

Episode 8: “Adapting Exagoge”

Transcription

An actor reads a selection from the play *exagoge*:

Actor 1: I stayed in my home. Outside my window, I could see my sisters, my cousins, my people, bruised, beaten, and burned for believing as I do. There could only be one religion, and it was not ours. I could not stay home any longer. I could not stay.



Host Aaron Henne: Welcome to *The Dybbukast*, the show in which we ask: What do poems, plays, and other creative texts from throughout history tell us about the times in which they were written, and what do they reveal about the forces still at play in our contemporary societies? I'm Aaron Henne, artistic director of theatre dybbuk.

In this episode, presented in collaboration with the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University, we'll be investigating one of our own works, adapted from an ancient text. *Exagoge*, by Ezekiel the Tragedian, is the earliest documented Jewish play, thought to have been written in Alexandria, Egypt in the second century, BCE. From the fragments that remain — 269 lines, to be precise — we know that it tells the biblical Exodus narrative in the style of a Greek tragedy. In 2016, theatre dybbuk took these fragments and created from them a new play that completed the piece, and, in order to highlight the inclusive nature of the Exodus story, incorporated modern day narratives of refugee and immigrant experiences, as well as those from communities affected by marginalization. We also included texts from speeches by a variety of leaders from throughout American history.

This episode features performances from our production of *exagoge*, intercut with a conversation between me, who served as the play's writer/director, and Dr. Miriam Heller Stern, Vice Provost for Educational Strategy at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, and founder of Beit HaYotzer/the Creativity Braintrust. That conversation was recorded live as part of an in-person presentation at the annual convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in March of 2022. In many of the play's selections, you will hear music composed by Michael Skloff, which was performed by the young artists of The Harmony Project: Leimert Park Choir. You will also hear different actors reading the part of Moses. In our adaptation of *exagoge*, each actor in the ensemble took a turn playing Moses as we tracked his evolution over the course of a lifetime. When a new person stepped into the role, they put on a Greek-inspired mask to signify this change.

And now, Season Two, Episode Eight: “Adapting Exagoge”.



Actor 1: When Jacob left Canaan land, he went down to Egypt, having 70 souls with him, and begot afterwards many people who were abused and oppressed. They had seen suffering at the hands of wicked men and mighty forces.

Actor 2: King Pharaoh, seeing the Hebrew race growing, devised much treachery against them, torturing men with brick work and the burden of building city towers, devised by labor from ill-fated brothers.

Actor 3: *Then, Pharaoh called for the Hebrew sons to be tossed into the deep flowing water. One mother hid her son for three months, but no longer could he stay hidden. So she robed him and abandoned him to float down a treacherous river.*

Actor 4: *Thereafter, the daughter of the king with her maidens came down to wash clean her youthful skin. And seeing the boy, at once knowing he was a Hebrew, she took him in her arms.*

Actor 5: *And then his sister, Miriam, who was watching nearby, ran to this daughter of the king and said, "I will find a nurse quickly for this child from among his people."*

Actor 6: *And soon, his own mother held him. And the king's daughter said, "Woman, nurse this child, and I will pay you for it."*

Actor 7: *And she named him Moses, because she took him from the drowning water.*

Dr. Miriam Heller Stern: So let's start with the text. There are a lot of rich texts in this play, from the original *Exagoge* to the numerous voices from American history, and texts from the voices of refugees and their experiences, that you bring together. Tell us a little bit about this mash-up of voices in the play. How did you decide what voices to bring into this Hellenistic text, and how did you weave it together?

