

Why the Success of Exodus in 1950s America?

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Capstone Abstract

The positive reception of Exodus, by Leon Uris, in mainstream America during the 1950s is a phenomenon that has been largely overlooked. Arguably too much attention has been directed towards the aftermath of the book and film, without properly situating the novel in the context of current events and public opinion on Judaism and Israel at the time of its release. In order to establish a thorough framework within which to examine the legacy of Exodus, it is essential to understand American society at the time of publication and assess the impact of current events, such as the founding of the state of Israel and the 1956 Suez Crisis, upon the novel's audience. In so doing, we learn a great deal about America's attitudes toward Judaism and Israel. This paper explores the climate in America that allowed for the novel's positive reception, identifying the three strongest motivational factors for reading Exodus as: 1) Israel's portrayal in the media, 2) suburban integration, and 3) Holocaust memory. Divided into three chapters, each portion of the paper analyzes one facet of America's changing image of Israel or Judaism at the time of the novel's publication in 1958.

Introduction

The novel Exodus, written by Leon Uris, was published on September 18, 1958 and commanded immediate fame. Were his words the truth, Uris's novel could have served as a creation myth for the state of Israel, inspiring nationalism amongst world Jewry and providing heroes for a downtrodden post-Holocaust generation. In this piece of historical fiction, Uris recounts the founding of Israel through a tale of the illegal immigration movement that followed World War II. He crafts well-developed characters and subplots to delineate his own tragic-cum-triumphant history of the Jewish people, drawing upon the oppressive experience of Jewish life in the Pale of Settlement during the 1800s and the painfully recent memory of the Holocaust.

Within one month following the publication of Exodus, the novel achieved status as a bestseller in America, holding the number one slot for nineteen weeks and maintaining a position on the bestseller list for a full year. Director Otto Preminger purchased Uris's screenplay, transforming the novel into a wildly successful feature film, released in 1960, with advance sales of \$1.6 million and a gross total of \$13 million; this profit for advance sales was the highest in cinema history. Hailed by The Chicago Tribune for the "richness of [the book's] detail and for the range of its historical content" and labeled by The New York Times as "a Book of Exodus for our time," the book witnessed unprecedented success.¹

The novel's positive reception in mainstream America during the 1950s was a phenomenon that has been largely overlooked. One scholar, Rachel Weissbrod, suggests that the

¹ "Books—Authors," The New York Times, July 17, 1958. Web: October 3, 2010; Deborah Dash Moore, "Exodus: Real to Reel to Real," Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting, ed. J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler (New York: Princeton UP, 2003), 210; Victor P. Hass, "Rich Novel of Israel's Birth," Chicago Daily Tribune, September 28, 1958. (*ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune*), C3. Web: October 17, 2010; "The Founding of the New Israel," The New York Times, October 12, 1958. Web: October 15, 2010.

novel's success is best attributed to its melodramatic qualities. She thoroughly proves that Exodus has the characteristics of this literary type, pointing toward extreme characters, a tense plot, and polarization between forces.² Although a link between the popularity of melodrama and the novel's positive reception exists, it begs the follow-up question of why *this* particular melodrama, Exodus, would command such attention.

Additionally, Weissbrod briefly inspects alternative roots of positive reception, listing possible causes for success beyond the popularity of the melodrama genre, including Uris's employment of the beloved myth concerning the "flight from slavery to freedom in the Promised Land." However, her argument comes up short, relying upon the "wave of works on Jewish themes" that emerged at the time to explain the novel's popularity.³ This understanding merely scratches the surface of a much larger question: what caused this entire group of novels concerning Jewish topics and Israel to find a place in mainstream American society during this time?

Like Weissbrod, scholar Steven J. Whitfield took note of the massive success of Exodus. In his analysis of Jewish contributions to American popular culture, Whitfield was certain to include the novel and film. He too takes a stab at determining reasons behind the popularity of Uris's work, pointing toward "the expanding hospitality of the majority culture," again noting the collection of "'Jewish blockbusters'" that were published in the 1950s.⁴ Prior to Exodus, Doubleday published Diary of a Young Girl in 1952, and 1955 saw the release of Herman Wouk's Marjorie Morningstar, which in 1958 became a film.⁵ Whitfield is correct in identifying

² Rachel Weissbrod, "Exodus as a Zionist Melodrama," Israel Studies, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 129-152, 1999. Web: September 3, 2010, 129-132.

³ Weissbrod, 142.

⁴ Stephen J. Whitfield, American Jewish History: American Jewish Life, 1920-1990, ed. Jeffrey S. Gurock, Vol. 4 (New York: Routledge, 1998), 347.

⁵ Whitfield, 346-347

the shift in mainstream America's mentality, but it is necessary to develop this point further. What images were Americans receiving about Israel and Judaism to create this change? How was the founding of Israel reported in America?

One piece of literature, Our Exodus: Leon Uris and the Americanization of Israel's Founding Story, by M. M. Silver, develops a framework for understanding Exodus's success. Silver's assertions focus primarily on the Jewish community's reception of the novel, attributing its overwhelming popularity to the uplifting message of Jewish tenacity in the wake of the Holocaust and the strong parallels drawn between Israeli and American societies. Silver's analysis offers many possibilities for how Exodus may have met a particular need or filled a void for Jews and non-Jews alike by drawing parallels between Israel's founding narrative and American values, but this is a limited perspective that gives too much credit to the concept of Americanization. In order to understand the enormity of the novel's success, it is essential to approach the text with an understanding of mainstream America's perceptions of Judaism and Israel. This paper will broaden the scope of Silver's analysis, which employs a confining lens, in order to thoroughly delve into the reasons why Americans read the novel with such voracity.

Despite the limited discussion of catalysts for Exodus's popularity, scholars have examined the impact of Exodus at greater length. Uris reports that readers sent him letters claiming his novel changed their lives and gave them "pride in their Jewishness."⁶ Deborah Dash Moore's work supports Uris's claims, asserting that his novel was responsible for "integrating Israel into the imagination of American Jews" and produced a new image of being Jewish.⁷ Her work incorporates several book reviews from the time, which suggest that Exodus offered American Jewry an opportunity to live vicariously as Israelis and a fresh perspective on

⁶ Whitfield, 347.

⁷ Moore, "Exodus," 219.

what it meant to be Jewish.⁸ Though both of these ideas are possible factors for the novel's success amongst Jews, the novel was well received by mainstream America as well. The 1950s were a time of acculturation for American Jewry, and an analysis of mainstream American popular opinion would be valuable to this conversation.

Though the work of these scholars is important, this conversation would benefit from an exploration of causal links between mainstream America in the 1950s and the success of Uris's novel. What caused this novel to reach such acclaim in popular American culture? Arguably too much attention has been directed towards the aftermath of the book and film, without properly situating the novel in the context of current events and public opinion at the time of its release. In order to establish a thorough framework within which to examine the legacy of Exodus, it is essential to understand American society at the time of publication and assess the impact of current events upon the novel's audience.

In so doing, we will learn a great deal about America's attitudes toward Judaism and Israel and answers to a number of questions regarding these topics. How much contact existed between Jews and gentiles in the 1950s? What was the impact of Americanization on American Jewry? How did the atrocities of the Holocaust reverberate in American society? What was the role of mainstream media in shaping public opinion, and how did it cover relevant topics at the time? Which aspects of Uris's novel met the needs of or appealed to American society? By answering these questions, the legacy of Exodus can be better understood; one can follow the trajectory of change as a result of the novel's publication in this particular time period and environment.

This paper aims to answer the questions above through an exploration of the climate in America that allowed for such positive reception, identifying the three strongest motivational

⁸ Moore, "Exodus," 210.

factors for reading Exodus. First, Israel's portrayal in the media had a profound impact on the novel's success. A second factor was the move of Jews to suburbia and their subsequent integration. The third catalyst was Holocaust memory in the postwar era. Divided into three chapters, each portion of the paper will analyze one facet of America's changing image of Israel or Judaism at the time of the novel's publication in 1958.

