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An Ugly Story?

by

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Among the many themes to which Joel and Ethan Coen's *A Serious Man* speaks so richly and suggestively, I will focus here on three that seem especially pertinent to our understandings of American Jewish identity, as well as to the academic practice of Jewish studies, and that exhibit the film's blend of complexity, clarity, and opacity. All three are closely related aspects of a larger question about the possibility of communication and, hence, of relation, but it should be useful to articulate them separately here. Each may be said to present, through the characters' interactions and the things they read and hear, its own question for judgment, but in no case does *A Serious Man* indicate how the viewer is to rule on that question.

One theme is the question of misunderstanding: as viewers, readers, or auditors, when we are shown a failed communication between two characters, shall we "side" with one as being correct and shun the other as relying on assumptions that are somehow illegitimate? A second is the relation between literacy and orality: Which is more authentic, or more primal, or (alas) more fatal? The third is transmission and identification across generations: Can these be achieved in America without illusion or repression?

These themes are tied together by a narrative thread running throughout the film (more than a subplot, because it arguably leads to the protagonist's downfall) concerning the encounter between physics professor Larry Gopnik and an unhappy student. Near the beginning of the film, Larry enters his department office and is handed a few sheets with phone messages. One is from "Clive Park" and carries the message "Unjust test results." (Neither on first nor second viewing but later, in a paused screen shot, somehow the impression conveyed is that Larry really should be getting this "message" that the test results were unjust.) This message comes to Larry, and to the screen, immediately after Larry has been to the doctor and been told (incorrectly, as we will learn at the end of the film) that "you're in good health." Thus Larry, too, has received "unjust test results" or, if Larry, like Job, does not deserve his ultimate diagnosis, then the later, correct test results instead will be "unjust." But what could Larry do even if he understood these many messages aright?

As Larry settles into his office chair, a Korean American student (Clive Park) comes in to complain to Larry about the "F" he received on a midterm

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exam. Clive offers Larry what we might call the "cultural argument," pointing out that if he fails the course, he will "feel shame" (something along the lines of "in my culture, failure is serious because it leads to shame," though Clive is far from a native speaker of English and perhaps not quite this articulate). Indeed, the tense dialogue plays out as a debate about the subjective or objective criteria of understanding, as Clive further argues that he had in fact well understood the physics, while Larry insists that "you can't really understand the physics without understanding the math. The math tells how it really works." Ultimately Larry will not budge from his position that the performance deserved the grade, and there's nothing the professor can do. Rather unlike the paradox of Schrödinger's cat, a presentation of which is the occasion for Larry's entry into the movie (see "The Physics of Being Jewish, or On Cats and Jews," by Shai Ginsburg, in this issue), Larry thus presents the question of test results in stark, objective, black and white. Clive leaves, disappointed. Some seconds after he departs, Larry discovers (and we discover, not sure ourselves how it got there) an envelope stuffed with cash on his desk. He runs out to confront Clive, but it is too late.

The next day, Clive returns to Larry's office at Larry's summons. Larry submits that Clive has tried to bribe him by leaving the envelope with money on his desk. Clive's initial response, clearly a denial, is difficult for Larry (and at least for this viewer) to comprehend. This, though Larry has just insisted that "I can interpret, CLIVE. I know what you meant me to understand" (by allegedly leaving the envelope with cash on Larry's desk). Clive's retort appears in the script as "Meer sir my sir."[1] However, the first two times I saw the film (without, of course, following along in a written script), I heard Clive's response as something like "mise maysuh."

Larry repeats Clive's utterance back to him, more or less accurately but, as it seems, without comprehension. Larry's repetition is written out in the script as identical to Clive's above, but somehow seems more "audible" to this viewer—perhaps precisely because it is a repetition. It sounded to me like "mirser mayser?" At which Clive repeats, patiently and without taking visible offense, trying to make sure he is understood this time: "Mere surmise, sir. Very uncertain."

Very uncertain, indeed. Listening again, and pausing, and stopping and rewinding again, at home in Chapel Hill in February 2011, I hear Clive now, even the first time, making a slightly different utterance—one in which the "r's" (famously, if stereotypically, difficult for native speakers of East Asian languages) do come through, distinctly enough for Larry to pronounce the "r's" when speaking Clive's utterance back to him, but indistinctly enough for me to have been able to hear Clive's utterance, at least the first two times I watched this film, as a Yiddish phrase meaning, of course, "ugly story." The scene ends there.[2]

1. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, *A Serious Man* [script] (Internet Movie Script Database [IMSDb], 2007), p. 33, www.imsdb.com/scripts/A-Serious-Man.html.

