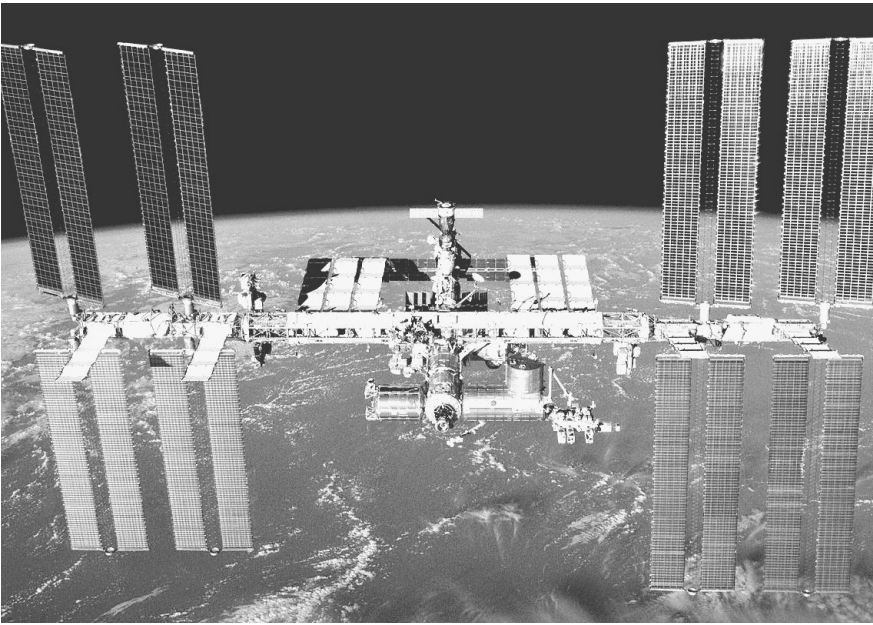




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Tritsch-Tratsch Polka: A Cinematic Triptych in Honor of Rabbi Avi Weiss



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I. Moral Gravity and Spiritual Audacity: The Ethic of “Choosing Life” in Abraham’s Akeidat Yitzhak and Alfonso Cuarón’s Gravity

“DO WHAT IS RIGHT,” Rabbi Weiss always taught us, “not what is popular.” Rabbi Avi Weiss has lived by this principle of *azut dik’ dusha* [spiritual audacity]. And he continues to act as an anchoring force of moral gravity. Rabbi Weiss’s moral compass constantly directs us toward Judaism’s central religious and ethical ideal: *uvaharta bahayim*, “choose life.”

Rabbi Weiss’s 5775 (2014) Shabbat Shuva *drashah* [address] was entitled “As the World Confronts Terror: Why the Yom Kippur Theme of Choosing Life is More Critical Than Ever.” In this *drashah*, Rabbi Weiss discussed how the story of *Akeidat Yitzhak* [the binding of Isaac] is not, as certain Christological readings would have it, a story that idealizes martyrdom; rather, *Akedat Yitzhak* is a story that exemplifies the meaning of Deuteronomy 30:19’s teaching to choose *life*. The binding of Isaac episode, Rabbi Weiss stated, is not about dying for God; the binding of Isaac episode teaches us what it means to *live* for God.

How do we know this? How can we be so sure of the seemingly counter-intuitive notion that the *Akeidat Yitzhak* story teaches us what it means to choose *life*? Rabbi Weiss illustrated this *hiddush* [novel explanation] through a rabbinic teaching in *Midrash Tanhuma*. The midrash attempts to fill in some of the missing elements in the story of *Akedat Yitzhak*, an episode whose narrative is enshrouded in a penumbra of ambiguity and whose laconic dialogue wraps a veil of vagueness upon its characters. The *Tanhuma* attempts to pierce the veil of Abraham’s unstated motives and unexpressed apprehensions by presenting us with an occurrence that Abraham may have experienced on the way to Mount Moriah:

While Abraham and Isaac were traveling on the road to Mount Moriah, Satan appeared to Abraham in the guise of an old man and asked him where he was going. Abraham answered, “to pray.” The old man asked, “Why then are you carrying wood, fire, and a knife?” Abraham answered, “We may spend a day or two there, and we will kill an animal, cook and eat it.”

“Old man,” said Satan, “are you out of your mind? You are going to slay a son given to you at the age of one hundred! And tomorrow, when you do, He will tell you that you are a murderer, guilty of shedding your son’s blood.” Abraham said, “Still, I would obey Him.” And Abraham turned away from Satan.¹



I was not present when Rabbi Weiss delivered this *drashah* at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale on September 27, 2014 (I was home—which is in western Massachusetts—during that Rosh Hashanah and the subsequent Shabbat), but I was present when Rabbi Weiss delivered an abridged version of this *drashah* at YCT on Sept. 29, 2014 to a full Beit Midrash at YCT. When Rabbi Weiss read the line, “and then the man said to Abraham, ‘*zaken* [old man]! Why are you suddenly willing to throw away the son that God has promised you, the son of your 100th year?!’”, he looked up from the podium, glanced to his left, and made eye contact with me. “Danny,” he asked, “why is this ‘old man’ calling Abraham a *zaken* [old man]?” Somewhat surprised that Rabbi Weiss would cold-call me and put me on the spot—and knowing that he must be asking *me*, and not another Daniel (even though there were five other Daniels at Chovevei at that time), because he was looking at me (and because he was calling me “Danny,” even though only two or three other people in the world actually call me “Danny”), all I could muster up was, “Well . . . Avraham was pretty old, too.”

