

# Parsha Ponders

Shemos | December 26, 2018 | 19 Teves 5779

## *Decreeing their future salvation<sup>1</sup>*

ויקם מלך חדש על-מצרים אשר לא-ידע את-יוסף

A new King arose over Egypt that did not know Yosef<sup>2</sup>

As we begin the book of Exodus, the Torah describes how a new Pharaoh became the ruler over Egypt, after Yosef and his brothers had died. The Torah says that this Pharaoh didn't know of Yosef. Some say<sup>3</sup> what this really means is he annulled the decrees of Yosef. What does this refer to? Yosef, while he was viceroy in Egypt, decreed that all the Egyptians had to become circumcised<sup>4</sup>. This was their prerequisite to get food to eat during the ravaging famine. Yosef's intention was that he that knew his family would be exiled to Egypt, and he didn't want his circumcised brethren to feel alienated. With this decree, everyone would be the same. After Yosef died, Pharaoh annulled this decree<sup>5</sup>. While this may be an interesting historical fact, why is it placed in the middle of the story which describes the beginning of the Egyptian slavery?

A fundamental principle of Hashem's intervention in this world is that he provides the cure before he introduces the disease<sup>6</sup>. The classic case is with Esther becoming the Queen of Persia before Haman's genocidal decree was enacted. This position of power allowed her to save her people. The case with Pharaoh annulling the circumcision of the Egyptians is another example of this. Before the Egyptian subjugation of the Jews even started, Hashem was planting the seeds for their eventual salvation.

Pharaoh eventually decreed that all male babies born to the Jews were to be thrown in the Nile river<sup>7</sup>. Moshe's parents managed to hide his birth, but they realized they could no longer keep him at home<sup>8</sup>. In an act of desperation, they sent their baby off in a small boat down the Nile river. Their worst nightmare came true as his boat fell into the hands of the daughter of their greatest enemy, the daughter of Pharaoh. However, the Torah says that she realized it was a Jewish child, and had mercy. How did she realize it was a Jewish child?

The simple answer would seem to be that it had to be a Jewish child, because who else would send their baby away in a boat<sup>9</sup>? Since the Jewish baby boys were being thrown in the river, this child was clearly a Jewish mother's last attempt at saving him. However, it's not so simple. *Chazal* tell us<sup>10</sup> that since Moshe's birth, Pharaoh decreed that *all* baby boys, both Jewish and non-Jewish, were to be thrown in the Nile river. His astrologers told him that the Jews' savior was just born, and they weren't sure of his

<sup>1</sup> Based on Chasam Sofer Al HaTorah to Exodus 1:8, from the year 5591

<sup>2</sup> Exodus *loc. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Targum Onkelos *ad. loc.* See <http://parshaponders.com/shemos-5777> for a lengthy treatment on this opinion, and those explain the verse differently

<sup>4</sup> Bereishis Rabbah 91:5, brought by Rashi to Genesis 41:55

<sup>5</sup> See Chasam Sofer Al HaTorah to Genesis *loc. cit.* for an explanation for why he annulled it at this point. The Chasam Sofer (like usual) doesn't cite a source that this was the annulled decree. I saw that Parshegen *ad. loc.* says that Marpeh Loshon *ad. loc.* also says this, and uses it to explain the intent of Targum Onkelos. However, Parshegen provides two other explanations for נתחדשו דזירותיו; see there

<sup>6</sup> Megillah 13b. See also Rashbam to Bava Basra 91a s.v. מתה אשתו, Rabbeinu Bachya to Exodus 2:1, 25:6, Abarbanel to Deuteronomy 4:25, HaEmek Davar to Deuteronomy 8:5, and Malbim to Jeremiah 11:11

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 1:22

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* Chapter 2

<sup>9</sup> Ramban to Exodus 1:22

<sup>10</sup> Sotah 12a and Shemos Rabbah 1:18, brought by Rashi to Exodus *loc. cit.*

background. To cover all bases, Pharaoh continuously had all the male babies drowned until he felt secure. Therefore, perhaps the baby that the daughter of Pharaoh discovered was actually an Egyptian child. Maybe an Egyptian mother wanted to save her baby. How then did she know it was a Jewish child?

The answer is that she saw that he was circumcised<sup>11</sup>. Originally, there would have been no differentiating between a Jewish child and an Egyptian child this way. However, since Pharaoh annulled Yosef's decree, only the Jewish babies were circumcised. Pharaoh's daughter saw that this child was, and correctly intuited that it belonged to a Jewish family. Now that we've established how she knew this child's background, what difference did it really make?

Once Pharaoh's daughter decided to spare Moshe's life and raise him, she ran into a dilemma. How will she feed this baby? She tried someone to nurse him, but to no success<sup>12</sup>. Miriam, Moshe's older sister, was watching the scene unfold. She revealed herself to Pharaoh's daughter and offered to find one of the Jewish women to nurse the child. Pharaoh's daughter decided that this was the proper approach, as she knew that Moshe was really Jewish<sup>13</sup>. Miriam ended up bringing Moshe's true mother to nurse him.

What this event did was start a chain of events which eventually lead to the Jews' salvation from Egypt. Moshe, being nursed by his true Jewish family, ended up spending a lot of time with them. Even though he was raised in the palace<sup>14</sup>, he was also a full-fledged member of his original household. He was taught the fundamental Jewish beliefs. He knew he was Jewish. This caused him to have empathy for his brethren who were suffering. He was one day drawn to go out from the palace and see if he could help<sup>15</sup>. This led to him killing an Egyptian and having to flee the palace and Egypt, only to return as the eventual savior of the Jewish people.

None of this would have happened had Pharaoh not annulled Yosef's decree of circumcision for the Egyptians. Hashem was behind the scenes, engineering His children's eventual salvation, before their enslavement even began.

Good Shabbos

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<sup>11</sup> Sotah 12b, Shemos Rabbah 1:29, brought by Ramban loc. cit., although he rejects this. Ibn Ezra ad. loc. however says this

<sup>12</sup> See Sotah loc. cit. and Shemos Rabbah 1:21 (brought by Rashi to Exodus 2:7), which says that Moshe refused to nurse from any of the Egyptian wet-nurses

<sup>13</sup> This is my addition. The Chasam Sofer doesn't clarify why it should matter that she knew Moshe was Jewish. According to the previous note, she tried all the Egyptian wet-nurses and Moshe refused to nurse. The next logical choice would be to try a Jewish wet-nurse, even if Pharaoh's daughter didn't know Moshe's background. Perhaps he holds she wouldn't have considered that option for some reason, and only because she knew his background did she agree

<sup>14</sup> The Chasam Sofer seems to ignore this point. The simple reading of the verses imply that Moshe was raised by Pharaoh's daughter in the Egyptian palace. Also, Shemos Rabbah 1:26 supports this reading

<sup>15</sup> Exodus 2:11