

## [Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Our Favorite Passover Conversation

I'm Barry Weiss, and this is Honestly.

We're in the midst of my favorite Jewish holiday of the year.

It's the holiday that started last week when we sat down as a family at a long table and performed a very strange set of rituals in a highly particular order.

We dipped little pieces of parsley in salt water.

We used our pinky finger to remove wine from our glasses.

We ate horseradish and apples cut up with nuts, and the kids searched the house for a hidden matzah.

If you've never had one picture, a very big saltine, only drier.

Now those aren't the reasons I like Passover, at least they're not the only reasons.

The reason it's my favorite holiday is because at the heart of all of these rituals is the retelling of the Exodus story.

Now whether or not you believe that this story happened literally as the Hebrew Bible tells it, the 3,000-year-old story of the Israelites leaving enslavement from Egypt has over so many generations become the ultimate story of human persistence, of faith, of peoplehood, of unlikely survival, and of course, and above all, of freedom.

And not just freedom for Jews, but for people seeking freedom from subjugation all over the world.

And that includes here in America.

Indeed I would argue that the story of the Exodus is central to America's conception of itself.

From the founding fathers of the very start of our nation, to abolitionists like Harriet Tubman, who was known as Moses, and Frederick Douglass, to presidents like Lincoln and Washington,

to civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., the themes and symbols and ethics of the Exodus story are an integral part of how American leaders both inspired others and also found inspiration for themselves.

To tell that story to us last Passover on Honestly, we had on Rabbi Mayer Soloveitchek, and I love that conversation so much that I want to replay it for you today.

Sali, as he's widely known, teaches at Yeshiva University and is the rabbi at the oldest congregation in the United States.

And maybe you're listening to this, and you're Jewish, and you're like, my God, I'm sick of Passover.

I've heard this story a million times, or maybe you're Sam Harris, atheist type.

We love you here.

And you're like, nope, no God stories for me.

Thank you very much.

But here's the thing, Jew or Gentile, believer or not, if you're listening to this podcast, I suspect that you worry like me about how divided we've all become, how we're in the midst of an unraveling of a shared sense of reality, of a shared sense of purpose, and of a shared story that we can all draw meaning and inspiration from.

Sali is here to make the case that the Exodus is not just one of those stories.

It's the key story.

It's the key story that lies at the heart of who we are as Americans, and it's very

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much worth preserving.

Go down, go down, Moses, Moses, way down in each of Lantelos, Pharaoh, to let my people go.

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Rabbi Salovecic, welcome to Honestly.

Thank you so much, Barry.

It's wonderful to be speaking to you.

Okay, you're a rabbi, which means there's no such thing as a simple question and no such thing as a simple answer, but I really want us to try.

So if you could, in brief, what is the Jewish holiday of Passover?

Asking a rabbi a question like that to essentially summarize the first half of an entire biblical book is indeed a dangerous question.

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So with that in mind and with that forewarning, I'm going to attempt to summarize as best as I can what is a seemingly simple story, but is actually quite a complex one that draws together questions of politics, morality, theology, and identity.

The Book of Exodus opens with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, known as the children of Israel, living in Egypt and experiencing enormous population growth.

This alarms the ruling pharaoh who attempts to subjugate Israel first through enslavement and then through murder, through the killing of every newborn Israelite male, first by ordering midwives to kill the children when born, and then when the midwives refuse by ordering his servants to throw every newborn boy into the Nile.

A child is born.

That child is hidden by his Israelite parents for several months and then in desperation placed in a basket in the bulrushes.

The child is saved by one of all people pharaoh's daughter who adopts him and names him Moses. The name is significant.

We can discuss that later.

Most of the cinematic depictions of this story assume that Moses had no idea of his Hebrew parentage, but I don't actually think that's the biblical assumption.

Actually the entire drama of the story is that this man who could have lived in the palace in total luxury, chose instead to identify with his enslaved brethren, went out to his brothers, that's the words of the Bible, and it was one day that he went out to his brothers. He saw their suffering and he struck back and he killed an Egyptian task master and then was forced to flee.

Moses lived as an Egyptian for many decades and then at the age of 80, he now meets God on Sinai in the desert.

God appears to him out of a burning bush, a bush that burns but is not consumed.

God orders him to serve essentially as the agent of deliverance.

Originally Moses refuses saying in humility, who am I to do this or perhaps who am I, meaning am I truly a member of this people?

How can I serve as their deliverer if I've never suffered with them, if I was never enslaved with them?

