

BEN'S NOTES

EXODUS

BY **LEON URIS**



**Ben
Shapiro's**
Book Club

LEON URIS'S *EXODUS*

Leon Uris' *Exodus*¹ (1958) is far more than a historical adventure or romance. It is a thorough and provocative retelling of modern Jewish history, from the pre-Holocaust period through the establishment of the State of Israel. The book was one of the great publishing phenomena in American history: More than five million hardcover copies were sold by the mid-1960s, it remained number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list for eight months, and it was turned into a blockbuster film starring Paul Newman and Eva Marie Saint. It stands as a testament to a time when America saw itself as a force for good in the world – and when Americans believed that standing muscularly with allies for moral reasons was well worthwhile.

The story of *Exodus* revolves around the claims of Zionism. Those claims are, in essence, twofold: First, that the Jews have a historic, Biblically based claim to the land of Israel, including its capital, Jerusalem; second, that the Jews require a homeland thanks to the omnipresent, eternal threat of anti-Semitism. *Exodus* is the story of why those claims are eminently correct, and why they will always remain so.

LEON URIS: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Leon Uris was born in 1924, the son of a Jewish Polish immigrant father and a Jewish Russian-American mother. His father picked up his last name from the Hebrew word for Jerusalem, “Yerushalayim.” Leon Uris himself was no educational prodigy; he never graduated high school and reportedly failed English repeatedly. He enlisted in the Marine Corps at the beginning of World War II, serving in the South Pacific and fighting in Guadalcanal and Tarawa. In 1953, he wrote his first novel, *Battle Cry*, a major best seller that became a Hollywood hit. Uris then wrote for Warner Brothers for years before writing *Exodus*, which began as a movie deal: Uris sold film rights to the book before even penning the novel, then spent two years researching the book, reportedly interviewing some 1,500 people. He would go on to write several more best-selling books, ranging from *Mila 18*, about the Warsaw ghetto uprising; *Trinity*, about Irish history; and *QB VII*, about a defamation trial regarding a Polish

doctor working for the Nazis in a concentration camp. Uris was married three times. He died in 2003 at the age of seventy-eight of kidney failure.

THE SETTLER: ARI BEN CANAAN

In *Exodus*, Uris tells the story of two groups of people who have come to Israel: the early immigrants and the Holocaust survivors seeking to escape the ovens of Europe for a historic homeland. These Jews are pitted against the British occupiers – who, after an initial burst of enthusiasm for the establishment of a Jewish State, backtrack on their claims on behalf of Arabist realpolitik – and the Arabs, who are dedicated to strangling the infant State of Israel in its crib.

The original settlers of British Palestine, many of whom dated their ancestry back thousands of years – the Jewish presence in the land of Israel has been unbroken since the days of Joshua – comprise the first half of the Israeli story. In *Exodus*, they are represented by the Ben Canaan family.

Ari's father, Barak Ben Canaan, is originally named Jossi. He is a Russian expatriate, forced to flee the Russian Pale of Settlement for Palestine after the murder of his father. He and his brother, Akiva – nee Yakov – literally walk the distance from Russia to Palestine, only to find an uninhabitable wreck. Nonetheless, the love of the land bred into them by their religious father has never left them:

Jerusalem! Heart of their hearts—dream of their dreams! In that second all the years of privation and all the bitterness and suffering were erased.

They entered the old walled city through the Damascus Gate and wended their way through the narrow streets and bazaars to the mighty Hurva Synagogue.

'If only Father were with us now,' Jossi whispered.

'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem ... ' Yakov prayed the lament of the captives.²

These brothers rename themselves in Biblical Hebrew. They are instrumental in the re-creation of a Hebrew-speaking nation; they revive a language heretofore reserved for prayer and study, but now spoken by millions. They help found cities and build agricultural settlements.

And they raise their children as fighters. Barak teaches his son, Ari, to use a whip after Ari is attacked by Arabs. "The son of Barak Ben Canaan is a free man! He shall never be a ghetto Jew," he tells his astonished wife.³ As he later explains to his wife, "God asked Abraham to give his son in sacrifice. I suppose we of the Yishuv live in that shadow. We must keep giving Ari so long as God wills it."⁴

Ari becomes the whip hand of the new Jewish State. He is a new type of Jew: militant and nationalistic, but not particularly religious. As Ari says, "The old men in there ... don't quite

realize that the only Messiah that will deliver them is a bayonet on the end of a rifle.”⁵ Or as David Ben Ami puts it, more romantically:

