

# Longing for Egypt: Dissecting the Heart Enticed

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“[The Heart Enticed: The Exodus from Egypt as a Response to the Threat of Assimilation.](#)” the opening chapter of my most recent book, *Longing for Egypt and Other Unexpected Biblical Tales*,<sup>1</sup> reads the book of Exodus as a document of resistance to an internal threat instead of the record of a liberation from an external one. Freedom from oppressive slavery and persecution are not the central concerns of the Exodus narrative, I suggest, and where they do occur, they function primarily to separate Israel from Egypt. In what follows I shall try to contextualize this interpretation by describing some of the events and circumstances that led me to develop it, and then by outlining some of my experiences of sharing it. Strongly present in my mind are the opening pages of *Tristram Shandy*, in which Laurence Sterne meditates on the proper starting point for the story of a life. When I agreed to write this paper, I did not imagine that I would I need to travel back to my childhood to begin the story of a biblical interpretation, but it seems to me now that I must. For those interested in the details of textual exegesis, please see the session website for a link to the penultimate draft of the book chapter which this paper addresses.

## Upward Mobility

I grew up in England at precisely the time when it became possible to be upwardly mobile without being extraordinary, and the experience of moving from the working classes to the middle classes must have affected my later interests, as did the precise way in which I experienced that movement. When I went “up” (as they say) to Oxford to read English Literature in 1978, only 7% of Britain’s population went to any university, and the majority of those who did came from private or selective (grammar) schools. Most *Oxbridge* (Oxford and Cambridge) candidates stayed at school for an extra term after A-levels to prepare for the special Oxford entrance exam. I went to a Comprehensive (non-selective) school that had formerly been a Secondary Modern, a school for students who did not pass the Eleven-plus exam and could not therefore attend a grammar school at the age of eleven. No-one from my school had been to Oxford or Cambridge, and there were no facilities for a sixth term devoted to Oxbridge preparation, and I was the first person in my family to go to university, I had no source for outside school. I was therefore incredibly fortunate to have an English teacher (a former nurse who read English at Oxford as a mature student) who encouraged me to apply to Oxford to read English, a Religious Education teacher who encouraged me in many ways, from giving me the Arts sections of non-tabloid newspapers to making me believe that I did not belong at a Polytechnic (vocational college), and a second RE teacher (a former Church of England Minister who had lost his faith while being a missionary in South Africa) who had read Classics at Cambridge and offered to teach me

Latin at lunch times so that I could take the Oxford entrance exam. Since I read avidly and widely from a young age, the substantive part of the Oxford entrance examination in English posed no problem; I could easily write an essay based on sources ranging wildly from Chaucer and Donne through Shelley and Thomas Hardy to Heinrich Boll. It was, however, disconcerting to discover at my Oxford interview that applicants who had been prepared at school followed a very different formula. They spoke confidently and articulately about the *Shakespeare essay* or the *Jane Austen essay*. How did they know which was which, I asked myself repeatedly? But I was offered a place, and decided that there must be advantages to being different.

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<sup>1</sup> Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008.

While growing up, I had the experience, shared by many people like me, of living in a world of books that was more real to me than the real world. It was hardly surprising, then, that I responded to the real world differently than many of my peers. I assumed that would change at Oxford, when I was surrounded by people reading precisely what I was reading, but I was wrong. There are two obvious explanations for this. The first relates to my continued inability to write *the Jane Austen essay*; I grew up ranging wildly and I did not grow out of it. The second was that, once I got to Oxford, I made the decision (not in consultation with my teachers, of course) not to read any secondary literature. I wanted to learn to read primary texts, and the best way to do that (or so I thought aged 18) was to wrestle with them alone. I had a reasonable sense of other perspectives on the books I was reading; I went to lectures and heard my tutorial partners read out their bi-weekly essays in the weeks when I wasn't reading out mine. Naturally I would have changed my ways immediately had one of my tutors complained, but it never arose (a sign of the times – that could not happen now). I do not regret the path I chose at Oxford, but it was hardly calculated to bring me into line.