By investigating the media coverage of historical events related to Exodus's subject matter, we develop a richer context for the novel's success. The sources selected to represent popular media in mainstream America are LIFE Magazine and The New York Times. LIFE is regarded by corporate communications professionals as "one of the world's most iconic and well-known brands."⁹ In the late 1940s, approximately 22.5 million people read the magazine, and by 1949, LIFE sales reached 5.2 million copies, with an estimated readership of 12 million men and 10 million women with the inclusion of pass-along readership. The 1950s marked the height of LIFE's success, with sales of 5.8 million copies and earnings of \$137 million for its coveted advertising space.¹⁰ Much of the magazine's success has been attributed to its focus on photojournalism, which we can logically assume explains the magazines appeal for a wide array of ages, literacy levels, and attention spans.¹¹

Selection of The New York Times as a representative newspaper stems from its popularity in the New York area, as well as its sizable readership outside New York. This newspaper influenced journalists across the country and contained the most extensive coverage of current events during and following WWII. Further, articles from the Times reached 525

⁹ TimeWarner. "Time Inc. to Close LIFE Magazine Newspaper Supplement" TimeWarner Newsroom (TimeWarner: March 26, 2007). Web: December 3, 2010.

¹⁰ Erika Doss, "Introduction: Looking at *Life*: Rethinking America's Favorite Magazine, 1936-1972," Looking at LIFE Magazine, ed. Erika Doss (Washington: Smithsonian Institution P, 2001), 2-3; Loudon Wainwright, The Great American Magazine (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1986), 174, 179-180, 42.

¹¹ Doss, 7.

newspapers across the country, shaping public opinion for readers who were not purchasing a copy of the newspaper itself.¹²

By assessing the catalysts for a shift in public opinion about Judaism and Israel around the time of Exodus's publication, we can understand the novel's success and its impact on America's opinion of Israel and Judaism. First, this paper assesses the media coverage of events such as the founding of the state of Israel and the 1956 Suez Crisis. The way in which these events were covered in the media shaped mainstream America's opinion of Israel. Media coverage in America assumed a neutral to positive stance on the foundation of Israel and reported events in the region regularly. Further, despite the controversial nature of the Suez Crisis, Israel demonstrated her enormous military might, contradicting stereotypes of Jewish weakness. The juxtaposition of Israel's victory and France and Britain's foiled political plans again thrust Israel into the spotlight, creating hype around the state and piquing American interest in Israel. Exodus reinforced this strong image of Israelis and provided a moral imperative for Israel's founding at a time when the media excused Israel's controversial treatment of Arabs in the region and justified Israel's right as a democracy to defend herself from her hostile surrounding Arab neighbors. In conjunction, these two sources of information strengthened America's ties to Israel.

To demonstrate the trend toward suburbia that emerged in the 1950s and impacted the novel's success, this paper will synthesize several scholar's assertions that this geographic spread of Judaism is responsible for changing the image of Jewry amongst the general American public.¹³ The move to suburbia symbolizes the integration of American Jewry into the

¹² Laurel Leff, Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper, (Cambridge UP, 2005), 10.

¹³ Samuel Heilman, Portrait of American Jews: Last Half of the Twentieth Century (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1995), 19-28; Deborah Dash Moore, "Jewish Migration in Postwar America; The Case of Miami and

mainstream; this paper will prove that the integration of Judaism into the United States' most widely accepted religious groups created curiosity for gentile Americans. Exodus was published at a perfect time: the stigma surrounding Judaism was disappearing, so that those who were curious felt freer to investigate the religion. Further, the novel supplied these gentile neighbors with an engaging piece of historical fiction, whereby it became possible to read a mainstream book and learn about the history of Judaism at the same time. The move to suburbia had implications within the Jewish community as well, creating an identity crisis for Jews and pushing for reconciliation with modernity. In summation, Exodus served as a safe, almost trendy, source of information to feed the curiosity brought on by Judaism's spread to suburbia and provided a unifying narrative to fill the void in Jewish identity brought on by the move to suburbia.

Finally, Holocaust memory was another factor that permanently shaped the consciences of both American Jewry and the greater population.¹⁴ There are several links between the Holocaust and the success of Exodus. First, because of the way in which the Holocaust was reported initially in America, which included omission of the Jews as primary victims, Americans were ashamed when the conversation shifted to emphasize European Jewry, a link that relies upon the friendships forged in suburbia. Further, the amount of scholarship written on how much information various ethnic, religious, and social groups knew about the events in Europe, indicates repeated attempts at vindication; the majority of America experienced some level of guilt about their inactivity during the Holocaust. Even the American Jewish community failed to help their European counterparts and felt ashamed because of the negative Jewish

Los Angeles," American Jewish Experience, ed. Jonathan D. Sarna (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), 314-327; Jonathan Sarna, American Judaism: A History (Yale UP, 2004), 274-306.

¹⁴ Henry Feingold, "Who Shall Bear Guilt for the Holocaust? The Human Dilemma," American Jewish Experience, ed. Jonathan D. Sarna (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), 274-292; Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999).

stereotypes existing at this time. When Exodus was published, its success benefited from the guilty consciences of Jewish and non-Jewish Americans. They gravitated toward this novel because it provided a victorious narrative for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in the state of Israel.

The Role of Israel in America

A third reason for the success of Exodus is visible in how Israel was portrayed in the American media. The average American's attitude toward and knowledge of the state of Israel can offer insights into why the novel was such a big hit. There are two major events that must be taken into account, the founding of Israel in 1948 and the 1956 Suez Crisis. These two events were covered extensively by a variety of media outlets and influenced the public's perception of Israel, leading them to purchase Uris's piece of historical fiction.

The novel centers on the desire and fight for the establishment of Israel, a subject that at the time of Exodus's 1958 publication may have been a somewhat distant memory. However, the Suez Crisis was a more recent reminder of Israel's military might. Beginning in July of 1956, Egyptian nationalization of the Suez Canal under the rule of President Gamal Abdul Nasser caused commotion in the international community because trade agreements and financial interests were jeopardized. After international attempts at diplomacy and verbal negotiations, France, Britain, and Israel formulated a plan to invade and overthrow Egyptian control of the canal. On October 29, 1956, Israel invaded Egypt, taking control of the Sinai Peninsula and working to eradicate Arab bases in the Gaza Strip used to attack Israeli cities. After two days, airstrikes and ground units from France and Britain throughout Egypt aided the

Israelis. By November 6, 1956, Egypt had lost control of a portion of Port Said, a major trade center along the canal, but the U.N. enacted a ceasefire and undermined the progress made by the British, French, and Israelis. Shortly thereafter, U.N. took the canal under its control, and after four months, Israel handed the Sinai over as well. Ultimately, control and power were restored to Nasser and the Egyptians.

The majority of 1957 was spent finding a resolution to control of the canal. The debacle was an embarrassment for Britain and France but served as an ego boost for the Israeli Defense Forces.¹⁵ The timing of the Suez Crisis was a perfect precursor to the release of Exodus, because the Crisis marked the end of the British and French influence, and old imperial power, in the Middle East. America's new role in the region generated a buzz around Middle Eastern affairs and Israel.

Supporting this assertion about increased awareness, Scholar Eytan Gilboa suggests that during the Suez Crisis the Israeli display of military might "served to improve Israel's perceived importance." In Gilboa's analysis of public opinion polls from the time period, he found that the majority of Americans blamed the Suez Crisis on Egypt and the Arabs, but that the American public could not necessarily "justify" Israeli actions.¹⁶

How did the media portray the Israeli invasion of the Sinai, and what information about Egyptian provocations were relayed to the American public prior to the publication of Exodus? LIFE magazine mentions Nasser's "seizure" of the canal repeatedly.¹⁷ British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd accused Nasser of "den[ying] the canal's international character" and using the canal as a "weapon" and "instrument of national policy" for the government of Egypt, giving

¹⁵ Derek Varble. Essential Histories: The Suez Crisis 1956. (Osprey Publishing, 2003), 7-10.

