AJS Review 35:2 (November 2011), 347–348
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doi:10.1017/S0364009411000420

A Serious Man: Introduction

A session scheduled for 8:30 A.M. on the last day of AJS's annual conference does not usually draw much of a crowd, but on December 21, 2010, approximately eighty people turned out for a panel discussion of Ethan and Joel Coen's 2010 feature film, *A Serious Man.* The panel, organized by Jonathan Boyarin, featured presentations from Shai Ginsburg (in absentia), Ariella Lang, Riv-Ellen Prell, and Jeffrey Shandler, as well as Boyarin. Leslie Morris, who had been an extra in the film, was also scheduled to participate but was unable to do so; Zachary Baker, a Minnesota native, moderated the session and offered personal reflections about the Coens, whom he had known when they were young. The discussion, both among panelists and with the audience, was lively and wide ranging, extending from unpacking the film's references to the Book of Job and citing of Rashi to its use of Yiddish and the verisimilitude of its recreation of Jewish life in the suburban Midwest of the mid-1960s.

The conversations about *A Serious Man* continued in the corridors outside the room after the session had formally ended. Clearly this was a film that many Jewish studies scholars, working in an array of fields, had not only seen but also found intriguing, and the desire to discuss the film with fellow academics trumped the inconvenience of the early hour. (Also noteworthy was the interest in this conversation beyond this scholarly community. Unbeknownst to the panelists in advance, the session was attended by members of the Coen family; in addition, videotaping of the proceedings was done by the mother of Aaron Wolff, the young actor who played Danny Gopnik.)

The following short essays, developed from the original conference presentations, indicate the length and breadth of interest that *A Serious Man* has engendered among Jewish studies scholars. (For yet another such work, see Jason Kalman's essay focusing on the film's engagement of the Book of Job, in *AJS Perspectives*, Fall 2010.[1]) These analyses join a body of scholarship on Jews and film, as well as other media, which has grown steadily over the past several decades. In addition, these essays demonstrate how popular culture has engaged Jewish studies scholars, whether their area of expertise is philosophy, literature, anthropology, history, religion, Yiddish studies, American studies, media studies, or gender studies. Widely familiar works such as this film can bring scholars into conversation across disciplinary boundaries and can foster discussions between scholars and their students or larger publics. The essays that follow exemplify

1. Jason Kalman, "A Serious Man," *AJS Perspectives* (unnumbered volume), Fall 2010, 53–54.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0364009411000420 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the range of resources in Jewish studies for analyzing contemporary culture. From these analyses, both *A Serious Man* and its engagement by audiences—academics, critics, cineastes, members of the general public—emerge as compelling subjects of inquiry.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0364009411000420 Published online by Cambridge University Press