

THE  
EXODUS  
YOU ALMOST  
PASSED OVER

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Rabbi David Fohrman



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# THE EXODUS

You Almost  
Passed Over

BY

Rabbi David Fohrman



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# Preface

## **What Kind of Book is This?**

I once read a fascinating book by Mortimer Adler, entitled *How to Read a Book*. In it, Adler argues that one of the first things a reader needs to ask themselves is: what genre does this book in front of me belong to? What *kind* of book is it? The reason this question is important to ask, he argues, is that if I do not know the kind of book I am reading, I am likely to misinterpret it. I am likely to ask the wrong questions about the book.

Imagine you are reading Carl Sandburg's poetry—but you think you're reading a meteorology textbook instead. The first line you encounter is: "The fog comes on little cat feet." You become indignant at that silly statement. Fog doesn't have feet. And it's not a cat. You conclude that you are reading a ridiculous book.

Bottom line: knowing the genre of a book makes a difference. In that spirit, let me try to clarify for you, the reader, the kind of book I've intended to write.

## **The Kind of Book This Is Not**

This book may seem a little different than some other books of biblical commentary you might have encountered. The easiest way to describe its genre might be to describe, first, what kind

of book it is *not*. Contemporary biblical commentary comes in three different varieties, more or less. This book does not neatly fit into any of them, though I think you'll find that it does include elements of all three.

One kind of biblical commentary that can be found on today's bookshelf is what we might call critical academic scholarship. While the book in your hands does make evidence-based arguments, it does not fit neatly into the academic genre. I am writing for a lay audience as much as a scholarly one, and I am also seeking to explore questions related to *meaning*: how are we meant to relate to these texts? How can they, and how should they, inform our lives? What spiritual meaning does the Torah wish us to derive from them? Academic writing is typically silent on these questions. I believe, however, that the serious student of the Bible needs to consider them.

At the other end of the spectrum lies another genre of English-language biblical commentary that focuses more directly on questions of personal relevance. This sort of commentary, however, sometimes seems less interested in rigorously examining the biblical text than in offering nuggets of inspiration for the benefit of the reader. It tends to use the biblical text as a springboard to discuss ideas the author deems to be of spiritual or religious value. While this book is not indifferent to questions of meaning, it tries to allow meaning to arise organically from a close examination of the biblical text itself. As such, it does not really belong to this genre, either.

A third kind of biblical analysis available in today's marketplace is the anthology. In today's Jewish world, such works aggregate the ideas and analyses offered by the classical commentators of the medieval era—such greats as Rashi, Ramban, Seforno, and the even earlier Sages who composed the Midrash. Such works are certainly of immense value, but this book does not belong to that genre, either. While the reader will certainly find many of these commentators cited in the pages ahead, and while the

wisdom of the Midrash serves as a guidepost for me at various crucial points, this book is not, principally, an anthology of earlier commentary.

### **The Kind of Book This Is**

What kind of book is this, then?

It is, perhaps, a guidebook. This book offers the reader a journey—a journey that I myself have taken. It is a travelogue, of sorts, of my own personal attempt to grapple with the Torah's account of the Exodus, and with the meaning of that story. I am sharing with you, a reader of the Torah, how things seem to me, a fellow reader of the Torah.

At the core of this journey is an attempt to engage with the original Hebrew text of the Torah. Everything else will revolve around that. Our journey will begin with a number of questions about the biblical text—basic questions that the average person might ask, were they encountering the stories we are looking at for the very first time. I'll introduce these questions not in the spirit of skepticism but in the spirit of genuine inquiry. By grappling with these questions, and by paying attention to cues in biblical language, we will find our way to deeper and deeper layers of meaning embedded in the text.

There is nothing new or novel in trying to engage the Torah's text directly. Truthfully, *any* classic commentator—from Rashi to the Ramban, to Seforno, to Samson Raphael Hirsch and the Ha'emek Davar—is writing to you based on the assumption that you have already made a serious attempt to understand the text. If you have not tried to do so yet, you are not yet ready to read the commentator—for indeed, you have not yet read the text that he or she is commenting upon.

Making an attempt to read the text closely is not something new in the Jewish tradition. It is something I personally learned from my *rebbe*, the late Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel, Rabbi Yaakov

Weinberg. Rabbi Weinberg believed that, when it comes to the Torah, the choice between meaning and evidence-based learning is a false one. To simply use the Bible as fodder for sermons is to disregard its depth and sophistication. To confine the Torah to the realm of sterile intellectual curiosity is to similarly misunderstand and devalue it. Rigorous, evidence-based study and spiritual meaning must not only coexist in our study of the Torah, but the former must be a bridge to the latter.