Aaron Henne: Great, thanks, Miriam. So the fragments are truly that. They are fragments, and they were actually found in references from Christian theologians at a later time. So that's actually why we have the fragments, which is a whole interesting discussion in and of itself. And, so, first we began with the premise of why might this text have been created; asking hard questions, you know? You're living in Alexandria. You may not be going to Israel and making sacrifice at the temple. Did this have a ritual function? Was it engaging with the theater of the time? So we had to start with asking what was the original intention of the text. And, of course, this is the time when there was basically a civil war between Jews, right? Hellenistic Judaism. So also, what kind of statement might this Diaspora Jew had wanted to make about his Jewish identity? And so we wanted to ask those questions. We then started asking each of the sequences we had, what kind of metaphors were present in them, right? So, for example, there was a remarkable moment in the writing where Moses has a dream of being on Sinai and sitting on God's throne. And that's also a reference, for those who know Book of Enoch — there's a likelihood of a connection there.

Actor 3: *I have a dream of a throne at the top of Sinai. It was so large that it reached the folds of heaven. A man of noble birth sat upon it, having a crown on his head and holding a large scepter in his left hand. With his right, he motioned for me. And I stood before the throne. He gave me the scepter and told me to sit upon the great throne. He gave me the royal crown and then got off the throne. And I looked upon the entire Earth, and below the Earth and above the sky, great number of stars fell at my feet, and I counted all of them. They passed before me like a company of troops.*

Aaron: He's living in Diaspora. Does he feel like a refugee? Does Moses feel like a refugee? What's the experiences of refugees in the US? So, suddenly, we had to figure out how to look for refugee and immigrant narratives that could turn into dreams or nightmares.

Actor 5: *I am unable to move. I came to the US through the Iraqi Young Leaders exchange program. I was here for only months when I get a call from my family saying they have left home and the village was taken over by ISIL. I cannot not go back. I applied for asylum, and I wait for an answer. I wait, as my sisters are taken as slaves. I can see them. I don't know how, but there they are in the corners of my eyes. They wave to me and smile as if to say, it's okay. You will free us by being free. I must use this freedom to reach them. I am not a slave. I try to lift my legs, but it's no use. I look down and I see that they're bound, not by steel or iron, but by paper with the tiniest type, official-looking, filled with*

words I do not understand. They're linked together like those chains that children make to brighten a dank classroom. They should not be able to hold me, yet they do. They are unbreakable. I am not going anywhere.

Aaron: So we kind of did this mash-up, and the cast would say, well, maybe the scene means this, maybe the scene means that. Because we develop our shows together. We have script meetings every month for about a year, with the whole team. So that's kind of how that mash-up happened. We looked for what is the metaphor present in the sequence. And then, what is the thing from modern or contemporary life that could marry to it.

Miriam: So I'm sure that you were all struck by the insertion of this mythical bird, the phoenix, at the Red Sea, which, last I checked, does not appear in the original story.

Aaron (jokingly): What!?

Miriam: But it's a powerful metaphor, inserted in a Hellenistic telling of the Exodus from Egypt, retold in Egypt, second century, BCE.

Actor 7: *It was twice the size of an eagle. Its feathers were multi-colored. Its breasts appear to be purple, and its legs red. Around its neck, saffron-dyed tresses hung. Its head was like that of a cock. It was looking around with its yellow eyes, with its pupils as pomegranate seeds. His voice was the most extraordinary of all. It seemed as if it was king, for all the birds together, being fearful, followed after. He was in the front. And, as a prideful bull, he lifted his foot and walked with a quick step.*

Miriam: Can you tell us a little bit about how you interpreted that metaphor, and what was the phoenix in the play?

Aaron: It was the idea of, from death, from destruction, one can be reborn into something even more grand.

Actor 7: *Then the prideful bird built a nest of incense twigs where it ignited in flame, its body reduced to ash. And from these charred remains, a worm emerged, making its home amongst that which had died. And there it ate the ash until it was so full, it bursted skin and became a bird. Yes, made from the one who had perished before, but somehow even more beautiful. The Hebrews wept. They could not say why. And they rose to their feet and walked onward.*

Aaron: Seeing this phoenix is what encouraged them to keep walking on. That's kind of the place we thought it could hold. But then you have the dramatic irony of who's talking about it is a messenger from Egypt who sees it as a harbinger of terrible things, right? So it is hopeful for the Hebrews, but we also get this empathetic view of an Egyptian messenger saying, and then they kept walking; you're in trouble.