“True,” said Rabbi Weiss. “But why was *this* *zaken* calling Avraham a *zaken*?”

Rabbi Weiss paused. “The *zaken* who was calling Avraham a *zaken*,” explained Rabbi Weiss, “was none other than Avraham himself.” This ‘*zaken*’ that Avraham encountered along the road, Rabbi Weiss explained, was not a real, living, breathing being; rather, this *zaken* was Avraham’s own consciousness. Avraham was speaking to himself. And throughout his three-day journey to Mount Moriah, Avraham was wrestling with himself. He was asking himself, ‘can it be . . . can it *really* be . . . that God is asking me to do *this*? To kill my son? To kill a human being? To kill the son, the human being, that God promised me? Can I put an innocent human being to death, when I know that, more than anything else, the God that I stand for, live for, and teach others to believe in, is the God of *life*?’

In a knight’s move of midrashic audacity, and *biz’khut* Rabbi Avraham Weiss, I offer the following *midrash* [interpretation] of Alfonso Cuarón’s 2013 film *Gravity* as an artistic illumination of the meaning of “choosing life” in the context of Avraham Avinu’s *Akeidat Yitzhak*.

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“The heavens are the heavens of God, and the earth has been given to human beings.”² If ever a literal interpretation of this verse from Psalms has been rendered on film, it is presented in Alfonso Cuarón’s riveting *Gravity*.

The indefatigable human will to live, even in hostile environments, has been a persistent theme in Cuarón’s work. *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006), a film that

Cuarón produced, dramatized a young girl's struggle to create an inner life for herself while her adult protectors were trying to survive in Franco's repressive Spain. In *Children of Men* (2006), perhaps Cuarón's best effort until *Gravity*, Theo's (Clive Owen) determination in guiding a pregnant woman to safety in a future dystopian world in which women have become infertile served as a cinematic demonstration of what it means to "choose life" (Deut. 30:19). And in *Gravity*, Cuarón goes one step further by exploring the fierce human drive to live in even the most extreme circumstances: outer space.

"Life in space is impossible." These are the film's opening words, and they are written in white font on the pitch-black background of outer space. This tagline immediately frames the type of space movie *Gravity* will be; it will not be a *2001: A Space Odyssey*, wherein human life in space is as harmonious and peaceful as a Strauss waltz. But neither will it depict space as a place of absolute horror in the vein of *Alien*. Though it is a film very much in dialogue with Kubrick's and Scott's classic films—several shots visually reference *2001*, and the motif of the masculine space-cadet heroine appears to be lifted directly from *Alien*—Cuarón's film is not only visually innovative but thematically groundbreaking as well. Rather than recycling *2001*'s or *Alien*'s conceptions of space, *Gravity* depicts space as the biblical Temple in Jerusalem: a place of both beauty and danger.³ The sights are spectacular, but the slightest human error or natural impediment can lead to catastrophe. In short, this tagline, and the film in general, is a literal explanation of Psalms 115:16; both *Gravity* and Psalms 115:16 postulate that human beings are simply meant to exist on planet earth, not in outer space. *Gravity* and Psalms 115:16 both imply that the human effort to conquer the heavens is a foolhardy one that, like the construction of the Tower of Babel, will inevitably result in disaster.

In *Gravity*, however, the disaster that imperils the human effort to conquer the heavens originates from the earth, not from space or from some other heavenly realm. While medical doctor Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) and astronaut Matt Kowalski (George Clooney) are conducting routine repairs on the Hubble Space Telescope, the Russians shoot down one of their own satellites. Debris from the shattered satellite is propelled into a violent collision course with Stone and Kowalski's shuttle. When the debris collides with the shuttle, Kowalski and Stone are hurtled away from the destroyed shuttle and compelled to embark upon a frantic mission that necessitates the employment of all of their ingenuity and inner strength in order to save their own lives. How they ultimately do so has been the subject of much debate (astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson has poked holes in the scientific accuracy and physical efficacy of the techniques they employ to reach the International

Space Station), but what is significant in *Gravity* is its demonstration of the inner resources human beings possess that propel us to fight for life even in the most desperate of circumstances. If “Judaism and Christianity insist that death must be overcome,”⁴ *Gravity* illustrates that the human capacity to overcome death exists even in the harshest regions of outer space.

These regions are displayed in breathtaking splendor by the renowned cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, and the moving computer-enhanced photographs of planet earth engender the kind of awe and wonder that the best science fiction films are meant to deliver. The film was originally released in 3D, but the 3D glasses only slightly enhanced the visual pleasure of those already magnificent shots; the three-dimensional photography only truly factored into the viewing experience during the scenes in which space junk seemed to be hurtling directly at us viewers.

The cast of the film, like the space shuttle’s crew, is sparse but highly effective. Kowalski is a standard Clooney prototype—suave and über-confident, aware of his powers of attraction upon the opposite sex (“I know I’m devastatingly good looking but you gotta stop staring at me,” he deadpans), and endowed with a preternatural degree of sang-froid. As the heard-but-not-seen voice of Houston’s mission command, Ed Harris mostly reprises his role as NASA flight director Eugene Kranz in *Apollo 13* (1995) and channels elements of his John Glenn from *The Right Stuff* (1983) in yet another space role; some would add his role as Christof in *The Truman Show* (1998) to this list, though this would be somewhat of a stretch. And in a carefully wrought performance for which she justly garnered an Oscar nomination, Sandra Bullock singlehandedly carries the entire crisp ninety-minute affair. She enables the audience to identify with her extreme anxiety without badgering viewers over the heads with melodramatic hyperventilating—though, in one of the few flaws of an otherwise perfect movie, she does cross this threadbare-thin line at certain points; granted, in what is asked of her in this role, it is a line almost impossible not to cross.

