America and the Exodus

TWO JEWISH IMMIGRANTS IN NEW YORK AROUND 1935. (IMAGNO/GETTY IMAGES)

The story of Passover is not just a Jewish one. Our Founding Fathers were profoundly inspired by it. So was Cecil B. DeMille.

By Meir Soloveichik

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This Saturday night, Jews around the world will sit with their families and tell the story of their—our—liberation from slavery. As we celebrate our own freedom, we will also pray for those currently enslaved: the 59 hostages trapped in terror tunnels by Hamas.

But the story of the Exodus from Egypt is not just a Jewish story. The journey of the Israelites through the split sea, into the desert, and ultimately, to the Promised Land, has been a touchstone for so many in other places and times seeking freedom from subjugation—including here in America.

From the Founding Fathers to abolitionists like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, to presidents like Abraham Lincoln and leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., the themes and symbols and moral truths of the Exodus story have been at the core of how Americans seeking freedom from tyranny have seen themselves.

No one has brought that history alive for me better than Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, who helms the oldest synagogue in the United States. (You can listen to him on the subject right here—this early episode of Honestly remains one of my favorites.) Today, and with thanks to our friends at Commentary magazine, Soloveichik writes in our pages about the great Cecil B. DeMille, his classic film The Ten Commandments, and how America owed its greatness to the Jewish Passover story.

Passover is called zman cherutenu: the time of our freedom. May this season bring freedom of all kinds to all of us. And literal freedom, above all, to those languishing in slavery.

—BW

In every generation, one is obligated to see himself as if he had left Egypt.

—The Haggadah

In 1956, millions of Americans flooded cinemas to see the Exodus story brought to life in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. Among those moviegoers were American Jews, who could not help but feel that the film spoke to them, personally and profoundly. When Charlton Heston's Moses is asked whether he is ashamed upon learning he is not a prince of Egypt but rather a son of slaves, he responds: "If there is no shame in me, how can there be shame for the woman who bore me, or the race that bred me?"

In his book *America's Prophet: How the Story of Moses Shaped America*, Bruce Feiler recounts how, in the 1950s, DeMille had pleaded with Paramount Pictures to make a film about Moses but received only resistance, until its CEO, Adolph Zukor, an assimilated Hungarian Jew, rebuked his Jewish colleagues: "We should get down on our knees and say thank you that he wants to make a picture on the life of Moses." At a time when "many Jews still struggled with assimilation," Feiler notes, "Moses' open embrace of his faith was a powerful statement of self-confidence." (DeMille was himself of Jewish descent; his mother, Matilda Beatrice Samuel, was a cousin of 1st Viscount Herbert Samuel, the first commissioner of British Mandate Palestine. But he was himself raised in the faith of his Christian father.)

For many Orthodox Jewish immigrants, recently arrived on American shores, such assimilation was out of the question. Yet many of them also went to see the film, in the knowledge that there was a deep connection between their own faith and the culture of the American society that they had just joined. This belief was reinforced in the film's prologue, in which DeMille himself appeared on-screen and addressed the audience. "Ladies and gentlemen, this may seem an unusual procedure, speaking to you before the picture begins," DeMille said. "The theme of this picture is whether men ought to be ruled by God's law or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator like Ramses. Are men the property of the state, or are they free souls under God? The same battle continues throughout the world today."

To these religious Jews, recently arrived in America, this message was remarkable: One of the screen's legendary directors, the man who helped found Hollywood itself by making a film there in 1913, was telling them that America owed its greatness to the Jewish Passover story.

DeMille was right.

In his important book *The Hebrew Republic*, Harvard's Eric Nelson writes that while it is assumed the achievements of modernity, such as democracy and religious freedom, were the result of progressive secularization, the reverse was the case. The Renaissance, Nelson notes, reflected the pagan inheritance of antiquity and generated an approach to politics that was secular in character, whereas following the Reformation, "Christians began to regard the Hebrew Bible as a political constitution, designed by God himself for the children of Israel." Liberty, Nelson argues, took root in the political Hebraism of the English-speaking world.