¹⁶ Eytan Gilboa. American Public Opinion toward Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict. (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1987), 27-30.

¹⁷ "Climactic Hours: Frantic U.S. Activity to Clear Up Obstacles to a Mideast Settlement," LIFE Magazine 4 Mar. 1957: 27.

readers an insight into Nasser's strategy behind preventing equal access to the canal.¹⁸

The articles also included photographs of the power dynamics between Israelis and Arab refugees, such as one from the Gaza Strip of the refugees "plead[ing] for food from Israeli soldier supervising distribution."¹⁹ Another article contains a section dedicated to identifying locations where "planes and Israeli armor struck Egypt."²⁰ Though these images and the issues of resolution and Arab refugees perhaps portray Israel in a negative light, the sheer force and authority that Israel possessed may have been intriguing for Americans who believed "that Israel was too small and fragile" to fight a war with its neighbors. A primary theme in Exodus is Israel's power, and Uris went to great lengths in order to create "images of Israeli heroism" and a "punishing view of Israel's enemies."²¹

Also interesting to consider are Dr. Etyan Gilboa's findings that Americans held Egypt responsible for the conflict, rather than Israel who had attacked Egypt preemptively. In order to determine this, Gilboa synthesized American public opinion through careful analysis of a multitude of public opinion polls from various agencies and dates.²² America's decision to blame Egypt can be attributed to the media's coverage of and reminders that Egyptian raiders were using Gaza as a base to attack Israel. Multiple articles in LIFE magazine cite Egyptian raiders, and one explicitly reminds Americans of the "universal Arab hatred of Israel" and the anti-semitic sentiment in the Arab world.²³ In one article, Israel's purpose in the invasion of the Sinai Peninsula was its plan to defend against Egyptian attacks by destroying bases used for

¹⁸ "As Nasser Woos Arab World British Turn to U.N.—and U.S.," LIFE Magazine 8 Oct. 1956: 40-41.

¹⁹ "Climactic Hours," 26.

²⁰ "World Opinion Rallies for Suez Peace: U.S. Gains New Popularity as British, French, and Israel Defy the UN in Their Attack on Nasser's Egypt," LIFE Magazine 12 Jun. 1956: 44.

²¹ "Franco-British Attack on Suez: Small War in Shadow of a Big-Stick Threat," LIFE Magazine 19 Nov. 1956: 42; Silver, 94, 97.

²² Gilboa, 30-31.

²³ "Verbal Backing from Wary Allies," LIFE Magazine 8 Oct. 1956: 42; "Climactic Hours," 22-27; "Franco-British," 43.

raids, so perhaps this explanation of self-defense helped rally support for Israel. Another article explains that in the aftermath of Israel's invasion of the Sinai, the Egyptian border may have become increasingly secure, but other issues of safekeeping continued to exist for Israel.²⁴

Gilboa's findings about American public opinion on Israel indicate positive sentiments toward the Jewish state. A novel, such as Exodus, which paints Israel's history in such a positive light, would be appealing to supporters of Israel, like one man who wrote to LIFE asserting that "[Arab] refugees chose to leave their homes in Israel" as opposed to the version of history which suggests that many Arabs fled as a result of the War for Independence.²⁵

Of course, there were Americans who condemned Israel's actions as well. One reader of LIFE wrote, "Every step of the creation of Israel was an affront to American principles of justice," reviling America's support of Israel on the grounds of hypocrisy.²⁶ Another article features a picture of Arab students at the University of California, Los Angeles, watching President Eisenhower's speech in which he expressed that the Israelis should withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula. The caption relayed the students' words that America had "a president who is above minority pressures."²⁷ This comment is indicative of the tensions between Arab Americans and Jewish Americans who held opposing views on resolution of the Suez Crisis and Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

Regardless of the positive or negative public opinion of Israel's actions in the Sinai, Gilboa's analysis demonstrates that the Suez Crisis was indeed on the minds of the American public. The media featured coverage of the deliberation process of the United Nations, as it

²⁴ "World Opinion," 43-44.

²⁵ "Letters to the Editors," LIFE Magazine 22 Apr. 1957: 16.

²⁶ "Letters to the Editors," 16.

²⁷ "Climactic Hours," 23-24.

attempted to formulate a resolution to the crisis.²⁸ As evidenced by the opinion editorials and letters to the editor, the Suez Crisis sparked public debate, further explaining the appeal of Uris's novel.

The media also pointed towards the importance of Israel to the United States and its allies, yet another reason why American readers might have chosen Exodus. One article expresses the United States' anger at its "trusted allies" for their provocations in the Sinai.²⁹ Another describes the "vital interest" and "moral responsibility" of the United States in maintaining order in the Middle East and supporting Israel democracy.³⁰ In an interview with British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd, the importance of the Suez Canal for British trade patterns is explained, emphasizing the economic impact of decreased imports and exports due to restricted travel through the canal. LIFE Magazine featured multiple authors who expressed the benefits of a resolution to the crisis for the United States and detailed previous U.S. involvement in the region.³¹

To symbolize America's involvement with Israel, Uris's novel features a beautiful American nurse, Kitty Fremont, who volunteers in the displaced persons camps following World War II and the death of her husband, a soldier. Kitty finds herself drawn to a young Jewish girl, Karen Hansen, and romantically involved with the novel's protagonist, Ari ben-Canaan. Through these relationships, Kitty finds herself deeply entrenched in the illegal immigration process to Israel, eventually living on a kibbutz in Palestine for a time and helping the Israeli's defend their land during the War for Independence. Her character serves to draw in the average American without a religious or cultural tie to Zionism and Israel; she provides a role for non-

²⁸ "Climactic Hours," 24-25.

²⁹ "World Opinion," 44.

³⁰ "Editorials: Step Toward Law for Suez," LIFE Magazine 6 May 1957: 53.

³¹ "As Nasser Woos," 40-43; "Climactic Hours," 27; "World Opinion"; "Editorials".

Jewish Americans in the establishment of the Jewish state.

The media coverage of the Suez Crisis also contained allusions to the history of Palestine/Israel and the state's War for Independence in 1948. One article suggested that the recent struggles in the Sinai Peninsula and clashes over the Gaza Strip stemmed in part from the events of 1947 leading to Israel's declaration of independent statehood.³² LIFE magazine featured a nearly twenty-page article spanning the entire history of Jewish involvement and immigration to Israel and identifying instances of anti-semitism that led to Jewish waves of immigration, such as pogroms in Russia and the Pale of Settlement³³ and the Dreyfus Affair in Paris.³⁴ This role and meaning of this article can be interpreted in a number of ways. To begin with, the article would not have been included in the magazine if it were not thought to be of interest to LIFE's readers, indicating that the history of Israel was a topic drawing readership in during November of 1957. Further, readers of the article might have been encouraged to learn more and therefore turned to Exodus for an entertaining read-up on Israel's history.

Between 1947 and 1948, LIFE Magazine offered myriad articles on the clashes between new immigrants to Palestine and their Arab neighbors, which shaped the first American perceptions of Israel and lead them to choose a novel like Exodus, which would reinforce their positive notions of the new state. For example, one article details the birth of Israel and the United States' immediate recognition of the new state; on the next pages it describes the Arab reaction to the new state in almost childlike terms. According to this article the Arabs continued to "[throw] shells and bombs," especially on Tel Aviv. Several gruesome photographs of the casualties are included as well.³⁵ In another article, the Jewish military might is demonstrated

³² "Climactic Hours," 27.