In the end, he accepts the task and comes before the new reigning pharaoh.

Moses announces that God has demanded that his people be allowed to leave Egypt to serve him in the wilderness and when pharaoh refuses, God then as predicted and pronounced by Moses brings a series of plagues upon Egypt.

These plagues are not, as is often assumed, merely brought about in order to punish the Egyptians but also perhaps first and foremost in order to disprove the entire theology of Egypt on which pharaoh's semi-divine status as a ruler and enslaver is predicated.

These different plagues each in their own way turn the gods of Egypt against the Egyptians themselves, against the enslavers, beginning with the plague of blood in which the Nile God is struck by the God of Israel and then with the penultimate plague, we have darkness, three days of darkness, so that the head of the Egyptian divine Pantheon Ra, the Sun God, is clearly defeated by the God of Israel.

This is what brings us to the name Passover, though in my view the English word, which is the translation of the Hebrew, Pesach, is actually a mistake.

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The Israelites are asked to first take a lamb to themselves and then bring that lamb as an offering, put the blood on their door, which essentially turns their homes into Israelite altars.

God sends a plague to Egypt striking every home in Egypt so that there is, in the words of the Bible, no home in Egypt in which there is not one dead, meaning first born in every home is struck, which again overturns Pharaoh's claim to be the embodiment of the preserver of life in Egypt.

Meanwhile, God himself, in the description of the Bible, in Hebrew is Poseach, and what that I think actually means is he hovers over every Israelite home and shields them from the plague, protects them from the plague, so in the end it is the God of Israel that is the protector and guarantor of life.

And that's what brings us to the term Passover.

The assumption is that God skips over the Israelite homes, though I think more correctly Passover should be rendered hover over, if you will, or perhaps hangover, which is perhaps an apt term for a celebration in which a lot of wine is drunk, at least as the religion is observed today.

So, after that final plague, what happens next, because here's really the drama of the story, and for those of us who have watched Cecil B. DeMills, the Ten Commandments, many a time, or Prince of Egypt, this is the dramatic moment.

Yeah.

So, the dramatic moment that's so worthy of cinematic recreation is Pharaoh then terrified, orders the Israelites to leave.

They go, Pharaoh thinks better of it, chases after the Israelites, and seven days later, they seem to be stuck at the sea, God splits the sea, Israel crosses through.

As Pharaoh and his forces come through, or at least Pharaoh's forces, the sea joins together its waters once more, and Pharaoh's forces are drowned.

That's the biblical drama.

What's important about it is not merely what occurred, but how the Bible obligates Israel to remember the origin story of their people.

What Moses says on the eve of the Exodus is that every year, your children will ask you, why are you bringing this paschal sacrifice?

Your obligation will be to tell your children all that occurred to you, to recreate the slavery to freedom story for the next generation, and then they will be obligated to do that for the next generation, so that the memory of this moment will be forever enshrined in the Israelite minds and hearts, and that's really what Passover is ultimately all about.

So I think if you ask most Jews, or ask most Americans, they'll say, Passover, yeah, Jews freed from slavery in Egypt, but of course the Jews weren't yet the Jews, they were the Israelites.

Now Passover is, I think, the most celebrated Jewish holiday of them all.

How did it come to be celebrated and celebrated so universally, at least among the Jewish people?

Yeah, so it's clear from the Bible that it was always central to Israelite identity.

We know from the book of Numbers that they marked the Passover the very next year in the desert when they were still assuming the Israelites that they were about to enter the

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land of Israel.

They marked first the Passover, and it was already so central to who they were.

It was already so important to a civic national and religious ritual.

That we're told in the book of Numbers that those who were in a state of ritual defilement and couldn't participate complained painfully and poignantly because joining their brothers and sisters in this celebration was so important to them.

And then throughout the Hebrew Bible during the First Temple period, it always is at the heart of Jewish observance.

It's during the Second Temple period that more elements are added by the rabbis.

At this point, what the rabbis do is they take the style of eating at the time, which was the Greco-Roman symposium in which people would gather and recline on couches and drink cups of wine while engaging in philosophical discussion.

And what the rabbis did is they took that, overlaid it on the Seder, but in a fascinating and subversive way, Judaized it so that they added elements that highlighted how different their perspective was from that of Greece and or Rome.

So you would have the original details of the Passover meal during the Temple that was the Paschal Lamb along with what is still ingested today, the unleavened bread and the bitter herbs, but built around the telling of the story in an ordered fashion over four cups of wine.

