

From: Jay Miller <bigjaycc@gmail.com>
Date: Mon, Mar 31, 2008 at 12:55 PM
Subject: Ushpizin
To: thoffmd@att.net
Cc: Zvi.Lothane@mssm.edu

Dear Dr. Hoffman,

I am grateful to Dr. Zvi Lothane who knows of my interests in Judaism and Psychoanalysis for recommending that I see the film Ushpizin, read your paper, and send my comments to you. I hope that, after reading them, you too will be grateful to Dr. Lothane.

By way of apology:

1. I was able to see the film only once - and that a week ago - so there will be many points in the film that I did not pick up at all and errors in the ones that I did.

2. I did not have the time to research the sources of the material that I cite.

3. I am composing this paper as I type so this will be a "rough draft" not an edited paper.

4. I am a beginner at using the computer so probably parts of what I write will be messy and sloppy.

By way of method and goal:

Making use of the insightful locutions coined by our shadchan Lothane in his magisterial In Defense of Schreber, you engaged in "Hermeneutics(using Applied Psychoanalysis) to Explain" I will engage in "History (using my perspectives of Judaism and the Ultra-Orthodox World) to Understand". I most certainly will bear in mind that "In life, as in science, description, diagnosis, and dynamic formulation are inextricably interwoven, even though they are separated for purposes of presentation and analysis. Thus, a descriptive approach is necessarily the lowest level of interpretation of data by virtue of its being selective. It is already a certain perspective on the story, a way of imposing sense and order onto the blooming and buzzing confusion of a text."

I. Judaism in the Film:

1. The film enthralled me from the first scene on. One of the convicts said "Jehinom(Hell) instead of Gehinom. The Hebrew spoken today does not differentiate between the letter "Gimel" written with a dot and the same letter without a dot. The former is pronounced like the first "g" in the word garage and the latter like a "j" or the second "g" in the word garage. "Jehinom" is spelled with a "Gimel" without a dot. When I heard this I said to myself: "Amazing! He has them speaking Yemenite Hebrew!" Yemenite Hebrew is the most traditional and accurate dialect of Hebrew. Unfortunately, the "younger generation" of Yemenites are not concerned with preserving it. Such authenticity and precision of detail is seen throughout the film. The Belangas speak a Yemenite Hebrew. There are additional depictions of their Yemenite culture: 1. It is customary for Orthodox Households to have pictures of great rabbis on the wall, and one of their's was that of a rabbi of the Jews of the East. 2. Malka is wearing traditional Yemenite clothes both in style and color. Note as well the plethora and kinds of jewelry that she is wearing. The women of Ma'oh Sh'orim wear black and almost no jewelry. A woman of that world that would wear a colored tichel like Malka is selling would be considered most daring. 3. The fish that Malka serves at the Holiday meal is a Yemenite delicacy and is served as a main course. The housewife of Ma'oh Sh'orim serves Gefillte Fish or Boiled Carp as an appetizer. 4. The diminutive of Malka in the film is Mali. The Ashkenazic diminutive is Malky. From the moment the film depicted the Belangas as Chasidim living in Maoh Sh'orim I had 3 questions or perhaps issues; 1. In general, Yemenites do not live in Ma'oh Sh'orim. 2. In general, Yemenites are not Chasidim. Chasidim stem from Eastern Europe. (The vast majority of the inhabitants of Maoh Sh'orim are Ultra Orthodox but not Chasidic). 3. The language of Maoh Sh'orim is not Hebrew but Yiddish. We might say that the last is a device of the director to allow the film to be understood by a general audience, but still...These issues will be discussed in Part II of my analysis.

2. Expense of Mitzvos: 1.. For most mitzvos it is considered praiseworthy to spend more money than is "necessary" to get the mitzvoh object. The example that the Talmud uses when discussing this issue is esrog. Jews throughout the ages have been "extravagant" when purchasing an Esrog. There are certain defects which render the Esrog unfit for the performance of the mitzvoh. One of them is no "pitom". However this holds true only for an esrog that naturally has a pitom. There is a type of esrog that does not have a pitom, and sometimes those are the "best". That was the kind of esrog that Moshe brought. So even though Moshe as a "beginner" "went overboard" in the price that he paid he was not "out of line" in so doing. 2. There is a commandment of Simchas Yom Tov to be Happy on the Holidays. The Talmud says that while the "happiness" of men is the eating of meat and the drinking of wine, a man should make his wife happy by giving her jewelry. So even though the jewelry that Moshe as a "beginner" bought his wife was too "expensive" for a man of his means, he was not "out of line" in so doing.

