

Disaster Preparedness: Anew From The Ancient Old

Tuesday, 3 June 2025, 12:09 pm

Press Release: High Atlas Foundation

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Marrakech

The Kingdom of Morocco is taking the wise measure of building 36 storage facilities that will serve the people's serious needs during severe crises, should they ever arise, such as with the horrifying 2023 earthquake in the High Atlas region. Ancient knowledge captured in the biblical story of Egypt's cataclysmic famine can help guide nations today as they prepare for climactic and other forms of threatening instability that can occur with sudden destructive consequences.

The oral transmission of information through millennia embodied in the Midrash illuminates helpful guidelines for effectively preparing and ultimately saving lives or even civilizations. At the outset, a critical first lesson is that the cost of preparation today is less than the cost that will be borne when calamity strikes. Egypt's preparation before the onslaught of the famine, when there was relative price stability, was a critical feature in their survival during the period of profound scarcity and the associated increasing of prices.

The biblical Egyptian experience also notes that, even with Joseph's correct interpretation of the pharaoh's dream and forewarning, the famine still came with a suddenness as if the prior phase of abundance had hardly existed. Even when we are aware of potential impending disaster—as we are with today's climate crisis—when we experience its devastating effects, it feels as if there was no forewarning; whatever bounty may have existed, its abrupt end can be so severe that we feel as if times of plenty never were. This underscores the centrality of preparedness and how vital are the measures we take before a crisis befalls. After all, once the crisis happens, what was prior feels ended forever and even forgotten.

Egypt at that time also contended with the people's lack of appreciation for the essential measures, particularly food surplus storage, to prepare against the looming devastation. The people's gratitude came only after the fact when Joseph's foresight with the support of the pharaoh was widely realized to be what saved them. Leaders today ought not to expect thanks for crisis preparedness but ought to find comfort in the fact that should catastrophe occur, the measures they have taken to save the people will only then be understood and acknowledged.

The Midrashic commentaries of Egypt's ancient experience note that their famine devastation struck the wealthy at least as profoundly as anyone; no one was spared and all faced its brutal force. Rather than indulging during the years of abundance, all people were strictly limited to meeting essential needs while the surplus was saved and preserved, gathering essential provisions in order to survive. This is a vital guideline in that overconsumption during periods of relative plenty can undermine the vital measures needed to gather and preserve the necessary resources to live. Overindulgence during abundance—even when measures for storage have been taken—will see its harmful effect when serious scarcity is visited upon society.

Egypt established the arrangement that essentially a flat tax of 20 percent was levied during the preceding non-crisis period to prepare for their coming disaster. The management of that across-the-board arrangement was commonly and immediately understood, more able to be regulated for compliance, and seemingly fair.

Egypt's stockpiling was not of a singular grain variety, but of a range of innovatively preserved food and essentials. Product diversity for overwhelming human needs contributes to overall survival by stabilizing or dampening (even to some degree) dramatic price spikes and not having to rely on any single or even few products. The biblical text also notes that the storage procedure of different foods and grains require different manners of handling. However, general principles included storing in locations closest to where the products were produced to effectively preserve them.

This touches upon a key tenet of disaster preparedness in regard to storage, which is that the Egyptians localized it. Each city and town had their own facility. Organizing storage in this decentralized way involved people nearby in the collection and maintenance of the facilities and therefore reduced any tendency to panic when the onslaught occurred. Every region preserved its own produce and they took upon themselves such strategies as to use the local resources in the preservation process. There are some natural preservatives they used that should be considered today, such as quicksilver and mercury as insect repellents, salty soil, dust, ash, and woodchips.

In a number of instances, storage houses were underground. When we consider the weather features scientists describe in relation to our modern climate crises, such as heat domes of increasing voracity (that we are already seeing in Morocco) and ruinous winds, we should seriously consider underground storage facilities.

Notably, even as ancient Egypt's building and maintenance of storage was local, the dispersing of goods for the survival of the people was centralized to achieve regional balance and minimize waste. Notably, productive divisions of responsibilities between the local and national levels are highly consistent with Morocco's contemporary decentralization roadmap and system it is forging.

In the distribution of food and other vital essentials administered by Joseph, Egypt did not immediately open the storehouses when the people asked and even "cried" when the effects of famine were felt. People were able to endure during its beginning phases, and it was only when the famine became "severe" that the storehouses were opened. For Egypt to endure its seven-year civilizational threat, it could only open its storehouses when the threat level was significantly acute.

The storage facilities designated for the most serious disasters should be very specific as to when the threshold for their opening should take place. Opening them too soon could use resources too early and not provide enough resources to sustain the people throughout the entirety of potentially prolonged crises.

The location of the storehouses is also of major significance. Their placement should, for example, consider that in Morocco's earthquake the municipalities furthest from the provincial capital did not receive support as immediately as those in closer proximity, which is often the case worldwide with humanitarian service delivery. The most distant municipalities from provincial capitals might border a municipality of another province that is also relatively remote from its regional center. Storage facilities should be established near enough for access by those peripheral locations. This will have the stabilizing impact of less migration during times of crises and thereby place less pressure upon provincial, regional, and national capitals.

Finally, the biblical text and the Midrashic commentaries do describe Joseph's qualities as well as effective management attributes that are essential for societies to survive through cataclysmic events. The attention to detail on the part of national leaders is absolutely vital, and becoming somewhat of a grain, food, and critical supply merchant was not beneath Joseph, a prophet. Immediately upon being assigned the lifesaving task to prepare for what could have amounted to doom, he travelled from city to city, place to place, covering the entire land of Egypt, catalyzing and assisting its people in their actions to participate in saving their civilization. Shared purpose and communal direction were discussed and realized, avoiding what could have been widespread panic and enabling survival.

Our leaders today need to have a global humanistic vision, be entirely steeped in knowledge of the local situations' specificities, and sincerely connected through travel and close proximity to the people they serve. The management of storage facilities could not be relied upon to be a strictly bureaucratic function, but one of committed, focused, and immediate leadership to help steer through the seriousness of what had befallen them.

The scripture and Midrash point out that surrounding nations too were saved by Egypt's preparedness. It was its bounty and storage that spared people, communities, and countries beyond Egypt. The viceroy and pharaoh allowed those from abroad to come and obtain supplies to survive, which not only achieved their societies' continuation, but also brought essential revenue to Egypt and allowed for growth in the years following the end of the famine.

The Midrash speaks of the kindness and generosity of the viceroy as a person who did not speak harshly, who was discerning and wise in his consideration of the future ramifications of present actions. Food distribution required compassion and focus, and was a matter of cost to ensure survival; non-depletion of resources required an unusual thoughtfulness and calculation.

Most of all, consider the exceptionality of such a person who travelled so far and constantly, who connected with the inhabitants in all parts of his nation, and who provided in accordance with the children of families and their needs. For one to be so effectual as to save nations beyond his own provides a guide for us today, four thousand years later, as we too face imminent threats. Perhaps it could be helpful to our beloved Kingdom of Morocco, as it sets out to apply lessons of recent years and of the human condition and build storage facilities to save its people, should it ever be needed.

Morocco has all the biozones of Northern Africa and the Middle East and is not only of a diverse people but of vast biodiversity. Morocco, long committed to South-South unity, may be that breadbasket that not only will save itself, but even countries surrounding it, should it succeed in storing in preparation for what this world can put upon us.

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