

discernment and wisdom, and set him over the land of Egypt. <sup>34</sup>And let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers over the land, and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. <sup>35</sup>Let all the food of these good years that are coming be gathered, and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh's authority as food to be stored in the cities. <sup>36</sup>Let that food be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will come upon the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish in the famine."

<sup>37</sup>The plan pleased Pharaoh and all his courtiers. <sup>38</sup>And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, "Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?" <sup>39</sup>So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise as you. <sup>40</sup>You shall be in charge of my court, and by your command shall all my people be directed; only with respect to the throne shall I be superior to you." <sup>41</sup>Pharaoh further said to Joseph, "See, I put you in charge of all the land of Egypt." <sup>42</sup>And removing his signet ring from

וַיִּשְׁתָּהוּ עַל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: <sup>34</sup>יַעֲשֶׂה פֶרְעָה וַיִּפְקֹד פְּקָדִים עַל-הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחֲמֹשׁ אֶת-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשֶׁבַע שָׁנֵי הַשָּׁבַע: <sup>35</sup>וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת-כָּל-אֹכֶל הַשָּׁנִים הַטֹּבֹת הַבָּאֹת הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּצְבְּרוּ בְרִית תַּחַת יָד פֶּרְעָה אֹכֶל בָּעֲרִים וַיִּשְׁמְרוּ: <sup>36</sup>וְהָיָה הָאֹכֶל לִפְקֻדֹן לְאֶרֶץ לְשֶׁבַע שָׁנֵי הָרָעָב אֲשֶׁר תִּהְיֶינָה בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְלֹא-תִכָּרֵת הָאָרֶץ בְּרָעָב: <sup>37</sup>וַיִּיטֹב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי פֶרְעָה וּבְעֵינֵי כָל-עַבְדָּיו: <sup>38</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר פֶּרְעָה אֶל-עַבְדָּיו הֲנִמְצָא כֹּזֶה אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בּוֹ: <sup>39</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר פֶּרְעָה אֶל-יֹסֵף אַחֲרֵי הוֹדִיעַ אֱלֹהִים אוֹתָךְ אֶת-כָּל-זֹאת אֵין-נִבֹן וְחָכָם כְּמוֹךָ: <sup>40</sup>אֵתָּה תִּהְיֶה עַל-בֵּיתִי וְעַל-פִּיךָ יִשָּׁק כָּל-עַמִּי רַק הַכִּסֵּא אֲנִי אֶגְדֹּל מִמֶּךָ: <sup>41</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר פֶּרְעָה אֶל-יֹסֵף רְאֵה נִתַּנִּי אֵתָּךְ עַל כָּל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: <sup>42</sup>וַיֹּסֶר פֶּרְעָה אֶת-טַבַּעְתּוֹ מֵעַל יָדוֹ וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָהּ

not as part of the dream message but as a personal suggestion.

**34. let Pharaoh** Not wishing to raise any suspicion that he is suggesting the creation of a new focus of power, Joseph repeatedly emphasizes "Pharaoh," thereby stressing the ubiquitous, omniscient, and omnipotent nature of the king in ancient Egypt.

**35. good years** Joseph sensibly suggests that grain be stockpiled during the plentiful years against the forthcoming years of famine.

#### JOSEPH'S APPOINTMENT AS VIZIER (vv. 37-46)

**37. The plan pleased Pharaoh** Pharaoh and his courtiers are impressed by Joseph's perception that the two dreams are actually one, by his relating them to national affairs rather than to the king's personal interests, and by the social concern that he displays in his advice.

**38. Could we find** Pharaoh's question to his courtiers is rhetorical. He knows at once what he must do.

**in whom is the spirit of God** This is the

first biblical mention of an individual so endowed. Possession of the "spirit of God" impels one to undertake a mission (Num. 27:18), imparts extraordinary energy and drive (Judg. 3:10, 11:29), and produces uncommon intelligence and practical wisdom.

**39. discerning and wise** Pharaoh repeats Joseph's own words (v. 33).

**40. in charge of my court** This function probably refers to the position of "overseer of the domain of the palace," one of the known Egyptian bureaucratic titles. Most likely, Joseph is given control over the king's personal estates.

**41. Pharaoh further said** Joseph does not utter a word in response to Pharaoh's announcement.

**in charge of all the land** The function reflects the Egyptian title "chief of the entire land."

**42. removing** Pharaoh now performs a series of ceremonial acts that confirm Joseph's position as "grand vizier of Egypt."

**signet ring** The transfer of the ring bearing the royal seal from the finger of Pharaoh to that of Joseph signifies the delegation of authority; it

his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; and he had him dressed in robes of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck.<sup>43</sup> He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command, and they cried before him, "Abrek!" Thus he placed him over all the land of Egypt.

