

Review of Movies and Midrash: Popular Film and Jewish Religious Conversation by Wendy I. Zierler

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Wendy I. Zierler
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REVIEWS

Movies and Midrash: Popular Film and Jewish Religious Conversation,
Wendy I. Zierler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017),
ISBN 978-1-4384-6615-6, pp. 328, \$90.

Along with my friend and occasional collaborator, Rabbi Dr Raphael Zarum of the London School of Jewish Studies, I have long been attempting to apply a midrashic approach to film while simultaneously exploring film as akin to midrash. So, naturally, the title and premise of this book intrigued me.

Wendy I. Zierler, Sigmund Falk Professor of Modern Jewish Literature and Feminist Studies at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion has come up with the notion of “inverted midrash”. In each of the chapters of her book, she explores a “significant secular film that visually and thematically highlights a central theme in Jewish thought, text or practice” (p. 15). Thus, *The Truman Show* illustrates truth; *Magnolia*: confession and redemption; *The Descendants*: birthright and the issue of consent versus descent; *Memento*: memory; *Crimes and Misdemeanors*: sin and confession; *Forrest Gump*: simplicity versus cleverness in faith; *The King’s Speech*: speaking God’s word; *Stranger than Fiction*: God as author; *A Serious Man*: parables; and *Exam*: tests, trials, and attachments.

Immediately, I was pleased to see that, by and large, the author had avoided the obvious choices. Some of these films we might not even consider Jewish, making this a commendable attempt to widen the boundaries of what can be classified as a Jewish movie. And any book that widens the conversation on Jewish film or films about Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism in film, which Zierler’s certainly does, is to be welcomed.

Zierler claims that no guide has hitherto looked “in depth at influential or significant movies or other screen phenomena and [made] them interesting, meaningful, and textually relevant to a religiously interested Jewish audience”. Moreover, she contends, “there is no extant book that presents a Jewish ‘Reel Theology’, that is, a method of ‘reading’ film and popular culture in a way that is textually and religiously edifying for a Jewish reader”. She therefore sets out to fill that gap with just such a guide, “offering examples of how it can be done” (p. 6). On the back cover, Eric Michael Mazur, the editor of the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Film*, has

written that this book meets the need expressed by “non-Jewish readers who long for a non-Christian perspective on popular film”.

Here, I must take exception. There have been many books on popular film written from a non-Christian perspective. To name just one: Leslie Kane’s *Weasels and Wisemen* (1999) does a fantastic job of exploring the religious resonances in David Mamet’s work, including his films. Furthermore, given that Zierler’s brief bibliographic survey ends roughly in 2005, she has, of course, omitted my own work, which for years has attempted to build on Kane’s, culminating in my book, *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema* (2012). I have also written various articles on the topic, including quite a few on the cinema of Stanley Kubrick, drawing on work which has since been incorporated and synthesized in my monograph, *Stanley Kubrick: New York Jewish Intellectual* (2018).

I would also question Zierler’s programmatic formulations, specifically, her focus on a form of analysis that should be “textually and religiously edifying for a Jewish reader”. How might we quantify levels of textual and religious edification and measure their effect on “a Jewish reader”, no matter how one might define this concept? I am sure that Zierler’s discussion is based on underlying assumptions as to what, to her mind, constitutes a “Jewish reader”, and she really ought to have spelled those assumptions out. Conversely, of course, Zierler has offered a convenient criterion by which her own book can be judged: how textually and religiously edifying is *Movies and Midrash* for this Jewish reader?

Each chapter proceeds in the following fashion. After a close reading of the film’s major narrative and visual elements, a relevant Jewish theme is introduced in relation to the Jewish textual tradition, ranging from the Bible and rabbinic literature to classical and modern Jewish thought and literature. This is not my field of expertise but Zierler’s knowledge of Jewish textual sources does seem sound and extensive.

I am less convinced, however, of her film studies credentials. Obviously, she has cherry-picked the films she discusses after careful research, which makes perfect sense when writing a book. Nor does Zierler claim that her study is “thoroughly representative or completely up-to-date” (p. 15). Even so, the true test comes when one’s approach is applied to a film of somebody else’s choosing, one that does not present openly Jewish parables.

Moreover, her discussion is characterized by the frustrating tendency evinced by many scholars with no specific film studies background to

treat films as though they were a text that does not move or sound. Thus, the audio-visual properties and tools by which a director and/or text communicates meaning barely feature. Would it be acceptable for me to approach ancient and classical Jewish sources without paying appropriate attention to their Hebrew and Aramaic language in the same way as many scholars approach movies with little or no knowledge of film language?

These gripes notwithstanding, I was determined to enjoy this book. I wanted it to provide a model for using midrash to approach film, to break away from the predominant and (here I agree with Zierler) Christological models for the analysis of film. Unfortunately, however, for me, the two halves of each of her chapters – filmic and textual – failed to add up. Hence, despite the erudition clearly on display in the book, this Jewish reader found *Movies and Midrash* curiously unsatisfying.

Nathan Abrams