*Six million Jews died in gas chambers not knowing why they died ... If three hundred of us on the Exodus die we will certainly know why. The world will know too. When we were a nation two thousand years ago and when we rebelled against Roman and Greek rule we Jews established the tradition of fighting to the last man. We did this at Arbela and Jerusalem. We did this at Beitar and Herodium and Machaerus. At Masada we held out against the Romans for four years and when they entered the fort they found us all dead. No people, anywhere, have fought for their freedom as have our people. We drove the Romans and the Greeks from our land until we were dispersed to the four corners of the world. We have not had much opportunity to fight as a nation for two thousand years. When we had that opportunity at the Warsaw ghetto we did honor to our tradition. I say if we leave this boat and willingly return to barbed-wire prisons then we will have broken faith with God.*⁶

THE SURVIVOR: DOV LANDAU

The survivors of the Holocaust comprise the second part of the Israeli story. Their story is well known now but was far less known when *Exodus* was written: the story of the gradual takeover of the European continent by the Nazis, the subjugation of the Jews, the slaughter of six million of them in pits and vans and gas chambers.

Dov Landau acts as a guide to the story of European Jewry during the Holocaust. He isn't religious – his father, Mendel, is described as retaining “only a measure of faith in his religion,” accepting “the Bible for its historical value as a story of his people rather than as a basis for worship.” But Mendel is loyal to an idea: “It was remote and it was a dream and it was unrealistic. He gave his children the idea that the Jews must someday return to Palestine and re-establish their ancient state. Only as a nation could they ever find equality.”⁷

Mendel's prophecy comes true. Dov ends up as a runner in the Warsaw ghetto, the scene of one of the greatest acts of Jewish resistance in history. The Warsaw ghetto was used as a gathering place for Jews by the Nazi regime, which then deported hundreds of thousands of those Jews to the gas chambers. Thanks to Dov's exterior appearance – he is blond and blue-eyed – he can move between the ghetto and the outside. He is thus a key player in an uprising that lasted, astonishingly, almost a month – an uprising in which a few Jews, without any significant weaponry, held off the might of the Nazi military. In the end, nearly everyone was murdered. But the resistance is a reminder of what the Jew might become: not a victim, but a hero. As Uris writes:

*In that dank and slimy bunker ten feet beneath the earth the remaining Redeemers sang in a strange and wistful blend of voices. They sang a song that they had learned as children at Redeemer meetings. The song told them that the land in Galilee in Eretz Israel was beautiful and that wheat grew in the fields and the grain bent softly in the wind. In a bunker in the Warsaw ghetto they sang of the fields of Galilee that they knew they would never see.*⁸

Dov escapes the ghetto, only to be captured by the Nazis and sent to Auschwitz, where he survives only through his skill in forging. He enters British Mandate Palestine on the *Exodus*, where he eventually joins the Maccabees, a militant organization based on the real-life Irgun, run by Akiva Ben Canaan.

THE STATE OF ISRAEL, REBORN

In *Exodus*, the British – a stand-in for the Western powers more broadly – vacillate between pro-Zionism and a desire to placate an Arab world that betrayed the British during World War II. In 1917, the British government declared that it would support the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine in the Balfour Declaration, or what Uris calls the “Magna Charta of the Jewish people!”⁹

But the British quickly began buying back this promise. They do so thanks to the intransigence of the Arab states and the local Arab population. The story of the Arabs living in Palestine is a tragic one. Abandoned by their leaders, distracted by religious extremism, they fail to embrace the burgeoning success of the Jewish State or the call by that nascent state for co-existence. While the Jews moving into Palestine begin building agricultural settlements, engaging in democratic processes, and even founding cities, the Arabs remain relegated to small villages ruled by petty sheikhs. As Uris writes, “The masses were but pawns in the schemes of the effendis and sheiks. They could be stirred into religious hysteria at the least provocation and were thus useful as a political weapon.”¹⁰ And their unwillingness to live alongside the Jews is the chief obstacle to peace. As Taha, a lifelong friend of Ari’s who, in the end, sides with the Arab armies against Israel, believes, “He could not fight his friends nor could he resist the force around him which told him he was an Arab and an enemy of the Jew and he had to fight them whether it was right or it was wrong.”¹¹

Arab leadership sided with Adolf Hitler during World War II; no matter, the promise of oil would lure the British back to the table to make concessions at the expense of the Jews. As one British officer states:

I sat here at this desk during the war as one report after another of Arab sellouts came in. The Egyptian Chief of Staff selling secrets to the Germans; Cairo all decked out to welcome Rommel as their liberator; the Iraqis going to the Germans; the Syrians going to the

*Germans; the Mufti of Jerusalem a Nazi agent. I could go on for hours. You must look at Whitehall's side of this, Bruce. We can't risk losing our prestige and our hold on the entire Middle East over a few thousand Jews.*¹²

