



The Choice of Knowledge

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Parashat Shemot 5786

The deterioration of relations between Egypt and the Children of Israel proceeds rapidly.¹ What values, emotions, and perspectives make such a breakdown possible—and what could prevent it? The contrasting figures of Pharaoh and his daughter offer two opposing models, each of whom go through three steps. On the one hand, Pharaoh exemplifies the descent from relationship into fear, oppression, and alienation. On the other, his daughter represents a path grounded in courage, relationship, empathy, and a belief in the possibility of mutual flourishing.

“A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Yosef” (Shemot 1:8). This is how Pharaoh is introduced to us, as a “new king.” A moment of renewal is a moment of choice. Renewal invites the question: what will the relationship to the past be? New kings inevitably rise; this is the way of the world. But how “new” they truly are—therein lies a decision. It is striking that the Torah pairs the king’s newness (“A **new** king arose”) with knowledge—or more precisely, with the absence of it (“who did **not know** Yosef”).

¹ On this deterioration, see my essay from 5777, “The Slippery Slope from Fear to Evil,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/slippery-slope-fear-evil>. On the choices to know or not know at the beginning of Sefer Shemot, see Devora Steinmetz, “To Know and Be Known,” in *Why Rain Comes From Above* (2024), pp. 75-98.



This lack of knowledge raises questions: is this a king who does not know the past of his kingdom or is he choosing ignorance? The fact that he is king, surrounded by magicians and advisors strengthens the impression of a choice not to know. Does his ignorance signify a deliberate severing of ties with his own history? Does unfamiliarity with Yosef, a significant political figure, symbolize a broader disconnect from the statesmen of Egypt's past, or a break from the governing traditions that shaped the regime? Or maybe, his failure to know Yosef expresses something deeper: a lack of familiarity, even alienation, from the "other"—from foreigners like the Children of Israel who dwell among his people. Renewal from a place of ignorance is a choice with moral consequences. For knowledge is a form of connection—and connection comes with responsibility. Choosing not to know is, in essence, choosing disconnection, a severing of ties that leads to a withdrawal of responsibility. This marks the first step in the breakdown of relations between Egypt and Israel.

The second step that allows for this deterioration is the projection of a future reality, one shaped by Pharaoh's established disconnection and ignorance. When such a vision is rooted in estrangement and detachment, the only thing left to do is imagine the worst:

שמות א:ט-י

⁹וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל עַמּוֹ הִנֵּה עִם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעֲצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ: ¹⁰הֲבֵא נִתְחַכְמָה לוֹ פֶּן יִרְבֶּה וְהָיָה כִּי תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסֶף גַּם הוּא עַל שְׁנָאֵינוּ וְנִלְחָם בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן הָאָרֶץ:

Shemot 1:9-10

⁹And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much more numerous than us.

¹⁰Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they will join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground."

Pharaoh could have imagined a complementary relationship instead of a competitive one. He might have said, for example: "They are numerous"—and therefore they can be of great help



to us. Or “they may join”—us in fighting our enemies. But envisioning a hopeful reality requires renewal that connects rather than severs, a renewal grounded in memory, in knowing, and in the effort to understand. It requires choosing to know Yosef and his legacy, and recognizing the importance of acting in cooperation. This new Pharaoh chooses a path of division. Once our thoughts wander to separatist and comparative realms (much **more** numerous **than us**), and understanding others as a threat, they naturally lead to fear and assumptions of war: “they will join our enemies and fight against us.”

Here we reach the third stage: the impression of war pushes Pharaoh into survival mode. Believing that the Children of Israel—so numerous and mighty—pose a threat and intend him harm, he feels compelled to defend himself.

וַיִּשְׁימוּ עָלָיו שָׂרֵי מִסִּים לְמַעַן עֲנֹתוֹ בְּסִבְלָתָם...¹³ וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּפָרָה: וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת חַיֵּיהֶם בַּעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה...¹⁵ וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמִילֵדֹת הָעִבְרִיֹּת...¹⁶ בְּיֹלְדָן אֶת הָעִבְרִיּוֹת וַיֵּרְאוּן עַל הָאֲבָנִים אִם בֵּן הוּא וְהָמַתְן אֹתוֹ.

¹¹So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor.... ¹³The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites the various labors that they made them perform.