The word Seder, which is the traditional term for the celebration today, means order because it precedes in a complex and orderly manner.

And if you study it and you study the drinking, eating, and philosophizing habits of the classical era, you see how the rabbis in taking the original Passover meal and building it around a series of rituals of what becomes the Seder are actually commenting on what is central to the Jewish people, what sets the Jews apart from other nations, and ultimately are attempting to argue that it is this distinction that is the guarantor of Jewish eternity.

The way I was always raised to think about Passover was this is the birth of freedom in the world.

But as you've explained, it was also the death of something.

It was also the death of a particular theology and a political outlook that was antithetical to freedom.

I'd love if you can explain to me what died when freedom was born.

So if you went into a museum and you entered the Egyptology wing and you walked over to a statue of a pharaoh, let's say the statue of Ramesses II, which many scholars assume is the pharaoh of the Exodus, you'll see that he has many titles, but two of them would be Son of Ra, which is what Ramesses actually means, and then also Beloved of Mat.

Mat is the goddess of order.

Let me explain what that means is that the pharaoh is the intermediary of the gods and the guarantor, he rules like a god, and he is the guarantor of order in Egypt.

Order means, of course, prosperity, which is embodied first and foremost by the constant cycle of the Nile, which irrigates Egypt and is the source of its wealth and abundance and prosperity.

But it also means that slaves are meant to be slaves, and kings are meant to be kings, and that if the king wishes to enslave another human being or kill another human being, of

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course he can do that.

And so when the Bible begins the story of the Exodus, it actually begins with certain moral concepts before the political notion of freedom actually begins because these moral concepts are the guarantor and the foundation of the biblical concept of freedom.

So it begins, Barry, not with Moses, but with two humble midwives who are ordered by pharaoh to murder the newborn Israelite children.

And we are told, but the midwives feared God, and they did not do as they were ordered by pharaoh king of Egypt, and they gave life to the children.

And when you are reading this, you realize the radical revolution that is taking place here, which is that there is a universal God who can make moral claims that must be obeyed even in the face of an order of a king who is himself worshiped by millions as a God.

That's the revolution that first begins before the actual political freedom occurs.

For the very reasons you just explained so beautifully, the story of the Exodus is really not just a Jewish story.

And I think a lot of people may be surprised to know how deeply the echoes of the Exodus story not only run through American history, but are in fact integral to the American ideal.

And integral to the American ideal, even before Jews themselves were accepted, maybe you could argue, into the American ideal.

And that starts with the very founding of the country.

One example that I've always loved is the story of the great seal of the United States, which was chosen in 1782.

Can you describe to me what is depicted on the seal, what the alternatives were, and how the story and the debate really about what should go on the seal exemplifies the ways that the founders related so deeply to the story that you just told us about the biblical Exodus?

Yeah.

So this is one of my favorite stories in American history.

And it actually begins, Barry, on July 4th, 1776, because it was right after approving the declaration that a Congress moved and voted on a motion that Dr. Franklin, Mr. Adams, and Mr. Jefferson, be a committee to design a seal for the United States, meaning their job was to seek an image that would represent this nascent nation.

And we know about the entire discussion of the committee because of a wonderful letter from John Adams to his wife Abigail, who reports that among the several suggestions put forward, two of the founders suggested seals that would incorporate biblical images from the Exodus.

Benjamin Franklin suggested an image of Moses and Pharaoh at the splitting of the sea. And we have also Franklin's handwriting in his own pen describing how he thinks the seal should be depicted.

He writes something like, rays of light extends from a pillar of fire to Moses to signify that he acts by the express design of the deity.

And then Franklin also proposed that with this image of the splitting of the sea, and this, of course, brings us back to the story of the midwives, that with this image of the splitting of the sea should be the motto, rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.

Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.

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So that was Franklin's suggestion.

Jefferson had a very different suggestion, which is actually from the very same passage in Exodus, right before the splitting of the sea, as they're heading toward the sea, as they are fleeing the Egyptians and as they are following God.

And that suggestion was the children of Israel in the wilderness, following a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

That was Jefferson's suggestion.

In the end, of course, Barry, unfortunately, to my great pain, neither of these was ultimately adopted by the Continental Congress.

This was fighting a war against the British and they had bigger issues to face than what exactly the sea of the United States should be.

And as I usually put it when I'm talking about it, eventually, many years later, they came around to that scary eye on top of the pyramid, which is now the sea of the United States.

That is right, which is very creepy and strange.

Who suggested that image?

