams predict that Egypt will experience seven years of plentiful harvests, followed by seven years of famine. Joseph then gives the following unsolicited advice, outlining a thoughtful plan for distributing the soon-to-be scarce food resources to prevent starvation during the years of famine.<sup>1</sup>

#### Genesis 41:33-39

[Joseph said:] "Accordingly, let Pharaoh find a man of discernment and wisdom, and set him over the land of Egypt. And let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers over the land, and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. Let all the food of these good years that are coming be gathered, and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh's authority as food to be stored in the cities. Let that food be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will come upon the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish in the famine." The plan pleased Pharaoh and all his courtiers. And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, "Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?" So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise as you."

[JPS translation]

#### בראשית מא: לג-לט

ועתה ירא פרעה, איש נבון וחקם; וישיתוהו, על-ארץ מצרים. יעשה פרעה, ויפקד פקדים על-הארץ; וחמש את-ארץ מצרים, בשבע שני השבע. ויקבצו, את-כל-אכל השנים הטבות, הבאות, האלה; ויצברו-בר תחת יד-פרעה, אכל בערים--ושמרו. והיה האכל לפקדון, לארץ, לשבע שני הרעב, אשר תהיין בארץ מצרים; ולא-תכרת הארץ, ברעב. וייטב הדבר, בעיני פרעה, ובעיני כל-עבדיו. ויאמר פרעה, אל-עבדיו: הנמצא כזה--איש, אשר רוח אלהים בו. ויאמר פרעה אל-יוסף, אחרי הודיע אלהים אותך את-כל-זאת, אין-נבון וחקם, כמוך.

<sup>1</sup> As the famine progresses in later chapters of Genesis, Joseph carries out his plan in problematic ways. For further analysis, see Rabbi Lauren Kurland, "From Dreams to Dependency: Biblical lessons for contemporary food aid," *AJWS Reports*, Fall 2011 ([http://ajws.org/who\\_we\\_are/publications/ajws\\_reports/fall\\_2011/from\\_dreams.html](http://ajws.org/who_we_are/publications/ajws_reports/fall_2011/from_dreams.html)), and next week's *Dvar Tzedek* on *Parshat Vayigash*.

- Why do you think Joseph's plan was well received by Pharaoh and his courtiers?
- What about Joseph makes him "discerning and wise"?

Joseph's suggestion—to devise a careful plan for resource allocation during a time of scarcity—can shed light on our own practice of *tzedakah*, through which we choose how to designate money to respond to situations of need. In contrast to Joseph's careful planning, a recent study shows that many Americans are far less conscious of how they distribute their funds.

**Sheryl Sandberg, "The Charity Gap," *Wall Street Journal*, 4 April 2007<sup>2</sup>**

There is a surprising disconnect between Americans' philanthropic aspirations and their [actual] charitable giving. The vast majority of givers believe the bulk of their donations help those less fortunate than themselves. In fact, less than one-third of the money individuals gave to nonprofits in 2005 went to help the economically disadvantaged, according to a new study commissioned by Google.org, the philanthropic arm of Google. Of the \$250 billion in donations, less than \$78 billion explicitly targeted those in need. . . . Of course, philanthropic giving not targeted to the disadvantaged nevertheless supports important causes—education, health, the arts—and valuable public goods. . . . As Americans consider their 1040s this year, they need to ask if there is a disconnect between their desires and their actions. Many will find, perhaps to their surprise, that what they want to do is not, in deed, what they're doing. If so, they should start looking deeper into how their donations benefit those whose economic fortunes are dramatically different from their own.

- The Google.org study found that while Americans believe that their charitable donations help those who are economically disadvantaged, most actually support other philanthropic causes not explicitly directed towards the poor, such as educational institutions, the arts and health facilities. Do these findings reflect your own giving practices? How aware are you of where your *tzedakah* goes?
- Sandberg suggests that Americans should "look deeper" into our charitable giving. What would a "discerning and wise" plan look like for your own giving?

A *midrash*, commenting on a verse in the book of Psalms, highlights the importance of having a plan for the distribution of *tzedakah*:

**Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 34:1**

Rabbi Yonah said: The verse does not say: "Happy is the one who gives to a poor person;" rather, it says: "Happy is the one who *considers* the poor person" (Psalms 41:2). Therefore, you must *consider* how best to benefit such a person.

[AJWS translation]

**ויקרא רבה לד:א**

אמר ר. יונה: "אשרי נותן לדל" אין כתיב כאן, אלא "אשרי משכיל אל דל." הוי מסתכיל בו האיך לזכות עמו.

- What is the difference between "giving" to the poor and "considering" the poor?
- What factors should we consider when we give?
- Why would having a carefully considered plan for benefiting the poor make the giver happier than simply giving without consideration?

**Conclusion**

This year, we read *Parshat Miketz* during Chanukah, a time when many people give and receive gifts. For many of us, it also coincides with end-of-year charitable giving. This season can therefore be a particularly good time to follow Joseph's lead and make a thoughtful plan for the effective distribution of our *tzedakah* resources.

<sup>2</sup> <http://quidnimis.squarespace.com/the-charity-gap/>

To help you do so, AJWS has created an interactive activity called [Got Gelt?](#) that can be used at home or in an educational setting—for children and adults. *Got Gelt?* is part of our new initiative, *Where Do You Give? Reimagining Tzedakah for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*—which seeks to engage the Jewish community in critical questions about where we give, to whom and why. In addition to *Got Gelt?*, the *Where Do You Give?* [website](#) offers an array of activities that you can use at home or in educational settings to spark thoughtful discussion about how to allocate *tzedakah* in ways that are both effective and truly reflective of your values.

We hope you'll use this text study and the resources below to generate lively dialogue about *tzedakah* this holiday season:

- [Got Gelt? A Conversation about Giving in this Season of Receiving: Group Activity](#)
- [Got Gelt? A Conversation about Giving in this Season of Receiving: At-Home Activity](#)

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e [ajws@ajws.org](mailto:ajws@ajws.org) • [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)