¹⁴Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor.... ¹⁵The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives.... ¹⁶...“When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him.”

The verses reveal the escalating layers of Pharaoh’s defensive aggression: taskmasters, forced labor, enslavement, the embittering of their lives, and ultimately a decree of death against their sons.

In stark contrast to Pharaoh stands his daughter. Through her choices, actions, and relationships, she presents a radically different path, rooted not in fear, but in compassion, courage, and connection.

Pharaoh's daughter is portrayed as a person who sees:

^{2:5}וַתֵּרֶד בֵּת פַּרְעֹה לְרַחֵץ עַל הַיָּאֵר וַנַּעֲרֹתֶיהָ הִלְכְּתָּ עַל יַד הַיָּאֵר וַתִּרְאֵהָ אֶת הַתִּבָּה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת אִמָּתָהּ וַתִּקְחָהּ: ⁶וַתִּפְתַּח וַתִּרְאֶהוּ אֶת הַיֶּלֶד וְהִנֵּה נֶעַר בֹּכֶה וַתַּחֲמַל עָלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר מִי־לִדִּי הָעִבְרִים זֶה:

^{2:5}Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe by the Nile, while her maidens walked along the riverbank. She **saw** the basket among the reeds and **sent her maidservant to fetch it**.

⁶She opened it and **saw** the child—behold, a crying baby—and **she had compassion** for him, and said, “This must be one of the Hebrew children.”

In contrast to Pharaoh's stance which detaches and blocks (“who did not know”), his daughter chooses to see, from a stance which opens and connects. She allows what she sees to touch her, to move her, and to influence her: “She sent her maidservant... she had compassion for him.”

Once Pharaoh's daughter chose to see and to let what she saw touch her, she too, like her father, reaches a second stage: imagining a future reality. But unlike Pharaoh, whose vision was shaped by ignorance and fear, her perception emerged from a place of connection to the new which is revealed. “She saw... she had compassion... and she made him her son” (Shemot 2:10). From knowledge and recognition of Moshe, she envisioned a **shared** future, a future in which she would become the mother of this child.

She demonstrates for us that when an encounter is open—when we allow ourselves to be moved, affected, vulnerable—a shared future becomes imaginable. The mindset of mere survival is replaced by a sense of responsibility—for oneself and for others. The zero-sum view of reality gives way to the possibility of mutual growth, of a future in which all can thrive.

Pharaoh's daughter embodies this consciousness, as revealed in the name she gives the child she saved: "She named him Moshe, explaining, 'I drew him out of the water.'" (Shemot 2:10). Had the name reflected only their shared past, a moment in which he was seen and chosen, as she stood before him with vulnerability, his name would have been *Mashu'i*, "the one who was drawn out," in past and passive form. The name Pharaoh's daughter gives her son expresses her vision for the future. Moshe—which looks like the grammatical active, present form in Hebrew—is one who will draw others out. He is destined to become a redeemer. And indeed, as the Torah tells us, when he grows up he chooses to see and understand: "Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and **saw** their suffering" (Exodus 2:11).²

The choice not to see, the choice not to know the past and tradition and to disconnect from "Yosef" figures around us, the choice to interpret differences in a competitive way—"greater and mightier **than** us"—instead of **for** or **with** us—these intensify a perception of reality in which only one can survive, and this survival consciousness can easily lead to evil and war.

While Pharaoh acts out of denial, fear, and aggression, Pharaoh's daughter acts in the opposite way: first, she chooses to see and to know, allowing herself to feel and be vulnerable.

² Pharaoh's daughter is not the only figure who sees and knows. Like her is Moshe's sister: "His sister stood from afar to know what happened to him" (Exodus 2:4); and God, "God saw the Israelites and God knew" (2:25).



In the second stage, Pharaoh's daughter is able, based on this seeing and knowing, to imagine a shared future—"and he became like a son to her."

Parashat Shemot invites us to choose vision and knowledge, awareness of our past, and a renewal that connects and opens the door to knowing those around us, even (or especially) when they are different from us. It teaches us to imagine a life-giving future, one that makes room for all, perhaps even through cooperation and shared purpose. This outlook urges us to move beyond a survivalist mindset and instead embrace a sense of inner strength, the willingness to truly see the other, and the courage to be open and vulnerable. From this openness grows the capacity for responsibility—not only for ourselves, but for others.