Actor 7: *And now, they are an even greater danger. It is one thing to be willing to do what it takes to survive. It is another to believe that your future must be born from destruction.*

Miriam: Tell us about the Moses mask and the various stages of Moses's life that play out.

Aaron: We track a Moses who goes through phases of being a stranger — coming to Midian and needing to be accepted —

Actor 2: *The first time I entered as a member of the tribe into the temple, I hoped the worshipers would not look at me. This would be a sign that I had become one of them, a face not unlike their own and thus not worthy of notice.*

Aaron: — and then goes through a phase of trying to make a life there —

Actor 3: *Your people are now my own. As they suffer, I do as well. As they celebrate, I do as well. Let me stay here, where I am both a man and a husband, a father and a friend.*

Aaron: — and then goes through a phase of realizing he doesn't quite belong and decides to go up to the mountain and be alone.

Actor 6: *40 years, and I barely see Moses any longer. He has retreated to the mountain. Some say it is because our sheep have more room to graze up there. They might be right. Or it might be that my husband has always felt oppressed by us, my father and friends, and rather than fighting back, he became invisible, so that our attentions would not turn his way.*

Aaron: And then he catches fire and becomes the revolutionary. That's where we hear Patrick Henry.

Actor 5: *I know not what course others may take, but, as for me, give me liberty or give me death.*

Aaron: Then, that Moses leads the revolution, which is the 10 plagues we staged as a revolution.

Actor 5: *With this rod, you shall bring about your freedom. (music is heard). First, the river flows with blood, then every stream and pool of water — a show of power that cannot be denied. But Pharaoh calls forth his company of troops, and they too fill the waters with blood, they too rain death on all those that drink, all those that feed, all those that live. Even their own die. It is worse for them than us. The Egyptians suffered and we survive, for we have grown used to belonging only to death.*

Aaron: And then the death happens at Sinai, and there is: What is it to become a leader who means well as a revolutionary, but then starts asking for purity?

Actor 7: *When Moses returned, he claimed that he had talked with his god and the people bowed in awe. And he said:*

Actor 6: *God needs us to lead. God needs us. God needs only the righteous. We must make this new world God's alone.*

Aaron: And then: What is it — in that last Moses — to be left with, as we all know in the story, I can't go on? It's really to the next. I intended well, and I did a lot of good, and I also did some challenging things. And how do we hold both? And what legacy are we leaving for the next generation?

Actor 7: *Gather to me and listen well. I will not live for much longer. The struggles our enemies caused have left me brittle. Soon, I will break and become as the sand beneath your feet. And I fear that you will not look, and you'll forget that my shattered bones have laid the path for you. And so in time, misfortune will become you. Do not forget.*

Aaron: So that was the idea is that we're sort of tracking this whole life, going through phases of ups and downs and a trajectory of change that eventually leaves in an uncertain and a bit of a fraught place.

Miriam: I know that you build your productions around historical events, historical narratives, as a mirror for the questions you'd like us to think about today. Tell us a little bit about that mirror and theater as a mirror.

Aaron: So I think what we're doing is saying to people, here's a complexity in our world. Sit in the complexity. Actually, don't go to — immediately to the answer you think you know. And it's arts activism in the sense that in the long — in the long trajectory of it plants seeds that will hopefully bear fruit later on. But I hope that anyone watching a piece like this is seeing themselves. They're going, oh, that's right. That's right. My family, whatever generation back or this generation, had to find a way.

Actor 5: *By any measure, our right to be here had been established. For years, my father worked on the transcontinental railroad, waiting to see his children. He bravely led the way, risking his life so that we might be free. But then Congress decided there were too many of us, and a law was passed. We could not come. Finally, through a mixture of cunning and courage, we found a way. Our father had died. We were too late.*

Aaron: And so I think that's the kind of mirror I'm looking to hold up, and, also, you know, just history. I'm a big fan of deep scholarship and history and letting it inform. We have to remember that we are always in a moment packed with political and social considerations, and any looking at any story we tell — if we forget those political and social considerations, we are not actually seeing the story. We're seeing an echo of the story. We're seeing a shadow of the story.

