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"Serious" Talk

by

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Starting with its opening scene, *A Serious Man* offers a complex, provocative engagement with the role of storytelling in Jewish life, past and present. Many viewers have wondered how the film's "shtetl" prologue relates to its main story, set in Minneapolis in 1967. They have often speculated that there is some plot-driven relationship that they somehow missed. But the connection, by the filmmakers' own assertion, is not diegetic; rather, it is thematic, and storytelling figures strategically in articulating this link.

The prologue presents the shtetl as a lost locus of a thoroughly Jewish way of life, marked as such by the use of Yiddish. This bygone milieu is imagined as including both a traditional engagement with the supernatural in the course of daily life (you open the door, and in walks a dybbuk) and a traditional skepticism about this engagement (a dybbuk? Are you kidding?). *A Serious Man* presents this encounter with the uncanny in the idiom of the folktale. In doing so, the film both evokes and skews established tropes of Eastern European Jewish storytelling (the mysterious traveler, the dead present among the living, Yiddish as the vehicle for the tale as well as the language of daily life for the tale's characters), as the episode centers on vernacular explanations of the unknown.

The folktale that opens *A Serious Man* is not authentic to the Eastern European Jewish past. Joel and Ethan Coen readily admit that, not having found a traditional tale to suit their script's needs, they invented their own. The scene was scripted in English and then translated into Yiddish by Allen Lewis Rickman, the actor who plays Velvel, the husband of the shtetl couple who find themselves the hosts of the mysterious guest who may or may not be a supernatural being. Rickman's translation replaced a preliminary one used in auditions, which many of the actors trying out for the Yiddish-speaking parts found awkwardly unidiomatic.[1] Rickman embroidered the original English dialogue with a trove of folksy idioms—*in mitn plitsem; a pitshefke; der nit-guter; broytgeber mayner; gut shabes, gut yontef, aroys der foygl*—most of which is lost on the non-Yiddish-speaking audience, who follow the scene by reading the English subtitles. These are, in fact, the original lines of

1. Rickman reports that some of the earlier translation, which was prepared by Wendy Zierler, remained in the final version, especially lines spoken by Fyvush Finkel, who also added some idioms of his own. Allen Lewis Rickman and Yelena Shmulenson, in discussion with author, February 7, 2011.

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dialogue in the script.[2] Therefore, what appears to be the usual practice—translating the original, full dialogue that is heard on the soundtrack in subtitles that are relatively skeletal—is, instead, reversed. Rickman, in effect, fabricated an imagined Yiddish original, as if it were from the pen of the Coens, had they been fluent in the language, or from a literary reworking of a folktale by Y. L. Peretz or Isaac Bashevis Singer, or from an ethnographer's recording of a tale *fun folks moyl.*

This invention of an implied original that never actually existed is in keeping with the prologue itself and its significance in the film as a whole. Embedded within the shtetl prologue are clues that this is not genuine Ashkenazic folklore, its enactment in Yiddish notwithstanding, but "fakelore." The mysterious traveler, Treitle Groshkover (played by Fyvush Finkel), is misidentified as a dybbuk—a living person possessed by the soul of someone else who has died (most famously, the character of Leye is possessed by the soul of the dead Khonen in Ansky's *The Dybbuk*). Rather, Velvel's wife, Dora (played by Yelena Shmulenson), reports that Groshkover is dead; therefore, if the mysterious traveler is Groshkover, as the visitor insists he is, then he has somehow been restored to life. And the telltale "clue" of his death being Dora's discussion of his one unshaven cheek is specious; as a rule, pious Jews with such long, full beards as the one sported by Finkel did not trim their facial hair.[3] Of greater significance, the question of whether or not the mysterious traveler is in fact Treitle Groshkover, dead or alive, or is a dybbuk or some sort of demon in disguise, is left unresolved at the end of the prologue. Indeed, the film's closing credits identify the role played by Finkel as "Dybbuk?"

