

Parshat Sh'mot 2017

This week, we read the first parsha from the second book of the Torah, *Shemot*. After recounting each of the sons of Jacob, their households, and Jacob as well, a total of 70 souls who immigrated to Egypt. We are told that their descendants “became fruitful, increased and spread out, becoming very very strong, such that the land became filled with them.”

And then the bombshell.

We are then told, אֶת־יֹסֵף לֹא־יָדַע אֲשֶׁר צָרִים־עֲלֵיהֶם מֶלֶךְ־חָדָשׁ וַיָּקָם “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.”

Generations of rabbis debated whether this was to be read as *pishat*, literal translation, that is- the new Pharaoh really did not know how Joseph had saved Egypt from starvation and bankruptcy generations before, or did it mean that he, the new Pharaoh did not appreciate the contribution of Joseph and his descendants.

Whatever the interpretation, the new Pharaoh’s nationalistic policy clearly defined the children of Israel as “other”, as outsiders, as enemies of the state. This immediate pivot allowed the new Pharaoh to turn a whole minority into slaves. He siphoned their wealth with burdensome taxes and subjugated their bodies by forcing them to build two great memorial cities, *Pithom and Ramses*, filled with pyramids and statues to his greatness.

In reality, the new Pharaoh had to have known about the Israelites *and* their contribution to the economy because he states in the next sentence that “they have become so numerous that if war befalls us, they will join the enemy and depart this land.” He is not concerned that their numbers might lead to a *coup d’etat*, where the Israelites take over. No, he is concerned that they will leave, because they lack loyalty, and they will leave with their riches.

My friends, the Torah, in this parsha, sets up a tension that as Jews, we know how it will end because we recount the story every year in the reading of the Hagaddah at the Seder. It is a classic showdown

between power and history; power, represented by what Pharaoh can do, history, represented by what Joseph did do. More importantly, the story teaches us that might without memory is doomed to fail, and as we know, the scene after the last of the 10 plagues has Pharaoh's kingdom in ruins, his power gone, his firstborn son- his heir, and those of all of Egypt, dead, and the remaining Egyptians offering their gold and silver to the Israelites to leave.

Nechama Liebowitz, a Talmudic scholar who taught at the Hebrew University, notes that the Torah commands us *zachor*, remember, 169 times. Her lesson is that we cannot have the promise of Torah's enlightenment without remembering the past. By extension to this week's parsha, one might interpret that the new Pharaoh in Egypt "did not know Joseph" because the Israelites in his time failed to teach him sufficiently about Joseph's, or their, contributions to society.

There is no small irony that this parsha comes on the Shabbat when we transition to a new president, a new administration. Whatever your vote, whatever your position on President Trump and his new cabinet, our job as American Jews at its most basic level is to remind all Americans that power without "history" is a formula for disaster. We must be the group that stands up and repeats time after time, *zachor*, remember.

Although Jews have succeeded in wealth, stature and productivity in this country, although we can easily find safety by appearing to be part of the white majority, we know that 75 years ago to the day, the highest ranking Nazis convened the Wannasse Conference to plan the mechanics of the Final Solution to the Jewish Question.

In this era of fake news, of falsified reality that appears in instant tweets, that satisfies our most base prejudices, it is more important than even that American Jews hold onto and protect the rock of memory. We must make known to the highest powers in all parts of this country how the failure to remember history led to genocides and the destruction of nations.

It is my greatest wish that our great nation and its new leaders listen to our good council so that we continue to be beacon of hope and democracy to all Americans and to all the world.

Shabbat shalom.