I have written this book in an informal style, eschewing the detached air of academic impartiality or tendentious prose that pervades many scholarly works. My hope is that the reader can spend his or her time figuring out what the Torah means to say, rather than what Fohrman means to say. As befits a guidebook, in these pages, I have opted to engage the reader directly. If it feels like I'm talking to you in this book, that is by design. I am opening up my own personal journey through biblical texts and their mysteries to the reader who cares to join me on a re-creation of that journey. If you accept my invitation, I will do my best to provide you with a guided adventure that hopefully will kindle in you some of the excitement and thrill of discovery that I myself have found in the sacred words of the biblical Exodus saga.

PART I

Taking Apart  
the Exodus Story

# The Angel in the Back of the Room

In Hebrew, it is *Pesach*; in English, it is Passover. But either way, it seems like an odd name for a holiday. Would *you* have named it that?<sup>1</sup>

Imagine it is 3,000 years ago. You are an angel in heaven, and you have been invited to join God's Nominating Committee for the Naming of New Festivals.<sup>2</sup> One day, you and your fellow angels on the committee get word that the Master of the Universe would like to make a shiny new festival that celebrates His miraculous deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

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1. The biblical text often calls the seven-day holiday that we know of as Passover *Chag ha-Matzot*, "The Holiday of Matzot," and seems to reserve the name *Pesach*, or Passover, for the first night (Leviticus 23:5–6 and elsewhere). However, the use of the name *Pesach* to characterize the entire holiday seems to reach back to the days of King Josiah (see, for example, 2 Chronicles, chapter 35). Moreover, the Talmud regularly calls the entire holiday Passover. At the very least, starting with the Rabbinic Sages long ago, Jewish tradition has ensconced Passover as the name by which this holiday is known. It is this tradition that we will be wondering about below.

2. This is a variation on a thought experiment I first posed in my previous book, *The Queen You Thought You Knew*.

You immediately get down to work with your colleagues to brainstorm some possible names.

The angel on your left nominates *Independence Day*. Most everyone nods in agreement: it's nice, it's short, it gets right to the point. Someone else says, "We could call it *Freedom Day*; how about *Freedom Day*?" A bunch of angels concur. You put *Freedom Day* up on the whiteboard, right below *Independence Day*.

But then imagine some angel in the back of the room raises his hand and says, "I have a great idea. Much better than those names. Let's call it *Passover*. Passover is a really wonderful name."

So you say, as politely as you can, "Can you clarify a bit? That seems like a strange name. Why should we call it Passover?"

The angel at the back of the room speaks up again: "See, it's kind of a pun." He looks disappointed at having to explain his little joke. "You know how God made all these plagues to let the Israelites go, and then there was this tenth plague, right? And in the tenth plague, all of the firstborn children of the Egyptians were killed. But the Israelites? They were saved. So you could say that God sort of 'passed over' their firstborn children that night, when He didn't kill them. You get it? He *passed over* their firstborn? So let's call it Passover!"

You'd assume that few of your fellow angels would be impressed. What kind of name is that? Look, it's all very nice that our firstborn were saved from destruction that night, but in the scheme of things, that's just one particular detail about one particular plague. Yes, it's an important detail—no one wishes that our firstborn were killed—but still, it's a detail; it doesn't address what the holiday is *really* about, in the big picture. It doesn't speak of freedom, independence, redemption, or the birth of a nation.

But then imagine that, yes, God decides to go with that back-of-the-room angel's suggestion: the name Passover wins the day. You'd be left incredulous. And, of course, this isn't really a thought experiment at all; it's more or less real life. The Torah

*does* ordain a holiday to celebrate our Exodus from Egypt, and, of all things, that holiday ends up being called Passover!

Remarkable. What are we to make of that?

Perhaps the name suggests that we should adjust our sights somewhat. We tend to think of Passover the way I've just described it to you, as the holiday on which we got our freedom.<sup>3</sup> And yet, the Torah's *own* name for the night we went free doesn't emphasize the "free" part, it emphasizes being "passed over." Could it be that, somehow, the essence of the holiday really *does* revolve around the mysterious salvation that our firstborn experienced that night?

There might well be reason to believe it does. One gets the sense that the role of the firstborn children in the Exodus story is anything but peripheral. What happened to the firstborn on the night Israel went free seems to represent something more, as if their experience was a crucible, of sorts; as if their experience pointed to some kind of larger idea or mission.

We can demonstrate that with a second thought experiment...

