



11-28-2016

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### Recommended Citation

Tumanov, Vladimir (2016) "Daniel and The Sonnenscheins: Biblical Cycles in István Szabó's Film Sunshine," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol8/iss3/2>

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# Daniel and The Sonnenscheins: Biblical Cycles in István Szabó's Film *Sunshine*

## **Abstract**

As the exilic experience, initiated in 587 B.C.E., continued over millennia, no one has been able to settle the question of what it means to be a diaspora Jew. Are those who actively participate in non-Jewish life still in a position to claim the heritage of Israel? And what about Jews who actively seek assimilation and renounce their roots altogether: are they still Jews in spite of themselves? Authors, from Joseph Roth to Sholom Aleichem to Chaim Potok, have tried to deal with this issue in light of different diaspora circumstances. One of the most recent perspectives on Jewish identity comes to us through *Sunshine*, a powerful film by the Hungarian director Istvan Szabó (1999).

Ever since the Babylonian exilic period (587-539 B.C.E.) the Jews have grappled with the issue of assimilation in diaspora. The first exiles had to decide how to behave in a foreign land where paganism, rather than the monotheistic temple cult of Jerusalem, determined the essential aspects of existence. One reaction is expressed in Psalm 137:1: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion." The other, more pragmatic approach was integration into the life of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian empire and later the Persian Empire under Cyrus.

When the Persians had overthrown the Babylonian regime and allowed the Jews to go home in 539 B.C.E.,

the number of repatriates in this first convoy may well have been only a few hundred. The Jews in Babylon had already prospered because of their facility in the Aram chancery language. Their usefulness as undercover agents in the chanceries was doubled when Persia conquered Babylon. Moreover, private concerns like "Murashu & Co." are shown by cuneiform records to have been tycoons of business. [...] No great torrent accepted the king's invitation to exchange comfort and security for the fulfillment of a religious urge, "Next year in Jerusalem" (North: 386).

If one adds to this the scandal over the numerous marriages to gentile women (Ezra 10:1-44), we have a clear sense that large numbers of exilic Jews did not isolate themselves from gentile society. However, this did not necessarily amount to complete assimilation as exemplified by the biblical book of Esther which explores the "problem of how to be a faithful Jew in a foreign environment. [...] The Jews

must participate in the affairs of state; they must appreciate the good elements of non-Jewish society and cooperate wherever possible" (Nowell, Craven, Dumm: 576).

And yet, what exactly is suggested by "participating in the affairs of state" remained unclear well into the twentieth century. As the exilic experience, initiated in 587 B.C.E., continued over millennia, no one has been able to settle the question of what it means to be a diaspora Jew. Are those who actively participate in non-Jewish life still in a position to claim the heritage of Israel? And what about Jews who actively seek assimilation and renounce their roots altogether: are they still Jews in spite of themselves? Authors, from Joseph Roth to Sholom Aleichem to Chaim Potok, have tried to deal with this issue in light of different diaspora circumstances. One of the most recent perspectives on Jewish identity comes to us through *Sunshine*, a powerful film by the Hungarian director Istvan Szabó (1999).

Szabó, who wrote the screenplay with Israel Horowitz, tells the story of several generations in one Hungarian Jewish family: the Sonnenscheins. Living at the turn of the twentieth century, the patriarch of the Sonnenschein clan is Emmanuel, a successful distiller who seems to have found a balance between the two exilic extremes: neither complete assimilation, nor a retreat from gentile society. However, this equilibrium is disrupted by Emmanuel's descendants. Thus, Emmanuel's son Ignatz considers his identity in purely Hungarian terms. He

becomes a judge, changes his Jewish last name from Sonnenschein to Sors and devotes his life to serving the Austro-Hungarian emperor Franz Josef. As Susan Suleiman points out, this reflects the Hungarian " 'assimilationist contract' which characterized the high point of the Dual Monarchy period between 1848 and 1918 when Jews in Hungary felt more empowered and integrated into mainstream society than at any other time before or afterwards" (234). And even following World War I Hungarian Jews remained some of the most assimilated in Europe:

The specificity of Hungarian Jews until the Holocaust [...] is that they felt Hungarian: they were not exiles, Hungary was their home. Furthermore, as we have seen, they played an important historical role in the modernization of Hungary and in the creation of modern Hungarian identity. Jewish intellectuals - writers, journalists, publishers - played major roles in Hungarian cultural life, and the liberal professions were at times more than 50% Jewish (Suleiman: 245).