<sup>44</sup>Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh; yet without you, no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." <sup>45</sup>Pharaoh then gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him for a wife Asenath daughter of Poti-pha, priest of On. Thus Joseph emerged in

על־יֶד יוֹסֵף וַיִּלְבֹּשׁ אֹתוֹ בְּגָדֵי־שֵׁשׁ וַיִּסָּב רֶכֶד הַזֶּהָב עַל־צוּאָרָו: <sup>43</sup>וַיַּרְכֵּב אֹתוֹ בְּמִרְכָּבַת הַמִּשְׁנָה אֲשֶׁר־לּוֹ וַיִּקְרְאוּ לִפְנֵי אֲבִירָהּ וַנִּתֵּן אֹתוֹ עַל כָּל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

<sup>44</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל־יוֹסֵף אֲנִי פַרְעֹה וּבְלִעְדֶּיךָ לֹא־יָרִים אִישׁ אֶת־יָדוֹ וְאֶת־רִגְלוֹ בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: <sup>45</sup>וַיִּקְרָא פַרְעֹה שֵׁם־יוֹסֵף צָפְנַת פַּעֲנֹחַ וַיִּתֵּן־לּוֹ אֶת־אִסְנַת בַּת־פּוֹטִי פַרַע כִּהֵּן אֵן לְאִשָּׁה וַיַּצֵּא יוֹסֵף

enables the new official to validate documents in the king's name. The title "royal seal bearer" was well known in ancient Egypt.

**fine linen** The term translated as "fine linen" (*shesh*) is an Egyptian loan word for cloth of exceptional quality.

**a gold chain** The giving of a gold chain was one of the highest distinctions the king could bestow upon his favorites.

**43. chariot** This is the first reference to a chariot in the Bible. The Hyksos invasion of Egypt in the 18th century B.C.E. introduced the chariot to that country as an instrument of warfare.

**second-in-command** That is, viceroy.

**they cried before him** The practice of having heralds declaim in front of the chariot rider is recorded in Esther 6:9.

**Abrek!** An exclamation found nowhere else in the Bible. In Akkadian, *abarakku* is the term for a steward of the temple and the chief steward of a private or royal household.

**44. I am Pharaoh** That is, I speak with the full authority of my royal office.

**lift up hand or foot** A figure of speech meaning "no action shall be taken."

**45. gave Joseph the name** The change of name signifies a new identity and a fresh start in life. The king probably wanted to "Egyptianize" the name Joseph.

**Zaphenath-paneah** The Egyptian words mean "God speaks; he lives," or "the creator/sustainer of life." During this period in Egypt, it was not unusual for foreigners, and Semites in particular, to be welcomed by the court and to rise to positions of responsibility and power in the government.

**Asenath** The Egyptian name means "she who belongs to (the goddess) Neith."

**Poti-pha** See Comment to 37:36.

**priest of On** This city, located seven miles northeast of modern Cairo, was the worship center of the sun god Re. It was called Beit She-mesh in Hebrew (Jer. 43:13) and Heliopolis in

45. Is Poti-pha identical with Potiphar, whom Joseph served in chapter 39? The Talmud thinks he is and understands his giving his daughter to Joseph in marriage as an acknowledgment that Joseph was innocent of the charge brought against him (BT Sot. 13b).

A Rabbinic legend identifies Asenath as the daughter who was born to Dinah, Jacob's daughter, after she had been violated by Shechem (Gen. 34). Subsequently, she was adopted by the childless Potiphar. Thus Joseph, like the other Patriarchs, marries a relative.

#### HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

**41:45 the name** This is the first instance in Jewish tradition of having more than one name, one of them Hebrew. For purposes of religious honors (such as an *aliyah* to the Torah) and religious documents (such as for marriage and divorce), one is identified by one's Hebrew name, the son or daughter of (*ben* or *bat*) one's father's Hebrew name. In prayers for the ill, one is traditionally identified by one's mother's name. Conservative practice increasingly uses both the mother's and father's Hebrew names in all circumstances, as an expression of honoring both parents in accordance with the Decalogue (see Exod. 20:12).

charge of the land of Egypt.—<sup>46</sup>Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt.—Leaving Pharaoh's presence, Joseph traveled through all the land of Egypt.

<sup>47</sup>During the seven years of plenty, the land produced in abundance. <sup>48</sup>And he gathered all the grain of the seven years that the land of Egypt was enjoying, and stored the grain in the cities; he put in each city the grain of the fields around it. <sup>49</sup>So Joseph collected produce in very large quantity, like the sands of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.

