



A READING OF LEON URIS'S *EXODUS* AS A FOURTH WORLD DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

Leon Uris's Exodus is a piece of fourth world discourse. It not only traces the history of the establishment of the modern state of Israel but also presents the saga of the fourth world people, the Jews, to attain statehood. It traces the persecution of the Jewish people in Europe, which sparked off waves of immigration to Palestine, epitomized in the novel by the story of the Rabinsky brothers, Jossi and Yakov, the founding of the Zionist movement, the establishment of Jewish settlements in Palestine and throws light on the efforts made by Jews to sustain a Jewish state in Palestine.

INTRODUCTION

The Jewish nation portrayed in the Bible was destroyed when the 286 heroic Jews who manned the fortress of Masada in defiance of the might of Rome were betrayed and perished. The Jews dispersed to the four corners of the world. They suffered unspeakable persecution in most of the world. Through all the suffering they never stopped looking toward their ancient homeland with the Passover prayer that ended: "Next year in Jerusalem" (Leon Uris and Dimitrios Harissiadis, *Exodus Revisited* 33; [43]).

Many of the dispersed Jews went to Russia, particularly to the Crimean area as far back as the first century. The area was ruled by the Khazars. The Khazars were so impressed by Judaism that they adopted it as their own religion and their kingdom became a virtual Jewish State. But, when the Russians in the north ascended to power, they swept down on the Khazars and dispersed them to oblivion and began to persecute the Jews (Uris, *Exodus* 195).

After the Crusades, during the Ottoman era, a few pious Jews returned to Palestine and established centres of religious study in cities like Safed, Hebron and Jerusalem (Leon Uris and Dimitrios Harissiadis, *Exodus Revisited* [43]). Centuries of unrelieved abuse reached a

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climax during the reign of Catherine I. Pogroms—anti-Jewish riots--were unloosed against those who would not accept the Greek Orthodox religion (Uris, *Exodus* 195).

These events culminated in the establishment of the Jewish Pale in 1827. The Jews were ruthlessly driven from the smaller villages into the already overcrowded Jewish quarters --the ghettos--in the larger cities to live like prisoners (Uris, *Exodus* 196).

The starvation and deprivation rampant all over Russia, with the aristocrats enforcing a cruel feudalism, incited the people to unrest. To divert the people's mind from the tyranny, the masterminds behind Czar Alexander II used the Jews as scapegoats. The Russian government made anti-Semitism a deliberate political weapon. They claimed that Jewish anarchists were out to seize the government for their own profit. They secretly sponsored bloody pogroms in which ghettos were sacked and women raped and blood flowed freely. The Jews groped for an answer to their problems. One was a new voice heard in many ghettos, namely, the Hovevey Zion—Lovers of Zion. Their motto was “*Beth Yakov Leku Venelkha* --House of Jacob, lets us go up!” An acronym formed from the motto gave them the name *Bilu*. This was the First Aliyah—the first immigration wave (Uris, *Exodus* 199).

The trial for treason of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French army, shattered decades of peace and prosperity enjoyed by the Jews of France. One of the people who witnessed Dreyfus's hour of disgrace in Paris was a Hungarian Jew named Theodor Herzl, a brilliant intellectual and journalist. Pondering deeply, he came to the conclusion that the only solution to anti-Semitism was for the Jews to establish themselves as a nation and speak through a recognized government. He set down these ideas in a paper titled “The Jewish State.” His idea caught on and support gathered (Uris, *Exodus* 220-21).

In 1897 a convention of leading Jews of the world was called in Basle, Switzerland—a parliament of world Jewry. The convention called for a return of the Jews to their ancient homeland. The movement was named Zionism and its historic proclamation was: “THE AIM OF ZIONISM IS TO CREATE A HOMELAND FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN PALESTINE SECURED BY PUBLIC LAW.” Herzl wrote in his diary: “In Basle I established a Jewish State. If I were to say that aloud today, universal laughter would be the response. Maybe in five years, certainly in fifty everybody will recognize it” (Uris, *Exodus* 221-22).

Herzl's immediate objective was to obtain a charter or some other legal basis upon which Zionism could be built. England offered the Zionists a part of the Sinai Peninsula for Jewish immigration and colonization. Since the plan was vague and Herzl still hoped to gain a charter for Palestine, it collapsed. As the pogroms in Eastern Europe intensified, the British offered the African territory of Uganda to the Zionists for colonization. A desperate Herzl

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agreed. But, when he put the proposal before the next Zionist convention, fierce opposition arose, mainly on the ground that there was no mention of Uganda in the Bible (Uris, *Exodus* 222-24).

