

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Shemot

“A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Yosef.” (Exodus 1:8)

Our parsha begins with the description of Israel’s rapid descent into misery in Egypt. A king who did not have the regard appropriate for Yosef and his family came to power and promptly enslaved the Jews by force. Rashi here cites an interesting discussion in the Gemara (Sotah 11a):

“Rav and Shmuel differed in their interpretation of these words. One said that he was really a new king; the other said that it was the same king but he made new edicts.”

This argument is difficult to understand. Firstly, should the claim that it was actually a new king not be obvious? That is, after all, exactly what the verse tells us! Secondly, how is it that the Amoraim are arguing over such a basic historical fact? What was the truth? Thirdly, how is it possible that one Pharaoh could live for so long--from Yosef’s time until the Exodus?

The Maharal (R. Yehuda Loew, 1520-1609) explains that there can be no question that the Torah is not referring to the same king who Yosef dealt with. Rather, the debate of Rav and Shmuel revolved around the following question: Was this king from the dynasty that had ruled until now, or had that dynasty been overthrown? It is appropriate even from a linguistic point of view to call a new monarchical dynasty a “new king.”

According to the opinion that the Pharaoh’s edicts were what changed, the king can be described as a “tyrant.” The English philosopher John Locke says that “...tyranny is the exercise of power beyond right, which nobody can have a right to; and this is making use of the power any one has in his hands, not for the good of those who are under it, but for his own private, separate advantage.

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When the governor, however entitled, makes not the law, but his will, the rule, and his commands and actions are not directed to the preservation of the properties of his people, but the satisfaction of his own ambition, revenge, covetousness, or any other irregular passion.” By violating the social contract for his own reasons, such a king crosses over into the world of tyranny.

Had the previous king been overthrown, the new king would have been a usurper. Locke explains that usurpers, even if they rule justly, are by definition invalid insofar as they do not represent the line of kings anointed by the people: “...whoever gets into the exercise of any part of the power by other ways than what the laws of the community have prescribed hath no right to be obeyed, though the form of the commonwealth be still preserved, since he is not the person the laws have appointed, and, consequently, not the person the people have consented to. Nor can such an usurper, or any deriving from him, ever have a title till the people are both at liberty to consent, and have actually consented, to allow and confirm in him the power he hath till then usurped.”

A state of war only serves as an excuse for domestic tyranny.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Shabbat Shalom
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