<sup>50</sup>Before the years of famine came, Joseph became the father of two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Poti-phares, priest of On, bore to him. <sup>51</sup>Joseph named the first-born Manasseh,

עַל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: <sup>46</sup>וַיֹּסֶף בֶּן־שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה בְּעָמְדוֹ לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ־מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּצֵא יוֹסֵף מִלִּפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וַיַּעֲבֹר בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

<sup>47</sup>וַתַּעַשׂ הָאֶרֶץ בְּשִׁבְעַת שָׁנֵי הַשָּׁבַע לְקַמְצִים: <sup>48</sup>וַיִּקְבֹּץ אֶת־כָּל־אֶכָּל וְשִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּתֵּן־אֶכָּל בְּעָרֵים אֶכָּל שְׂדֵה־הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֶיהָ נָתַן בְּתוֹכָהּ: <sup>49</sup>וַיַּעֲבֹר יוֹסֵף בָּר כְּחֹל הַיָּם הָרַבָּה מְאֹד עַד כִּי־חָרַל לְסָפֹר כִּי־אֵין מִסְפָּר:

<sup>50</sup>וַיִּלְיוּסֶף יֶלֶד שְׁנֵי בָנִים בְּטָרַם תְּבוֹא שָׁנַת הָרָעָב אֲשֶׁר יִלְדֶּה־לוֹ אֲסֵנַת בַּת־פּוֹטִי פַרַע כֹּהֵן אֹן: <sup>51</sup>וַיִּקְרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת־

Greek. The high priest at On held the title "greatest of seers." Joseph thus marries into clerical nobility. Moses would later do the same.

*emerged in charge of* Literally, "went out over." The clause probably should be understood as short for "he left Pharaoh's presence to be in charge of the land of Egypt."

<sup>46</sup>. *Joseph was thirty* This note, given at the time Joseph's ordeals end, corresponds to the recording of his age as 17 when they began (37:2) and provides a framework for the narrative.

*entered the service of* Literally, "stood before."

*Joseph traveled* Joseph begins to familiarize himself with local conditions to prepare for the task of enabling the Egyptians to survive the expected famine.

THE SEVEN YEARS OF PLENTY (vv. 47–49)

<sup>47</sup>. *in abundance* The word translated as

"in abundance" (*likmatzim*) means, literally, "by handfuls," i.e., "bumper crops."

<sup>48</sup>. *he gathered all the grain* From Joseph's activities it is clear that he holds the well-known Egyptian office of "overseer of the granaries of Upper and Lower Egypt," whose duties included the collection of tax payments on field produce, the storage of an adequate supply of food in years of plenty, and the distribution of food during years of famine. He was, in effect, minister of agriculture.

JOSEPH'S TWO SONS (vv. 50–52)

<sup>50</sup>. *years* Literally, "year." The sons were born either before the first year of the famine or before the year when its effect first became severe—i.e., toward the end of the famine's second year, when the migration of Jacob and his family took place.

<sup>51</sup>. *Manasseh* Joseph adapts the name,

<sup>50</sup>. *Before the years of famine came* Once the famine arrived, however, people stopped having children, so as not to have additional mouths to feed (BT Ta'an. 11a).

<sup>51</sup>. By calling his first son Manasseh, Joseph

is not saying that he has forgotten the circumstances of his coming to Egypt. He is saying that he remembers them but that the memory no longer oppresses him.

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

41:51 Joseph named the first-born See Comment to Gen. 29:32.

meaning, "God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home."

<sup>52</sup>And the second he named Ephraim, meaning, "God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction."

<sup>53</sup>The seven years of abundance that the land of Egypt enjoyed came to an end, <sup>54</sup>and the seven years of famine set in, just as Joseph had foretold. There was famine in all lands, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. <sup>55</sup>And when all the land of Egypt felt the hunger, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do."—

<sup>56</sup>Accordingly, when the famine became severe in the land of Egypt, Joseph laid open all that was within, and rationed out grain to the Egyptians. The famine, however, spread over the whole world. <sup>57</sup>So all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to procure rations, for the famine had become severe throughout the world.

