

# Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Vayigash, Genesis, Chapters 44-47 | December 23, 2023

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

## Egypt and Us

In the Egypt collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, there is a small model Egyptian bakery that is many thousands of years old. It was found in the tomb of a very early Egyptian by the name of Meketre, a member of the pharaoh's court, and the position he held ought to be of enormous interest to us. We have read how Joseph, in prison, met two stewards of the king: one was the *sar ha-mashkim*, a sort of royal sommelier, and the other was the *sar ha-ofim*, which literally means the "steward of the bakers." That is precisely what Meketre seems to have been—though in an age earlier than Joseph's—and as a sign of honor he was buried with exquisite models of the Egyptian royal baking process.

The story of the models' discovery is fascinating, as the Met's website describes:

All the accessible rooms in the tomb of Meketre had been robbed and plundered already during antiquity; but early in 1920 the museum's excavator, Herbert Winlock, wanted to obtain an accurate floor plan of the tomb's layout for his map of the Eleventh Dynasty necropolis at Thebes and, therefore, had his workmen clean out the accumulated debris. It was during this cleaning operation that the small hidden chamber was discovered, filled with 24 almost perfectly preserved models.

These models allow us to learn about Egyptian baking from thousands of years ago, and when we read the museum's description of them, two facts stand out. The first is the leavening process: fermentation was so central to Egyptian baking that the bakery is actually attached to a model of a brewery. The second feature is the actual shape of the bread, which, as we will see, is also quite important. We are further told by the Met's website:

The bakery in the inner room is divided by a screen wall into two compartments. In the first a man . . . crushes grain with a pestle for two female millers to grind into flour. Two men then mix the dough in tall tubs, while two black ovens are tended by a man with a poker. In the middle of it all stands a basket with baked conical loaves.



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Bread, baked in large ovens, especially conical bread, was central to Egypt, and understanding why this is so is essential to comprehending the lessons of this week's Torah reading. Though our *parashah* is best known for its beginning—when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers—most of the reading is about Joseph's overseeing of Egypt's agricultural economy; and a careful study of the story allows us to understand how he acts to preserve Israel's identity in exile, and why Israel is warned forever that it must never become like Egypt.

Let us review the early scenes of *Vayigash*. Joseph, in the guise of an Egyptian vizier, informs his brother that Benjamin will be kept as his slave, and Judah steps forward and asks to be taken instead. Astonished, Joseph bursts into tears and embraces his brothers, revealing himself as the Hebrew that he is. The sons of Jacob are sent back to Canaan to inform their father that Joseph is alive, and that they are all to live in Egypt, where they will be sustained throughout the famine. Meanwhile, Joseph informs Pharaoh, for whom he works, that his family will be coming. Pharaoh, delighted, issues what appears to be an extremely generous invitation:

... take your father and your household and come to me. . . . Have no concern for your goods, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours. (Genesis 45:18–20)

This is ostensibly gratifying; yet danger can be sensed in Pharaoh's words. Recall that Pharaoh has embraced Joseph, but only as an Egyptian. The king has bestowed on Joseph an Egyptian name, and given him as a wife the daughter of a pagan priest. In this invitation, Pharaoh, concerned for Joseph's own loyalty, is asking Joseph to ensure his family's assimilation into Egypt. Rabbi Yair Kahn, who cites these verses, explains what they mean:

Pharaoh invited Joseph's family to the Egyptian capital. There they would join the royal court. According to Pharaoh, there was no necessity to bring possessions and certainly no need to march the flock all the way from Canaan. They would join the royal court, with the other noble families and all their needs would be cared for.



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Joseph, as Rabbi Kahn explains, must therefore act in a way that will allow him to continue to serve Pharaoh as an Egyptian member of court, while at the same time ensuring, as an Israelite, the future identity of his family. He therefore, as Rabbi Kahn notes, asks his brothers, in speaking to Pharaoh, to emphasize an occupation that would strike horror in Egyptian hearts:

... I will go up and inform Pharaoh and I will say to him, My brothers and my father's household from the land of Canaan have come to me. The men are shepherds, for men of flock they have been from their youth till now, and they have brought their sheep and cattle and all their possessions. And you will say: Your servants were men of flock from our youth till now, we and our ancestors ... (Genesis 46:31-34)

As Joseph concludes, this will ensure that Pharaoh will allow the Israelites to dwell apart from Egyptian society:

... in order that you may dwell in the land of Goshen; for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians. (Genesis 46:34)

Why is shepherding so abominable to Egypt? It is often suggested that because Egyptian divinities were depicted in animal form, this meant that Egyptians revered animals themselves, and abhorred any subjugation or slaughter of them. But this is untrue; Egyptians ate meat, and indeed the very same tomb of Meketre also contains a model of an Egyptian abattoir:



