Introduction

In Parashat Vayigash, Joseph has risen from slavery to become Pharaoh’s second in command. Newly appointed to his role, he is put in charge of designing and administering a system for responding to the famine he predicted through interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams. Joseph’s solution is to store grain during the seven years of plenty in order to distribute it during the seven years of famine. The following is a description of how he implements this plan:

**Genesis 47:13-22**

There was no food, however, in the whole region because the famine was severe; both Egypt and Canaan wasted away because of the famine. Joseph collected all the money that was to be found in Egypt and Canaan in payment for the grain they were buying, and he brought it to Pharaoh’s palace.

When the money of the people of Egypt and Canaan was gone, all Egypt came to Joseph and said, “Give us food. Why should we die before your eyes? Our money is all gone.” “Then bring your livestock,” said Joseph. “I will sell you food in exchange for your livestock, since your money is gone.” So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and he gave them food in exchange for their horses, their sheep

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**בְּרֵאשִׁית מֹתוֹ-יָה**

ולְךָ אֵין בְּכָל הָאָרֶץ, כִּי כָבֵד הָרָעָב מְאֹד; וַתֵלַהּ אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִּם, וְאֶרֶץ כְנַעַן, מֵפְנֵי הָרָעָב

וַיְלַקֵט יוֹסֵף, אֶת כָּל הַכֶּסֶף הַנִּמְצָא בְאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִּם וּבְאֶרֶץ כְנַעַן, בַשֶבֶר, אֲשֶר הם שֹבְרִים; וַיָבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת הַכֶסֶף, בֵיתָה פַרְעֹה וַיִּתֹם הַכֶסֶף, מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִּם וּמֵאֶרֶץ כְנַעַן, וַיָבֹאוּ כָל מִצְרַיִּם אֶל יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר הָבָה לָנוּ לֶחֶם, וְלָמָה נָמוּת נֶגְדֶךָ: כִּי אָפֵס, כָּסֶף

וַיֹאמֶר יוֹסֵף אַּל מִקְנֵיכֶם, וְאֶתְנָה לָכֶם בְמִקְנֵיכֶם אִם אָפֵס, כָּסֶף וַיָבִיאוּ אֶת מִקְנֵיהֶם, אֶל יוֹסֵף, וַיִּתֵן לָהֶם שֶבֶר, בֵיתָה פַרְעֹה, בְמִקְנֵיכֶם.
and goats, their cattle and donkeys. And he brought them through that year with food in exchange for all their livestock.

When that year was over, they came to him the following year and said, “We cannot hide from our lord the fact that since our money is gone and our livestock belongs to you, there is nothing left for our lord except our bodies and our land. Why should we perish before your eyes—we and our land as well? Buy us and our land in exchange for food, and we with our land will be in bondage to Pharaoh. Give us seed so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate.” So Joseph bought all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. The Egyptians, one and all, sold their fields, because the famine was too severe for them. The land became Pharaoh’s.

And Joseph reduced the people to servitude, from one end of Egypt to the other.

1. What happens in this story? How does Joseph implement his program?
2. What do you believe are Joseph’s motivations? How does that affect your understanding of the story?
3. What is the impact of Joseph’s system on the Egyptians? On Pharaoh?

Contemporary Solutions to Hunger

Like Joseph’s ancient system, the current U.S. food aid system also saves millions of lives. But it also has flaws. Current law requires that our government ship the majority of our food aid from the U.S., rather than buying food from local farmers in the countries we’re helping and then distributing it to people who need it. Here, one Haitian farmer describes the impact of this system on his livelihood:

Jonas Deronzil, Hatian rice farmer.1

“We were already in a black misery after the earthquake of January 12. But the rice they’re dumping on us, it’s competing with ours and soon we’re going to fall in a deep hole,” said Jonas Deronzil, who has farmed rice and corn in Haiti’s fertile Artibonite Valley since 1974. “When they don’t give it to us anymore, are we all going to die?”

1. How does this response to hunger similar to Joseph’s? How is it different?
2. What are some of the unintended short-term consequences of this type of response to hunger?
3. What could be the long-term consequences?

Conclusion

Joseph’s food aid system has many important positive impacts. It saves the lives of the Egyptian people, and helps the country to make it through the terrible time of famine. However, it also has some extremely negative impacts, whether or not they were intended. Joseph’s system of collecting food and then selling it back to the people of Egypt during the famine results in them becoming much more vulnerable and dependent, to the point that they must sell all of their capital and finally offer themselves as slaves to Pharaoh.

http://www.otherworldsarepossible.org/another-haiti-possible/miami-rice-business-disaster-haiti
This biblical situation has many parallels to modern food aid systems. Just like Joseph’s plan, U.S. Food Aid is a crucial program, especially in times of famine and conflict, which saves millions of lives around the world. But like the food aid system in our parashah, contemporary U.S. Food Aid also has some serious negative consequences.

Current U.S. food aid policies require that food aid come in the form of actual grain, shipped to countries in need from America. In addition to being inefficiently slow and expensive, dumping free grain on troubled foreign markets often has the effect of putting local farmers—who can no longer sell their own products—out of business. This means that local communities, like the people of Egypt, are unable to grow their own food and thus become even more vulnerable and dependent on future aid.

AJWS is working for changes to U.S. food aid policy that would make it a more flexible system, allowing for shipping U.S. food in some situations and buying food locally, in others. Join us: for more information about how you can get involved in this work, visit www.ajws.org/reversehunger.