Gravity also suggests that space is like a foxhole: there are no atheists in either place. Or, more precisely, even if there are atheists in space, in certain circumstances, they will still experience a desire to pray. When Stone thinks she’s about to die, she wants to pray, but doesn’t know how. “No one ever taught me how to pray,” she wistfully remarks. In the Russian space shuttle, she sees an icon of Jesus, and in the Chinese shuttle, she sees a figurine of Buddha. Cuarón’s camera lingers on these images for a few moments to ensure we don’t miss them, as if to say that if Stone is to return to earth, she must believe in *something*, whether it is Jesus, Buddha, or her own untapped

inner strength—if not the transcendent God without, then perhaps the immanent God within.

In fact, that Stone's discovery of her own inner resources occurs in near-by proximity to the close-ups of these religious icons suggests that she may have, in her own way, discovered God. Like Rabbi Irving Greenberg's interpretation of the Torah as narrative, not history,⁵ the theologian Rabbi Neil Gillman reads the Bible's account of the revelation at Sinai not as an historically accurate description of an actual event, but as an attempt to put an ineffable, indescribable moment into words.⁶ 'If the ancient Hebrews did not literally hear God at Sinai as the Bible describes,' I asked Rabbi Gillman, 'then what exactly was revealed to them? Do you think they invented God?' A revelation *did* occur, he responded—*something* happened in the Sinai desert. But *what* exactly happened, he said, we do not know, and perhaps never will know. During the Hebrews' journey through the unknown, unforgiving Sinai desert, he explained, they culled all of their collective physical, spiritual, and psychological resources in order to survive. And during this process, they discovered strengths about themselves and unknown inner capacities that they never previously imagined they possessed. This, Rabbi Gillman explained, was their revelation of God. Their discovery of their own inner strength *was* their discovery of God: "They did not *invent* God; they *discovered* God, and *invented* the metaphors."⁷

In the process of discovering their collective inner strength during the Sinai wilderness, the ancient Hebrews discovered a transcendent God. In the process of accessing inner powers she never imagined she had possessed,⁸ Ryan Stone discovers an immanent God in outer space. The metaphor that the Hebrews invented for this discovery of God was the name YHVH (or "Yahweh"); Ryan Stone's invented metaphor for this discovery may be the word "myself." It is this discovery that gives her the further strength to confront her personal Hamletesque quandary:

I get it, it's nice up here. You could just shut down all the systems, turn down all the lights, just close your eyes and tune out everyone. There's nobody up here that can hurt you. It's safe. What's the point of going on? What's the point of living? . . . It's still a matter of what you do now. If you decide to go then you just gotta get on with it. Sit back, enjoy the ride, you gotta plant both your feet on the ground and start living life. Hey, Ryan, it's time to go home.

How *Gravity* portrays Ryan's manner of addressing her Hamlet dilemma is something that must be seen to be believed—or, perhaps more precisely, it is something that must be believed in order to be seen.

As in *Gravity*, so in the *Akeidah*: just as Stone's conversation with Clooney, we eventually learn, is really a conversation with herself—Clooney is a personification of her own paralyzed consciousness—the Midrash *Tanhuma's zaken* [old man] is a personification of Avraham's perambulating consciousness. Just as, after a harrowing ordeal and a near-death experience, Stone eventually chooses life, so too, after a harrowing three-day journey and the near-death of Isaac, Avraham eventually chooses life as well.

I wish to conclude with the following *drash*. It may be a bit audacious, but if I have learned anything from Rabbi Weiss, it is that if you believe you are right, you most not concern yourself with popularity. And the following *drash*, I believe—if Rabbi Weiss's interpretation of the *Tanhuma* is truthful—is, if not right, then true: Avraham passed the test of the *Akeidah* *not* because he was willing to *kill* Isaac, but because, ultimately, he was willing to let Isaac *live*. When Avraham heard the voice of the angel telling him to desist from killing Isaac, he could have reasoned, 'God Himself told me to kill my son, and now an angel is telling me *not* to kill him? How can I obey the voice of the angel instead of the command of God? In a conflict between the command of the master and the command of the disciple, would one heed the command of the disciple?' But Avraham knew that the angel was correct—*Avraham knew that the angel was completely correct to such an extent that the angel's command could even override the command of God*. And how did Avraham know this? Because, as the rabbis (and Shakespeare) teach, "this to thine own self be true": Abraham trusted his own inner moral and ethical intuitions, and stayed true to himself. (See *Midrash Tanhuma* [Vayigash 11] and *Avot deRabbi Natan* 33:1 on Psalms 15:7, narrating the myth that Avraham's two kidneys taught him Torah—a midrash which poignantly teaches that Avraham's own ethical intuitions—and perhaps ours as well—are religiously significant, and deserve to be heard.) Avraham knew that God would never, in the end, actually desire him to kill an innocent human being. He knew that the God of life, above all else, desires human beings upon whom He has bestowed the gift of life to continue to choose life.

