

A NEW KING AROSE

“There arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (Exodus 1:8). In one dramatic moment, everything changed. It was not unusual for Egypt to get a new king – just a few verses later the narrative informs us of yet another change on the throne – but the operative condition is that this king “did not know Joseph.”

The new ruler did not know, or did not care, about history or prior commitments. There was no loyalty, no trust, no commitment, no sense of ongoing relationship. It was as if the past had not happened.

Change in rulers or leaders is part of every system, whether the change be through revolution (goodbye Czar, hello Workers’ Soviet; goodbye Shah, hello Ayatollah), hereditary succession (from Hussein to Abdullah) or election (from Schroder to Merkel, from Peres to Netanyahu to Barak to Sharon to Olmert and back to Netanyahu). The quadrennial change in presidency in the United States is an essential element of the system, one that I am increasingly coming to appreciate and anticipate.

But there was something different about the transition described in Exodus, a discontinuity that proved disadvantageous to the Hebrews, who until then had enjoyed a position of privilege in suburban Goshen, thanks to the elevated status of Joseph in the Egyptian managerial class.

Disruptive succession could happen here, too. Consider our personal lives, where a change in management at work might mean that suddenly no one knows, or cares, how much you contributed to your company or organization, how loyal or valuable you were – even if you were a founder. Or a change in the synagogue – a new rabbi or board, who do not know how much you did for the community and who do not seem to care. Consider the veteran who realizes that a once grateful society now cannot honor its most basic commitments. This can occur in international politics, as the promises once made by the League of Nations to

the Jewish People gyrate between UN Security Council resolution 242 and the recent contradictory resolution 2334. The new Pharaoh asks, “What have you done for me lately?”

Absent vibrant government institutions that serve as checks and balances, what is a Hebrew in Egypt to do? One answer appears following Pharaoh’s order to kill Hebrew newborn boys: “The midwives, fearing God (Elo-him), did not do as the king of Egypt had told them” (1:17). This “yir’a” – fear, respect, awe – impelled Shifra and Pu’ah and their corps, to risk their lives and act ethically in disobeying Pharaoh’s command. An essential part of their humanity, or their Hebrew culture – something – kept them from crossing a line.

Later, a sense of moral outrage impels Moshe to strike a taskmaster – an act of violence not necessarily endorsed by the narrative or sages. Later, among the Midianites, Moshe receives direction from God (Elo-him) to represent God and the Hebrews in Pharaoh’s court.

While the Hebrews had lost all of their property and privilege, and even “ownership” of their very labor, they had managed to retain their families, their language, their identity, and the fundamental values instilled by their ancestors’ God. The Hebrews asserted that they – and Pharaoh – answer to a Higher Authority. This call enabled them to survive the generations of slavery and Pharaoh’s genocidal intentions.

When faced with chaos and danger in a changing world, we too can draw on the strength of our families, our synagogue, camp and school communities, our civilian institutions, our autonomous homeland, the wisdom of our Torah and the fundamental moral demands of our God to strengthen and sustain us. When we are knocked off kilter, we can use our worthy and stable traditions as a support, so we can keep our balance and remain upright.

