



The Collective Conversation

*Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community*



Sefer Shemot

Parshat Shemot

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La Plus Ça Change

By Hersh Wolf

Often when we learn Torah, we delve deeply into one passage or one idea, study all the commentary on that one narrow concept and try to gain a deep understanding of what the Torah is trying to tell us. Sometimes, it seems to me, rather than clawing down deeper and deeper as if using a microscope to analyze each verse, each word, each letter and even the תגין, the crowns adorning the letters of the Torah, it can be instructive and revealing to stand back and take a broader view of the events of the parsha and see what they may teach us about Jewish history.

With a focus in the United States and internationally on the alarming rise in antisemitism, it might be interesting to look at some of the events in שמות with a focus on comparing these events to a repeated cycle of antisemitism throughout history. We should start with a look back to the events at the end of the book of בראשית. Joseph was a hero – he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams accurately and came up with a brilliant economic plan that saved Egypt and made Pharaoh incredibly rich. Pharaoh became in effect the owner of all the land of Egypt. He returned the land to the farmers for use in return for a permanent tax of 20% on all their produce. Joseph was the prime minister of all of Egypt, the second most powerful person in the land, an adviser to the king. The Jewish people grew, became plentiful, and excelled in the land. As the Torah tells us at the end of בראשית and again at the beginning of שמות, Jacob and his family descended into Egypt with only 70 souls and as we see in שמות, Chapter 1, verse 7:

וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׁרְצוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ כַּמְאֹד מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם:

The Jewish people grew, multiplied as fast as insects, became strong and, wealthy and filled the land.

Then, in the very next verse:

וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע אֶת-יֹסֵף:

A new king arose over Egypt that did not know Joseph.

Rashi brings the well-known argument between Rav and Shmuel recorded in Sotah 11A of whether this was truly a new king or whether the reigning king intentionally dismissed Joseph's contributions and brought new decrees on the Jewish people with the aim of marginalizing them.

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It could be argued that if this had truly been a new king, the Torah would have told us that the previous Pharaoh had died. Perhaps then, this was the same king who judged that the Jews had become too powerful, so he enacted a new political agenda. Regardless, this king created the trope that has been repeated against Jews living in a foreign land ever since. He also created the antisemitic playbook that has been used throughout history.

Look at the next few verses:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־עַמּוֹ הַזֶּה עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעַצוֹם מְאֹד:

הֲבָה נִתְחַכְמָה לּוֹ פְּו־יִרְכָּה וְהִלֵּיָה כִּי־תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסֶף גַּם־הוּא עַל־שָׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחֶם־בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן־הָאָרֶץ:

Pharaoh said: (1) the Jews are too powerful; (2) they have dual loyalty, cannot be trusted and would join our enemies in a conflict and (3) we must come up with a plan, with some propaganda to unite the nation against them.

Pharaoh continued to pass decrees against them, each one slightly more oppressive than the previous one, dehumanizing Jews in the eyes of the Egyptian people. This ultimately led to genocide, the murder of Jewish male children. The Jews were enslaved, not entirely killed to serve as cheap labor to support the Egyptian economy. They descended into the abyss, with declining human dignity, a position from which they could be extricated only by God himself.

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The parallels to recent history are chilling. Hitler and Goebbels used the same propaganda strategy: the Jews are like vermin; their increasing wealth and power are dangerous, and their true loyalty is not to Germany.

There are disturbing signs internationally and domestically that some of these same methods are being employed by antisemitic elements. Let us hope that we can recognize and respond appropriately – by strengthening the Jewish people internally to withstand attacks against us and thrive as a nation.

Hersh and Geet Wolf have been Westchester residents for nearly 40 years, and have been very active in the YIS community since moving here from White Plains in 1986. They have five children, four of whom are married; all but one live in the greater NY metropolitan area.

*Want to write a Parsha essay?
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