

**Exodus 1947 (Aliyah Bet 5707)
Passover 2018 (5778)**

“Thus says the Eternal God: When I have gathered the House of Israel from the peoples among whom they have been scattered, and have made manifest My holiness there in the sight of the nations, they shall dwell on their own soil, which I gave to my servant Jacob. They shall dwell on it in safety, and build houses, and plant vineyards..And they shall know that I, the Eternal, am their God.”

Ezekiel 28: 25, 26

“There is a whole school of American Jewish writers who spend their time damning their fathers, hating their mothers, wringing their hands and wondering why they were born. This isn’t art or literature. It’s psychiatry. These writers are professional apologists. Every year you find one of their works on the best-seller list. Their work is obnoxious and makes me sick to my stomach. I wrote *Exodus* because I was just sick of apologizing—or feeling that it was necessary to apologize.” Leon Uris, [New York Post](#) interview, circa 1998.

American-Jewish novelists fill a pantheon of distinguished writers. Among them Nobel laureates Saul Bellow and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Additionally, a string of Pulitzer Prize winners such as Edna Ferber, Philip Roth, Herman Wouk, Michael Chabon, Geraldine Brooks. But half a century ago a single historical novel transformed American Jewry as no other work has done—before or since—and it garnered none of these honors. The book, *Exodus*, with its author, Leon Uris (1924-2003), was “savaged by critics and academics and resoundingly ignored by literary prize committees.” (Bradley Burston, [Haaretz](#), November 2012). When it was published in 1958, it exploded into an international publishing phenomenon and sold millions, remaining on the [New York Times](#) best-seller list for 8 months, (some sources say 19 weeks; others say 52 weeks) and the biggest best-seller in the United States since *Gone with the Wind*. The film by Otto Preminger followed in 1960 starring Paul Newman and Eva Marie Saint. The novel begins with a compressed re-telling of the voyages of the 1947 immigration ship, *Exodus*, and goes on to retell the founding of the State of Israel, its publishing realizing and initiating sympathy for that newly established sovereign State. “As a literary work, it isn’t much,” sniffed David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s founding prime minister, still in power at the time *Exodus* was published, ‘but as a piece of propaganda, it’s the best thing ever written about Israel’” (Ibid). Author Pete Hamill said it differently in 1976: “Leon Uris is a story-teller in a direct line from those men who sat around fires and changed the tribe and made them human. The subject is man, not words; story is all, the form it takes is secondary.” (from [New York Times](#) obituary on Leon Uris, June 2003). Said Uris biographer, Ira B. Nadel, “You did not study the books of Leon Uris, but you learned a great deal from them.”

In preparation to write *Exodus*, Leon Uris read 300 books, traveled 12,000 miles within Israel and interviewed 1200 people. He combined a compressed story of the real-world 1947 ship *Exodus* and its illegal immigrants headed to Palestine with the story of the freedom fighters of 1948 Mandatory Palestine leading to Israel’s declaration of independence May 14, 1948 and the rebirth of a nation. Anxious to change the perception of Jews as victims, Uris said several years after the novel’s success: “*Exodus* is the story of the greatest miracle of our times, an event unparalleled in the history of mankind; the rebirth of a nation which had been dispersed 2,000 years before. I have written about my people who, against a lethargic world and with little else than courage, conquered unconquerable odds.”

Uris told his story of Jewish empowerment in a world that was still emerging from the ashes of destruction in Europe and where, in America, there were still high levels of anti-Semitism and discrimination, the America still curbing acceptance of Jews in universities, neighborhoods and clubs and the America of judeophobes such as Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh—who were adored by the American public. He tells the story of the founding of the State of Israel from the sailing of the immigrant ship, *Exodus*, with its load of displaced persons (DPs) and Holocaust survivors, including children, all illegal immigrants to Mandatory Palestine, of the confronting and defying of the British blockade and on to the hard-driving “freedom fighters” in radical underground groups or on kibbutzim—farming the land and at the same time, defending it—all as a new breed of Jew who will “not turn the other cheek.” (Source of the above: Bradley Burston, “The Exodus Effect,” [Haaretz](#), Israel, November 2012).

