

'Aida' Production Personifies God's Love for Israel

Recently, I had the wonderful experience to attend a semiprofessional production of the modern musical adaptation of *Aida* in Jerusalem. The music was uplifting. The acting was engaging.

No matter how "semi" professional, it's a great to attend something that brings a little bit of the Broadway that I grew up with to Jerusalem. The truth is, having grown up close to New York, with easy access to Broadway, and remembering taking a bus to meet my great-aunt to see the *Magic Show* as a 10-year-old, it's one of the things I miss from living in the U.S. and a cultural experience I wish I could give my children more often.

If you don't know the *Aida* story, it's worth checking out. I was impressed with the performance, but there were two things before the show started that unquestionably fell into an "only in Israel" experience I have grown to love and which I try not to take for granted.

In what was probably the first time the modern adaptation of the opera *Aida* was performed in Israel, two of the cast members gave opening introductory remarks, connecting the story of *Aida* to biblical values, specifically regarding slavery. Unlike slavery in the U.S. through the 1860s and other places throughout the world, in the past and even still today, biblically, slaves were not property, had to be treated according to strict rules and were set free every sabbatical year. Such a *dvar torah*, word of Torah, is commonplace in Judaism and especially in Israel.

For those who live their lives through the prism of the Torah, it's quite normal to find a connection to our biblical core,

even in the most mundane things, such as the performance of a Broadway musical several thousand miles from Broadway.

The other thing that impressed me was the closing remark on behalf of all the cast that they “hope they do the playwright’s work justice.” I have a hard time imagining that, had he been in the orchestra seats, he’d not have been impressed.

But there was something else I noticed that made this performance all the more interesting and relevant, being in Jerusalem and because I have the privilege of living here. For the Egyptian slaves from Nubia, it was clear that they longed for their homeland and never let go of this dream. Few Broadway musicals have any more direct a biblical parallel.

While we know that the Jewish people were ordained to be slaves in Egypt, that God promised to redeem us and that Joseph realized this and forgave his brothers for selling him into slavery, we also know that, as slaves, we yearned to be free and in our own land. Thousands of years later, we are still obliged to remember our having been slaves in Egypt, as if we were slaves, and set free ourselves. There are many lessons to take from this, but one certainly is not to take our freedom for granted. That’s especially true in Israel.

Yet there was something special about this performance taking place in a united Jerusalem, the capitol of the 65-year-old Jewish state, God’s covenanted land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, including me and my family. Through the acting and music, it was almost as if we were sitting in Jerusalem, witnessing the realization of the dream of Jews over thousands of years, which included a 400-year stint as slaves in Egypt, being performed on stage.

And other than the obvious idolatrous polytheism with God in the plural, there’s something biblically reminiscent of the history of the Jewish people as expressed in the music of a

20th-century modern musical:

The gods love Nubia, the beautiful, the golden

The radiant, the fertile, the gentle and the blessed

The pain of Nubia is only of the moment

The desolate, the suffering, the plundered, the oppressed

The gods love Nubia, the glorious creation

The songs roll sweetly across the harvest plain

The tears of Nubia, a passing aberration

They wash into the river and are never cried again

The gods love Nubia, we have to keep believing

The scattered and divided, we are still its heart

The fall of Nubia, ephemeral and fleeting

The spirit always burning though the flesh is torn apart

In three stanzas, thousands of years of Jewish dispersion, enslavement, persecution and genocide were summarized: the land is magnificent and blessed, our suffering is temporary, we still have faith, and you can take the Jewish people out of the Israel, but you can never take Israel out of the Jewish people. Oh, and we will return. No, we *have* returned.

While the message is similar, and it was special to experience this in Jerusalem in 2014, one thing remains unique in the story of the Jewish people as compared to this modern rendition. As much as “the gods” may have loved Nubia, since Abraham, God has loved the Jewish people, our covenant is as valid today as it was then, it and He are eternal, and He will always love us. As compared to a beautifully written fantasy with great music, we live here as His cast, living out His

love, receiving His promises and blessed by His prophesy.

And despite—or perhaps because of—this, we need to remind ourselves to stand before God with humility, as displayed by the *Aida* cast to the playwright, and hope that we are doing His will justice.

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