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Defiance

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Defiance

Abstract

This is a review of *Defiance* (2008).

In an unstable world of madness and death, should a person lose his humanity in order to seek revenge? Edward Zwick's intriguing film *Defiance* focuses on answering this difficult question. The movie is based on the true story of the Bielski partisans, a group of Polish Jews who escaped from Nazi persecution and helped other Jews survive the Holocaust. The unit is founded by the four Bielski brothers – Tuvia (Daniel Craig), Zus (Liev Schreiber), Asael (Jamie Bell), and Aron (George McKay) – who have just lost their parents during a German attack on their town. The brothers escape to the nearby forest and create a makeshift community. Tuvia, the oldest of the Bielskis and a former member of the Polish Army, naturally assumes command but is quickly challenged for control by his younger brother Zus. The two battle over how to best run the outfit. Tuvia espouses a survivalist mentality, only encouraging stealing as a means of living. Zus, on the other hand, seeks revenge against the Nazi army and wants to kill as many enemy soldiers and collaborators as he can find.

Tuvia and Zus's debate between survival and revenge is an important theme of the piece. Tuvia initially desires revenge against the Germans and murders the Nazis officers who killed his parents. However, after a botched supply raid on a Nazi car results in the deaths of some members of the community, Tuvia changes his leadership approach. He believes that if the Jews of the triad can work together and live freely and humanely, then they can effectively get their revenge against

Hitler and the Germans by surviving. Zus's thirst for vengeance is born out of his belief that blood for blood is doing God's work. Unlike Tuvia, Zus is unable to get revenge against the people responsible for the deaths of his family. He instead takes out his anger on the rest of the Nazi army. The brothers' debate extends to how they treat the other members of the partisans. Zus derogatorily refers to anybody who does not fight as *malbushim*, a Yiddish word meaning "clothes." He essentially finds them to be useless since they do not benefit the community or share his desire for revenge. On the other hand, Tuvia feels an obligation toward saving as many European Jews as possible. His former schoolteacher Shamon Haretz (Allan Corduner) quotes from the Talmud when he reminds Tuvia that "if you save a life, you must take responsibility for it." This statement is reminiscent of another famous Talmudic saying that was quoted in *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993): "Whoever saves a single life, saves the world entire." By combining these religious quotes, Tuvia's increasingly heavy burden can be seen; instead of viewing the weaker Jews as expendable like Zus, Tuvia must care for the old and sick in order to preserve the Jewish world.

Tuvia's compassion for others and his role as a strong Jewish leader earn him a comparison to Moses by his compatriots. Like his Biblical counterpart, Tuvia must help his people escape from the oppression of an apparently undefeatable nation. Director Zwick, to the film's detriment, approaches this material too bluntly.

The German attack on the Bielski village is set to occur on Passover, the same time that Moses freed the Jews from Egypt. Tuvia is later openly inspired by the Israelites' survival when he devises a similar plan to avoid the German onslaught. In an even more obvious reference, the group faces the seemingly insurmountable task of crossing a river, much like Moses and the Red Sea.

Zwick uses the film's dialogue to relate the Bielskis to a long history of strong Jews, from Moses to David and the Maccabees. In all of these stories, the Jews are portrayed as the weak underdog to an imposing opponent (the Egyptians, Goliath, or the Seleucid Empire). The Bielskis follow this tradition as longshots to survive against the Nazi army. Although Zwick makes these Biblical comparisons, he never loses sight of the fact that he is telling the story of imperfect men who occasionally fall victim to their vices of lust and vengeance. One particularly emotional and harrowing scene finds a captured German soldier being beaten to death by some members of the Jewish camp as they mournfully cry out for their murdered relatives. Zwick does not tell the audience whether this type of revenge is appropriate or not, but allows the viewer to make up his own mind.

While Zwick links the Bielskis' tale to Jewish history and religion, he allows *Defiance* to still be relevant in today's society. Its thematic debate of survival and revenge during wartime is universal, and not just Jewish, especially with wars currently occurring throughout the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The

film also encourages people to selflessly help others during times of great need. *Defiance* is able to present traditional Jewish values while simultaneously providing an important universal commentary for non-Jewish viewers.