Well, obviously, if you've seen one of the cinematic achievements of our time, Barry, you would know that that seal is linked to a treasure map on the back of the Declaration of Independence.

And that, of course, is revealed in one of the best movies ever, National Treasure.

But it incorporates Masonic symbols as well as, I believe, the eye of Providence.

And that's what ultimately was adopted by the Continental Congress.

But I think we both agree that either of these two images would have been way cooler.

But nevertheless, it's an important story because it highlights how these founders, who, by the way, were probably to the least devout of the founders, Franklin and Jefferson, nevertheless understood the power behind this story and the universal implications of the Exodus tale.

Another example of how resonant this story was among the founders and also just how biblically literate they were involves George Washington.

It's 1789.

He had just been elected.

And ahead of his inauguration, all the minority groups in America write Washington a letter, the Catholics write a letter, the Baptists write a letter, the Quakers write a letter.

And there's only about one at the time.

How many Jews in America?

A thousand?

Yeah, around a thousand, probably around a thousand Jews, yes.

Right.

But of course, these are Jews.

So as the old joke goes, two Jews, three opinions.

And of course, among these thousand Jews, they literally can't agree on a letter.

So they end up sending Washington three letters.

And each letter is different.

But one of them, from the Jewish community of Savannah, praises Washington for his support of religious tolerance.

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And Washington writes a response that is quite incredible and to this day hangs on the wall of a synagogue in Savannah.

Can you tell us a little bit about what that letter from Washington said?

Sure.

So it's very striking because if you just put into Google Washington letter to the Jews, the letter that always pops up is the second letter that Washington wrote, which was to the Jews of Newport, who by the way, Barry, refused originally to lead the letter writing to Washington because Rhode Island hadn't originally ratified the Constitution.

So they said, we can't, Rick, we can't.

We're not allowed to congratulate Washington on being president because our state hasn't congratulated Washington on being president.

So this was an effort that was being led by the Jews of Philadelphia and New York.

They write to the Jews of Newport.

They write to the Jews of Savannah.

The Jews of Newport say in classical Jewish fashion, we can't do it, but you guys are late and you should have done it already.

And then the Jews of Savannah say, and you can imagine the reaction of the Jews in New York and Philadelphia says, oh, we sent the letter already without you guys.

So they sent the letter and the letter, each one of these letters is essentially an implicit plea for continuing Jewish equality in America.

And Washington in his letter to Newport famously talks about civil rights, equality, taking the phrase of the letter writer and making it famous in his own response, a government that gives to bigotry, no sanction, persecution, no assistance.

And that's what becomes famous.

And the Newport letter is wonderful.

But the letter to Savannah is, I think, even more exquisite because Washington on his own in response talks about the Bible.

And this is what he says.

Here's how he concludes, may the same wonder working deity who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors planted them in the Promised Land, whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation, still continue to water them with the dues of heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is, and then he uses the actual name of God, the traditional Jews from the Hebrew, the traditional Jews don't pronounce.

So Washington is actually saying on his own to the Jews of Savannah, we welcome you and we are inspired by you because we see our story as a parallel to your story.

And we see that the God who wrote miracles for you in Egypt, he was the one who wrote miracles for us in the revolution.

And no one ever talks about this letter.

Why is that?

Because the Newport letter is such a clear statement of civil rights and political equality that that became in the story of Washington and the Jews, and America and the Jews, the embodiment of what Jews were hoping, the guarantee that Jews were hoping to receive



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from America.

Washington quotes, again, a bigotry, no sanction, persecution, no assistance that he gets from the letter writer.

And then he also writes in the letter to the Jews of Newport, it is no longer toleration that is spoken of.

In other words, he says, we're not tolerating your presence here.

You're the same as us.

So that became so important to the Jewish mentality that the Savannah letter was forgotten.

But what I try to emphasize is that the two have to be taken together in tandem.

Because if we want to understand why the Jews received such a warm welcome in America in a way that was so profoundly different from their experience in so many other countries and indeed so many other countries in the West, it's because of how many founders were inspired by a Hebraic heritage and saw their story not as replacing the Jewish story, but as paroling it and being inspired by it.

One thing I'm struck by is the founders imagine themselves as new Israelites in a way.

I think it was Lincoln that called Americans the almost chosen people.

And yet, of course, these new Israelites, at least some of them had slaves.

And that evil and the contradiction between their stated ideals and their behavior comes to a head during the Civil War.

And here's where the story of the Exodus gets utilized again, perhaps in ways that would have surprised the founders, or maybe not, I'm curious what you think.