Indeed, in the ancient world, human sacrifice was not uncommon, and when one believed that the gods had commanded one to sacrifice a human being—even if the human happened to be one's own child—one unequivocally obeyed the command of the gods. When the Greek warrior Agamemnon believed that the gods (Artemis, specifically) demanded that he sacrifice his own daughter (as recounted in Aeschylus's play *Agamemnon*) in order to calm the winds so that the Greek fleet could safely sail to Troy, Agamemnon obeyed without question. This was not considered a "trial" on Agamemnon's part; in the ancient world, sacrificing a child to appease the



gods was de rigueur. Likewise, when God commanded Avraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, the “trial” was not whether Avraham would obey *God*; the trial was whether Avraham would obey the *angel*—the angel that told Avraham *not* to heed the original command of God. Avraham passed this trial not when he agreed to sacrifice Isaac, but when he agreed to let Isaac *live*.

And perhaps, in the spirit of the *Tanhuma*—and in the audacious, but morally grand spirit of *Gravity* and Rabbi Weiss—even the angel’s command to ‘desist from slaughtering your son’ was in fact none other than an emanation from Avraham’s own mind. Not only the *zaken* [old man], but even the angel, was a projection of Avraham’s own consciousness. ‘Desist,’ Avraham said to himself. ‘Do not lift your hand upon this lad,’ the angelic aspect of Avraham’s consciousness said. ‘Yes, you—Abraham, you silly old man you—yes, you may have thought that you have heard the voice of God commanding you to kill your innocent son,’ said Avraham’s angel, said Avraham’s inner Gabriel. ‘But did you *really*? Did you *really* hear this voice? Are you *sure*? Really, *really*, absolutely, one-hundred-and-fifty percent sure?’ said the angelic Voice in his head. ‘Perhaps God said “*ha’aleihu*” (bring him up), not “*shah’teihu*” (slaughter him)? And you *have* “brought him up,” have you not?’ Avraham carefully pondered the words of his inner angel, pored over his soul, checked his ethico-religious moral pulse, and concluded: ‘No. I cannot do it. I *will* not do it. I cannot, will not, shall not, kill my son, my beloved son, my innocent son. I may have thought that I heard God tell me to do this, but I cannot believe that this is what I accurately heard, nor can I truly believe that this is what this God truly desires. No—I will not, cannot, shall not do this deed. *Ad kahn*. Some pagans may venerate Hades, other polytheists worship gods of the underworld, and the Egyptians may have constructed a cult of death, but my God is not like their gods—their gods are gods of death; my God is the God of life. I cannot, will not, shall not kill my son—I shall not do this deed—no. I shall let him live. And I shall pass this teaching on to him, to his children, to his children’s children, and to the great nation which God has promised will issue from his offspring: that, more than anything else, the God of life created us human beings in His image so that we may imitate the God of life by creating children, beauty, and wisdom—and by choosing life. And, at the end of his life, when Moses’s thoughts could have easily turned to death, this people’s great teacher will teach his people the teaching that will become the predominant imperative of their entire civilization: “choose life, so that you and your children shall live.”’



NOTES

1. *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu, Va-Yera* 22; also found in *b. Sanhedrin* 89b, *Genesis Rabbah* 56:4; *Midrash va-Yosha*; and *Pesikta Rabbati* 40:67-69. Translation from Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 340.
2. Psalms 115:16, my translation.
3. See Moshe Simon-Shushan, *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford, 2012), 216-19. The Temple was a place of order and purity, but chaos and death could occasionally ensue as a result of human misdeeds and ritual misprisions; God smote Nadab and Abihu for improper behavior in the sanctuary (Leviticus 10:1-7), Uzzah died for touching the Ark whilst attempting to prevent it from falling (II Samuel 6:6-7), and a priest died for attempting to reveal the Ark's location (Mishnah, *Shekalim* 6:1-2); *ibid.*
4. Irving Greenberg, "On the Road to a New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity," in *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 18. In a review felicitously titled "Between Heaven and Earth," A.O. Scott unintentionally adumbrated *Gravity's* Judeo-Christian motif of "choosing life" in noting that the film, for all of its "pictorial grandeur," is ultimately "about the longing to be pulled back down onto the crowded, watery sphere where life is tedious, complicated, sad and possible." A.O. Scott, "Between Earth and Heaven," *New York Times*, 10/3/2013, accessed on Dec. 4, 2013 available at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/04/movies/gravity-stars-sandra-bullock-and-george-clooney.html?_r=0&pagewanted=1
5. Eighth lecture in the course series "Shaping a Religious Response: The Rabbinic Engagement with a World in Transformation," delivered at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, Dec. 4, 2013. According to Rabbi Greenberg, the Bible is not meant to be interpreted as a simple collection of facts; rather, it is meant to be read as a narrative, because its selection of specific facts creates a structured story. This story is meant to serve as a normative guide for persons attempting to find meaning in life and their place in the world.
6. Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990).
7. Personal communication. This quote is taken from memory, but I trust that my memory of this quote is accurate; Rabbi Gillman is fond of this observation, and has repeated it in other settings.
8. Spoiler Alert: one of these powers is a keen imaginative capacity. Stone's imaginative capacity allows her to conjure an image of Kowalski. Similar to the rabbinic explanation (*b. Sotah* 36b; *Genesis Rabbah* 86:7; *Midrash Tanhuma* 8-9) of how Joseph was able to resist the advances of Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39:7-23—a "likeness of his father [Jacob] appeared to Joseph" warning him of the consequences of submitting to temptation—a talking, breathing "likeness" of Kowalski provides Stone with the mental fortitude she needs to persevere. Cuarón's use of this filmic device allows this intriguing rabbinic narrative to be understood on a cinematic plane.

II. *Is This All There Is?* *Or is there . . . a Magic in the Moonlight (2014)*

Does God exist? Does life have any meaning? Does the universe have a purpose? Who among us has not brooded upon these baffling inscrutabilities? Woody Allen certainly has, and his *Magic in the Moonlight* (2014) is his most theological, philosophical, and autobiographical movie yet.

