

Storing Fortune for the Future

Dena Weiss – weiss@hadar.org

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In the beginning of this week's *parashah*, Pharaoh is dreaming. His dreams are frightening and disorienting, but Pharaoh knows better than to ignore them. He consults with his advisors but finds their interpretations wanting; his unrest is unresolved. When his royal butler hears of Pharaoh's distress, it reminds him of his own and the dream that he had when he was in prison. The butler remembers how Yosef, a fellow prisoner, was gifted in the interpretation of dreams and urges Pharaoh to consult him. Pharaoh finds in Yosef not only an interpreter for his dreams but also an architect of his nation's future.

The text does not tell us why the interpretation of his advisors was unsatisfactory to Pharaoh. However, we do see part of what made Yosef's interpretation so special. It is that he does not stop at mere interpretation. He does not only tell Pharaoh what the dreams mean; he also guides Pharaoh through the message they impart. Yosef teaches Pharaoh how to manage the years of abundance and the years of famine. Yosef's ability to advise Pharaoh in this way is a direct outgrowth of his own experience. Indeed, Yosef has experienced his own cycles of plenty and lack. He therefore knows what it means to be patient and to store up hope for the future. Yosef not only provides Pharaoh with a strategy; Yosef embodies this strategy. He thus models for us how to deal with the vicissitudes in our own lives, thereby teaching us how we must and can learn to prepare for our own times of scarcity.

Pharaoh selects Yosef to provide the recommended leadership and swiftly appoints him as his second-in-command. The Torah spares no detail in describing Yosef's appointment:

בראשית מא:מא-מג

⁴¹וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל יוֹסֵף רְאֵה נִתְּמִי אֵתְךָ עַל כָּל אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: ⁴²וַיָּסֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶת טַבַּעְתּוֹ מֵעַל יָדוֹ וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָהּ עַל יַד יוֹסֵף וַיִּלְבָּשׁ אֹתוֹ בְּגָדֵי שֵׁשׁ וַיָּשֶׂם רֶבֶד הַזָּהָב עַל צַוְאָרָיו: ⁴³וַיַּרְכֹּב אֹתוֹ בְּמַרְכָּבֶת הַמִּשְׁנָה אֲשֶׁר לוֹ וַיִּקְרָאוּ לִפְנָיו אֲבֵרָה וְנָתָן אֹתוֹ עַל כָּל אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

Bereishit 41:41-43

⁴¹Pharaoh said to Yosef. “See that I have placed you over all of the land of Egypt.”

⁴²Pharaoh removed his ring from upon his hand and placed it on Yosef’s hand. He clothed him in linen garments, and he placed a strand of gold around his neck. ⁴³He had him ride in his second chariot, and they called out, “Genuflect!” and he was placed over all of the land of Egypt.

Upon closer inspection, we can see why the Torah indulges in this elaborate description. It is, in fact, a step-by-step reversal of Yosef’s fate. When he first approaches his brothers, he is desperate for them to listen to his dreams. Now, Yosef is a renowned interpreter of the dreams of the king. His brothers stripped him of his *ketonet pasim*, the fine garment that his father gave him; and now he is clothed again in royal linen and gold. He was brought down to Egypt as human chattel on a slave caravan,¹ and now he rides in the chariot befitting his new status as the second in command to the king of Egypt.

Perhaps the most striking example of this reversal is portrayed in the way that Yosef is ushered into the palace:

בראשית מא:יד

וַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה וַיִּקְרָא אֶת יוֹסֵף וַיְרִיצֵהוּ מִן הַבּוֹר וַיַּגְלֵחַ וַיַּסְלֵף שְׂמֹלֶתָיו וַיָּבֵא אֶל פַּרְעֹה:

Bereishit 41:14

Pharaoh sent for and beckoned Yosef and rushed him from the dungeon (*bor*). He shaved, and changed his clothes, and came to Pharaoh.

¹ Bereishit 37:6, 23, 25.

The Hebrew word for the dungeon from which Yosef was freed is *bor*. This is not an accident. A *bor* is also where Yosef was cast by his brothers. When Yosef is brought from the *bor* to the palace, he emerges completely from the unfortunate chain of events precipitated by his brother's jealousy. He begins to take his fate into his own hands and move it in a positive direction. The term *bor* here is very deliberate and instructive. When the royal butler refers to the prison that was his former home, he says that he was *ba-mishmar*, in custody. Yosef's master, Potiphar, sends him to the *beit ha-sohar*, prison. Yet Yosef himself refers to the prison as a *bor*.² Yosef understands his life trajectory as being in and out of the pits that he has been thrown into. In his own narrative, every dark place from which there should be no escape is a *bor*. And crucially, for Yosef, every *bor* eventually leads to freedom.

