Embracing Marc Chagall’s refugee Christ

The painter’s *Exodus* calls to mind the Passover, the Shoah, Ukraine, and the southern border.

by Zac Koons in the June 29, 2022 issue

If you hold your arms out like the crucified Jesus before you, you can just touch both edges of Marc Chagall’s *Exodus* (1952–66). It’s an intimidating canvas to stand before, not just because of its size (51 x 64 in.) but also because of its composition. Two radical decisions stand out right away. First, Chagall chooses Jesus, rather than Moses, to preside over Israel’s flight from Egypt. Second, he inverts the traditional orientation of the scene so that we, the viewers, are not running with the people of Israel toward the Red Sea. Instead we are looking at them from the perspective of the sea itself. In a sense, we *are* the sea. The people are running directly at us.

This perspective confronts any viewer of the image with a crisis: If we are the sea, will we part and let this endangered people pass on dry land? Will we welcome those running toward us, or will we crash down on them with violence?

The outcome in the world depicted on the canvas is not at all certain. This is not a typical exodus image of deliverance and celebration. Here instead is a world of dimly lit panic—of houses on fire, of women wailing with and for children, of men shouldering hurriedly packed sacks of treasured possessions, provisions, and even pets. It is an image not unlike those coming out of Ukraine, where the chaos of war threatens to blur the unique contours of each family’s tragic circumstance. Simply put, what we see on Chagall’s canvas does not map immediately or simply onto the exodus story we know.

There’s an important reason for that: the ancient exodus of the Israelites is not the only exodus Chagall is depicting.

After World War II, a Zionist group bought an old coastal packet ship from the United States and renamed it the *Exodus* 1947. In 1947 the ship transported more than 4,000 displaced Jewish Holocaust survivors from France to British-controlled

Palestine. While the ship was still far from shore, it was surrounded by British destroyers, refused entry, and rerouted back to France. Once there, the passengers refused to disembark and staged a hunger strike instead. This lasted more than three weeks. The French authorities were unwilling to remove them by force, so eventually the British rerouted them again, this time to Hamburg, then under British control—where, to add bitter irony to their plight, the refugees were held in camps on German soil.

Chagall depicts Jesus, not Moses, presiding over the exodus—with the people running directly at us.

All of a sudden it's clear we are not looking solely at a biblical scene—we're looking at a Holocaust painting. A whirling grandfather clock has collapsed one event into another, like a Passover liturgy in paint. We can be confident Chagall knew of this event because another canvas of his, *The Boat Exodus* (1948), directly depicts it. But even in this later canvas he paints a ship in the upper left corner. We also see the too common Holocaust image of a shtetl set aflame. For Chagall, these terrified masses aren't just ancient Israelites, they are his currently suffering Jewish kin.

And here's where Jesus becomes important. His presence accomplishes two things at once for Chagall. For his Jewish audience, Chagall finds in Jesus a powerful symbolic shorthand for expressing solidarity with Jewish suffering. Chagall said that Jesus "symbolized the true type of Jewish martyr," and he frequently (though not here) depicts the crucified Jesus wearing a black-and-white tallit (prayer shawl), sometimes even phylacteries. Jesus is not, for Chagall, the Christian Messiah but a brother Jew who died for his beliefs.

But Chagall's image says something much more pointed to his Western Christian audience: if Jesus is an archetype of Jewish suffering, then the person you claim to be God is actually the refugee you are refusing entry. The Jews you have killed or interned in camps are this Christ that you supposedly worship. Chagall is cleverly using a Christian image to combat Christian antisemitism, to unveil the hypocritical logic behind whom Western Christians do and don't decide to welcome. You can't say you love Jesus with your lips and then hate Jewish people with your actions.

If Chagall's *The Boat Exodus* communicates this sharply and specifically to the British people who denied entry to Holocaust survivors in 1947, his later *Exodus* —grander in both artistic achievement and literal size—strikes the same note and

then transforms it into a symphony that resounds through the decades. For you and me, the question is no longer, Will we welcome these endangered people? but rather, Will we welcome Christ himself? Not, Will we welcome the wailing mothers and their children? but instead, Will we receive the Madonna and child? Chagall positions them front and center, even depicting Mary in blue.