Lord knows Woody Allen has put himself on screen before, but even though he doesn't actually appear in *Magic in the Moonlight*, his presence is so palpable that you could swear he was in it—which, in fact, is this film's one true act of prestidigitation. This is a movie about magic, but Allen's screenplay employs no legerdemain; he reveals his conscience, exposes his deepest existential anxieties, and even bares his soul. Never before has Woody Allen brought forth a film as blatantly autobiographical as *Magic in the Moonlight*. Not that this is a bad thing—John Updike was a notoriously autobiographical writer, usually to great literary effect—it is just that in Allen's latest feature (his forty-fourth, by my count, which doesn't include his made-for-TV movies), the characters sometimes seem more like his mouthpieces than actual cinematic personas.

But oh, what mouthpieces! Where else in modern movies do we hear such monologues? Where else in contemporary cinema can we hear similar disquisitions and deliberations about the existence of God, the meaning of life, and the purpose of the universe? Critics continue to castigate Woody Allen for his alleged cinematic crimes—recycling old ideas, reshuffling used concepts, relying on built-in audience goodwill even though “he has nothing new to say”—but are these really crimes at all? After all, from Monet's water lilies to Cézanne's Mount Sainte-Victoire to Rothko's multiforms, the greatest artists have consistently circled back to familiar themes—but when they do so, they always paint the same scene in a slightly different light, with a slightly different shade of color, and with a slightly but significantly altered perspective.

As in art, so in film: Hitchcock gave us many tremendous tales of mystery and suspense, Tarantino continues to give us superb slugfest spectacles, and Allen continues to give us excellent existential philosophical-comedies, so why do we continue to complain? Is it because of—in contrast to, say, Terrence Malick—the sheer amount of films he has now directed? I suppose we'd also tire of gourmet cuisine if we ate Daniel Boulud's cooking every night for dinner. And if the repetition is the source of our griping, the riposte may come from religion itself: the liturgical masters of the great religious

traditions knew that certain messages needed to be repeated day after day, month after month, and year after year in order for people to properly internalize the values that a religious text seeks to convey. For instance, the composers of Jewish liturgy believed that the central Jewish teaching is its monotheistic message; all other Jewish teachings, they knew, would naturally flow from an acceptance of the monotheistic creed. Thus, they took a verse from the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:4)—“Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is One”—and placed it in the prayer book. They mandated that it be said once during the morning prayer-service, once during the evening prayer-service, and once again before going to bed, thereby ensuring that Jews would never forget its message of monotheism and the ethical values embedded therein. And, by inserting the phrase “Blessed art thou, God, reviver of the dead” into the thrice-daily prayer of the Amidah, they further ensured that the eternal Jewish message of hope—symbolized by the resurrection creed—would never be forgotten as well. The Jewish ecclesiastical authorities surely understood the psychology behind the adage, “the three-fold cord is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

All of this is not to say that Woody Allen is the second coming of a great Jewish liturgical composer; it is not even to suggest that he’s as great of an artist as Monet or Cézanne (notwithstanding Colin Firth’s—Allen’s *Magic in the Moonlight* mouthpiece—description of himself a great artist). But it is to suggest that the secret of great art, similar to the secret of establishing time-tested religious principles, lies in repetition. We should not be so hasty to dismiss “yet another” Woody Allen film with “yet more armchair philosophizing” about the meaning of life.

However—and here is where *Magic in the Moonlight* distinguishes itself from all prior Allen films—*Magic in the Moonlight* is no mere “more armchair philosophizing.” Yes, Woody Allen has pondered existential issues in many a film past, but never before has he confronted God so openly. Never before has he thought up a film as theologically minded as *Magic in the Moonlight*.

The film’s plot may be simple, but its messages are complex. Set in the artistically fertile interwar era of 1920s Europe—a unique historical epoch memorably mined by Bob Fosse in *All That Jazz* (1978)—Stanley Crawford (Colin Firth), a renowned magician whose off-stage specialty is exposing psychics, magicians, and spiritualists as the frauds he knows them to be, is invited to the south of France in order to debunk a spiritualist (Sophie Baker, played by Emma Stone) who has an extremely wealthy American family in her sway. A sober man of science with a cynical disposition, Stanley is naturally skeptical of Sophie’s spiritualist “sensations,” but the more time he

spends with her, the more he is astounded by her seemingly supernatural skills. He eventually becomes so taken with her talents that he starts to question the very foundations—science, rationalism, and materialism—upon which he has carefully constructed the edifice of his conscience.

Firth's and Stone's chemistry is surprisingly delightful, and their romps recall the great cinematic screwball comedy pairings of yesteryear: Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert in Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), and, in particular, Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn in Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), another film featuring a sober man of science whose seriousness is mellowed by a magical woman.

