

Chaos and the Fear of "Other"  
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Exodus 1:8-2:10

Today's selection from the Hebrew Scriptures might well have been written in and for our time, and not 2500+ years ago. Pharaoh could easily be any tyrant who's afraid of his own people. Likewise, the Israelites could be any minority group which is oppressed despite the key contributions they make to the overall welfare of society. When the two of them mix, the results aren't pretty – for example, in how certain governors have duped migrants into getting onto buses or planes which have dropped them in major cities from California to Martha's Vineyard; or how it seems like every day we hear stories about immigrants and others having to work in horrible conditions, having their wages stolen outright, or being openly discriminated against, and without any real ability to have the root of those problems addressed.

Their situation is nothing short of chaos. It's of a similar flavor to what the first chapter of Exodus describes. It's chaos as this new pharaoh tries to get a handle on his kingdom. The two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, find themselves being thrown right into the middle of it when they choose their fear of God over fear of the consequences for disregarding Pharaoh's order to perpetrate a genocide. It's chaos for the Israelites, who were oppressed despite their people's history of saving Egypt from starving to death. All of this is caused by a leader who thinks he's threatened by people who aren't

part of his dominant culture and that "dealing shrewdly" with them is the way to make himself, and his people who think like him, feel better.<sup>1</sup>

Fear is what drives Pharaoh to act as he does. He is afraid of the Israelites only because they're a group he can label as "other." He believes the only way to deal with them, and make himself feel better in the process, is to try to get rid of them: "He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.' Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them" (Exodus 1:9-10, NRSV).

It's a predictable move for anyone who knows their history – it's similar to the tactics employed by the regime in Nazi Germany, and White southerners after the Civil War, for example - but it's not a very smart one. Pharaoh's not exactly the sharpest crayon in the box, as he's portrayed throughout the first third or so of Exodus. He's what one commentary described as "a tyrant of very little brain. Although he does get one thing right – a boy is in fact thrown into the Nile but hardly to die. Rather that child will grow up in pharaoh's own house, being nursed by that boy's own mother who is paid for that motherly task by pharaoh's own daughter! If you think these Egyptians are ever going to get the best of these Israelites, this Hebrew author wants you to know for certain that that will never happen."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kimberly D. Russaw, "Commentary on Exodus 1:8-2:10." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-21/commentary-on-exodus-18-210> [accessed August 21, 2023].

<sup>2</sup> John Holbert, "Pharaoh Goes Bonkers, or the Stupidity of a Tyrant: Reflections on Exodus 1:8 – 2:10." <https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/pharaoh-goes-bonkers-john-holbert-08-18-2014> [accessed August 21, 2023].

Standing in direct contrast to Pharaoh's almost irrational fear of the Israelites is the fear the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, have of God. It's not so much fear as it is a healthy respect and awe. It's what the writers of Genesis would call righteousness of the same sort Abraham himself possessed. God rewards them for it, just as God rewarded Abraham, with families of their own. We're meant to infer that things turned out happily ever after for them, where they will not for Pharaoh and the Egyptians. God doesn't deal with them very kindly as this story develops. God sends ten plagues, and causes the death of all of the Egyptians' firstborn children, and that's before God drowns the entire army in the Red Sea.

The narrator comes off as more than a little smug when it comes to the Egyptians' fate. However, we need to be careful in treating this as merely a tale of winners and losers, despite how the writers want to set it up that way. It's one of how to deal with two groups who are deeply suspicious of one another, and in a context where the dual existence of privilege and a power imbalance put everyone at risk for real harm. The idea of, "We're better than those OTHER people" doesn't work all that well in practice. However, for the writer of Exodus, it's important rhetorically to set up the ultimate confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh at the Red Sea from the get-go.

As we know, that black-and-white, us-vs.-them way of thinking historically has not done humanity much good. Nearly all of the wars that have been fought in the last 100 years have had "otherness" as the basis in one way or another; and closer to home, we're hearing it all over the so-called "culture wars" which are threatening to take over the political discourse in this country right now. Here's the thing: Reducing someone else to the status of "other" does not only prevent us from entering and sustaining

relationships. It also prevents us from recognizing that the person we've labeled as "other" is also a beloved child of God, just the same as we are. Until we can learn that lesson – and by “learn” I mean that it will have become our default mode – humanity is doomed to continue to treat each other in the same way as Pharaoh treated the Israelites.

There is hope. We know this destructive pattern CAN be changed. Jesus himself tells us this repeatedly in the Gospels. He also showed us, repeatedly, what that change looks like in practice, starting with things like the Feeding of the 5000 and having his mind changed by the persistence of a Canaanite woman, and ending with his death. I don't know about you, but I really don't think Jesus – or God for that matter - would have bothered going to that length if people lacked the capacity to make it so. Thing is, it's hard. It requires endurance, patience, and, above all, the willingness to give up the security which comes with knowing what it is to be in a certain place. It instead requires us to pack up and go to the land of abundance that God will show us, and without necessarily having anything other than faith in God to go on.

When we get to that place, we will find that there is no need to fear what someone whom we've labeled “other” will take away from us. It means in practice that there is a place of respect and honor for all, and that even Pharaoh can rest assured that the Israelites will not threaten him, and he not threaten them. Getting there is much more easily said than done. Just ask Moses – or, say, someone who was involved in the Civil Rights Movement sixty years ago. We're not collectively there yet, not by a long shot. I have hope that we will be, someday, IF we are willing to be as brave in standing up to the injustices perpetrated by power as the two midwives who defied Pharaoh.

