



MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

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A Puzzling Argument

The Torah couldn't be clearer...why, then, do the rabbis argue?

A few weeks ago, the Torah opened the story of Yetziat Mitzraim with the words:

“And a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Yosef.”

Upon which the Talmud commented:

Rav and Shmuel [disagree]...

One authority accepts the straightforward meaning of the text. A “new” Pharaoh, he contends, rose to power following the passing of Yosef’s generation.

The other scholar, however, maintains that there was no physical transference of authority at all. The Pharaoh of the Exodus was the same king who had ruled previously. Only his decrees were “new.”

We find ourselves forced, however, to ask the obvious questions alluded to above...

What are Rav and Shmuel really arguing about?

The text explicitly asserts that the Pharaoh of the Exodus story was a “new king,” distinct from the Pharaoh who ruled in Yosef’s time. How could either of these sages state otherwise?

And, to strike even further, why does it matter whether the Pharaoh of the Exodus story was “new” or not? One way or the other, this king launched the first, horrific persecution of the Jewish people.

To answer our questions, we must read the Torah’s account of our oppression at the hands of the Egyptians as it is meant to be read.

This is not simply a tale of happenings long past. Like the rest of the Torah’s narratives, the story of our ancestors’ enslavement is as relevant to our day as it was at the moment of its unfolding.

What emerges is a “blueprint for persecution.”

Frighteningly familiar scenes greet our eyes, as Pharaoh embarks on a staged, calculated course designed to destroy the Israelite nation even before it is born.

With increasing intensity, the stages unfold: propaganda, isolation, debasement, back-breaking labor and torture, culminating in a final act of genocide that would have ended our story on the spot. A carefully planned pattern of persecution that first appears in Egypt, but is then repeated again and again, with only minor adjustments, across the face of our long, turbulent history.

Likewise, Pharaoh’s desperate determination to complete his plan—even at the cost of his own people’s welfare—and his inexplicable hatred of the Israelites—are also hauntingly mirrored by the fanatic enemies surrounding us to this day.

The opening parshiot of Shemot thus form a cautionary tale portending challenges to follow. *Prepare yourselves*, the Torah seems to say, *for you will face this scenario repeatedly on your national journey.*

But how does it all begin? What are the warning signs? How can we best prepare to meet an oncoming challenge?

Perhaps this is where Rav and Shmuel enter

the picture. These great sages may not be arguing at all, but rather suggesting two alternative paths. *The story of Egyptian slavery, they contend, could have begun in one of two ways: either a new king arose to confront the Israelites, or the same king transformed from friend to foe. Both possibilities are real, and both will confront you on your journey.*

Let this serve as an example and a warning: you cannot rest easy. The next challenge may erupt suddenly, from the most unexpected source. Remain vigilant. Expect the unexpected. Prepare for every contingency. Only an awareness of the many possible dangers surrounding you will enable you to meet the next test — before it is too late.

As our world changes daily and dramatically, our task becomes inordinately harder. From what direction will the next challenge emerge? What will the nature of that challenge be? How can we possibly prepare for events that we can scarcely predict?

And yet, the lessons emerging from the dawn of our history remain constant. We cannot allow ourselves to be surprised. With increased intensity, we must carefully and constantly study the world around us, searching for hints of potential challenges to come. And when those challenges do emerge, we must rise together to meet them with the courage and strength that has enabled our people, not only to survive, but to thrive, across the ages. ■

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."

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