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Between the Temples

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Between the Temples

Abstract
This is a film review of *Between the Temples* (2024), directed by Nathan Silver.

Keywords
Judaism, Bat Mitzvah

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Author Notes
Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches “Religion and Film” at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.

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Between the Temples (2024), dir. Nathan Silver

*Between the Temples* could be described as a Jewish psycho-drama rom-com; it could also be fairly described as *Harold and Maude* (1971) meets *The Graduate* (1967). In both of those films, one or the other of the romantic leads is coded Jewish implicitly (Jewish Dustin Hoffman as Benjamin Braddock) or explicitly (Ruth Gordon as Maude, revealed to be a Holocaust survivor by the tattooed number on her arm). However, as a film whose plot is grounded in the process of cantor Ben Gottlieb (Jason Schwartzman, playing a “Benjamin,” just like Hoffman) guiding his elementary school music teacher Carla Kessler (Carol Kane) through a late-in-life Bat Mitzvah, the characters in *Between the Temples* are overtly and resplendently Jewish. (The only non-Jewish character, in fact, is a Protestant woman who briefly shows up for a J-Date with Ben because she “doesn’t like the feel of foreskin”). Virtually the entire film takes place at Ben’s synagogue, in the Bat Mitzvah instruction, at a Sabbath dinner, or at a Jewish cemetery: the site of an erotic encounter between Ben and Gabbi (Madeline Weinstein), the single daughter of his synagogue’s Rabbi. In fact, it is almost literally bookended by the sound of the *shofar*, the ceremonial rams-horn trumpet.
that opens and closes the High Holy Days (and which also makes a humorous appearance, in “non-kosher” form, as the Rabbi’s putting cup).

However, the Jewish religious structure is but the container for the complicated relationships between Ben and Carla, Gabbi, and his not one but two Jewish mothers (paging Dr. Freud!), who are trying to set Ben up with a proverbial nice Jewish girl since the accidental death of his wife a year earlier. In fact, the film opens with the two women (played by Caroline Aaron as Ben’s biological mother and Dolly De Leon as his mother’s wife, a convert from Manilla) declare that they think Ben should see a doctor. Ben reluctantly agrees that seeing a therapist might help, only to find that his moms actually mean he should see, socially, a beautiful and successful plastic surgeon, who shows up at their house moments later. While Ben is not yet ready to reinvest in love and romance, he is having worse problems professionally, as he is his synagogue’s cantor: but every time he tries to lead the ritual readings from the Torah, which a cantor sings in a traditional chant for the congregation, his throat closes up, and he coughs and sputters until he has to stop. (Paging Dr. Freud again!) It is after one such episode that a chance encounter brings Carla back into Ben’s life after five decades.

When Carla shows up at Ben’s Benei Mitzvah class preparing of Jewish boys and girls for their coming of age, Ben initially refuses, saying the course isn’t for her. But Carla badgers him into letting her do it, mainly through a moving monologue about the specific reasons why she didn’t have hers at the traditional age of 12 or 13 (depending on the branch of Judaism), which involved her parents’ status as Communist Russian immigrants and thus hers as a “Red Diaper Baby.” She forces Ben to speak her entire monologue back to her—and then she knows that Ben fully understands her, her past, and how it informs her present. In an exemplary Jewish way, in fact, the presence of the past is a running theme throughout the movie, especially for Ben, who remarks, “Ben; even my name is in the past tense.” In a variety of ways, his old selves keep reappearing in his present, from his time with Carla (then Mrs. O’Connor) in elementary school to
paintings his biological mother has made of him over the course of his life and that she keeps up in her house. Most disorientingly, after he and Carla inadvertently drink some psychoactive tea and watch a VHS of his own Bar Mitzvah, adult Ben appears behind himself as the Bar Mitzvah boy on the tape and, then, “Little Benny” appears with them in the room and has to fend off their interrogation of him by stealing adult Ben’s kippa, leading Ben to chase his adolescent self to get the symbol of his Jewish male identity back.

Clearly, Ben is going through an existential crisis, not just about his place in the synagogue as a cantor who can’t sing. At one point he wanders into a Catholic church and talks with the priest about faith, doubt, and God—but also about death, a lingering concern since his wife’s accident. Even in death, his wife is a character. Ben gives Gabbi his wife’s novel, leading to the erotic encounter in the cemetery and the revelation that Ben has kept over 700 pornographic voice mails from his dead wife on his phone. It is the presence of his wife’s absence that makes the comfort of the traditional Jewish liturgy stick in his throat, until he reconnects with the source of his own song in the form of Carla. Carla’s younger self also reappears from the past in the form of an LP she recorded as a young adult; from the visage on the album cover, she was likely in her 20’s. Now she and “Little Benny” reconnect fifty-some years later, and he helps her enter fully into her Jewish identity, while she helps him enter into life, and love, again. At a disastrous family dinner with his two mothers, the Rabbi, his daughter, and Carla, on the eve of her Bat Mitzvah, he tells her, “I could just jump into your heart and live there.” Bridges burnt with both his family and his synagogue, they improvise a home Bat Mitzvah for Carla, and then, finally, his voice finds its song again.