A New Pharaoh, Yosef and Abraham Lincoln

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A new king arose over Egypt, who did not recognize Joseph.
Shemot, Exodus, 1:8

We have already explained (Exodus 1: 7) that after two or three generations of arriving in Egypt, the Jews born there began to feel at home: the first thing they did was to leave their community, Goshen, and venture into Egyptian territory looking for new economic opportunities (see here). The next verse tells us how the situation of the Jews began to get worse.

Exodus 1: 8 says, “And then a new king arose in Egypt, who did not recognize Yosef.”

A NEW DYNASTY

There were two ways to become a new Pharaoh in Egypt: inheriting the throne from the father (or grandfather), or leading a coup against the monarch on duty. Everything seems to indicate that in this case it was the latter, a military revolt that produced a new dynasty, something not uncommon in Egypt. As usual in these cases, the allies of the previous government are now the enemies of the government in power. The Jews enjoyed a privileged position with the Pharaoh of Yosef’s time. This new King, however, “did not recognize” Yosef. This is not to say that he had never heard of him: Yosef was extremely famous. He saved Egypt’s economy with his prophetic predictions of the famine years and served Egypt loyally. The Egyptians deeply thanked Yosef for saving their lives and giving them food and seeds to plant. Yosef was a national hero. But now the new Pharaoh decides to rewrite history and sentence Yosef not to oblivion but to disgrace. Why?

THE NEED FOR AN ENEMY

The Italian philosopher Umberto Eco explained in his essay “Building an enemy” that for many rulers, especially dictators, an enemy, real or imagined, is an essential necessity. It serves the dictator to consolidate his power by creating a feeling of national unity based on hatred for a

common foe. The enemy will be blamed for all the ills of the state. Which will serve the tyrant as a perfect distraction from internal problems that he cannot solve. For centuries, humanity's favorite enemy has been the Jewish people. And this phenomenon, which still persists – for example, in the United Nations' obsession against Israel – was born in Egypt. The new Pharaoh redefined Yosef and his descendants as "enemies of the people." And for a long time I asked myself how did it happen? Was it possible to rewrite history, erase the national memory of a people and turn heroes into villains?

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

I've seen some similarities between what happened with Yosef and some events that took place in America during recent months. There are some extremist groups in the United States who are dedicated, among other things, to erasing the historical memory of this country, by demonizing "national heroes." Take, for example, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), one of the Founding Fathers of the United States; who served as the third president of this country, and was, among other things, the main author of the Declaration of Independence and a defender of democracy and individual rights. But since he was a slave owner, which in those days was the accepted norm, he is criticized and demonized as if he "would own slaves today, in 2021". Or Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), the president who put an end to slavery in the United States! The statues of these heroes have been destroyed or vandalized. Schools that bear their names will be renamed. And the same is happening with Christopher Columbus, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, or in England with Captain James Cook and others. These radical revisionist are trying to rewrite history in an anachronistic way, based on a political agenda, turning the heroes of the past into the new villains of the present.

A MIDRASH AND CURRENT EVENTS

Despite the obvious differences what one sees today sheds light on what happened then. It gets clearer for me to understand what transpired in Egypt, and what were the tactics Pharaoh used to "demonize" Yosef and make believe the Egyptians that all their problems were caused by him. And that now his descendants will have to pay for it! The Midrash Tanchuma presents an opinion that seems surreal for its unbelievable contemporaneity. It says the new Pharaoh "had

Yosef’s remains unearthed from his luxurious tomb and thrown into the Nile, as a show of contempt on the part of the new Egyptian ruler for the great Jewish leader.” The Tora is not a collection of ancient myths or stories. Some times the present helps us to better understand the Tora; and the Tora allows us to better analyze and grasp present events, showing us patterns of behavior from the past that we can identify even today.