The relationship between my early education and quirky Bible exegesis in general needs little elaboration. I knew that the book of Exodus is about liberation, as I knew the standard interpretative theories about medieval lyrics or T.S. Eliot, but I was not accustomed to *internalizing* accepted readings, and blithely developed my own. More specifically, my experience of upward mobility, achieved in my case through education, may well have led me to diminish the role of slavery and persecution in Exodus. In comparison with most of my peers at Oxford, I was socially and educationally disadvantaged. Sometimes I was aware (as I remain) of not having learned English grammar or to play tennis or to do small talk at parties, but for the most part, I did not see myself as disadvantaged. Moreover, I felt uncomfortable when I encountered people who came from backgrounds similar to mine and dwelt on (in?) them. Since Oxford was a promised land which, for me, was totally separate from the working class environment I left to go there, it is hardly surprising that I was not naturally inclined to link the Promised Land with slavery in Egypt. Indeed, at some level, I equate interpreters who highlight persecution and oppression in Exodus with those privileged members of the English middle-classes who harp on their deprived working-class childhoods.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I cannot resist reproducing this in full; it says it all. Monty Python's Flying Circus, 'Four Yorkshiremen.' The Scene: Four well-dressed men are sitting together at a vacation resort. 'Farewell to Thee' is played in the background on Hawaiian guitar.

FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: Aye, very passable, that, very passable bit of risotto.

SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: Nothing like a good glass of Château de Chasselas, eh, Josiah?

THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: You're right there, Obadiah.

FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Who'd have thought thirty year ago we'd all be sittin' here drinking Château de Chasselas, eh?

FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: In them days we was glad to have the price of a cup o' tea.

SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: A cup o' cold tea.

FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Without milk or sugar.

THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: Or tea.

FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: In a cracked cup, an' all.

FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Oh, we never had a cup. We used to have to drink out of a rolled up newspaper.

SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: The best we could manage was to suck on a piece of damp cloth.

THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: But you know, we were happy in those days, though we were poor.

FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: Because we were poor. My old Dad used to say to me, "Money doesn't buy you happiness, son".

FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Aye, 'e was right.

FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: Aye, 'e was.

FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: I was happier then and I had nothin'. We used to live in this tiny old house with great big holes in the roof.

SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: House! You were lucky to live in a house! We used to live in one room, all twenty-six of us, no furniture, 'alf the floor was missing, and we were all 'uddled together in one corner for fear of falling.

THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: Eh, you were lucky to have a room! We used to have to live in t' corridor!

FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: Oh, we used to dream of livin' in a corridor! Would ha' been a palace to us. We used to live in an old water tank on a rubbish tip. We got woke up every morning by having a load of rotting fish dumped all over us! House? Huh.

FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Well, when I say 'house' it was only a hole in the ground covered by a sheet of tarpaulin, but it was a house to us.

SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: We were evicted from our 'ole in the ground; we 'ad to go and live in a lake.

THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: You were lucky to have a lake! There were a hundred and fifty of us living in t' shoebox in t' middle o' road.

FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: Cardboard box?

THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: Aye.

FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: You were lucky. We lived for three months in a paper bag in a septic tank. We used to have to get up at six in the morning, clean the paper bag, eat a crust of stale bread, go to work down t' mill, fourteen hours a day, week-in week-out, for sixpence a week, and when we got home our Dad would thrash us to sleep wi' his belt.

SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: Luxury. We used to have to get out of the lake at six o'clock in the morning, clean the lake, eat a handful of 'ot gravel, work twenty hour day at mill for tuppence a month, come home, and Dad would thrash us to sleep with a broken bottle, if we were lucky!

THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: Well, of course, we had it tough. We used to 'ave to get up out of shoebox at twelve o'clock at night and lick road clean wit' tongue. We had two bits of cold gravel, worked twenty-four hours a day at mill for sixpence every four years, and when we got home our Dad would slice us in two wit' bread knife.

FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Right. I had to get up in the morning at ten o'clock at night half an hour before I went to bed, drink a cup of sulphuric acid, work twenty-nine hours a day down mill, and pay mill owner for permission to come to work, and when we got home, our Dad and our mother would kill us and dance about on our graves singing Hallelujah.

FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: And you try and tell the young people of today that ..... they won't believe you.

ALL: They won't!

### Formative Texts

When I was an undergraduate, I read *The Legacy*, a short story by Virginia Woolf in which Angela Clandon, the aristocratic wife of a distinguished MP, dies when she steps off the kerb in front of a taxi. Later, her husband reads her journals and discovers that she had excised certain words and passages by over-writing them with the word EGYPT:

Hastily he reached for the last of the diaries—the one she had left unfinished when she died. There, on the very first page, was that cursed fellow again. “Dined alone with B. M. . . . He became very agitated. He said it was time we understood each other. . . . I tried to make him listen. But he would not. He threatened that if I did not . . .” the rest of the page was scored over. She had written *Egypt. Egypt. Egypt*, over the whole page. He could not make out a single word ...

It emerges that Angela Clandon was having an intense *across the tracks* love affair with B.M., her maid’s brother, whom she met through good works intended to improve working conditions in factories. The excised diary entries were about B.M., and it transpires that her death was suicide, following his suicidal death. This story, though far from Virginia Woolf’s finest literary achievements, had a disproportionate effect on me, and from the moment I read it, I began to write EGYPT over text I want to excise. As well as being a word that happens to function well to obliterate others, EGYPT resonates thematically in this story about social boundaries and the complexities of crossing them. It is hard to imagine that this story had no effect on my thinking about Israel and Egypt when I came, much later, to examine Exodus in detail.

My original desire was to do a PhD not on Bible, but on midrash. When no suitable supervisor emerged, I settled happily with Bible and studied midrash on the side with Meira Polliack, who was in Cambridge working on the Cairo Genizah at the time. From the moment I encountered it in Hebrew, midrash became the intellectual love of my life. Midrashic readings seemed shockingly familiar, like seeing my own thoughts unfolding, even when the interpretations were new to me and I could not have generated them independently. Rightly or wrongly, I was keen to defend the value of these readings for Bible scholars, and when colleagues and students used *midras*” with its derogatory meaning of “fanciful and anachronistic,” I worked hard to demonstrate that, on the contrary, it uncovers a layer of meaning in the Bible not otherwise accessible to us. A perfect example of this is the midrash about the plague of darkness. According to this reading, God used the plague of darkness to conceal Jews who died in Egypt by his own hand. And which Jews were these? They were the Jews who changed their names. When I read this midrash for the first time after starting to work on Exodus and assimilation (I must have read it before, but I had not understood or absorbed it), I felt something approaching ecstasy. In the context of the traditional reading of Exodus, the midrash is, to say the least, bizarre. In the context of my reading, it captures a crucial aspect of Exodus; there were Israelites who wanted to become Egyptian and they achieved this by the all-too-familiar mechanism of changing their names, but not only did they fail to become Egyptian, they died in the attempt.

I begin my chapter on Exodus with a literary manifestation of the Jewish love affair with Egypt, Yehuda Halevi’s poem, reproduced there in a stunning translation by Gabriel Levin and entitled *In Alexandria*.<sup>3</sup> Other manifestations of this phenomenon abound. I cannot contemplate Jews and Egypt without thinking of Claudia Roden’s *The Book of Jewish Food* (1997), in which recipes from her Cairo childhood are lovingly reproduced and annotated:

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<sup>3</sup> *Poems from the Diwan*, Anvil, 1992.