And that's by the abolitionists who saw themselves as being trapped in an American Egypt.

Talk to me about the way that the abolitionists in this country during the Civil War drew on the Exodus story for their cause.

Yeah.

So, of course, the Bible became central to the abolitionist cause in a variety of different ways.

The Liberty Bell became the Liberty Bell, actually, not first and foremost because of its association with the revolution.

The notion that it was wrong to proclaim the revolution is actually a myth that was built on a story that was written later.

The Liberty Bell is known as the Liberty Bell because it has a verse from Leviticus, proclaim liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof, which is describing a ritual that involves the freeing of slaves in the Holy Land.

And then the Liberty Bell is transported across America as an abolitionist symbol.

And so you'll see the Hebraic concept of liberty cited by slaves, by abolitionists, by politicians who are not known as full-fledged abolitionists leading up to the Civil War but are still fervently anti-slavery like Abraham Lincoln and others.

And there are so many examples.

I'll just give you a couple off the bat.

Abraham Lincoln in his eulogy for Henry Clay, I think this is eight years before the Civil War, long before he's a very, very prominent political figure, he said the following.

He said, Pharaoh's country was cursed with plagues, and his hosts were drowned in the Red Sea for striving to retain a captive people who had already served them more than 400

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years, may like disasters never befall us.

Which is an eerie thing for Lincoln to say because ultimately his theology of the Civil War is that it's God's punishment for the sin of slavery.

Frederick Douglass, describing the slave spiritual Ocanon, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan, spoke about how that was actually.

They would sing it in front of those that were enslaving them.

But the slaves, he said, understood what it really meant.

The way Douglass put it is, he said it was something more than a hope of reaching Haven.

We meant to reach the north, and the north was Ocanon, meaning the north was their promised land, the dream of leaving enslavement and finding freedom.

So you see it all over the place.

And I would add, Barry, that what you also see, and this brings us back to the philosophy of freedom that is stressed in the book of Exodus before the actual political liberation occurs, that also is central to the abolitionist cause because what the story of the midwives and the story of Moses standing up for his enslaved brethren meant to many was that an unjust law should not be obeyed and can be opposed.

So I'll actually just cite to you briefly, this is something I, myself, only just came upon and it's someone I'm ashamed to say that I didn't know much about, I'm only reading about her now.

I don't know if you've heard of somebody named Angelina Grimke, a fascinating person.

This was a woman who was born in the south from Charleston and was one of the few abolitionists that came from the south.

And she was a very famous female abolitionist and also a fighter for women's suffrage.

And she wrote a pamphlet that was called An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South.

So you have someone who grew up in the south asking Christian women to oppose slavery.

And then, so in the pamphlet, I want to quote this to you, she wrote the following.

And she's telling women in the south to oppose the law that prohibits the teaching of slaves to read.

And she writes as follows, but some of you will say, we can neither free our slaves nor teach them to read for the laws of our state forbid it.

Be not surprised when I say such wicked laws ought to be no barrier in the way of your duty.

And I appeal to the Bible to prove this position.

What was the conduct of Shifra and Pua, those of the midwives?

What was the conduct of Shifra and Pua when the king of Egypt issued his cruel mandate with regard to the Hebrew children?

They feared God and did not, as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men, children alive.

And then she writes, after quoting the story, did these women do right in disobeying that monarch?

Therefore, says the sacred text, God dealt well with them, meaning God rewarded the midwives.

And so she is citing the story, not merely to argue in slavery, but in order to stiffen the spine of opponents of slavery in refusing to obey an unjust law.

So you don't just have the tale of slavery to freedom.

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You also have the story of the midwives as a founding tale in the moral history of liberty and disobedience.

Rabbi Salavishik, I've never heard of Angelina Grimke.

I've never heard of that pamphlet.

I cannot wait to read more about it.

To me, and I think to many listeners, the person who we think of as embodying the spirit of the exodus in America is Harriet Tubman, who's remembered as the Moses of her people. There's called her Grandma Moses, the hymn of Go Down Moses, which lots of people sing at their saders.

Go Down Moses, Way Down to Egypt Plan, Tell Old Pharaoh to Let My People Go, singing about the South, singing about America.

Do you have any pamphlets to share with us about Harriet Tubman or any bits of Arcana or American history that we should know about her?

Well, what's striking, just because you mentioned, she was called Moses, she was called the Moses of her people.

What's striking is if you actually look at that song that you were citing, the actual other verses, some of them are about freedom, but some of them, of course, are about punishment. So what comes right after, you just quote, when Israel was in Egypt's lands, let my people go.

