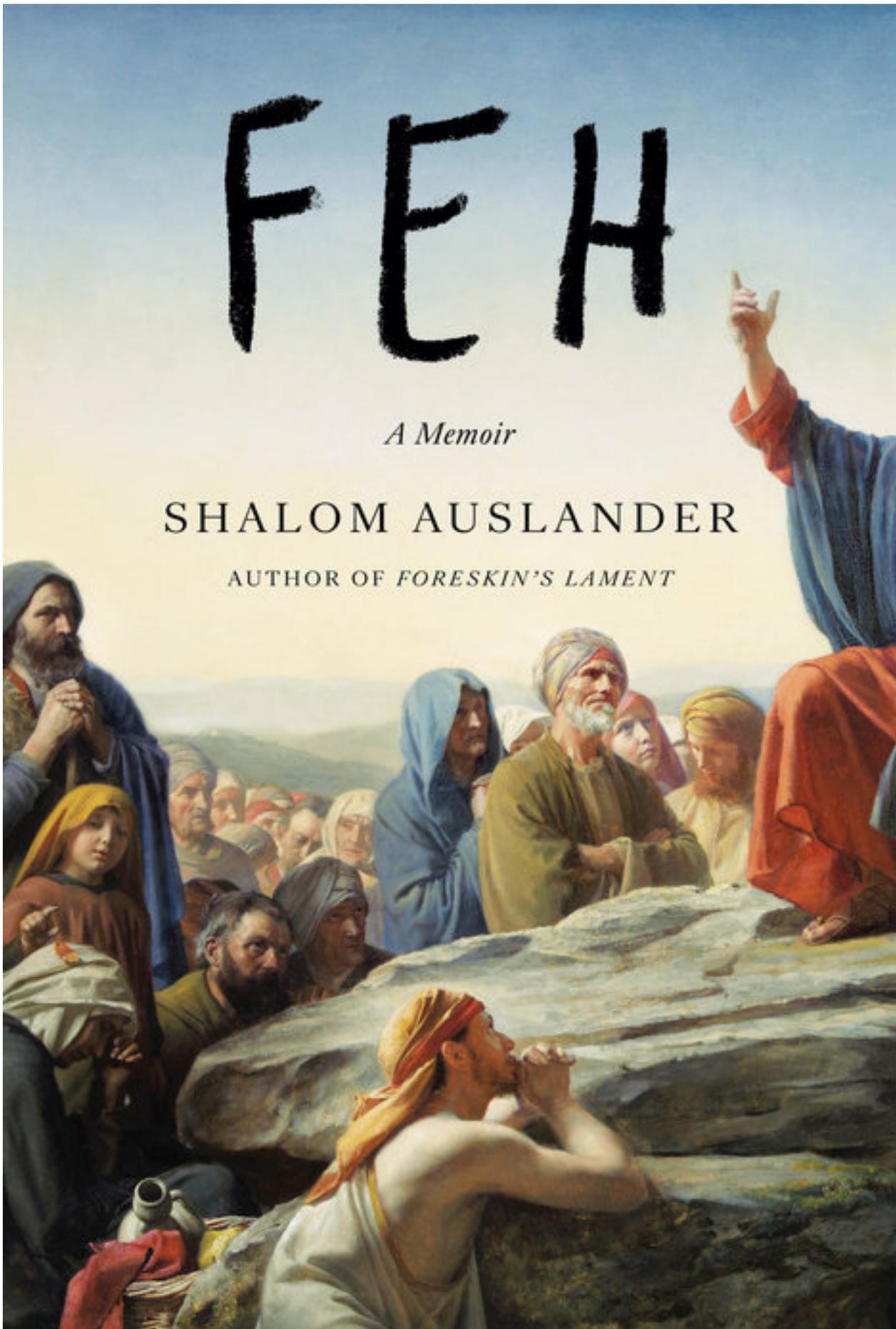




## Feh. A Memoir

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**Shalom Auslander: Feh. A Memoir** Riverhead Books: New York 2024; Hardcover, 368 Pages;  
**\$29.00**



Stories can be a plague, stories can blind us. Shalom Auslander's *Feh: A Memoir* is about a writer raised with this story about the Bible: God is good and people are bad and, therefore, deserve

judgment and punishment. *Feh* is a Yiddish term denoting disapproval or disgust, "yuck." Auslander warns us about the distortion of telling one story about the Bible. Indeed, in this memoir, the story of disappointment about ourselves is tied to this story about the Bible. You don't have to be skilled in negative self-talk and poisonous self-sabotage to find Auslander's memoir compelling, but it helps. Maybe you love someone who never misses a chance to cultivate a negative interpretation of themselves. If hope is the thing you backed over in the driveway or if you find yourself not staying off icy ledges, this book might be a story you need. (And I do mean the physical book as the cover art plays a central role in an illustration of seeing differently).

