

Pilgrim's Progress

Creating Jewishness in a post-religious age: Leon Uris' *Exodus* and S.Y. Agnon's *Only Yesterday* paint Israel's history in broad and fine strokes

By Adam Kirsch | September 27, 2011 7:00 AM



It is tempting to say that Judaism has always been a religion of stories. After all, what stories are more familiar or beloved than the ones in the Hebrew Bible: Adam and Eve, the binding of Isaac, Joseph and his brothers, Daniel in the lion's den? These stories are certainly Judaism's greatest legacy to the world; adopted by Christianity, they have been told in every language, not to mention painted, acted, and set to music. Even in a post-biblical culture like our own, they remain the closest things we have to universal myths.

Yet the truth is that for most of the history of Judaism it would have been an insult to reduce the religion to its narratives. Until the destruction of the Second Temple, in the first century C.E., cultic worship and sacrifice were the heart of Judaism. After that trauma, for the next 1,800 years, it was the interpretation and practice of law that defined a Jewish life. It is only in the modern, secular world that narrative, the simple fact of storytelling, could be considered the supreme human method for making meaning, including Jewish meaning.

That is because, for modern people of all faiths, stories are often the only part of religious heritage that still seems valid. We no longer believe in laws dictated from heaven, or even in heaven itself; but we allow ourselves to feel that ancient religious stories have a numinous power, if only as a residue of the faith that so many generations invested in them. For many Jews today, reading biblical stories, or retelling them on Passover or Hanukkah, is the only part of Jewish tradition that still seems available, or necessary.

This new focus on story as the heart of Jewish experience can be dated to the beginning of the 20th century. Chaim Nachman Bialik mined ^[1] the Talmud for its legends and tales and published them as *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* in 1911; Louis Ginzberg's even more broadly based collection of midrashic tales ^[2], *The Legends of the Jews*, began to appear in 1909; Martin Buber performed a similar task for Hasidic stories, publishing ^[3] *Legend of the Baal-Shem* in 1908. All these works reflected a growing tendency to divorce law from literature, *halakhah* from *aggadah*, in keeping with the positivist spirit of the 20th century.

Despite his contribution to this movement, Bialik, in a landmark essay called "Halakhah and Aggadah in Jewish History," expressed a fear that *aggadah*—the inner, spiritual, narrative legacy of Judaism—could not survive in the world without *halakhah*—the outer, material, legal practice of Judaism. Depending on how you look at it, this fear has either been justified or refuted by the course of Jewish life in the post-Holocaust world. There's no denying that rabbinic Judaism as it was lived for 18 centuries is no longer part of the lives of the large majority of Jews. Yet this secularizing process is not peculiar to Judaism: The vast majority of Western Christians, too, no longer lead lives as defined by ritual practice as they were two or 10 centuries ago.

To the extent that there is a Jewish culture or identity that cuts across national boundaries, it is defined largely by storytelling. Just as many Jews now consider scripture to be what Wallace Stevens called a "supreme fiction," so fiction has become our contemporary scripture—a body of texts that creates Jewishness in a post-religious age. When we read the major Jewish writers of the last 60 years, we inevitably think about what they have in common and what we have in common with them, as Jews and interpreters of Jewish experience.

These are the questions I will explore in this space over the next year, in a monthly series on postwar Jewish fiction. Some of the writers I will discuss are well-known to American Jewish readers—Isaac Bashevis Singer, Saul Bellow, Cynthia Ozick—while others may be new discoveries—France's Romain Gary (born Roman Katsav), Brazil's Moacyr Scliar. They write in a half a dozen languages (though I am reading them in English), and they occupy every point on the spectrum of Jewish identification. By reading them together, it may be possible to get a new sense—less authoritative but more intimate than those offered by politics and religion—of what it means to belong to the Jewish people today.

In the postwar world, it has hardly been possible to think about that question without thinking about Zionism and the State of Israel. In fact, if you wanted to name the most influential Jewish novel of the last 65 years, a good case could be made for picking Leon

Uris' pulp epic about the founding of the Jewish State, *Exodus*. Published in 1958, it has sold 7 million copies in the United States alone, and the movie version has reached millions more around the world. Samizdat copies of *Exodus* helped inspire the first refuseniks with the dream of going to Israel. That was exactly the kind of reaction Uris must have hoped for. As David Ben-Gurion^[4] put it when the book came out, "As a literary work it isn't much. But as a piece of propaganda, it's the best thing ever written about Israel."

Uris engineers the book according to familiar Hollywood formulas, in particular the formula of the Western. Ari Ben Canaan, the novel's hero, is a classic cowboy—ultra-masculine, brave, and taciturn, he defends civilization without quite joining it. To be complete he needs the love of a good woman—in this case, Kitty Fremont, an American Gentile who gets caught up in the Zionist movement largely out of unadmitted love (and lust) for Ari. And of course in a Western there must be Indians, the savage enemies of civilization. This role is played in *Exodus* by the Arabs, and the novel is never more propagandistic than in its unapologetically hostile caricature of "the Arab world": "unspeakable disease, illiteracy, and poverty were universal. There was little song or laughter or joy in Arab life. It was a constant struggle to survive. In this atmosphere cunning, treachery, murder, feuds, and jealousies became a way of life." The message Uris wanted the American reader to take from the book is unmistakable. Kitty Fremont states it on the last page: "Israel stands with its back to the wall. It has always stood that way and it always will ... with savages trying to destroy you."