The Jews began buying land in Palestine. The unsuccessful Russian Revolution of 1905 incited more pogroms and more Jews poured into Palestine, most of them youngsters indoctrinated in Zionism and determined to redeem the land—the Second Aliyah. (Uris, *Exodus* 225-31).

However it soon became obvious that the agricultural colonies were failing miserably and a new strategy decided upon was communal farming, with all the land belonging to the community and all the farmers working to redeem the land and to build a homeland, with no thought of personal gain. From these principles was born the unique Jewish institution of the *kibbutz*. Gradually the Jewish community adopted several changes towards reviving the Jewish nation. The Jews of Palestine became known as the Yishuv, with Hebrew as their everyday language. Many took Hebrew names and began to speak exclusively in Hebrew. Steps were initiated for building the first all-Jewish city in two thousand years, to be called Tel Aviv, the Hill of Spring (Uris, *Exodus* 236-42).

More British officials began to speak in support of a Jewish homeland. England became the headquarters of the Zionist movement. When World War I erupted, the tottering Ottoman Empire asserted its power again and balked British geopolitical aspirations in the region. The Yishuv openly supported the British. Lord Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, wrote to Baron Rothschild, the European Jewish philanthropist:

“His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object.”

This was the Balfour Declaration, the Magna Carta of the Jewish people, to which the Yishuv clung desperately for years afterwards. The Turks unleashed a reign of terror on the Jews for supporting the British. But, when the British army led by General Allenby captured Damascus, it was the end of the Ottoman Empire. To govern the Yishuv the Jews elected a representative body, the Yishuv Central, a quasi-government to speak for the Jews (Uris, *Exodus* 244-51).

While, by their secret Sykes-Picot Agreement, the French and the British sought to divide the Middle East between themselves, Haj Amin el Husseini became the Mufti of Jerusalem, the most powerful Muslim. He regarded the return of the Jews as the greatest block to his plans for power. So he whipped up the religious frenzy of the illiterate fellaheen and incited a

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pogrom within Palestine. For their part, the British, who now ruled Palestine by a mandate from the League of Nations, issued a White Paper limiting Jewish immigration to “economic absorption.” The Yishuv Central, at a secret meeting, decided to arm themselves quietly and train a militia in secret, to be called the Haganah—the Army of Self Defense (Uris, *Exodus* 251-56).¹

When, gradually, grumblings arose about the lack of privacy and family life in the *kibbutz*, the Jews conceived of the *moshav*, which was largely a cooperative farm, but also permitted private ownership of land and individual family life and houses instead of the communal arrangement of the *kibbutz* (Uris, *Exodus* 256-57).

In 1933 Adolf Hitler and the Nazis ascended to power in Germany and moved against the Jews. Suddenly a large number of German Jews poured into Palestine. The Arabs protested against this new Jewish immigration and the British obliged them because of the power of Arab oil. So the Yishuv resorted to Aliyah Bet—illegal immigration. The Haganah grew steadily and the Yishuv Central smuggled arms into Palestine to give it teeth. In 1934, a section of the Haganah withdrew to form a terrorist organization, calling themselves the Maccabees (Uris, *Exodus* 266-71).²

The British have established a detention camp at Caraolos on the island of Cyprus to intern Jews who are caught attempting to run the British naval blockade of Palestine. David Ben Ami, a commander in the Palmach, the secret army of the Jews, is in charge of the camp. He clandestinely receives Ari Ben Canaan, who has come on a mission (Uris, *Exodus* 21).

Ari plans a monumental hoax of a breakout by three hundred Jewish children from Caraolos by a ship appropriately named *Exodus*. The feigned breakout is intended to break the back of the British policy on Jewish immigration to Palestine by arousing universal sympathy for the orphaned survivors of concentration camps. Three hundred children are smuggled out of Caraolos and put aboard the *Exodus*. By prearranged signal, Mark, an American journalist and Ari’s friend, releases the story of Operation Gideon to the world. A spokesman for the *Exodus* is reported to have stated that the hold of the ship is filled with dynamite and that the children have joined in a suicide pact to blow up the boat if the British try to board her (Uris, *Exodus* 35-172).

The British are caught with their pants down. Mark’s story creates a sensation all over the world. There is an acrimonious discussion at the Institute of International Relations at Chatham House, London. The participants are General Sir Clarence Trevor-Browne, Humphrey Crawford of the Colonial Office and Cecil Bradshaw of Chatham House. Bradshaw is pro-Arab. Sir Clarence’s sympathies are known to be with the Jews and in support of the ruling Labour Party, which has promised to help establish a Jewish homeland



in Palestine. Sir Clarence advocates allowing the *Exodus* to sail to Palestine, which is what the Jews do not want. Bradshaw adamantly rejects the suggestion (Uris, *Exodus* 172-74).