Every cuisine tells a story. Jewish food tells the story of an uprooted, migrating people and their vanished worlds. It lives in people's minds and has been kept alive because of what it evokes and represents. My own world disappeared forty years ago, but it has remained powerful in my imagination. When you are cut off from your past, that past takes a stronger hold on your emotions. I was born in Zamalek, a district of Cairo with palm trees, pretty villas and gardens with bougainvillea, scented jasmine and brilliant red flowers called *flamboyants*. On the map it looks like a cocoon clinging to the banks of the Nile. For the first fifteen years of my life it was the cocoon from which I never ventured unaccompanied. I lived in an apartment building with my parents, my two brothers, Ellis and Zaki; and our Yugoslav-Italian nanny, Maria Koron. Awad, the cook, who came from Lower Egypt, lived on the roof terrace, where servants had rooms. From the windows we could see the Nile and feluccas (sailing boat) gliding by. The sounds were the muezzin's call and the shouts of street vendors. It was a world full of people. It ended in 1956 after Suez, as a result of Egypt's war with Israel. My father died in 1993 at the age of ninety-four, a few months after my mother. They had spent the last years holding hands, switching from one radio station to another listening to the world's events, and talking passionately about their life in Egypt. They lived near me in London, and I was the audience for their constant dramatized re-enactments of the stories of all the people they had known. These stories were capable of endless change as new interpretations were explored. At 16 Woodstock Road, it seemed that we had never left Cairo (p.3).<sup>4</sup>

Biographical works on Jewish Egypt that stand out for me are Andre Aciman's superbly evocative *Out of Egypt* (1996) and (especially) Lucette Lagnado's extraordinary *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* (2007), both of which recount childhoods where Egypt is at one and the same time a stage set populated by European coffee houses and oriental spice markets, and the backdrop for a tale of dislocation and persecution. Last year I heard Lucette Lagnado speak about her book at the Egyptian Jewish Cultural Club in London. She told the hundred plus audience of mainly elderly Egyptian Jews who had assembled at Lauderdale Road Sephardi synagogue that she was delighted to answer questions, but had addressed enough gatherings of this kind to predict exactly what would transpire. Members of the audience would recall their own Cairo memories – the best café, most fashionable dress-maker – and at least one person would promise to locate a source for white sharkskin (a shiny cloth used to make suits in Lagnado's father's generation). But the elusive fabric would never materialise. That writers from Yehuda Halevi to Lucette Lagnado have portrayed with remarkable consistency the Jewish love affair with Egypt implies nothing one way or another about the Bible. Yet these accounts and others like them made me want to re-read Exodus with the possibility in mind that the Bible too longed for Egypt, and I came to the conclusion that it did. Thinking about Roden, Aciman and Lagnado as I write this paper has also led me to think that my reading of Exodus would speak very differently than the traditional reading to Egyptian Jews such as these, and to others exiled from countries in which they once thrived.

### Eden in Egypt

It is difficult to hear Egyptian Jews speak of Egypt without glimpsing *Gan Eden*, as Yehuda Halevi did in *In Alexandria*, and even Egypt unfiltered by a Jewish lens can produce powerful effects. Six years ago, I was driving in a Tel Aviv rush hour with my friend Itzik Genizi and his then year old daughter Na'ama. The traffic was bad and Na'ama began to cry, and Itzik asked me to take a tape from the glove compartment – Oum Kalthoum singing *Enta Omri*. A huge string orchestra, truly a case of East meets West, produced some unmistakably Egyptian chords. I expected them to last for a few seconds, but they went on and on, foreplay for the great Egyptian diva whose funeral was attended by more people than Nasser's. Na'ama immediately stopped crying and I too was transfixed, not by a remembered or recorded past but by some sort of primal connection to the sound of Egypt. I bought a copy of the CD when I got back to Jerusalem, and used to listen to it most Friday afternoons while preparing Shabbat dinner. One

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<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to my friend Toni Marcus for a wonderful feast of dishes from her Egyptian childhood.

