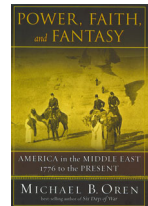


Lessons from Our Favorite Film: A Conversation about **LAWRENCE OF ARABIA** with Historian Michael Oren

By Jan Lisa Huttner

LAWRENCE OF ARABIA is Jan's all-time favorite film, so when she found out it was also the all-time favorite film of Michael B. Oren (author of the best-selling new book **POWER, FAITH, & FANTASY: AMERICA IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1776 TO THE PRESENT**) she scheduled a follow-up call with Oren at his office at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem.



JAN: Boker Tov, Michael. Our subject today is **LAWRENCE OF ARABIA** & how this movie influenced American thinking about the Middle East. **LAWRENCE** was originally released in theaters in December, 1962. When was the first time you saw it?

MICHAEL: My father took me to see it when it came out. I was 7. It's all fantasy. There was no darkness, no disease, only the beautiful sprawling desert with rhapsodic music—charging on camelback, swords flashing. The whole thing was deeply, deeply romanticized & so irresistibly alluring. If that was your image of the Middle East, you wanted to learn about that.

I'll tell you an interesting story: Bernard Lewis was my professor at Princeton. I was living in the desert for five years & I took Bernard Lewis out for a trip in the desert near where I was living. It was the middle of winter. It was cold & as we approached this Bedouin camp, all these children came running out to greet Bernard Lewis.

Bernard Lewis is dressed in his signature blue blazer & blue cravat, red shirt, & these children run out. Their faces are streaming with snot. Some of them are deformed. They're filthy; hair matted. & I could see Bernard Lewis literally, physically recoiling.

What this moment meant to me was the academic image of the Middle East mixed up with the real Middle East. This was about as real as you could get. This was real Bedouin life, & real Bedouin life is not an easy life. Real Bedouin life is full of disease; the Bedouin have one of the highest mortalities rates from the world. There's nothing romantic about it, but several generations of Americans were sold on a romantic image of the Middle East by **LAWRENCE OF ARABIA**.

JAN: When journalist "Jackson Bentley" (Arthur Kennedy) asks: "What is it, Major Lawrence, that attracts you personally to the desert?" "Lawrence" (Peter O'Toole) replies: "It's clean." (See the end of DVD chapter 38.)

MICHAEL: The movie is a reflection of well over 200 years of Western, especially American, romance with the Middle East. Maybe the movie was revolutionary in

<http://www.films42.com/chats/michael-oren.asp>

cinematographic terms, but it was no revolution in terms of American perceptions of the Middle East; American myths about the Middle East go back hundreds of years.

In my new book, I talk about the first American explorer to the Middle East, John Ledyard. He went to the Middle East in 1788. He corresponded with Thomas Jefferson & through his letters to Jefferson we get a glimpse of what the Middle East looked like to an American in the immediate post-Revolutionary War period. He said of the Bedouin, these are people with an “invincible attachment to liberty.” This camel-born nomad as cousin to the American frontiersmen, that’s how old that myth is. (See **POWER, FAITH, & FANTASY** page 48.)

JAN: In Bentley’s words, when conversing with “King Faisal” (Alec Guinness): “Your Highness, we Americans were once a colonial people & we naturally feel very sympathetic to any people anywhere struggling for freedom.” (See the beginning of DVD chapter 38.)

But when you & I first saw **LAWRENCE**, Michael, & when our “Baby Boomer” peers first saw it as kids, we saw it right before the Six Day War. Now, seeing it again as adults, we’re seeing it in the context of current debates about the Middle East. So what lessons have we learned from watching & re-watching **LAWRENCE** all these years?

I’ll be very specific here: in Rashid Khalidi’s new book THE IRON CAGE, he goes on & on about the Balfour Declaration, & it makes me laugh. I want to ask him: “Don’t you know about the Sykes-Picot Treaty? The British were promising everything to everybody during WWI!” That’s my perception from having seen **LAWRENCE**. The Balfour Declaration is just one paragraph!

MICHAEL: & it’s a very ambiguous paragraph. Keep in mind that the promises made to the Arabs under the Hussein/McMahon correspondence were very specific about borders: there’s going to be an independent Arab state here, here, & here. They were designating borders.

