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Regional Commentary

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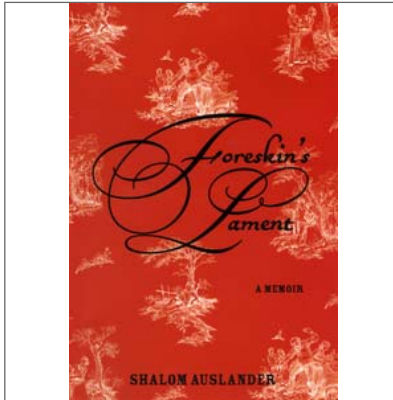
Are you there God? It's me, Shalom

The Almighty Thug, Judaism as joke, and faith's unlikely usefulness are ever-present in this furious, funny memoir.

Foreskin's Lament

By Shalom Auslander  
Riverhead. 320 pp. \$24.95

Reviewed by Mark Sarvas



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In his hilarious, caustic and surprisingly moving memoir *Foreskin's Lament*, Shalom Auslander offers the cautionary tale of Moses to illustrate the dangers of an unpredictable and vindictive God:

... Moses, who escaped from Egypt, and who roamed through the desert for forty years in search of a Promised Land, and whom God killed just before he reached it - face-plant on the one-yard line - because Moses had sinned, once, forty years earlier. His crime? Hitting a rock.

Auslander, a contributor to *This American Life*, *Esquire*, *Nextbook*, and the author of the short-story collection *Beware of God*, has good reason to fear retribution, his lengthy list of sins far outstripping Moses'. *Foreskin's Lament* opens with the young Shalom being raised in the Orthodox Jewish enclave of Monsey, N.Y., where he is already swearing, mixing meat and milk, and switching lights on and off on the Sabbath, inspired by a rabbi who has informed him that "the Sages tell us that the Torah tells us that until the age of thirteen, all of a boy's sins are ascribed to his father." So Auslander tries, unsuccessfully, to bring Yahweh's fatal wrath upon his abusive, drunken father.

*My father banged angrily on the bedroom door. - Lights out, he barked.*

*I smiled. For you and me both, pal.*

Before long, Auslander's list of sins takes on truly heroic dimensions - he experiments with, and becomes addicted to, decidedly nonkosher junk food. The troubled teen discovers pornography, drugs and shoplifting before finally being packed off to Israel, where he experiences a short-lived religious epiphany. All along, the threat of God's punishment hangs overhead, terrifying him into all manner of spiritual contortions to set the karmic logbooks straight.

The tale of Auslander's coming of age is juxtaposed against the present-day narrative of his wife's pregnancy and the couple's impending decision whether to have the boy circumcised. Although he has left the religious fold and settled with his wife in secular splendor in Woodstock, N.Y., he remains haunted by God, his shadow antagonist, who continues to threaten him with all manner of divine retribution - the more ironic the better.

*The kid doesn't have a chance. It's a trick. I know this God; I know how He works. The baby will miscarry, or die during childbirth, or my wife will die during childbirth, or they'll both die during childbirth, or neither of them will die and I'll think I'm in the clear, and then on the drive home from the hospital, we'll collide head-on with a drunk driver and they'll both die later; my wife and child, in the emergency room just down the hall from where only minutes ago we stood so happy and alive and full of promise.*

*That would be so God.*

*Foreskin's Lament* is a very, very funny book. It is also a very, very angry book. (His son's birthday cake is inscribed with a message excoriating the rest of the family as "bitter miseries who'd rather drag us into the morass of their bleak, tragic lives than share for a moment in our joy." It's a large cake.) Writing funny and angry columns is one thing, but sustaining that pitch of laughter and fury for the length of a book is extraordinarily difficult.

Auslander succeeds because, although superficially extreme in its concerns - God is a thug and Judaism can be ridiculous - *Foreskin's Lament* manages to occupy a station left open in the current Religion Debates. At one end we find the True Believers and at the other we find Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins denouncing religion as the root of all evil, the solace of dupes. For all his asperity, Auslander reports to us from the middle, as one who can't deny religion's contradictions and lunacies yet has been unable to entirely do away with belief and its necessity. In this, he is probably more representative of most Americans than either of the extremes, and it is in those moments that *Foreskin's Lament* is most heartfelt and effective.

As Auslander recently said in an interview at [Bookslut.com](#), "It's easy to just slam the door on it, but there are people I know who find solace in it. And, certainly, the idea that there's a God should be right." Perhaps beneath all the name-calling fury and scabrous wit, *Foreskin's Lament* is intended as a parable on the strange durability of faith. That would be so Auslander.

Mark Sarvas hosts the literary blog the *Elegant Variation* ([www.elegvar.com](http://www.elegvar.com)). His debut novel will be published by Bloomsbury in May.

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