2. Whether a film's published script better attests to what characters "really" say than what an audience hears is far from simple to determine—another example of the questions I posed above regarding both understanding versus misunderstanding, and literacy versus orality. If the script actually represented best what a character "really" says, we would, for example, have to make sense of a line

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What sense of class or cultural context could lead a character to such a dramatically more intelligible response? The changes in Clive's phonology between his initial assertion and his carefully conscious rearticulation for Larry's sake, involving among other things more prominent "r's," curiously recall William Labov's sociolinguistic work from the 1960s on the social (not "ethnic") stratification of English in New York City. As some readers may recall, Labov had gone into three New York department stores—the now-defunct, and inexpensive, S. Klein's on Union Square; the more upscale Macy's on Herald Square; and the decidedly high-class Saks Fifth Avenue, and asked counterwomen where a certain item—something that Labov knew to be located on the "fourth floor"—might be found. The answers confirmed Labov's expectation, that dropped "r's" remained a distinctive marker of working-class New York speech, were stigmatized as such, and therefore the "r" would be pronounced more distinctly in the upper-class stores. Labov also found that that even at Klein's, the most "working-class" of the three department stores, saleswomen "knew" to put the "r's" back in when they were enunciating carefully.[3] Thus, Labov confirmed that pronunciation of English was stratified by class (and not only region or ethnicity) and that speakers were at least implicitly conscious of that stratification and able to "correct" their speech when the situation called for it.

Here, though Clive's initial response is somewhat indistinct, it is not merely an example of the unreflective use of an ethnic accent. Clive asserts that Larry cannot know his intent, that the threatened charge of attempted bribery would surely not stand up in court. Clive understands the story (if not the math) and knows what to say even if he has to be reminded to say it more carefully. In addition, as though rehearsing (in the 1960s) the rise of Asian Americans as a model minority following the supposed example of American Jews, he is able to return "dropped 'r's" to his speech when he needs to.

But I didn't hear those "r's" the first two times I watched the film. I heard Clive speaking Yiddish, saying "miyese mayse," another way of saying, "Your accusation is an ugly fiction." Indeed, the ugly story could be one of the protagonist's racism against a member of another "minority" than Jews. Is Clive's "ugly-story" accusation there or isn't it (is the cat alive or is it dead?)?

In the film's very next scene after the "ugly-story" accusation, we see Larry's son Danny at home, practicing his bar mitzvah portion by listening to a long-playing record over and over again. Danny is denied (in the film's montage) even the minimal continuity of live bar mitzvah tutorship, by his father or anyone else. (In one of the film's relatively few slips that I have caught, the record jacket is of Yossele Rosenblatt chanting a High Holiday service, rather than a weekly Torah portion.) And the first words of the *parasha*

attributed to *A Serious Man*'s Hebrew teacher as "Hamrah oomoh meshiach oomshel zal?" Coen and Coen, www.imsdb.com/scripts/A-Serious-Man.html, p. 11.

3. William Labov, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 [1966]).

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refer to the very fact of God speaking to Moses. Is that, too, meant to be a "very uncertain" discourse?

So much perhaps is not *put into* the movie, but that is not to say that so much, and more, is not there. In any case, although, unlike us, Danny is obligated to physically pick up the stylus in order to "pause" or "replay," he does at least get to hear the *parasha* over and over again, and will ultimately triumph on his bar mitzvah day. Danny's study is certainly uncomprehending. He doesn't speak Hebrew, and we are apparently to understand that he doesn't even have a live tutor, since we are not shown one. Nor is anyone shown explaining the text to him. Moreover, at least at home he appears to be illiterate, since at this point he is only listening to the record and not looking at a text at all. What he really wants to be doing is watching *F Troop*, and a bit later in the film, we will actually see Danny listening to the record over and over once more, paying half attention while watching a science fiction film on the grainy black-and-white TV.

A bit later, Clive's father appears at Larry's now broken suburban home. His arrival is announced by Larry's daughter, Danny's older sister: "Dad? Dad! Chinese guy. . . ." This sets the scene for a driveway confrontation, a showdown at the hardly okay corral, under the pitiless sun of the raw and treeless Midwestern plain, no doubt former farmland on which ranch houses have just been somehow made to grow. In this showdown, a sour cowboy appears: to Larry's mortification, Larry's grotesquely, comically stereotyped, Midwest Anglo macho neighbor, not incidentally out to make his own son in his tough image (and at least in Larry's fears, a *farbisener* anti-Semite), offers to come to Larry's aid ("Is this man bothering you?").