With Mark incrementing his story day by day, the *Exodus* affair becomes top draw in the world press and public opinion galvanizes all over the world in support of the Jewish children. Mark becomes the first journalist to be permitted to board the *Exodus*. Ari closes his interview to Mark with the words: “I say the same thing to the Foreign Minister that a great man said to another oppressor three thousand years ago—*LET MY PEOPLE GO*” (Uris, *Exodus* 175-78).³

After two weeks of standoff, the children on board the *Exodus* announce a hunger strike—Ari’s way of going on the offensive, with overtones of a Gandhian *satyagraha*. As the hours tick by, the children start fainting and are stretched out on the forward deck. There are demonstrations all over Europe. A general strike paralyzes Cyprus. Ari’s crew itself is jittery and fears the consequences if one of the children should die (Uris, *Exodus* 180-82).

Ari shocks the British by announcing that, from the next day onwards, ten volunteers a day will commit suicide on the bridge of the *Exodus* in full view of the British garrison, until the *Exodus* is permitted to sail for Palestine or everyone aboard is dead. Bradshaw knows that he has been defeated. He tries to stall for time to work out a face-saving settlement, but Ari gives him no quarter. Countries all over the world express concern. All the Arab governments threaten against permitting the *Exodus* to go. Bradshaw is afraid of becoming another Pharaoh and bringing down a curse on Britain.⁴ He orders that the *Exodus* be permitted to sail for Palestine (Uris, *Exodus* 186-88).

The *Exodus* children arrive in Palestine and are sent to several settlements where they are well taken care of, because Jews believe that the future of their nation lies with the children. The rest of the narrative presents vignettes of Jewish life during those troubled days, with stories of heroism, betrayal, political opportunism, memories and reminders of the holocaust against the background of the Jewish people’s painful march towards nationhood. Beyond World War II, the British find the Palestine Mandate untenable and throw the whole Palestinian issue into the lap of the United Nations (Uris, *Exodus*, book 3).

The United Nations takes up the Palestinian issue in November 1947 at Lake Success, Flushing Meadow, New York. On 27 November 1947, the resolution on partitioning Palestine to create the new state of Israel is put to vote. The motion is carried by a comfortable majority and the Jews have, at last, a provisional state. However, on the ground, the passage of the resolution sparks off attacks by several armies of liberation from every possible direction, backed in every way by the regular armies of several hostile Arab countries. The Haganah, with its striking arm, the Palmach, and the Jewish terrorists fight



with extraordinary heroism, making astounding sacrifices. The Yishuv is determined to hold on to as much of the land allotted to it by the United Nations as militarily possible. On 13 May 1948 the British High Commissioner quietly leaves Jerusalem. On 14 May 1948, Kol Israel, the Voice of Israel, officially announces the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel in Palestine (Uris, *Exodus*, book 4).

The final chapter provides a fitting finale to the moving story of the birth of modern Israel:

They all gather in the dining room for the Seder and, as Ari walks towards the head of the table, Uris closes the novel with an epiphanic scene:

“If you would not be offended,” Sutherland said, “I am the oldest male Jew present. May I tell the Seder?”

“We would be honored,” Ari said.

Sutherland walked to the head of the table, to the place of the head of the family. Everyone sat down and opened his copy of the Haggadah. Sutherland nodded to Dov Landau [the youngest male Jew present] to begin.

Dov cleared his throat and read.

Why is this night different from all other nights of the year? [”]

[Sutherland answered:] *“This night is different because we celebrate the most important moment in the history of our people. On this night we celebrate their going forth in triumph from slavery into freedom.”* (Uris, *Exodus* 599)

Notes

¹ During World War II, at the Allies’s darkest hour, as General Rommel was preparing to capture the Suez Canal and Egypt, the British asked the Yishuv Central to form guerilla units to cover the British retreat. This guerilla force was called the Palmach. It later became the striking arm of the Haganah.

² In fact Palestine had two Jewish terrorist groups named the Irgun Tsevai Leumi and the Stern, with the chilling war cry “An eye for an eye.”

³ Moses, speaking for the God of the Jews, who had commissioned him to lead the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land, told King Pharaoh of Egypt: “Let my people go. . . .” Exod. 7.16; 8.1; 8.20; 9.1; 9.13; 10.3.



⁴ When King Pharaoh refused to let the Jewish people go forth into freedom in the Promised Land from slavery in Egypt, God visited Egypt with ten plagues. Exod. 7-11.

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