



Exodus Complexidus

Shalom Auslander wonders whether God and political leaders are as hopeless as each other.

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It is Moses season in America. There are Moses on the radio and Moses on TV. Followers of one Moses hand out fliers at the grocery, followers of another Moses put up signs along the street. ‘Moses 2008,’ shouts a blue sign, ‘Vote Moses!’ shouts a red. There are rallies for this Moses, marches for that one, and every week or so, all the Moses gather together on stage and attack, to the delight of the ravenous crowd, the other’s plan for the Exodus.

‘I promise to lead you out of bondage in the first year of my Presidency.’

‘Oh please, you voted for the bondage last year.’

‘But then I voted against it. Can we keep this

discussion about the Pharaoh?’

‘I’ve been working to fight the Pharaoh since college.’

And so on. It is Moses season in America, and I never liked Passover much to begin with.

I was raised in the ultra-Orthodox community of Monsey, New York. It’s a bit more ultra now than it was then — perhaps then it was just mega-Orthodox, or mondo-Orthodox, or Orthodox Xtreme — but suffocation is an absolute, and suffocate I did. My rabbis taught me that God was violent, that God was vengeful, that God was quick to anger, and that when He got angry, watch out: the Earth just might flood, the blood just might turn to water, another Holocaust just might happen and God just might once again decide to ‘turn His head.’ God, basically, was a prick, and for the first twenty years of my life, my rabbis stood with their hands raised overhead, exhorting us to do what He says if we didn’t want any trouble. This sounds troublingly like what gunmen say when they hold up a bank, only with gunmen, it’s possible the police will rescue you; nobody, unfortunately, is going to kick in the doors of the synagogue and pump God full of lead, so you do what your rabbis tell you and hope the All-Homicidal goes away without killing anyone. A dysfunctional home life only made the problem worse; I might not have believed all the bad news about my Father in Heaven if my father on Earth wasn’t just as

violent, just as erratic, just as terrifying as the God my rabbis were telling me about. All of which makes me, 37 years later, a big fan of exodus, but not so much of Passover.

For one thing, I don't think Moses and me would have gotten along. I don't trust politicians, particularly those raised in palaces, and frankly, he seems like he was a bit of a reactionary. 'Oh, the bush told you to confront Pharaoh, did it?' We do have two things in common, though: we share the same vindictive lunatic of a God, and we both found ourselves in a place that was stifling, restrictive, and which we needed to leave. The trouble is, Moses was heading for the place I was escaping.

From a very young age, I wanted to go. I wanted to run. I didn't know where I wanted to go, but I knew I wanted to leave — my community, my family, my God. Consequently, no other story was as frustrating to me then as the story of Exodus. It had the best beginning and the worst ending. Go! it began. Be free! Be liberated! Live your own lives! How excited I was by that. 'I can leave?' I thought. 'That's cool with everyone?' But then, somewhere around the middle of the second act, the story takes a turn for the worse. Because from where I was sitting, the place the Israelites were going did not sound like a place of freedom. It sounded like Monsey. It was a place, again, of rules and obligations, another land ruled by a vicious dictator (in fact, according to some, when this Dictator gave them the Holy Rule Book at Mount Sinai, he held the mountain over their heads until they accepted His rules; out of the Egyptian fire, so to speak, and into the kosher frying pan). Check out the Table of Contents if you don't believe me: the promising Book of Exodus is immediately followed by restrictive Book of Leviticus. The Book of Freedom is followed by the Book of Submission. The Book of Possibility is followed by the Book of Do What I Say. I was hoping for a story of leaving, but this wasn't what I got; this was a story about digging your way out of one prison only to emerge from the ground, muddy and disappointed, in the yard of the prison next door. And the Warden of this new prison, if my rabbis were to be believed, was even crazier and more powerful than the warden of the last. Here's what the story said to me, a young boy stuck in a bad place, under the thumb of an abusive father and an even more abusive God: you can run, but you can't hide. From the introduction to the Artscroll Family Haggadah:

It is a night when every Jew should regard himself as though he were freed from Egyptian slavery, and began the march toward Sinai, where Israel would receive the gift of the Ten Commandments... On the night of Passover, (the nation) came to acknowledge no master but God...

Crap. Here's the ending I was hoping for:

And all the Pharaoh's army drowned in the sea, and the Israelites were free. And Moses said, 'All right, cool, that's over. Do what you want. I'm heading south, but I'm kind of a sun guy.' And Aaron went north, because he had some friends who had a ski lodge up there, and everyone else went off on their own, free to do what they want. The End.

Alas.

I didn't think about this much until my son was born three years ago, and it was his birth that made me, at last, bring to a close my own exodus — an exodus from a poisonous family, a

restrictive place, a destructive theology. It had been a long and difficult journey — not quite 40 years in the desert, but close — and it was around the time of his first birthday that I realized I probably wasn't going to make it. I realized that even though I had managed to leave my family and community behind, the terror they had instilled in me from such a young age was so hard-wired, so ingrained, that I would probably never rid myself of this God, never stop worrying, every minute of every day, about the cruel traps and painful punishments He was setting for me around every corner. But I also realized that maybe my son could. Maybe my son could live in a land without God, or, at the very least, without this God, this cruel God, this Prick my rabbis had taught me about. And suddenly, there — on my son's first birthday — was a third thing Moses and I had in common: we don't reach our Promised Lands, but we count it as the far greater victory if our children somehow do.

In a few months time, my fellow citizens are going to elect a new Moses. Right now, all we can think about is what we're escaping from: our politicians stand proudly before microphones and cameras, promising to deliver us from the evils of George Bush and Dick Cheney, and behold, the people do clap and cheer, and they dance and sing before their new Moses, be it Moses McCain, Moses Clinton or Moses Obama. But listen, I know these stories, I know how they end, and though I'm as excited as the rest of my nation to be out of bondage, I know that a month, or six months or a year after our emancipation, our new leader will reveal a whole new set of rules, a whole new type of bondage, or, more likely, the same old kind, and I watch them on TV and think 'Why bother?' But then I think about my son, and I think about that one Exodus story in my head, that one where Moses heads south and Aaron goes north and everyone goes their own way, that improbable one that really does end in freedom, and I reach over to my nightstand and set the alarm clock for 6:30 AM. It's Primary Day tomorrow, and the polls open at 7.

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