And so the British routinely renege on their promises to the Jews. After heavily restricting Jewish immigration into British Mandate Palestine during the Holocaust, leaving hundreds of thousands of Jews to their fate, they maintain a restrictionist policy in the aftermath of World War II. As Uris writes, "Throughout Europe the British embassies and consulates put pressure on every government to keep their borders closed to these refugees. The British argued that it was all a plot of the world Zionists to force their own solution on the Palestine mandate."¹³

Meanwhile, the British refuse to enforce the law to prevent Arab attacks on Jewish settlements. This, in turn, forces the Jews to engage in reprisal. As one rogue British officer working with the Jews tells them, "Reprisal ... remember that, for the Jews are outnumbered ... we must use the principle of reprisal."¹⁴

Over the course of years, under the noses of the British, the Jews build a ragtag army, undermanned and under armed but with the fire of God within them. They battle with one another over the proper tactics – should they commit acts of aggression against suspected terror cells in neighboring Arab villages, or attempt to work within defensive boundaries? Should they attack British sites, or attempt to avoid conflict? Such questions lead to a falling out between Barak and Akiva. But that conflict, in the end, is put aside in the face of necessity.

Necessity becomes the nascent Israel's byword. The Jews are forced to accept compromise after compromise. And they do. They accept a partition plan that leaves them with indefensible borders. The UN, against hard odds, votes in favor of Israel's establishment.

The Arabs, by contrast, reject the partition and declare war; in fact, they declare their ambition to annihilate the Jews, just three years after the end of the European Holocaust. And the international community, as Barak Ben Canaan observes, does little or nothing to stop the bloodshed: "International law," he says, "is that thing which the evil ignore and the righteous refuse to enforce."¹⁵

Despite the overwhelming might of the Arab armies, the Jewish State survives. Uris tells the story of the resistance campaign – the story of the Burma Road bypassing Latrun and ending the siege of Jerusalem. And the Jewish State becomes the site of a massive gathering of exiles, hundreds of thousands of Jews from Arab lands. As Barak states just before his death, "It is good to have a country to die for."¹⁶

CONCLUSION

“Our very existence is a miracle,” David Ben Ami tells Ari Ben Canaan. “We outlived the Romans and the Greeks and even Hitler. We have outlived every oppressor and we will outlive the British Empire. That is a miracle, Ari.”¹⁷

It has been sixty-four years since *Exodus* was written; in that time, the State of Israel has emerged as a regional power, a fully industrialized modern economy complete with a thriving technology sector, and a strong ally of the West. It has also remained a canary in a coalmine: attacks on Israel rarely end. They are usually a proxy for various ideological hatreds that prey upon the same Judeo-Christian basis that undergirds the American experiment. A nation’s treatment of its Jewish population has always served as a leading bellwether of its success or failure – nations that have welcomed Jews have historically thrived, in line with the Biblical blessing bestowed by God on Abraham, that those who bless Israel will be blessed, and those who curse her will be cursed. Today, that same logic extends to the Jewish State, thanks in no small part to the support of Americans, who remain overwhelmingly in favor of the tiny State of Israel against its religiously extremist enemies. As Ari Ben Canaan tells Kitty, “I like Americans. Americans have consciences.”¹⁸

As for the reason for the State of Israel, Karen Clement expresses it best, just before she is murdered by the fedayeen for the crime of attempting to build an agricultural moshav in the wilderness:

*Please ... please listen. You know that even when I was a little girl in Denmark I asked myself why I was born a Jew. I know the answer now. God didn't pick us because we were weak or would run from danger. We've taken murder and sorrow and humiliation for six thousand years and we have kept faith. We have outlived everyone who has tried to destroy us. Can't you see it, Kitty? ... this little land was chosen for us because it is the crossroads of the world, on the edge of man's wilderness. This is where God wants His people to be ... on the frontiers, to stand and guard His laws which are the cornerstone of man's moral existence. Where else is there for us to be?*¹⁹

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STUDY QUESTIONS

1. When is it morally justifiable to endanger your own life – or the lives of children – for a cause?
2. Why does anti-Semitism seem to crop up throughout world history so frequently and powerfully?
3. Is nationalism an evil or a good?
4. What factors create an effective community?
5. Why does Kitty feel attraction to Ari Ben Canaan? Why does he feel attracted to her?
6. What does Uris's depiction of the Middle East suggest for the future of peace negotiations?
7. *Exodus* was a massively important factor in driving American support for Israel during the 1967 Six-Day War. How much should moral considerations count in foreign policy?
8. How should modern people view the Bible: as a historical document, as a road map for action, or as a guide to the future?
9. What does Israel's founding tell us about the status of America today?
10. Do nations require external pressures in order to achieve cohesion?

ENDNOTES

¹Leon Uris, *Exodus* (Bantam Books, 1958).

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.