



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayigash 5772

By Sigal Samuel
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Through its description of the devastating famine in ancient Egypt, *Parshat Vayigash* suggests two models that can inform our response to hunger today. By this point in the biblical narrative, Joseph, Pharaoh's trusted vizier, has been reunited with his brothers in Egypt. The rest of his family, however, is still suffering from terrible famine in Canaan. Pharaoh's solution to the family's plight is to invite the whole clan to move to Egypt, where he will support them in this time of need.¹

What seems, at first glance, like a wonderfully generous offer on Pharaoh's part contains darker undertones when examined closely. The text notes that Pharaoh does not merely extend an invitation; rather, he issues an order, saying: "Now you are commanded."² This strident language applies not only to the injunction to leave Canaan, but also to the order to leave all material possessions behind. "Give no thought to your possessions," Pharaoh says, "for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours."³ By charging Joseph's family members to arrive empty-handed, Pharaoh ensures that they will find themselves in a state of utter dependency—a state from which *his* largesse can then bail them out, on his terms.

But Joseph's family ignores the command. Instead, they arrive with "their flocks and their herds and all that they have"⁴ in tow. Joseph then instructs them to ask Pharaoh if they may settle in Goshen, where the best pastures are located. When Pharaoh grants this request, they proceed to support themselves by herding sheep. Having been given all the resources they need to be self-sufficient, their community is wildly successful: "Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the region of Goshen, and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly."⁵

The success of Joseph's plan for his own family contrasts starkly with the outcome of his famine relief program for the Egyptians, who are led to enter into a relationship of dependency with the state—much like Pharaoh intended for Joseph's family. Rather than helping the Egyptians increase the fertility of their own land, Joseph sells them the grain that he had stored during the seven previous years. In exchange, they give up everything they own: first their livestock, then their land and finally their own freedom. So keen is the hunger of the Egyptians that they actually beg Joseph to make them into Pharaoh's slaves, if only he will provide them with more grain. Once the vizier has done so, they express nothing but gratitude, even though the upshot of this quick fix is that future generations will also find themselves indebted and enslaved. The text emphasizes that such a 'solution' to famine has long-term effects; that it will impact the Egyptians "to this day."⁶

¹ Genesis 45:16-20.

² Genesis 45:19.

³ Genesis 45:20.

⁴ Genesis 46:32.

⁵ Genesis 47:27.

⁶ Genesis 47:26.

Parshat Vayigash, with its contrasting models of self-sufficiency and dependency, offers us an opportunity to reflect on contemporary solutions to hunger—an opportunity that could hardly be more timely, given the famine now raging in the Horn of Africa. As several recent writers of *Dvar Tzedek* have discussed, the United States is the largest donor of global food aid, and people worldwide rely on its continued generosity. But that generosity often has unintended, yet tragic, results, stemming from the fact that the law requires most American food aid to be shipped from the U.S. to regions in need. This policy, which almost all other donors of food aid have abandoned in favor of local procurement of food and voucher systems, causes several problems: First, the process is slow; it often takes months for food to reach people who desperately need it. Second, once the aid reaches its destination, it frequently undercuts local farmers by glutting the market with free American food, resulting in even greater food insecurity. By harming local agriculture rather than investing in it, the U.S. puts developing countries at risk of entering into a cycle of dependency on food aid, which is not a long-term solution to hunger.

In 2012, Congress will debate the U.S. Farm Bill, providing us with an opportunity to reform our food aid program for the better. As we reflect on how best to take advantage of this opportunity, we can learn from the Israelites' insistence on cultivating self-sufficiency. While continued support in the form of U.S. food aid is still a vital necessity for millions of people worldwide, *Parshat Vayigash* underscores the importance of introducing food aid into developing countries in a way that promotes long-term food security, not lasting dependency. We can achieve this goal by urging Congress to design a more flexible policy that provides our government with a variety of ways of responding to hunger, rather than only sending food. In addition to procuring food locally when it is available, the U.S. must also invest in creating resilient local food systems and sustainable agriculture practices—from breeding livestock to creating agro-ecological farms—and must support organizations that are helping communities fight hunger at the grassroots level.

Currently, AJWS funds approximately 60 such grassroots organizations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and is engaged in a major campaign to reform U.S. food aid policy. As the Farm Bill debate approaches, you can help by [signing AJWS's Jewish Petition for a Just Farm Bill](#) and by encouraging your friends and families to do so, as well. By applying the timely insights that we find embedded in *Parshat Vayigash*, we can take concrete steps toward ending the global food crisis, and ensure that our solutions to hunger continue to save lives far into the future.



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