So what comes after that?

Thus spoke the Lord, bold Moses says, let my people go.

If not, I'll strike your firstborn dead, let my people go.

People leave that part out.

Sure.

I mean, people are squeamish about the plagues, but that becomes central to the entire American narrative because that warning is implicit in this song of slaves.

And then that warning becomes central post facto to the entire theology of America that's put forward by Lincoln.

Lincoln essentially says, we have a covenant.

As you mentioned, he called American almost-chosen people.

The covenant of America according to Lincoln was the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that all men are created equal.

And because America from the very beginning violated that covenant, therefore they were punished.

And what's astonishing about it, and Lincoln says this fully in the second inaugural, is that Lincoln is not saying it to the South because, of course, hundreds of thousands of Northerners died in the Civil War.

He's saying this is something that contradicted the American ideal at the very beginning.

And so therefore, all must pay, all are guilty, which is why, of course, that leads to the conclusion, which is with malice toward none, with charity to all.

So what's originally issued is a warning of slaves who apply the story of Pharaoh to their own lives, call Harriet Tubman Moses, but also implicitly warn what might happen to those who ignore that warning of the Moses story.

More with Rabbi Soloveitchek after the break.

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Now back to the show.

So Rabbi Salavichek, I know we're skipping a ton in American history, but I want to take us to 1956.

Now why 1956?

Because the epic drama of the Ten Commandments comes out in 1956.

At the time it was an absolutely insane hit, and it remains one of the most popular films ever made.

I think it's aired on Primetime during Passover every year for 50 years.

So why did this 3 and a half hour epic religious drama become as memorable and as celebrated as movies like Star Wars and Gone with the Wind?

So this is one of my favorite films.

I've seen it many times.

In the period before Passover, I'm always annoying my kids by walking around singing

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songs from the movie, especially the song that the people bearing the bones of Joseph through the splitting of the sea are singing as they're going.

How does it go?

Bones of Joseph, bones of Joseph, many colors was his coat, something like that.

So I walk around doing that all the time, and of course, and of course saying things like, behold his mighty hand, and man shall be ruled by law, not by the will of other men.

Anyhow, so I could do this all day.

Yeah.

So you like the movie?

Yeah, I could take it or leave it.

You could put me down as undecided.

So we have to think about the time that this was brought into being.

It was created during the Cold War, and it was created as an anti-communist movie.

Cecil B. DeMille actually came on the screen before the film rolled and spoke to the audience.

Ladies and gentlemen, young and old, this may seem an unusual procedure.

The theme of this picture is whether men are to be ruled by God's law or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator like Ramesses.

Are men the property of the state, or are they free souls under God?

This same battle continues throughout the world today.

They don't show it, of course, nowadays.

They just start with the film, but that's what people would see in the theaters.

And that, of course, was another way of identifying the American story with the Hebraic story of the Exodus.

So it spoke profoundly to the American ethos at the time.

And he gave the story the love and respect that it deserved.

I mean, if you read the biography of Cecil B. DeMille, which I have, because I'm moderately interested in this film, he actually went, Mary, to the Sinai Desert and went to the site that is identified by some as Mount Sinai, and the tablets for the film, which were utilized for the movie, he had carved out of the stone of Mount Sinai itself.

And so it's another statement to say that he spent an enormous amount of money and created special effects which seemed tame to us today, but were extraordinary at the time.

But what he was trying to do was to bring this biblical story to life so it's simultaneously that he lavished love on this story while at the same time communicating to Americans that this is not only an ancient tale, but it's a story whose lessons have to be learned today.

And that's why I think it spoke so profoundly to those who had seen it.

Well, the movie comes out in 1956, and communism's on the rise, but here at home there's also the civil rights movement, right?

The year before the movie comes out, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for not giving up her seat on the bus.

And of course, here's the Exodus again.

One of the great images, one of the great themes of the civil rights movement in this country is the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

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And I'm struck by, you know, we think about King and the way that he spoke and the kind of rhetoric and biblical imagery he used.

The day before he's assassinated, he would give the speech, I've been to the mountaintop, saying things like, talk to us about the way that, like the slaves and the abolitionists before them.

The way that activists and leaders in the civil rights movement pick up the image of the Exodus for their cause.

Yes.

So the greatness of King's rhetoric is that it embodies how the American ideal has been advanced and expanded throughout its history in the joining of two themes that work together in tandem.

One of them is the imagery of the Bible, the eerie reference that King makes to Moses right before he dies.

