

Jewish Power and Powerless: “Inglourious Basterds” and “A Serious Man”

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When Quentin Tarentino's movie *Inglourious Basterds* opened this past summer, I saw the previews and immediately determined I would not like the film and wasn't interested in seeing it. I don't enjoy watching violence. There is too much of it in the world and there is always too much of it in Tarentino's films. I also had no desire to see what I perceived from commercials was a comedy/spoof on the Holocaust. For that reason mainly, I paid no attention to the film.

When the Coen Brothers' film “A Serious Man” opened this fall, I was interested. Hmm. A movie framed by a biblical story, set in the American Jewish suburban scene of the sixties. I was intrigued. And, after many congregants saw it and asked my opinion, I wanted to see it and join in the conversation.

Funny thing is. The movie I thought I would hate, I loved. And the movie I thought I would love, I hated. *Inglourious Basterds* was shown at the Jewish Theological Seminary this week. Following the screening, there was a panel discussion with the producer of the film Lawrence Bender, Chancellor Arnie Eisen, Rabbi Jack Moline from VA, and Rabbi Amy Kalmanofsky, a Bible scholar who teaches at JTS and specializes in “texts of terror.” Quentin Tarentino was supposed to participate as well but he was sick with laryngitis....

Inglourious Basterds is a revenge fantasy with a men-on-a-mission motif. The American army has formed a unit, led by Lt. Aldo Raine, played by Brad Pitt, and composed of eight Jewish men who are charged with killing as many Nazis as possible. The Lieutenant says to his men: “We didn't come to teach the Nazis humanity...every S.O.B. in a Nazi uniform is gonna die..” (The audience laughed at this scene). Lt Raine goes on to charge the unit to be cruel and ruthless. “The Germans will be tortured by us.” The Germans will fear this unit that scalps Nazi soldiers after it kills them and the ones they leave alive they mark with swastikas in the forehead....because they can take off their uniforms but now they can never remove the proof that they served Hitler in the SS...The fear of this unit goes all the way to Hitler who is shown angered and apoplectic about this unit and their success.

The movie starts with a black screen and the words “Once upon a time in Nazi-occupied France” and it is told in five chapters. This is a fantasy. What would happen if a Jew who had escaped Nazi death could make a life for herself? What would happen if a Jew living under a pseudonym was given the opportunity to host a Nazi propaganda film and show the audience a film of her own? What if a Jew was given the opportunity to kill Hitler, Goebbels, Goring and a theater full of Nazi elite? What if she succeeded....and what if America gave the Jews an opportunity for revenge? What if there was a Jewish unit that was formed with the sole mission of killing Nazis and killing Hitler? And, what if they succeeded?

It's hard to accuse the film of rewriting history because we are all told up front that this is a fantasy. “Once upon a time in Nazi-occupied France.....” While there is intense drama and tension, especially in the first chapter, there are alternating moments of humor that remind us to laugh at the Nazis and have faith that Quentin Tarentino always gives his characters the opportunity to take revenge—even if it leads to their own destruction.

What about “A Serious Man”? “A Serious Man” is a Coen brothers film set in the suburbs of

Minneapolis in the early 60s, the setting of the Coen brothers' own childhood and adolescence, although they insist it is not autobiographical. The main character of the story is Larry Gupnick who is a university physics professor up for tenure with a son approaching Bar Mitzvah, a daughter who wants a nose-job and a wife who is having an affair with a very annoying man who refers to himself as "A Serious Man." Larry's life is unraveling quicker than we can comprehend and he is quiet in his suffering. He tries to ask why this is happening to him. Why is God doing this to him? He goes to three rabbis for answers....similar to the three friends who address Job, none has satisfactory answers....to Larry or to the audience. Each rabbi is comical and out of touch with this poor guy and really, it seems, out of touch with what's going on in the world.....

My defensiveness led to my displeasure....I have been thinking that I should see the film again and try to be more open....but why...what do I need to open myself up to....there was no message that offered redemption...the message of this film was that we are all powerless to understand what is happening to us. If we try to understand, we will go mad like Larry's brother, be arrogant like his wife's lover or be deluded like the rabbis...

