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“As for the nation, he resettled it by cities” (Gen. 47:21)

The biblical account of Joseph’s economic initiatives, particularly his re-distribution of the Egyptian population during the famine years, has been regarded as problematic on a number of counts. At the least, it seems superfluous or irrelevant to the Torah’s grander ideological messages. Worse, the plan Joseph engineered, entailing mass exile and urban re-location of innocent citizens, with all the human suffering it implicitly caused, seems to be ethically questionable. This essay considers the real tactical motivations involved, additional more metaphysical concerns, and certain crucial text-critical aspects of the sources in the attempt to shed light on the events this verse recounts. Traditional Jewish commentary and contemporary historical and economic theory are brought to bear in evaluating the positive effects of the agrarian reforms Joseph introduced.