³³ "Modern Prophet of Israel," LIFE Magazine 18 Nov. 1957: 156.

³⁴ "Modern Prophet," 159.

³⁵ "Israel is Born in Travail and Hope," LIFE Magazine 31 May 1948: 21-22.

by their takeover of the port of Haifa. Again, the Arab retaliation is included in negative terms; Arabs from surrounding areas are shown wading through the Jordan River to engage in “guerilla warfare.”³⁶ The article emphasizes the significant difference in population, 650,000 Jews facing approximately 32 million Arabs in the surrounding Middle East³⁷ and states that the small number mattered not because the “Jews were united” except for clashes between the Irgun and Haganah forces,³⁸ another topic addressed in Exodus as Ari ben-Canaan’s father is a Haganah leader and no longer speaks to Ari’s uncle, who joined the Irgun.

In addition to the information available regarding Israel’s birth, LIFE Magazine also included articles about the displaced persons issue following World War II. One editorial addressed the “moral obligation” of the United States to recognize the 175,000 Jewish refugees and resolve the issue of displaced persons.³⁹ Another suggested Americans allow “Zionists to carry the ball” in order to aid the “pitiful Jewish survivors.”⁴⁰ Full-page advertisements from the United Jewish Appeal appeared, promoting the 1948 Destiny Campaign. The campaign requested donations to sustain the Jewish refugees “still alive” in such poor conditions. Large photographs of refugees behind barbed wire tugged at the heartstrings of Americans. In addition to monetary donations, the advertisements advocated for the enforcement of the United Nations vote on November 29, 1947 to establish an independent Jewish state and a push for 75,000 of the refugees to be allowed into Palestine.⁴¹

The United Jewish Appeal included information on the displaced persons camps in Cyprus, specifically featured in Exodus, as well as mention of 24,000 children who would be

³⁶ “Jews Score a Preliminary Victory,” LIFE Magazine 10 May 1948: 29.

³⁷ “Jews Score,” 33.

³⁸ “Jews Score,” 30.

³⁹ “Editorial: The State of Israel,” LIFE Magazine 31 May 1948.

⁴⁰ “Editorial: The Palestine Problem,” 34.

⁴¹ “This is a campaign to decide...,” LIFE Magazine 8 Mar. 1948: 101; “In the Meantime—,” LIFE Magazine 5 Apr. 1948: 113.

included in the push for the emigration of 75,000 Jewish refugees to Palestine.⁴² In Exodus, Leon Uris draws upon the ability of children to generate sympathy for a cause and mobilize people towards action. As explored in the previous chapters, the narratives of Karen and Dov, and the psychological damage inflicted upon them as a result of their traumatic upbringings, compelled anyone interested in a child's perspective on Israel to read Exodus. Further, Uris exercises a bit of historical license, filling the ship from Cyprus to Palestine with children who stage a hunger strike in order to be allowed to exit the harbor in Cyprus.

Exodus fulfilled its readers' desires to learn about Israel's history and establishment as a Jewish state in a number of ways. Through an analysis of mainstream media portrayal, we can better understand the American perception of Israel. The establishment of Israel in 1948 took place only ten years prior to the publication of Exodus, and in case anyone had managed to forget the newly established Jewish state, the Suez Crisis of 1956 brought the spotlight back to Israel. The media paid particular attention to Israel's massive military might and to clashes between Arabs and Jews in Palestine (and, later, Israel). Because the American mainstream had been conditioned to focus on these two aspects of Israel's persona, Exodus's strong narrative of triumph in the Holy Land and justification of clashes between Jews and Arabs offered Americans an entertaining piece of fiction that explored relevant topics of the time.

The Move to Suburbia: the Non-Jewish Majority and Issues of Jewish Identity

During the immediate postwar era, the most important development for American Jewry was the growth of suburbia. Migration to these neighborhoods helped American Jewry integrate

⁴² "In the Meantime—," 113.

into the non-Jewish majority, respond to modernity, and spread geographically across the United States. Postwar prosperity spurred the move from cities to suburbia, manifesting itself in the forms of cars for ease of commute and expensive new homes. Government programs, such as the GI Bill, which helped veterans obtain low-cost mortgages and pay off loans, contributed to the economic boom as well.⁴³

While migration to these fledgling neighborhoods near major cities was common for middle-class Americans, that the number of Jews that migrated is disproportionately higher than other groups in America is particularly intriguing. Between 1945 and 1965, one in three Jews moved to suburbia. In New Jersey, for example, the Jewish population of Newark, a major city, declined from 58,000 to 41,000 individuals; meanwhile, neighboring suburbs experienced a surge in their Jewish populations. Livingston, NJ, increased to approximately 2500 Jewish individuals from less than 100 Jews. Millburn rose from 600 Jews to 2000, and West Orange grew from 1600 Jews to over 7000.⁴⁴ American Jewry's expansion beyond its compact city-based communities stimulated interaction between Jews and non-Jews, with permanent repercussions for Judaism as a religion and for mainstream perception of Jews. These changes led to the acceptance of Judaism as a primary American religious group.

The overwhelming popularity of Leon Uris's Exodus among both the American Jewish community and the non-Jewish majority can be attributed to the Jewish community's identity crisis as a result of the move to suburbia, as well as the increased awareness of an acculturating Jewish presence across the United States. First, this paper will demonstrate the impact of American Jewry's move to suburbia on both the Jewish community and the non-Jewish majority, examining factors that facilitated Jewish integration and acceptance into mainstream America.

⁴³ Moore, "Jewish Migration," 315-317.

⁴⁴ Moore, "Jewish Migration," 316; Edward S. Shapiro, A Time for Healing: American Jewry Since WWII (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), 143, 144-145.

Then, it will explore a link between Jewish integration and the curiosities of non-Jewish neighbors, who perhaps read Exodus as a source of information and history about the new arrivals in their suburban neighborhoods. Next, this chapter will investigate the connection between the Jewish identity crisis that arose during the move to suburbia and Exodus as a way for American Jews to reconnect with the Jewish community and get in touch with their Jewish roots.

According to scholar Edward S. Shapiro, the perception of Jews shifted from a group that was ethnically different or other to a religious group following World War II. This new identity can be explained in part by the post-World War II religious revival, which was seen as a protest against the religious intolerance of communism and a demonstration of democratic principles. At this time, “white” America was increasingly tolerant of religious diversity, and Shapiro’s observation implies that Jews came to be considered “white,” instead of a distinct ethnic group. In 1955, sociologist Will Herberg posited that Protestants, Catholics, and Jews had all come to be considered true Americans.⁴⁵ The emergence of “a trifaith America” established a role for Judaism in the “nations cultural and spiritual tradition.”⁴⁶ The acceptance of Judaism as a primary American religion was a starting point for integration into mainstream American society.

Further, Jews in the postwar era wanted to be seen as “individuals pursuing happiness,” striving for the lifestyles of their non-Jewish counterparts who were also recouping from the war, chasing economic opportunity, and building families.⁴⁷ Minority groups viewed the move to

⁴⁵ Shapiro, A Time, 52-53; Alfred A. Goren, “A ‘Golden Decade’ for American Jews: 1945-1955,” The American Jewish Experience (New York: Holmes&Meier, 1986), 301.

⁴⁶ Shapiro, “A Time,” 53.

