

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.

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