

Rabbi Rena Kieval

We have begun the book of Exodus, *Sefer Shemot*, during a time of trauma for our country: we have seen the trauma of tyranny and last week, with the attack on the Capitol, we have seen what it can lead to. In the Exodus story, the Torah too shows us the nature and behavior of a tyrant, and how that behavior can lead to oppression and even violence. This seminal story of the Jewish people is set in ancient Egypt, a place that is a far cry from a modern democracy. Yet the picture it presents of autocratic leadership and those who enable it, is sadly, eerily recognizable to us today.

Last week's parsha introduced us to the Pharaoh we know well from the Exodus story. Who is this Pharaoh? The first thing we are told about him is that he is a new king who "did not know Joseph," *lo yadah et Yosef*.

How can this be? How could an Egyptian leader fail to know Joseph, who saved the Egyptian people from famine, who had been second to Pharaoh in the Egyptian monarchy? That would be like a US president who "did not know Abraham Lincoln!"

Some Torah commentators imagine that this was in fact the very same Pharaoh who had worked side by side with Joseph and been helped by him, but that this Pharaoh was actively setting a *new policy* of ignoring Joseph, pretending and choosing not to "know" him.

Modern Bible scholar Nahum Sarna suggests that the key to understanding this Pharaoh lies in the word, *yada* (to know). In the Torah, he says, knowledge is not primarily about the intellect... Rather, it is more experiential, embedded in the emotions. To *know* someone encompasses qualities like intimacy, concern, relatedness, and mutuality. Conversely, *not to know* is synonymous with indifference, alienation, and estrangement. To *not know* someone culminates in callous disregard for their humanity.

In other words, this Pharaoh, whether he ever literally knew Joseph or not, chooses to disconnect himself from Joseph and his family, the Israelites. He disregards their contributions and shared history, and ultimately – he disregards their humanity. The Hebrews become a *nameless* and *faceless* people, seen as a threat. They are enslaved and oppressed, with attempts even made to eradicate them.

We recognize this kind of "not knowing" from other despots throughout history. We are all too familiar with leaders who have "not known" people who were different, and demonized and dehumanized them as a foundation for campaigns of hate and even genocide. And shockingly, we have watched in our own time, in our own country, how "not knowing" – ignorance, indifference and increasing disconnection from real people, and from truth, can set off an insidious process of dehumanization, leading even to violence.

We have seen the “not knowing,” and not *caring*, that hundreds of thousands of our citizens are losing their lives in a global pandemic. We have seen the demonization of refugees from other countries, the enabling of white supremacists, racists, haters - and ultimately a broader hostility and incitement of violence towards anyone who might disagree or show disloyalty.

The Torah, even as it describes similar evils, opens the Exodus story with the important reminder that resistance is possible, as we meet the midwives Shifra and Puah who stand up to Pharaoh, as well as Yocheved and Miriam, and Pharaoh’s own daughter. Together they save the future redeemer of the Israelites. Resistance is possible from both the weak and the strong.

This weekend we remember a peaceful and influential resister of our own age, the Rev Dr MLK Jr. And we see new ways of resisting, and of knowing, from the Black Lives Matter movement. These are powerful agents of change and movement towards redemption.

The ancient Israelites endured 4 long centuries of slavery at the hands of Pharaoh and his enablers before they cried out and were ultimately liberated. Once freed, the Israelites were given a roadmap for a new kind of society, guidelines for a community of morality, justice and respect for all of its members.

We are beneficiaries of those societal ideals given to our ancestors. We are fortunate to live in what remains a great democracy, imperfect and recently challenged, but still great. We can still cry out and have our voices heard through our system of government, the exercise of our rights and our dedication to the safety and dignity of all people.

We pray that our incoming leaders, with the support of the good people in our country, will turn the tide back towards those ideals so sacred to us. We pray that they will ‘know us’ – the American people – and all people - as human beings, in the way that Pharaoh and his ilk do not: that they will *know* our humanity and care about all people.

Right now many of us are in pain for our country, and the anxiety and anger that we feel can *also* foster a lack of knowing. Even as we feel wronged, even traumatized, it remains our responsibility also to know. Certainly, we must stand up for the values we believe in, and some issues are very clear: violence and hatred, racism and tyranny are never acceptable.

But as we go forward, hopefully into a time of repair and healing for our land, let us also remember that some people, and some issues, are more nuanced and complex. We do not want to be ruled by Pharaohs, and we also do not, God forbid, want to *become* Pharaohs who ‘do not know.’ So let us keep our minds and hearts open, and take time to “know” one another, as we help build back a country that strives towards justice, respect and love.

Shabbat Shalom