

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Managing Our Disagreements

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In this moment, when nobody seems to be listening to anybody with a different point of view, when each side vilifies the other and thinks the other side is going to destroy this country, it was calming to watch conflict play out in this way that was devoid of rage and judgment and hurt, that had each person continually acknowledging the other person's humanity.

—Stephanie Foo, *This American Life*, Episode 602, "Act Five: Long Island"

This erev Shabbat is Inauguration Day. Right after the election, *This American Life* broadcast a conversation between two old friends, one of whom had voted Trump and one Clinton. These two friends disagree strongly with each other, but, thanks to their friendship, mutual respect, and faith in the other's goodness, they are able to have a civil, thoughtful, reasonable political conversation.

Parashat Shemot offers a cautionary tale of what can happen when we're not able to do that. Moses sees two Israelites fighting and tries, unsuccessfully, to intervene. The fighters tell Moses that he has no right to interfere since he killed an Egyptian the previous day. Moses is frightened, and says "אכן נודע הדבר", "indeed the matter is known" (Exod. 2:13). The Midrash interprets this as the middle of Moses's ruminations about why the Israelites deserve God's punishment of slavery, and "the matter is known" as meaning that he's figured out the answer: God's punishment is because of the sin of gossiping, which is so widespread in the Israelite community that word of the previous day's incident spread incredibly fast (Exodus Rabbah 1:30).

I'd like to suggest that the sin wasn't gossiping: it was the Israelites' fighting itself. Whatever those two Israelites were arguing over, they shouldn't have let it go so far. Moses saw two Israelites moving beyond verbal disagreement into physical violence, and realized that *that's* why God's punishment was deserved.

There will be tough times ahead, when people will disagree strongly. The podcast reminds us how we should manage disagreements; the Torah cautions us of what can happen when we don't.



Shemot 5777

שמות תשע"ז



The Doing that Comes from Knowing

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Among the undercurrents in our portion are the consequences of forgetting and remembering on rescue and liberation, and of seeing and knowing on oppression and death. The Israelites' fortunes are transformed, and transformed again, so rapidly in our portion's opening, it seems the Torah wants to signal the tenuousness of circumstances that seem secure. The Torah goes to the trouble of naming the eleven sons of Jacob who relocate to Egypt (Joseph already having been there) and reports that their entire generation passed away. In the space of 11 words—and seemingly no time at all—their 70-member extended family explodes in number and becomes an innumerable presence to be reckoned with in Egypt (Exod. 1:1-7).

And then we read: "A new king arose over Egypt who knew not Joseph" (Exodus 1:8).

Fear and suspicion, conspiracy dressed up as prudence, and exploitation and oppression follow immediately. It only gets worse.

Why is the king's ignorance of Joseph the arrow that fells Israel's rising fortunes? Why should the king have been expected to know Joseph in the first place? We've only just learned that Joseph and his entire generation had died. The Israelite population had to have grown over time. So Joseph's critical role in saving Egypt, which was the subject of several elaborate chapters at the end of Genesis, was already in the distant past by the time this new king arose. So he wasn't a history buff. So what?

On the other hand, by storing grain and nationalizing land and labor during the famine years, Joseph had been Egypt's savior. How could anyone—a king, no less—be ignorant of this essential history? To know Joseph was to know

Egypt's formative past. For a king *not* to know Joseph, then, was not to know Egypt itself. And in the ancient world, the king was Egypt.

Rashi cites a debate between Rav and Shemuel in the Talmud (BT Sotah 11a). Rav takes the Torah at its word: Egypt's new king was ignorant of his country's indebtedness to Joseph and his descendants and took a harsh line against alarming developments. Shemuel, noting that the Torah never reported the death of the Pharaoh of Joseph's day, while it *does* report the death of Joseph, understands rather that the same king reversed course and issued new, oppressive decrees. Rav cannot imagine that one who knew Joseph would turn against the Israelites. Perhaps Shemuel, who had access to the Persian court in his day, was more attuned to shifting allegiances. He sees Pharaoh's ignorance, and the decisions he took in consequence of it, as willful.

There is a certain poignant irony in this matter of not knowing Joseph. It's not the first time Joseph has been forgotten to ill effect. We read a few weeks ago that when Joseph was thrown in jail on false charges of assaulting Potiphar's wife, he asked that the steward, whose dream he correctly interpreted, would advocate for him upon his return to Pharaoh's court. But the steward forgot Joseph, who languished in jail (Gen. 40:23).

A little further in our portion, the significance of the king's not knowing becomes apparent. Meanwhile, the oppression has deepened and advanced to appalling infanticide. True, there are the heroine midwives, Shifra and Puah, and the incredible faithfulness and bravery of Yokheved (Moses's mother), Miriam, and Pharaoh's own daughter. But the wretchedness of the Israelites' situation is laid bare when the Hebrew whose life Moses saved repays Moses's act against the state with exposure, and the people resent and reject Moses's attempts at just leadership. Moses flees. We learn in 2:23 that the king dies (for sure, this time) and the Israelites allow themselves to hope. They cry out for relief. God attends on their suffering. The Torah brings an astonishing flurry of verbs: "God *heard* their moaning, and God *remembered* His covenant... And God *saw* the Israelites, and God *knew*" (v. 24-25).

God knew? What did God know? The passage of time is irrelevant for God, and as we affirm on Rosh Hashanah: אין שכחה לפני כסא כבודך. There is no such thing as forgetfulness before God's throne.

Rather, the Torah is telling us that *knowing* is what makes relationships intimate, engaged, and compelling. Knowing is the opening of empathy and justice. For God to remember is for God to respond *hineini*, I am here, to the people's cries. This is exactly what God tells Moses when, at the burning bush, He commissions him to undertake the liberation:

"I indeed have seen the abuse of My people that is in Egypt, and its outcry because of its taskmasters. I have heard, *for I know its pain*—ידעתיו את מכאוביו. And I have come down to rescue it from the hand of Egypt..." (Exod. 3:7-8)

Pharaoh lays down the challenge to accomplishing the rescue that knowing God would have compelled. When Moses, on God's authority, commands Pharaoh to release his Israelite slaves into God's service as their Sovereign, Pharaoh replies: "Who is the LORD that I should heed His voice to release Israel? I do not know the LORD, nor will I release Israel" (Exod. 5:2). Knowing has consequences and so does not knowing. Bringing Pharaoh to know God is one of the aims of the Exodus.

Bringing ourselves to know God, and living by the ritual, social, ethical, and political implications of that knowledge, are some of the aims of Judaism. The Exodus, together with Creation, is its foundational lesson. We may shake our heads that Pharaoh "knew not Joseph." But I think the Torah is elbowing us at the same time, asking, "Do you?" It's not a matter of being history buffs. It's about owning our past. Pharaoh ought to have known Joseph and acted on that knowledge. Similarly, Judaism expects us to know our own story intimately and also to know the pain of the world today—whether close by or seemingly remote—and to act on that knowledge.

Torah means Teaching. We are not indifferent to one who does not know. At no Seder has anyone ever left either the *Incurious Child* or the *Child Who Does Not Know How to Ask* alone. At the Seder, it can sometimes seem like the goal is learning the content. But that's not really it at all. When we see the Exodus unfold in the Torah, as we do in this week's portion, we realize that it's not ignorance itself that Judaism particularly fears. Rather, it's the failure of relationship signified by Pharaoh's failure to know Joseph. There is a kinship between knowing God and knowing one another. For Judaism sees such opportunity, such dignity, such responsibility, such holiness, such rescue, and such love, in knowing.

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