Chagall also plants the cross of Christ in the place of Moses' staff before the sea. In doing so, he turns the same screw that Jesus does in Matthew when speaking of the final judgment: "For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me" (Matt. 25:42–43).

There is no simple, one-to-one analogy between the survivors of the Holocaust and the refugees of Ukraine, but they have more in common than one might at first expect—and Chagall himself is right in the middle of their common ground. He was born in what is now Belarus, next door to Ukraine. His village of Vitebsk was occupied and mostly destroyed by Nazis. And Chagall himself was later made a refugee from France because of the Nazi advance.

For Chagall, Jesus is an archetype of Jewish suffering and a challenge to Christians.

Prior to the Holocaust, Ukraine had one of the largest Jewish populations in the world—more than 224,000, according to a 1939 census. The largest single massacre of the Holocaust took place in Kyiv, where 33,771 Jews were killed in two days at Babyn Yar. (An almost-finished Holocaust memorial there was recently bombed by Russia.) And still, amid those killed, fleeing, and fighting today, a significant Jewish population perseveres in Ukraine, including President Volodymyr Zelensky. Israeli Jews with Ukrainian ancestry have been returning to help refugees in and around Ukraine as well.

Perhaps a Christian viewer of *Exodus* ought to do no more than sit with the sting of antisemitism Chagall rightly accuses us of. Indeed, there is plenty of antisemitism that remains in the church, and it must be rooted out. But as we are simultaneously confronted with the images of the war in Ukraine, and as our governments face the questions of whether, how, and how many refugees they will welcome, it seems appropriate, from a Christian perspective, to extend the Jewish specificity of Chagall's argument to all 5 million refugees of Ukraine, Jew and gentile alike.

We need not stop there. The same logic can expand to include all refugees fleeing every kind of conflict the world over. There is virtually no controversy in the United States over whether we should welcome refugees from Ukraine. We're on the opposite side of the globe and will bear only so much of the burden even if we maintain an aggressively welcoming posture. But we are not so harmoniously united, even as Christians, when it comes to refugees fleeing countries closer to home, including those fleeing natural disasters, poverty, political persecution, or gang and drug-related violence in Latin America.

From the perspective of Christian theology, this interpretive move is not a simplistic universalizing. On the contrary, it is only because we see and know Jesus as particularly Jewish that we can see Jesus as representing any other particularity. God's identification with humanity in the incarnation of Jesus is not abstract. As James Cone famously said: Jesus is Black because Jesus was a Jew. This is not sidestepping the particular sting of Chagall's painting; it is, if anything, intensifying it. The Jewish flesh of Jesus is the neck in the hourglass that opens up into another world on the other side.

Chagall's *Exodus* confronts Christians with a beautiful and haunting fact: when we look at the face of a refugee, we are looking at the face of Christ. We are looking at the face of the Madonna and her child. It offers us a pointed reminder that Christian opinion toward these questions of welcome should not be complicated—Christians welcome all, full stop, because when we do, we welcome Christ himself. How beautiful. And when we don't, it is Christ we reject. How haunting. When Christians build walls to keep refugees and strangers out, they can be sure that Christ remains on the other side.

Chagall's Christ is on the cross, but upon closer inspection, his arms appear not so much nailed down as open for embrace. Stretching out our arms to mirror his—to receive him—is the entire point. When we welcome the world's refugees with open arms, we begin to look more and more like Christ, such that one day it will be like looking into a mirror. We become a Christ much like the one Chagall depicts, simultaneously refugee and deliverer, eyes closed in temporary defeat yet haloed already in everlasting glory, body marked by the yellow pallor of death yet somehow also glowing with new life like Moses' face and tablets.

We become, in short, what we worship: our Lord Jesus Christ, who stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the

reach of his saving embrace.

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