The desire to shed one's Jewish heritage is best illustrated by Adam, Ignatz Sonnenschein's/Sors' son, who becomes an Olympic fencing champion, desperately seeking to embrace Hungarian nationalism. Having won a gold medal at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Adam feels he has defended the glory of his nation. The question is: which nation is his? The answer appears to be given as soon as Adam leaves the Olympic medal awarding ceremony. Still reeling from the exhilaration of the moment, Adam finds himself in Berlin's Pergamon Museum of Antiquities. The very first antiquity that he encounters is the famous processional way with raised relief lions leading to the gate of Ishtar. The sequence of events is

important here because Adam is looking at something built under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II, the very king who captured Judah and took the Jews into Babylonian exile (cf. Collins: 29). The assimilated Olympian seems to be reminded that he cannot escape from himself. Like the very first deported Israelites who may have gazed at these lions over two thousand years earlier, Adam is a Jew in exile no matter how hard he may try to deny it. This message is made unmistakable when he is murdered in the Holocaust in spite of his Olympic achievement and Hungarian patriotic fervor.

Therefore, all diaspora experience right up to Hitler constitutes the reenactment of Exile as a biblical paradigm. Mircea Eliade argues that the repetition of a primordial or founding action is at the base of myth and the mythic perception of time which is circular: "The person who reproduces the original act is transported to the mythic moment when the example-setting act is revealed" (49-50, my translation - V.T.). And this brings us to the form of Szabó's film which acquires its mythic dimension through constant reenactment:

[In *Sunshine*] characters tend to function as types, rather than as fully developed "round" figures [...] The narrative relies on repetition and parallelism as its most important tropes. [...] The choice of a single actor to play the three generations of protagonists is the most obvious example, emphasizing the similarities in character and situation, as well as the physical resemblance of the three men." (Suleiman: 238-9)

Thus, just as Ignatz Sonnenschein/Sors becomes a Hungarian judge rather than a Hungarian Jew, and just as his son Adam seeks to fence his way out of his Jewishness, so too Adam's son Ivan joins the secret police in Communist Hungary after World War II. Ivan is given the task of fighting a "Zionist conspiracy" and for a time aligns himself with the modern Nebuchadnezzar whose current name happens to be Stalin.

Each Sonnenschein/Sors repeats a pattern which can be termed "climb toward the center of gentile power." Ignatz, in his capacity as central court judge, supports the empire under Franz Josef and is once even received by the emperor himself. Ignatz is so moved that he can barely walk as he leaves Franz Joseph's palace in Vienna. When asked by another Jew to be lenient toward certain Jews on trial, Ignatz furiously refuses to comply since he is a judge in the service of the emperor! Adam, as Olympic champion, is honored by the Hungarian government and ends up temporarily exempted from the Jewish laws of 1938/9. These laws excluded Jews from practically all facets of life in Hungary, but certain exceptions were made, e.g., for Olympic champions. The way Adam jubilates upon learning of his and his family's exemption is a clear indication to what extent he seeks to break with the Jewish part of his identity. However, this closeness to gentile power does not help because in the end Adam dies the death of an exile Jew under Hitler: beaten to death by sadistic labor camp guards. Adam's son Ivan also seeks gentile

power by becoming a policeman, i.e., a member of the machinery that controlled every aspect of society in the Soviet Block after World War Two.

Apart from this central reenactment pattern, the film abounds with examples of repetition conveying *Sunshine's* subtext of mythic cyclicity. The reappearing flower-covered courtyard of the Sonnenschein house, the dish dashed to the floor by generations of Sonnenscheins, the fish eaten at the family dinner table by Emmanuel and then by his aged son Gustave, the piano duet by Ignatz and his wife Valerie and then by the old Valerie and Ignatz's brother Gustave, the deer hunt with Ignatz and the boar hunt with Ivan, Adam's arrest under the Nazis and then Ivan's arrest under the Communists - everything keeps recurring right down to the dysfunctional sexual life of the Sonnenscheins (cf. Suleiman: 242). And it all fits into the eternal return of Jewish identity - whether denied or affirmed - which always goes back to the source: the Bible.

The connection between the biblical prototype and its reenactment is made in a letter sent by Emmanuel Sonnenschein to his son Ignatz. This letter is found at the end of the film by the last Sonnenschein, Ivan, and is presented as being read by all the generations of the family. Emmanuel makes an explicit link between the life path of his son Ignatz - and implicitly the fate of Adam and Ivan - and two biblical prototypes: Moses and David. Although the Sonnenscheins must walk in the footsteps of the mythic lawgiver and king, Emmanuel warns that the Jews have



to avoid association with gentile power in exile. Essentially, Emmanuel sums up the experience of his ambitious, assimilation-driven descendants. An alliance with the Babylonian lion is a great temptation because it offers a sense of security, but that lion might devour the exile at any moment as is illustrated by the film. The letter insists on independent thinking and faithfulness to one's Jewish roots. And so, given the key points of Emmanuel's message, it can be argued that the most appropriate biblical prototype here would be Daniel, the very first exile under Nebuchadnezzar II whose lions Adam Sonnenschein/Sors sees at the Pergamon Museum in 1936.