The characters, many of whom are based on actual historical figures, come from diverse backgrounds told by use of flashbacks. Ari Ben Canaan, son of Barak, raised on a kibbutz and as part of the Mossad Aliyah Bet (an organization which organized Jewish immigration to Palestine), is the character around whom much of the novel focuses. As a “freedom fighter,” he uses creative techniques to organize Jewish immigrants from all over the world—more than allowed by the British quota—to

Palestine and then steers the worn out, broken-down ship, *Exodus*, through British restrictions, confronting the British blockade and going on to fight Arab resistance on the kibbutz. Dov Landau, a very angry teenager and survivor of the Holocaust, surviving the Warsaw Ghetto and Auschwitz, turns many circumstances to his advantage and has a thirst for revenge. Karen, a teen-ager, sent to Denmark by her parents to escape the Holocaust, is a passenger on the *Exodus* and becomes unofficially engaged to Dov. Akiva and Barak Canaan (formerly Yakov and Jossi Rabinsky respectively), brothers from the Russian Pale of Settlement, walk all the way overland from the Pale to Palestine, Akiva to become a member of the radical underground, the “Maccabees” (a militant organization based on the Irgun), and Barak to become a kibbutz pioneer, head of the Jewish Agency and father of Ari and Jordana. Kitty Fremont is a very American, very Presbyterian, very blonde nurse, who becomes concerned about the hunger-striking passengers on the *Exodus*, who also becomes Ari’s love interest and who tells Ari, “You can’t fight the whole British Empire with 600 people. It isn’t possible.” His counter: “How many minute men did you have when they fired the shot heard round the world?” “I don’t know,” she replies. “Seventy-seven,” is his answer. (Bradley Burston, *Haaretz*, Israel, November 2012). Thus, Ari becomes the proud “new breed of Jew,” no longer defenseless, now unapologetically assertive and aggressive and for whom “powerless” and “victim” will never again define him and his people. And, finally, Jordana Ben Canaan, Ari’s fiery, gun-toting sister and leader of a Palmach brigade and Bruce Sutherland, a very aristocratic and conflicted British officer.

Collecting these personalities/characters, Leon Uris, the story-teller, molded and crafted a tale of unbelievable courage and chutzpah, of a tough pioneer spirit and regeneration of a land to give us the gigantic story of the rebirth of a great nation and a whole new face of the empowered Jew. The critics trashed and snubbed the literary form but the public loved the rugged, human spirit and the grand story of the people who said, “Never again.”

Shortly we Jewish people will celebrate Passover (Pesach), our ancient story of the Exodus (1,500 B.C.E.) of the Israelite people out of slavery in Egypt in defiance of an ancient Pharaoh to claim their promised land. In 1947, there was another “Exodus” of thousands of the descendants of those early Israelite people back to that land after 2,000 years—this time in defiance of a Twentieth Century empire. The Twentieth Century story does not begin with 1947/48 but rather further back in the middle of WW I, the “Great War.” It begins with the Balfour Declaration, a short, two-paragraph letter dated November 2, 1917 from British Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour to Lord Walter Rothschild, president of the British Zionist Federation that made public the British support of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. It became known as the Balfour Declaration and led the League of Nations, endorsed by 52 nations, on July 24, 1922 to entrust the United Kingdom with the Palestine Mandate. The British were instructed to use their best endeavors to facilitate Jewish immigration, to encourage settlement in the land and to secure a Jewish national home. The United States was not a member of the League of Nations but Congress endorsed the concept by a resolution signed by President Harding.

Prior to WW I, Zionism was already gathering momentum as a movement. During WW I, the British needed help in the form of finding a source for acetone, a chemical needed for the production of arms (Germany having cornered the market for acetone). Chaim Weizmann, a chemist, but also the leader of the Zionist movement, developed a fermentation process to produce acetone, enabling Great Britain to continue their arms production. This brought Weizmann into connection with Lord Balfour (previous British Prime Minister) and David Lloyd George (British minister of armaments) who responded to Weizmann’s pressure for support of a Jewish homeland. In addition, Great Britain was seeking the entry of the United States into WW I in order to defeat Germany and the Ottoman Empire (which included the entire Middle East) and they hoped that supporting a Jewish homeland would encourage world Jewry to sway the U.S. to join the war. (Source: Martin Kramer, “The Forgotten Truth About the Balfour Declaration,” *Mosaic*, June 2017).

