

Stefanie Knauss

## **Book Review: Wendy I. Zierler, Movies and Midrash** 2018

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## Book Review

### Wendy I. Zierler, *Movies and Midrash*

Popular Film and Jewish Religious Conversation. Foreword by Eugene B. Borowitz. Albany: State University of New York, 2017, xiii + 309 pp., ISBN 978-1-4384-6615-6.

With *Movies and Midrash*, Wendy I. Zierler makes a very welcome and important contribution to the field of film and theology by adding a Jewish voice to a (so far) mostly Christian conversation. In eleven chapters and a conclusion, each focusing on a different film, the author shows how the analysis of popular film can enrich and deepen the understanding of central aspects of Jewish theology, using a method she calls “inverted midrash” (14). The book emerged from a course taught by Zierler, a professor of literature and feminist studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute, together with the late Rabbi Dr. Eugene Borowitz, with the goal of “combining close analysis of film narrative and visuality with a study of an array of classical and modern text [...] as a means of deep textual engagement and Jewish religious return” (12).

Out of these commitments grows Zierler’s particular approach to contemporary film, inspired by Franz Rosenzweig’s “learning in reverse order”, that moves from non-Jewish knowledge back to the Torah as a means to overcome the modern alienation from Jewish tradition (14). Consequently, in their course (and in this book), Zierler and Borowitz “begin [their] learning with the profound matters that are raised by thoughtful, artistically rendered novels and movies and seek to show how they are analogous to or intersect with one or another aspects of Jewish thought, text study, practice, memory, and knowledge” (14). This approach is rooted in the midrashic tradition of biblical exegesis in which parables are used to contextualize the biblical text and make it relevant to a different context. In this book, the secular narratives and images of the films are understood as a *mashal* (parable) that finds its application (*nimshal*) in Jewish text study and theology, deepening the understanding of Torah (18). Thus the chapters move from film to Torah, and sometimes back again to the film, enabling an enriched interpretation of the film after the theological reflection it inspired. Drawing on Brent S. Plate, Zierler understands her stance in this endeavor of “Jewish Reel Theology” as one of “re-creative alienation” that

acknowledges the re-creative power of film, yet at a critical distance because of her Jewish theological and cultural commitments (20). While the author lays out this interpretative methodology of inverted midrash and the theoretical underpinnings of her theological engagement with secular films in the introduction, one would have wished for an occasional return to these questions in the following chapters as well, in which the film analyses and theological reflections would have provided rich opportunities for further meta-reflections.

Given these methodological decisions, the chapters in the book generally move from a close reading of a filmic *mashal* to the equally close textual discussion of the element from the Jewish tradition that the film is taken to elucidate, drawing on the full range of the tradition from biblical texts to rabbinical reflections to modern theology and philosophy, with additional references to novels or poems, showcasing the rich complexity of Jewish culture. Each chapter focuses on a film and a central theme, often also in close relation to a specific figure, be it from the biblical text or a thinker in the tradition. Thus, the first chapter looks at Peter Weir's film *THE TRUMAN SHOW* (US 1998), a film about a man who is unknowingly the protagonist of a reality TV show. Zierler's reading of the film focuses on the theme of truth, Truman/true-man's quest for the truth about himself and his life, and his dismantling of the false idol of the show's producer. Inspired by this analysis, she makes her theological move, a reflection on the discovery of God's truth. In doing so, the author turns to the book of Jonah, the sixteenth-century Midrash *Yonah* and the poetic retelling of Jonah's story by Canadian poet A. M. Klein, and parallels Truman's discovery of truth and reality with Jonah's discovery of God as a compassionate and gracious God, attributes that in the Hebrew Bible are often paired with truth. As in the film so also in the Jewish tradition, truth is seen as inhering in relationships, both among humans and between humans and God. A further connection between the film and the book of Jonah is their common genre of comedy, which aims at revealing hidden truths, exposing the limitations of knowledge, and opening up moments of salvation. As Zierler points out, the book of Jonah is the last of the Yom Kippur readings, when the listeners are already light-headed from fasting. Listening to the reading, they are jolted into smiling discoveries about themselves and God by the discrepancies of Jonah's comic lamenting of God's graciousness towards the people of Niniveh while enjoying God's kindness himself, his foibles and misfortunes.

The following chapters, all of which can also be read independently, look at such films as *MAGNOLIA* (Paul Thomas Anderson, US 1999), analyzing its complex fabric of interconnected story lines as a film that deepens the understanding of Judaism as confession and redemption, with the theological reflection focusing on the figure of Judah. The analysis of *THE KING'S SPEECH* (Tom Hooper, UK/US/AU 2010), with its story of the Duke of York's (Bertie) overcoming of his

speech impediment, understands the film as a *mashal* to think further about Moses's "heaviness" of speech, and more generally, the importance of words and hearing for Judaism. Comparing the halting, stammering speech of Bertie and Moses with Hitler's fluency and rhetorical skills, the reading of the film in relation to Moses's story in Exodus leads to the insight into the demonic qualities of fluent rhetorics over against a stuttering, stumbling approach to the unsayable truth of God. *A SERIOUS MAN* (Joel and Ethan Coen, US/UK/FR 2009), the only film discussed in the volume that is set in an explicitly Jewish context, is itself interpreted as a parable about parable and the use and function of parables in the Jewish tradition and theology. While each chapter focuses on one film, references to other relevant films are frequent and situate the respective film in the broader context of film history, and thus a filmography – in addition to the bibliography and index at the end of the volume – would have been very useful to readers.

The uniquely Jewish perspective of the volume is apparent both in the author's reference points in the Jewish tradition (although not exclusively so) and in her interpretative methods, such as the careful attention to the meaning of names and words and to etymological and semantic relationships across different contexts. Occasional comparisons to readings from a Christian viewpoint (for example in the discussion of *STRANGER THAN FICTION* by Marc Forster [US 2006] with regard to the religious significance of the central character) show clearly the impact of one's religious and intellectual tradition on one's interpretations, and thus underline the importance of broadening the scope of the film-and-theology conversation beyond the dominant Christian tradition in order to gain a fuller understanding of popular cinema's potential for theological reflection and insight. For readers not familiar with Hebrew or with some of the sources, the author provides sufficient explanation, context and transcriptions to guide them through her reasoning so that the volume is accessible to readers (like myself) from non-Jewish traditions as well, who will profit from her careful, complex film analysis and theological reflections.

## FILMOGRAPHY

*A SERIOUS MAN* (Joel and Ethan Coen, USA/UK/FR 2009).

*MAGNOLIA* (Paul Thomas Anderson, USA 1999).

*STRANGER THAN FICTION* (Marc Forster, USA 2006).

*THE KING'S SPEECH* (Tom Hooper, UK/USA/AU 2010).

*THE TRUMAN SHOW* (Peter Weir USA 1998).