

Shabbat Shalom

Last week in synagogue we heard the words, chazak chazak v'nitchazek, the blessing of sorts we shout out when we finish a book of Torah. It says, may we gain greater strength and strengthen each other. It's a beautiful custom. I have gained strength, and that strength has turned to gratitude over the week. Gratitude for this religious tradition in which I find logic, precedent, and hope.

This week we interact with a remarkable series of episodes that describe our oppression into slavery and our eventual freedom in the Book of Exodus. Some of the most vivid images of Bible are in this book. The burning bush, the 10 plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, and finally the giving of Torah. Those elements of change and forward development all seem so far back, when our world is so engaged with the change of today.

One of the most tempting ways of finding a contemporary meaning in Torah is the urge to say: look, our story of today is right here in Torah, as we are experiencing our own reality. That would be great, but traditionally, we don't use the text as a divination tool or a mirror for our own existence, we take it's meaning and apply it to our lives. But this week, text feels inescapable in its coincidence. Here's what I mean.

After eight verses of genealogy describing how the Israelites thrived and proliferated in Egypt, we are met with the verse: va yakom melech hadash al mitzrayaim asher lo yadah et Yosef. A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph." Granted, an astonishing textual coincidence, is how we look at it. It is an ominous foretelling of the oppression of the Israelites.

My colleague David Kasher from Kevah, the emerging Jewish learning organization brings us a passage from Talmud which asks: "Can the new ruler really have forgotten the man who served as the right hand to the previous king, the Jewish leader who saved Egypt from famine?"

Rashi asks, what kind of new administration this was, and how authentic was their "forgetting?"

One scholar said it was truly a new king while another said, no, it's just that his laws were new, and that "he did not know Joseph," meant that he acted as if he did not know Joseph.

This latter teaching is that this was not simply a convenient gap in some new leader's memory, but a feigned ignorance for political purposes. Here in the Book of Exodus we have hints of a dangerous psychological profile of the new Pharaoh: a person who could shift personalities at will, and speak lies with total conviction. A Pharaoh with unlimited power to turn the tables around and reverse the good life the Israelites enjoyed and who saved Egypt from famine and perhaps extinction.

And, this Pharaoh did not accomplish his agenda to enslave the Jews alone. He had a cadre of support and we see him, turn to his advisers and whisper, "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they do not increase..."

But, who were these complicit and perhaps sympathetic advisers?

Rabbi Hiya said in Exodus Rabba: "Three people were there to advise the new Pharaoh: Bilaam, Job, and Jethro.

Bilaam, the tyrant from the book of Numbers affirmed the enslavement plan, and he was later killed in the book of Numbers. Job, who was silent with the Pharaoh and who was famously silent later in Bible, was punished with exquisite suffering. Jethro, the father in law to Moses: fled, he escaped the new oppressor, and because of this bravery, his children sat on the High Court of Israel.”

These three types of personalities have much to tell us about staffing the changing of the guard in our ancient story. One personality Bilaam, who follows orders to enslave and manage with cruelty, is himself persecuted and killed by the sword in a fierce battle. Job will not raise his voice against God or against an unjust rulership, is forced to raise his voice in agony when it is his turn to speak out. The last is Jethro, who like Moses, fled an oppressive Egyptian state, unable to endure the injustice, is rewarded with a lineage of high status and enduring memory.

There are certainly other forms of relating to a new ruler and a new plan for oppression. And there is another potent episode and personality traits from our text this week. The characters of Shifra and Puah, the midwives charged to bring life into the world who were charged to kill the babies as they were birthed. They defied the Pharaoh's order to kill Hebrew infants in order to limit our population immediately seeing its cruelty. These two women give us the model for resistance to unjust authority as the women's Torah commentary says: “the midwives resistance goes beyond non-cooperation to a direct defiance of Pharaoh.”

By way of the URJ Women's Commentary we learn that when Pharaoh's decree to kill all the Israelite male newborns, the Israelites chose to cease procreating, and Amram—Moses and Miriam's father—divorced his wife Yocheved. Miriam rebuked him and described his decree as harsher than Pharaoh's and Miriam prophesied that Moses would redeem Israel from slavery and so he remarried his wife Yocheved to ultimately save the Jewish people.”

Those are the personalities I am grateful for in Torah. The brave and the weak, the prophet and the obedient, the activist and the quiet. In that I locate my wealth of gratitude. These are the models of behavior that demonstrate of how our own actions will unfold in the days to come.

And so, I return to gratitude on this shabbat of Exodus. I am grateful to my lineage, my tradition of argument and disparate points of view; I am grateful to this rich Jewish way of learning and interpretation; a world of invention and imagination for a world at peace and the prophetic tradition of speaking truth and kindness to power.

Chazak. May we gain strength from our tradition. Chazak, may we be strong in the face of challenge. V'nitchazek, may we strengthen each other with our commitment to a better world.

Shabbat Shalom