⁴⁷ Heilman, 19.

suburbia as “a symbol of Americanization” and “acceptance.”⁴⁸ Formerly Jewish neighborhoods in the cities began to fill with lower income families, primarily blacks, Puerto Ricans, and other immigrant groups, causing the Jewish population to seek neighborhoods with less crime and violence.⁴⁹ Additionally, clashes amongst African Americans and Jewish Americans during the Civil Rights movement indicate that Jews were perceived as part of the “white ethnicity.”⁵⁰ The migration of Jews away from the city and lower-class during the late 1940s and early 1950s served as “the most concrete expression” of American Jewry’s entry to the middle-class.⁵¹ Following World War II, the majority of Americans fell into the middle-class category, and therefore, with their increased education and success in the professions, Jews became part of this majority.⁵²

Though many of the communities to which American Jews moved during this time became primarily Jewish, these families began to acculturate, and the act of moving to suburbia signified Americanization on the part of minority groups. Building upon American Jewish participation in World War II, this next step of moving to suburbia for standard American pursuits continued to strengthen Jewish integration into mainstream American society.⁵³ With this pursuit and entry to the middle-class, came the expectation of religious values. Because church affiliation became “the generally accepted pattern of the suburb,” Jewish families followed suit within their own traditions.⁵⁴ Instead of converting, American Jewry capitalized on the recognition of Judaism as a primary American religion.

Because suburban development in the postwar era enabled American Jewry to physically

⁴⁸ Oscar Handlin, “Forward,” *Jews in Suburbia*, Albert I. Gordon (Boston: Beacon Hill P, 1959) ix.

⁴⁹ Albert I. Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia*, 9-10.

⁵⁰ Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001), 163.

⁵¹ Goren, 295.

⁵² Shapiro, “A Time,” 155; Gordon, 18.

⁵³ Heilman, 21-22; Sarna, *American Judaism*, 283; Moore, “Jewish Migration,” 315.

⁵⁴ Gordon, 86; Shapiro, “A Time,” 167.

relocate and mingle with non-Jews while retaining their Judaism, the Jewish presence in these neighborhoods commanded attention.⁵⁵ This is evident in the building of over six hundred synagogues from 1945 through the 1950s of “imposing size and sumptuous architectural design,” which channeled church structures for inspiration.⁵⁶ The buildings reflected the “accepted presence of a Jewish community” that wanted their religion represented in the same manner as Christianity.⁵⁷ Non-Jewish neighbors could not miss the increasing number and size of synagogues, and in this way, Judaism was brought to their attention.

Non-Jews encountered Judaism across the country through the massive geographic spread of Jewry. This spread served as a follow-up to Jewish participation in the war, which had stationed them across the country.⁵⁸ The decision to remain spread out after the war “reflected increased affluence and the pursuit of status.” One area of particular popularity for American Jewry became known as the Sunbelt; cities such as Miami and Los Angeles grew exponentially.⁵⁹ This move to the Sunbelt developed “the growing diversification of American Judaism.”⁶⁰ By moving to a variety of locations, Jews expanded their presence in America and cultivated a symbiotic relationship in which they influenced and were influenced by the mainstream.

During the movement to suburbia, in the early 1950s, an event of great importance took place and called for much celebration: the Jewish Tercentenary, which celebrated three hundred years of Jewish presence in America. Many different projects and endeavors were created to memorialize and commemorate Jewish contributions to American culture and society. The

⁵⁵ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 275.

⁵⁶ Goren, 295; Sarna, *American Judaism*, 291.

⁵⁷ Goren, 295; Gordon, 156-157.

⁵⁸ Heilman, 24; Moore, “Jewish Migration,” 315.

⁵⁹ Moore, “Jewish Migration” 318; Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the Jewish American Dream in Miami and L.A.* (Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁶⁰ Jonathan D. Sarna, “Chapter 19,” *The American Jewish Experience* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), 293.

effects of the celebration were twofold – partly upon mainstream Americans, but also upon the American Jewish community itself. Organizations distributed brochures, entitled “Man’s Opportunities and Responsibilities Under Freedom,” which drew attention not to Judaism at all, but rather celebrated American democratic ideals and the Jewish community’s support of them. Additionally, a national Tercentenary dinner was held, in which President Eisenhower spoke, and new media technology enabled viewers across America to watch on their televisions at home.⁶¹ The event drew the general public’s attention to the longstanding history of Jews in America and their accomplishments.

For event planners and Jewish community leaders, the emphasis was on American participation in democracy, in order to counteract the popular perception that Jews were communists. At a time of McCarthyism and the Iron Curtain, the Red Scare hastened the political integration of American Jewry and encouraged them to utilize this celebration as an opportunity to clarify a common misperception. Further, with this celebration came a search for American Jewish “exceptionalism” and a variety of organizations, such as the American Jewish Archives and the American Jewish History center were established.⁶² The Tercentenary served to demonstrate the role that American Jewry played in establishing and promoting “the American democratic civilization” that was looked to by the world for guidance. With this celebration came a wave of “intensified group consciousness and pride” and “the search for self-definition and self-understanding” within the Jewish community was supported strongly. This celebration of American Judaism and the increased pride amongst the Jewish community came to characterize the 1950s as a decade.⁶³

Published shortly after this surge of Jewish pride and intensified presence in America,

⁶¹ Goren, 302, 304.

⁶² Goren, 305.

⁶³ Goren, 302, 294; Sarna, “Chapter 19,” 293.

Exodus appeared at a pivotal moment. The timing of the novel's publication capitalized, deliberately or not, on the increased awareness of and interest in Judaism amongst Americans. As Rachel Weissbrod has suggested, the novel had powerful melodramatic qualities, and as such, it may have appealed to non-Jewish Americans for genre-related reasons.⁶⁴ The literary qualities of the novel in combination with the increased curiosity regarding Judaism served as an impetus for Americans to read Exodus. For those inclined towards drama, the original jacket boasts "a thousand dramatic moments" and cites specific locations where "drama unfolds." Lovers of historical fiction would enjoy Uris's use of fictional characters and exaggerated events to recount Israel's founding. The jacket mentions the "British naval blockade," the "Warsaw ghetto," the "ghettoes of Russia and Poland" or the Pale of Settlement, and "the birth of the new state of Israel," all intriguing events for a history lover. For readers of romance-novels, the jacket calls Exodus a novel about "men and women in love" and suggests romantic relationships between Kitty Fremont, "a Christian nurse," and Ari Ben Canaan, a "silent underground fighter" and "leader of men" and Karen, "the refugee girl," and Dov, "a hate-ravaged product of the Warsaw ghetto."⁶⁵ Even an individual with the slightest interest in drama, historical fiction, or romance novels would feel compelled to pick up a copy of Exodus to simultaneously answer their questions about Judaism.

Further, the character of Kitty Fremont, a "great American tradition" and "all-American girl," who becomes entangled in the struggle for a Jewish state may have appealed to non-Jewish readers. Kitty lost her husband in World War II and their daughter died of tuberculosis shortly thereafter; her personal ties to WWII may have made her relatable to many American readers.⁶⁶ Kitty's war torn past, which was relevant to many Americans during this time, and her American

⁶⁴ Weissbrod, 129-132.

⁶⁵ Leon Uris, Book Jacket, Exodus (New York: Doubleday Publisher, 1958).

⁶⁶ Uris, Exodus, 4-5, 8.

charm drew non-Jewish readers to the novel.

