

FORGETTING HISTORY: A BIG KNOW-NO

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

And a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Yosef. (1:8)

Rashi cites the dispute between Rav and Shmuel (Talmud, Sotah 11a): One of them says it was indeed a new monarch; the other says it was actually the same king, but with "new" policies, designed to break the spirit of the fledgling Jewish nation. How is it possible that this king, whether "new" or "renewed," did not know of Yosef, who had singlehandedly moulded Egypt into a world-class nation? [Rashi addresses this question, and explains that he "acted as if he did not know Yosef."]

This past Sunday was the Yohrtzeit of the holy tzaddik Reb Elimelech of Rudnik zt"l (5548-5609/1788-1849). Once the Jews of Rudnik found themselves in a tight squeeze: It was already the fifteenth of the month, and there had not yet been an opportunity to recite kiddush levana (the blessing over the new moon - which can only be recited until the fourteenth or fifteenth of each month). Furthermore, the weather was overcast, and the sky was covered by thick clouds. As the Jews of Rudnik waited anxiously, R' Elimelech boldly promised that if they would each donate money for wine, there would be a moon. Everyone gladly contributed, except for one miserly fellow. "Why should I waste my money?!" he reckoned. "If there will be a moon for the others anyway, I will simply recite the blessing together with them!" He chuckled, pleased with having outsmarted the Rebbe.

While they waited, the group exchanged words of Torah and chassidus - all except for the miser, who had fallen asleep. Suddenly, someone came in to say that the clouds had cleared, and a beautiful levana was visible. The group quickly went outside to recite the blessing, inadvertently forgetting their sleeping friend. When they returned, singing and dancing, the miser awoke and ran outside. But by the time he got there, the sky was already covered in clouds, hiding the moon once more.

How foolish, says the K'li Yakar, was Pharaoh. "And [Pharaoh] said to his people, 'Behold! the people, the Children of Israel, are [becoming] greater and stronger than us! Come let us outsmart him, lest they become [too] numerous...' (1:9-10)" Rashi notes the inaccuracy in Pharaoh's wording: He should have said, "Come let us outsmart them!" Perhaps, explains Rashi, Pharaoh used the singular pronoun "lo" (him/it) because he was referring to "the nation." Chazal (Talmud, Sotah 11a) say that what Pharaoh meant was: "Come let us outsmart Him (i.e. G-d), by throwing the Jews into the water. After

all, G-d only punishes when the punishment suits the crime. And Hashem has sworn never to bring another flood upon the world!" [Little did he know, there are other ways to punish with water besides floods...]

Pharaoh made the mistake so many world rulers seem to fall prey to: He did not pay heed to history. He forgot the story of Yosef. Yosef had had a dream, a vision, a prophecy. One day he would be king, and his brothers would bow down to him. Without delving into the many reasons and explanations given by mefarshim (commentaries) for their actions, basically Yosef's brothers went to great trouble to see that his dreams would not bear fruit. In the end, Divine providence arranged things such that not only did they not succeed in destroying Yosef; their actions ultimately provided the catalyst that propelled Yosef into his role as viceroy of Egypt.

"Hashem annuls the counsel of nations - He voids the thoughts of peoples. Many thoughts are in man's heart; yet the counsel of Hashem - only it will prevail! (Tehillim/Psalms 33:10, Mishlei/Proverbs 19:21)"

And a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Yosef. He knew Yosef, says the K'li Yakar. But he did not know Yosef. Would Pharaoh have taken the time to consider the story of Yosef, and the lesson it teaches - that one can not outsmart the Almighty - perhaps he would have realized that all of his dastardly plans would be for naught, and his iniquity would ultimately bring about the pathetic downfall of his once powerful nation.

In the illustrious yet painful history of our nation, many a power has risen up against us to proclaim our end. "They have stumbled and fallen, yet we arise and are renewed! (Tehillim/Psalms 20:9)" While there may be those who despair of the future of our nation, we silently await the ge'ulah.

Have a good Shabbos.

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