After the opening credits that follow the prologue, *A Serious Man* continues in an entirely different Jewish milieu: the postwar American Midwest. The prologue—its setting, characters, and plot elements—is never mentioned again, and yet it haunts the rest of film through oblique cinematic evocations. Yiddish continues to be heard in the film, whether the occasional word or expression in the Midwestern Jews' dialogue (*mazel tov*, *get*, *tzaddik*, *lamedvovnik*, *shiva*, *shabbes*, *tsuris*, *chuppah*, *naches*)[4] or in the strains of Sidor Belarsky's performance of the Mark Warshavsky song "Dem milners trern," a recording of which the film's protagonist, Professor Larry Gopnik (played by Michael Stuhlbarg), plays repeatedly, apparently as a source of solace. There is visual evocation of the prologue as well: It opens with an overhead shot of the roofs of shtetl houses; later, this scene is echoed with a view of the roofs of postwar tract homes in suburban Minneapolis, intimating that these two social geographies are somehow parallel, not only as sites of Jewish communities but also as sites of Jewish storytelling that seeks to address the uncanny.[5]

2. Ibid.

3. Rickman raised this issue, among other details that came up in the process of translating the script, with the Coens. Allen Lewis Rickman e-mail message to Jeffrey Shandler, February 23, 2011.

4. These and several other Jewish terms are glossed—and spelled as given here—on a bonus feature included on the DVD of *A Serious Man* (DVD no. 62106191, Universal Pictures, 2010), titled "Hebrew and Yiddish for Goys."

5. In addition, some claim that a portrait of Treitle Groshkover can be glimpsed in the office of the reclusive Rabbi Marshak. In fact, this is not the case; rather, this claim projects the desire for some direct sign of a connection between the prologue and the rest of the film.

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This cinematic self-consciousness about narrative appears in other Coen brothers films. There is a similarly mock folkloric framing device in *The Big Lebowski* (1998), which has a cryptic, folksy narrator—a cowboy, known only as "Stranger" (played by Sam Elliott). Indeed, these two films offer complementary notions of the place of American Jews in the Coens' cinematic narratives: In *A Serious Man*, a story of Jewish life in a Midwestern suburb is somehow an echo of shtetl folklore; in *The Big Lebowski*, the misadventures of Los Angeles Jews—both "Big" Jeff Lebowski and "Little" Jeff Lebowski, also known as "the Dude," as well as Walter Sobchak, who famously doesn't bowl on Shabbes—are somehow the stuff of cowboy legends.

* * *

By juxtaposing the shtetl and the suburb, the Coens position their cinematic storytelling about post–World War II Midwestern Jewish life as a contemporary vehicle for religiously inflected storytelling analogous to the Yiddish folktale—even as the juxtaposition problematizes the comparison. In the Coens' narrative, Jews probe their fascination with and skepticism about believing in something large and all-embracing to explain our existence, whether it be demons or God or physics. In *A Serious Man*, such beliefs are portrayed as both compelling and absurd in equal measure. One seldom sees a film—especially an American one—that engages issues of spiritual questing so richly and with such playful ambiguity.

The playfulness is signaled, if cryptically, by the film's opening epigraph—"Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you"—taken from Rashi's commentary on Deuteronomy 18:13. *New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis reports that this sentence is also cited (in this rendering in English) in a nineteenth-century Yiddish story by Aizik-Meyer Dik, "The Gilgul, or the Wandering Soul," which appears in a collection of Yiddish literature of the supernatural edited and translated by Joachim Neugroschel; this may have been one of the sources of Yiddish folk narrative the Coens explored before inventing one of their own.[6] Dik's tale, a satire of hasidic beliefs and practices, cites the Rashi text forthrightly as an admonition to the reader not to be taken in by the claims that hasidim make for *rebeyem* who can perform miracles and facilitate theurgic encounters.[7] The Coens' offer of Rashi's advice, however, is anything but straightforward. His guidance is not heeded by characters in the film; Larry Gopnik, a self-proclaimed "serious man," never stops questioning what larger explanation might account for all that has befallen him, and he draws others around him into his existential questioning.