In addition, Kitty's personal relationships explore the possibilities of connection between Jews and non-Jews, a compelling topic for this time period when Jewish newcomers to suburbia were beginning to mingle more heavily with their non-Jewish counterparts. After witnessing the "overcrowd[ing] and...deplorable condition[s]" in the camps for herself and working as a nurse "at the request of her American conscience," Kitty forms a bond with Karen, a Jewish girl who was saved by a gentile Danish family during WWII. Upon first sight of Karen, Kitty's maternal instincts kick in, and Kitty becomes increasingly attached to Karen. Aboard the *Exodus* ship, Karen's health begins to deteriorate during a dramatic hunger strike staged by three hundred Jewish refugee children and the illegal organization leading immigration to Palestine, Mossad Aliyah Bet. Kitty boards the ship to care for Karen and is persuaded to voyage to Palestine. For the rest of the novel, Kitty attempts to convince Karen to return to the United States with her, but Karen's love for Palestine is too great.⁶⁷

Another example of connection between Jew and non-Jew is the romance between Ari and Kitty. From the moment they meet, there is a spark between them; they immediately interact in a manner of "verbal fencing," and Kitty's attraction to Ari is "obvious."⁶⁸ Throughout the novel, they look out for one another, share romantic moments and sexual tension, and eventually develop a relationship in which Kitty manages to warm the heart of Ari Ben Canaan, who is described in the novel as a *sabra*, a term used to describe native-born Israelis that literally translates to prickly pear.⁶⁹ The intense and instinctual nature of Ari and Kitty's relationship mimics a popular trope for the time period of assimilation through love. According to Riv-Ellen

⁶⁷ Uris, *Exodus*, 21, 59, 66, 60, 101, 112, 190-193.

⁶⁸ Uris, *Exodus*, 49, 55.

⁶⁹ "sabra," *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2008. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sabra>, April 19, 2011.

Prell, “love served...as a powerful symbol of Americanization because it revealed the reordering of the most fundamental principles of European Jewish life.”⁷⁰ In other words, this generation chose to place love and romance as a higher priority than their immigrant parents. Further, by employing a romance between members of different faiths and cultures, Leon Uris fits into the relevant theme of assimilation through love and the controversy over intermarriage surrounding many of America’s minority groups.⁷¹

In American Jewry’s attempt to acculturate through involvement in their synagogues, a conflict arose about how to best encourage Jewish participation and maintain a proper Jewish identity. The move to suburbia also forced the American Jewish community to address necessary reforms for Judaism’s survival in this new environment. Because of the layout and diversity within neighborhoods, Jewish culture “could no longer be absorbed,” and the decision to affiliate and connect with one’s community became individual choice.⁷² Judaism could no longer be “about apathy” because Jews needed to expend effort and financial resources to remain connected. Many organizations emerged in order to offer community ties and social support during the transition to suburban life; Young Hebrew Men’s Associations (YHMA) became popular, as did other organizations specifically for women, who found themselves geographically isolated with “more time but less to do.”⁷³ To encourage involvement, the synagogue center drew upon social, cultural, and religious needs.⁷⁴

The invention of synagogue centers, which emerged to supply children with Jewish education and young families with programming and social opportunities, is one of the strongest

⁷⁰ Riv-Ellen Prell, Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 79.

⁷¹ Werner Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 71-74, 99-101, 110-112.

⁷² Sarna, American Judaism, 283.

⁷³ Heilman, 11; Shapiro, “A Time,” 172; Sarna, American Judaism, 286.

⁷⁴ Jonathan D. Sarna, “Chapter 20,” The American Jewish Experience (New York: Holmes&Meier, 1986) 312-313).

examples of American Jewry's desire to belong to a community. One example, the Levittown's Israel Community Center, which was created in 1948 in Long Island, New York, served to fill the local Jewish community's needs. This synagogue-center advertised its active congregation that could fulfill "social as well as cultural and religious needs." The Levittown example "could be duplicated with minor modifications almost everywhere in our newer suburban communities," making it a prime example for what was transpiring across America.⁷⁵

The members of Levittown's Israel Community Center rallied behind the foundation of Israel. The first President of the congregation, Louis Goldberg, expressed, "I felt that if people in Israel could stand up as they were doing and saying 'We are Jews and we're going to create something worthwhile, then I, too, wanted to stand up and really belong to the Jewish people.'"⁷⁶ Goldberg drew inspiration from Israelis, and his congregation supported Israel; perhaps Exodus would have appealed to them because of this.

This need to reconnect with the Jewish community, as well as the establishment of synagogue centers in suburbia, is an indication of how much assimilating Jews still valued Judaism and a conscious effort to sustain the community. There is a clear desire to repair damage caused by geographic spread and the inconvenience of active participation in maintaining traditions and community.⁷⁷ During the postwar era, "the number of Jews who are searching for values which can give meaning to their lives as Jews appears greater...than it has been in the past four decades of American Jewish life," signifying a new catalyst for this search.⁷⁸

What about Exodus met the needs of American Jews who felt detached from the Jewish

⁷⁵ Gordon, 98, 104.

⁷⁶ Gordon 102.

⁷⁷ Sarna, American Judaism, 283.

⁷⁸ Gordon, 166.

community? To begin with, the cover clearly states that Exodus is “a novel about Israel,” which drew upon any ties that American Jewry may have had to Israel at the time. Interestingly enough, the cover only mentions Jews specifically one time at the mention of “the plight of Jewish refugee children” that tugs at Kitty Fremont’s heartstrings. Despite this, any member of the Jewish community, or any informed member of society for that matter, would have been able to piece together the details on the cover to recognize that the “sorrows, struggles, and dreams” documented in Exodus would explore the Holocaust, its aftermath, and the fight for a Jewish homeland in Israel.⁷⁹

The novel provides a thorough history of the Jewish people in the 20th Century. Ari Ben Canaan’s father and uncle, the Rabinsky brothers, were from the Pale of Settlement, or “one enormous ghetto,” from which many American Jews are able to trace their ancestry. The brothers encounter the beginning phases of Zionism and escape from pogroms, trekking by foot for over three years to Palestine.⁸⁰ Additionally, the novel pulls heavily upon Holocaust memory through Karen and Dov, survivors with different narratives, each emphasizing the degradation of European Jewry and the resulting psychological traumas shared by many survivors. Peter Novick notes that Holocaust became “the only common denominator of American Jewish identity,” supporting this assertion that the inclusion of Holocaust narratives in Exodus contributed to its appeal and met the needs of the Jewish community.⁸¹ By leading up to the establishment of Israel with the persecution of Jews throughout their history in the Diaspora, Uris creates a common message of victory after tragedy to unite world Jewry and fill the void in American Jewry’s identity.

Additionally, reforms to Judaism itself were necessary in order to retain membership;

⁷⁹ Uris, Book Jacket.

⁸⁰ Uris, Exodus, 211-221.

⁸¹ Novick, 7.

synagogues were in competition with one another. With the establishment of these synagogues, the branches of Judaism offered competing strategies to maintain membership; for example, specifically Orthodox suburbs emerged at this time in order to make observing customs easier. According to Jonathan D. Sarna, despite this effort, the Conservative Movement prevailed because it allowed for adaptations to modernity. The strongest example of this is the use of cars on Shabbat; if a family lived beyond a reasonable walking distance, they could drive to synagogue.⁸² Political scientist Charles S. Liebman noted that the “ambivalent American Jew” is torn between “integration and acceptance to American society” and “Jewish group survival,” which explains the sacrifice of certain values and traditions in order to encourage Jews to remain involved.⁸³

One way in which Exodus was able to specifically address the need for a more modern Judaism was through the narrative about the Rabinsky brothers. Exodus redefined what it meant to be a Jew, replacing perceptions of traditional Jewish garb and devotion to the study of Torah with strong men and women who turned a desert wasteland into thriving greenery. When the brothers are making their homes in Palestine, each “take[s] a Hebrew name” and requires their wives to replace Yiddish with Hebrew because “Yiddish is the language of exile” and “of the ghetto. Hebrew is the language of all the Jews.”⁸⁴ Through these examples of how Israel abandoned traditional Jewish identity and traits that “made [one] a ghetto Jew,” perhaps American Jews were able to draw inspiration during their dispersion from the cities to suburbia.⁸⁵

The postwar era was a time of adaptations and growth for all of American society; during

⁸² Sarna, American Judaism, 290, 284.

⁸³ Goren, 294.

⁸⁴ Uris, Exodus, 252.