Shabbat, a couple I'd met only very briefly before that evening, and knew nothing about beyond their nationality, arrived early, while Oum Kalthoum was still playing. Their expressions of surprise when they entered my kitchen made sense only when they explained that Gabi (Rosenbaum) was a professor of Egyptian culture at Hebrew University, and had published on Oum Kalthoum and Egyptian nationalism. A few years later they wrote from Cairo, where Gabi was running Hebrew University's Israeli Academic Centre.

Gabi has no Egyptian ancestry, but was strongly drawn from an early age to Egypt. The same is true for my close friend Julian, a Jew from an ordinary United Synagogue family in Leicester and a graduate of Carmel College (now defunct but once the UK's only Jewish Public [elite private] school), who spent his summer vacations from the Anglican School in Jerusalem where he taught History, living in tombs in Cairo. During one of those summers, Julian met Shadi, a ridiculously beautiful convert from Islam to Coptic Christianity whose life choices alienated him from his Muslim Sheik family. Julian abandoned an extraordinary world in Jerusalem, where he was as much a fish in water as I have ever seen, in order to bring Shadi to London and marry him in one of the first gay civil marriages performed in the UK. I am certain that Na'ama's fascination with Oum Kalthoum, Gabi's academic engagement with Egyptian culture and language, and Julian's deep attraction to Cairo and all-encompassing love for Shadi sensitized me the intoxicating power of Egypt which, appropriately or otherwise, I incorporated into my thinking about Exodus.

### Progressive Judaism

Since publishing *Longing for Egypt*, I have moved to London and go to a Sephardi synagogue where, not surprisingly perhaps in view of what I describe here, I feel happy and at home. During the time I was working on [The Heart Enticed](#), however, I was an active member of Beth Shalom Reform Synagogue in Cambridge, a community with many academics, frequent visitors from other countries, and many members married to non-Jews. My roles included running the cheder (Sunday School) and preparing children for Bar and Bat Mitzvah. One student in particular contributed massively to my reading of Exodus. Sam came to my house once a week after school so that I could teach him to chant his *parsha*. One sunny late summer afternoon, we sat at my dining room table talking about the death of the firstborn (Sam's *parsha* was *Beshallah*), and Sam asked me the million dollar question: why were there Egyptian slaves when they had Israelite slaves? That question reveals a lot about Sam – he was a very smart 12 years old (and a first-born!) who is now reading English Literature at university. But it also speaks volumes about the context in which he read Exodus. Sam's non-Jewish academic lawyer father came to synagogue with his family every Shabbat without fail. At the party after Sam's Bar Mitzvah, Neil delivered the funniest and most moving Bar Mitzvah speech I have ever heard, chronicling with sophisticated yet self-deprecating references to Yiddish terminology his move from a childhood divided between a modest home in rural England and a relatively privileged Public (private) school where he had a choral scholarship to life with Liz, the North London United Synagogue eventual property lawyer he met at Oxford. Despite having „married out“ , having lost her parents at a young age and thus being without parental back-up, and living in Cambridge, where Jewish identities are not easily forged, Liz was determined that her children would maintain and develop their Jewishness, and, with Neil's help, she succeeded. All three were Bar and Bat Mitzvah, and Sam spent a year in Israel between school and university, and both his younger sisters are following suit. Sam's question about Egyptian and Israelite slaves did not come out of the blue, and only my awareness of the precise context that lay behind enabled me to use it as the catalyst that it became for me.

