

Anticipating Pesach's four questions, I have four questions of my own, with some possible answers and a challenge to you to come up with your own conclusions and answers. It's an ongoing process, after all.

1. When does a prevailing culture begin to perceive an established group of resident aliens as dangerous and undesirable? For one, when it gets too large. In describing how the Israelites have multiplied, the Torah uses the word נִישְׂרָצוּ (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 grow more visible, excel, and finally come to be viewed as interlopers. 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 career is understandable. Egyptians, who abhorred anything not Egyptian (Genesis 43:32) would never have tolerated a foreign viceroy, but the Hyksos readily accepted Joseph and 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.'" An invisible being with an enigmatic name uproots an erstwhile adopted Egyptian prince turned fugitive Israelite from his quiet life in Midian, to lead "his" enslaved people into the unfathomable world of freedom. In other words, eternity acting in the present to ensure the future. How quintessentially Jewish!

4. Who were Shifrah and Puah, the 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," which means that the evidence we have gathered over the centuries points to their being "righteous Gentiles," those intrepid souls 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)*. a highly significant word, as we know. 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 disarray. Even without the lingering aftereffects of the pandemic, multiple wars and environmental catastrophes are forcing ever greater numbers of people to leave their homes, creating the largest refugee crisis the world has ever known. Even the most welcoming and generous are beginning to be overwhelmed, adding more *tzuras* to our collective and individual burdens. However, the outspoken, and all too often brutally negative reaction of many in whose lands these newcomers arrive and begin to settle is as old as humanity itself. When gullible people automatically fear change, equate difference with danger, and feel threatened by the accomplishments of people who are unlike them, the stage is set for the next demagogue to conjure up a whole world of "facts" designed to churn frustration into fury. When the aspired pathway to recognition and respect turns out to be the road leading straight back to the narrowness of bigotry and hatred, everyone suffers. Tragically, some newcomers do lash out against the land that offered them refuge, and it is wise to temper our empathy with caution. There are no easy answers to this persistent dilemma. I earnestly pray that we humans will someday emerge from our self-wrought narrow straits into the true freedom that is grounded in *yirat haShem* – fear/awe of the Divine Power. It is this essential human emotion that motivates those brave midwives (1:17) and sustains our entire world, allowing us to be truly human by acknowledging the dignity of all of HaShem's creation. Indeed, we must learn from the past and live mindfully in the present in order to help lay the groundwork for a better future.

Shabbat shalom!