⁸⁵ Uris, Exodus, 249.

this time, the most important development for American Jewry was the growth of suburbia. Moving to the suburbs facilitated Jewish integration and acculturation, forced reconciliation with modernity, and permanently changed the landscape of American Jewry. Exodus was published at a time when non-Jews were questioning their perceptions of their Jewish neighbors and Jews were facing an identity crisis. The novel answered gentile questions and provided a strong narrative for Judaism behind which American Jewry could rally.

Exodus: Changing the Image of Jewry

In order to develop the context into which Exodus was published, it is important to consider the impact of World War II and the destruction of European Jewry on both the Jewish community and the non-Jewish majority in America. This chapter will focus particularly on what information about the Holocaust was available to the American public in the years leading up to Exodus's publication in 1958 in order to demonstrate a link between Holocaust consciousness and the novel's astounding popularity.

During World War II, the average American would have read about the atrocities taking place in Europe, but the gravity of the situation would have remained beyond comprehension. Further, the scale of Jewish destruction remained ambiguous, largely because of the way in which the topic was covered and featured by print media. As public discourse regarding the war became more explicit and a clearer idea of Nazi terror developed, Leon Uris's novel served to placate the guilty consciences of Americans who worried that they had stood idly by during the war years. Further, Exodus provided American Jewry with a victorious narrative and strong,

heroic characters to combat the stereotype of Jews as a weak and vulnerable people.⁸⁶

In this paper, atrocities committed by the Nazis against Jews during World War II will be referred to as the Holocaust, but it is important to note that the use of this term is anachronistic. The Jewish community and non-Jewish majority would not have referred to Hitler's Final Solution as the Holocaust for at least another decade. In part, this is due to the lack of differentiation or acknowledgement of European Jewry as Hitler's primary target. Primary sources from the time period prior to the publication of Exodus lacked a specific term for steps taken by the Nazis to annihilate the European Jewry. Scholars only began to employ the word as a proper noun during the early 1950s, and the term began to enter popular vocabulary through Elie Wiesel's consistent use of it in his writings. Not until the late 1960s, when the conversation about World War II shifted to emphasize Jews as a specific group of particular victimization did the term truly become commonplace.⁸⁷

The amount of scholarship that exists on the topic of supposed American ignorance during the war is remarkable. Scholars have shown what information was available to which religious group or subculture at various points during the war. They have examined newspapers, ranging from the far-reaching *The New York Times* to more local newspapers in specific states and regions, and magazines in popular circulation, such as *Life Magazine* and *Newsweek*. This range of resources available to assess what the American public knew about attempts to eradicate European Jewry is important to consider because the extensive research conducted is indicative of an attempt to determine how complicit Americans were in the Holocaust; the break down of

⁸⁶ Laurel Leff. "When the Facts Didn't Speak for Themselves: The Holocaust in the *New York Times*, 1939-1945." *Why Didn't the Press Shout: American & International Journalism during the Holocaust* (Yeshiva University Press: 2003); Max Frankel. "Turning Away from the Holocaust: *The New York Times*." *Why Didn't the Press Shout*; Kirsten Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957-1965* (Brandeis University Press: 2006) 4.

⁸⁷ Novick, 20; Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "The Americanization of the Holocaust," *American Jewish Identity Politics*, ed: Deborah Dash Moore (University of Michigan: 2008), 49-51; Fermaglich, 2.

the American public into smaller segments of the population, by region, language, or religious affiliation, demonstrates efforts by each to alleviate guilt felt by these communities.

One of the foremost scholars in this area is Laurel Leff, whose book offers a comprehensive examination of articles from *The New York Times* between 1939 and 1945, meticulously analyzing the articles' placements, the specificity of victim groups and the emphasis on (or lack of) Jewish victimhood. Leff uncovers the personal biases behind the decision of *The Times*' ownership to avoid publishing articles that emphasized Jews as the primary victims of the Nazis. Further, she concludes that because *The New York Times* was the leading newspaper at this time, other newspapers mimicked *The Times*' presentation of the Holocaust to the American mainstream.⁸⁸

Delving further into the topic, Leff composed a paper, which examines the effects of *The Times*' reporting and editing upon the American public. In her chapter, she argues that "the placement of news about the Holocaust...made it difficult for most Americans to find the facts and to understand their importance." Leff asserts that the way in which the Holocaust was reported failed to draw attention or place emphasis on the gravity and importance of the events taking place in Europe.⁸⁹ After clearly demonstrating that the information was indeed available to the readership of *The Times* and that the facts were present, she concludes that the infrequent inclusion of articles on the subject, the fact that the majority of articles "obscured the fact that the victims were Jews," and the placement of the articles implied to the American public that this issue was low priority or insignificant.⁹⁰

Other scholars agree with Leff's conclusion that the news did reach the American

⁸⁸ Leff, "When the Facts" 51; Max Frankel. "Turning Away" 79; Laurel Leff, Buried by The Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper (Cambridge UP: 2005).

⁸⁹ Leff, "When the Facts," 51, 54-57.

⁹⁰ Leff, "When the Facts," 58-70, 68.

mainstream. Historian Ron Hollander consulted a wider variety of newspapers from across the country and concluded that Americans were privy to information about the atrocities in Europe; however, he argues that Americans failed to respond for reasons other than the lack of emphasis placed on related news by the media. Hollander suggests that a combination of the incomprehensible nature of the crimes and the anti-semitic sentiments still prevalent in the United States contributed to America's failure to act. Further adding to the conversation, journalist Max Frankel suggests that the "guiding principle" for the way in which *The Times* reported the Holocaust was not to place emphasis on European Jewry or to differentiate their suffering from the predicament of other Europeans.⁹¹

If the existing research on this subject suggests varied levels of American awareness, comprehension, and ignorance about the Holocaust, it does not prove a link between the American conscience and the soaring popularity of Exodus. When the American public recognized the enormity of the Holocaust and the extent to which European Jewry was singled out for destruction, questions arose about what could have been done to prevent the genocide or to intervene in Hitler's Final Solution. Yet the connection is clear: the Holocaust and America's postwar grappling with it provided an important context for Exodus's publication. As I will show, in the second half of the 1950s, a shift in the conversation about the Holocaust occurred, placing the emphasis on Jewish victims and drawing attention to the lack of action on the part of the United States. Exodus provided a victorious narrative for the Jewish people and may have helped alleviate the guilty American conscience. Secondly, the publication of Exodus challenged the commonly accepted stereotype of Jews as weak, providing heroes for American Jewry.

⁹¹ Ron Hollander, "We Knew: America's Newspapers Report the Holocaust," Why Didn't the Press Shout? American Journalism & International Journalism During the Holocaust (Yeshiva UP: 2003), 80.

With regard to the shift in conversation, historian Kirsten Lise Fermaglich researched the topic of Holocaust awareness in the United States in her book, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957-1965*. Her work largely covers the time period after Exodus's publication, but she notes that America's awareness of Nazi destruction became "center stage" beginning in 1957, the year directly before Exodus was released. Much of her research suggests that Exodus may have played a role in increasing Holocaust awareness, and it is clear that most of this shift occurred in a time frame too late to have impacted Exodus's popularity. Despite this, she sets the starting point at 1957 and points towards the prosecutions of former Nazi criminals as an attention-grabber for mainstream America.⁹²

Following the popularity of the Nuremberg Trials, the American mainstream soaked up human-interest stories and triumphant reunions of survivors with their families. The issue of displaced persons came to the American foreground as debates ensued regarding quotas and where to relocate the survivors.⁹³ Exodus combines, chronicles, and dramatizes the process of illegal immigration to Israel, which would have been of interest to Americans at the time. In Chapter 3, we will return to the impact of immigration and the foundation of Israel upon the American mainstream and its link to Exodus's popularity. Also at the time of Exodus's publication, there was a surge of "Nazi camp imagery in American literature, film, and theater," which brought the Holocaust into the mainstream.⁹⁴ Following liberation of the concentration camps, newsreels and pictures became available and demonstrated the extent of destruction and

⁹² Fermaglich, 18.