Miriam: So speaking of that echo, tell us about the perspective of the Midianites and the idea of making the Midianites the Greek chorus.

Aaron: The original fragments have no Greek chorus. Greek theater plays from this time had a chorus, had people who were commenting, often elders of the city. And so we were like, who's the chorus? Is there a chorus? And the Moses monologue that we heard Jenny beautifully deliver —

Actor 1: *For now, I have wandered to this foreign land —*

Aaron: — is how that monologue ends in the original. And I was like, oh, huh, what do the people who live there have to say, this new land, this Midian? Oh, they must be our chorus. And then the metaphor of Midian essentially becoming a place of many peoples in the desert, and a stand-in, in many ways, for America.

Actor 4: *We need more than politics as usual when it comes to immigration. We need reasoned, thoughtful, compassionate debate that focuses on our hopes, not our fears. My people of Midian, we have heard about the Hebrews who are distances away. They are surrounded by oppressors with their backs bent against the wind, slashing again and again. And we who are united are strong enough to offer them relief.*

Miriam: And the whole idea of place shifting, —

Aaron: Yeah.

Miriam: — place being a political tool itself, is an important theme in the play.

Aaron: Yes. Absolutely. And also that these places we claim as our own were often a place either by force or by choice or by some combination of the two we had to make a home. And so, so what does it mean to claim something as your own and then to close the borders?

Miriam: We see so many stories of suffering in this play: migration, forced migration, refugees. What was the story that you were trying to tell?

Aaron: I'm always a little reluctant to say what I intend because, as audience members, I want you to be left with what you received and didn't receive. I want you to leave uncertain, and what's the play saying, and I saw this and I saw that. That actually, I think, is good theater. It leaves us — it leaves us in a place of question, and it leaves us in a place of conversation and being a little disrupted, which I think good art is, is often a disruption.

Actor 4: *You may think that because he is Alawite he agrees with Assad. It is not that simple. They belong to the same people, but not necessarily the same ideas. The complexity of their politics matter little when he is walking past the shrine and suddenly a car — or maybe it was a truck, I don't remember — explodes, sending metal in every direction. They say, this is where the prophet's daughter is buried. At least he is in good company.*

Aaron: This play was originally staged in 2016. And we were in a particular fraught moment at that time. We're in another, different fraught moment, although definitely on a trajectory. And I was interested in people going, what is it to remember really being the stranger? What is it to remember really where I came from, and what is it to be harmed? And so I forget. And so I forget. And how do I reconcile the forgetting and the need to remember, in order to actually do the next right thing? That's kind of where I wanted people.

Actor 6: *Living here in the United States, I do not think of my mother. I was born in Soekaboemi, on the island of Java. World War II started, and we escaped to my grandparents' plantation, thinking there would be no violence there. But that is where they picked my mom up. Shoved a gun in her face and took her we know not where, and we could say nothing. Our standing was low and their power great. That is when we decided to leave.*

Miriam: So what were some of the key questions that you hoped the audience would go home wrestling with?

Aaron: Well, one is for those who know the story, the Exodus narrative — people at least know the broad strokes in our society, for the most part — one is just ask them to wrestle with: Wait, what's this story actually saying? How does it actually operate? We often skip over the real darkness that's at the center of the story

Actor 7: *From gate to gate throughout the camp, his followers took their swords and separated head from body again and again. Some 3000 of Moses's own ancestral family fell that very day. The stories of inhuman brutality to their own brothers and sisters are numerous and not to be denied.*

Aaron: Let's blow up our mythologies. They have all sorts of highs and lows and depths, and the flattening robs them of their power. And so what is it to ask questions of the story? And then, once we're asking questions of the story and we're acknowledging that darkness exists in our mythologies, then we can acknowledge the darkness in ourselves and we can take a look at it and kind of turn it over.

