



Saving and Enslaving: The Complexity of Joseph

Rabbi Shai Held

Sometimes the line between heroism and cruelty can be difficult to discern.

Faced with severe famine, Joseph shows himself to be a skilled and effective administrator; with great foresight and planning, he repeatedly brings the Egyptians back from the brink of starvation. Joseph is obviously an adept manager, but he is also seemingly a ruthless one: He saves the Egyptians but, as we shall see, he also enslaves them. In so doing, he runs afoul of the Torah's vision of how an ideal society should function.



As the devastating famine in Egypt persists, the land languishes and the Egyptians grow progressively more desperate. Joseph provides the people with “rations,” in exchange for which he “gathers in all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt” (47:14). The Egyptians’ money gives out but conditions are still terrible and the people need food. They approach Joseph, saying, “Give us bread; why should we die before your very eyes? for the money is gone” (47:15). Joseph responds by demanding that the Egyptians bring their livestock, and feeds them “in exchange for the horses, for the stocks of sheep and cattle, and the asses” (47:16-17). But the livestock too runs out and, finding themselves in dire straits, the Egyptians approach Joseph again:

Joseph saves the Egyptians but he also enslaves them.

¹ I borrow the phrase “saving and enslaving” from Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis,” in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *Jewish Study Bible* (2004), comment to Genesis 47:13-27, p. 93.



“We cannot hide from my lord that, with all the money and animal stocks consigned to our lord, nothing is left at my lord’s disposal save our corpses² and our land.” They beseech him, “Why should we 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 (*avadim*) to Pharaoh; provide the seed, that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become a waste” (47:18-19).

Joseph dispenses food and thereby “gains possession of all the farmland of Egypt for Pharaoh, every Egyptian having sold his field because the famine was too much for them”; soon enough, Pharaoh owns every last inch of the land (47:20)—except that owned by the priests (47:22). Joseph “removes the population town by town, from one end of Egypt to the other” (47:21). Reminding the Egyptians that he has “acquired [them] and [their] land for Pharaoh,” he disburses seed for them to sow the land. He instructs the people that they may keep four fifths of what they grow, but the remaining fifth is a tax due to Pharaoh (47:23-24). The people respond with gratitude, declaring, “You have saved our lives! We are grateful to my lord, and we shall be serfs (slaves? Hebrew *avadim*) to Pharaoh” (47:24). Joseph establishes this as the law of the land “to this very day”: A fifth of everything the people grow belongs to Pharaoh (47:25). Having surrendered everything—their money, their livestock, their land, and their freedom—to Joseph, the people become Pharaoh’s “slaves”—or, as some modern scholars prefer, “tenant farmers of the state.”³

How does Joseph understand his own behavior? Earlier, in an attempt to alleviate his brothers’ distress, Joseph had told them that “it was to save life (*la-mihyah*) that God sent me ahead of you” (45:5). At minimum, his words refer to his now having the power and wealth to feed his own family (45:7,11), but Joseph may well think that his mission is grander and more universal: God sent him to Egypt so that he could save the lives of the Egyptians, too.

² Gordon Wenham notes that the Egyptians’ use of “our corpses” “vividly anticipates their state if Joseph does not provide them with food.” Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (1994), p. 448.

³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (1989), p. 321.



And indeed, when the Egyptians thank Joseph, they use language strikingly reminiscent of Joseph's own: "You have saved our lives (*hehiyitanu*)!"⁴

But how does the Torah view Joseph's enslavement of the Egyptians? And how are we, as modern readers, to understand his actions? Commenting on Joseph's decision to remove the Egyptian populace from their homes (47:21),⁵ R. Samuel b. Meir (Rashbam, 1085-1158) and R. David Kimḥi (Radak, 1160-1235) powerfully (though unintentionally) capture the ambiguity of the text. Rashbam compares Joseph's actions to the Assyrian King Sennacherib's (2 Kings 18:32) and explains that Joseph wanted to make sure that the Egyptians could not claim possession of their lands after having sold them (Rashbam to Genesis 47:21).⁶ By comparing Joseph's actions to those one of Tanakh's great villains, is Rashbam subtly condemning them? Or is he merely explaining (one aspect) of what Joseph did by comparing his actions to those of another biblical figure? It is difficult to know.⁷ Radak goes one step further, explaining that Joseph dislocated the Egyptians because he wanted them to be cognizant of their profound indebtedness to Pharaoh, on whose land they are able to dwell their only by his good graces (Radak to Genesis 47:21).⁸ Is Radak criticizing Joseph here, or merely uncovering the inner logic of his decisions? Again, it is difficult to say.

⁴ Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 438. It seems to me that the plausibility of this interpretation depends on Genesis 45:7 being taken as illustrative of Joseph's meaning in 45:5 but not exhaustive of it.

