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by Rabbi Yaakov Finestone

YOU ARE MY SLAVE!

PARSHAS VAYIGASH

Rav Yisroel Belsky zt"l spent summers in Camp Agudah. His erev Shabbos was very busy, packed with shiurim, private meetings, phone calls, and Shabbos preparations. On Shabbos, before he joined his family for the Shabbos meal, he would sit at the waiters' table. The waiters had to daven Maariv early and eat a somewhat hurried Shabbos meal so that they could serve the staff families. Rav Belsky would sit and sing zemiros with them, transforming their rushed meal into a beautiful Shabbos meal that they would cherish for the rest of their lives.

Rav Belsky's greatness in Torah was matched by his great concern for other Jews.

(Rabbi Shimon Finkelman in Yated Ne'eman)

Egypt and the surrounding countries were in the midst of a severe famine, just as Yosef had prophesized. The Egyptian people had stored tons of grain during the seven years of plenty. However, all the grain that they had stored rotted. The only grain that remained was that which Yosef had stored for Pharaoh's royal granaries. The Egyptians bought grain from Pharaoh with their money. When they had no money left, they bartered grain for their livestock. Those exchanges helped the Egyptians with food for the first year of the famine. When the second year started, The Egyptians sold their land to Pharaoh. Then, as they needed more food, they sold themselves as slaves. *"Yosef said to the people, 'Behold, Today I have purchased you and your lands for Pharaoh....'"* (Bereishis 47:23).

The **Ohr HaChaim** asks, since Yosef acquired the Egyptians as slaves, why was it necessary to acquire their land as well? The **Talmud** (Pesachim 88B) teaches us that when one acquires a slave one automatically acquires everything that the slave owns. Thus, there was no need to mention the

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acquisition of these Egyptians' lands separately. **Ohr HaChaim** answers that it is possible that Yosef did not acquire the Egyptians as actual slaves. The Egyptians became hired hands who were not free to leave their employment. Rather, they were

obligated to continue to farm the land that they had farmed previously and pay a portion of their harvest to Pharaoh. As a result, Yosef had to acquire the land separately.

Meshech Chachma has a different understanding. He explains that Yosef did enslave the entire population of Egypt to Pharaoh. **Meshech Chachma** asks what was the significance of the Torah telling this to us? **Meshech Chachma** gives an astounding answer. Yosef purposely enslaved the Egyptian populace in anticipation of an event that was going to occur many years in the future. That is also why the Torah makes a point of it.

The **Talmud** (Sanhedrin 91A) records a fascinating story. After Alexander of Macedon, known as Alexander the Great, conquered part of the world,

the people of Egypt approached him with a claim against the Jewish People. The Egyptian people said to Alexander, "It says in the Torah, 'And Hashem gave the people favor in the eyes of Egypt, and they lent them...' (Shmos 12:36). Give us the silver and gold that the Jews took from us. They claimed that they were borrowing it, and they never returned it." Geviha ben Pesisa asked the Jewish sages for permission to defend the Jewish People. The Sages gave him permission, and he went to defend the Jewish People. Geviha ben Pesisa said to the Egyptians, "From where are you citing proof that you are entitled to the silver and gold?" They said to him, "From the Torah." Geviha ben Pesisa said to them, "I, too, will cite proof to you only from the Torah, as it is stated, 'And the sojourning of the children of Israel, who dwelt in Egypt, was four hundred and thirty years' (Exodus 12:40), during which they were enslaved to Egypt, engaged in hard manual labor. Give us [the Jewish People] the wages for the work performed by the 600,000 men above the age of twenty (see Shmos 12:37) whom you enslaved in Egypt for four hundred and thirty years." Alexander of Macedon gave the Egyptians three days to consider the matter and respond to Geviha. They examined the matter but were unable to find a response to Geviha's claim.

Geviha's argument explained why the Jewish people were not obligated to return the silver and gold vessels borrowed from Pharaoh, since he was the one who enslaved them, and he owed them back wages. He made them build the cities Pison and Ramses (Shmos 1:11). However, why were the Jews entitled to keep the vessels of their Egyptian neighbors?

Yosef anticipated this argument. That is why he made all the Egyptians slaves of Pharaoh. As slaves, all their possessions belonged to Pharaoh. Therefore, the Jewish People were entitled to keep everyone's vessels as payment for the debt that Pharaoh owed them.

Yosef had a daunting task. "*He was the one who sold to all the people of the land*" (Bereishis 42:6). According to **Sforno**, Yosef was involved in every sale of grain! He did not trust his servants with the task because the sums involved were too great. Despite Yosef's heavy involvement, he thought about how he could do something now that would be helpful to his people, approximately 1,500 years in the future!

Yosef displayed true greatness! He thought about others! He even thought about others when he was so busy! He even thought about helping other Jews in the distant future!

This is a beautiful lesson for us.

We should ALWAYS be thinking about how we can help our fellow Jews!

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Rabbi Yaakov Finestone is the director of JEP Queens. For almost 50 years JEP Queens has been in the forefront of kiruv. JEP has changed the lives of thousands of Jewish children enrolled in public schools and kiruv schools. Many are shomrei Torah and mitzvos today because of JEP.

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