A *bor* is neither a pit nor a dungeon. A *bor* is a cistern. This is the reason why—when Yosef is initially thrown into it—the verse testifies to the fact that there is no water inside, *וְהַבּוֹר רֵק*, *אֵין בוֹ מַיִם*.³ Since a *bor* is created with the express purpose of collecting water, the text reasonably tells us that this particular cistern is empty. The image of a cistern is not just reflective of where Yosef is, but is an expression of *who* Yosef is.

There are a number of ways to get water. You can dig a well and try to retrieve water from underground. You can identify a spring or a river and carry or channel the water from its natural source to your field. You can wait and pray for rain. Or you can dig a cistern to collect it.

Choosing to dig a cistern is both a cautious and a courageous choice. Employing a cistern is trusting that the rain will come and at the same time, acknowledging that the rain isn't guaranteed to come exactly when you need it. Creating something to collect the rain is a strategic plan to stockpile when you have plenty and spend what you've collected strategically and frugally. At the moment when you dig the cistern, you implicitly declare

² Bereishit 41:10, 39:20, 40:15.

³ Bereishit 37:24.

that you know that there will be both lean years and years of plenty. Sometimes your *bor* will be full. Sometimes it will be empty. A cistern mentality braces for and even embraces that fluctuation.

Up and down, empty and full is the cadence of Yosef's life. He loses his mother, but then becomes his father's favorite. He is about to be killed by his brothers, but then his life is spared. He rises in the ranks at Potiphar's house, but then he is imprisoned. He leaves the prison and on that very day, becomes the viceroy of Egypt, saving the lives of the Egyptians and many from the surrounding areas, including the brothers who would have killed him.

It is precisely this life experience that enables Yosef to supply Pharaoh with the strategy that he needs in order to sustain his country in the years of famine. Pharaoh is used to relying on the Nile; his is an irrigation mentality. He needs Yosef and his cistern mentality in order to prepare properly for the years of scarcity.⁴ The Midrash in Bereishit Rabbah subtly indicates the way in which Pharaoh and other similarly powerful and privileged Egyptians are completely ill-equipped to handle the adversity foretold in Pharaoh's dreams. When the famine comes, the verse⁵ describes its intensity as covering "the entire face of the land." The Midrash remarks on this odd turn of phrase:

בראשית רבה צא:ה

וְהָרָעָב הָיָה עַל כָּל פְּנֵי הָאָרֶץ, רָאוּי הָיָה לְמַקְרָא לֵאמֹר עַל הָאָרֶץ, מִה תִּלְמִיד לֵאמֹר עַל פְּנֵי, אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בֶּר נַחֲמָן לְלַמֶּדֶד שֶׁלֹא הִתְחִיל הָרָעָב אֶלָּא בְּעֶשְׂרִים, שָׂאִין פְּנֵי הָאָרֶץ אֶלָּא עֶשְׂרִים.

Bereishit Rabbah 91:5

The famine was on the entire face of the land. The verse should have said, "on the land," why does it say, "on the face?" R. Shmuel b. Nahman said: This comes to teach

⁴ In Devarim 11:10-11, Egypt's irrigation system is contrasted with the land of Israel's dependence on rain which the text argues increases one's reliance on God. Pharaoh's needing Yosef who is an *Imi*, someone from Cana'an, reflects this dynamic.

⁵ Bereishit 41:56.

you that the famine began with the wealthy, for the face of the land necessarily refers to the wealthy.

This midrash makes an unintuitive claim, that the people who were first affected by the famine were the wealthy and powerful, the top stratum and the “face” of Egyptian society. This is not usually the case when it comes to natural disasters. Ordinarily, the poor suffer disproportionately, as the poor lack the resources and infrastructure to defend themselves from the damage. It usually takes more time for the wealthy to be adversely affected.