In fact, the abhorrence of shepherding lies in the nature of Egyptian economic life. Egypt was an agricultural society, fixed around the Nile and dependent on its regular sustenance. The ultimate embodiment of its fixed nature are the large baking ovens that we see in the Meketre models. Shepherds, in contrast, lived a lifestyle that the stationary subjects of Pharaoh found repugnant. Dr. Tova Dickstein, in an illuminating essay on biblical agriculture, explains why this is so:

Egyptians were farmers, each person permanently connected to his own tract of land. The Hebrews, on the other hand, were nomadic shepherds. An inherent enmity between these two occupations has existed since the beginning of mankind, from the moment that Cain, the farmer, murdered his brother Abel, the shepherd. . . . The Egyptians reserved a special loathing for shepherds, dubbing them looters, plunderers, *habiru*—Hebrews (!?).

The bread that the Egyptians ate was leavened bread. Egypt was known as a land of grain and bread. Long before the Israelites came to Egypt, Egyptians had learned the secret of leavening bread, even discovering the secret to what we now call sourdough. They learned that “starters,” left-over dough that started to ferment, when added to fresh dough and allowed to sit in a warm place for a number of hours, would rise and, when baked, produce loaves of leavened bread. Bread can only be baked in an oven with a certain depth that can retain a consistent temperature throughout its interior. Evidence that the Egyptians had developed this technology is found in the remains of very large bakeries that have been found in Egypt from the period that the Children of Israel lived there. . . .

In contrast, shepherds ate unleavened bread. Nomads cannot carry a heavy oven with them as they travel from place to place, nor can they wait for dough to rise, as was the case when the time came for the Israelites to flee from Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

If Egypt abominated shepherds, it was not because Egyptians worshipped animals, but rather because shepherding reflected a nomadic lifestyle that was the antithesis of their own. In contrast, Israelite shepherding reflected its Abrahamic origin and faith; Abraham was a man who believed in a God Who was with him wherever he wandered, the source of all he achieved. Thus, introducing themselves as shepherds would ensure that the Israelites would be allowed by Pharaoh to live in Goshen, a site suitable for shepherding, and apart from the royal court.

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**Joseph in Egypt thus lives a double life, with his family’s well-being in the balance.**

But having separated his family, having prevented its assimilation, Joseph has given Pharaoh further reason to doubt his own loyalty to Egypt. As Rabbi Kahn further points out, and as we will discuss next week, when Jacob passes away, Joseph is only allowed to journey to Canaan to bury his father if a whole Egyptian entourage accompanies him, in order to ensure Joseph’s return. Joseph in Egypt thus lives a double life, with his family’s well-being in the balance. Within Pharaoh’s court, he is the ultimate Egyptian vizier, ensuring the enhanced power of the king he serves. As the famine grows ever more severe, Joseph, acting on Pharaoh’s behalf, asks the



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Egyptians to give the Egyptian ruler their property in exchange for grain with which to produce bread:

And Joseph answered, Give your cattle, and I will give you food in exchange for your cattle, if your money is gone. So they brought their cattle to Joseph; and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the donkeys: and he supplied them with food in exchange for all their cattle that year. (Genesis 47:16–17)

Thus did Egyptians become even more dependent on agriculture, and even more dependent on Pharaoh. Soon after, with Egyptians seeking sustenance once more, they are told to give their very land to the state:

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh; for all the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them. The land became Pharaoh's; and as for the people, he made servants of them from one end of Egypt to the other. Only the land of the priests he did not buy; for the priests had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh, and lived on the allowance which Pharaoh gave them; therefore they did not sell their land.

Then Joseph said to the people, Behold, I have this day bought you and your land for Pharaoh. Now here is seed for you, and you shall sow the land. And at the harvests you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh, and four fifths shall be your own, as seed for the field and as food for yourselves and your households, and as food for your little ones. And they said, **You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be servants to Pharaoh.** (Genesis 47:20–25)

What emerges is a system in which Pharaoh's power grows, and Egyptians themselves exist in a position of indentured servitude to the state, with land owned by the king; in seeking sustenance, they see in Pharaoh the gift of life itself. One of the most important hieroglyphs is the cone, because conical bread was a primary form for loaves; the cone hieroglyph means "gift," and if you walk through the exhibit in the Met and look at the hieroglyphics you will often see the Egyptian *ankh* symbol paired with the cone of bread, so that together they mean "the gift of life."



This gift of life is seen as being in the hands of the Pharaoh, who himself is worshipped as divine.

