Who You Gonna Call
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
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"There arose a Pharoah who knew not Joseph." (Shemot 1:8).

This might be one of the most terrifying verses on all of the Torah. For at its core is the evaporation of Jewish power.

Before the State of Israel and with the exception of the brief 100 years of the Hasmonean Dynasty, the rule of the Maccabees Jewish power was not at the end of a sword or gun or in the hands of an army of soldiers. For the vast majority of Jewish history Jewish power and our means of survival has rested in who we knew, who we could call, who we hand influence and a relationship with.

Think about what you know of moments of Jewish crisis before the state of Israel, and even today in the diaspora. It's always been our ability to pick up the phone and call that person, to leverage of our political influence, our business or social connections that often was the key to Jewish survival. It wasn't always successful, indeed our efforts to use back channels to shape policy or politics in our self interest were often used as justification for antisemitic tropes and accusations.

Jews in power have always been suspect of their true loyalty, Jews behind power have always been viewed with great suspicion. Indeed our parasha this morning traces that suspicion back to the origin of our people hood. When this unknowing or uncaring pharaoh rises over Egypt and its growing Hebrew population the Torah records his great fear was that our growing numbers would overwhelm Egyptian culture, threaten his power and challenge his authority. The same charges that have stalked Jewish settlement in every land and society we've ever settled in. The very basis for the infamous statement of the answer to the question of Jewish immigration to Canada, "None is too many".

But the fear is not as simple as a pharaoh ignorant of our historic contribution to Egyptian society.

In this same verse The Talmud (B. Sotah 11a) preserves a debate in which Rav and Shmuel disagree about the words "new king":

The verse states: "And there arose a new king over Egypt, who knew not Joseph" (Exodus 1:8). Rav and Shmuel disagree about the interpretation of this verse. One says

that this means he was actually a new king, and one says that this means that his decrees were transformed as if he were a new king. The one who says that he was actually a new king holds that it is because it is written “new.” And the one who says that his decrees were transformed holds that it is because it is not written: “And the previous king of Egypt died and a new king reigned.” This indicates that the same king remained.

To sum that up: One scholar said that the new king really was a different person, while the other said that it was the same king as before, but he had transformed into a tyrant.

My colleague Rabbi Eli Garfinkel writes:

“What I find interesting about these two differing opinions is that both of them are frighteningly realistic. They leave us a menu of two choices that lacks the only good option, which would have been “neither A or B.”

The question, then, is not which kind of new king would have been best, but which one would have been the least terrible. A choice not far off from how many view the upcoming US and eventually Canadian National elections. Maybe every election. Some things in politics never change!

What is the greatest fear of a Jew in the diaspora? It’s that the people in power will stop taking our calls.

We survive as Jews in Canada, in the US, not by our sheer numbers, but by our influence. What makes the Exodus scenario most frightening is not that a new king arose that we had no influence over or relationship with. That happens from time to time, and we have learned to adapt, to not burn bridges to maintain friendships on both sides of the chamber or aisle to use an American reference.

The scariest scenario is that described by Rabbi Shmuel that, “a new king whose decrees were transformed” arose over Egypt. In this instance the king that we had come to know, deal with and trust changes his core beliefs about Jews. We go from friend to foe, from allies to enemies.

A king whose behavior changes, who starts looking for enemies, and who ignores basic historical facts, and abandons past agreements for new political expediency is the greatest danger for Jewish survival in the diaspora.

To paraphrase GhostBusters, “Who you gonna when the guy you had aligned yourself with stops taking your calls?”

Discussion Questions:

Do you agree with me that a mentally changed pharaoh would have been more threatening than a new person on the throne? Why or why not?

What would you do if a leader of your country started ranting and raving about the Jews?