The religious environment of Cambridge affected my reading of Exodus more generally. I was accustomed to giving *Divrei Torah* (sermons) in a context where there were no holds barred and no line to toe. Many of my research topics began because I needed to speak for ten minutes on a particular Torah or *haftarah* (prophetic) text, and nothing prevented me from drawing on my academic resources to do so. It was an ideal context in which to think outside the box. Since I wanted to stimulate and challenge the congregation without offending them, and since the rate of

inter-marriage in the congregation was very high, I was very unlikely to generate readings that denigrated “the other.” Although this was by no means a conscious feature of my thinking at the time, in hindsight it is clear why I gravitated towards an interpretation of Exodus that was positive about Egyptians, the Bible’s non-Israelites *par excellence*. It helped, of course, that I was teaching in a religious environment where persecution and oppression were not significant threats to Jewish continuity. A far greater threat was the allure of the local non-Jewish culture (Cambridge and its environs), and the ease with which Jews can lose themselves within it. Although I see myself as, above all, engaging in the close reading of texts, I am aware as I write this just how well my reading of Exodus fits with the religious and cultural context in which I produced it.

### We were slaves in Egypt

Our family’s celebration of Passover undoubtedly played a significant role in my reading of Exodus. Our (first-night) seder was led brilliantly for many years by my husband Peter Lipton *z.l.* who as master of the seder was highly engaging, deeply challenging, intensely moral and extremely funny. Our 25 or so guests typically came from a wide variety of backgrounds – Jewish and non-Jewish; more and less and non-observant; young and old; English, American, Israeli, Mexican; Russian. For almost all (some had fled persecution in their own lifetimes – from Nazi Germany, and even from Egypt), questions about identity were more pressing than fear of persecution. Not one, I imagine, would have been comfortable vilifying another national, ethnic or religious group, which brings me to another point I want to make about our seder. It was handed down from Sinai that every seder must have among its participants a Walter Matthau figure (as my son Jonah put it), a smart, funny, knowledgeable, cynical sceptic, ideally from New York City; a man (usually but not necessarily) who would not be anywhere else on the First Night of Pesach, but wishes that he could be. Our Walter Matthau was our old friend Hyman, who did his very best to tolerate the endless discussion and the singing, and whose central role was to go to the front door and pour out God’s wrath upon the nations. How did it emerge that Hyman was given this task? For one thing, he was bound to do it ironically – he did everything ironically. For another, any discomfort it caused him would be indistinguishable from the low to medium grade discomfort caused to him by Passover in its entirety. For yet another, he knew the Hebrew from his Orthodox childhood and could pronounce it in a suitably scathing tone. But above all, I now think, we allocated this role to Hyman because it functioned as a vent for his own intensely complex feelings about Jews and Jewishness. Far from pouring out God’s anger on the nations, we were giving Hyman a chance to pour out his own irritation and frustration, if not anger, sparked by this annual contact with primitive, particularist, tribal, organised Judaism. The dynamics of Hyman’s encounter with Passover were simply a version with large of a set of emotions experienced by many Jews of the kind who lived in or visited Cambridge. I reflected on this complicated dynamic every Pesach, and I am certain that it complicated my thinking about Israel in Egypt.

Peter’s sense of humour made it impossible for him to conduct our seder in absolute seriousness, and certain components were an annual magnet for his jokes – why we had a parsnip – an ivory-coloured carrot – instead of a shankbone on our seder plate, for example (our family was vegetarian). He especially loved the word “rigour,” which appears several times in the Schocken *Haggadah* to denote the Hebrew *be’farekh*, and read it with a funny intonation intended to highlight its archaic nature. For me, his intonation raised a different question: Why does the haggadah emphasise this word, almost positive in its modern usage, but clearly intended to be problematic in the haggadah? I concluded that in Exodus too “rigour is barely negative, specifying duration of contract rather than harshness of labour. Of course, my general interest in minimising persecution in Exodus might have led me to compare the Exodus use of this word with its use in Leviticus (25:23, 46), where it cannot be entirely negative. Yet I cannot be sure that *be’farekh* would have leapt from the biblical page as it did without Peter’s emphasis.

