

One of the mysteries of this week's Torah portion was how things changed so dramatically for the Israelites with the advent of a new king. How did the situation of the Jews go from secure and respected residents to dehumanized slaves, so quickly?

The Torah text doesn't tell us much: "there arose a new King who did not know Joseph".

Some modern scholars say, it could not just have been a new king, it must have been a new dynasty, otherwise Joseph and all he had done could not have been forgotten. They look in the history of ancient Egypt and identify the 19th dynasty and Pharaoh Ramses II, who moved the center of his administration to the Eastern Delta of the Nile. This is the direction taken by the Jewish Publication Society and by the Conservative movement's new Biblical translation Eytz Chayim.

But older sources, see things in a different light. It was not necessary for there to be a new dynasty, or even a new king for things to go poorly for the Jews. Even new policies could wreck havoc on centuries of peaceful co-existence. The king could have been ignorant of what Joseph had done or he could become indifferent: " what you did for me yesterday doesn't matter, what did you do for me today?" In politics the focus is often on the future with no loyalty to the past.

The question of how things could have changed so dramatically for the Children of Israel in Egypt, is not only a question about the Pharaoh, but also about the Israelites. Why did they let this disaster occur?

Again, there are different scenarios. One posits that the change was sudden and unanticipated, so that no one was prepared to react. As a result they were already enslaved before they even had time to muster resistance.

Other say just the opposite. It was done gradually, gently. At first they were asked for a day of service, to help in an emergency. Then another day, and then another. Having said yes once, it was harder to say no the second time, and so on until they were totally enslaved.

Modern psychologists say this is how it works even today. If a person is asked to do something wrong, perhaps steal something large, they will often object. What do you think I am a thief? But if asked to cheat just a little, they might say yes, and the next time when asked to cheat a little bit more, will do so, and so on, until they find themselves doing things they never would have agreed to in the beginning. That is how the grooming behavior of pedophiles works, beginning with things that are just a little off, until the children become adjusted to that, and then moving onwards.

For this reason the rabbis say that we should learn alertness from this episode.

We must be willing to resist even small acts of wrongdoing. Modern rabbis derive from this the need to stand up to small infringements of rights as well as large ones.

We can also learn something positive from this, something which I hope will inspire Morgan throughout her life. One small positive step, makes the next one easier, and one accomplishment gives us more confidence for the next.

Reinforcing cycles can be positive as well as negative and starting a positive cycle of reinforcement is one of the best things we can do.

Morgan we hope that all your accomplishments this morning will inspire you to greater confidence in everything you undertake and motivate you to continue to achieve and contribute.