

Esquisse Pour L'Exode by Marc Chagall

by Sarah Benitiz Mendoza

“Witness to the Exodus: Art of Survival and Resilience”

Elie Wiesel once said, “For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.” This call to remembrance resonates deeply in Marc Chagall’s *Esquisse Pour L'Exode* (1952-66), where the past and present become one with each brushstroke. By transforming an ancient biblical story into a meditation on the plight of refugees, Chagall bears witness to Jewish history. During a period of global recovery from World War II atrocities, he expresses the sorrow of war to those unfamiliar with such tragedy, while preserving the memory of those forever marked by it. Reimagining the biblical Exodus through modern crises, the painting bridges ancient narratives with contemporary struggles, reflecting on human suffering and the responsibility of refuge. This painting challenges traditional aesthetic norms, intertwining chaos and harmony into a deeply evocative vision. It reveals truth through its portrayal of displacement, capturing the fear and despair of those forced to flee. At its core, the piece confronts the actions and responsibilities of those in power during times of crisis, urging reflection on the impact of oppression, while serving as a testament of humanity’s struggles and as a guide toward empathy and peace.

Marc Chagall, born Moishe Shagal (1887-1985), was a Belarusian French artist, known for his dreamlike and colorful paintings that blend modernist styles with Jewish folklore and themes. As an immigrant, Chagall’s experience deepened his artistic vision, highlighting exile and belonging as universal themes. He combined elements of folklore art, Jewish heritage and the

avant-garde. His work bridges Jewish tradition and modern art, while engaging in art movements of his time, including Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism (Hall). *Esquisse Pour L'Exode* references the biblical story of the Exodus and represents the Jewish people's journey from oppression to freedom, echoing the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt. This resonates with Chagall's own experience of escaping Nazi-controlled territories and portrays the sense of fleeing and survival attached to being Jewish. This personal connection informs his artistic choices, reinforcing the painting's themes of displacement and resilience.

The painting itself is vibrant and expressive, and the figures are elongated and even distorted, conveying movement and urgency, flight, and escape. Chagall includes figures carrying torches, representing the light of faith and hope that guides people through darkness. The composition is chaotic yet purposeful, filled with figures that appear to run, and their bodies are infused with desperation. At the center, a yellow Christ on the cross protects them with his arms open. The bold colors and dramatic contrasts intensify the emotional impact of the scene (*Marc Chagall Official Website*). Each brushstroke seems to pulse with energy and emotion, evoking both the suffering of the journey and the hope for liberation. The painting not only captures attention visually but also functions to raise awareness. It invites viewers to reflect on deep human truths and historical experiences, while urging a consideration of our collective responsibility toward empathy and action.

The Exodus story recounts the liberation of the people of Israel in Egypt in the 13th century B.C., under the leadership of Moses. The journey involved the crossing of the Red Sea and Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai, resulting in divine intervention and moral law during chaos (Beegle). Chagall draws a parallel to this with the Holocaust, where the Jewish people endured unimaginable agony, displacement, and a desperate search for safety amidst destruction. He makes

two striking artistic choices in *Esquisse Pour L'Exode*. First, he places Jesus, not Moses, at the center of Israel's flight from Egypt, symbolizing protection and sacrifice. Second, he includes a figure in the lower right corner holding the Ten Commandments associated with Moses. Some interpretations suggest this figure may represent Chagall himself, positioning him as both an observer of suffering and a bearer of moral responsibility (Koons). By portraying the central figure of Christ with outstretched arms, Chagall conveys both divine mercy and a call for human compassion, urging viewers to recognize pain beyond religious boundaries. This connection between Jesus' dual role as witness and guide, and Chagall's own mission as an artist, reinforces the themes of shared adversity and resilience. As described in *The Christian Century*, "In a sense, we are the sea. The people are running directly at us," making the viewer an integral part of the scene and the moral challenge it represents.

By infusing the painting with emotional intensity, Chagall's work serves as a visual testimony to the universal aspects of the human experience. It captures the shared struggles and hopes that define our existence across time and place. *Esquisse Pour L'Exode* reveals more than just the anguish of the Jewish people – it underscores universal truths of displacement and the longing for redemption. At its core, the painting speaks to a truth that transcends historical and religious boundaries, reflecting the enduring human experiences of persecution and the quest for safety and justice. Chagall's use of Christ as a symbol of protection represents an acknowledgment of our shared vulnerability and duty toward those in need. The outstretched arms of Christ symbolize divine mercy, but also an invitation to humanity to take part in the collective responsibility of alleviating suffering.

Chagall's portrayal of exile and survival draws a parallel to the Kabbalistic concept of the Shekhinah in exile. In Jewish mysticism, the Shekhinah is the feminine aspect of God's Divine

Presence, which, rather than remaining distant, enters exile with the Jewish people. The Shekhinah is not just a symbol of divinity – it is an active, compassionate force that shares in the suffering of the oppressed, moving alongside them in their pain and endurance (Feinstein-Feit). As a Jewish artist, Chagall would have been deeply influenced by these concepts, integrating elements of his heritage and faith into his work. In *Esquisse Pour L'Exode*, the chaotic movement of the figures and the stark contrast of colors reflect this duality of suffering and hope, just as the Shekhinah is believed to one day reunite with her divine counterpart in a future messianic age. Similarly, Chagall's figures reach toward an uncertain yet redemptive future.

Furthermore, the Shekhinah's duality of light and darkness is reflected in Chagall's composition. The torches carried by the figures symbolize divine illumination guiding the exiled, mirroring the Shekhinah's nurturing role amidst adversity. The figures in Chagall's painting, caught between action and despair, reflect the Jewish struggle to redefine the Shekhinah not as a passive figure of exile, but as a dynamic force of revelation and resilience (Feinstein-Feit). The same tension is embodied in Chagall's asserting as Moses holding the Ten Commandments. As the *Marc Chagall Official Website* suggests, Moses is positioned as both a witness to the anguish of his people and an active participant in their spiritual journey. *Esquisse Pour L'Exode* thus invites introspection, prompting the audience to question their role in oppression and reinforcing that the lessons of Exodus and the Holocaust continue to resonate in addressing contemporary issues of displacement and persecution.

Esquisse Pour L'Exode contributes to our understanding of the world by offering a visual record of human endurance, perseverance, and hope. It serves as an emotional and intellectual tool for grappling with historical trauma and spiritual transformation. Both journeys are stories of hope and redemption, symbolizing the triumph of faith over adversity. Chagall's *Esquisse Pour L'Exode*

is not merely a reflection of the past, but a timeless reminder of our moral duty to recognize and respond to suffering. As displacement and persecution persist in today's world, the painting challenges us to bear witness, just as Chagall did, and to act with empathy and justice.

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