

# Zera Shimshon

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## Chapter X: Mikeitz (Gen. 41:1–44:17)

### Essay 9. The collection of grain

**פסוק** "ומעש הארץ בשבע שני השבע לקמצים". קשה מהו הלשון "קמצים" ומה ענין קומץ לכאן?

There is a verse: **“During the seven years of plenty, the land produced in handfuls.”**<sup>1</sup>  
There is a question: What is the language “in handfuls,” and what significance is “handful” to this?

ויובן עם מה שפירש בעל צרור המור על פסוק "וחמש את-ארץ מצרים" שכל אחד נפריש חמש מתבואת ביתו כדי שיהיה למחיה בשבע שני הרעב. ולכן אמר הכתוב "ומעש הארץ בשבע שני השבע לקמצים", כמו הקומץ שהוא חמש אצבעות כה היו עושים מדות מחומשות להפריש מהם החומש. אבל קשה איך נספיק חומש אחד לבדו בשבע שני השובע כדי לזון כל העם בשבע שני הרעב, ומן הראוי היה להפריש החצי של כל שנה משני השובע כדי שיהיה להם למחיה בשבע שני הרעב.

This will be understood by what the author of *Tzror HaMor*<sup>2</sup> explained on the verse, “Let Pharaoh take action and appoint officers over the land and take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of plenty,”<sup>3</sup> that everyone should separate a fifth from the produce of his household in order that there would be food in the seven years of famine. Therefore, Scripture said, “During the seven years of plenty, the land produced in handfuls,”<sup>4</sup> like the handful which is five fingers, thus they shall make measures from the handfuls to separate from them a fifth.

But it is difficult to understand how taking one fifth alone during the seven years of plenty would be enough to feed the entire people during the seven years of famine. It would have been appropriate to set aside half of each year of the seven years of plenty in order that they would have food for the seven years of famine.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. 41:47.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Abraham Saba (1440–1508), *Tzror HaMor* (Venice 1523). (The first edition incorrectly gave the Roshei Teivot ה"ז, instead of ה"ז.)

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 41:34.

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 41:47.

ואיתא במדרש "צמחות" אינו אומר "עולות" אלא "צמחות" רמז לו ששני הרעב יצמחו אבל לא יעלו, וכן הנה כיון ששעברו שתי שנים בא יעקב למצרים ופלה הרעב עכ"ל. וכן אמרו ז"ל על פסוק "וקמו שבע שני רעב אחריהו", ששבע שני השבע אמר "הנה שבע שנים באות שבע גדול", ובשבע שני הרעב אמר "וקמו" ולא אמר "ובאו", כדי שלא יתפסוהו אם יראו שלא יתקיימו שבע שני רעב אלא אמר "וקמו" כלומר נתחילו ולא יסיימו לבא, כי בבוא יעקב אז נשלמו שנות הרעב עכ"ל.

The Torah describes Pharaoh's second dream: "He fell asleep and dreamed a second time: Seven ears of grain, solid and healthy, grew on a single stalk. But seven ears, thin and scorched by the east wind, sprouted after them."<sup>5</sup>

**It's brought in the Midrash (cited in the *Tzror HaMor*) that the Torah specifically used the word "sprouted." It did not say "grew," but "sprouted," as a hint to [Joseph] that in the years of famine, crops would sprout but they would not grow, and thus it was that after two years had passed, Jacob came to Egypt, and the famine ceased.**

**Also, [the rabbis] of blessed memory said on the verse, "After them will come seven years of famine,"<sup>6</sup> that in the seven years of plenty, they said, "here seven years of great plenty are coming," but in the seven years of famine, it says, "seven years of famine will arise after them," and it doesn't say "are coming."<sup>7</sup> That is in order that won't be caught unprepared if they will see that the seven years of famine weren't fulfilled. Rather, it says "will arise," as if to say, [the years of famine] will start but they won't come completely, because with the coming of Jacob, the years of famine will be finished.**

ולכן יוסף שהיה יודע שלא הנה צריך להם תבואה אלא לשתי שנים לא הכריחם אלא לתת חומש, כי כלל גדול בנדנו המבזבז אל יבזבז יותר מחומש. ועוד כי ארבע חומשים יהיה להם למאכל ביתם בשבע שני השבע וישפירו שבע חומשים לשתי שני הרעב, ארבע חומשים בשנה. ואף על פי שצדיין צריך חומש אחד, כי לשתי שנים צריך שמונה חומשים, לכן אמר "ויצברו־בך תסת גד־פרעה", כלומר אף על פי שכל אחד יתן חומש אפלו הכי פרעה יצבור הרבה יותר כדי להשלים אותו החומש.

**Therefore, Joseph, who knew that they would need grain for only two years,<sup>8</sup> forced them to give only a fifth, because we have a great rule: "One who dispenses [his money to charity] should not dispense more than one-fifth."<sup>9</sup> Also, after giving one fifth, they will have four fifths for food in their households during the years of plenty. After seven years of plenty, during which Joseph collected one-fifth of each annual harvest, they would have the equivalent of seven-fifths of an annual harvest remaining, [to be spread over] the two years of famine. As**

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 41:5–6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Judah Loew ben Bezalel (d. 1600) ("Maharal of Prague"), *Gur Aryeh al haTorah* (Prague 1578).

<sup>8</sup> Rashi on 47:19: "As soon as Jacob came to Egypt a blessing came with his arrival: they began to sow and the famine came to an end. Thus do we read in the Tosefta of Sotah [10:3]." The translator does not know if there is a source that Joseph knew that the famine would only last two years.

<sup>9</sup> Ketubot 50a.

noted above, after taking one-fifth for each year during the year of plenty, they had **four-fifths** remaining in [each] year. Thus, they would still need one fifth, because if during each of the seven years of plenty, they were able to manage with four-fifths of a year's worth of grain, then for two years of famine, they would need four-fifths times two, or **eight fifths**. Therefore, it says, "and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh's authority,"<sup>10</sup> as if to say, even though everyone will give a fifth, even so, Pharaoh will collect and store much more from his own crops, in order to complete that missing fifth for his people at the end of the second year of famine.

ובזוה יובן הטעם שלאחר שבא יעקב ופלה הרעב, אמר להם יוסף "והיה בתבואת ונתתם חמישית לפרעה". ולמה שם עליהם חק זה אלא לפי שבשבע של הרעב הוצרך פרעה לתת חומש יותר משלו לכן שם עליהם חק זה. ועוד כי הרעב פלה בזכות פרעה ואם לא היה פלה הרעב היו צריכים מתחלה לתת יותר מחומש, ולכן עתה נתנו חומש לפרעה.

In this way the reason will be understood, that after Jacob came and the famine ceased, Joseph told [the Egyptian people] (Genesis 47:24), "and when harvest comes, you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh."<sup>11</sup> Why did he place this law upon them, to continue taking one fifth of the people's crops, after the end of the famine? Only because in the seven years of the famine, which actually would end after two years, Pharaoh had to give more than one fifth of his own crops, as we have said above, to complete the missing one fifth that his people would need for the end of the second year of the famine. That was more than his own share, therefore [Joseph] put this law upon [the Egyptian people], so that Pharaoh would be made whole again. Also, because the famine ended in the merit of Pharaoh, and if the famine had not ended, they would have needed from the start to give more than a fifth, and therefore now they will give a fifth to Pharaoh.

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<sup>10</sup> Gen. 41:35.

<sup>11</sup> Gen. 37:24.