Large numbers of Jews (a quarter of a million in the 1930’s fleeing Nazism) began immigrating to Palestine but there was Arab discontent. Enter the White Paper of 1939, a policy paper issued by the British government under Neville Chamberlain which redefined Jewish immigration by restricting its flow to 75,000 per year, basically reneging on the Balfour Declaration and saying that creating a Jewish State was no longer a British policy. The White Paper prevented millions of European Jews to escape from Nazi-occupied Europe before and during WW II. The United States was also limiting the number of Jewish immigrants at the same time. Great Britain believed that Jewish support was now unimportant and feared the Arab world would turn against them.

After WW II, millions of European Jews were living under guard as “displaced persons” (DPs), without adequate medical care in camps in Germany and Austria. Jewish organizations began organizing an underground network to move thousands of Jews from those camps to ports on the Mediterranean Sea so they could be sent to Palestine by ship. This was part of an effort called Aliyah Bet (second immigration) for Jews to immigrate illegally to Palestine—both before and after WW II. The British, still responsible for Mandatory Palestine were vehemently opposed to this large-scale immigration and prepared a massive naval and military force to turn back the refugees. Over half of the voyages were stopped by British patrols and most intercepted immigrants were sent to internment camps in Cyprus, the Atlit detention camp in Palestine, and to Mauritius (island state in the Indian Ocean).

Of the 64 vessels that sailed in the Aliyah Bet (staffed by volunteers from the United States, Canada and Latin America), *Exodus 1947* was the largest carrying 4,515 passengers, 655 of which were children—the largest ever number of illegal immigrants to Palestine. Its name and story received enormous international attention, especially an incident occurring toward the end of Aliyah Bet and the end of the British mandate after which Britain withdrew its forces and the State of Israel was established. Historians say that *Exodus 1947* helped unify the Jewish community of Palestine and the Holocaust refugees of Europe and rallied support for a Jewish state—one calling the story of *Exodus 1947* a “spectacular publicity coup for the Zionists.” (Thomas Kolsky, Temple Univ. Press, 1992).

Exodus 1947, originating in the United States as a packet steamer, then named the *SS President Warfield*, was sold for scrap for slightly more than \$8,000 and acquired by the Haganah (an underground Jewish military organization) to use in Europe to transport Jews who sought to immigrate illegally to Palestine. The derelict but sturdy ship, fast and made of steel to resist ramming, sailed from near Sete (near Marseille), France in July 1947 with British destroyers surrounding it before it reached Palestinian territorial waters. A struggle ensued between the passengers and the British naval forces. Attempting to make an example of the *Exodus*, it was towed to Haifa, the passengers transferred onto 3 navy transports and returned to Europe, first landing in France. The French refused to force the passengers to disembark. The British, fearing public opinion, decided to wait until the passengers disembarked. The passengers, including many children, declared a hunger strike which lasted 24 days. Mounting pressure from international media coverage pressured the British to find a solution. The ships sat in sweltering heat for 3 weeks with the passengers refusing to disembark and the French refusing to force them. The British then transferred the passengers back to Germany where they were interned in camps. The cruel irony of this action was not lost on the Jews of *Exodus 1947* nor the world. Vociferous protests began all over Europe and the other side of the Atlantic. The ensuing public embarrassment for Britain played a significant role in the diplomatic swing toward the Jews and the establishment of the State of Israel. (Ruth Gruber; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). Most of the passengers eventually successfully reached Palestine. Of the original number, only 1800 remained in 2 Exodus camps in April 1948. They were eventually transferred to Israel.

Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948—the end of the Mandate. On May 15, 1948, the Arab-Israeli war began with Israel being attacked on all sides by 5 armies of the Arab League: Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt—all with more arms, more men and seemingly more power—but with no unified goal and no central command, the only tenuous connecting thread being their desire to destroy Israel. Israel, more disciplined, more organized, better trained and more unified—and fighting with passion and unbelievable courage—was victorious. And thus, began a 70-year growth—and rebirth—of a magnificent nation. On May 14, 2018, Israel will observe the 70th anniversary of its establishment as a sovereign state. In 70 years this small nation, approximately the size of New Jersey, the only democracy in the Middle East, has produced 10 Nobel laureates (medicine, math, physics, chemistry, peace, literature), developed expertise in water conservation, discovered drip irrigation, developed expertise in water desalination, developed expertise in waste-water reclamation, discovered the cherry tomato, cultivated prize-winning vineyards, developed medications for Parkinson’s disease and Multiple Sclerosis, developed the cell phone, developed the voice-mail system, developed stem-cell technology, developed the pill-camera, shares its expertise in water conservation with both Jordan and the Palestinian Authority (a mere few examples)—all while defending themselves in 8 wars and unrelenting terrorist attacks. And, in a service close to the heart of this writer, maintains a first-class, prize-winning IDF (Israel Defense Force) field hospital which is the first to show up—within 12 hours—in disaster areas around the world—to Haiti, the Philippines, Mexico, Nepal, Peru, Japan, Paraguay, Armenia, Pakistan, hurricane Katrina —again naming only a few—receiving the award from WHO (United Nations) as the world’s best in field medicine and disaster relief (from Israel 21c, November 2016), the president of WHO saying, “The world should learn from Israel how to operate in disaster areas with the right ethical values.” (Ibid).

Soon, in a matter of days, it will be Passover and we will gather at homes, apartments, as Hillel student groups at colleges and universities, in places of assisted living, families gathering together, seating ourselves at long tables—or tables jockeyed every which way to fit all of us in—for the ritual meal, the Seder (meaning “order”), and we will read yet again, as commanded, from the liturgical book, the Haggadah (meaning “to tell”), the story of the Exodus of the Israelite people out of Egypt and slavery. As we turn the pages of the Haggadah, we will eventually come to the section called, “Eser Makkot,” the naming of the 10 plagues God brought upon the Egyptians for not allowing the Israelites to be free. And then the crossing of the Israelites upon dry land through the Red Sea and the drowning of the Egyptian army by the returning sea. We will be instructed to dip a finger into the wine and name each plague—resulting in 10 red spots on our plates. Why? Because just as our cups cannot be totally full, so our hearts should not be full because people died so that we could be free. A midrash in the Talmud describes the angels beginning to sing and dance when the Egyptian army was destroyed. But God silenced them asking, “How can you sing while my children are drowning?” (Rahel Musleah, “Why On This Night?” Haggadah.)

Jewish people take the value of that midrash very seriously. Moving forward from it a few millennia to today's Israel and reported in December 2017: medical assistance from Israel has been given to wounded and ill Syrian citizens for the past two years at the border of their country with their "worst enemy," Israel. Israel set up an IDF field hospital manned by Arabic-speaking Israelis and treated patients from Syria, starting with a few—seven Syrians who badly needed medical attention. Gradually the number of Syrians arriving at the border needing medical help grew—up to 100 per day. Where needed, patients were transferred to an Israeli hospital in northern Israel, treated, given prescriptions as needed and sent home without any sign they had been treated in Israel. (Note: the Syrian army never attacked the area where the IDF field hospital was erected.) ("Israel's Extended Hand: The Hardly Told Story," Norit Greenger, December 2017).

This is the Israel the press does not cover. This is the Israel that is the truth. This is the Israel of Leon Uris's passion. This is the Israel he wrote about to confront the world's indifference—the stuff of which made him sick. The world is still at it—at its indifference, its readiness to attack. The hand-wringing apologists are still wringing their hands and writing their books. But Leon Uris's refusal to apologize stands firm—an unrelenting sentinel—626 pages of Jewish courage standing tall. And Israel's IDF field hospital keeps showing up—to rescue, to repair, to heal—that same indifferent world.

"And for all its troubles, all its tempestuous passages, what a march it is! Today, people under fifty cannot remember when Israel did not exist...To this awed observer of Israel, the miracle still gleams. Doomsayers abound to point to the problems..Yet with all that taken into account, Zion is stronger than ever. Life in the land is stimulating and colorful...this is an honest word about the beautiful, flourishing Land of the Jews.,,There is a wry Israeli byword in which I believe heart and soul; and with that I close an eyeblink glance at troubled, radiant Zion in the fortieth year of the Return: 'Yih'yeh b'seder'—It'll be okay.'" Herman Wouk, 1987, Purim 5747, on Israel's 40th anniversary, from This Is My God.

Mazel Tov, Israel, on 70 years! May you go from strength to strength!

Happy Passover

Jean Guthery