Nor is it easy for the film's audience to take Rashi's advice at face value. *A Serious Man* continuously invites interrogation of plot elements and speculation about the thematic underpinnings of its narrative, tempting viewers to join Gopnik in his search for hidden larger meanings. At the same time, the film

6. Manohla Dargis, review of *True Grit*, "Wearing Braids, Seeking Revenge," *New York Times*, December 21, 2010, http://movies.nytimes.com/2010/12/22/movies/22true.html?pagewanted=2.

7. Aizik-Meyer Dik, "The Gilgul, or the Wandering Soul," in *The Dybbuk and the Yiddish Imagination: A Haunted Reade*, ed. and trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 154.

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defiantly resists offering any kind of resolution to the many questions it presents. Viewers' expectations of revelatory insight are repeatedly set up and knocked down, notably with the shaggy-dog story about the "goy's teeth," told by the second of three rabbis that Larry consults for advice, in which an uncanny occurrence not only goes unexplained but is dismissed as being pointless, and in the comically anticlimactic apotheosis of Marshak, the elusive third rabbi, whose much-vaunted sagacity turns out to be cribbed from Jefferson Airplane. And the film ends with several dangling plot developments: Is Larry being punished by God with some dread disease because he accepted a bribe from a student and changed his grade?[8] Will Gopnik's son, Danny (played by Aaron Wolff), his Talmud Torah classmates, and perhaps the entire Minneapolis Jewish community be wiped out in a tornado that looms ominously in the film's final shot?

The stories in *A Serious Man* mark these interrogations of the supernal as a Jewish practice, not simply by dint of cultural markers (use of Yiddish, portrayal of synagogue life, references to the Book of Job), but also by enacting the telling and listening to them as communally constitutive activities. They are as much about affirming Jewish peoplehood, history, and cultural literacy as they are about contemplating the supernal. Like the characters' various efforts to explain the uncanny, this affirmation of Jewishness is double-edged: The community takes itself very seriously, and yet is often ridiculous. Compared to the cultural rootedness of the shtetl evoked in the prologue, the American Jews of Minneapolis appear relatively hapless. They don't have a full Jewish vernacular: Yiddish has been reduced to sentimental song and fragments of speech; *Ivrit* is portrayed as a farcical nonsense language (unlike the Yiddish prologue, sequences in Hebrew are not translated in English subtitles), and, when it is addressed to American Jewish youth, falls on deaf ears—or rather, ears that would sooner listen to Grace Slick. These Jews' clerics are buffoons, and their youth are more interested in watching television sitcoms or getting high than in religious life. At the same time, these Jews enact religious rites in earnest, though the filmmakers portray synagogue rituals as mock heroic (for example, when Danny, the stoned bar mitzvah boy, is handed the *yad*, it is accompanied by the sound effect of a metallic zing, as though he were withdrawing the Arthurian sword from the stone). In their conversations, these Jews readily invoke and speculate about God (referred to—anachronistically, I think—as Hashem) and raise fine points of Jewish law (e.g., the *agunah*). At a Jewish community outing, a woman friend (played by Katherine Borowitz) exhorts the despairing Larry: "It's not always easy deciphering what God is trying to tell you. But it's not something you have to figure out all by yourself. We're Jews! We've got that well of tradition to draw on, to help us understand. When we're puzzled, we have all the stories that have been handed down from people who had the same problems." This seems compelling advice,

8. Strictly speaking, the disease that Larry is being summoned to his doctor's office to discuss at the end of *A Serious Man* was already in effect at the film's opening, when Larry underwent the tests on which his diagnosis is based. Therefore, could Larry's illness be an act of divine punishment for accepting the bribe? Or is all this foreordained by some supernal power—that is, a power other than the film's creators?