For the second night seder, we usually went to friends such as Liba and Niall. Liba, a historian of ancient science and a colleague of Peter's, grew up in a traditional Jewish household in Chicago. Her husband Niall is a Catholic from Belfast who can pass as a North American unless he reverts (not "slips back" – it's never by accident) to the near-incomprehensible-to-outsiders accent with which he grew up. Liba and Niall had made the Passover seder their own, and one manifestation of this was that they did not read *magid*, the story, from the haggadah, but from a 1960s children's translation of the book of Exodus. I forget why and when they developed this tradition, but I speculate as follows. First, Liba is self-described Polyanna, who wants whenever possible to accentuate the positive; the Exodus version of the flight from Egypt is a good deal less negative than the haggadah and so she reads it. Second, Liba loves Niall and wants him to feel as much at home as is humanly possible in her Jewish world. She gravitates towards the Bible both because, unlike the haggadah, it has a place in Niall's own tradition, and because she instinctively saw it as less hostile than the haggadah to outsiders in general and Egypt in particular, and to Niall above all. Liba and Niall's decision to read from the Bible instead of the haggadah forced me to think about the parallels and differences between the two accounts. This train of thought was especially potent in the context of a seder in the home of Liba and Niall, two people with multiply complex national, social and religious identities, now intertwined.

### The Holocaust and Egypt

Perhaps the most significant "theological" implication of my work on Exodus is that it highlights the extent to which liberation requires a persecuting enemy, real or constructed. While this point may have emerged directly from my textual exegesis, it seems likely that I was influenced by ways of thinking about the Holocaust that have affected me personally. My husband Peter's parents were both born in Germany, and their parents died there – in Auschwitz and en route to it. They very, very rarely discussed their childhood or their experiences in Nazi Germany; life began in New York City (and very briefly Brooklyn). Their commitment to their Jewishness, and to raising Peter as a Jew, was absolute, but the Holocaust played no visible role in this. Indeed, Peter's father was extremely agitated by plans afoot at the time to build a Holocaust Museum in New York City (it eventually became the Museum of Jewish Heritage); he feared that it would provoke anti-Semitism and found it in other ways problematic.

Our nuclear family seemed to absorb Opa's point of view as if by osmosis. On the one hand, I organised and led Yom HaShoah services and related talks and performances every year in Cambridge, and Peter's mother made donations enabling us to bring speakers and performers (musicians playing work composed in Theresienstadt, for example, or actors staging a play about a contemporary of Ann Frank). But that was for us a matter of memorial, not education or identity building. We did not inevitably see Holocaust films, we rarely went to Holocaust museums (Berlin was an exception), and our sons Jacob and Jonah did not go on concentration camp tours. In recent years, I think they have begun to think differently about the years their grandparents spent in Germany, and have spoken about visiting their respective hometowns, Mainz and Nuremberg. But this happened slowly. Despite a very early interest in Second World War history, Jacob would carefully pass over pages with concentration camp photograph in any book he was reading, and, as I note in a footnote in my Exodus chapter, when he went to *Yad Vashem* while studying in Israel, he was disturbed by a take-home message that emphasised the need for a Jewish State (not that he doubted it) rather than the universal dangers of intolerance and persecution. I cannot resist reporting that Jacob is now spending a year working for the Foreign Minister of Sierra Leone, Zainab Bangura. Now I am wondering if Jonah and I should join him there for Passover: next year in Freetown!

For myself, I see now for the first time how systematically I have avoided the Holocaust in teaching Judaism and Jewish Studies, whether in a secular context or a religious one. The Holocaust had a small part in the curriculum of the Cambridge Reform Synagogue's Cheder (Sunday School), which I ran for fourteen years. It disturbed me greatly that the most popular course in the Cambridge Divinity School during the years I spent teaching in Cambridge was a

final year course called Jewish and Christian Responses to the Holocaust, the majority of whose students had taken no other courses in Jewish Studies (so the Holocaust was their only academic exposure). And although there are certainly many other explanations for this, it is not entirely coincidental that the Jewish Studies MA for which I am now responsible at King's College London offers 16 modules, only one of which relates to the Holocaust (post-Holocaust philosophy). I do not write this to defend my philosophy of Jewish education, but to illustrate my tendency to keep identity and persecution in separate categories. It seems implausible, to say the least, that this is unconnected with my interest in minimizing persecution in Exodus.

