

A Personal Exodus



As many North Americans of the baby-boom generation, my introduction to the history of the biblical lands was through Hollywood epics. Cecil DeMille's '*The Ten Commandments*' (1956) was so revered in my Canadian village in the early 1960s, that pastors promoted it to their congregations. The local movie theatre even arranged matinee showings for school classes.

The jaw-dropping cinematographic spectacle of plagues Jehovah beset on Egypt—followed by the Red Sea parting for the fleeing Hebrews, stirred a conviction that the Jews had to be god's chosen people. No matter that Moses, played by the blue-eyed Charlton Heston, could not have looked less semitic—for a ten-year old, he epitomized strength and courage. Those were virtues soon to be ascribed to all the persecuted children of Israel...

'*Ben Hur*' (1959) and '*King of Kings*' (1961) were other epics first seen along with an elementary school class at the village movie theatre. Both movies reinforced the 'Judeo-Christian' heritage profoundly linking Christians and Jews...

'*Exodus*' (1960), another epic film from that era, brought the story of the biblical homeland of the Jews into the modern era. The movie dramatized the travails of Jewish refugees settling in Palestine after World War Two. Dialogue-heavy—it was not the fare for elementary school kids. I didn't see it until it appeared on TV at the end of the decade. Yet its musical score, written by Ernest Gold, was familiar from the time of the movie's release. My little heart was deeply moved by the score's ineffable poignancy.

I recall once hearing the theme from '*Exodus*' in a dream from which I awoke in sobs. The version I had heard could have been either of the two that were popular at the time. Most stirring was the instrumental—with the dual pianos of Ferrante & Teicher. It was stunning in stereo. The other was a vocal version with lyrics written by the clean-cut Christian, Pat Boone: "*This land is mine, God gave this land to me!*"

Those lyrics seemed to viscerally resonate with the image of Moses in '*The Ten Commandments*' clutching the smoking tablets zapped with Yahweh's fiery finger. The eyes of the 10-year-old never failed to moisten.



Almost from infancy, through my father's soldiering stories and from war comics, I had known that the Germans had been a vicious enemy. *'Exodus'* may still have been on the hit parade when I first learned Nazi Germans had been particularly cruel to Jewish people. That awareness came with the trial of Adolf Eichmann (*circa* 1961). The blurry TV images of the bespectacled man standing in a glass box was accompanied by my mother's voiceover. The Jews were punishing a very bad man who "killed so many of their kind," she explained.

The term 'concentration camp' was first heard around 1962 on Mike Wallace's *'Biography'*. That was the avidly watched TV documentary (Sundays at 6:30 PM) that profiled a range of public figures of the twentieth century, both heroes and villains. It was either in the profile of Ben Gurion or that of Hitler in which newsreel footage of Auschwitz was shown. The skeletal figures peering out from prison bunks and human corpses bulldozed into trenches were identified as Jews...

Those nightmarish images came to mind on the morning my father, from behind the spread pages of the provincial *'Telegraph-Journal'*, mentioned that Eichmann had been hung in Israel. His execution seemed like justice from the same fiery finger that etched the holy tablets...



Yet around the age of fifteen and a half, I began to doubt the existence of the Judeo-Christian deity. In spring 1967, I unambiguously proclaimed that *'god is dead'* by painting that slogan on the back of my bush jacket...

A few weeks thereafter, the trumpets blew for Israel's victory in the Six Day War. I was clueless of the politics—as was probably a majority of North Americans. The impression given in the reportage was of a gutsy little Israel fending off a barbaric attack by Arab bullies. The smiting of the lumbering Goliath by little David was hailed a miracle. How could anyone moved by the swelling chords of '*Exodus*' not have cheered the sweeping conquest by modern Jews of their ancient homeland? It seemed almost like divine intervention. For a few weeks, my apostasy was a little shaken...

Though awareness of global affairs badly lagged, by late adolescence my tastes in books and music were expanding. I had a special reverence for Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen. Their ethnicity was of no importance—but it seemed notable that so many in the 1960s counterculture pantheon—from Allen Ginsberg to Abbie Hoffmann—also happened to be Jewish.

