



Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

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Pesach: From the Shakespearean Stage to the Shores of America

The Exodus, America's Ever-Present Inspiration

BY RABBI DR. STUART HALPERN

The following excerpt is adapted from Rabbi Dr. Halpern's [article](#) which appeared in The Lehrhaus in April 2020.

Roughly 130 years after Christopher Columbus had written in his diary of the intimidating physical dangers he and his crew faced, “The rising of the sea was very formidable to me as it happened formerly to Moses when he led the Jews from Egypt,” the Pilgrim William Bradford likened his fellow Mayflower passengers’ journey to “Moses and the Israelites when they went out of Egypt.” John Winthrop, one of the Puritan founders of Massachusetts Bay Colony, compared his departure for New England to how the Lord “carried the Israelites into the wilderness and made them forget the fleshpots of Egypt.” For these men of faith, whose compatriots and communities were plagued by disease, hunger, and harsh physical conditions, the bridge they envisioned through troubled waters was a literal one, the protective path the Lord had cleared for the Israelites through the Red Sea and wilderness three millennia earlier. Throughout the history of the United States, and even during its pre-history, when faced with uncertainty, danger, and personal and communal hardships, Americans have turned to the story of the Exodus for inspiration.

The role of the Exodus in articulating the very idea of America extended through its first citizens’ view of their Revolution

and its villain, an “unnatural” nemesis sowing societal disunity. England’s King George III was their Pharaoh. Thomas Paine referred to the British monarch as the “hardened, sullen-tempered Pharaoh of England.” As scholar James P. Byrd has documented, the third-most-cited biblical text during the Revolutionary War was Exodus 15’s “Song of the Sea,” the victorious hymn proclaimed by the Israelites after God had drowned the Egyptians at the Red Sea—the chapter that has served every year (alas, besides the present one) as the central component of the synagogue Torah reading on the seventh day of Passover.

God and Moses’ partnership, was, for early presidents, the model of governmental leadership they hoped to embody. In proposing that the seal of the United States reflect its rootedness in the story of Israel’s redemption, Benjamin Franklin suggested “Moses [in the dress of a high priest] 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.” Thomas Jefferson chose the Israelites in the wilderness being led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, the manifestation of the Lord’s protection against enemies both seen and unseen. After the Revolution’s end,

it was George Washington who, in American minds, best represented the hero of the now United States' founding narrative of deliverance. Pastor Eli Forbes, in his eulogy of Washington, the reluctant leader who led his people to victory over Pharaonic-like tyranny, encapsulated this analogy by referring to the biblical Moses as "the Washington of Israel."

The abolitionist cause also rested on the broken chains of the ancient Israelite slaves. Spirituals with titles like "Go Down, Moses" and "Didn't Old Pharaoh Get Lost" were sung by countless cotton-pickers yearning for liberation. Harriet Tubman's authorized biography appeared under the title *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People*. And Frederick Douglass, at an abolitionist rally on July 4, 1852, reminded Americans of the responsibility that lay in their freedom by explicitly evoking the Jewish festival, saying "This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day."

The very *Seder* ritual itself served as sacred succor for those in uniform fighting slavery. The *Jewish Messenger*, in 1862, published an account from one J. A. Joel of the 23rd Ohio Volunteer Regiment of a Passover celebration by Union soldiers in Fayette, West Virginia. In it, Joel recalls what seems to have constituted a particularly enthusiastic, albeit unintentional, fulfillment of the *Haggadah's* commandment to imagine oneself as if he left Egypt:

We all had a large portion of the [*maror*] herb ready to eat at the moment I said the blessing...The herb was very bitter and very fiery like Cayenne pepper, and excited our thirst to such a degree, that we forgot the law authorizing us to drink only four cups, and the consequence was we drank up all the cider. Those that drank the more freely became excited, and one

thought he was Moses, another Aaron, and one had the audacity to call himself Pharaoh. The consequence was a skirmish, with nobody hurt, only Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh, had to be carried to the camp...

Transitioning, at the end of his story, from the humorous to the heavenly, Joel concluded, "I doubt whether the spirits of our forefathers, had they been looking down on us, standing there with our arms by our side ready for an attack, faithful to our God and our cause, would have imagined themselves amongst mortals, enacting this commemoration of the scene that transpired in Egypt."

The modern Civil Rights movement, too, evoked biblical Israel and its successful navigation of anxiety, fear, and constant danger. Then-candidate Barack Obama referred to the "Moses generation" of leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis, who had paved the path to his presidential campaign.

Throughout American history, the Passover story has served as a timeless and timely source of spiritual sustenance. From the Mayflower to Martin Luther King Jr.'s Moses-like vision of the Promised Land from atop the mountain, to our current moment, its miraculous mix of God's divine intervention alongside courageous human leadership has enabled anxious eyes to look towards a redemptive future. As Princeton political philosopher Michael Walzer has written, "[m]any men and women, believing in God's mighty hand, have nevertheless girded their loins, challenged the pharaohs of their own time, marched into the wilderness—and understood what they were doing by reading Exodus... marching through the world to a better place within it."