I just want to do God's will, and he's allowed me to go up to the mountain, and I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land.

I may not get there with you, but I want you to know the night that we as a people will get to the Promised Land.

So that's one side of his, one side of his rhetoric and the rhetoric of the civil rights movement, and then of course the promise of America, the greatness of King is bound up in the fact that it's an American story.

King does not reject the American idea, nor does he reject the values of the American founding, but demands that America live up to its founding ideals.

He sees the founding documents as promissory notes, not...

Yes, exactly.

And of course the hybridism is delivered at the Lincoln Memorial, and so he is joining the two together.

And the civil rights movement is one of the fullest expressions of how the two have always worked together in tandem at some of America's greatest moments.

But it's also probably the last moment in American history where the Bible is utilized in fusion with the story of the American idea, at least in mainstream culture.

Yeah, it's just outside of the 700 Club, it's impossible to imagine a leader in America talking like that today.

Why?

What happened?

Where did the Exodus go?

Where did the biblical literacy go?

Why did these things cease to be a touchstone in American culture?

So I guess I assume the only answer can be is that part of the upheaval of the years that followed was a wholesale rejection of much of the heritage of the past that relates to the way we teach American history, and it relates to the way that the Bible was central to the American founding and to Western civilization itself.

And so now we've reached an odd point where the Bible is not only not studied with reverence, it's not studied for the impact it had on history, which is striking because if you don't know the Bible, you don't know history, you know, I remember, I think, I don't remember

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when this was exactly, I was in high school or college, and I was watching Jeopardy because I'm a huge nerd, and we couldn't tell.

And this was emblazoned on my mind this moment, watching Jeopardy, and one of the topics is the Bible.

And the answer on Jeopardy was, this prophet appeared to the witch at Endor.

So I was like, oh, I know, who is Samuel?

Who is Samuel?

All right.

As you know, us nerds are wanting to do, and we're shouting at the screen during Jeopardy.

And so the first two answers are wrong, but they were, okay, later figures from later biblical books, but fine, ballpark, it was, who is Elijah?

Who is Elijah?

And then somebody else keys in and says, who is John the Baptist, right?

So if you don't know enough about the Bible, right, and you don't know about the Hebrew Bible and then Christian scripture, even just historically, you would know that there are many centuries between Saul, and they said, this appeared to King Saul and the witch at Endor.

That's the question.

So you would know that there are centuries and centuries between King Saul and John the Baptist.

Anyone who knows anything about history, and certainly people who are appearing on Jeopardy and know the most arcane facts, and yet they didn't even come close.

And that's when I realized that for them, it wasn't that the Bible was no longer the good book.

It wasn't even a book that was important.

There was an example a few years ago, I know you write for the Wall Street Journal and love it, but there was an unbelievable mistake.

I don't even know what to call it, a snafu.

I mean, here's what happened.

Basically, the Wall Street Journal is reporting about the APAC conference.

And Netanyahu, who was prime minister at the time, was there.

And in his speech, he made a reference to Moses drawing water from a rock, right?

It's one of the more well-known stories in the Exodus.

It's actually given as the reason for why Moses was never allowed to enter the Promised Land, because rather than speaking to the rock, as God had told him to, he strikes it.

Anyway, Netanyahu makes this reference in his speech.

There's lots of Israeli politicians constantly referencing biblical history, even though they're secular.

They wrote it in this Wall Street Journal article, except that the reporter misquotes Netanyahu as saying that Moses drew water from Iraq, as in the country, not a rock.

And it was hilarious.

I mean, Jewish Twitter, and I'm sure all of our WhatsApp and Signal groups were going off about it for days hysterically laughing.

It's a funny story, but it's also an alarming story, because it shows the lack of literacy

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that you began to see during your nerdy teenage years on Jeopardy.

Yes.

So I would love for you to prescribe what's happened, give us a little bit of an autopsy of how we've arrived at a place where a Wall Street Journal reporter who I'm sure is well-educated could make that kind of mistake, a mistake that they would never make about so many other realms of knowledge and history.

Right.

And what's striking about this mistake is that it's not pernicious in any way.

Of course not.

It's utterly understandable if you know absolutely nothing about the Bible.

What is striking is that surely someone who becomes a reporter for an elite institution is someone who would be highly educated and yet clearly never encountered some of the elemental stories in the Bible, stories that had a profound impact on the history of the world.

What's striking about that example itself is that even if someone didn't know the tale of Moses hitting a rock, one would know that Moses was never in Iraq, that Moses was born in Egypt and never made it to the Holy Land, let alone Iraq.

