

# Shemot

The Pharaoh Who Did Not Know Joseph

By Rabbi Yitzi Genack

January 9-10, 2015  
19 Tevet, 5775

For decades the Jews lived in peace in Egypt protected by their champion Joseph. However, once Joseph and his brothers die the situation suddenly changes. A new king arises, and he knows not of Joseph. ויקם מלך חדש על מצרים אשר לא ידע את יוסף. There are two nuances in this pasuk that catch the astute reader's eye. First, the word "ויקם" means to stand or rise up, but the more standard way to express a king's reign is "וימלך" which means to rule. So why does Pharaoh begin to "stand" instead of to "rule?" Second, how can anyone in Egypt not know who Joseph was? Egypt's entire infrastructure had been developed by Joseph during the years that he had fed all the people of the region, and now he is anonymous?

These questions have been asked for centuries, and one can trace the motion of their resolution by simply moving your finger along the page of the Chumash. Let us give our attention to the commentary of the כלי יקר who offers a unique interpretation. We are offered a parallel pasuk for comparison: ויקם קין על הבל אחיו - ויהרגו. And Cain stood against his brother Abel and killed him. Here, and in other places too, the word stand represents an attack. /if Pharaoh's ascension is an attack, it is described by the second part of the pasuk - אשר אל ידע את יוסף - his denial of Joseph defined his actions, as we will see.

Take the image of a triangle. In the lower left corner place Joseph who is persecuted by his brothers who stand in the lower right corner. They try and scheme to destroy him, but fail because God is in the third corner, and He had shown Joseph that he would be led to greatness. The harder the brothers try to get rid of Joseph, the greater their failure. This story and relationship was understood by Egypt, as Joseph often attributes his success to God.

Pharaoh should have understood. Pharaoh should have grasped that his relationship with the Jews living in his country fit into the same triangular structure as Joseph and his brothers. Just as Joseph is guarded and watched by God, so too the Jews, in just a few decades since they had arrived in Egypt, have already grown numerous, prosperous and strong. Clearly God was with them. Yet, Pharaoh chooses to ignore the lessons learned from Joseph's brothers' mistakes. And in the end, God, placed at the top of the triangle, oversees the success and failures of those below.

Pharaoh's reign is described as ויקם, because by ignoring the lessons of Egypt's previous ruler he has staged a double attack. He is poised to attack and destroy the Jews, and the second aspect of the offensive is an affront to God. God is clearly perched on top and maneuvering, blessing the lives of the Jews below. Just like Joseph's brothers, Pharaoh attempts to circumvent God's Will, and like Joseph, the Children of Israel will continue to be blessed and guarded through adversity and tribulation.



## **This Past Week at the 6AM Shiur**

It's early, there's no doubt it's early (it helps discipline me to go to sleep instead of wasting time late at night). Sundays, it's after the 7:30 minyan, so that's easier. But the hearty insomniacs who attended this week's study of *Massechet Avodah Zarah* wrestled with Resh Lakish's claim that we all somewhat benefit from the sin of the Golden Calf.

Leaving aside the ins and outs of the conversation, which have to be experienced in person, the Gemara concludes that Resh Lakish meant that death was temporarily conquered at the Giving of the Torah at Sinai. Had there been no Golden Calf, those who stood at Sinai (and their future generations) would have lived forever. While we would still have been born, it would have been into a world in which all the greats of Jewish history would have been alive.

To walk the earth with Moshe Rabbenu Aharon HaKohen, David HaMelech, Yeshayahu, Yirmiyahu, Yehezkel, R. Akiva, R. Yehudah HaNasi, and more, and more, would make it difficult if not impossible to carve our own place, to find a contribution we could make. In that sense, the sinners of the Golden Calf did us a favor, leaving a world that has more than enough room to feel like we have what to do to help bring it closer to its perfection.

Incidentally, the other view is that immortality was never on the table at Sinai, that the Giving of the Torah gifted us complete independence, political and cultural. Before the sin of the Golden Calf, we had been freed to set our own destiny in all ways, to choose what was right and do it. With the Golden Calf, we lost that independence (until Messianic times), and no one in the Gemara says that there was anything positive about that.

Friday morning (which has already passed by the time you're reading this), we'll be taking up the question of where we are and aren't allowed to help others who are about to sin. If another person asks us to give them an item of sin, when may we? The Torah says לפני עור לא תתן מכשול, we cannot put a stumbling block before the blind, and the Gemara's will work on figuring out how far that extends.

Some of the highlights of this past week at the 6 AM Shiur.