It was even more astounding that the intellectual giants of the twentieth century were Jews: Marx, Freud, Trotsky—and of course Einstein—reputedly the brainiest human who ever lived. Even in the absence of religion, that seemed more than coincidence. I wondered whether Jews really were 'chosen'—at least in a genetic sense...

In the fall of 1969, the world further opened when I transferred from my village school to a city school in Saint John, New Brunswick. For the first time guided by competent teachers—I dove into my Grade Twelve English and history classes. Most fascinating in the latter, was learning about the rogue's gallery of Hitler and his henchmen. It was probably my impassioned essay on the Holocaust that earned a special citation for my matriculation exam result—a tiny miracle for an erstwhile school failure...

Meanwhile, for the first time I had Jewish classmates. The son of a Jewish dentist who became a friend wrote poetry, played guitar and made 8 mm movie shorts. After high school, he emigrated to Israel for a few years. I still have a letter he sent from a kibbutz, *circa* 1973. He gave the impression of attending an adventure camp welcome to both Jewish and Gentile "kids". He extolled the subtropical climate, cheap brandy, potent hashish and gorgeous girls. In closing he urged: "*You should get your ass over here!*"

I was still broadly sympathetic with the Jewish state—but no more inclined to break daily bread with communalists in Israel than with Mennonites in Saskatchewan.

It would be nearly twenty years before I heard from that old classmate again. Sadly, he had struggled with addictions and ended up in the Vancouver Post office. By then, he had veered from the path of Zionism into the search for UFOs and extra-terrestrials...

Soon after my classmate sent that letter from the kibbutz in 1973, the Yom Kippur War broke out. Israel was almost caught with pants down. After Egypt's initial gains, the tide turned towards the Israeli Defence Forces. Unlike in the Six Day War, Goliath emerged from the cease-fire with dignity intact. Also, the western cheerleading for the Jewish State was not quite as full-throated as it had been in 1967. Anxiety was heightened by the nuclear slingshot which the (no longer 'little') David might well have employed had the barbarians really crashed the gate.

The other shoe was soon to drop with the OPEC oil embargo. Daily, I followed the reports on CBC radio largely sharing in the whipped-up indignation: '*How dare those greedy Arabs threaten our economy!*'



Until my mid-twenties, I had scarcely any contact with Muslims or with any aspect of their cultures. On a backpacking adventure to Spain in 1971, I did briefly cross the European frontier into North Africa. A ‘cheating’ incident, involving a prayer-bead fingering money changer in a Moroccan marketplace, left an ugly impression. I related that anecdote to a Jewish co-worker whom I dated once in the summer of 1975. Much to her credit, she didn’t care *whose* side I claimed to be on...

Before the 1970s, I hardly ever heard ‘Palestinian’ used in reference to people. The term was initially thought to refer to nihilistic ultra-leftists—Arab versions of the Baader-Meinhof gang or the Symbionese Liberation Army...

In September 1972, the terrorist connection was deepened in the murder of Jewish athletes at the Munich Olympics. By that time, it had not escaped me that the lands conquered by Israel in the Six Day War were disputed. Still, the overriding impression was that Israel was fighting for sheer survival against an enemy ever scheming her annihilation.

In 1975, I shared in the American resentment to the seating of Palestinian representatives at the UN General Assembly. The appearance of Yasser Arafat wearing a pistol at the podium seemed a desecration of the institution dedicated to peace. The same year, I thought it unseemly that third world countries would sponsor a UN resolution declaring ‘*Zionism is racism*’. That seemed a craven attempt to curry favour with the oil sheikdoms incensed by little Israel’s success.

The following year—also along with a well-primed audience—I marvelled in the dramatic rescue of Israeli hostages held by Palestinian terrorists at Entebbe airport in Uganda. I agreed with the journalistic observation that the tactical savvy of the Israeli commandos could have prevented the tragedy of the Germans’ botched rescue attempt at the Munich Olympics.