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Wherefore Art Thou, Moses?

BY DR. SHAINA TRAPEDO

The following excerpt is adapted from Dr. Trapedo's [article](#) which appeared in The Lehrhaus in April 2020.

The Jewish festival of Passover commemorates redemption and the construction of a shared identity. With Passover approaching, like many people I am not sure about how best to observe a holiday predicated on gatherings of family and community in light of current restrictions designed to protect the most vulnerable members of our families and communities. The Jewish festival of Passover, in particular, commemorates redemption and the construction of a shared

identity. Its practices and liturgy are bound with notions of connectedness, collective memory, and intergenerational continuity. With hospitals filled, synagogues empty, and travel plans canceled, Passover in isolation feels like an oxymoron.

The *Haggadah*, the traditional text read over the course of the *Seder*, opens with an invitation: "Let all who are hungry come in and eat. Let all who are in need come and join us." This

hospitable injunction is sure to reverberate more solemnly this year from within the closed doors of our homes. And amidst my downscaled holiday preparations, I found myself wondering: if Shakespeare is indeed the “be all end all,” perhaps he can shed light on how to celebrate Passover in quarantine.

The bard’s extensive knowledge of the bible has been studied for centuries. As [Hannibal Hamlin](#) notes, “there was no biblical book, including the Apocrypha, to which he did not allude.” In *Twelfth Night*, when Maria and her entourage humiliate Malvolio by locking him in a cramped dark chamber and making him think he’s gone mad, Feste taunts the presumptuous steward saying “thou art more puzzled than the Egyptians in their fog” (4.2.45). As *You Like It’s* melancholy Jaques threatens to “rail against all the first-born of Egypt” (2.5.59) if his sleep is disturbed and Lorenzo thanks Portia for gifting him with the deed to Shylock’s estate by saying “you drop manna in the way / Of starved people” (*The Merchant of Venice* 5.1.315).

Shakespeare’s heroines also invoke the drama of the Exodus for heightened rhetorical efficacy. In *All’s Well that Ends Well*, Helen persuades an ailing, stubborn king to let her try an experimental cure by recalling the supernatural wonders of Moses drawing water from the rock and the splitting of the Red Sea: “Great floods have flown / From simple sources, and great seas have dried / When miracles have by the great’st been denied (2.1.157–159). Most appropriately, in *Antony and Cleopatra* (also written while the playhouses were closed during an outbreak), the tragic queen beckons the plagues of locusts (“flies” in the Geneva Bible), hail, and death of her firstborn son to afflict her as they did the biblical Egyptians. She counters Antony’s accusation of betrayal by proclaiming that if she has been disloyal, “Let heaven engender hail... The next Caesarion smite, / Till by degrees the memory of my womb, / Together with my brave Egyptians all... Lie graveless till the flies and gnats of the Nile / Have buried them for prey” (3.13.195–204).

The bard’s ability to “cite Scripture for his purpose” (*Merchant* 1.3.107) is especially visible when his characters mention biblical personalities by name—an economical means of activating and illuminating a play’s thematic concerns for his 16th and 17th-century audience. Adam, Abraham, Jacob, Noah, Job, Jesus, and Paul come up in multiple plays. Yet aside from a passing remark about an off-stage outlaw named “Moyses” in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, believed to be Shakespeare’s first

play, the Hebraic Moses—arguably the central protagonist of the Hebrew Bible and a prominent figure in Renaissance cultural consciousness—seems conspicuously absent from the playwright’s work.

Moses is noticeably missing from another key text: the *Haggadah*. Aside from a verse quoted by Rabbi Yossi the Galilean in a section discussing the miracles performed during the Exodus, which notes that “the people believed in God and in His servant Moses” (Exodus.14:31), Moses is not mentioned at the *Seder* table.

It’s hard to say which is more astounding: the monumental role Moses plays in the saga of Jewish life and continuity or the fact that his achievements are denied ceremonial recognition. Following the patriarchs of Genesis, Moses is the Israelites’ first political leader, a divine appointment he famously refuses in his conversation with God at the burning bush: “Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11). As a humanities teacher, I am fascinated by the Hebrew Bible’s invitation to engage in character analysis within its own narrative. Moses’s epic struggle with identity and destiny must have captured Shakespeare’s imagination. The bard’s most compelling characters, including Hamlet, Lear, and Macbeth, all confront obstacles that prompt them to ask *who am I* and *why me?* When Juliet discovers she’s fallen in love with the only son of her family’s sworn enemies, she quickly grasps the turmoil that ensues when identity comes into conflict with individual will. Her poignant meditation, “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?” (2.2.36) asks not *where* is Romeo, but *why* Romeo? Why him? Why me? Why now?

For Shakespeare’s characters, feeling choiceless leads to tragedy, but being forced to reckon with one’s circumstances and selfhood can also be a catalyst to greatness. Like Moses himself, readers of the bible have sought to understand why he was able to connect with the divine so intimately—to singularly speak to God “face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (Exodus 33:11). Put another way, *wherefore art thou, Moses?*

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