A New King? Thoughts for Parashat Shemot

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shemot

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“A new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph” (Shemot 1:8).

Rashi records the Talmudic comments of Rav and Shemuel. One said that an actual new king arose; the other suggested that it was the same king who made new decrees, behaving as though he did not know Joseph.

Neither Rav nor Shemuel offered evidence for their statements; they were not debating about a historical fact. Rather, they were offering keen insight into human psychology. From a historical standpoint, one of them was correct and one was incorrect. From a psychological viewpoint, they both were perceptive students of the human condition.

An actual new king arose: this is the most likely meaning of the verse. Joseph was 56 years old when Jacob died, and at that time he was still in a position of power in Egypt. But the Torah tells us nothing about Joseph’s career from then until his death at age 110. During those fifty-four years, was Joseph still a government official? Did he become “emeritus” at some point? Did the Pharaoh who had originally appointed him continue in power for all those fifty four years or did he die and leave his position to a successor? It is certainly plausible that a new Pharaoh arose who may not have known or worked with Joseph.

But why did the new Pharaoh ignore the earlier achievements of Joseph? How could the new Pharaoh “not know”—not appreciate and respect—Joseph’s accomplishments? The answer: people remember what they want to remember and “forget” what they want to suppress. The new Pharaoh was interested in consolidating his own power; he ignored Joseph’s achievements because he was interested in undermining the status of the Israelites.

That “new Pharaoh” was like many people. They enjoy benefits of others but are quick to turn on them; they “don’t know”—don’t want to be reminded—about the gratitude they owe. They are interested in promoting themselves and enhancing their own power.

What about opinion that the same Pharaoh ruled, but feigned not to know Joseph? This is an example of particular ruthlessness. After all that Joseph had done for him, Pharaoh had the audacity to pretend that he didn’t even know Joseph. Whereas a “new Pharaoh” might justify his misdeeds since he didn’t actually know Joseph, the “same Pharaoh” had no such justification. He knew Joseph; he worked with Joseph; he benefitted immensely from Joseph. Nevertheless, he hard-heartedly cut Joseph off.

Rav and Shemuel were not debating a historical point: they were commenting on human perfidy and betrayal. They were echoing the teaching of Rabban Gamliel (Pirkei Avot 2:3): “Be wary of your dealings with the ruling power, for they only befriend a person when it serves their needs. When it is to their advantage they appear as friends, but they do not stand by a person in their hour of need.”

The problem, though, doesn’t only relate to ruling powers. Ingratitude and betrayal manifest themselves in many situations. Self-serving people in all walks of life use others but “don’t know them” once they are no longer needed.

“A new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph.” Do we know people like that? Are we ourselves like that, even sometimes?