So it just reveals that one can go through an entire experience of elementary school, high school, college, probably beyond, and never experience what the Bible is and was, why are its stories important, how did it impact the world?

The Bible is not only literature, obviously I believe it's revelational literature, but even if one doesn't believe that, no other text has impacted civilization more profoundly.

And so it just means that it's not being taught.

And this reflects both the fact that in certain institutions one is not allowed to teach about the Bible perhaps, or people are afraid to bring up traditional religion in the context of education, or even more dismayingly probably that in certain academic institutions the Bible is now seen by many as a pernicious work that has had an injurious, from that perspective, impact on civilization.

What are the deeper ramifications of losing this common language, and not just a common language, but the kind of shared ethical truths that come from these stories?

So here's where I think the real critical issue arises.

And this actually brings us back to what we discussed at the beginning, which was how the story of the Exodus changed the world, and how it was central to the American story. My late friend, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, once noted that there were four revolutions that defined modernity.

There was the British Revolution, and that can include both Cromwell, and then what's called the Glorious Revolution, then there's the American Revolution, there's the French Revolution of 1789, and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

And the world that we live in today is, in a very real sense, defined by those revolutions.

And he said the following, and this is a quote, in Britain and America the source of inspiration was the Hebrew Bible, and France and Russia was the great alternative to the Bible, namely philosophy, Marx and Rousseau.

The contrast between them is vivid.

Britain and America succeeded in creating a free society, not without civil war, but at least without tyranny and terror.



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The French and Russian revolutions began with a dream of utopia, and ended with a nightmare of bloodshed and the suppression of human rights.

So he says, why did America succeed, and France and Russia failed?

He said, the explanation is surely complex, but much perhaps all turns on how a society answers the question, who is the ultimate sovereign, God or man?

The British and Americans gave the first answer, the French and Russian revolutionaries the second.

For the British and American architects of liberty, God was the supreme power.

All authority was therefore subject to the transcendental demands of the moral law.

For the French and Russian ideologists, ultimate value lay in the state.

When human beings arrogate supreme power to themselves, politics loses its sole secure defense of freedom, and he concludes, societies that exile God lead to the eclipse of man.

So I think the stakes cannot be higher when we consider what it means for a society to lose the teachings of a text that was so elemental to its founding story.

One of the things I'm struck by when I think about the loss of these common stories and the moral truths that they insist on is the way that lies sort of come to replace them, or the question really of what fills the void.

And we're sitting here talking about freedom from slavery in Egypt, but one of the most common slanders, libels, being pushed about the Jews today in America is the idea that Jews funded the American slave trade.

Something that's been pushed by people like Louis Farrakhan that maybe two generations ago was a fringe idea and now really has moved into the mainstream.

I wonder if you see a connection between the loss of biblical literacy and common knowledge and the rise of these kind of lies.

If we attempt to analyze anti-Semitism, what binds the different forms of anti-Semitism together is, I think the following, and I think this was best expressed by a friend of mine who was a young Christian leader, I don't know if you know him, his name is Rob Nicholson.

This is what he said.

He said, to fight anti-Semitism, we need to understand its spiritual sources.

This isn't just any old hatred or racism.

It is a grand anti-myth that turns Jewish chosenness on its head and assigns to the people of Israel responsibility for all the world's ills.

Then he adds the following.

He says that anti-Semitism almost always grows from a resentment of chosenness, the idea that the Jewish God appointed one nation, the nation of Israel, to play a special role in history.

The fact is, when you look at the history of societies in which Jews find themselves or even societies in which Jews are not there, it's rare that people will just be neutral about the Jews.

You will either find, as you will in the early story of America, an admiration for the impact that Jews have had upon history at times going so far as to embrace the notion of chosenness itself.

If you don't have that, what you will find often is the anti-chosenness, an attack on

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chosenness which seeks to espouse a lie that places the Jews still at the heart of history, but in this anti-Semitic reversal of chosenness.

Instead, now the Jew becomes responsible for the world's ills.

To put it more bluntly, the loss of reverence for the Abrahamic heritage of America is something that should be of deep concern to American Jewry, because the embrace we received in America is bound up with the American reverence for not just the Exodus story, but the entire Hebraic heritage that it embodied.

Bye bye, Mary Salovecic, first of all, thank you so much, and second of all, have a wonderful Passover.

Thank you, Barry, and thank you, it's been a joy.

Thanks as always for listening.

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