### **The Little Black Boxes**

Let's imagine that one day, you decide to create your very own religion (don't try this at home). You put together lots of commandments for your band of followers, along with a bunch of theological tenets you'd like them to embrace. You write it all down in this really long book. Then you have a wonderful idea: why not create ways your adherents will be able to express their fealty to the tenets of this book? So you decide to create some rituals. In one of them, your followers will fashion for themselves

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3. Indeed, even later Rabbinic characterizations of Passover suggest as much; in our prayers, we regularly refer to the holiday as *zman cheiruteinu*, "the time of our freedom."

little black boxes. In these boxes, they will place a scroll on which they will inscribe representative sections of the book. The scroll will contain the most basic tenets of their new faith. Your adherents will show their devotion to these tenets by literally strapping the boxes onto their arms and heads at least once a day.

As it happens, Judaism has just such a ritual device. The little black boxes are known as *tefillin*, and they contain scrolls with short sections of the Bible inscribed upon them.

So back to our thought experiment: let's talk about what you would put in those boxes. If the book with all those laws was the Five Books of Moses—what short selections from the Five Books would you choose to put in those boxes?

Well, you might nominate the short text known as the Shema. The Shema proclaims one's basic belief in God, and is generally seen as the credo of the Jewish faith: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." That would be a good thing to put in the boxes, right?

One might go further, and add the next paragraph of the Shema declaration. This next paragraph instructs people to love God with all their hearts and with all their souls. That would be good to put in the boxes, too.

What else would you put in the boxes? Remember, there's not a lot of room on the little scroll. You have to choose carefully.

To borrow our earlier image, imagine that our friend, the angel in the back of the room, is back. He raises his hand and suggests the following:

"Why don't we include the law of *peter chamor*, the law of the broken-necked donkey?"

"Excuse me?" you respond, somewhat confused.

"Sure," he says, "you know the law. It's right there in Exodus, chapter 13. See, the Bible says that whenever the Children of Israel have a firstborn male—whether human or animal—they should consider it sanctified to God. If it's a human child, it needs to be redeemed with money, to take ownership of it back from God,

so to speak. If the offspring is an animal, then it depends. If it's an animal that can be offered on the altar, like a sheep, then the firstborn is slaughtered as an offering to God. If it's an animal that is not kosher for sacrifice, like a donkey, then the owner can redeem it with money, and use the money to buy an animal that *can* be offered, like a lamb. And for a donkey in particular, there's a special law—if you don't redeem your firstborn donkey, then it must be killed; the Bible says its neck is to be broken.”

The angel takes a deep breath, and comes to his emphatic conclusion:

“So I say we include *that* law in the little boxes!”

If you were in charge of the ritual committee, you'd probably ask this angel to find himself another job. Look, you might tell this fellow, it's a fine law, this idea of redemption of the firstborn and all those permutations about the donkey and everything. It's great for putting in the book of Leviticus somewhere. But we only have so much room in the little boxes. We must save the space for what's really essential, for the laws and ideas that define the essence of what it means to be a Jew. There's no room for that law in the boxes.

But lo and behold, there *is* room for his law in the boxes; for when we exit our thought experiment and rejoin real life, we find that tefillin, as described by the Torah, do contain, of all things, the law of the broken-necked donkey. Surprisingly, the Torah mandates that tefillin must include these laws. Why? Because they are meant to recall the way God spared our firstborn the night we left Egypt and went free (Exodus 13:14–16).

So there you have it. The threat to the firstborn on the night we went free, and their redemption from that threat—these ideas are evidently more fundamental than we might have supposed. Passover gets its name from them. And these ideas make their way onto the ultimate short list—the tefillin scroll that contains the basic tenets of the Bible. How might we explain that?

### Beyond Biblical Poetry

I mentioned above the possibility that the Torah is using the idea of firstbornness as a kind of shorthand, perhaps, for a larger idea. I want to call your attention to a strange statement that seems to confirm this. It appears at the very beginning of the Exodus narrative, before even the first of the ten plagues has struck Egypt:

וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר יְקֹוֹה בְּנִי בְּכֹרִי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל: וְאָמַר אֵלַיִךְ שְׁלַח אֶת־בְּנִי וַיַּעֲבֹדֵנִי

*And you shall tell Pharaoh, Thus says God: My firstborn child is Israel. And I say to you: Send out my child that he may serve Me... (Exodus 4:22–23)*

If you stop to think about it, what the verse says here is puzzling. Evidently, God had instructed Moses to go to Pharaoh and to use those exact words, “My firstborn child is Israel,” in phrasing his demand that Pharaoh set Israel free. But the words are so hard to understand; what does it mean to claim that Israel is the firstborn child of God?

Maybe calling Israel firstborn is nothing more than a flourish of biblical poetry. In that case, it simply indicates that God sort of likes the Children of Israel, and that’s the end of it. Anyway, we might argue, no one really takes biblical poetry all that literally. The Bible speaks of a land flowing with milk and honey, but no one traveling to Israel packs galoshes so they can wade through the honey-filled streets more easily. So too, when one encounters a biblical phrase like “Israel is My firstborn child,” a first reaction might be to see it as some sort of flowery, non-literal turn of phrase.