שם הבכור מנשה כִּי־נִשְׁכַּח אֱלֹהִים אֶת־  
כָּל־עַמְלִי וְאֶת כָּל־בֵּית אָבִי: <sup>52</sup>וְאֵת שֵׁם  
הַשֵּׁנִי קָרָא אֶפְרַיִם כִּי־הַפְרִנִי אֱלֹהִים  
בְּאֶרֶץ עֲנִי:

<sup>53</sup>וַתִּבְלֶינָה שְׁבַע שָׁנֵי הַשָּׁבַע אֲשֶׁר הָיָה  
בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: <sup>54</sup>וַתִּחְלֶינָה שְׁבַע שָׁנֵי  
הָרָעָב לָבוֹא בְּאֶשֶׁר אָמַר יוֹסֵף וַיְהִי רָעָב  
בְּכָל־הָאֲרָצוֹת וּבְכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הָיָה  
לֶחֶם: <sup>55</sup>וַתִּרְעַב כָּל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּצְעַק  
הָעָם אֶל־פְּרֹעֶה לֶלֶחֶם וַיֹּאמֶר פְּרֹעֶה  
לְכָל־מִצְרַיִם לָכֵן אֶל־יוֹסֵף אֲשֶׁר־יֹאמַר  
לָכֵם תַּעֲשׂוּ: <sup>56</sup>וַהֲרָעַב הָיָה עַל כָּל־פְּנֵי  
הָאֲרֶץ וַיִּפְתָּח יוֹסֵף אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר בָּהֶם  
וַיִּשְׁבֹּר לְמִצְרַיִם וַיַּחֲזֶק הָרָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ  
מִצְרַיִם: <sup>57</sup>וְכָל־הָאֲרֶץ בָּאוּ מִצְרַיִם  
לִשְׁבֹּר אֶל־יוֹסֵף בְּיַחֲזֹק הָרָעָב בְּכָל־  
הָאֲרֶץ:

which means "he who causes to forget," to his own situation.

*meaning* Hebrew: *ki*, "because."

*my hardship and my parental home* This is an instance of a single idea expressed by two terms. It means, "my suffering in my parental home."

<sup>52</sup> *Ephraim* The name must have meant either "fertile land," from the stem פרה, or "pastureland," from "afur." Either meaning would suitably describe the future territory of the tribe bearing this name, which was located in the central region of the Land of Israel and blessed with good soil and rainfall.

*made me fertile* The Hebrew verb *hifani*, a wordplay on the name Ephraim, refers to the blessing of abundant descendants.

*the land of my affliction* That is, where I spent 13 years in captivity.

#### THE ONSET OF FAMINE (vv. 53–57)

The entire agricultural economy of Lower Egypt, the northern, virtually rainless area of the country, has always depended on the Nile floods caused by the river's periodic rise during three summer months. There are years when the rains in the southern Sudan are insufficient. A

shortfall of only a few inches could bring famine to Egypt. This phenomenon and the motif of seven-year famines are well documented in Egyptian and other Near Eastern texts.

<sup>54</sup> *in all lands* In actuality, there could not be any natural connection between the famine in Egypt and that in neighboring countries. The situation in Canaan resulted from a prolonged lack of rainfall that had nothing to do with the failure of the Nile to rise.

<sup>55</sup> *Go to Joseph* This verse, which anticipates the next episode, explains why the brothers have to appear in person before Joseph (v. 57).

<sup>56</sup> *Accordingly* For the sake of clarity and for continuity with verse 55, the translation inverts the order of the Hebrew clauses.

*within* The Hebrew word *ba-hem*, literally, "in them," has no antecedent. The ancient versions variously rendered "all the granaries," "all the granaries in which was grain," and "everything in which was grain." These either reflect a different text or are attempts to interpret the difficult Hebrew.

*over the whole world* Literally, "over all the face of the land."

been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my fathers during their sojourns." <sup>10</sup>Then Jacob bade Pharaoh farewell, and left Pharaoh's presence.

<sup>11</sup>So Joseph settled his father and his brothers, giving them holdings in the choicest part of the land of Egypt, in the region of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded. <sup>12</sup>Joseph sustained his father, and his brothers, and all his father's household with bread, down to the little ones.

<sup>13</sup>Now there was no bread in all the world, for the famine was very severe; both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. <sup>14</sup>Joseph gathered in all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, as payment for the rations that were being procured, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's palace. <sup>15</sup>And when the money gave out in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us bread, lest we die before your very eyes; for

*my fathers* In the mouth of Jacob the term refers only to Isaac and Abraham. The former lived to 180 (35:28), the latter to 175 (25:7).

*10. Jacob bade Pharaoh farewell* He saluted the king, as in verse 7.