The Balfour Declaration, by contrast, promises to support the creation of “a Jewish national home,” not “a state,” not Palestine as “the Jewish National Home,” & certainly not Palestine as “the Jewish state.” There’s a double ambiguity built into the Balfour Declaration that’s not built into the Hussein/McMahon correspondence. So in terms of promises, it’s probably the flimsiest one the British gave to anybody during World War I. The fact is the Jews were able to turn around & make that promise something else, but then Jews don’t divide themselves along tribal lines.

In my book I talk about a man named William Yale. He fascinates me. He was an oil executive, & he became the State Department’s advisor on the Middle East during World War I. He was very anti-Zionist. In 1919, he’s an advisor to the King-Crane Commission, which comes back with a damning view of Zionism, & there’s one dissenting view & it’s by William Yale. Yes, creating a Jewish state in Palestine is going to cause trouble, he agrees, but: “whereas injustice may be done to individuals who

inhabit Palestine an injustice is not being done to a nation.” In other words: Palestinian Arabs are not a people, & if you’re going to try to make a state out of Palestinian Arabs, you’re going to have to create the Palestinian people first. On the other h&, he says: “The wishes & desires of 14,000,000 Jews who have a national history, national traditions, & a strong national feeling must be taken into consideration.” In other words: give them a state, & Jews will make a state. (See **POWER, FAITH, & FANTASY** page 390.)

Talk about insight! Keep in mind, the Palestinians have been offered a state more often than any other people in history. We’re going go back to the Peel Commission of 1938, the first time Palestine was partitioned. Not only did they fail to take advantage of any of these offers, they turn them down with force & violence: 1938, 1947, 1979, & 2000. But you take Jews from 70 different countries, & they build national institutions, & they take the first opportunity given them, small though that was, & they turn it into a viable state. Not that the state doesn’t have gross problems; it does. But the fact of the matter is we hold together as a nation.

Now **LAWRENCE** is very politically astute, remarkable how astute it is. & the ending is anything but romantic. The Arab characters are trying to conduct a parliamentary session in Damascus, & they’re clearly breaking down along tribal lines – a diagnosis of a fundamental problem the Middle East.

I had no memory of that part until I recently went back to see it. All I had remembered was the glorious desert. But in that scene, they’re trying to conduct a parliamentary meeting. When your society is based on tribal affiliation, you can’t expect people to somehow rise above that tribal affiliation to give their true allegiance to a state; it’s an abstraction, it means nothing to them. This is the reason why Iraq has broken down, & this is the reason that Palestine breaks down. The only Arab states that succeed are states that are basically a family with an army, capable of exerting very savage central power. But when you take away that family & its army (as you did in Iraq), or if you can’t find a family to empower (in the case of Palestine), then the state doesn’t hold together because tribal loyalties are too strong.

JAN: Or as “Auda abu Tayi” (Anthony Quinn) says to “Sherif Ali” (Omar Sharif) at the very end of **LAWRENCE**: “Being ‘an Arab’ will be thornier than you suppose, Harith!” (See DVD chapter 53.)

JAN:
So, shall we keep going?

MICHAEL: OK.

JAN: All right, so let’s talk about **EXODUS**. When did you first see it as a kid, & have you seen it again as an adult?

MICHAEL: Again, my father took me to see it when it first came out (1960). It would be like a double-header: you'd have an intermission, & you'd have a popcorn, & it was very magical.

JAN: So what about EXODUS, what do you think it told people about Israel when it first came out?

MICHAEL: It's based on the Leon Uris book, which sold, I don't know, something like 50-million copies worldwide. It probably did more for the State of Israel than any single book or movie ever. It came out in the aftermath of the Suez crisis (1956) when there was a lot of criticism of Israel in the United States, tremendous strains between Israel & the Eisenhower Administration. It came out & reminded people about the mythic quality of Israel's War of Independence.

JAN: There are almost no Arabs in EXODUS, just the John Derek character, playing the good Arab who gets killed in the end. People typically don't usually remember that, but that's the truth.

In one of your recent articles in AZURE, you say about Suez that Israel's collusion with Britain & France seemed to affirm the Arab charge that the Jewish state was little more than a "beachhead for Imperialism," but EXODUS makes the point that the first enemy was the British. Arabs barely register in that movie.