In the confrontation, Clive's father is devastatingly clear in his message, frustratingly paradoxical though that message may ultimately be for Larry. Mr. Park starts the conversation by pushing his clenched fists together and announcing, "Culture clash." Mr. Park makes it clear that, one way or the other, if Larry *doesn't* accept the bribe, he's going to get in trouble: denounced for soliciting a bribe or denounced for defamation of a minority student. Larry seeks certainty, arguing that the two alternatives should be mutually exclusive: "This doesn't make sense—either he left the money or he didn't." But the response (a sendup, perhaps, of the stereotype of Oriental wisdom?) is, "Please—accept the mystery." The cat is both alive and dead. You solicited the bribe, and you defamed my son.

Near the very end of the picture (near the very end of Larry's life?), this question of a grade change is going to come back to haunt him—more accurately, to foreshadow some unspecified but very bad news about his health. Larry has just received an illusory kind of immortality in the form of tenure, but it is not enough. His final temptation to accept that bribe is occasioned by the last straw in his ever-increasing financial burden—a criminal lawyer's bill for defense of his troubled brother, coming shortly after Larry's agreement to pay for the funeral of his wife's lover, the new-age bully Sy Ableman. This linkage, at least narrative and perhaps even in some plot sense "causal," between, on the one hand, Larry's willingness not only to be his brother's keeper, but also to take on the mitzvah of *halvoes hames* (provision of decent burial), and on the other, his own onrushing

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mortality, comes fairly close to being properly tragic. And yet the act to which all this drives him, that appears to seal his doom, is a tiny act of erasure and rewriting: Clive's failing "F" changed to a "C," Clive's shame rewritten as Larry's secret dishonor.[4] This is a twist—one that simultaneously begs for interpretation and laughs at our attempts to do so—on the film's opening scene, where (we can only imagine) an ambiguous act by a female ancestor may have (once again, in a kind of tragic trajectory) led to Larry's downfall a world away and generations later.

Larry is without counsel other than that which he buys from lawyers. His fruitless attempts to seek wisdom from a series of rabbis may well be the key source for the common impression that *A Serious Man* is an indictment of American Jewry. What's missed in that reading is the fact that Larry has already lost his father. There are no grandparents in this film. Larry's son Danny is shut out of every attempt to communicate back to ancestry—for example, by the Hebrew school principal's insistence that he speak only in the supposed ancestral language, *Ivrit*—which neither Danny nor any of his fellow-sufferer Hebrew school classmates have acquired. For Danny, Larry is not so much a teacher as a television repairman. Moreover, Larry cannot protect Danny from the neighborhood bully. By contrast, Clive Park appears to be well protected by his father.

Yet, before the whirlwind that ends the film, Danny succeeds in actually *reading* the Torah, affording him access to the wise senior rabbi from whose presence, like Kafka's man waiting before the Law, Larry has been excluded. Danny is admitted to the chamber of the old magus—Rabbi Marshak—and, in something like an iteration of the classic sociological theme of the return of the third generation, the rabbi temporarily becomes a benevolent father for Danny. Only for a moment is there this flash of redemption for Danny and for the aged rabbi. In an asthmatic voice, with a heavy Yiddish accent but in readily comprehensible English, Marshak proffers the return of Danny's confiscated radio, while reciting the names of the members of the Jefferson Airplane and acknowledging that at least some of the questions in Danny's world are questions in his as well. The results of Danny's attempt to communicate here differ somewhat, but significantly, from the moment at the beginning of the film when he is utterly silenced as he tries to explain to the Hebrew school principal how the earphones work, since Danny could only have explained this in English, not *Ivrit* nor "even," of course, the real ancestral language of Yiddish. Now (after he has become a member of the ritual community?) Danny is permitted to communicate back to Marshak, whispering the name "Kaukonen" that Marshak neither quite hears nor rejects. Perhaps the redemption, such as it is, has come about not only through listening and speaking rather than through reading, but moreover in a moment of flawed, gentle, real conversation between this wheezing angel from the past and this stoned preadolescent.

4. War Danny's passion for "F Troop" a warning that his father failed to hear? We will never know, but no one has ever heard of a television show called C Troop.

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Is the story ugly or beautiful? Receive it with simplicity, but turn it and turn it and turn it again, because there's an awful lot in it, and we'll never know fully where it came from. Where it goes is up to us.

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