

“A Little Foreskin Nation”

Ben Scherban

Shalom Auslander

Foreskin's Lament

Riverhead Books, 2007, 320 pages.

Shalom Auslander was raised “like a veal in the Orthodox Jewish town of Monsey, New York,” and is positively haunted by the harsh image of the God (“a prick”) he was educated to believe in as a boy. As his memoir, *Foreskin's Lament*, opens, he is now married, estranged from his parents, and expecting a child. A writer whose other published work includes a collection of short stories entitled *Beware of God*, Auslander's latest work is a satirical, often hilarious record of his troubled relationship with God from his childhood to the present. Auslander is terrified that God will kill his pregnant wife and their unborn child – indeed, he spends much of his time dreaming up various horrific deaths that might strike them or anyone else close to him.

Auslander is no heretic. He is very clear about where he stands, theologically speaking: “The people who raised me will say that I am not religious. They are mistaken. What I am is not *observant*. But I am painfully, cripplingly, incurably, miserably religious...I'm doing my best to lose Him. I'm failing miserably.” But this wasn't always the case. One of the most frightening moments in the book occurs when, in third grade, young Shalom first begins to sin. Auslander's home was not a happy one. At the Sabbath table on Friday nights his father, drunk, would regularly beat Auslander's older brother. One day Shalom learns in school that “until the age of thirteen, all of a boy's sins are ascribed to his father...My heart leaped...I could sin so much Hashem [God] would have to kill my father.” And sin he does, as best as he can, by secretly eating milk after meat and turning on lights on the Sabbath. The rest

of Auslander's life seems to spring in one way or another from this childish and desperate attempt to save his older brother from his hated father by utilizing a loophole in divine law. His father doesn't die, but nothing will ever be the same, and in time Shalom progresses to other violations of Jewish law as well.

Freudians would have a field day with Auslander, but it is obvious, and even he implies, that much of his theological difficulties can be traced to his fear of his abusive father. When he is eight years old he hears his teacher refer to God as "Our Father in Heaven." Auslander recounts:

I shuddered. There's another one? In heaven? *That's* God? Did He stumble around in His underwear? How big was His fist? As big as a car? As big as a house? What was it like to get punched by a house? If someone hit you with a fist as big as a house, you'd probably die, right, I mean, if God ever got drunk...

Auslander does not push the point, but it is telling nonetheless.

The book progresses by jumping back and forth from Auslander's current preparations for parenting with his expectant wife to various scenes from his childhood, all of which seem to alienate him more and more from his community and his God. In fifth grade, for instance, his parents transfer him "from the ultra-Orthodox Yeshiva of Spring Valley to the ordinarily Orthodox Torah Academy, just a short walk from our home." There he sticks out, especially because of his "enormous black velvet yarmulke," but he begins to learn about the opposite sex, attempting to imitate Abraham bargaining for Sodom by bargaining with God for the heart of one Deena Seigman. It doesn't work out very well, and Shalom takes it personally. And as he continues to attempt to haggle with God and continues to be disappointed, he begins to sin more and more.

By the time he is in high school, Shalom has given up on the "endless spiritual scorecard manipulation." "I was tired," he tells us, "of trying to find favor in someone or Something else's eyes, particularly when that someone or

Something seemed to be assholes and/or an Asshole.” He regularly smokes pot, eats non-kosher food, and violates the Sabbath. He has also begun stealing, relying on his yarmulke to allay suspicion. “The only places I didn’t steal from were the porno shops. Yarmulkes didn’t fool the porno store owners...they understood we were all the same.” Auslander also discovers Western high culture, going to the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, browsing (and stealing from) the shelves of bookstores, all the while becoming more and more separated from his parents and his old friends.

Eventually Shalom winds up in Israel to study in a yeshiva for a year after graduation, although how that happens is a story in itself. He attends Neveh Zion, which is at the bottom of the “piety scale,” “with no rules, no set schedules, and no expectations.” Here he eventually begins a tentative reconciliation with God, and even returns for a second year of study. But his newfound religiosity is not fated to last.