In the Book of Daniel we are told that Daniel and three young men from the Jewish elite are brought to the court of king Nebuchadnezzar in order to be integrated into Babylonian life. This is the call to assimilation so eagerly answered by the Sonnenscheins and much more cautiously by Daniel's group. This difference in attitude is exemplified by the name-change pattern. Daniel and his three companions are made to take Babylonian names by Nebuchadnezzar's officials (Daniel 1:7). The Sonnenscheins reenact this paradigm; however, in the case of the biblical prototype, it is made explicit that the name change is imposed upon Daniel and the three young men. Ignatz Sonnenschein chooses to take the name Sors in order to attain a higher position in the Hungarian legal system. Although he could remain a lower-level judge, he wants to be part of the power structure. As Ignatz,

his wife and his brother leave the civil registry office with their new, gentile name, they giggle wildly, indicating the difference between them and Daniel. This silly laughter suggests how blind these modern exiles are to their inability to escape from their identity which will come back to haunt the family during the Holocaust.

The Sonnenscheins' rise in Hungarian society reenacts the events in the book of Daniel where the Jewish exiles receive influential posts in the Babylonian administration: "Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men" (Daniel 2:48; also cf. 1:8-21). The Israelites comply, echoing a call from another exilic text, Jeremiah: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile [...] for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (29:7). However, Daniel and the three young men are pragmatists - not cynics. They seek a balancing act which is summed by John J. Collins as follows: "Daniel and his companions prove themselves loyal and devoted subjects to the gentile kings and embrace much of the gentile culture. Yet they also insist on a limit to assimilation, especially in chaps. 3 and 6." (146). This "limit to assimilation" brings them to grief and illustrates Emmanuel Sonnenschein's warning about the danger of coming too close to gentile power.

When Daniel and his friends refuse to venerate any deity but their own, the Babylonian lion turns on them: literally and metaphorically. Daniel is thrown into

a lion den (Daniel 6) while his three friends are cast into a fiery oven (Daniel 3). Unlike the Jews who were cast into the fiery ovens of the Holocaust - including those who thought themselves safe thanks to assimilation - Daniel's comrades do not burn thanks to God's intervention, and Daniel is rescued from the lions. This experience is repeated in *Sunshine* as the very system that Adam and Ivan have sought to support and glorify becomes their bitter enemy: Adam is killed and Ivan ends up in jail. Thus, Emmanuel Sonnenschein turns out to be right: there is no safety for the exilic Jew. And this means that there must necessarily be a "limit to assimilation" (cf. Collins above): a lesson that is exemplified by the behavior of Daniel's group and finally learned by the last Sonnenschein. Ivan Sonnenschein/Sors, upon reading Emmanuel's letter, decides to change his name back to Sonnenschein, symbolically assuming the attitude of the first biblical exiles.

It must be noted that neither Daniel nor his three friends seek proximity to gentile power. It is thrust upon them, and they accept for reasons outlined above. This is not the case with the Sonnenscheins whose blind ambition I have discussed. Therefore, there is a symbolic moral basis behind the salvation of the biblical exiles and the demise of their Hungarian counterparts. At the same time Daniel's faithfulness must not be taken as a literal recipe for security, for, as John J. Collins argues, "any Jew of the post-exilic period must have known that God, for whatever reason, does not always deliver the faithful" (188). However, Szabó

appears to be suggesting that in exilic circumstances an equilibrium of identity is the only way. It is, therefore, appropriate that Susan Suleiman calls the early part of the film, where Emmanuel is still alive, "the sunlit age" (234). Emmanuel is the example to follow, and his attitude corresponds most closely to the ideological stance in the Book of Daniel.

Philip French sums up *Sunshine* by saying that "anti-Semitism is ineradicable, [and] Jews must always be self-conscious outsiders who deceive themselves if they think they are truly Hungarians or Germans" (*The Observer*, April 30, 2000). Essentially it is Anti-Semitism that determines the cyclical nature of Jewish life in diaspora. The reenactment of past events is inevitable as long Jews in exile are the target of institutionalized or ideologically-based alienation. Therefore, the eternal return of myth appears to be programmed into Jewish identity which straddles a dizzying number of centuries. For this reason the Bible can be viewed as the subtext for so much discourse about modern Jewish life. Every year in every synagogue around the world the scroll of the Torah is read from beginning to end and then rolled back for yet another reading at Simchat Torah. It seems that all Jews, no matter how assimilated, are connected through that rolling mechanism, and István Szabó's film is yet another confirmation of this notion. *Sunshine* is a profound reflection on moderation which makes yet another important contribution to the still unresolved question of what it means to be a Jew.

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