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A Serious Man

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A Serious Man

Abstract

This is an analysis of the film *A Serious Man* (2009).

In the Coen brothers' movie, *A Serious Man*, they once again present the age old question of theodicy, the paradox of a just and good God and the existence of evil and injustice in the world, challenging the apparently simplistic religious notion that God rewards the good and punishes the wicked. This time the issue is part of a Job like story that, like religion itself, asks more questions than it answers.

And in the Coen brothers' style, they utilize highly exaggerated stereotypes and caricatures that mock, humiliate and incite the sensibilities of their viewers, who have come to understand that it is part of the price of admission.

The Stereotypes of Joel and Ethan Coen

If you like the Coen Brothers' movies, you will probably like this one. If you don't, you probably won't. Of all their films this is the most identifiably Jewish, most potentially philosophical, and most troubling theologically. It is highly entertaining, but perhaps, at the expense of a number of individuals and ethnic groups. A disclaimer at the end of the credits reads: No Jews were harmed during the filming of this movie. And that is one of the main objections people raise

about the film. Will the use of antisemitic images and attitudes have a negative effect?

The debate is reminiscent of the great Archie Bunker brouhaha years ago when Norman Lear's *All in The Family* television show first appeared, creating an outrage over whether it was appropriate to depict such stereotypic images in mass communication. Some said that it would make bigots of people. As it turned out, the television show helped to raise consciousness about prejudice and inspired positive change in our culture.

According to David Gunzerath, writing about the show for the Museum of Broadcast Communications, "*All in the Family* was not only one of the most successful sitcoms in history, it was also one of the most important and influential series ever to air, for it ushered in a new era in American television characterized by programs that did not shy away from addressing controversial or socially relevant subject matters...To Archie, gains by the 'Spades,' 'Spics,' or 'Hebes' of America (as he referred to Blacks, Hispanics, and Jews, respectively), came at his expense and that of other lower middle class whites...*All in the Family* seemed to revel in breaking prime time's previously unbreakable taboos. Archie's frequent diatribes(were) laced with degrading racial and ethnic epithets,..All in the Family's impact went beyond the world of television. The show became the focus

of a heated national debate on whether the use of comedy was an appropriate means by which to combat prejudice and social inequality...”¹

That debate is far from over. Contemporary culture’s shifting boundaries about political correctness revives the discussion about blatant stereotypes, their purpose in satire, and their lasting influence and effect on bigotry and prejudice. The Coen brothers are renowned for the use of such images in most, if not all, of their films.

Jews are not the only target of stereotyping in *A Serious Man*. The film depicts Asians as highly competitive for grades, so much so that they would do anything, including cheat, bribe and threaten lawsuits, using libelous litigious arguments to get what they want. Will people now think that’s what Asians do? It might reinforce a pre-existing prejudice but some would argue that it would not create such a bigoted attitude ab initio.

In fact, as a rabbi, I have as much reason as anybody to be offended by the movie’s images. The most exaggerated stereotypes in the entire story are those of the three rabbis. Yes, three rabbis and no apparent wisdom.

Yet, there is so much to like about the movie.

Jewish traditional language and images

The movie had me from the beginning. “Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you.” Never before had I witnessed words attributed to the great medieval Jewish commentator, Rashi, flashed on the screen in the opening scene of an American movie. At a Torah study class yes, referenced in sermons, of course. But as the words on which the first scene of a movie opened, never! Then again, until the Coen Brothers’ *The Big Lebowski*, I never imagined I would hear in a film the phrase: “I am Shomer - Shabbos” (religiously observant of the Sabbath laws) with the “f-bomb” in the middle.

It is obvious that *A Serious Man* is a modern rendition of the story of Job. If so, then the authors of both the movie and the Biblical story share skepticism about the popular religious notion that the good are always rewarded and the wicked punished, that there is an automatic connection between a person’s deeds and his consequent fate and destiny. This is a theme that permeates the Coen brothers’ entire film repertory. From their first film *Blood Simple* to their most recent, *True Grit*, the pursuit of justice and its consequences is an underlying motif.

Indeed, one of the overarching themes of *A Serious Man* is the uncertainty of life. Larry lectures his classes about Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. He

tells the students that, “it proves we can't ever really know what's going on. So it shouldn't bother you, not being able to figure anything out, although you will be responsible for this on the midterm.” (Echoes of Woody Allen?)

