

Our Pesach seder is centered around four questions. As we begin the book of Exodus, I too have four questions, with some possible answers, to which I encourage you to add your own thoughts.

- 1.** When does an established group of resident aliens become perceived as dangerous and undesirable? For one, when it gets too large. In describing how the Israelites have multiplied, the Torah uses the word וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ (they swarmed) – the same word used on the 5th day of creation when HaShem tells the animals to multiply. We humans have a pernicious tendency to distrust those who are not like us, a trait that all too often leads to immense tragedy, especially when these people become visible, excel, and come to be viewed as a threat to the status quo. Jealousy is a lethal force.
- 2.** How could it be possible that the new Egyptian king did not know Joseph, the person who had saved Egypt from famine? If Joseph had come to Egypt during the reign of the Hyksos, a Semitic, likely Canaanite people, his rise to power is understandable. Egyptians, who abhorred anything not Egyptian (Parashah Miketz, Genesis 43:32) would never have tolerated a foreign viceroy, but the Hyksos had no problem with Joseph or his family. After they had been defeated and Egyptian rule restored, past history was suppressed, and aliens were once again marginalized. But we have no proof that this happened. The rabbis of the Talmud are also puzzled – was it a new king in a new dynasty, or the same king with new decrees? No matter who it was, this king did not wish to recognize Joseph. Sotah 11a states: “... he [Pharaoh] was like someone who did not know him [Joseph] at all. Although he certainly knew Joseph and his accomplishments, he acted as if he didn’t.” Based on this, Rashi teaches that this Pharaoh had a new mindset that led him to ignore the facts, or, in today’s language, to put forth “alternative facts.” This too, is a persistent, insidious pattern that throughout history comes to the fore during times of economic stress when people are particularly susceptible to conspiracy theories.
- 3.** Why is Exodus called Shemot (Names) in Hebrew? The obvious answer is that it begins with a list of Jakob’s family members who went to Egypt. Hebrew names are descriptive: Jakob (heel, wily), Israel (God-Wrestler), Gershom (stranger here), *ehyeh asher ehyeh* (I will be what I will be). This is the name that stands out most in our parashah: “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘*Ehyeh* sent me to you.’” Someone with an enigmatic name that sounds more like a prophesy is sending a fugitive Israelite raised by Pharaoh’s daughter to lead his enslaved people into the unfathomable world of freedom – this is truly eternity acting in the present to ensure the future. How quintessentially Jewish!
- 4.** Who were Shifrah and Puah, the 2 midwives who briefly appear in our parashah, and what do midwives do? Were they Egyptian or Israelite? Were they midwives for or of the Hebrew women? Because the Hebrew text is ambiguous, interpretations vary. They are described as “Godfearing,” so I hope that the evidence we have gathered over the centuries points to their being among the “righteous Gentiles” who in every generation bring us help and hope in our darkest times. We know what midwives do – they guide babies through the narrow birth canal into the world. The Hebrew name for Egypt is *Mitzrayim*. The word מצר means *strait, isthmus*, with related words for *narrowing, border, limit*, as well as *distress, trouble (tzuras)*. We won’t go into the etymology of this complicated word; instead, let’s focus on its significance. Our lives as slaves in Egypt were constricted and controlled, but life was predictable – just like life in the womb. Release into the big wide world is exhilarating, but it is also fraught with danger. We constantly have to make choices, and temptations abound. Our Torah is full of warnings about pursuing “other gods,” and for very good reason. Among the many temptations vying for our attention is the desire for power and status. Every human being has the right to be recognized and respected, but no one has the right to claim it at the expense of other human beings.

So here is a bonus question: How do these 4 questions relate to each other in light of our human need to be recognized and respected? Our world is once again in a precarious state of flux. Even without the pandemic, war and environmental catastrophes have forced people to leave their homes in search of a better life. This is nothing new, and the negative reaction of many in whose lands these newcomers arrive and begin to settle is as old as humanity itself. When gullible people automatically equate difference with danger and view the accomplishments of people unlike them as a threat, the stage is set for the next demagogue to conjure up a whole world of “alternative facts” designed to churn frustration into fury. What is perceived as the pathway to recognition and respect is actually the road leading straight back to the narrowness of bigotry and hatred, and it is always a dead-end street. I earnestly pray that we humans will someday emerge from these self-wrought narrow straits into the true freedom that is grounded in *yirat haShem* – fear/awe of the Divine Power that sustains our entire world, allowing us to be truly human through acknowledging the dignity of all of HaShem’s Creation. It is for this future that we must learn from the past in order to live mindfully in the present.

Shabbat shalom!