Auslander’s final repudiation of religion (brief snippets from some 15 years) is textually interspersed with his current quest: now 35 years old, Auslander still cannot escape from the baleful influence of a God, the ultimate sadist, looming over his life and laughing at his every move. Despite Auslander’s non-observance, he is torn over whether to circumcise his baby if it is a boy, as it eventually turns out to be, and how to deal with his parents, who want to see their grandson. His decision is an agonizing one, and it is this search that gives rise to the title of the book, as Auslander realizes that he is a foreskin himself, “cut off from my past, uncertain of my future, bloodied, beaten, tossed away.”

The seriousness of the subject matter should not overshadow the fact that this is a very funny book, even if touches on some rather prickly points within the Jewish, and indeed any monotheistic religious, community. Auslander has an enjoyable, if sometimes heavy-handed, style, and his eye for satire is usually on target; if vicious, it is always at least somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Displaying childish logic in justifying his first non-kosher purchase, for instance, he reasons:

There was no sin in just *buying* it was there? I could always throw it out. It's not like I *had* to eat it. I mean, if just buying something that might be used to commit a sin was in itself a sin, then you probably couldn't buy a car because you might drive it on Sabbath, right? But Rabbi Kahn had a car; my parents had two cars. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai probably had a car.

Still, as amusing as the book is, it does begin to drag a bit three-quarters of the way through. After a while, Auslander's God-phobia can grow tiring. The scathing section dealing with his sojourn in Teaneck (where "the Promised Land was a thirty-year mortgage on a two-and-a-half-bath with a cook's kitchen and two-car garage on the Queen Anne Road side of town") and his attempts to navigate watching Ranger playoff games on the Sabbath ("Category 37"), work better as stand-alone stories. In some cases, these stories have appeared in other publications, and indeed seem almost to have been grafted into the body of the book. It is funny, and it is revealing, but at this point we have heard it before.

The main problem with *Foreskin's Lament*, though, is that ultimately Auslander's conception of God is a childish one, of "a man who was very strong." For this reason, the sections devoted to his childhood ring most convincingly, while later sections can seem slightly caricaturized. Auslander does deal with God more sophisticatedly as he grows older, but he never stops relating to the concept of God as a person. This makes for good reading but bad theology. True, the book is a memoir, not a religious apology; he is not arguing doctrinal nuances but attempting to detail his own experience. As such, his own portrait of God cannot be challenged, at least within the text. Yet to a certain extent, his theological position demands some sort of judgment by the reader: Auslander's divine dilemma is exactly where he expects (and gets) the reader's sympathy. But each reader will have to decide personally how compelling Auslander's paranoia is.

Regardless, the most important part of *Foreskin's Lament* is clearly the social criticism intertwined within it. Auslander is afraid of religion and

what it has led to in his own life. Theological abuse, he calls it, is worse than sexual abuse: “It involves adults, known or unknown to the underage victim, telling them that a Lunatic runs the world, that He’s spying on them, that He’s waiting for them to break a rule.” Auslander also targets hypocrisy and stupidity in the Orthodox world; but, while it is unfortunate he faced so much of it, it is obviously neither a fair nor representative sample. Again, because this is a personal memoir, is Auslander therefore justified in his actions, and more importantly, in his criticism? Here too each reader will have to decide. But Auslander’s social criticism is certainly much more important than his theological criticism, especially in highlighting the problems a (perhaps all too common) poor religious education can lead to, irrelevant of the truth or value of that position when presented properly.

What, then, is the point of *Foreskin’s Lament*? At the end, Auslander writes, “I’ve been thinking about the people in my life now, and here’s what I think: I think they’re all foreskins...A little foreskin nation, trying their best to start over, build up, move on.” Ultimately, *Foreskin’s Lament* is a cry of hope, hope to escape the human condition (for who isn’t a foreskin, in some sense?), to leave the world a better place, to raise a new generation that won’t have to face its own problems. One does not need to agree with Auslander’s analysis of God or Judaism to be able to laugh as well as wince when reading *Foreskin’s Lament*. And one does not need to renounce Judaism, as he does, to respect his decision to create his own community of foreskins and give his son a better, less biased upbringing than his own.

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