Still, there was a dawning awareness that the IDF was increasingly operating like the mythic cowboys of Hollywood westerns. They took an eye for any eye (or ten for one) while ignoring ‘lily-livered’ objections to rough justice... I gave scanty attention to news from the Middle East. What did filter through was generally received with little critique. In my mid-twenties, that attitude was to radically change:



In January 1977, I began a two-year placement as an English teacher at a high school in northern Nigeria. Most of my students were Hausas whose ancestors had adopted Sunni-Islam nearly nine centuries before. For the first time, I was immersed in a Muslim-dominated world.

Along with the Nigerian teachers (including a few Christians from the south), the school was staffed by international expats drawn by the Nigerian oil boom. From India, Pakistan, Sudan, Egypt and the Philippines—most were Muslim.

The school community was welcoming and warm. Freewheeling conversations that began with colleagues at the staffroom often continued in neighbourly visits. Unlike in more authoritarian regimes—in Nigeria, politics was not off-limits. Since most of us got international news from the BBC World Service, there was usually a common starting point for discussion.

At the time, Israel was much in the news. The reaction of colleagues to the ascendency of the right-wing Likud government in 1977 was uniformly fearful. Some noted the threat of Israeli nukes against neighbouring states. There was alarm in the reports of the influx of Russian Jews into Israel. Their Zionism was reported to be more radical than that of European Jews. In 1978, there was disappointment in Anwar Sadat’s “selling out” the Palestinians by signing the Camp David accords with Likud Prime Minister (and former Irgun terrorist), Menachem Begin...

Meanwhile, the most scathing criticisms of Israel were not heard from Muslim colleagues but from a fellow Canadian:

SR, from Manitoba, had taught at the school a few years before my arrival. He spoke fluent Hausa. In 1977, he returned to Northern Nigeria to research a doctoral thesis in geography. In our conversations over the weeks of my settling in, he spoke often about the injustices suffered by the Palestinians. In one conversation, he described Israel as “a rogue state on stolen land.” He decried the “silencing of Palestinians voices” in American news coverage of the Middle East. He claimed the deep-seated bias in the western media was due to intimidation by “powerful vested interests...”

Never before had I heard such scorching criticism of Israel from the left. SR believed that Palestinians were victims of colonialism no less than were Africans. Undeniably, his historical knowledge of the Middle East was far broader and deeper than mine.

Still, his references to the Israeli lobby's "shadowy control" of U.S. media were troubling. That initially harkened to scurrilous claims about the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion'. But subsequent chats left no suspicion that SR's opposition to political Zionism was in any way, antisemitic. That was a distinction that seemed fair and legitimate. Through our conversations, I recognized there was much to learn and much more to reflect upon.

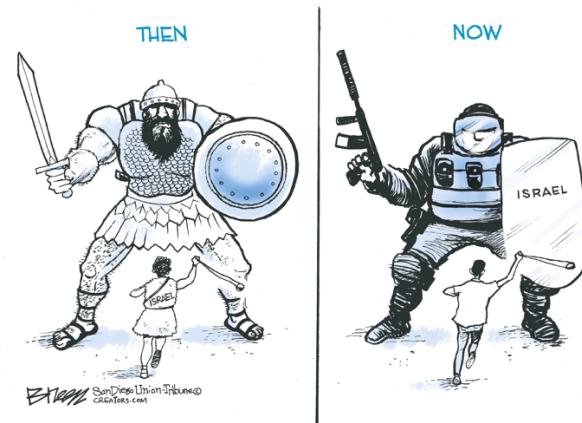
I already had some rough exposure to the evils of imperialism. Before sojourning in Africa, I was a veteran of the gringo trail. In backpacking from Mexico to Chile, I had been rattled by scenes of grinding poverty alongside decadent wealth. It was nakedly clear that western civilization was no gift to benighted 'natives.' I knew the story of the ravages of 16th century *conquistadores* upon the great empires of Mexico and Peru. That conquered indigenous people have been in myriad ways more 'civilized' than their conquerors—was a lesson deeply absorbed.

