

Cultural Daily

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12 Years a Slave – A Jewish Perspective

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, October 30th, 2013

As a Jew who celebrates Passover, every year I contemplate this issue of slavery – the fact that my ancestors were slaves in Egypt, and what exactly does this mean in the context of my life in the present year. This year, am I enslaved or free? In the service of Pharaoh, or conversely, Pharaoh to those who serve me? What responsibility do I exercise to preserve my freedoms? What risks will I undertake in freedom's defense?

My earliest memories relating to the narrative of slavery in U.S. history are connected to living not so far from those Virginia plantations during the Vietnam War, when my father did his service in the Capitol. Alex Hailey's televised mini-series "Roots," in 1977, is etched in my memory as paradigm shifting, a cultural phenomenon of national historic import. More recently, reading the powerful "Autobiography of Frederick Douglass," while tutoring U.S. history, further impacted my evolving understanding in regards to the institution of slavery in our nation's not so distant past and the multitude of means that those in power employ to preserve their influence.

The Criterion Collection's Tyler Politt this past Friday published a list of the [ten most emotionally draining films](#) — a rather curious classification (not derogatory, but curious flattery, nonetheless). Steve McQueen's latest film "12 Years a Slave" most definitely qualifies for consideration as one of the most emotionally draining films that I have ever seen. The audience at the Mill Valley Film Festival, where I watched the film for the first time, was mute with shock by its conclusion. It was a good three minutes into the closing credits before they spontaneously erupted with applause.

"12 Years a Slave" tells the true story of Solomon Northup, a free black man living in Saratoga Springs, New York, who was abducted and sold into slavery and endured twelve years of hard labor and abuse at the hands of slave-owners before his rescue and release. The screenplay is based on Northup's autobiography, which was published in 1853. McQueen was astonished to discover Northup's book and mesmerized by his firsthand account, which McQueen compared to "The Diary of Anne Frank." Director McQueen tells the story straight, with little sidestepping, reimagining the harshest realities Northup endured. In "12 Years a Slave," there is no artifice or flamboyance to soften the emotional blow as in Quentin Tarantino's revenge fantasy "Django Unchained," for example, which debuted last Christmas. Director McQueen takes his time, composing visuals that allow the viewer space to develop a deep empathy for Northup, as rendered in a stunning performance by Chiwetel Ejiofor.

As has been noted by many critics, telling the story from the point of view of a free man who has suddenly lost that freedom, allows contemporary viewers an opening for unparalleled identification. One is aware from the outset that Platt will ultimately obtain his release, but there is no foreshadowing when or how. When his release does come at last, the act of heroism is so fundamentally simple, and the reunion in the conclusion of the film so profoundly affecting, it elicits utter catharsis, as Aristotle must have meant it.

Yet I ask myself, what new insights did I glean from the film, that were worth subjecting myself to such torment?

I first learned of the horrors of the Holocaust when I was nine years old. If memory serves me correctly, my initiation was “The Diary of Anne Frank,” followed close upon by “Night and Fog.” For a time, I became obsessed with reading about the Holocaust, trying to account for such inhumanity of man to his fellow man. I remember my Hebrew schoolteachers admonishing us that we were each personally responsible for never forgetting the Holocaust, for keeping the memory of the atrocity alive, and defending that no such future abuses would be tolerated.

In the way that every Jewish filmmaker holds a sacred obligation to tell a Holocaust story, perhaps every black filmmaker has the same obligation to pay witness in recounting his own version of the unspeakable horrors of slavery in the United States.

Just after the screening of “12 Years a Slave,” I ran into film critic, Kevin Robinson, publisher of Medium Rare, a website devoted to films directed or produced by artists of color. As an African-American film professional, I was curious to get his take on “12 Years a Slave.”

“How many films each year are made about the Holocaust? — at least one each year,” he answers his own question. “How many do you remember about slavery?” When I remind him about “Roots,” he retorts, “It’s been nearly forty years since the making of ‘Roots!’” He rues moreover how the mini-series may have never been re-televised since its debut. “There is a whole generation of kids who know nothing about ‘Roots!’”

If each new generation enters into the world tabula rasa, upon which we are to imprint our values, then the recounting of Northup’s story in “12 Years a Slave” to future generations seems imperative. For members of my generation, watching the film feels like penance for the sins of our fathers. Moreover, “12 Years a Slave” doles out a whipping for the sins we perpetuate with our current state of justice and law.

McQueen has described how he felt motivated to make a film about the maze of slavery at this “perfect storm of a time” — the 50th anniversary of the Great March on Washington, the 150th anniversary of slavery, the first black President, and Trayvon Martin. While Northup ultimately regained his freedom, we learn in title cards at the end of the film that he lost his case; his former slave owners and his kidnappers avoided prosecution. Just as Northup endured an unjust eternity in hell, how many black men like Northup have their freedoms unjustly usurped and remain incarcerated in our prisons for crimes for which they are innocent or where the severity of the sentence is well in excess of the transgression?

Lest we forget to consider the treatment of our President Barack Obama, and the lack of Congressional decorum that has lead to the wasting away of taxpayer dollars, with House Speaker John Boehner in the lead, permitting 44 attempts by the House to defund or derail the Affordable Care Act and ultimately enabling the shutdown of the whole Federal Government to preserve his position of power. Yes siree, Bob, racism is alive and kicking at home in the grand ole US of A.

“There is a fearful ill resting upon this nation, and there will be a day of reckoning yet,” prophesies Bass, the Canadian laborer played by Brad Pitt in “12 Years a Slave.” With the film McQueen implies that to be a black man in America, you have to walk the straight and narrow, lead the life of a Saint, for the slightest of transgressions will be met with the severest of consequences.

And any act of heroism entails willingness on the part of a single individual to risk personal liberties for universal principals.



12 Years a Slave is currently playing in theatres throughout the United States. Details [here](#).

Photos from 12 Years a Slave. Photos courtesy of Fox Searchlight.

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