Miriam: And, of course, where the play lands is with the Harmony Youth Project. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Aaron: You know, classic Greek theater is filled with music. People don't often realize that's one of the primary modes of communication, and what happened was Michael Skloff — he said to me, I've been working with this great youth choir. They — The Harmony Leimert Park Choir — and, maybe we can have them involved. And so then that planted the seed for how do they interact in the piece. And we realized, you know, if this is a piece of — somewhat about the complexities of what are we holding on to and what do we leave behind — the only way to really ask that question is to leave the next generation onstage, and us looking at them and them looking at us, and saying, what do they

need and who are they going to become. And what are we leaving on the stage for them to hold on to? What legacy are they holding on to?

We hear the youth choir singing.

Aaron (cont'd): I want to ask you a quick question to close us out —

Miriam: Okay.

Aaron: — if I might. So you studied our process. This takes place over a year, two years, meetings. And I'd just love to hear you kind of share a little bit about your observations of what this kind of process and this kind of narrative might have to say about Jewish engagement, Jewish learning, et cetera.

Miriam: So, engaging with theater engages us with questions. It doesn't prescribe to us what we should think, but it invites us to think and invites us to wrestle and to grapple. And that's the power of arts in learning. As we watched this company develop this script over time, whether it was discussing to what extent should we be adhering to the genre of Greek tragedy or even mix in a little bit of Monty Python — that wasn't a real consideration.

Aaron: It came up for a moment.

Miriam: But it was fun. There was humor involved. There were memories of both Jewish Sunday School and Christian Sunday School, and how are God and Moses portrayed, and a lot of rethinking of old held notions of who is Moses and what is a leader and who are the Jewish people and what is our identity as a nation? And what is this story of Exodus and liberation about? And I had the opportunity, along with Dr. Tobin Belzer, to observe and study the company as they created this with you over about 6 to 12 months. Many of us weave together learning communities. We bring together learners in the hopes that they'll find personal meaning in texts, and they'll each come away with something meaningful that they can take with them in their own lives. But when the theater company comes together, rather than being a learning community, they are taking their learning and bringing it to the world in some elevated way, asking new questions and engaging other learners. So, it occurs to me that there's a way in which this model of creatives coming together to create something new with their learning is perhaps a way to elevate learning itself and get us to a place of asking richer questions, looking at different perspectives, embodying the different facets of a leader like a Moses, who we might have assumed was unidimensional, and, in fact, was a very, very complicated, complicated character. And we can look at that Moses through the lens of our own leadership and all of the many struggles and triumphs that we have.



Aaron: Thank you for listening to this episode of *The Dybbukast*, "Adapting Exagoge". Featured in this episode were actors Rob Adler, Jenny Gillett, Nick Greene, Julie Lockhart, Rebecca Rasmussen, Diana Tanaka, and Jonathan CK Williams. The music in this episode was composed by Michael Skloff and performed by the young artists of The Harmony Project: Leimert Park Choir.

Thank you to Dr. Miriam Heller Stern for facilitating the discussion and sharing her insights. Thank you to the Central Conference of American Rabbis for hosting the conversation between me and Miriam. And thanks also to Temple Israel of Hollywood, Grand Park and the Fowler Museum at UCLA for presenting the world premiere production of theatre dybbuk's *exagoge* in 2016. Miriam and Dr. Tobin Belzer coauthored an essay that investigates theatre dybbuk's process of creating *exagoge*. It will be included as a chapter in a book titled *Portraits of Adult Jewish Learning: Making Meaning At Many Tables*, published by Wipf And Stock Publishers, anticipated summer, 2022. Our theme music is

composed by Michael Skloff and produced by Sam K.S. Story editing is led by Julie Lockhart with support from me, Aaron Henne. This episode was edited by Gregory Scharpen. Please visit us at theatredybbuk.org, where you will find links to a wide variety of materials which expand upon the episode's explorations. And if you want to know more about theatre dybbuk's work in general, please sign up for our mailing list on that same website on the contact page.

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We hear the cast of *exagoge* singing.