

A World in Crisis Needs a Yosef

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Our society today faces crises of overwhelming proportions on many fronts—some observers have called our situation one of [polycrisis](#), to emphasize how crises interact and amplify each other. Climate change is breathing down our necks, wars proliferate, and pandemics threaten our health, all while governments struggle to react sufficiently. Many who enjoy relative peace and affluence suffer from a sense of helplessness and foreboding. We need a Yosef.

Yosef appears in Parashat Miketz as the savior of Egyptian society from an ecological crisis of epic proportions. Seven straight ruined harvests would have resounded catastrophically across the region if not for Yosef's prescient interventions on Pharaoh's behalf.

One quarter of the way through the 21st century, we cry out for our own Yosef: leadership with the courage to recognize the looming crisis and the aptitude to marshal resources on a global scale.

Was the famine foreseeable? Pharaoh literally saw it in a dream. The truth of the crisis lurked at the threshold of his consciousness. Quite possibly imperial expansion had brought the soil to the point of exhaustion and set the stage for failure. His court interpreters, rooted in Egyptian society, couldn't imagine failure at such a comprehensive scale, so they couldn't see the warning etched into Pharaoh's dream.

The midrash in Bereishit Rabbah 41:5 suggests that they understood the dreams as seven daughters who would be born to Pharaoh and then die, seven lands that Pharaoh would conquer and that would later rise up. The symbolism is loose, and the events (personal and military) disconnected from each other—they capture only the general flow and ebb of fortune and misfortune but do nothing to satisfy the sense of urgency that Pharaoh seems to feel. As R. Shmuel David Luzzatto writes:

לא היה מי שידע לפתור אותם לפרעה להנאתו ולהנאת עמו, כי זה הוא מה שהיה פרעה מבקש, שיבינו מתוך חלומו דבר העתיד לבא על עמו ושיועיל למצרים היותו נודע בטרם יבוא . . . שאם אין אתה אומר כן, מי מנע אותם מאמור לו פתרון ככל העולה על רוחם?

Nobody could interpret the dreams *to Pharaoh's and his people's benefit*. For this is what Pharaoh was seeking: to understand from his dream something that will happen to his people in the future that it would help them to know in advance . . . for if this is not so, who could stop them from saying any interpretation that came to mind?

Pharaoh feels in his gut that he has received a warning.

Yosef, a young foreigner, sees the clear and unified warning in the dream—the symbolism is tight and the events of the dream focused on one message. Stout cattle and fat grain will give way to starving cattle and blighted grain: it's time to act.

The miracle is not that Yosef could interpret the dream, but that Pharaoh could listen to his dark and inconvenient vision, because God had planted within him -- he who had the power—a warning of existential crisis for his people.

We should also listen to the warning in our gut.

Yosef's ability to hear the warning of Pharaoh's dream means his analysis and advice is of value too. He advises the appointment of a steward who is both knowledgeable (*navon*) and wise (*hakham*). Incredibly, this convicted adulterer and foreigner has instantly gained the Pharaoh's trust—Pharaoh knows that Yosef is that steward. Bereishit Rabbah provides a vivid analogy for the double

qualification: *navon vehakham* is someone who is both strong and well-armed; someone who both knows what to do and has the means to get it done.

According to Ramban, *navon* refers to a leader who knows how much grain to distribute to the people to meet their needs and brings the surplus to market to generate funds for the state; *hakham* is one who knows how to manage grain storage and avoid rot. That is, wisdom in economic management and agronomy. A broad view of all the moving pieces and intimate understanding of how all the pieces work together. But implied by this is a suggestion of the plan: hold Egyptian society to strict, but not punitive, rations, in order to build up a formidable surplus to survive the lean years.

Yosef's stewardship of the crisis led to a reorganization of Egyptian society, described in detail in chapter 47. [Some readers](#) detect a note of critique in the Torah's treatment of this reorganization, even suggesting it may have led to the slavery suffered by the Israelites. But his intervention was undeniably appropriate to the scale of the crisis. Suffering and starvation would have destabilized Egyptian society, with local landowners hoarding grain from their poorer neighbors before depleting their own small stores. Yosef recognized that facing the crisis meant facing entrenched social interests that might not share his and Pharaoh's vision, and be reluctant to give up their bounty to a centralized authority. As a magistrate who was *navon vehakham*—intellectually well-armed—Yosef knew big changes wouldn't come easily.

In 2023, our years of plenty have passed and the famine is upon us. The flood waters are rising and no Noah has built an ark to save us. In a world of rising [temperatures](#) and unbalanced, chaotic [water systems](#), the earth's ability to sustain God's creation is in question like never before. And yet even at the dawn of the [Anthropocene](#), a new geological epoch driven by human activity, Northern hemisphere farming is projected to suffer less than the ecospheres of the South, which will be scorched by unlivable heat. We in the US and Canada will find ourselves in a situation similar to Yosef's Egypt, less damaged by ecosystem collapse and

facing a wave of refugees looking for our help. We should welcome a Yosef who comes to change our way of life. We don't need a Noah who will build an ark and wall others out; we need leadership that paints a vision for how to help ourselves and make space to help others.