

JANUARY 9, 2012

Parashat Shemot

Same King, New Policy

A new king arose (Exodus 1:8)

ויקם מלך חדש (שמות א:ח)

Describing the rise of a new king who “did not know Joseph,” the Midrash wonders: How could a sovereign possibly rise to power in Egypt that was unaware of Joseph’s tireless efforts that literally saved Egypt from starvation and ruin? Rashi (on 1:8) explains that while the new king undoubtedly knew of Joseph, “he made himself as if he did not know Joseph.” The Midrash (Lekach Tov) adds a critical component, noting that the text does not say that Pharaoh died. Rather, “It was the same king. What is [the meaning of the word] ‘new’? That he initiated new decrees. And what [is the meaning of the phrase] ‘and he rose’? [This means] that he rose up against Israel as an enemy.”

Just as a new agenda in ancient Egypt led Pharaoh to ignore the benefits of cooperation with the Jewish people and adopt a policy of hostility and violence, a new political agenda in modern Egypt could lead to similar results.

Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood will not recognize Israel under any circumstances and might put the peace treaty with the Jewish state up to a referendum, [Ynet](#) reported. The Muslim Brotherhood “did not sign the peace accords” Rashad al-Bayoumi, the movement’s second in command, told the newspaper *Al-Hayat*. “We are allowed to ask the people or the elected parliament to express their opinion on the treaty, and (to find out) whether it compromised the people’s freedom and sovereignty” he said. “To me, it isn’t binding at all.” Al-Bayoumi stressed that under “no condition will we [the Brotherhood] recognize Israel...It is an enemy entity, an exploiting, criminal occupier.” According to al-Bayoumi, no member of the Muslim Brotherhood will ever meet with Israelis: “We won’t cooperate with Israel in any situation.” The announcement came days before the final round in the first parliamentary elections in post-uprising Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party has emerged as the biggest winner in polls, capturing nearly half of the seats so far. For more on the situation in Egypt, click [here](#).

In biblical times, Pharaoh first welcomed the Israelites into his midst and then abruptly changed course. Sadly, Pharaoh’s legacy could permeate a modern Egypt whose potential new leadership may seek to abrogate the peace treaty with Israel and disavow ties with the Jewish state. ■

Female Leadership

But the midwives feared God (Exodus 1:17)

ותיראן המילדות את האלקים (שמות א:יז)

Despite being ordered to kill all Jewish males during childbirth, “the midwives feared God, and did not [do] as the king of Egypt commanded them” (1:17). Even with continued pressure from the Pharaoh, Shifra and Puah refused to follow his immoral and hateful command. The Torah explains that as a reward for their bravery and morality, God “Made for them houses.” What does this mean? Based on the Midrashic assumption that the Shifra and Puah mentioned in the text were really Yocheved and Miriam, Moses’ mother and sister, the Talmud (Sotah 11b) notes that these women were rewarded with houses of monarchy and priesthood—Yocheved was the mother of Aaron, the first priest, and Miriam the progenitor of the Davidic monarchy.

The birth of the Jewish nation was built on the bravery and strength of Jewish women like Yocheved and Miriam. Their heroics live on as the modern Jewish state takes pride in the valor of its women, and the critical roles that they play throughout society.

Despite recent headlines noting tensions surrounding the issue of women's rights in Israel, women play incredibly prominent roles across all levels of Israeli society. In fact, women hold the top leadership position in two major political parties—Tzipi Livni of Kadima and Shelly Yachimovich of Labor—and Israel was the third country in the world to be led by a female prime minister, Golda Meir. Women comprise 20 percent of Knesset members, a higher proportion than the 17 percent of the U.S. Congress that are women. Women are also a central part of the Israeli judicial system. They comprise 51 percent of all judges and 44 percent of all active lawyers. Moreover, Israel is the only country in the world with a mandatory military service requirement for women. At a recent graduation ceremony for newly trained pilots, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [told](#) the female graduates that “In a country in which women sit in the cockpit—in that country, women will sit wherever they like...There are already female pilots, female navigators and female helicopter pilots...You truly serve as examples and role models to an open, liberal, democratic society like that in the state of Israel.” For more on the roles of women in Israeli society, click [here](#).

Through their bravery and self-sacrifice, Yocheved and Miriam set the standard for female leadership. Women across Israel emulate their example, serving as leaders of government and the military in the modern Jewish state, helping defend and shape the future of this incredible nation. ■

Self-Inflicted Wounds

Every son that is born (Exodus 1:22)

כל הבן הילוד (שמות א:כב)

When the midwives refused to follow Pharaoh's command to kill all the male Jewish children at birth, the king issued a new edict: “Every son that is born you shall cast into the river” (1:22). Rashi notes that Pharaoh's edict did not specify killing only Jewish children. Rather, he commanded that they cast every male child—both Jewish and Egyptian—into the river. Why would Pharaoh do this? Quoting the Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 1, 22), Rashi explains that Pharaoh's astrologers predicted that a male child would be born that would redeem the Jewish people, but they could not tell him whether the child would be Jewish or Egyptian. To ensure the security of his regime, the king ordered all male newborns executed without exception.

Like the cruel Pharaoh who called for the murder of his own subjects to avert a threat to his rule, Syrian President Bashar Assad has demonstrated his willingness to murder his countrymen in order to preserve his power.

Notwithstanding Assad's famous assertion to Barbara Walters that “No government in the world kills its people, unless it's led by a crazy person,” the killing of civilians has continued in the Syrian city of Hama—despite the presence of Arab League observers there, [The New York Times](#) reported. According to the [United Nations News Service](#), Navi Pillay, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights said the overall death toll in the Syrian clashes “probably exceeds 5,000,” a number that includes at least 300 children. The Arab League said that it would send more monitors to Syria to shore up its heavily criticized mission to ensure that Assad's embattled government lives up to its promises, including a pledge to withdraw troops from cities and to release political prisoners. However, Syrian activists say that at least 150 people have been killed in the country since the observers started their work. Meanwhile, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France issued a call for Syria's president to step down, labeling killings by the Syrian government “massacres.” Victoria Nuland, a spokeswoman for the State Department, also said in a news briefing that “the Syrian regime has not lived up to the full spectrum of commitments that it made to the Arab League when it accepted its proposal some nine weeks ago,” and noted that “the violence hasn't stopped—far from it.”

When he felt threatened, Pharaoh issued an immoral edict to kill not only Jewish children, but his own subjects as well. The despicable actions of the Syrian regime, coupled with the horrifying death toll that continues to grow, are reminiscent of Pharaoh's actions, and show Assad's blatant disregard for human life. ■

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