However, the natural disaster which was the Egyptian famine was not like most. Most catastrophes are unforeseen, but Pharaoh saw that this famine was coming in a dream. Pharaoh was privy to a divine communiqué about the impending disaster to come. But what was most unique about this famine was not its prognosis; it was the miraculous fact that before the famine descended, God sent enough plenty to last through the difficult years to come. *This* is why the wealthy people were at a unique disadvantage. Usually, the wealthy and powerful have more physical resources in the face of a disaster and therefore fare better when it comes. However, in the Egyptian famine *everyone* was provided with enough physical resources in the years before to last them through the difficult years to come, so having wealth was not what would determine whether or not you would survive. What determined whether or not you would survive was your ability to save those resources in order to be able to rely on them later.

In a famine such as this, the advantage goes to the people who have experience with saving, with tightening their belts, with delayed gratification. It does not go to the people who command the most material resources; it goes to the people who have spiritual resources. The people who were poor, who experienced hardship, knew how to prepare for additional hardship. They knew that having enough is not a stable state, it is a fluctuating condition. If you have more than you need today, then you should save for tomorrow. The body of the people understood this and had practice in it, but the face of the people, the privileged few,

didn't know how to manage the increase and therefore couldn't adequately prepare for it to disappear.

In this situation, the people who have a *bor* mentality survive. Those who harvest the rain when it comes and save it for when the water stops are those who know how to live through drought. Perhaps Pharaoh realizes that Yosef's life of hardship and lack prepares him to lead the country through rationing measures. Maybe he realizes that his own life experience, as a pampered king by the Nile, leaves him ill-equipped to guide his people through this challenge.

A *bor* mentality isn't only about money or physical resources, it's an entire approach to harvest and hardship, plenty and lack. In life, there are times of bounty, when you might have the feeling that you have everything you need—stretches of financial security, closeness with other people, intellectual excitement, and religious meaning. But there will also be lean times of feeling financially, emotionally, and spiritually strained. To be a cistern means to save and savor the times of plenty and to spend that physical or emotional sense of abundance at the time when you feel that you are living without. It is to realize that the experience that you have of not-having-enough is what gives you the wisdom and the emotional fortitude to persevere when things seem impossible. The person with a *bor* mindset remains calm and even-keeled and uses the long-term perspective.

The experience of having to save in the good times to tide yourself over in the bad times is enshrined in the laws of *Shemittah*, the sabbatical year. In the ideal *Shemittah* that the Torah envisions, God promises that the bounty of the sixth year will extend to cover the financial loss that leaving the land fallow in the seventh year will engender.

ויקרא כה:כ-כא

²⁰ וְכִי תֹאמְרוּ מָה נֹאכַל בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִית הֵן לֹא נִזְרַע וְלֹא נִאֶסַּף אֶת תְּבוּאֵתֵינוּ: ²¹ וְצִוִּיתִי אֶת בְּרַכְתִּי
לָכֶם בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁשִׁית וְעָשִׂיתָ אֶת תְּבוּאָהּ לְשָׁלֹשׁ שָׁנִים:

VaYikra 25:20-21

²⁰If you say, what will we eat in the seventh year given that we can't plant or harvest our produce? ²¹I will command My blessing to you in the sixth year, and it will produce the equivalent of three years.

According to VaYikra, the dynamic present in the Egyptian famine, of great prosperity followed by desperate panic, rain then drought, is not a once in history event, it is a universal dynamic. It didn't happen just once for seven years, it happens every seven years and survival depends on planning accordingly.

Yet, the lesson to be learned from *Shemittah* is not about holding on to the land's bounty. It is about reminding us that there is nothing in God's world that we truly own. During the *Shemittah* year, the land is considered ownerless, and when the *Shemittah* year arrives, all debts are cancelled. God does God's part, by providing years of plenty. Human beings have to do our part by saving up our good fortune, then letting it go. According to Devarim 15:9-11, the danger of the *Shemittah* year is that when we see it coming, we might become more stingy, less likely to lend and more inclined to hoard, and harden our hearts against those who do not have their own savings. Therefore it says, **פָּתַחְתָּ אֶת יָדְךָ לְאֶחִיךָ לְעִנִּיךָ וּלְאֶבְיֹנְךָ**, **בְּאַרְצְךָ**, you should open your hand to your brother, your poor, your destitute in your land.

Yes, it is important to save like Yosef. But it is equally important to distribute like Yosef, to open your heart to your brothers and your palm to those in need. To spend our resources wisely and to spend our resources well also means to share what we have, both the spiritual and physical, with others.

Wishing you a Shabbat that will sustain you through the coming week.