One film, though, stands out as the motivic predecessor of *Magic in the Moonlight*: Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* (1997). Like Lyne's controversial adaptation of Nabokov's controversial novel, *Magic in the Moonlight* also showcases the disconcertingly seedy specter of an older, rational, cynical, intellectual European man becoming infatuated with a younger, wide-eyed, precocious, redheaded American girl. When Stanley and Sophie first form an emotional bond during a road-trip to Provence, we recall that in *Lolita*, Nabokov also used the motif of the road-trip to famous (or infamous) literary effect. And when Sophie cuddles up close to Stanley during one unsettling scene, we notice that Stanley looks like, is dressed like, and even sounds like Jeremy Irons' Humbert Humbert. Sophie is even photographed in the same voyeuristic, "male gaze" manner in which Dominique Swain was photographed in *Lolita*. Is Mr. Allen, who famously said that "the heart wants what it wants," trying to tell us something about the nature of (older) male love? Is there something to be made out of the eerie phonetic similarities between 'Stanley' and 'Woody,' 'Olivia' (Stanley's middle-age fiancée) and 'Mia,' and 'Sophie' and 'Soon-Yi'? Is this film Mr. Allen's mea culpa—or his apologia—or both? Like the unanswered theological questions posed in *Magic in the Moonlight*, these unanswered biographical questions lie in fallow fields, beckoning seekers and cinephiles to harvest these fallen sheaves.

Mr. Allen's typically eclectic musical choices in *Magic in the Moonlight*—ranging from big-band jazz to Ravel's "Boléro" to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony—make the movie seem like a lightweight summer trifle. Not that the Ninth is light—its familiar *molto vivace* movement is especially ominous when used in film; its striking second movement immediately evokes the dark, dystopian denseness of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). And the film's rococo backdrops and lush cinematography also lend it a feathery feel. One particular shot, a cinematographic composition of Stanley speaking with Sophie as she sits on a swing in a luxurious garden setting, is an almost exact

filmic carbon copy of Jean Honoré Fragonard's rococo masterpiece "The Swing" (1767; oil on canvas; The Wallace Collection, London).

But while the film affects a light appearance, the questions its characters ponder are some of the heaviest dilemmas known to man: Is this all there is? Or is there something more—something beyond what the mere eye can see? Is life "nasty, brutish, and short," as the Hobbes-spouting Stanley likes to state, or is it filled with a mysterious, mystical magic, as the whimsical, waifish Sophie (who is Audrey Hepburn-esque in her diaphanousness) is wont to believe? These are only several of the intractable questions that Stanley is compelled to confront, and his reassessment of everything he thought he stood for may have viewers questioning many of their assumptions about God, life, and the universe, or—because it is a non-didactic, nuanced, subtle film with no unitary message—it may not. Like the religious-truth claims of faith, the multiple messages in *Magic in the Moonlight* are conveyed but can never be scientifically proven; it is left up to us to decide whether to take the proverbial leap of faith into the *mysterium tremendum* and accept them, or to rationalistically remain on materialistic terra firma and reject them.

One of the most salient symbols in *Magic in the Moonlight* is the astronomical observatory. While Stanley and Sophie are driving back from Provence, their car breaks down, and they take shelter in a nearby observatory. It is a place that Stanley used to frequent as a child, he explains to Sophie. When Stanley opens the roof of the observatory so that they'll be able to see the starry night sky, the observatory's magisterial telescope clearly points to the resplendent silver moon crescent.

Stanley, the self-described "sober man of science," flatters himself with this false appellation, for unlike the great astronomers, he is startlingly close-minded in his doctrinaire, unchanging and inflexible worldview. Only when he is with Sophie does he first begin to open the closed roof of the "observatory"—the closed, settled viewpoint of his own mind—to begin to explore what may lie beyond.

In fact, the irony represented by Stanley's affinity for astronomy is illuminating: Stanley regards the open-minded religious dolts—the believers in "delusions" who place their chimerical wishes in faith's fraudulent creeds and religions' false hopes—as erring souls. And he perceives the close-minded men of science—those for whom concepts like "belief," "faith," and "spirituality" are irrelevant in a world of empiricism, observation, and experimentation—as the only coterie of humankind in possession of truth. Yet it was the original "sober men"—and women—of science, the great explorers,

astronomers, and scientists of years yore who, in their *open*-mindedness—in their willingness to entertain the possibility that there *must* be something more than meets the earthly eye, in their belief that there *must* be something more than this planet, and in their flexibility to integrate new scientific revelations into their old worldviews—opened the knowledge-base of humanity to the wonders of the universe. By pointing the telescope into the sky, the cosmologically curious Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Giordano Bruno challenged the close-minded men of medieval religion—the men who believed that this world was fixed and immovable, and that the center of the solar system was our planet—and opened our minds to the awe-inspiring spectacles of this magisterial universe. And it is the cosmologists, astrophysicists, and scientists—those with genuinely open-minded spirits—who continue to push the boundaries of our consciousness by insisting that there is more out there that we do not know, that there are more wonders waiting to be discovered, and that there are more mysteries waiting to be solved. The “observatory,” as Stanley subtly indicates, must remain open if we deign to discover the manifold delights of our magnificent material domain.

III. Inside Llewyn Davis

The Coen brothers are indubitably the most versatile, skillful, and interesting filmmakers in contemporary American cinema. Witness their last five films: *No Country for Old Men* (2007), a flawless,¹ chilling twenty-first century version of *The Night of the Hunter* (1955) which netted the Coen brothers a Best Picture Oscar; the underrated ensemble comedy *Burn After Reading* (2008), a film that features what is arguably Brad Pitt’s finest comedic performance since *Twelve Monkeys* (1995); the dark comedy *A Serious Man* (2009), a twenty-first century take on *The Book of Job* which some critics deemed to be their best film to date—this amongst a filmography that already boasts *Fargo* (1996), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), *Barton Fink* (1991), and *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994); a virtuosic revival of the Western, *True Grit* (2010); and now, an unclassifiable, confounding tragedy, *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013), a film that has the feel of a Kafka story (“*The Trial*,” specifically) transmuted to celluloid.