3. A man must "sit in a Sukoh" on the holiday of Sukos. However the Sukoh must be his and cannot be stolen. Hence when Moshe approaches the original owner of the Sukoh he is asking for Mechilah remission of obligation not only for having violated the sin of "Do not Steal" but also a remission of ownership. However, Moshe as a "beginner" confused this with the formula that a court uses when releasing a man from the "obligations of an oath" and had the man repeat "Mochul Loch" 3 times.

Note. The appellation "beginner" for Moshe will be explained in Part II.

4. The Sefiros on Sukos. There is no precise translation/understanding of the word; The concept is found throughout Kabbalah. One way of understanding how this concept "came to be" is that it is a solution to a major philosophical problem of the Middle Ages: A basic tenet of our belief is that G-D is Perfect Complete etc not subject to change, emotion etc yet we see throughout the Bible that G-D is merciful sometimes angry, responds to the actions of man, listens and responds to prayers etc. So the Kabbalists "divided" G-D into two, the Ein Sof the Infinite and the Sefiros which would be the pleroma of G-D in the world the hypostasis of his Being etc going down in a more "coarse" order. The last one is the intermediary between the Divine World and our world and the world we live in. There are ten Sefiros but we "deal" with the seven lower ones through the intermediary of the last one. There are different sets of names for the Sefiros. The one set that the film talks about explicitly is that which corresponds to our Fathers each one being the apotheosis of a different G-D substance. Now as mentioned before on every holiday there is a mitzvah to be happy by eating and drinking. However if one does not invite the "poor" as his guests G-D rejects his "table." Each day of Sukos we invite one of the seven Sefiroh Fathers together with the other Sefiroh Fathers to be our guests our Ushpizin in the Sukoh which is the abode of the last Sefiroh Sh'chinoh, the Divine Presence. If however a man does not have poor mundane guests in his Sukoh the Sefiroh Father of that day departs in anger followed by the Others. We can therefore understand the Belangas desperately desiring guests and as "beginners" confusing the Divine Guests with the human ones. The significance of the names of Moshe's guests: Our Father Yosef is given the name; attribute Zadik, the Righteous One because of his withstanding the seduction of his master's wife - note the anomaly here. Eliyohu is a guest at every Bris so it is fitting that he appear when they circumcise Nachman. When the Kabbalah discusses Lulov and Esrog it uses the set of Names corresponding to different parts of the body. The Lulov is the icon of Sefiras Y'sod Foundation the Phallus and the Esrog is the icon of Sh'chinoh the last one the feminine the pudendum and so when we hold the esrog next to the lulov in our performance of the mitzvah, bringing the two together we are effecting a union of the two Sefiros, a "Heiros Gamos," "Taking the Lulov" is an independent Mitzvah; it is not a part of the liturgy. In the film, the Rav has Moshe take it while praying. This Kabbalistic minhag custom was introduced by the Ari. In general a man's copulating with his wife is a mitzvah and considered to be "making her happy. When in the film the Rav tells Moshe to make his wife happy, he is having him combine this happiness with the happiness brought about by the fulfillment of the mitzvah of making his wife happy on the holiday. In addition their sexual congress is an imitation - emulation of the Heiros Gamos mentioned above. "The Esrog is a S'guloh for having sons". These are the words spoken in the film; the subtitles translate S'guloh "Treasure" which indeed is one of the meanings of the word. However, in this context it would best be translated "Charm"; a charm that brings about the birth of a son. In the film the esrog would cause Mali to become pregnant with and give birth to a son. A personal note: My mother told me that I was born a boy because my Zeideh, her father in law, had her eat the pitom of the esrog. If we bear in mind that she was already pregnant when she ate the pitom, we see that the Esrog has the power to dictate the gender of the fetus.