היו ימי שני חיי ולא השיגו את ימי שני חיי אבותי בימי מגוריהם: <sup>10</sup>ויברך יעקב את-פרעה ויצא מלפני פרעה:

<sup>11</sup>וישב יוסף את-אביו ואת-אחיו ויתן להם אחוזה בארץ מצרים במיטב הארץ בארץ רעמסס כאשר צוה פרעה: <sup>12</sup>ויכלכל יוסף את-אביו ואת-אחיו ואת כל-בית אביו לחם לפי השף:

<sup>13</sup>ולחם אין בכל-הארץ כייכבד הרעב מאד ואלה ארץ מצרים וארץ כנען מפני הרעב: <sup>14</sup>וילקט יוסף את-כל-הכסף הנמצא בארץ-מצרים ובארץ כנען בשבך אשר-הם שוברים ויבא יוסף את-הכסף ביתה פרעה: <sup>15</sup>ויתם הכסף מארץ מצרים ומארץ כנען ויבאו כל-מצרים אל-יוסף לאמר הבה-לנו לחם ולמה נמות נגדך כי אפס כסף:

*and left Pharaoh's presence* The patriarchal period in the history of the people Israel has now come to an end.

## JOSEPH'S AGRARIAN POLICIES (57:11-27)

*11. Joseph settled his father* His role as provider for his family reminds the reader that the famine is still raging.

*the region of Rameses* This is another name for Goshen. The pharaoh Ramses II, in the 13th century B.C.E., enlarged the city of Tanis and made it his capital. Thereafter, his royal name was attached to it. The use of the name here in Joseph's time is anachronistic.

*13. there was no bread* The severity of the remaining years of famine is such that the people become wholly dependent on the state for their survival.

*14. gathered in* Joseph averts disaster through a series of drastic measures that, in effect, nationalize the land and livestock and turn the populace into tenant farmers of the state.

Jacob to sound so bitter about his life. He has been reunited with his beloved son, whom he thought dead, and has been promised a life of ease in Egypt. Jacob's life has been described as "a story with a happy ending that withholds

any simple feeling of happiness at the end. . . . Although he gets everything he wanted, it is not in the way he would have wanted. Everything has been a struggle" (Alter).



the money is gone!" <sup>16</sup>And Joseph said, "Bring your livestock, and I will sell to you against your livestock, if the money is gone." <sup>17</sup>So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them bread in exchange for the horses, for the stocks of sheep and cattle, and the asses; thus he provided them with bread that year in exchange for all their livestock. <sup>18</sup>And when that year was ended, they came to him the next year and said to him, "We cannot hide from my lord that, with all the money and animal stocks consigned to my lord, nothing is left at my lord's disposal save our persons and our farmland. <sup>19</sup>Let us not perish before your eyes, both we and our land. Take us and our land in exchange for bread, and we with our land will be serfs to Pharaoh; provide the seed, that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become a waste."

<sup>20</sup>So Joseph gained possession of all the farmland of Egypt for Pharaoh, every Egyptian having sold his field because the famine was too much for them; thus the land passed over to

<sup>16</sup> ויאמר יוסף הכי מקניכם ואתנה לכם במקניכם אם-אפס כסף: <sup>17</sup> ויביאו את-מקניהם אל-יוסף ויתן להם יוסף לחם בסוסים ובמקנה הצאן ובמקנה הבקר ובחמרים וינהלם בלחם בכל-מקניהם בשנה ההוא: <sup>18</sup> ונתתם השנה ההוא ויבאו אליו בשנה השנית ויאמרו לו לא-נבחר מאדני כי אם-תם הכסף ומקנה הבדמה אל-אדני לא נשאר לפני אדני בלתי אם-גוייתנו ואדמתנו: <sup>19</sup> למה נמות לעיניך גם-אנחנו גם אדמתנו קנה-אתנו ואת-אדמתנו בלחם ונהיה אנחנו ואדמתנו עבדים לפרעה ותר-זרע ונחיה ולא נמות והאדמה לא תשם:

<sup>20</sup> ויקן יוסף את-כל-אדמת מצרים לפרעה כי-מכרו מצרים איש שדהו כי חזק עליהם הרעב ונתהי הארץ לפרעה:

*into Pharaoh's palace* Joseph took nothing for himself.

**16. sell** He will sell to them the "bread" mentioned in verse 15.

**17. horses** This is the first time the Bible mentions the horse, which was widespread in the Near East by the middle of the 16th century B.C.E. Its place at the head of the list marks its high value.

**18. the next year** Literally, "the second year." This could refer to the second year of the famine, to two years after the arrival of Jacob, to the second of the remaining five years of famine, or to the seventh year of the famine. The last might explain why the people ask for seed. The predicted end of the famine is at hand, and it is

time to prepare for next year's harvest. Farmers continue to sow their fields in years of famine.

**19. Take us and our land** The suggestion to barter livestock for food had come from Joseph. Now the Egyptians initiate the proposal to surrender their land and become serfs of the crown.

*provide the seed* Egyptian sources document the practice of the state lending seed corn to farmers for repayment at harvest time.

