



HILLEL'S JOSEPH MEYERHOFF
CENTER FOR JEWISH LEARNING

PLAGUED- FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

<http://www.guiltandpleasure.com/plagued>

In this short story, Shalom Auslander retells the well known story of the Israelites exodus from Egypt, from an arresting and irreverent new perspective, similar to the way that *Wicked* challenges *The Wizard of Oz*. Salon members will likely be familiar with the story of the Exodus, if not from Passover seders and text study, than at least from popular films like *Ten Commandments* and *The Prince of Egypt*. This short story raises questions about identity, peoplehood, and the making and breaking of cultural history, by offering a fresh take on an old tale.

This story is likely to illicit many diverse and interesting reactions from salon participants. Your job as the facilitator is not to push the conversation in any specific direction, but to help the conversation flow naturally and help draw everyone into the discussion. Sometimes great conversation happens on its own, and sometimes it is necessary to pose questions to the group which can spark discussion or advance the conversation after a lull.

Here are some sample discussion prompt questions to ask at your salon:

1. What do you think of this type of storytelling? Have you seen other examples of this format- retelling a classic story from an alternative perspective? How does this story differ from other “retellings” you have read?
2. What did you find surprising about this story? How has reading this short story challenged your understanding of the story of the Israelites exodus from Egypt?
3. What specific themes did Auslander emphasize throughout the novel? What do you think he is trying to get across to the reader?
4. In the Haggadah read at Passover seders, Jews recall their obligation to remember the exodus in every generation, as if they themselves went out of slavery from Egypt. How does reading this story defy and/or fulfill this obligation?
5. When thinking about the story of the Exodus, did you ever consider that some Israelites may have been happily integrated into Egyptian society and unwilling to leave?
6. How does Seth, the main character, understand his own identity compared to how others see him? Which matters more, self-perception or external-perceptions? Do you feel empathy for Seth?
7. Does this story successfully satirize American culture and/or American Jewish culture? Is that the goal of the story?
8. What do you think of the different ways Moses is depicted in the story (human rights activist, terrorist, politician, prince, prophet, magician, madman, etc.)?
9. Does this short story make the story of the exodus from Egypt feel more real or more mythic/fictional?

10. What is God's role in this story? How is God depicted (thug, murderer, etc.)?
11. Are the Israelites naturally hated, or hated only because of the plagues?
12. What does it mean to identify/be identified as an Israelite in the story (race, nationality, people, religion, culture, or something else)? How is this different/similar from our understanding of what it means to identify/be identified as Jewish?

Additional opportunities to share with students:

1. Personal website of the author with additional stories, columns and reviews: <http://www.shalomauslander.com/>
2. Nextbook is an organization devoted to promoting Jewish literature and culture. The author writes a column for their website regularly and he sometimes speaks at their events around the country: www.nextbook.org
3. If you enjoyed this contemporary retelling of the biblical narrative, you may also enjoy Jonathan Goldstein's take on the story of Noah and the Flood. An audio version of this story can be found on an episode of Public Radio's "This American Life." The 14 minute story can be found 44:18 into episode #321 entitled "Sink or Swim" - http://www.thisamericanlife.org/Radio_Episode.aspx?episode=321