

Parashat Shemot: Choosing to Know

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Shemot 1:8-10	
<p>וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע אֶת-יֹסֵף: וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-עַמּוֹ הִנֵּה עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעָצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ: הִבֵּה נִתְחַכְמָה לּוֹ פֶּן-יִרְבֶּה וְהָיָה כִּי-תִקְרָאנָה מִלְחָמָה וְנוֹסַף גַּם-הוּא עַל-שָׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם-בָּנוּ וְעָלָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ:</p>	<p>A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground."</p>

1. Pharaoh

Rashi on Shemot 1:8	
<p>וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ חָדָשׁ- רַב וְשִׁמוּאֵל, חָדָד אָמַר חָדָשׁ מִמֶּשׁ, וְחָדָד אָמַר שְׁנֵיתֵי חָדָשׁ גְּזֵרוֹתָיו: אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַע- עֲשָׂה עֲצָמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ לֹא יָדָעוּ (סוֹטָה י"א):</p>	<p>וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ חָדָשׁ- Rav and Samuel differed in their interpretation of these words. One said that he was really a new king; the other said that it was the same king, but he made new edicts (Sotah 11a). אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַע- he comported himself as though he did not know him.</p>

Devora Steinmetz, *Why Rain Comes from Above: Explorations in the Religious Imagination*, 76

Whether the verse means that the king did not know Joseph personally, or that the king chose not to recognize his debt to Joseph, or simply that the memory of Joseph and the help that he extended to Pharaoh had not been forgotten, one thing is clear: the king's not knowing corresponds with the decision to harm Joseph's people. Not knowing is a moral stance; it means that the king will not act in gratitude toward Joseph's family- in fact, will not act even with the duty of care that a king has toward his subjects.

2. Cain

Bereishit 4:9	
<p>וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-קַיִן אֵי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי:</p>	<p>GOD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"</p>

Devora Steinmetz, *Why Rain Comes from Above: Explorations in the Religious Imagination*, 76

The two parts of Cain's reply constitute a single claim: "I do not know," which means I don't *have* to know...Not knowing, or claiming not to know, or choosing not to know, is a denial of moral responsibility.

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

3. Moshe's Sister

Shemot 2:4	
וַתִּתְצַב אַחֲתוֹ מֵרֶחֶק לִדְעָה מֶה־יַּעֲשֶׂה לוֹ:	And his [Moshe's] sister stationed herself at a distance, to know what would befall him [Moshe].

Devora Steinmetz, <i>Why Rain Comes from Above: Explorations in the Religious Imagination</i> , 77
Moses's sister...does not stand there merely to gather information about her brother's fate. She positions herself in a place of knowing so that she can help shape that fate...Moses's sister, then, is the antithesis of Cain. While Cain chooses a stance of not knowing, of not being his brother's keeper, Moses's sister makes sure to know and to act to save her brother. She is also the antithesis of Pharaoh; his not knowing propels the story of enslavement, while her knowing sets the stage for redemption.

4. God

Shemot 2:23-25	
וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הָהֵם וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּאָנְחוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־הָעֲבָדָה וַיִּזְעֻקוּ וַתַּעַל שְׁוַעֲתָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־הָעֲבָדָה: וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נַאֲקָתָם וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יִצְחָק וְאֶת־יַעֲקֹב: וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּדַע אֱלֹהִים:	A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered the covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God knew.

Devora Steinmetz, <i>Why Rain Comes from Above: Explorations in the Religious Imagination</i> , 77
God's knowing is the culmination of God's hearing and seeing and remembering the covenant. This is an empathic knowledge...

5. Choosing to Know or Not Know

Nahum Sarna, <i>The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus</i> , 5
It is a key term in the Exodus narratives, occurring over twenty times in the first fourteen chapters. The usual rendering, "to know," hardly does justice to the richness of its semantic range. In the biblical conception, knowledge is not essentially or even primarily rooted in the intellect and mental activity. Rather, it is more experiential and is embedded in the emotions, so that it may encompass such qualities as contact, intimacy, concern, relatedness, and mutuality. Conversely, not to know is synonymous with dissociation, indifference, alienation, and estrangement; it culminates in callous disregard for another's humanity.

Simone de Beauvoir, <i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , 159
Regardless of the staggering dimensions of the world about us, the density of our ignorance, the risks of catastrophes to come, and our individual weakness within the immense collectivity, the fact remains that we are absolutely free today if we choose to will our existence in its finiteness, a finiteness which is open on the infinite. And in fact, any man who has known real loves, real revolts, real desires, and real will knows quite well that he has no need of any outside guarantee to be sure of his goals; their certitude comes from his own drive.

Big Question: Why do people choose not to know?