In Nigeria, I began to read of African empires—Songhai, Benin, Ashanti, Zimbabwe—hardly mentioned in western histories. I soon discovered that the European scramble for African palm oil or ivory (not to mention slaves) was no less ugly than their medieval counterparts' greed for gold. While it had already been plain that there was little benevolence in the colonial enterprise—newly discovered evidence of that was staggering.

For the first time I read non-fiction written by Africans and by writers from the African diaspora. Some were angry and polemical (e.g. 'How Europe Underdeveloped Africa' (1972) by Guyanese Walter Rodney)—but were nonetheless informative. 'Black Skin White Masks' (1967) by Franz Fanon, was a revealing study of the dehumanizing effect of colonialism on the very psyche of the colonized. It was humbling to realize much real history was omitted in textbooks of old.

Soon thereafter, I came upon Palestinian-American Edward Said's essays on the silencing of the Palestinian story of expropriation and exile. The Zionist settlement in Palestine seemed to parallel colonial land expropriations of earlier centuries. At the same time, the Palestinian perspective seemed to fit the pattern of a marginalized people's history—deliberately slighted, ignored—and ever suppressed—by the powers that be...

I learned about genocides in history that have been almost overlooked—such as that of the millions of Amerindians who perished in silver mines of Potosi, Bolivia. A clear measure of political power, it seemed, was in having the means to make one's tragedies known to the wider world... Still, I did not ignore the history of pogroms against Jews or forget the horrors of the Holocaust. Yet I came to believe the historical persecutions of Jews cannot permanently shield Israel from criticism of its conduct towards Palestinians.



Even after jettisoning the David VS Goliath (i.e. ‘civilized’ Jews VS ‘barbaric’ Arabs) mythos, I did not entirely lose sympathy with all the pioneer Jewish settlers. Some had been refugees from the Holocaust, eager to work the soil of their “promised land”. A few were socialists who were even prepared to join hands with Arab villagers in “making the desert bloom”. Yet they were a minority. Many Zionists—assuming a right to return to an ancestral homeland—had emigrated from countries where their ancestors had prospered for centuries. Even blonde-haired American settlers believed themselves to be more semitic than the Palestinian Arabs whose homes they appropriated.

It was disturbing to learn that Arab Palestinians had been a clear majority in the British Palestinian Mandate. They had apparently lived in prosperous villages or on farms which their ancestors had worked for centuries. Then in 1948, accompanying the birth of the state of Israel, came the *nakba* [catastrophe]. Therein, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced from their homeland, never to return...

I wondered—why had I not known that before? Admittedly, I had not been much interested in history or current affairs of the Middle East. Along with most North Americans—I mostly took in pre-digested morsels of reportage. Had I been manipulated?

I rejected on principle any notion that I had been subjected to some sinister conspiracy. I had come across far-right hate literature before: such as cartoons showing Jewish bankers pulling puppet strings on a globe. Such images remained as repulsive as ever. Still, I was upset by a clear sense of injustice. Why was there such suppression of Palestinian grievance—especially in the news sources to which I had been so long captivated?



Given that American media was the source of my early impressions of the Middle East conflict, I have reflected over the years on the relationship between Israel and the USA. How is it that Israel has virtually come to be regarded as the fifty-first state?

The following observations have seemed particularly revealing:

It seems that much of the emotional bond with Israel and matching hostility to Palestinians is captured in the expression: '*Judeo-Christian heritage*'. The term was apparently coined by 19th century protestant theologians in reference to Jewish converts to Christianity. In latter days, the term has been insidiously used by American conservatives. They use it to suggest that a spiritual bond exists between Christianity and Judaism that is unique and exclusive. The idea is that the most noble strivings of humanity are the fruits of this '*Judeo-Christian*' heritage. It is also suggested that no cultural tradition is more alien to this heritage than that of Islam.

The implication is that 'Allah' is a pagan god that inspires fanatics bent on the destruction of civilization. For many American conservatives, the conflict in the Middle East is a story of civilized Israel in a heroic struggle against barbaric Arab Muslims...

