THE FOLLOWING STORY IS TOLD IN THE

Bible (Genesis 47: 20-21):

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, for the Egyptians had sold their fields because the famine had become hard for them; and the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, Joseph moved them from all over the realm to the cities.

In these two sentences, the silence outweighs the story, for who could retell the anguish of displacement and relocation that these two verses implied for so many? In reflecting on Joseph's act and its emotional impact, the late Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, Dr. J.H. Hertz, reasoned: "The cities became 'concentration camps' for facilitating the distribution of food." With this comment, Dr. Hertz meant to make Joseph's action seem less heartless and perhaps even kind for, now, Joseph could better feed the Egyptians.

"Concentration camps?" Did the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire write that Joseph had set up "concentration camps?" Lesser words have been eliminated from the use of morally sensitive men and women! Actually, Dr. Hertz did write that Joseph had set up "concentration camps" in Egypt and he did mean that comment to humanize Joseph's seemingly cruel act. But Dr. Hertz published those words in May, 1936, the year of the first edition of his translation and commentary. In that year (and, in October 1937, when the first one-volume edition appeared), the words "concentration camp" did not have the horror attached to them that they were to have later. In 1936-7, the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire did not know what the near future held, what the words "concentration camp" were to come to mean. Strange, perhaps shocking, to tell, Dr. Hertz did not make any change in the March, 1941, American edition of his translation and commentary, for the phrase occurs as published in 1936 (ad loc., page 117). Did he not know in 1941? Or was he unaware of the reference, preoccupied perhaps with greater problems?

To be sure, the Holocaust made it impossible to leave in the text a reference to Joseph setting up "concentration camps" in Egypt. Whatever Joseph did, whatever his motive, he certainly did not set up "concentration camps" in the sense that those words acquired after World War II.

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And, after the death of the late Chief Rabbi in 1960, the trustees of his estate issued a second edition. This one included some additional material and, here and there, a change was made in the text itself. At Genesis 47:21, the comment was changed to read: “The cities became depots for facilitating the distribution of food.” (Interestingly, some copies of the 1958 printing read “depots” and some read “concentration camps.”)

Of all small things
That have the most infernal power to grow,
Few may be larger than a few small words
That may not say themselves and be forgotten.

Edward Arlington Robinson

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