



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Miketz 5771

By Dani Passow
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Yosef's get-out-of-jail free card, his ability to interpret dreams, thrusts the young son of Yaakov into a position of responsibility that would have been difficult to imagine when his brothers first sold him. After interpreting Paroh's dreams as foretelling seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine, Yosef, in a strikingly courageous act, inserts himself as unsolicited economic counsel, advising Paroh to store grain during the years of abundance in order to be sold to the people during the years of famine.¹

Pleased with Yosef's suggestion, Paroh cedes vast power to the formerly incarcerated Israelite, who enacts policies that go far beyond the original conservation plan. During the seven years of scarcity, when the Egyptian people come to buy the stored grain from Yosef, he collects the money, removing it from circulation. Lacking money, the people then offer their livestock in exchange for grain, then their land and finally their very selves as slaves.² Despite the hardship that these policies imposed, the Egyptians proclaim to Yosef: "You have saved our lives!"³

Many of us might wonder about the Egyptians' enthusiastic gratitude given that Yosef's actions had many long-term costs: in addition to robbing the Egyptians of their autonomy, he may, ironically and eerily, have set the stage for the future enslavement of the Israelites. While ultimately his method is effective in staving off catastrophe, Yosef's tactics are deeply problematic: he resolves imminent starvation by disempowering the population, and ignores the potential devastating impacts that his plan will have in the long term.

When addressing poverty ourselves, particularly global poverty, we must learn from the Yosef story and pay careful attention to the tactics of our aid efforts. Our strategies must incorporate the knowledge and experience of those we seek to help, and must empower people rather than subjugate them, in order to be conducive to creating long-term solutions. As outsiders—like Yosef—our vision is necessarily myopic and limited. Those on the ground, who have intimate experience with the complexities of the structures and culture of their communities, however, can have a nuanced enough perspective that will anticipate future challenges and result in sustainable change.

One example of an organization that uses communal engagement and empowerment as tools to fight poverty is Tostan, a Senegal-based organization with which I had the opportunity to work in June 2009 as part of an AJWS Rabbinical Students' Delegation. Tostan works predominantly in rural areas, providing basic education directed toward encouraging communal participation in projects related to human rights and democracy, health and hygiene, child welfare and economic development.⁴

In one village we visited during our trip, Darou Mouride, we learned how Tostan initiated a two-year curriculum, primarily with the village's women, teaching fundamental principles of democracy and decision making. Upon

¹ Bereshit 41:1-31.

² Ibid. 47:14-22.

³ Ibid. 47:25.

⁴ www.tostan.org

conclusion of the course, rather than assessing the community's needs itself, Tostan asked the participants to think about issues they felt most needed attention. Working with the rest of the village, the group decided that they needed improved sanitation facilities. In response, Tostan then helped secure funding and labor (which included my group of volunteers) for building latrines, which would save lives by reducing water-borne diseases.

Though Tostan's approach has supported numerous communities in achieving positive change, even a grassroots organization can sometimes assume the role of "outsider." By introducing Western ideas like democracy, Tostan inadvertently undermines the traditional power structure of some local communities, even as it helps provide life-saving facilities like sanitation.

I was particularly struck by this when, one morning, before getting to work on the latrines, we met with the village elder and the village Imam, who had formerly maintained most of the decision-making authority in the village. These leaders were now being somewhat sidelined by the new democratic system introduced by Tostan. I wondered about the right balance between preserving and respecting traditional communal norms and introducing external philosophies and approaches that could help communities achieve their development goals. On the one hand, Tostan's democratic approach could destabilize Darou Mouride, a community that, for centuries, has faced and overcome many challenges by using its traditional framework. On the other hand, many of the residents appreciated the support provided by Tostan, which dramatically furthered the community's development efforts.

As supporters of international development, we too experience the tension between a fear of cultural imperialism and our desire to answer the Torah's call to "not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor,"⁵ a charge that in a globalizing world should be universally applied to all whose lives are at risk. Yosef's story illustrates both sides of this tension. His life-saving interventions suggest that sometimes external expertise can assist those in peril. But the story also functions as a warning about the serious risks of disempowering local populations. We need to learn both lessons, inculcating within ourselves a sensitivity to respond to poverty and injustice, and applying the wisdom to partner with and empower those whose lives we seek to aid.



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⁵ Vayikra 19:16.

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