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It's Déjà vu All Over Again

Yogi Berra, the master of malapropisms, is famously to have said, "It is like déjà vu all over again." I was overcome by this feeling over the weekend as I watched with my family Otto Preminger's, *Exodus*, starring the boyish Paul Newman, and the stunning Eva Marie Saint as Mrs. Freemont.

Leon Uris, years ahead of the better known James Michener, wrote the vast historical novel to portray a story most would think impossible for the cinematographer to duplicate. Along came Otto Preminger, who specialized in subjects like bringing Moses into the neighborhood movie theater.

*Exodus* influenced my generation of Jewish-Americans in a way that no other film has been able to do before or since. The film created a generation of Zionists, at least in their heart.

When I was young, all I knew about Israel was that it was the fledgling state hanging on to existence for dear life filled with half starving Holocaust survivors surrounded by hostile Arabs. The dream of a Jewish national homeland and the vision of its founders was something that I had learned about minimally in Hebrew school, but there were few sinews to connect the bodily parts.

My knowledge of the Holocaust was based upon the grainy newsreels showing the hollow and soon to be dead survivors of European atrocities. I heard stories from family members on my maternal grandmother's side who survived. Grandma Pauline spent many days, perhaps most of her days, crying and grieving for her dead Polish family. My mother religiously, and that is no mere figure of speech, assured that we saved coins in those little blue boxes above the kitchen sink known as *Karen Ami*. We knew that our pennies, nickels and dimes were helping to build a Jewish homeland. Our parents told us how grandma's brother, Avraham, along with his son, Joseph, had escaped a death camp and fought for the Russians. Their reward after the war was to be sent to Siberia with so many other Jews who, because they clung to their religion and traditional ways, became enemies of the state.

Communist anti-Semitism saw Jews as inclined to capitalism while western anti-Semitism viewed all Jews as communists. In the Twentieth Century, it seemed that ignorance always triumphed.

*Exodus* was one of the first grand Hollywood movies, with young, exciting stars and fabulous music, that I had ever seen. The audio and visual effect of connecting the Holocaust with the establishment of the State of Israel was so real that I might as well have been a part of the film myself. *Exodus* reinforced my desire to work for important Jewish causes, to help my people in their eternal struggle to gift the world with their considerable talent, and to visit the State of Israel. When I finally arrived in Israel for the first time in 1969, I immediately headed for Hadera where the surviving Schneps family had lived in tents since the end of the war. My cousins were among the lucky ones, they had moved from their tents into a 3-room box-like stucco house in Hadera, and their father, Joseph, had a job working at a pharmacy. My cousins were serving in the Army, as women in Israel are expected to do.

These beautiful and inspired people, who are my own kin, might just as well have been actors in the movie, *Exodus*.

So much of the movie seemed antique when I watched it with my wife and son, who were seeing it for the first time. On the other hand, much of the movie was extremely current, especially in addressing the desire of Arab totalitarianism to complete the work initiated by Adolf Hitler. Not much has changed, and Hitler's role has now been handed off to the Arab and Iranian tyrants in the Middle East.

Israel, however, has changed remarkably. The country is one of the most technologically advanced and democratic countries in the entire world. As Bob Dylan wrote in his tribute to the will of the Israelis who survive, *Neighborhood Bully*:

"He's made a garden of paradise in the desert sand  
In bed with nobody, under no one's command."

Unfortunately, Israel has never had anyone to make peace with. The treaty with Egypt required Israel to give up the security of the Sinai Peninsula. Only Israel's treaty with Jordan can be any kind of template for the future. Neither side gave up its physical security and Jordan has thus far ensured a border impervious to the smuggling of weapons.

As violence and revolution contorts Arab regimes in the Middle East, the United States and Israel wonder what their roles should be. Old dictators will give rise to new ones, and Israel, the only democracy that any Arab has ever seen, will continue to serve as a beacon of truth and justice in the region.

The world must focus not on demonstrations in the streets of Cairo or Damascus, but rather on assuring that the maniacs in Iran, with their nuclear ambitions, end their control in neighboring Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza. No one will turn these autocratic modern Muslim caliphates into democracies, but we may be able to contain their expansionist intentions. Nothing less will do in order to ensure the safety and security of the United States, Israel, and the European democracies.

Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire  
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey, Harris,  
Waters & Waffenschmidt  
161 West Third Street  
Williamsport, PA 17701  
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)  
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)

Cliff Rieders, who practices law in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.