⁹³ Beth B. Cohen, Case Closed: Holocaust Survivors in Postwar America (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2007) 19, 28.

⁹⁴ Fermaglich, 4.

the horrific conditions under which people were forced to survive.⁹⁵

Additionally, the postwar surge in intellectual interest in the psychology of perpetrators, bystanders, and survivors may have caused Exodus to appeal to American intellectuals; as mentioned in Chapter 1, two of Exodus's main characters, Dov and Karen, are Holocaust survivors. Both grew up during the Holocaust and their experiences shaped their psyches, but the two have vastly different stories.⁹⁶

Dov Landau was from Poland, and his father instilled Zionist values in him rather than deep religiosity. When Polish Jewry was confined to ghettos, Dov's family was relocated to the Warsaw ghetto, and at eleven years of age, Dov watched as his neighbors, friends, and families starved to death, endured inhumane living conditions, and disappeared during transports to concentration camps.⁹⁷ Dov joined the underground resistance movement as a "courier through the sewers" and partakes in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.⁹⁸ Eventually he is sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he survives because of his expert counterfeiting skills and position as a *Sonderkommando* in charge of removing bodies from gas chambers. Dov suffers serious trauma as a result of his childhood—the film even suggests he was "used like a woman" by the Nazis and raped; he is prone to rage, rarely speaks or smiles, and is introverted.⁹⁹ Dov's Holocaust experience renders him unable to connect with other people and see the good in humanity.

Karen is another example of a Holocaust narrative woven into Exodus. She is sent to Denmark to live with the Hansen family as a Christian Dane. For a time the Hansens are able to correspond with her parents, but eventually her family disappears, and Karen can hardly

⁹⁵ Leff, 54.

⁹⁶ Cohen, 133.

⁹⁷ Uris, Exodus, 120, 125-127.

⁹⁸ Uris, Exodus, 126, 133-139.

⁹⁹ Boze Hadleigh, The Lavender Screen: The Gay and Lesbian Films, Their Stars, Makers, Characters, and Critics (New York: Citadel Press Books, 1993), 123; Uris, Exodus, 145-148 163-165.

remember life before she moved to Denmark. Following the war, Karen searches desperately for her father, and against all odds is able to locate him in Palestine. When she visits him, he is a shell of a man, unable to recognize or even interact with her. Memories of her childhood flood back to her, and she screams for him to recognize her. The experience leaves her feeling abandoned, and she clings more tightly to Kitty and to Dov. Karen's experience during the Holocaust causes her to crave affection and search for a family, which she finds on the *kibbutz* in Palestine.¹⁰⁰

Their stories are just two examples of the traumatic events and the disruptive natures of many children's Holocaust experiences, which captured the interest of many leading intellectuals in the years after the war. Kitty comes across a file containing names and experiences of child survivors, as well as the conditions they contend with as a result of trauma during the Holocaust. The majority have "no known family," and suffer from "bedwetting," "overt hostility," and "nightmares." In this file, Kitty finds a letter that attributes the "quick recoveries and dynamic results" amongst these child survivors to "the wonder drug... 'Eretz Israel.'"¹⁰¹ This attribution reinforces the link between Holocaust memory and the role of Israel; this theme is developed throughout Exodus and would encourage readership amongst individuals with an interest in this particular dynamic. As the conversation shifted to emphasize the destruction of Jewry, interest in this area increased.

In combination with the ways in which Exodus offered subplots that would capture the attention of mainstream America, it also offered a victorious narrative for the survivors. Following the war, survivors were seen as "ghost people" or hollow human beings, remnants of

¹⁰⁰ Uris, Exodus, 61-71, 397-399.

¹⁰¹ Uris, Exodus, 467-468.

life from before the war.¹⁰² Typical anti-semitic stereotypes still prevailed at this time, suggesting Jews were weak and frail bookworms, but Americans wanted to avoid association with the Nazi way of thinking and “the loss of individual rationality at the hands of the organization.”¹⁰³ Uris feels this predominating phobia of Jews in the post-war era is worth including in Exodus; while on vacation in Cyprus, Kitty’s services as a nurse are requested at a refugee camp. She is hesitant to “get mixed up” in that line of work because the children are Jewish.¹⁰⁴ Her reservations towards Jews were common amongst Americans following WWII, but the novel provides Kitty, and its readers, with a new image of Jewry.

Leon Uris’s novel humanized Holocaust victims and portrayed them as a community with great strength and a fierce determination to rebuild their lives. Featuring a strong, cunning main character, Ari ben Canaan, Uris demonstrated that Jews were capable of defending themselves and their homes. The novel tells of strong Jewish people, who transformed their traumatic experiences and sorrows into motivation to rebuild their lives and establish a safe haven for their future generations. The changing way in which the Holocaust was discussed piqued interest of the American mainstream, which began to comprehend the magnitude of the destruction and the degree to which the Jewish community was singled out for death around the time of the novel’s publication. In combination with this, Exodus fulfilled the desire of American Jewry, and liberal Americans, to challenge anti-semitic stereotypes as it offered characters that were passionate and strong. These two points set the stage for an American mainstream that wanted to read a heroic tale of Israel’s establishment.

¹⁰² Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting, ed. J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2003), 119.

¹⁰³ Fermaglich, 8.

¹⁰⁴ Uris, Exodus, 19.

Conclusion

Today, on Amazon.com, Exodus has received four and half out of five stars from customer feedback and rave reviews. Similarly, the film has a strong four-star rating. The book jacket on the latest edition of the novel calls the story “the acclaimed bestseller of modern times” and a “Modern Classic.”¹⁰⁵ The novel remains highly regarded by many, as well as a source of controversy over its presentation of Palestine’s Arab inhabitants. As previously stated, the majority of the conversation regarding Exodus has been focused on either the accuracy of the events within its pages or the impact the novel had in shaping the reader’s conscience and perception of the founding of Israel.

By developing this thorough context for the publication of Exodus, by Leon Uris, it is clear that the novel’s success can be attributed to a larger theme in American society during the late 1950s: a shift in attitudes about Judaism and the state of Israel. Though much of the attention has been focused on the novel’s role in shaping those very attitudes, the truth is that the novel was published during a subtle movement within American society to change the perception of Jews. Exodus merely benefited from and furthered a change that was already underway and rose to enormous popularity and acclaim.

By examining the media’s portrayal of the founding of Israel in 1948 and the Suez Crisis of 1956, it is clear that public opinion began to accept Israel as an American moral interest and a democratic hub in the midst of the Middle East. The story told in Exodus reinforced the image of a new type of Jew, the strong Israeli that would fight back and defend a country of his own. Further, following WWII, the growing contact between Jews and non-Jews as a result of Jewish migration to suburbia created an environment of increased Jewish visibility and developed the

¹⁰⁵ Uris, Exodus.

idea that Jews were not ethnically different from the American majority. Further, the move to suburbia reshaped the face of Jewry itself, calling the sustainability of an American Jewish community into question and pushing for reforms that integrated Jews into mainstream America. Finally, the impact of the Holocaust and the development of conversation regarding the atrocities in Europe resonated within American society, and Exodus provided a triumphant final chapter to one of the most difficult events humanity with which humanity has had to come to terms. The novel challenged the image of Jews who died in Europe without fighting back and offered strong Jews who overcame their personal tragedies for the good of the Jewish nation.

These three important factors were the true precursors to the change in America's attitudes about Jews and Israel. The acceptance Jews into mainstream America, and therefore the success of Exodus, stems from the media portrayal of Jews and Israel as strong and militarily equipped, the move to suburbia which made Judaism accessible to the American majority, and the memory and guilt surrounding the Holocaust, which provided the moral imperative for American support of Israel's founding.

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