⁵ According to the Masoretic text, Joseph "'removed' (*he'evir*) the population town by town (*le-arim*)" (or perhaps: he transferred them into cities); the Septuagint, in contrast, reads: "He made slaves (*he'evir*) of them (*le-avadim*)."⁶ The Septuagint version does more closely follow the logical flow of the text, since the people have just said they would be Pharaoh's serfs (47:19). That seems to be the version accepted by most—though by no means all—modern scholars.

⁶ Cf. also Midrash Seikhel Tov and Midrash Lekah Tov as well as the comments of R. Joseph b. Isaac Bekhor Shor (12th century) to Genesis 47:21.

⁷ I am grateful to Professor Martin Lockshin for our exchange on this point.

⁸ Following Radak (but without mentioning him) Robert Alter explains Joseph's dislocation of the people as follows: "The purpose would be to sever them from their hereditary lands and locate them on other lands that they knew were theirs to till only by the grace of Pharaoh, to whom the land now belonged." Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (2004), p. 275.



Some scholars defend Joseph and even heap praise upon him, noting that “each time the citizenry give Joseph something of theirs, he gives back something of value. In exchange for their money, Joseph gives them rations (47:14). In exchange for their cattle, he gives them food (47:17). In exchange for their land and persons, Joseph gives them seed (47:23).”⁹ Though enslavement “sounds harsh,” they argue, “it was in this situation beneficial, for now [the people’s] food supply was Pharaoh’s responsibility.”¹⁰ One scholar insists that Joseph was very far from a “callous, unethical taskmaster”: Although the people do give up ownership of their land, Joseph allows them to keep fully 80% of their harvest.¹¹ As another scholar asks, “What kind of ‘serfdom’ is it that grants four-fifths of the produce to the ‘serf’?”¹²

Even some scholars who themselves see Joseph’s actions as troubling nevertheless doubt that the Torah shares their perspective. Jon Levenson, for example, avers that “the cruelty of Joseph’s enslavement of Egypt does not seem to bother the narrator,”¹³ and Robert Alter suggests that “the reduction of the entire population to a condition of virtual serfdom to the crown in all likelihood was meant to be construed not as an act of ruthlessness by Joseph but as an instance of his administrative brilliance.”¹⁴

Brought to Egypt as a slave, Joseph now becomes Egypt’s enslaver. And soon enough, a new Pharaoh rises.

⁹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50* (1995), p. 618.

¹⁰ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 449.

¹¹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50*, p. 618.

¹² Eric I. Lowenthal, *The Joseph Narrative in Genesis* (1973), p. 193, cited in Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50*, p. 618, n 41. Bruce Waltke notes that “by ancient Near Eastern standards, 20 percent interest is low; the average was 33 ⅓ percent.” Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (2001), p. 591.

¹³ Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis,” p. 93.

¹⁴ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, p. 275. In a similar vein, Nahum Sarna maintains that the story is included here precisely because “it provides examples of Joseph’s wisdom and leadership capabilities.” Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 321.



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erment are equivalent.*

And yet I wonder. 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."¹⁵ 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.

Does this mean that Joseph is no better than the Pharaoh who eventually oppresses Israel? Hardly. The Torah paints a far more subtle and nuanced picture. It is surely noteworthy that while the Israelites groan under their misery (Exodus 2:23), the Egyptians, as we have seen, express gratitude to Joseph for keeping them fed (Genesis 47:25).¹⁶ Not every slaveholder is the same, and not all processes of disempowerment are equivalent. But being better than Pharaoh is not in itself a ringing endorsement. The question is not whether Joseph is the most oppressive figure in the Torah; he most assuredly is not. The question is more modest: How does the Torah evaluate his behavior?

The Torah makes clear that Joseph is not out for his own profit or gain: The text is careful to mention that "Joseph brought the money [he collected] into Pharaoh's palace" (47:14), and Nahmanides (Ramban, 1194-c. 1270) astutely explains that the Torah wants to emphasize Joseph's "trustworthiness": He does not create secret storehouses for his own lucre in Egypt,

¹⁵ Levenson, "Genesis," p. 93. Terence Fretheim comments that "as Joseph makes 'slaves' of the Egyptians (though not to himself), so the later pharaohs—who do not have the wisdom and commitments of Joseph—will make 'slaves' of his family... While we cannot be certain, this reversal raises the question of whether later pharaohs extend Joseph's economic policy to include the Israelites." Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (1994), p. 655.

¹⁶ Cf., in a similar vein, Waltke, *Genesis*, p. 589.



nor does he send the money to Canaan. Rather, “he gives it all to the king who trusts him” (Commentary to Genesis 47:14).