But it would be too easy to say that the message, or the battles and love scenes, is what explains the success of *Exodus*. In fact, Uris, like Dan Brown today, is so popular because he delivers something like an education—or at least, great heaps of more or less accurate historical information. In Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, it's the history of Christianity and the Catholic Church; in *Exodus*, it's the history of Eastern European Jewry, from the rise of Zionism in the 1880s through the Holocaust and the birth of Israel in the 1940s. And reading *Exodus* is not the worst way to get an introduction to this period. It teaches the reader about Bilu and Hovevei Zion and kibbutzim and the Haganah—and about the Nuremberg Laws and the Warsaw Ghetto and the postwar DP camps. This is one of the most fascinating and tragic periods in modern history, and millions of people, including many Jews, got their first introduction to it from Leon Uris.

The problem with Uris' history is not inaccuracy, though of course there are errors. It is that he can find in all of it only a single meaning: the importance of Jewish toughness. This is not a value to be scorned, and it is true that it inspired much of the urgency and success of the Zionist movement. But with Uris, it becomes something monomaniacal and amoral—an obsession with proving that Jews can and will use violence. Take the scene where the young Ari, having been robbed by Arabs, is instructed by his father Barak in the use of a bull whip, Indiana Jones-style. "The son of Barak Ben Canaan is a free man! He shall never be a ghetto Jew," he bellows.

By a natural extension of this principle, Uris reserves his greatest admiration for Jews who are tough enough to commit suicide. One of the novel's Jewish heroes, wounded in battle in the War of Independence, lures a platoon of Arabs to him and then pulls the pin on a grenade. Another launches a doomed attack on besieged Jerusalem ("They didn't have a chance. It was a suicide mission"). The climax of the first part of the novel comes when Ari

Ben Canaan, trying to get a ship full of Jewish children out of Cyprus and into Palestine, threatens that the whole group will starve themselves to death if they don't get visas. Today, we are used to Hamas killing Jewish children to make a point; it is shocking to see Uris, 50 years ago, imagining that this was also the practice, or the meaning, of Zionism.

This honoring of suicide—and of terrorism, in the form of the “Maccabees,” the novel's lightly fictionalized version of the Irgun—is the clearest sign that *Exodus* is not interested in the Jewish life Zionism built. It is only interested in the effect of Zionism on the way the world perceives Jews. Indeed, Uris writes with remarkable frankness, or naiveté, about the psychic benefits American Jews derive from the sacrifices of Israeli Jews. Here is Bill Fry, an American Jewish ship's captain who volunteers to run immigrants into Palestine:

All my life I've heard I'm supposed to be a coward because I'm a Jew. Let me tell you, kid. Every time the Palmach blows up a British depot or knocks the hell out of some Arabs he's winning respect for me. He's making a liar out of everyone who tells me Jews are yellow. These guys over here are fighting my battle for respect ... understand that?

This passage is the psychological key to *Exodus*, and it explains why the novel has so little interest in what Israel is actually like. Ari Ben Canaan declares on the novel's last page that “Israel is the bridge between darkness and light,” and if that sounds like a place without a latitude and longitude—much less car-rental agencies and zoning codes and divorce lawyers—Uris doesn't mind. After all, he has all those things, the appurtenances of real life, back home in America. The more *Exodus* claims to be a novel about Israel, the more clearly it reveals itself to be a novel about the self-image of American Jews—a problem that continues to plague American Jewish thinking about Israel and Zionism.

It would be hard to imagine a book less like *Exodus* than *Only Yesterday* ^[5], by S.Y. Agnon. This modern Hebrew classic also deals with the prehistory of Israel—in this case, the period of the Second Aliyah, in the first decade of the 20th century, when hundreds of idealistic Zionists came from Eastern Europe to Palestine “to build the land and to be built by it.” First published in 1945, three years before Israel achieved statehood, *Only Yesterday* was not translated into English until 2000, by Barbara Harshav. It would be surprising if it has had one American reader for every thousand of *Exodus*'.

Yet looking at the two novels side by side reveals a certain kinship. Just look at the minor character of Gorishkin in *Only Yesterday*, a writer who, Agnon says, “has already left behind all his own thoughts and wants only to be the writer of the Land of Israel. A new life is taking shape in the Land and it needs its writer.” He sounds like a version of his creator: Agnon moved to Palestine in 1908, at the age of 21, and went on to become a modern Hebrew classic, and the only Israeli writer to win the Nobel Prize. But in his nationalistic fervor, Gorishkin also sounds a bit like Uris, who designed *Exodus* to be a Hollywood-scale myth of the “new life taking shape in the Land.”