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except that the film repeatedly contravenes it (including creating an expectation among viewers that the prologue offers some kind of insight into Larry Gopnik's problems). And the woman who offers this well-intended but feckless advice wears heavy leg braces, suggesting that her counsel is itself disabled. If *A Serious Man* is a reworking of the Book of Job, it's a Jobian comedy.

* * *

Buried in the film's closing credits—shortly after the notice that "American Humane monitored the action" to ensure that "no animals were harmed," and just before the boilerplate disclaimer that "characters and events depicted in this photoplay are fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental"—appears the following sentence: "No Jews were harmed in the making of this motion picture." On discovering this message, some are amused; others are not and, in fact, beg to differ. "Unfortunately the statement is a blatant lie," opines Rabbi Benjamin Blech, in his discussion of *A Serious Man* on Jewlarious: Jewish Arts, Humor and Entertainment, a subsection of the website aish.com. "The harmed victims run the gamut from rabbis to God—all of whom are mercilessly mocked."[9] Others writing about the film online disagree with the frequent assertions that in it the Coens caricature American Jews and their faith—or, according to *Village Voice* film critic Ella Taylor, go beyond being merely self-hating Jews to being "everyone-hating."[10] Indeed, one observer argues that the film follows a respected cinematic precedent: "The Coen Brothers have done for Jews what Fellini did for Italians," asserts Henry Makow, in a posting on the website Conspiracy Planet. "I don't think there is malice intended but rather a recognition of Jewish limitations in style, culture and religion, i.e., the stultifying parochialism, conformity, status seeking, and meaningless observance."[11]

If *A Serious Man* is, in part, a film about Jewish storytelling as a definitional practice and is an example of this storytelling practice in itself, then an analysis of such a self-reflexive work should extend to considering the discussions it has engendered. These include published responses by film critics and Jewish community figures, as well as blog postings and untold impromptu discussions among friends and colleagues in informal settings. In some of these discussions, participants employ their own Jewish literacy—whether in Jewish texts and folklore or in the Jewish elements of the Coens' oeuvre (*Miller's Crossing* [1990], *Barton Fink* [1991], as well as *The Big Lebowski*)—to make sense of the film. In others, discussants relate *A Serious Man* to their own stories of Jewish community life, especially those who feel an affinity to its 1967 setting or the Midwestern milieu.

9. Rabbi Benjamin Blech, "If Only the Coen Brothers Were Serious," www.aish.com/j/as/63956022.html.

10. Ella Taylor, "For *A Serious Man*, Coen Brothers Aim Trademark Contempt at Themselves," *Village Voice*, September 29, 2009, www.villagevoice.com/2009-09-29/film/for-serious-man-coen-brothers-aim-trademark-contempt-at-themselves/.

11. Henry Makow, " 'A Serious Man': Scathing Portrayal of Judaism," www.conspiracyplanet.com/channel.cfm?channelid=136&contentid=6395&page=.

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Much of the American Jewish discussion of *A Serious Man* is proprietary and in this sense is in keeping with a running discourse of the work of other American Jewish filmmakers—Woody Allen, Barry Levinson, Steven Spielberg—whose films Jews often evaluate in terms of these works' representation of Jews and Jewish life. This scrutiny sometimes extends to the filmmakers themselves. Thus, when Jordan Hiller listed *A Serious Man* as ninth in his list of "25 Essential Jewish Films" on the website Bangitout: Kosher Comedy Community, he posited that the Coen brothers "would not be pleased to find their latest work on a list of essential Jewish films. They do not comfortably affiliate with the religion, neither planned on attending Yom Kippur services, and both married out of the faith."[12]

For some Jewish observers, a film that offers such a densely realized ethnographic display of Jewish life demands close scrutiny of its accuracy, especially to time and place. In addition to numerous observers catching apparent mistakes and anachronisms (including my own findings), one posting on the site Three Jews, Four Opinions faults the film for its inconsistent intimations of exactly when in 1967 the film takes place:

