

The Book of Exodus opens with a brief reminder of how the Israelites found themselves in Egypt. “Then Joseph died, as well as all his brothers and all that generation.” (1:6) What follows depicts an all too common phenomenon in human history. “The children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and increased and became exceedingly strong, and the land was filled with them.” (1:7) It is noteworthy that the word **וַיִּשְׁרֹאֵל** (they swarmed/teemed) is also used on the 5th day of creation when HaShem tells the animals to multiply; i.e., what is desirable in the case of animals does not apply to all humans. Alas, we have a pernicious tendency to distrust those who differ from us. When a group of resident aliens flourishes and poses a threat to the status quo, jealousy augmented by fear of being replaced becomes a lethal force. But how could the new pharaoh not have known about Joseph? If Joseph had come to Egypt during the reign of the Hyksos, a Semitic people, his rise to power is understandable. Egyptians, who abhorred anything not Egyptian (see Genesis 43:32) would never have accepted a foreign viceroy, but the Hyksos did not share this mindset. After they had been defeated and Egyptian rule restored, this episode was suppressed, and aliens were once again marginalized. (Plausible, if we remember how the Maccabean victory over the Greek war machine was subsumed by the myth of the oil miracle!) However, because there is no definitive proof that this happened, we have debated for centuries about the identity of the new king “who did not know [about] Joseph.” (1:8) Was it a new king in a new dynasty, or the same king with a new outlook? Regardless of who he was, this king refused to recognize Joseph. Talmud Tractate 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 allowed him to ignore the facts, or, in today’s language, to introduce “alternative facts.” This too, is a persistent, insidious pattern that often arises during times of economic stress, when people are particularly susceptible to conspiracy theories. A debate between Talmud sages Rav and Shmuel in Midrash Shemot Rabbah elaborates: “The rabbis say, ‘Why does it call him a new king? Wasn’t this the same pharaoh as before? But the Egyptians said to Pharaoh, ‘Let us mix it up with this nation.’ He replied, ‘You are crazy! Were it not for Joseph we would all be dead.’ When he didn’t listen to them, they deposed him from the throne for three months, until he said, ‘Whatever you want to do, I am with you.’ And they re-appointed him. That’s why it says, ‘A new king arose.’” A group of envious people fearful of becoming overshadowed by aliens who have prospered in their new home bands together and coerces a malleable leader to make huge concessions. This is eerily reminiscent of Kevin McCarthy’s recent long and embittered struggle to become Speaker of the USA House of Representatives, which he accomplished only by offering concession after concession. And it calls to mind other, far more disastrous concessions, such as British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement policy that allowed Hitler to expand German territory at will, and the infamous Hitler-Stalin Pact that ignited World War II. Once the process of concession begins, there is no turning back. The Egyptians were “disgusted because of the Israelites.” (1:12) The root **תָּרַק** forms words such as disgust, fear, and thorn. The Israelites were literally a disgusting thorn in the side of the Egyptians. Once convinced of this, Pharaoh acted, and one stricture led inexorably to the next. The Israelites were “enslaved with forced/oppressive labor.” (1:13-14). Then, the midwives were ordered to kill the newborn boys and only allow the newborn girls to live. Finally, “Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, ‘Every son who is born you shall cast into the Nile, and every daughter you shall allow to live.’” Our sages note that the Torah does not specify which boys. Midrash Shemot Rabbah explains: “On the day that Moses was born, Pharaoh’s astrologers told him that the one who will save the Israelites has been born, but we do not know whether from the Egyptians or from the Israelites, but we see that he will ultimately be smitten through water. Therefore, on that day he issued a decree also upon the Egyptians.” Given that these midrashim were written in the early Middle Ages, it is hardly surprising that this story is strikingly similar to the story in the Gospel of Matthew about King Herod’s fear upon hearing that the Magi were seeking the newborn “King of the Jews.” Since the ascendency of Christianity in the 4th Century CE, our midrashim have concentrated on producing a uniquely Jewish history to define and unite us as we fight our own battles against forces that try to denigrate us. Yes, we all make our own concessions in the ongoing conflict between assimilation and isolation, and some end up being Faustian bargains with long-ranging consequences. After all, we’re subject to the same human weaknesses as everyone else. But we’re also *Yisrael* – God-wrestlers, which means that we wrestle with ourselves to determine how to live Jewish lives in the larger world. We come from a tradition of thinking, questioning, and exploring multiple answers to the questions we face. Our Torah and the vast body of Jewish writing provide a broad framework within which we can make healthy decisions without compromising our principles.