Of course, this prejudice conveniently overlooks the deep similarities between Judaism and Islam. Both religions have common roots, texts and myths. Both likely arose from mirages of thirst-crazed nomads in the same harsh desert landscape. In laying down the laws for their 'chosen' tribes, both Yahweh and Allah are equally paternalistic and despotic. The real outlier in the three premier Abrahamic religions is Christianity—with its bizarre concept of father, son and holy ghost...



Along with the ‘Judeo-Christian heritage’ (which Palestinian Christians, apparently, do not share), support for Israel in America seems to rest upon the belief that both America and Israel are ‘exceptional’ nations. Both are believed to be bound in a special covenant with the almighty. Further, many Christian Americans regard the support of Israel as a religious obligation. Many believe there is an historical connection between the fall of great empires— Egypt, Rome, and Spain—and their persecution of the children of Israel. The implication is that America’s continuing greatness depends on its protection of the Jewish state... Evangelicals believe Jehovah’s covenant with Abraham, as revealed in the book of Genesis, warns latter-day nations: *‘If you bless Israel, I will bless you; if you curse Israel, I will curse you...’*

So it is that the American descendants of Christians who believed that Jews performed secret rituals with the blood of gentile babies— are today, the most fervent Zionists. Yet the same evangelicals who adore the Jewish state look forward to the conversion of all Jews in the apocalypse of ‘the end-times’.

Apparently, none of that *goyim* superstition distresses the increasingly hard-right Israeli governments or their voters. American evangelicals are too useful. They make pilgrimages to the holy land—and even raise money for Jewish settlements in Judea and Samara—as Zionists (both Jewish and evangelical Christian) refer to the occupied Palestinian territories. Many Israelis regard evangelical Christians as more loyal to the Jewish state than America’s ‘liberal’ Jews...



Meanwhile, many Israelis and Americans acclaim a non-religious cultural bond between their peoples: a supposed devotion to rugged individualism. Gung-ho Americans marvel at political assassinations by Mossad or the pre-emptive bombings by the IDF. They envy Israel for having the balls (or *chutzpah*?) to go it alone— like Gary Cooper in *‘High Noon’*.

The reality, of course, in that ‘ruggedly independent’ Israel is utterly dependent on American money. But given the spiritual bond, the dollars dependably flow in—from both private donations as well as from the public purse. No other country receives a fraction of the aid the USA channels to Israel. But for many Americans— financial support for the Jewish state is not even considered ‘foreign’ aid.

Still, one might ask: should Israel not be a little nervous about having most of its eggs in the American basket? Might it be less vulnerable by spreading them more evenly around? In such regard, one might think of the cat in Aesop’s fable of *‘The Cat and the Fox.’* When the cat is pursued by hounds, it

climbs a tree—its single but reliable defence. Meanwhile a nearby fox, unsure of which of its many tricks to employ—is torn to pieces...

So like Aesop's one-trick cat, Israel's strategic calculation has been that unconditional support of one nation—the world's most military powerful one—is worth immeasurably more than the lukewarm support of a host of weaker ones. Let the UN can scream until blue in the face about illegal settlements! Why should Israel care so long as the behemoth that bestrides the globe has its back?



Volumes have been written about the influence of American Jews on their country's policies towards Israel. Suffice to say, the American 'diaspora' is 6.3 million strong—close to the total Jewish population of Israel. Few ethnicities can claim more heavy hitters in high places. Still, legions of corporate executives, lawyers or journalists do not equate with unequivocal support for Israel. Jewish Americans, like their fellow citizens, are individuals with political leanings across the ideological spectrum. A majority do tend to be progressive. No doubt all diaspora Jews wish the best for Israel, but not many American Jews take the *carte blanche* dual citizenship Israel offers them. Like other Americans, most of Jewish heritage probably feel they are already in the promised land...

Still, as prosperous as many of today's Jewish Americans have become, it is well documented that the land of milk and honey did not receive their forebears with open arms. Many arrived from eastern Europe without English and struggled to make their way. In the early 20th century, powerful hate groups like the KKK targeted Jews along with blacks and non-Nordic immigrants.