**20. Joseph gained possession** Private landed property existed in all periods of Egyptian history, but after the expulsion of the Hyksos in the middle of the 16th century B.C.E., the major part of the land became the actual property of the state.

#### HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

**47:19 serfs** The Sages placed so many restrictions on slave owners that slavery became economically disadvantageous (e.g., BT Kid. 20a). In any case, the Torah requires us to help the poor so that they should not have to sell themselves into slavery in order to repay a debt (cf. Lev. 25:25,35).

Pharaoh. <sup>21</sup>And he removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt's border to the other. <sup>22</sup>Only the land of the priests he did not take over, for the priests had an allotment from Pharaoh, and they lived off the allotment which Pharaoh had made to them; therefore they did not sell their land.

<sup>23</sup>Then Joseph said to the people, "Whereas I have this day acquired you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed for you to sow the land. <sup>24</sup>And when harvest comes, you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be yours as seed for the fields and as food for you and those in your households, and as nourishment for your children." <sup>25</sup>And they said, "You have saved our lives! We are grateful to my lord, and we shall be serfs to Pharaoh." <sup>26</sup>And Joseph made it into a land law in Egypt, which is still valid, that a fifth should be Pharaoh's; only the land of the priests did not become Pharaoh's.

<sup>21</sup>וְאֶת־הָעָם הָעִבְרִי אֶתְּנָה לְפָרֹעַ מִקְצֵה גְבוּל־מִצְרָיִם וְעַד־קֶצֶדוֹ: <sup>22</sup>רַק אֲדָמַת הַכֹּהֲנִים לֹא קָנָה בִּי חֹק לַכֹּהֲנִים מֵאֵת פֶּרֶעָה וְאָכְלוּ אֶת־חֶקֶם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָהֶם פֶּרֶעָה עַל־פִּן לֹא מָכְרוּ אֶת־אֲדָמָתָם: <sup>23</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־הָעָם הֵן קָנִיתִי אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם וְאֶת־אֲדָמַתְכֶם לַפֶּרֶעָה הֲאֵלֶכֶם זֶרַע וּנְרַעְתֶּם אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה: <sup>24</sup>וְהָיָה בְּתֵבוֹתַי וּנְתַתֶּם חֲמִישִׁית לַפֶּרֶעָה וְאַרְבַּע הִיְדֹת יִהְיֶה לָכֶם לְזֶרַע הַשָּׂדֶה וְלֹאֲכֹלְכֶם וּלְאֲשֶׁר בְּבֵתֵיכֶם וּלְאֲכַל לְטֶפְלְכֶם: <sup>25</sup>וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִחִיתָנוּ נִמְצָאֵהוּן בְּעֵינֵי אֲדֹנָי וְהִינֵנו עֲבָדִים לַפֶּרֶעָה: <sup>26</sup>וַיִּשָּׂם אֹתָהּ יוֹסֵף לְחֹק עַד־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה עַל־אֲדָמַת מִצְרָיִם לַפֶּרֶעָה לְחֹמֶשׁ רַק אֲדָמַת הַכֹּהֲנִים לִבְדָּם לֹא הָיְתָה לַפֶּרֶעָה:

מפסיר

**21. he removed the population town by town** The text is generally understood as referring to a population transfer on a large scale, probably to remove farmers from nationalized lands.

**22. the land of the priests** Because the temples received fixed royal endowments, they were under no pressure to barter their lands for food or seed.

**23. here is seed** The provision of seed depends on the barter of the peasants' land for food.

**24. one-fifth to Pharaoh** The state-controlled land is cultivated by the former land-owners, who pay a tax of 20 percent of the harvest in return for the privilege and for the seed

allotment. Such an interest rate was not considered excessive in the ancient Near East.

**25. grateful** Joseph's actions must be judged in the context of the ancient Near Eastern world, by whose norms Joseph emerges here as a shrewd, successful, and highly admirable administrator.

**26. still valid** The Hebrew formula meaning "until this day" (*ad ha-yom ha-zeh*) is used here in a legal context (as in 1 Sam. 30:25). The narrator here bears witness to the fact that the ancient laws described in verses 22 and 24 were still in use in his day. The statement reflects the fact that at various periods of Egyptian history individual temple estates were exempt from taxation by royal decree.

**22. Only the land of the priests** Among Israelites, priests and Levites owned no land (Num. 18:23–24). They depended on the tithes and gifts of worshipers, which led them to identify with the poor among the people. In Egypt, by contrast, the priests were a privileged class, likely to be sympathetic to other privileged elements in Egyptian society.

