

of the mind... Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. . . In the woods, we return to reason and faith. . . Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

—R. W. Emerson, “Nature” (1836)

It is in the wilderness that the voice of God calls out to Moses—in the desert, in the vast expanse of nature’s simplicity: it is amid the solitude of the shepherd, the contemplative soul, the man haunted by the shadows of his past. The miraculous burning bush, unconsumed—mystery and marvel in that desert terrain, the supernatural wonder erupting within the ordinary. Here natural space is transfigured in revelation; the mundane recast as the Indwelling of Divinity.

“Remove your sandals from your feet,” God says to Moses, “for the place on which you stand is holy ground.” It is sacred as the place in which the Divine is first revealed to Moses, as the mountain to which he will return with the people of Israel to receive the Torah (*har haElohim horevah*). The solitude of Moses’s wandering is not incidental to the mystical experience of the burning bush, and it is that aloneness within the mystery and wonder of Nature that frames the prophet’s opening into the sublime.

But the ethical urgency of his vocation is also inseparable from that powerful individual moment of revelation; for he is called to be God’s instrument of redemption, to alleviate the suffering of the Israelite slaves in Egypt. Spiritual cultivation is inextricable from moral application. Though he is initiated into the divine encounter in the spiritual solitude of nature, Moses must overcome his fear and insecurity in order to ease the suffering of the enslaved. I am the God of your fathers, God says to a frightened Moses. Each of us carry the blessings and burdens of our forbears, the commanding power of the past.

But God is also Ehyeh, as revealed to Moses—the Divine I Am / I Will Be of all existence; the God of Becoming who envelops all time—past, present, and future—into the One of all Being. In that moment, as Emerson put it, “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.” God as I Will Be is the immediacy of sacred Presence and the forward-looking hope of redemption and healing.

Parashat Shemot 5776

פרשת שמות תשע"ו



Hope for the Unknown

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As legend has it, my great-grandfather quit school after the eighth grade. Apparently this decision had little to do with academics: my Grandpa Harry, *z”l*, was a smart man who went on to become a successful furrier with his own business in Manhattan. No, apparently it had everything to do with social pressure. As legend has it, he walked into school on the first day of the ninth grade, realized that no one at his new school knew him, and walked out.

I think of him every year as I encounter that powerful verse that launches the Exodus story: “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph” (Exod. 1:8). As particular as it is to the Joseph narrative and the story of our people, it is also strikingly universal. This tiny little verse describes such a powerful and typical human experience: the one of walking into a room full of strangers and feeling totally out of place. The unsettling moment where you go from being the most popular kid in school to the new kid on the block. That feeling of being unknown, and the riskiness of it—for who knows what happens when no one knows to think highly of you? This is the subtext of the verse, actually: had the new king known Joseph, we imagine, he never would have treated the Israelites that way. It is exactly what we tell ourselves in our own moments of loneliness and fear when surrounded by new people: “If they only knew me.”

This interpretation is perhaps the one closest to the verse’s *peshat* (literal) meaning. Along with it I offer two more. Together, the three readings offer a widening lens on how to handle some of life’s challenges—and the beginnings of an answer that this book of Shemot might offer.

The second interpretation is less literal than the first. It wonders: what if the “new king” wasn’t really a new king? Rashi reminds us of the midrash found in the Talmud:

Rav and Shemuel differed in their explanations of the verse. One said that he was actually a new king; the other, that new decrees were issued by him. But if so, how can the verse go on to say, “Who knew not Joseph”? Because it seemed as though he was not aware that Joseph ever existed. (BT Sotah, 11a)

In other words, it is not that there was actually a new person now ruling Egypt, but that he had changed. His attitude had changed—and his love of Joseph and Joseph’s kin. Things were so different, in fact, that it felt as if there were a new king on the throne, one who had never even known Joseph, much less brought him and his descendants into his trust.

Isn’t that what much of life is about? Living with ever-changing relationships? The brother who was your closest ally in childhood who no longer speaks to you. That group of friends you couldn’t live without with when your kids were young—now that the children have grown, you never see them anymore. The best friend who lost interest in the friendship—in you—over time. Sometimes it feels like that person who once knew you so well now doesn’t know you at all. As the midrash envisions it: it was the same king all along, but his heart had changed. He knew not Joseph.

In *Netivot Shalom*, Rabbi Shalom Noah Berezovsky (the Slonimer Rebbe, born Belarus in 1911 and died in Israel in 2000) offers a third—and very different—reading.

This verse is the beginning of *galut*, the story of exile . . . *Galut* (exile) is always a matter of our separation from God. *Galut* is the inner state of a person not feeling God’s nearness in times of trouble . . . And redemption (*ge’ulah*) is a person’s feeling God’s presence again, in every moment . . . This is what is meant by “who knew not Joseph.” Joseph represents holiness, and the king of Egypt represents the broken shards (*kelipot*) of God’s presence.

In other words: it is taking place within us. The “new king” who did not know Joseph is part of ourselves. The “new king” is that feeling that arises within us from time to time, at the times of life when we don’t feel God’s presence, when we wonder if there is a God at all. According to this interpretation, Joseph’s dying (in the verses preceding ours)—that is our own faith dying, the loss of our sense of God’s presence in our daily lives. The “new king” that arises after that is the voice in our head at times, whispering: “there is only fear and pain and suffering in this world.” Redemption (*ge’ulah*), according to this reading, is also internal: it is what happens when the fog lifts, when we are able to see God’s miracles all around us, to feel God’s presence again and have faith even during dark times. According to the *Netivot Shalom*, everything in this verse is happening inside of each of us.

Together these three commentaries paint a rich picture of the kinds of “kings” who challenge and oppress us. Sometimes life’s challenges take the form of being unknown, surrounded by new people and situations. Sometimes the people aren’t new to us, but we become alienated nonetheless as relationships change over time. Sometimes it’s about our attitude, our inner life, when the challenge is to hold on to a sense of God’s nearness during our hardest moments.

Our Exodus story begins with a verse about not knowing, because that is the real challenge: we just don’t know how things will turn out. Will the kids at my new school ever become my friends? Will my brother ever want to know me again? Will I ever feel God’s presence in my life after the hardships I’ve endured? This verse, with all of these readings flowing from it, launches it all.

The book of Shemot is the central story of our people. Its overarching message is that God will hear our cries. That no matter how hard life gets, no matter how harsh or violent the world becomes, no matter which kind of “not knowing” we encounter: we as Jews are to hold hope in our hearts. That the Promised Land awaits us. That God is bringing us and our children’s children there. This week I write from Israel, where I am leading the Reshet Ramah Bar/Bat Mitzvah Family Adventure trip. So I cannot help but recall the poem by Naftali Herz Imber that became Israel’s national anthem: *Hatikvah, The Hope*. “*Lo od avdah tikvatenu*” we sing: our hope is not yet lost. This is the essential message of the book we begin reading this week, the book of Shemot. The story begins with a king who does not know us and launches us into a lifetime of challenges of all sorts, throughout which this book of hope and faith unfolds before us as a guide.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



The Landscape of Revelation

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Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. . . The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?...

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches. . . The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible...

Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state