But faithful service to Pharaoh does not necessarily righteousness make. What of Joseph’s treatment of the Egyptian people? Joseph does indeed save lives—no small feat in the midst of a widespread famine (42:57). And yet the reader is left to wonder just how many of the steps Joseph takes are really necessary. Feeding the Egyptians is one thing, but progressively stripping them of everything they have is seemingly another. In what is perhaps another irony, the Israelites themselves will soon find out that being fed by one’s owner creates an unhealthy and undignified sense of dependence, keeping one bound to one’s oppressor (Exodus 16:2-3).¹⁷

Assume for a moment that Joseph’s actions at the moment of crisis itself are defensible. It is nevertheless difficult to understand why he makes the serfdom of the Egyptians permanent, “to this very day” (Genesis

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47:26). When the Torah imagines Israel’s life in the land, it prohibits the permanent selling of land (Leviticus 25:23); more generally, biblical texts insist that land is a heritage rather than a commodity to bought and sold—let alone for all time.¹⁸ Deuteronomy is especially emphatic

¹⁷ Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (1982), p. 356. Moreover, contemporary interpreter Berel Dov Lerner notes, Joseph misses an opportunity to “walk in God’s ways”: “During their sojourn in the desert,” Lerner writes, “God gave manna freely to the Children of Israel and did not use food to extort power.” The same, obviously, cannot be said of Joseph. More expansively, Lerner insists that “the Torah’s condemnation of Joseph’s administration is complete.” Berel Dov Lerner, “Joseph the Unrighteous,” *Judaism* 38 (1989), pp. 278-281; passages cited are on pp. 279, 281. I am not convinced that the Torah’s view is clear and unequivocal: When Genesis wishes to register its disapproval of Sarah’s mistreatment of her Egyptian slave, it describes her as “oppressing” Hagar (*va-te’aneha*) (Genesis 16:6)—the key word the Torah later uses to characterize Pharaoh’s treatment of Israel; I find it interesting that there is no obvious linguistic parallel here. Cf. the comments of Ramban and Radak to Genesis 16:6, and cf. what I have written in “Are Jews Always the Victims?” CJLI Parashat Lekh Lekha 5774, available [here](#). While I think Lerner’s position needs some nuancing, his provocative essay is worth reading carefully. For another critical perspective on Joseph’s actions, cf. Naomi Graetz, “From Joseph to Joseph,” *Jerusalem Report*, January 4, 2009, p. 45.

¹⁸ Cf., e.g., the struggle between Navoth and King Ahab in 1 Kings 21.



that, when the people arrive in the land, debt must be “rob[bed] of its tyrannical power” in order to “limit human misery.¹⁹ In particular, slavery must have a built-in limit of six years (Deuteronomy 15:12²⁰); permanent enslavement is unthinkable. In other words, the Torah passionately prohibits the Israelites from doing to one another what Joseph does to the Egyptian people as a whole.²¹ Walter Brueggemann notes that Deuteronomy’s legislation is intended to serve as “a contradiction to the economic processes of the state economy in Egypt, in which debt-slaves evidently were so deeply indebted to the state that they were hopelessly and perpetually in bondage.”²²

In light of all this, Brueggemann cuttingly observes that “Joseph may be credited with shrewdness. But for a tradition looking to the Exodus, it is a doubtful credit.”²³ I would be inclined to a somewhat more nuanced position: Joseph does save countless lives in a disastrous time and thus brings abundant blessing to the Egyptians. And yet he exacts too high a price from them—everything they have, including their very freedom—and insists on making what should have been at best a temporary arrangement permanent.²⁴ With those decisions, he plays with fire, and that fire will eventually wound his own family in unspeakable ways.

¹⁹ Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (2002), p. 190. And cf. what I have written in “Opening Our Hearts and Our Hands: Deuteronomy and the Poor,” CJLI Parashat Re’eih 5774, available [here](#).

²⁰ Cf. Exodus 21:1.

²¹ Again, with the exception of the priests—Genesis 47:22.

²² Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (2001), p. 169. Brueggemann points to our verses as a counter-example to Deuteronomy’s vision. In struggling with a text like this, it can be difficult to discern definitively what is the Torah’s perspective and what may be imported by modern readers. Perhaps we can put the question raised by this essay in one other way: in the ancient world, “slavery was the accepted way of bailing out the destitute.” Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 449. But the Torah clearly worries about the implications of long-term debt-slavery. Is our story about a man doing the best he can within a fixed economic system or about a man who too readily plays along with—and even amplifies—a fundamentally problematic system? Or is the ambiguity of our story a function of the fact that on some level, it is about both?

²³ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 356.

²⁴ Societies are commonly tempted to take measures meant to cope with emergencies and render them permanent. The temptation is no less hazardous for being widespread.



Joseph provides short-term relief in the midst of a ghastly famine, but he also systematically and relentlessly strips the people bare. There is something to be said for administrative aptitude, but it is sobering to realize that it can be coupled with profound short-sightedness. It is also a great virtue to behave honestly and honorably with our superiors. But the greatest test of character may lie elsewhere—in the empathy we display towards those who stand powerless before us.²⁵

Shabbat shalom.

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²⁵ For Joseph's remarkable exercise of restraint in another situation in which he has the power to do great damage, cf. what I have written in "The Majesty of Restraint, Or: Joseph's Shining Moment," Parashat VaYehi 5774, available [here](#).