**23–24.** Rashbam criticizes Joseph as ruthless, comparing his dispossessing the people of their lands to the actions of Sennacherib (infamous Assyrian king; 2 Kings 18, esp. vv.31–32).

**25. we shall be serfs to Pharaoh** A generation later, the Egyptians would take their revenge on Joseph for having reduced them to slavery, by enslaving his people.

<sup>27</sup>Thus Israel settled in the country of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; they acquired holdings in it, and were fertile and increased greatly.

וַיָּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן  
וַיַּאֲחִזּוּ בָהּ וַיִּפְרוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ מְאֹד׃

**27. Thus Israel** Following the digression, the narrative resumes the story of the Israelites. This verse is closely connected with verse 11.

**settled** This verb is in the singular, whereas the succeeding three verbs are each plural. The inconsistency is deliberate. Israel the individual

Patriarch merges with the national entity. See Comments to 46:3ff.

**and were fertile and increased greatly** God's blessing, bestowed on Jacob on his return from Haran (35:11) and repeated as he was about to go down to Egypt (46:3), is now being fulfilled.



Naphtali, Gad and Asher. <sup>5</sup>The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt. <sup>6</sup>Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. <sup>7</sup>But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.

<sup>8</sup>A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. <sup>9</sup>And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. <sup>10</sup>Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they

יבולן ובנימין: <sup>4</sup> וְגָד וְנַפְתָּלִי וְאָשֶׁר: <sup>5</sup> וַיְהִי כָל-נֶפֶשׁ יִצְחָק יַעֲקֹב שְׁבַעִים נֶפֶשׁ וַיּוֹסֶף הָיָה בְּמִצְרַיִם: <sup>6</sup> וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף וְכָל-אָחָיו וְכָל הַדּוֹר הַהוּא: <sup>7</sup> וַיִּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׁרְצוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ בְּמִאֵד מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם: פ

<sup>8</sup> וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע אֶת-יוֹסֵף: <sup>9</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-עַמּוֹ הִנֵּה עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וַעֲצֻמִּים מְאֹד: <sup>10</sup> הֲבֵיאָה

**5. Jacob's issue** Literally, "that came out of Jacob's loin." In the Bible, the Hebrew for "thigh, loin," (*yerekh*) is a euphemism for the male organ of procreation.

**seventy** The number 70 in the Bible usually is not meant to be taken literally. It evokes the idea of totality, of being all-inclusive, on a large scale. Here, it is a round number.

**6.** The entire immigrant generation had died out by the time the oppression began.

**7.** This description of the Israelites' extraordinary fertility (in language that is also used in the Creation narrative of Gen. 1:20,28) suggests the concept of the community of Israel in Egypt as a miniature universe, self-contained and apart from the larger Egyptian society. It is the nucleus of a new humanity, spiritually speaking.

**the land** Not the whole of Egypt, but the area of Israelite settlement known as Goshen.

#### THE OPPRESSION (vv. 8–14)

The Israelites experience sudden cataclysmic change. The most reasonable explanation for the Israelites' change in fortune lies in the policies adopted by pharaohs of the Nineteenth Dynasty (ca. 1304–1200 B.C.E.), especially by Ramses II (1290–1224 B.C.E.), who shifted Egypt's administrative and strategic center to the eastern delta of the Nile, where he undertook building projects that required a huge local labor force. "A new king" may also refer to a new dynasty.

**8. who did not know Joseph** He was ignorant of or indifferent to the extraordinary service that Joseph had rendered to Egypt and the crown.

**know** This is the first appearance in Exodus of the verb יָדַע, a key term in the Exodus narratives, occurring more than 20 times in the first 14 chapters. The usual rendering, "to know," hardly does justice to the richness of its meanings, which include emotions and relatedness as well as the intellect. The use of the word here to describe Pharaoh may anticipate "that you [Pharaoh] may know" in 9:29.

**9–10.** The historical situation that prompted his fears may plausibly be reconstructed if it is assumed that the text refers to Ramses II. The eastern delta of the Nile was vulnerable to penetration from Asia. In the middle of the 18th century B.C.E., it had been infiltrated by the Hyksos, an Egyptian term meaning "rulers of foreign lands." The Hyksos were a conglomeration of ethnic groups among whom Semites predominated. They gradually took over Lower Egypt and ruled it until their expulsion in the second half of the 16th century B.C.E. After that, the delta was neglected by the central government, although many Semites remained in the region. A revival of interest in that part of Egypt began with the reign of Haremheb (ca. 1330–1306 B.C.E.) and accelerated under his successors. It probably heightened sensitivity to the presence of a large body of foreigners in that strategic area.