MICHAEL: Isn't that funny? It was a mythic movie. I saw it recently, really recently. It's a really bad movie as opposed to LAWRENCE OF ARABIA, which is still listed among the ten greatest movies of all time. But EXODUS: it's got the innocence, it's got the heroism; it's got a great, great soundtrack; & it's got Paul Newman. The music to EXODUS (sings: "This land is mine; God gave this land to me..."). Gives you the chills even hearing that!

JAN: My dad used to sing it in the car all the time! So, the idea that Israel was a western creation, when in fact the enemy was the British at the point of independence... the Peter Lawford character is the most despicable character in the whole film.

MICHAEL: "I can smell a Jew."

JAN: Right. So now, going down the food chain of movies, you must've seen CAST A GIANT SHADOW at some point, right?

MICHAEL: So bad! The only redeeming quality is that John Wayne gets to be a Zionist!

JAN: It's of it's time, for sure, very much like THE LONGEST DAY, but I saw it on cable two weeks ago, & the fact is, it's not so bad – especially if you ignore the stupid little Senta Berger "love interest" stuff. It reminds us how touch & go things were in 1948...

MICHAEL: It's interesting, CAST A GIANT SHADOW, made in 1964, was the last major pro-Israel film made by Hollywood. We're talking about over 40 years. There were some made for TV movies that were rather heroic, but no major Hollywood movies. This is of course a "Jewish industry," so you have to ask yourself: "What's going on here?"

I have personal experience because I've been trying to get a film made for a long time on the life of Orde Wingate -- one of the great stories of all time! He was the British officer who really founded the Israeli army, then went on to beat the Japanese in Burma, beat the Italians in Ethiopia... & I can't get this movie made because it's too "pro-Israel."

JAN: People tell me Americans always take the Israeli side & never the Palestinian side because there are so many pro-Israeli movies, but when I ask which movies they're referring to, beyond EXODUS, the answer is: "Well there are all these movies about the Holocaust..." So that gets us to MUNICH...

MICHAEL: I have a lot to say about MUNICH, also WALK ON WATER. I could give a series of lectures around that, I've seen that film maybe 15 times. Fascinating stuff, fascinating stuff: guilt-ridden Mossad agents!

Let me talk to you about the movie as a Zionist. There are severe problems with the movie. For one thing, I found the movie very anti-Arab & racist: the only people in the movie who have moral universes are Jews. Arabs have no conscience. Only a Jew has a conscience.

But where does this conscience lead them? Well the message of MUNICH is that to have a Jewish state & to defend that Jewish state means dirtying your "Jewish soul." The only option is run away from it. You can't deal with the fact that having a sovereign state means sometimes you get dirty? You go to Brooklyn, so you don't have to worry about it.

In the last scene, we see the Twin Towers. Now there's a big problem here. First of all, the Twin Towers weren't built yet, so that's a little bit of historical anachronism. But the message there is very clear: Somehow this is tit-for-tat -- the Mossad results in 9/11.

JAN: Which is obscene!

MICHAEL: It's obscene because 99% of the Arab world believes that the Mossad was behind 9/11, & along comes Tony Kushner & Steven Spielberg who say: "Yes, they were."

JAN: Yeah, I hated it too.

MICHAEL: Now, let's talk about **WALK ON WATER**. **WALK ON WATER** was the largest grossing Israeli film of all time, & again, you have the same notion of the Mossad agent who is on a guilt trip. This has become a Hollywood cliché.

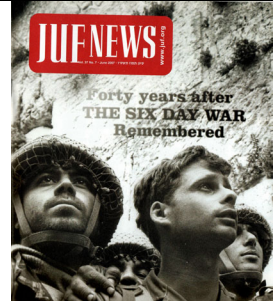
There's no such thing as a Jewish Dirty Harry: "Go ahead; make my day!" Jews don't do this. Jewish good guys shoot the bad guy & walk away thinking: "Oh no, I just shot the bad guy. I'm going to become just like him. I'm becoming the thing I hate." They're always guilt-ridden! Jews are a burden with their moral universe.

JAN: I agree, Michael, these are both bad movies! Anything else you want to say before I release you back into your incredibly hectic life?

MICHAEL: I want to make the Wingate movie!

JAN: And I'll definitely be there to see it when you do! Todah rabah, Michael, l'hitraot!

© Jan Lisa Huttner (3/28/07)

	<p>EDITOR'S NOTE:</p> <p>The first half of this interview appeared in the June '07 issue of the JUF NEWS & is posted here with permission</p>
--	--