### Reception

The first person with whom I shared my theories about Exodus and assimilation was my friend, and at that time daily running partner, Simon Goldhill. Simon is a Professor of Greek at Cambridge, a radical re-reader who, even as he accumulates status and kudos, manages to retain his *enfant terrible* reputation. At the other end of the spectrum, he is the Chairman of the Traditional Jewish congregation in Cambridge where, despite some provocative *divrei Torah* (at least in the context of an Orthodox synagogue) he does not, in my estimation, use his Classics brain. It is no exaggeration to say that Simon hated my interpretation when he first heard it, and we fought tooth and nail for several weeks during our early morning circuits of Parker's Piece. Even for an iconoclast like Simon, the liberation motif in Exodus had sacred cow status, and he could not at first accept the idea that it might have been enhanced let alone created by later readers. I am not sure if he was ever fully convinced, but he did stop resisting. Most importantly, he came up with the title of my book, *Longing for Egypt*, which he later matched with his own, *Jerusalem, City of Longing* (2008).

Although I gave early versions of the papers that became [\*The Heart Enticed\*](#) in various academic settings from Eton (the British Public school) through the Oxford Theology Department to the Society of Biblical Literature, I cannot say that my experience was radically different from my experience giving other papers. More striking was my experience of giving essentially the same academic paper in faith or semi-faith settings, Jewish (Limmud, for example, a Jewish Adult Education conference) and Christian (for example, a day conference for Anglican clergy held at Southwark Cathedral). I shall focus on the latter. There is no question that the 250 strong audience was initially sceptical (or maybe they were just cold – it was November [I went directly from the cathedral to the airport for SBL San Diego] and we met in the seemingly unheated cathedral). I began by carefully acknowledging the power of the Exodus liberation story to inspire the oppressed, and emphasized that I would not undermine that inspiring message even if I could. But then I turned to the problem of a reading that depended on a persecuting enemy and the ethical difficulties emerging from the use of an enemy to bolster identity, especially for a multi-cultural, multi-faith society such as London. It was clear to me from the long question and answer session at the end, and from many different kinds of feedback long after the event, that the material I presented made a serious impact, though I have no sense of if or how these inner-city clergy will be able to use it.

I want to close with two observations about the responses to my ideas about assimilation versus persecution in Exodus that I cannot explain. The first is that I have delivered versions of this paper on several occasions – most recently last week to a class of MA students in Bible and Ministry in the Department of Education and Professional Studies at King's College London – to audiences that included Christians from Africa. Each time I have been especially anxious about offending them, given their history and their particular affinity with Exodus as traditionally read, and each time I have been amazed that they seem more than averagely receptive to my reading, and more than averagely responsive to the down-side of demonizing Egypt. Given that this cannot plausibly be related to the Black Athena phenomenon (Africans and people of African origin identifying with Egypt – not Greece – as the cradle of civilization, according to Martin Bernal), I do not know how to explain it. The second relates to Israel and Palestine. It is rare for

me to give public lectures on the Bible, whatever the theme, that do not provoke questions on Israel and Palestine, and my Exodus papers have been no exception. The Christian audiences with whom I have shared these ideas are most likely to be moderate Anglicans, and their starting position is most likely to be that any level of support for Israel is equivalent to supporting apartheid. Despite the fact that I do not touch in this work on questions relating to Israel and Palestine, something in the ideas I present seems to make my audiences nuance or at least re-assess their position. Again, I cannot begin to explain why this might be, but these are questions I shall continue to ponder, as perhaps others will too.