And, after I saw *Inglourious Basterds*, I figured out the main reason that I didn't like "A Serious Man." It's primary image, in contrast to *Inglourious Basterds*, is a vision of powerlessness. Mankind are victims, especially Jews are victims...and our religious traditions ring hollow, our religious leaders offer us nothing that will help us cope with the real world. They are powerless and we are powerless. And, in the end, there is only death and destruction.

Tarentino, on the other hand, using the tool of fantasy, offers a vision of Jewish power and potency that reminds us that we have strength in the world. The message is certainly not that we should go on suicide missions of destruction and revenge....it is a fantasy after all, not a guidebook for life....but the film gives us a view of something we have never allowed ourselves to think about without a lot of bellyaching.

If you saw the movie "Defiance", you saw a movie where Jewish victims take some control over their destiny but you also heard a few melodramatic speeches plagued with the dilemma of Jewish defense. There is no ambivalence amongst Aliso Raine's unit.

What would it mean to have power and use power in the world to fight evil and win....who doesn't want revenge on the Nazis? Who hasn't had visions of it, wondered what it would be like....The panelists who discussed Tarentino's film at JTS offered that the film could provide the Jewish community with a catharsis---an expression of their own fantasies that allows them to move beyond and rise above....

Producer Lawrence Bender recalled the screening in Germany as cathartic. The Germans cheered the film. Germans didn't like the Nazis either, they ruined their country. In New York City the movie was premiered to an audience of Holocaust survivors who gave the film a standing ovation at the end. There have been 600 Holocaust films where Jews are victims. This is a film where the Jews win.

During the panel discussion, and in a Kol Nidre sermon this year, Rabbi Jack Moline presented the idea that there are two reigning paradigms of Jewish life in modern history: the paradigm of the Holocaust and the paradigm of Zionism. When we live the paradigm of the Holocaust, we see ourselves as victims. When we live the paradigm of Zionism, we see ourselves as masters of our own destiny. Rabbi Moline suggested that American Jews live in the Holocaust mentality; we fear hatred and destruction around every corner, even though we are in the highest ranks of American society—government, business, entertainment—we still fear being attacked, threatened, destroyed, made to be victims once again...I don't disagree. This is no way to live, however, and no way to create a vibrant Jewish future.

To quote Chancellor Eisen from Wed night: “Enough with the victimhood already!” That's why I reject the imagery of “A Serious Man”. That's why, although I reject the tactics of terrorism and suicide bombing, I embrace the imagery of “Inglorious Basterds”.

There *are* other revenge narratives in our tradition: the story of Exodus during which God enacts revenge on our tormentors and the Book of Esther in which we not only outsmart Haman, but we kill the Persians who sought to kill us. Even Joseph in this week's Torah portion, parashat Miketz, seems to be taking revenge on the brothers who threw him into a pit, sent him into slavery and staged his death. Why deny ourselves a revenge fantasy for the greatest crime that has been perpetuated against the Jewish people—the Holocaust?! The impulse behind this film reminds us that we do have the power to control our own destiny. We have the sovereign state of Israel and can never entertain the challenge to its existence for this very reason. And, in contrast to the message of the Coen brothers' film, we do have the power to find meaning in life, to elevate our lives beyond the suffering and misery life can hand us. We have powerful Jewish traditions that help us sanctify life, bring holiness to human relationships, build strong families, loving homes, vibrant communities that talk about real problems and offer compelling answers and approaches to life.

Yes, life can give you suffering, unexplainable and indescribable. And, your community is there to comfort you. Jewish tradition is there to offer you a means to yell at God in anger and approach God in thanksgiving...And rabbis and cantors are here to listen to you, to help you ask questions and help you find answers. At least this rabbi and this cantor are here for you! We are inspired by Jewish tradition and we are here to journey with you through life's ups and downs, to offer you comfort and guidance and a shoulder to lean on. We live in this world alongside of you and we do our best to find meaning, inspiration and strength from the glorious tradition of Judaism.