Inside Llewyn Davis is a leisurely paced tale of the trials and sorrows of a young singer (Oscar Issac) aspiring to carve out a niche for himself in the early 1960’s pre-Dylan Greenwich Village folk scene. The film’s subdued, unaffected tone, its drawing-room and kitchen-sink scenes, and its adagietto tempo hearken back to the profoundly personal films of the 1970’s auteurs, recalling

the time when Scorsese, Coppola, Altman, and pre-*Star Wars* George Lucas conveyed personal messages to the film-going public. Except, in *Inside Llewyn Davis*, the Coen brothers have not only made a personal film—they have “done” the personal film before, most recently in *A Serious Man*—but they have gone for something much, much deeper. Like Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, *Inside Llewyn Davis* is reaching for something very big—a sweeping, existential interpretation of the human condition, perhaps—and the success (if such a term can be used for such a film) of this movie rises and falls with the perception of whether they have attained this result.

The Coen brothers’ tragic take on the music movie is a subversive corrective to films like *Walk the Line* (2005), *Coal Miner’s Daughter* (1980), and other musician biopics in which the path from a hardscrabble existence to musical success seems predetermined. *Inside Llewyn Davis* reminds us that for every Loretta Lynn and Jonny Cash, there are hundreds of Llewyn Davises. The path to success in the entertainment industry is strewn with the sad tales of those who did not succeed. Llewyn Davis, a character based upon Dave Van Ronk, is one of those figures.

Inside Llewyn Davis holds out the promise of being a unique viewing experience, and it most certainly is. However, this does not mean it offers a pleasing viewing experience. In fact, my initial reaction to the film after leaving the theater was one of visceral dislike; I had never reacted so negatively to any Coen brothers’ movie before. And I have seen—and loved—virtually all of their films. What, I wondered, was so unlikable about this particular Coen brothers film?

Some of its unlikability inhered in Oscar Isaac’s remarkably pathos-free performance as Llewyn Davis. The character is so devoid of emotion that he seems virtually inhuman. Spending time in the theater with a character as congenitally incapable of caring as Isaac’s Davis provokes a reciprocal reaction that makes it difficult to become emotionally invested in the character.

The other reason this film is so unlikable is because it lacks the comedic elements that we have come to expect and enjoy in Coen brothers films. Aside from the hackneyed screwball subplot that involves chasing a runaway cat (a device the Coen brothers previously used in *The Ladykillers* [2004], and one that is also used in Noah Baumbach’s *The Squid and the Whale* [2005]), John Goodman provides some of the only comic relief, but mostly as a dialogic symbol of “John Goodman, comic character actor in Coen brothers films.” He’s not particularly funny in this role, but his mere presence in another Coen Brothers film conjures his past performances in Coen brothers films from *Raising Arizona* (1987) onwards, and gives the

viewer a kernel of hope that this movie will be like many of the others. It is not.

But mostly, this film is so unlikable because it paints a picture of a world that we would rather not look at; for those of us who have suffered disappointment, heartbreak, and failure—and what human being has not?—it is a picture that may be all too recognizable. Like Kafka's frightening parables about a careless, heartless world, *Inside Llewyn Davis* is an unnerving look at a world with an existential void at its core. It is a film that adopts a fundamentally tragic view of life—but so do many of the Coen brothers' other works, most notably *No Country for Old Men* and *Fargo*. Where *Inside Llewyn Davis* departs from these works is that it is, on the surface, irredeemably tragic—there is no foreseeable saving grace in the world of Llewyn Davis. It is not only a tragic world, but a Sisyphean one—a cold world without a shred of hope, a lonely world in which we are doomed to a never-ending cycle of disappointment, despair, and defeat. In short, it is the world of Nietzsche's madman: it is a world without God.

The great ethico-theological idea that the Hebrew Bible introduced to the world was the idea of a moral God who is involved in the world. As Nahum Sarna observed regarding the biblical monotheistic conception of God,

The God of the Bible is not a remote deity, inactive and ineffective. Having created the world, He did not remove himself from humanity and leave man to his own devices. On the contrary, He is very much concerned with the world He created and is directly interested in human behavior.²

Abraham, the Jewish sages teach, was the first human being to conceive of a personal God: "From the day that God created the world, no one addressed God as 'master' until Abraham addressed God as "Adonai" [my master]. Abraham saw himself not at the mercy of uncaring gods but as standing in a relationship with a caring, personal God."³ Calling God "Adonai," my master, conveys the speaker's belief that God has a personal relationship with each individual. More than steering the world from polytheism to monotheism, Abraham and the monotheistic religions that claim him as their patriarch taught the world that the universe is not a chaotic, cold, hostile arena where people are at the mercy of mercurial gods; instead, the monotheistic faiths portrayed the universe as an intelligible (if not altogether orderly) domain overseen by a personal, loving God.

Since the time of Spinoza, the notion of a personal God presiding over an orderly universe has received many blows. These blows first came from

philosophy and science, then from literature and psychology, and finally from the behavior of humanity itself. Now, the Coen brothers have demonstrated that film is a medium capable of depicting the consequence of what it means to believe that we live in a world without God.