The Coen brothers are quite adept at having us guess their view of Divine justice. It appears that they have disdain for a traditional religious view. But if they are so passionately opposed to the belief, then why do they tease with several incidents that speak in favor? For example, can we surmise that Larry Gopnick, the protagonist, is a descendant of the Yiddish speaking couple in the opening shtetl scene and conclude that he is being punished for their misdeeds? And why then does Si Abelman find his punishment in a car accident that cuts short his plans to destroy Larry's family life? And isn't it curious that Larry's single act of corruption is followed by possibly the worst personal blows of all. Perhaps the Coen brothers have revealed their unconscious. Or better yet, perhaps they have confirmed what we can find within our own souls, the wish that the world did work that way: that reward and punishment always made sense and that God would vigorously defend the principles upon which religion seems to be founded and the promises that we expect to be fulfilled.

It is difficult to know what they really intend. The possibility of irony, sometimes missed, sometimes intentional keeps the viewer guessing. Is it their open flaunting of this view that prevails? Or is there an unconscious desire being

revealed that there is somehow a theme of justice that prevails, but only in the long run.

I would imagine that, like many reasonable people, they understand that it is difficult to maintain such a clear reward/punishment theory about the world and its events. Fundamentalists may have no trouble defending this ethic, but most modernists are left with a sense of insecurity about justice and Divine attention to such matters.

The real question is whether the Coen brothers are being literal about the teachings of tradition, selling short the value of a religious tradition like Judaism. One thing is clear. They must have had teachers like the ones depicted in the movie.

Religion is easily criticized when opponents of traditional thinking take literally the principles at the core of Bible and other religious literature. Can we be so simplistic as to believe that William Faulkner, Mark Twain, and Jonathan Swift deserve more examination and interpretation than do the authors of the Biblical text? Do we naively believe that we moderns are so much more sophisticated than those who also perceived the injustices and ironies of life in pre technological society?

Did the ancients not also wonder about a moral order in the universe? Is this not what has led people everywhere in all eras to question the basic fairness of life.

Alas, the world does not work as it does in fairy tales or in the movies. And so the question remains, the question about which the movie revolves: How can we find a reliable moral order in the universe?

Finding or making a reliable moral order in life

Long ago the Biblical author of Job understood that there are not always satisfying answers to life's most difficult questions. Job seems to have been punished severely. His children are dead; he has lost all his wealth. He is writhing in pain from physical illness as well. He is critical of his friends who come to visit him in his misery. They tell him: "You must have sinned. Surely God would not punish you if you were innocent." Job grows impatient with them as he does with God. Job's reputation for patience is not supported in his story. He reacts strongly, as most of us would do.

Just read a few chapters of Job to get this sense. Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar come to comfort him. Indeed they begin their visit with silence, recognizing that there is nothing they can say that will bring relief from his suffering. They should have left it at that, but when Job speaks up

cursing the day that he was born, they begin to debate him trying to get Job to accept his personal responsibility for his troubles. Job does not take this lying down; he lashes back, revealing the folly of their supposed wisdom.

See chapter 19 in particular when Job replies to their empty words of comfort: “How long will you grieve my spirit, and curse me with words? Time and again you humiliate me, and are not ashamed to abuse me.”²

Job makes it clear, There are no answers, so when we try to explain, it only makes it worse.

How many preachers and funeral orators might learn from this? Instead of using Job as a silent sufferer, we can acknowledge that the Biblical authors felt the same confusion and quest for meaning in life facing the frustration of fundamentalist explanations of the world’s woes.

In Larry’s story we have a similar tale. He is bombarded with misfortune. His wife is cheating on him. His kids are stealing from him. His brother is sick and gets into one problem after another, with Larry taking responsibility for him. Larry is being threatened by one of his students. Larry is being considered for tenure but does nothing to advance his cause. Larry allows the department chair to taunt him with inappropriate statements about anonymous letters vilifying Larry.

But Larry is not Job. Only in his dreams does he come to life and act. In real life, he merely says “I didn’t do anything,” again and again and again. He is unlike Job and is actually similar to two other characters in Jewish literature: Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Gimpel the Fool,³ who is taken advantage of by everyone in town, including his wife, who lies and cheats and bears children that could not possibly be his and I. L. Peretz’ Bontshe the Silent,⁴ which begins with his death and the recounting of the sad events of his life.

Larry, like them, is the prototypical friar – in Hebrew, the sucker who is the fall guy every time. Si, the man with whom Larry’s wife Judith is cheating, treats Larry with passive aggressive mockery. Si and Judith convince Larry to move out of the house and into a motel. After Si dies, Larry ends up paying for Si’s funeral. Larry is the ultimate in naiveté - a modern extension of his ancestor in the opening shtetl scene, with no backbone whatsoever.

Coen brothers’ homage

Larry tells people that his wife and her lover Si have not slept together. He believes it. He exercises no discipline over his kids. In fact, he responds to his son’s badgering requests by climbing on top of the house to repair the TV reception. In the Coen Brothers’ typical style this is homage to a popular

Broadway Play and film of that era. Larry fiddles with the TV antenna, thus making him the Fiddler on the Roof. At least Tevye argued with God.