Israelites, in contrast, as shepherds, remain independent of the agricultural power of the state, and thus the last verse of the reading concludes:

Thus Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen; and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly. (Genesis 47:27)

But of course, as Rabbi Kahn also notes, this verse appears eerie in hindsight, for when a Pharaoh will come to power “who did not know Joseph,” then the prosperity of the Israelites will turn them into a target.

Why is this tale so important? Why does the Torah tell us so much about Egyptian agriculture and politics? Some centuries later, Israel will exit Egypt, and it will create, in the Holy Land, an agricultural society. It will be warned that in so doing, it must remember how it once lived a nomadic life, which kept it apart from Egypt—and that Israel must never become Egypt.

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**[T]he Israelite leader had a right to tax for the greater good, but could not take what he wished.**

One way in which this is to be achieved is through rituals that remind Israelites of moments of their existence in Egypt, and their nomadic wanderings through the desert. On Passover Israelites consume not

the leavened bread that Egypt gave the world, but the bread of shepherds, thereby reminding themselves of all that they owed the past, of their ancestors' preservation of their Israelite identity. After every year's harvest, Israel marked the festival of Sukkot, reliving the nomadic wanderings of its ancestors in the desert, recalling how all had once come as manna from heaven, and therefore that it must see its own bounty in the same way, as the gift of God. It is therefore striking to note that Dan Senor and Saul Singer, the very same authors who documented the astonishing economic achievements of Israel in their book *Start-Up Nation*, have now documented, in their book *The Genius of Israel*, the source of meaning that Israelis find beyond economic achievement in seeing themselves as part of a larger, remarkable story that stretches back millennia into the past. And as I have reflected in these essays, we are, I think, only beginning to see a larger embrace of identity and faith in the modern Jewish state.

Another important aspect of how Israel is warned to reject the ways of Egypt can be found in the way in which the Bible decries the seizure of property by the state. In his book *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, the economist David Landes suggests, as did Niall Ferguson after him, that the notion of private property, free from arbitrary intrusions of others or of the state, was essential for the flourishing of the West. Landes further suggests that this notion of private property was received in the West from the Hebrew Bible: the Israelite leader had a right to tax for the greater good, but could not take what he wished. As Landes puts it, “The Hebrew hostility to autocracy, even their own, was formed in Egypt and the desert.”



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Building on Landes, Rabbi Sacks, in an interesting interview with the Acton Institute, reflected as follows:

Judaism as a religious vision emphasizes the integrity, freedom, and independence of the individual, as well as his or her responsibilities to society. Individual property rights were therefore as important to the Hebrew Bible as they later were to John Locke. One of the great biblical dramas is Elijah's challenge to King Ahab, who seizes Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21). Kings did not have the right to appropriate private property. The prophet Micah dreamed of a day in which "every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree and none will make him afraid" (Mic. 4:4). A world of limited government and respect for private property, in which individuals are self-supporting through their own labor, is a world of maximal freedom and human dignity.

Our reading, then, provides a warning for the West today, and especially for America, which has been so profoundly shaped by the Hebrew Bible, and which is in danger of forgetting its teachings, but which may yet be open to learning from the biblical worldview. We live in an age of astonishing technological achievement, but also one in which popular culture is profoundly unbiblical, a culture that seeks assimilation into its ethos. Leon Kass reflected on the teaching of Joseph's story in a provocative way:

Biblical Egypt should be of special interest for modern Americans. For Egypt was the peak of ancient civilization, a civilization characterized by agricultural plenty, high levels of science and technology, advanced bureaucracy and public administration, and—perhaps most relevant for us—a passion for longevity and the pursuit of bodily immortality through the conquest of decay and death. Yet Egypt was also the place where women were rounded up for the ruler's harem, foreigners were held in contempt, a man was worshiped as a god, and in the end, the people's preoccupation with survival and material well-being led to their enslavement. Is Egypt, perhaps, a permanent human possibility and temptation?

To create a flourishing economy that also allows for personal freedom, private property, and the flourishing of the human person; to allow for technological and economic opportunity and ingenuity, but to remember that all we have is by the grace of God; this remains a challenge now as much as thousands of years ago. In our age the moral teachings of the Bible are as relevant as ever.

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### **Additional Resources**

Tova Dickstein on Agriculture, Bread, and Egypt, “A New Look at Hametz, Matza, and Everything in Between,” Neot Kedumim. [Click here to read.](#)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Judaism and Capitalism, “Judaism’s Religious Vision and the Capitalist Ethic,” *Religion & Liberty: A Publication of the Acton Institute*, November/December 2001. [Click here to read.](#)