Llewyn Davis is an unconnected, unmoored, rootless folk singer adrift in an impersonal, uncaring cosmos. Peering down from his squalid Bohemian Greenwich Village pied-à-terre, he condescends towards those upwardly mobile, middle-class aspiring persons who do not create and “just exist,” but Llewyn barely manages to exist himself. And what kind of existence is his lot? Llewyn exists without a sense of a deeply rooted, venerable past, without a stable community of family and friends in the present, and without an inkling of a hopeful, redemptive future. He is an exemplar of the dreadful Durkheimian anomie that preys upon individuals who lack the warmth and shared values of a supportive religious community.⁴

One who reaches for too much ends up grasping nothing at all: “*tafasta merubah lo tafasta, tafasta muat tafasta*”, the Talmud states (*b. Yoma* 80a; *b. Hagigah* 17a). Immediately after viewing the film, I felt as if the Coen brothers had reached for too much, and had come up empty. But this is not the type of film that deserves a knee-jerk reaction. If one attempts to rapidly consume and digest it like a fast-food entrée, it will not be appreciated. Instead, it should be slowly digested like a complex carbohydrate and processed only after a few days—or even after a few weeks.

“You’ll have to explain this one to me,” a friend I bumped into at the theater said to me after the movie. I’m still not sure I can, but what can be said is that the highly allusive *Inside Llewyn Davis*, in addition to resembling a cinematic version of a Kafka parable, also bears strong resonances of Dante’s deeply symbolic *Divine Comedy*. Just as each individual and each episode in *The Divine Comedy* is profoundly symbolic, each individual and each episode in *Inside Llewyn Davis* also carries symbolic weight. For instance, what Llewyn causes his sister to do with his records and memorabilia is analogous to being sprinkled with the waters of the mythological river Lethe in *The Divine Comedy*.

In the Coen brothers’ Dante-esque film, no creature is more symbolic than “Ulysses” the cat. In many respects, the wandering cat is a feline proxy of Llewyn, and is appropriately named Ulysses.⁵ For just as Ulysses was a wanderer, adrift midway through life’s journey, so too is Llewyn. Just as Ulysses lacks a true home and community for much of his journey, so too does Llewyn.⁶ And just as Ulysses is a crucial figure in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (particularly in the latter cantos of *Paradiso*) who symbolizes the possibility of redemption—his eventual returning to his home is a microcosmic symbol of

the world's eventual restoration to its pure, pre-sin state on a macrocosmic plane—the dual returns of Llewyn and Ulysses the cat to their respective abodes adumbrates the Coen brothers' interest in the redemptive possibility of return and restoration. (The motif of return is operative in *Raising Arizona*, *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, and *No Country for Old Men* as well.) Thus, naming the cat Ulysses (who, like the original Ulysses, undertakes an “incredible journey” of its own) serves to evoke the surprising possibility of return and redemption amidst our seemingly hopeless journeys through a cosmos that is, on the surface level, Sisyphean. Furthermore, *Inside Llewyn Davis*'s ambiguous ending conjures the similarly strange ending of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (the nearly impenetrable novel by the author of the modern *Ulysses*): both end where they begin; for both Llewyn and Finn, their nadirs effectuate their eternal Eliadian returns—their ends bring about their recurrent rebirths.

Indeed, almost more than it is a Kafkaesque parable of life in an absurd universe, *Inside Llewyn Davis* is a Dante-esque tale of a journey through a hellish environment which culminates in—or at least holds out the hope of—eventual redemption.

NOTES

1. The great artists paint the same picture over and over and over again—Monet and his water lilies, Twombly and his *Ledas*, Cezanne and his vistas of Mont Sainte-Victoire—until they get it just right; up until *No Country for Old Men*, the Coen brothers had been making movies that were preoccupied with the same concerns—the ambiguity of morality; anomie; existential loneliness—and that featured common motifs—restoration and return; odysseys; folk music; desolate, heartless landscapes; empty roads; terrifying bounty hunters; dimwitted criminals committing bungled crimes—and their experimentations with this form reached its apotheosis in *No Country for Old Men*, in which all of their themes and motifs harmonized to form a filmic masterpiece. (In fact, their usage of the Four Tops song “It’s the Same Old Song” in the closing credits of their first feature, *Blood Simple* (1985), contains a line that characterizes nearly all of their subsequent films: “It’s the same, same old song / But with a different meaning.”)
2. Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The World of the Bible in the Light of History* (New York: Schocken, 1970), 52. See also *ibid.*, 52-58, and Jonathan Sacks, “Noach: True Morality,” *Covenant & Conversation*, 2012 (positing that the concept of revelation implies objective, universal morality), available at <http://www.aish.com/tp/i/sacks/174092141.html>
3. Eliakim Koenigsberg (citing Rabbi Shimon Schwab), “Parshas Lech Lecha—My G-d,” *Parsha Bytes*, Oct. 10, 2013, accessed Dec. 31, 2013 http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/798650/Rabbi_Eliakim_Koenigsberg/Parsha_Bytes_-_Parshas_Lech_Lecha_-_My_G-d

4. Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893); idem, *Suicide* (1897).
5. The name “Ulysses” is itself a trope that occasionally recurs in Coen brothers’ films; it is the name of the character played by George Clooney in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000)—a film that exemplifies the Coen brothers’ long-gestating interest in *The Odyssey*.
6. Other parallels between Llewyn and Ulysses become illumined upon close watching: Llewyn felt that only his departed singing partner was his musical equal, similar to how Odysseus felt that only “ghosts”—the absent Agamemnon, Achilles, and Ajax—were his “equals.” See Harold Bloom, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 508. Additionally, Llewyn is accused by Jean (Carey Mulligan) of turning everything he touches into human waste; he can be said to be possessed by some kind of curse. If Llewyn is thought of as an Odysseus, it is interesting to observe that the name “Odysseus” (or “Ulysses” in Latin) refers to one who “inflicts his curse upon others, or someone who himself is victimized by a curse.” (Ibid., 505)