But while this might seem a handy explanation, the rest of the verse simply does not allow for it. After calling Israel the firstborn child of God, the verse continues:

וְתִמְאַן לְשַׁלְחוֹ הַיְהוָה אֶת־בְּרִיָּה בְּכֹרֶךָ:

*And if you refrain from sending him out, behold, I  
will kill your firstborn child (Exodus 4:23)*

The Almighty makes a direct comparison between Israel, His firstborn, and the actual firstborn children of the Egyptians. On the basis of this comparison, He states that if the Egyptians fail to send out God's firstborn, they will ultimately suffer the demise of their own firstborn—a prophecy that comes to its chilling realization when the tenth plague eventually strikes.

So let's be clear: people will die because of this firstborn-to-firstborn comparison. *You take my firstborn; I'll take your firstborn!* Now, you'll excuse me, but this doesn't sound much like poetry. This sounds real. It sounds like God is quite serious about the notion that Israel is a firstborn nation. But why? Israel was not the first nation ever to come into existence. Lots of others were around before Israel came on the scene. In what sense are they firstborn?

### **A Nation, First Born**

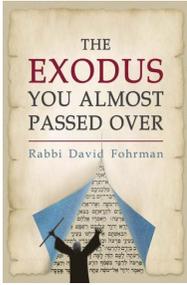
At this point, we don't know much, but we do know one thing for sure: the firstborn theme is everywhere in the Exodus story. The story begins with God's statement to Moses that Israel is His firstborn. It ends with the Smiting of the Firstborn. It is commemorated by tefillin and by rituals such as the redemption of the firstborn. The holiday that celebrates it all is named for what happened to our firstborn. The firstborn theme is the fabric out of which this story is woven. To know the Exodus is to know firstbornness.

Maybe, then, the Exodus story is about more than we ever suspected. Is it about freedom? Yes, it surely is. Independence and the birth of a nation? Yes, that, too. But it is about more than this.

In this book, I want to argue that the Exodus story tells us who we are. It is a story that tells us not just about our past, but about our future. It speaks not only of our birth, but of our destiny. It speaks of *why* we are here and what we are meant to achieve. The story is about what it means to be a firstborn nation.

In the pages that follow, we are going to examine the Exodus story and try to unpack some of its mysteries—among them, the meaning of the firstborn theme. We will try to read the story with fresh eyes, and taste its newness. I invite you to come along with me on that journey, so that together, we may thrill in the discovery of unseen delights, uncovering the hidden secrets of this ancient and sacred saga.

Rediscover The Exodus You Almost Passed Over: [Purchase Now](#)



## About the Author

Rabbi David Fohrman is an internationally renowned lecturer on Biblical themes and the principal educator at Aleph Beta Academy. He has served as an adjunct professor at the Johns Hopkins University, and as a lead writer and editor for ArtScroll's Talmud translation project. Rabbi Fohrman has also served as scholar for the Hoffberger Foundation for Torah Study for 10 years. He is author of "[The Beast that Crouches at the Door](#)," finalist for the 2007 National Jewish Book Award, and "[The Queen You Thought You Knew](#)." Rabbi Fohrman spent his childhood years in the San Francisco Bay Area – where he reveled in the opportunity to hike in Yosemite National Park. He currently lives in Woodmere, NY with his wife and children (but is still game to head back to Yosemite at a moment's notice).

## Book Reviews

Read more than 100 customer reviews on [Amazon](#), plus more five-star reviews on [Good Reads](#).

Rabbi Fohrman's new work, "[The Exodus You Almost Passed Over](#)," is a welcome addition to the corpus of Passover-related literature that offers new insights into the timeless story of Passover. Like his earlier works, this is a smooth, quick read, whose light tone belies its vast scholarship. Utilizing his characteristic conversational tone, Fohrman guides his readers in investigating the word choice and structure of the Bible's description of the Exodus... Such an insight, both into the concept of firstborn-hood in the Bible, as well as in life as a whole, has a particularly salient relevance within the context of the Passover seder.

–[Stu Halpern](#); read the full review at [Jewish Book Council](#)

Why is Rabbi David Fohrman's new book different from all other books? There is a paradoxical characteristic about this book. It is both a page turner and not a page turner. It is a page turner because the reader is eager to turn the page in order to find the answers to intriguing questions Fohrman poses. It is not a page turner because Fohrman's analysis of events gives the reader pause to ponder and contemplate viewpoints he has presented. If you like surprises and revelations about biblical events, supported by lucid interpretations of biblical texts, then Rabbi Fohrman's book is one you will thoroughly enjoy reading.

–[Steve Wenick](#); read the full review at [The Philadelphia Jewish Post](#)

## About Aleph Beta

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