> We are in Minneapolis or its environs, and the movie ends with a tornado. Tornado "season" in Minnesota is July–August; 60% of all Minnesota tornadoes happen in those two months. The naked sunbathing neighbor suggests summer. But the son, Danny's, Torah portion is Ki Tavo, chanted in the synagogue on September 23, 1967. But an attempted bribe over a "midterm" grade, and the meeting of a tenure committee? Those things can happen in October or November (or maybe, in the spring, March or April). The non-Jewish neighbor goes deer-hunting in the movie. Deer-hunting season in Minnesota is September to December. When is this moving [*sic*] taking place?[13]

At the same time that the makers of *A Serious Man* went to great lengths to offer a verisimilitude of the Midwest in 1967 (as detailed in the DVD bonus feature "Creating 1967"), it is also a patently surreal film, with several dream sequences, hallucinations (more than one scene takes place in the haze of a marijuana high), and manic fantasies (Uncle Arthur's "Mentaculus" as indecipherable graphomania, Rabbi Marshak's office as a bizarre cabinet of curiosities). The film's play with verisimilitude parallels its ludic approach to the desire for some understanding of the numinous. Similarly, just as audiences struggle with the filmmakers' ambivalence about the desire for explanations of the meaning and order of existence, they often chafe at its points of slippage between what looks true-to-life and what tweaks and flouts viewer expectations of authenticity.

Even more important than questions of accuracy (e.g., noting that a mezuzah is posted on the wrong side of the doorway) in American Jews' discussions of this or other films about Jewish life are concerns about whether these films offer a

12. Jordan Hiller, "25 Essential Jewish Films: A Serious Man," posted September 27, 2009. www.bangitout.com/articles/viewarticle.php?a=2901.

13. Diane, "Should We Take 'A Serious Man' Seriously?" posted January 6, 2010, www.threejews.net/2010/01/should-we-take-serious-man-seriously.html.

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respectable portrayal of Jews. In such analyses, films are read as communal representations to a general, national (if not international) public of outsiders. The concern of these analyses is with the imagined gaze of non-Jews upon the Jewish community both as it is represented within the film and, to a lesser extent, as it is represented by the act of creating this kind of self-portraiture itself. Such a reading of films approaches them not as works of art, philosophy, sociology, or autocritique but rather as a kind of public relations. This concern is not unique to American Jews; many African Americans, for example, are as equally concerned about the image of African American life in films made by African American filmmakers.

Nor is the public airing of these concerns a recent Jewish practice. The producers of the original film version of *The Jazz Singer* (1927) addressed the issue of Jewish self-portraiture in the souvenir program for its premiere, in which the Warner Brothers pay homage to their father. Benjamin "Pa" Warner, they explain, provided the filmmakers with information authenticating the film's presentation of Jewish ritual ("much of the charm of the home and Ghetto scenes is due to his suggestions"). In addition, the Warner paterfamilias was something of an inspiration for *The Jazz Singer*'s story, which the Warner Brothers saw as being, in a way, their own—a drama in which Jewishness is configured both as defining and as a point of departure: "The story of Warner Bros. opens in Poland in 1885," the souvenir program explains, "when Benjamin Warner, chafing under conditions which prevented his children from getting an education, made his way to the land wherein all men are free and equal."[14] Similarly, the Coen brothers have made a film that offers an oblique self-portrait, in which Jewishness is both intimately definitional and viewed at a skeptical distance, informed by the storytelling idiom of dramatic filmmaking for the American public.

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14. "Warner Bros. Supreme Triumph: *The Jazz Singer*" (facsimile of souvenir program, supplement to "three-disc deluxe edition" of *The Jazz Singer*) (DVD no. 79889, Warner Bros. Entertainment, Inc., 2007), [18].

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