



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Shmot 5775

By Jimmy Taber

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I often imagine the day my two-year-old daughter will turn to me and ask the simple question, “How can people hurt each other?” It may happen at a demonstration surrounded by signs calling for justice. It could be around our Shabbat table as talk inevitably turns to the activism of our friends. Maybe she will ask as my wife and I try to make sense of a world that all too often seems senseless. Regardless, I know this day will come, and I will be forced to explain how, despite my deep belief that people are good, we are able to treat each other as if we are not.

This week’s *parashah* offers a key insight into this vexing question, as well as an important opportunity to reflect on the path to overcoming this all too common experience.

Parashat Shmot marks a sharp turn in the story of the Israelites in Egypt. Following a period of protection and prosperity as a result of the relationship between Joseph and Pharaoh, Joseph dies. In Exodus 1:8 we read that “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.” This new leader oppresses the Israelites—ushering in 430 years of slavery. On first read it would appear that the new Pharaoh was capable of inflicting this harm because he did not know the people, while the previous king protected them because of his relationship with Joseph. Understood this way, this story suggests that being in a relationship with one another humanizes us and creates a barrier to inflicting harm on others—but that the lack of a relationship can create a space in which oppression could enter.

But remarkably, the Medieval commentary Rashi suggests that Pharaoh’s actions cannot be explained so simply. He writes: “Since the Torah does not say ‘The king of Egypt died, and a new king arose,’ it implies that the old king was still alive, only that his policies had changed, and he acted like a new king.”¹ According to Rashi this was not a new Egyptian leader who did not know the Israelites; it was the very same leader who previously *had* known them—but his way of knowing them had somehow changed.

One could certainly explain this change away by assuming that Pharaoh’s relationship had been with Joseph alone, and so when he died there was no connection with the rest of the Israelites to maintain his good favor; but I believe that it goes much deeper. In order to hurt someone that we know, we must go through a process of *unknowing*. We must create space for dehumanization to flourish. The other must become foreign to us.

In his seminal work, *I and Thou*, Martin Buber offers a blueprint for transforming unknowing into knowing; hurt into healing. He writes: “If I face a human being as my Thou, and say the primary word I Thou to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things.”² In entering into relationship with another, he or she necessarily becomes humanized. One can no longer see the other as an object, as Pharaoh did.

¹ Rashi on Sotah 11a

² Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (London: Continuum, 2004), 15.

This is why building human relationships is often a key part of conflict resolution, and is essential in ending oppression. As activists, too, we must cultivate a sense of knowing between ourselves and those we wish to serve. While positive, it is not enough to sign a petition, write a letter, or attend a demonstration. These acts are fleeting and don't result in the development of a human bond. We must move beyond the identification with a people or a cause as a symbolic act of solidarity to a place of cultivating a deep relationship. We must ask ourselves, do we *know* this community? Do we feel bound together by personal relationship and intimate knowledge of one another? It is only in this knowing that we can transcend the objectification that so often results in hurt.

I hope that my daughter will grow up to care about social justice issues and join us in our protests, political discussions, and righteous indignation. But more importantly, I hope to convey to her the simple beauty of being in relationships with others, especially those she seeks to help in order to bring about a more just world. For it is through this process of knowing that she will be able to truly find the humanity in others and transcend the eternal question of "How can people hurt each other?"



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