Upon hearing a summary of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Auslander replies, "That's not funny, that's my life," to which the bookstore owner retorts, "That's why it's funny" (143). Auslander's darkly humorous second memoir (his first was *Foreskin's Lament*, Riverhead Hardcover, 2008) ruminates over the stories we are told and those that we tell about humanity in the Bible (he calls the Old and New Testaments, *You Suck*, Parts 1 and 2) and in capitalism (where poverty is identified with laziness and , wealth with deserved success). Although Auslander says he dreads exposure—he envisions hell as an eternal swimming pool in summer where you can only wear a skimpy bathing suit (155) instead of a comfy dark wood in the middle of the journey of life à la Dante's *Divine Comedy*—this memoir presents a glaring (self-)exposure that only slowly reveals a modest, hard-won, pin-point glimpse of a less judgmental story as the author finds a new way to see—or better yet, a way not be blind to—what is good about himself and humanity.

Auslander admits he's a "miserable prophet" (264), a hunger artist, an athlete of self-loathing: "Self-destruction is my whole thing," he says to his psychiatrist (239). His memoir is built on multiple narrative threads. There is the story about himself: a writer in his 50s, raised strictly Orthodox Jewish, married to the dancing and laughing Orli, with two sons (one of whom does a Beyonce routine that wows crowds), a couple of dogs, more than a couple of relocations, his friendships, professional projects, and conversations with his therapist. Interwoven with his life are stories about God, such as when God and the Angel Gabriel watch Auslander's life like a show, as in "this-week's-episode-is-the-one-where-his-friend-Philip-Seymour-Hoffman-dies" or "we-will-be-right-back-with-more-hilarious-Auslander," as well as Auslander's own micro-fiction such as "Splat" (167) and "The Unfortunate Man Who Had a Head" (277). His conversation partners about the human condition are stories from famous writers (Franz Kafka, Jonathan Swift, Ayn Rand, Jose Saramago, Raymond Carver), philosophers (Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Arthur Schopenhauer) and the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Job, Jeremiah, Ezekial). Sometimes he retells biblical stories as his flash fiction, such as "People Also Hate You" (Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, etc.) and "The Barbecuing Children Who Got Barbecued by God" (Aaron's sons) (169).

Auslander's relentlessly negative internal monologue is a masterclass in feh. He absorbs and reflects a judgmental story with cutting precision from family, religious leaders, social media, and society. "Stories are powerful things," he writes (135). He knows the Bible contains multiple stories of the same events (Sodom and Gomorrah, for example: one in Genesis which, according to his Rabbi, is about supposed *feigeles* (Yiddish for "little birds" but slang for gay men), but another in Ezekiel about the sin being unkindness and inhospitality), so why do many of us only hear one story, not only about Sodom and Gomorrah, but about the Bible?

After a life of hearing the Bible as a story about people being awful and deserving God's judgment, Auslander (via the Angel Gabriel) asks: Is God the protagonist or the antagonist of the Bible? If God is the hero of the Bible and the Bible is God's story (as told to Moses, as Auslander learned in Hebrew school), this effectively means that God makes God the hero of the story and humankind the problem, the *feh*. With a sinking feeling, Auslander writes, the Angel Gabriel, after watching the Auslander Show with God, asks Elijah, "What if we have it backwards?"—that is, what if God is the antagonist and humans are the heroes (241)? God is like the Wolf in *The Three Little Pigs*, in which the powerful narrator (Wolf: "I'll huff and I'll puff. . .") casts the actually weak and vulnerable little pigs as the problem. Why else would the Book of Job end with Job despising himself (Job

42:1-6) and the plagues in Exodus end only when Pharaoh embraces the idea that he and all his people were wicked (Exodus 9:27)? In a heavenly vignette, Auslander has Elijah agree with Gabriel: God is the wolf. Even though Auslander recognizes that the Bible contains multiple versions of the same story, he doesn't entertain what I would consider a more human-centered story about the God of the Bible, except to note that Jesus is a provocateur who criticizes the powerful and is subsequently executed.

We are all catastrophe junkies now: The "people who tell us it is the worst of times seem to be having the best of times" (295). You might attempt to avoid the litany from a thousand messengers (mass shootings, war, hate, misery, sorrow, insecurity, illness, fires, floods, homelessness, increasingly terrifying videos served up algorithmically, apps for neighbors to complain, apps to track nearby crimes, the news) by burrowing (into the gym, weed, whiskey, porn, drugs, apps to limit your internet use or that produce ambient noise), but burrowing only makes the world smaller and smaller, not better. Auslander says that a *feh* story causes one to collapse in real crisis (chapter 44), but I beg to differ. I think his ability to criticize sick stories, including religious ones, and to expose his own rethinking of stories shines a light to beat back the "terminal affliction of Being" (153).

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