**Israelite people** The unique Hebrew phrase *am b'nei yisra-el* (the nation of the descendants of Israel) is found only here. It tells us that the family of the patriarch Israel (Jacob) has become the people Israel and hence are a threat to the Egyptians.

**deal shrewdly** Literally, "wisely." To control

Jacob had to wrestle and change to become Israel, and his children, the children of Jacob, also had to struggle to outgrow their less admirable traits to become the children of Israel.

**8. who did not know Joseph** Pharaoh knew that Joseph had saved Egypt, but did not care.

He did not let the information change his outlook (MRE 7:137). Through much of Jewish history, the people's well-being depended on the goodwill of a ruler. When the leadership changed, the fortunes of the Jewish community often changed as well. Pharaoh begins by

may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.”<sup>11</sup> So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Rameses.<sup>12</sup> But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites.

<sup>13</sup>The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites <sup>14</sup>the various labors that they made them perform. Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.

the growth of the Israelite population. Pharaoh unwittingly challenges the will of God, for the divine promise to Abraham (Gen. 22:17 and elsewhere) had pledged that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of the heaven and the sands of the seashore.

*and rise from the ground* The literal meaning of the Hebrew (*v'aloh min ha-aretz*) may come from a forgotten idiom that means “to rise from a lowly state,” or “to gain ascendancy over” (see Hos. 2:2). Or it may simply mean “leave the land.”

**11.** The Israelites are conscripted for compulsory unpaid labor on public works projects for indefinite periods.

*they built* The Hebrew may refer to founding new cities as well as to rebuilding those that existed.

*Pharaoh* The title combines two Egyptian words, *per-o* (literally, “the great house”). They originally applied to the royal palace and court; later, during the Nineteenth Dynasty (ca. 1304–

נִתְחַפְּמָה לוֹ פִּי-יִרְבֶּה וְהָיָה בֵּית-קִרְאָנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסָף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שְׂנְאֵינוּ וְיִלָּחֶם בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ: <sup>11</sup> וַיִּשְׁמְנוּ עָלָיו שָׂרֵי מִסִּים לְמַעַן עֲנֹתוֹ בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיִּבְנוּ עָרֵי מִסְכְּנוֹת לְפָרֹעַ אֶת-פִּתּוֹם וְאֶת-רַעַמְסֵס: <sup>12</sup> וַיִּבְאֶשׁ יַעֲקֹב אֹתוֹ בֶּן יִרְבֶּה וְכֵן יִפְרֹץ וַיִּקְצֹוּ מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

<sup>13</sup> וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרֹךְ: <sup>14</sup> וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת-חַיֵּיהֶם בְּעִבְדָּה קָשָׁה בְּחֹמֶר וּבִלְבָּנִים וּבְכָל-עֲבָדָה בַּשָּׂדֶה אֶת כָּל-עֲבָדָתָם אֲשֶׁר-עָבְדוּ בָּהֶם בְּפָרֹךְ:

1200 B.C.E.), it was an honorific title for the reigning monarch. It is analogous to present-day use of “the Palace” or “the White House.”

*Pithom and Rameses* Both names are well known in Egyptian sources, but their precise location has not been fixed. Pithom is never again mentioned in the Bible. It was identified with a location in the eastern Nile delta (Tell er-Ratabah, in the east of Wadi Tumilat). The name derives from the Egyptian *per-atum*, which means “the House of (the sun god) Atum,” indicating the presence of a major temple dedicated to the primeval creator god of that name. Raamses can be none other than the famous delta residence built by and named after Pharaoh Ramses II; its beauty and glory are extolled in poems still extant. The city was situated in “the region of Goshen,” a phrase that is synonymous with “the region of Rameses,” where the Israelites lived.

**13–14.** The Israelites now are subjected to forced labor in construction and agriculture, as opposed to the labor exacted from them earlier

refusing to acknowledge Joseph, and later refusing to acknowledge God, saying, “Who is the LORD that I should heed Him?” (Exod. 5:2).

**14. harsh labor** One of the Sages reads “harsh labor” (*b'farekh*) as “with soft words” (*b'feh rakh*). Instead of confronting the Israelites with threats and demands, the Egyptians hid their evil intent behind soft, innocuous words, assuring the Israelites that this was for

their own good. The word “*b'farekh*” occurs one other time in the Torah. In Lev. 25:46, the Israelites are told never to treat their own slaves *b'farekh*. Some oppressed people, given the opportunity, would be eager to reverse the roles and oppress others. We are taught that, because we know how it feels, we should never oppress others. Abraham Lincoln reflected the teaching of the Torah in his statement: “As I

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**1:14, they made life bitter for them** The Haggadah of Pesah connects to this verse the practice of eating bitter herbs at the Seider.