It is therefore significant that Ben Franklin made this proposal for a seal for the United States: "Moses standing on the Shore, and extending his Hand over the Sea, thereby causing the same to overwhelm Pharaoh who is sitting in an open Chariot, a Crown on his Head and a Sword in his Hand. Rays from a Pillar of Fire in the Clouds reaching to Moses, to express that he acts by Command of the Deity. Motto, Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God."

Franklin's suggestion reminds us that the Haggadah's central exhortation—that we must see ourselves as if we had been slaves in Egypt and had been guided out by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm—is not only a religious idea but also one with political and moral implications. The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has noted that modernity was formed by four revolutions: the British (in 1688) and American on the one hand, and the French and Russian on the other. In Britain and America, one source of inspiration was the Hebrew Bible. Secular philosophy guided the French and Russian revolutions. The former led to free societies, while French and Russian utopian revolutions ended in tyranny.

Why, asks Sacks, did Britain and America succeed where France and Russia failed?

> The explanation is surely complex but much—perhaps all—turns on how a society answers the question: who is the ultimate sovereign, God or man?. . . . For the British and American architects of liberty, God was the supreme power. . . . For the French and Russian ideologists, ultimate value lay in the state. . . when human beings arrogate

> supreme power to themselves, politics loses its sole secure defense of freedom. . . . Societies that exile God lead to the eclipse of man.

Sixty years ago, the Hebraic foundation of the American idea was taken for granted by the culture. That, safe to say, is no longer true today. Michael Novak once argued that "[t]he culture of this republic was born around unusual understandings of what is noble and worth striving for. Our present age seems to have lost—or almost to have lost—those understandings. If we do not regain them, our culture will prove to be a cracked cistern and may run dry. The problem is that the cause of intellectual and cultural renewal is far less clear than the causes of the wealth of nations and political renewal. Less clear, but more important."

CECIL B. DEMILLE ON THE SET OF HIS 1956 BIBLICAL EPIC *THE TEN COMMANDMENTS*. (SCREEN ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES)

The Ten Commandments was DeMille's second bite at the Exodus apple. In 1923, he made a silent version. Among his extras, DeMille hired 250 Orthodox Jewish immigrants. The writer Marshall Weiss, who assembled these accounts, wrote about how this was more than a role for these novice "actors." He cites one witness who recounted how, when filming the Exodus scene, "these Jews streamed out of the great gates with tears running down their cheeks, and then without prompting or rehearsal, they began singing in Hebrew the old chants of their race, which have been sung in synagogues for thousands of years."

Another remembered an elderly woman, overcome with emotion, who fell to her knees and shook a fist at the gates of Pharaoh, weeping and casting sand on her head. For the scene depicting the splitting of the sea, the actor who played Moses stood on a rock by the Pacific Ocean. An overcast sky interfered with the light DeMille was looking for. Then, suddenly, the clouds cleared, bestowing a radiance on Moses' face.

"A gasp went through the crowd," one spectator described. "The faces of men and women reflected this light. Tears trembled on wrinkled cheeks, sobs came from husky throats. For many, the world had moved back 3,000 years, and they stood once more on the shores of the Red Sea, viewing once more the good omen of deliverance." Weiss reflects that many of these extras didn't even speak English; but for them, this was more than a movie: "[D]uring those moments, the American dream and their heritage converged."

The bond between America and the Exodus sheds light on our current moment, in which Jew-hate has made itself so monstrously manifest. As I have argued over the past many months, those that stand with Hamas on college quads and city streets do not only hate Jews—they hate America. At rallies that are purportedly about Israel, it is the American flag that is desecrated, because the people rallying hate the way its founders dreamed dreams inspired by the Bible; they hate the way that the story of the chosen people inspired the covenantal way in which America saw itself. It is America's notion of itself as an exceptional nation that they seek to destroy, and so they target the people whose story, repeated at the seder year after year, lies at the very heart of American exceptionalism.

But if the past year and a half has been difficult, it has also revealed how so many Americans love the Jewish people, admire the Jewish state, and are eager to stand with them. We can, in other words, sit at our seders speaking of slavery and freedom in the grateful knowledge that the message of the Exodus endures, and that the spirit of the American founding lives still.

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