

A new king arose...

Shemot 5782/2021

The opening of the book of Shemot leaves us at the end of the generation who arrived into Egypt, Joseph and his brothers have now passed away, and the Israelites are multiplying. The Torah tells us that a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph¹.

This verse has always puzzled me. How does someone become king of a land and people, but does not know the saviour of that same land and people just a generation before? I remember in my childhood commenting that perhaps this new Pharaoh had amnesia.

While some historians have explained that at the supposed time of the events recounted in the book of Shemot there was a coup de ta of an invading army from the south, and perhaps it truly was a new king, reading through the various sources it has become clear that something more nefarious is going on. Rashi and the Chizkuni explain that it was not a new king, but rather the same Pharaoh who was fearful at losing power, and therefore found an easy scapegoat in the Jewish people^{2&3}.

The Ein Yaakov explains that this easy blaming of the Jewish people, who just a generation earlier had come to the rescue, meant that this new king was the first to be killed in God's divine retribution against Egypt⁴. In fact, we see this just verses later when we are told that Pharaoh died while Moshe was communing with God⁵.

However, what is shocking is that the very subjugation of the Jewish people, was the brainchild of Joseph. Darren Lauber explains the Beer Yosef, written by Rabbi Israel Salanter, which states that everything Joseph did to the Egyptians, Pharaoh began to do to the Jewish people – taking away their freedom, their land, their ability to move – the Egyptians were now released from the shackles of Joseph's salvation plan – the slaves had become the master.

In some ways it seems tragically appropriate, karma had come back to haunt the Jewish people, making them not just strangers in a strange land, but were subjugated to hard work and enslavement.

The Beis HaLevi, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, redeems the Jewish people in his commentary on the Hagaddah, by explaining that the words 'and the Egyptians were evil to us' does not mean just that their physical treatment of the Jewish people was evil, but that they 'made us out to be evil'. Pharaoh became the ultimate historical revisionist, turning the minds of the Egyptians against the Jewish people, by reversing the narrative of why the Egyptians were in the predicament they were in.

While we should always be cognisant of our actions, ensuring that we go above and beyond to not only do the wright thing, but also being seen to do the right thing, we must also realise that there will always be someone who will try and twist what has occurred if it is going to suit their agenda.

A new king did arise over Egypt, but it was one that mastered the art of political spin in the most nefarious way.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**