When we encounter Gorishkin, however, he hasn't yet figured out the right way to write the epic of Eretz Yisrael. As Agnon writes, “he hasn't yet made up his mind whether to write things as they are, that is, to copy from reality, or to make his books novels. On the one

which is the vertigo that results when a 20th-century Jew returns to the land his ancestors left 2,000 years earlier.

What Isaac discovers is that Zionism yields an unending series of paradoxes. As he talks to various fellow-immigrants—much of the novel is made up of anecdotes and conversations—he hears tales of frustration and bewilderment. There is Reb Alter, a pious old Jew who broke his leg stepping off the ship in Palestine; as a result, even though he lives in Jerusalem, he's never been able to walk the few blocks to pray at the Western Wall. There is Hemdat, the poet, who “doesn't have anything to do and doesn't do anything. As long as he was Outside the Land and his heart was in the Land of Israel, he composed poems; now that he lives in the Land of Israel, what shall he do? Would he compose poems about the longings he once had?” Then there is Rabinovitch, another would-be farmer, who ended up as a storekeeper—and found himself so successful that he decided to leave Palestine to expand his business in Europe. “All his years he lived in his hometown he made the shop secondary and the Land of Israel the essential,” Agnon writes. “When he went to work in a shop in the Land of Israel, once again he made the shop the essential.”

All these pilgrims are thwarted by the paradox of longing, which can only remain longing while it has a goal to strive toward. When you get what you wish for, you are left wondering why you wished for it so strongly in the first place. The only solution to this dilemma, Agnon hints, is to restore to Zionism the eternal, unsatisfiable longing that it did away with on ideological grounds—the longing for God.

Thus Isaac starts out his life in Palestine in coastal, mercantile Jaffa, but he ends the novel in mountainous, pious Jerusalem, where he regrows his beard and returns to Orthodoxy. The same trajectory is paralleled in his romantic life. In Jaffa, he has a very modern love affair with Sonya, a liberated woman who refuses to commit; in Jerusalem, he marries the pious, innocent Shifra, the daughter of an ultra-Orthodox rabbi. In this way alone can he overcome his old Diaspora “rootlessness.” “In the end,” Agnon writes, “he became a tree with many roots, and even if all the winds in the world came upon it, they couldn't move it from its place.”

Yet Agnon is too modern a writer to be able to share or simply endorse Isaac's piety. That is why, as if in spite of itself, *Only Yesterday* turns repeatedly in its second half to the story of Balak the dog, which is one of the great retellings of the Job story in modern literature. Balak is an ordinary Jerusalem street dog, minding his own business, when one day Isaac, acting on a perverse whim, paints the words “Crazy Dog” on his side. This leads the people of Jerusalem to believe that he has rabies, with predictable results: He is shunned, feared, and hated, driven from place to place, bombarded with stones.

When Agnon channels Balak's inner voice, complete with “Arf Arf,” he makes a terrible comic pathos out of the dog's suffering. It is impossible not to see this story as some kind of parable. Yet as Agnon teasingly writes, just what the parable means is hard to say: “The people of Jaffa, who are all intelligent, applied their intelligence to that. ... This one says, There's something to this; and that one says, We have to derive the implicit from the explicit. But what is explicit here no one explained.” Is Balak mankind, doomed by a careless God to a life of suffering? Or is he the Jewish people, once beloved of God, then ruthlessly cast into Exile? At moments, Balak even seems like a Zionist, longing to return to

the Jerusalem of his origins: "But let me hear why you want to go to Meah Shearim of all places," other dogs ask him, and he replies, "Why? Because I want a meaningful life."

But finally there is no clear meaning behind Balak's story, and it is this ignorance—this doggish inability to understand the fate literally inscribed on his body—that makes Balak so movingly human:

At that moment, all his suffering was naught compared to the search for truth. And once again he turned his head back to see what were those signs and what was that truth. But all his pains were in vain because he couldn't read. He was amazed and stunned. Everyone who sees me knows the truth about me, and I, who possess the truth itself, I don't know what it is. He shouted loud and long, Arf Arf Arf, this truth, what is it?

What makes *Only Yesterday* such a disquieting novel about Zionism is not anything so simple as hostility to the Zionist ideal or for that matter the Zionist achievement. Even as it follows Isaac Kumer and Balak on their paths of unfulfillment in the Land, the novel repeatedly acknowledges how much the Second Aliyah achieved, against enormous odds. "There were those who heard the call and came," Agnon writes. "And if some of them went back, some did settle in the Land. And if the times betrayed them, they did not betray the Land. ... Because of them, the first immigrants began to raise their head, and because of them, all who came after them could stand tall."

It's easy to imagine Leon Uris nodding in agreement. In *Exodus*, however, "standing tall" marks the ultimate in human ambition; a life spent proving one's toughness is what Balak would call "a meaningful life." This is a view of Zionism, and of life, that is only tenable from a distance, by a writer or reader who fails to engage with the central questions of modern literature—the very questions Balak's story raises so acutely. What, really, is the meaning of being Jewish, of being alive, of Being? Zionism, Agnon suggests, is only a provisional answer to this question—one of the endless number of provisional answers that we invent to fill the void where a final answer ought to be.

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