In the 1930s, American nativists looked fondly towards the populist fascist regimes across the Atlantic. White supremacists like Charles Lindbergh speechified about excessive Jewish influence in: "*our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our government.*" That message, along with the awareness of the vicious turn of antisemitism in Germany, made American Jews feel—very justifiably—threatened.



Antisemitic stereotypes aside, the preponderance of Jewish producers and directors in the movie industry is an undeniable fact. It has been wryly observed that Hollywood was a creation of talented Jews who were barred from exclusive clubs of the eastern WASP establishment... The entertainment industry they built not only opened the doors of elitist clubs in California but gave Hollywood moguls extraordinary influence over the popular American mind.

Still, until the late 1940s, Hollywood tended to shy away from the touchy subjects of racism and antisemitism. Instead, movies often promoted patriotism and reminded audiences of the loftier democratic ideals upon which the republic was supposedly founded. It was in that indirect manner that Hollywood played a key role in combating the fascist virus and defeating American nativist isolationism...

Meanwhile, in Nazi Germany, the film industry, overseen by propaganda Minister Goebbels, was whipping up hatred against Jews through vile films like '*Jude Suss*' (1940). In response, the cream of Europe's film directors and actors—many of whom were Jewish—fled to Hollywood.

Among them was Michael Curtiz, who directed the classic wartime drama '*Casablanca*' (1942). It was not the first Hollywood film with Nazi villains but it notably steered clear of referencing the persecution of Jews—as did almost all Hollywood features until the 1950s...



Finally, I circle back to the movie that prompted these reflections—'*Exodus*'. The film was based on a novel by Leon Uris, a Jewish writer and directed by Otto Preminger, who was also Jewish American. It starred Paul Newman—playing a Jewish activist with Aryan features. No other Hollywood movie was more blatantly calculated to strengthen the political bond between America and the (then infant) state of Israel. Decades after its theme music has ceased to inspire me, there is one fact about the movie that intrigues: that its screenplay was written by Dalton Trumbo.

'*Exodus*' was the first Hollywood film in which Trumbo's name was allowed to appear on the credits after years of his McCarthy-era black-listing. During the red-scare era of the 1940s-1950s,

the Jewish American writer had been one the brave members of the Hollywood Ten. They were the movie industry professionals who refused to cooperate with the House of Unamerican Activities “commie” witch-hunt. Despite struggling for work through the McCarthy era, Trumbo remained a committed socialist. The script of ‘*Exodus*’ clearly evidences that he was also an ardent Zionist. It is interesting that in 1960, socialism and Zionism were not mutually exclusive. It is also noteworthy that the opening of ‘*Exodus*’ was picketed by the American Nazi Party...

Were Trumbo alive today—I wonder what he would think of the present state of Israel. How would he feel about the daily humiliations of Palestinians living under effective apartheid? What would he think of the bullying tactics of IDF or the zealotry of Jewish settlers in the occupied territories? Would he recoil from video of the Gaza strip which—without exaggeration—has been called “the world’s largest open-air prison”?

Were such a Zionist socialist of that bygone era to have known these outcomes of seventy years of a militant Zionist state—perhaps he would have been deeply appalled. He might even be moved to write a screenplay about the plight of the Palestinians...

Given the innumerable American films since the 1950s that have explored Jewish history, culture and angst—surely a few Hollywood films about Arab Americans or Palestinians are due.

What chance that a major Hollywood film could ever be made that tells the story of 1948 from the Palestinian perspective? Such a film—say in the genre of ‘*Schindler’s List*’—would not suffice for balance—but it would be a worthy token.

Might Steven Spielberg himself be up to making such a film? His ‘*Amistad*’, about African American slavery, showed a certain willingness to step outside a political comfort zone...

Even if a major director like Spielberg were to lend his talents to such an imaginary project—could such a movie get financial backing? Barring a political earthquake—the answer to that rhetorical question is deafeningly clear. A Hollywood film about the *nakba* is about as likely as one about Indiana Jones recruiting the flying monkeys of Oz for the rescue of the sacred lost Ark...

-1996, 2015