Larry's gazing from the roof at the naked neighbor Mrs. Samsky is a reference to the Biblical King David eyeing Bathsheba who sunbathed on her roof. (II Samuel, chapter 11)⁵ And there is a thinly veiled homage to the most popular film of that era, *The Graduate*, when Mrs. Samsky brings drinks into the parlor where she is attempting to seduce Larry, who cannot act on any of his urges, moral or not.

Larry is such a pitiful character. The Columbia Record club harasses him about his missing payments for a subscription that he never initiated. He has done nothing, but that is how those record clubs worked. Doing nothing obligates you to them. The Columbia Record Club is the perfect metaphor for life. Doing nothing gets you nothing or worse.

Indeed in his own field of academic expertise, Larry admits incompetence. In trying to explain the uncertainty principle, he tells his student. "I only know the math; I don't even know the stories." He pays attention to the details but doesn't see the big picture. His own story he does not understand. This is a major message of the film. Life is dominated by uncertainty. We must find certainty in our own moral compass. We all would like to have an understanding of life with its secrets

– but there is never a satisfactory final answer. It is an ongoing struggle. Within that chaos we must make sense.

The Coen brothers tease us with the theological conundrum of eternity. At the conclusion of the film is the punch line. As soon as Larry has achieved the coveted tenure whose quest was one of his anxiety producing challenges, he finally sways from his position of academic and moral integrity and erases the failing grade for the Asian student who has successfully bribed this upstanding Physics professor. The moment Larry pencils in a C- to replace the F, his phone suddenly rings with the bad tidings from his physician that his x-rays have provided bad news, and that he must come and see the doctor immediately. And as a coda, the film ends abruptly with the threatening tornado heading towards the Hebrew school students, whose wise teacher cannot figure out how to unlock the door to the shelter. This reference to the book of Job's depiction of God answering Job out of the whirlwind reminds us of one of life's recurring themes: Just when things seem to be going your way, when your family problems have been resolved, when your professional career finds success, watch out. There's always another storm that comes from nowhere.

The Coen brothers hit us over the head with their true attitude of the tradition they treat so superficially. They were taught as children in the same Talmud Torah classrooms they satirize in this film. The key held by the teacher,

cannot open the door to their salvation from the storm that threatens and approaches. What the Coen brothers really believe or what they unconsciously carry around will remain a mystery. Perhaps they themselves do not even know.

But the Coen brothers' personal theology is not nearly as significant as the thinking they trigger in the viewer about these matters. They succeed in leading each of us to our own investigation which leads to a variety of places. In the end we can console ourselves that we are not alone in seeking these answers. Many have found themselves lost in the forest. We may not know the way out, but we can all share the paths that we have explored that lead nowhere.

Modern Jewish theology, reflecting Jewish thinking throughout the ages, includes a variety of approaches to understanding God and theodicy. The very readable volume *Finding God*⁶ by Sonsino and Syme is a great introduction to the topic.

What is a serious man?

Yet, despite all of that, they leave us with a universal message that religious and secular alike can embrace and share. The Coen Brothers' movie title raises a Jewish question that is at the center of the meaning of life. Who and what is a serious man?

Is it Judith's lover, Si Abelman? – Larry's wife insists that he is. The rabbi eulogizes him with that very description. But of course not - he is merely an adult bully, a person who through passive aggressive behavior assaults poor Larry. In the classroom scene, which appears in one of Larry's dreams, Si, like a dybbuk, appears after his own death and reveals his true nature, what he did while alive only surreptitiously by verbal manipulation and anonymous letters. He physically attacks Larry and mercilessly bangs Larry's head against the blackboard. Larry is such a friar that it is only in his dream that he can realize what a jerk Si really is!

Is it Judith Gopnick, Larry's cuckolding wife, whose mouth opens and out comes sarcasm and cynicism? A serious man must be one who speaks with kindness, wisdom, and respect.

Is it Larry's brother, Arthur? Arthur is presented as a genius, who has a system for winning at cards, and spends countless hours writing his theories into a notebook, which is revealed to be a conglomerate of nonsense. Yet Arthur does not have a clue. He is jealous of his brother and complains that Larry's life is just fine. "Look at all that God has given you. I have nothing." Everything is relative. In reality, Arthur is a burden who won't go away. He lives in Larry's house, hogs the bathroom, and when Larry moves out to a motel, Arthur goes with him. He has a cyst on his neck that he keeps trying to drain but it comes back again and again. Arthur not only has a cyst. He is a cyst. He is certainly not a serious man.

Is it Larry? He says he want to be a serious man. He is trying to be a serious man. That's what he says, or whines, when he seeks the advice of the rabbis.

But can he be serious when he cannot see the reality all around him? Is he not taking Pirke Avot⁷ too far in giving the other person the benefit of the doubt?

The rabbis

Are the rabbis serious men? In one sense, they do offer him helpful advice. The young assistant, still wet behind the ears, urges Larry to use every crisis as an opportunity to change perspective and appreciate a different way of thinking about life. Ordinarily this would be sage advice but not from someone who has had such limited life experience and directs Larry to look at the parking lot. This rabbi is not yet a serious man.

And the senior rabbi, in his own pompous way, tells Larry that there are no answers to those kinds of questions; that the mysteries must remain mysteries and we had better get used to living with unanswered questions. Good advice, but the vehicle he uses, repeating a confidential story and demonstrating disdain for non-Jews, only proves that this rabbi has become cynical and is not a serious man.

The rabbi emeritus, Marshak, who sits in his study and refuses to see Larry, gives Larry the impression that his questions do not deserve a hearing, at least not from the learned rabbi. Yet this same rabbi instead offers Larry's son the sagest wisdom of the movie, the source of which surprises us. This octogenarian rabbi quotes the words of Gracie Slick and the Jefferson Airplane – “When the truth is found to be lies and all the joy within you dies (the rabbi actually says “when all the hope within you dies”. Is not a life without hope one without joy?)” This is the message of Jewish tradition. The most important thing in life is our relationship to others. That is how we serve God. “Don't you want somebody to love?” – People, our friends and our loved ones, to care about, and to treat with dignity and respect?

This elderly rabbi is an effective paradigm of what rabbis today need to be: to stand with one foot planted on Mt. Sinai, but the other set in modern culture. Judaism has always been a dynamic evolving way of life, and today is no different. Our teachings and metaphors need to involve the ancient symbols with contemporary language. Somebody to love is meaningful not only to devotees of pop music, but to those who cherish the idea of mensch-like (being a good human being) behavior as envisioned by our ancestors. The religious leaders who embrace both will be most adept at relating to those who come to us seeking meaning and relevance.

This is one of life's basic observations. Most religions attempt to answer that question. It is an essential part of growing up: to realize that we must find very concrete ways of experiencing the Divine in our actions and relationships with God's creation: other human beings. We cannot passively rely on a superstitious faith in a God who we naively reduce to a Celestial Santa Claus or Divine Bellhop. We cannot answer as doctors sometimes do to questions about unsolved illness by saying "it's a virus." And the way in which we understand and appreciate our faith and tradition will help us to cope and potentially can make a great difference in our attitude toward all that happens in life.

This elderly rabbi gives the boy advice from a contemporary source. Although he is the oldest character in the film and obviously has access to generations of Jewish wisdom from the Bible, Talmud, Midrash and commentaries, he is not stuck in the past. And when he concludes his recitation of Jefferson Airplane, Marshak says quite simply, "Be a good boy." Danny, the Bar Mitzvah looks up and his eyes smile for the first time in the film.

Being a mensch

A serious man is the answer to the question that is asked throughout the film. Where is goodness, where is God, why is there not justice? Judaism's answer has always been that it is our responsibility to fill the gap: to bring order and justice

and fairness and reward in an appropriate fashion. We do that by creating community and following the path of mitzvah. We do it by striving to be mensches. Indeed, the true definition of being a mensch is to be a serious man. To be a good boy! The way that we live is the center of the moral order in the universe, when there seems to exist no supernatural Deity who dishes out reward and punishment in the simplistic way that so many fundamentalist interpretations of religion have insisted for far too long, from the time of Job to the era of Larry Gopnick. I would guess that the Coen Brothers might agree.

We will continue to argue about God's justice or even if there is a God. But all who care about improving the world, struggling with the dark aspects of basic human nature, can agree that being a mensch is one way to bridge the gap, share the quest no matter what our theological beliefs.

¹ The Museum of Broadcast Communication website – *All in the Family* article written by David Gunzerath <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=allinthefa>

² *JPS Hebrew English Tanakh*, Copyright 2000 by The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia

³ *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories*, by Isaac Bashevis Singer, Noonday Press, 1957

⁴ Bontsha Schweig, Isaac Leib Peretz, 1894, "Bontsha the Silent" translation by Hilde Abel, in *Great Jewish Short Stories*, editor Saul Bellow (Dell, 1963).

⁵ *JPS Hebrew English Tanakh*, op. cit.

⁶ *Finding God*, Daniel B. Syme and Rifat Sonsino (2002, URJ Press)

⁷ Pirke Avot, *Sayings of the Fathers, Tractate from Mishnah* (traditional Jewish text) 200 CE