II. Bratzlov in the Film:

Rav Nachman of Bratzlov was unique in his genius and a member of a movement, Chasidus that attracted (and produced) men gifted in both soul and mind. At the peak of his leadership in the beginning of the 19th century he never had more than 200 followers. Not only the Misnagdim but many of this fellow Rebbe's opposed him because of his "unusual" ideas and practices. This opposition -- and even persecution -- from both camps of the ultra-orthodox continued throughout the years after his death and remnants of that fight exist today. Families were torn asunder when one member of the family joined the Bratzlovers. Rav Nachman was under 40 when he died. But even in death, he continues to be the Rebbe of the Bratzlovers. (The Bratzlovers received the appellation "toiteh chasidim" dead chasidim because they followed a dead rebbe.) In 1906, Martin Buber published The Tales of Rav Nachman. This was his first book about Chasidim and Chasidus and gave the "Enlightened Jews" of Western Europe their first glimpse of the Light of the Jews of Eastern Europe.

Today Rav Nachman's influence can be seen in 5 different groups of people: 1. The traditional Bratzlover Chasidim. Rav Nachman is the Rebbe, but there is a Manhig, Leader. There are also "renegade" groups that have left the main one. The traditional Bratzlover Chasidim refer to Rav Nachman as "The Rebbe"; they do not say "Rav Nachman" or "The Bratzlover Rebbe"; to them there is no other "Rebbe." 2. The scholars of Kabbalah and Chasidus that can be found in the Schools of Jewish Studies in various universities. 3. His works are studied in the Departments of Religion and Literature in various Universities. 4. In the 60's the Counter Culture "discovered" him, and he has become a staple of their religious diet. 5. Thinking Jews in general. 6. Jews on the fringe of society. From the beginning of the movement, the outcasts, i.e. the non observant, the poor, the beggars, the mentally ill, the petty criminals etc have seen Rav Nachman as their Father and "live in his home." Groups "1" and "5" see Rav Nachman as the Moshiach and eagerly await his Revival and the Revelation of his powers and the Redemption.

Moshe Belanga clearly belongs to this last group; his friends from his past are convicts who speak of Moshe and the "old days". Since Moshe is part of that group of Bratzlover Chasidim we can have Yemenites being Chasidim, living in Maoh Sh'orim, and speaking Hebrew not Yiddish. Moshe is a "beginner" since prior to becoming a Bratzlover he was not a traditional observant Jew. Mali, on the other hand, most likely comes from a traditional Yemenite home-she is conversant in traditional Yemenite dress and cuisine -- and

when she became a Bratzlover, she was following the lead of her husband. Since she has not come to this on her own, her adherence to the "Faith" is not total and she voices her objections to her husband's Bratzlover extremes. (This is not to negate her filling the role of the "practical" wife married to the "dreamer" husband.). They have sayings of Rav Nahcman on the walls of their home, Moshe returns from the Yeshiva and, without any prelude, excitedly tells Mali something he heard in the yeshiva in the name of Reb Noson, Rav Nahcman's chief disciple after his death. Mali too is excited when she hears it and only after hearing it insists that they speak of "practical" matters. The yeshiva that Moshe attends is named "Or Gonuz" the "Hidden Light", because after his death Rav Nachman's "Light" is not extinguished; it is hidden and continues to guide the faithful, the believers. When the Moshiach comes, this light will be revealed and seen by all. Among the practices that Rav Nachman advocated was that the Jew should talk to G-D like a child talks to his parents. The Jew when praying should not limit his words to the traditional liturgy. He should go "outside" to a deserted area with his own words scream to G-D telling Him his wants, hopes, and dreams. He should spell out his disappointments, anger etc. Since he is a novice, Moshe's "outside" is a park in which there are people. When he does get angry he sees his anger as "wrong" and tries to uproot it from himself. Mali, like the traditional Jewish woman that she is, does not go outside but prays at home sitting at the kitchen table. She prays from a Prayer Book and intersperses the traditional prayers with Bratzlover "Crying Out". Rav Nahcman:

1. Constantly iterates, reiterates and stresses the importance of "Emunoh P'shutah" pure simple Faith- Belief-Trust in G-D.
2. Declares and Declaims that there is "No Yaiush"; "Yielding to Despair" is an existential impossibility.
3. Teaches that all that befalls man is the result of Divine Providence. This providence is seemingly invisible yet is present in everything that a man encounters.

Moshe as a beginner takes the first of these doctrines to an extreme with his "exaggerated" reliance on G-D to provide for his needs, especially the spiritual ones. We mentioned in part I that Moshe as a beginner confuses the Divine and mundane guests one with the other. The third of these doctrines confuses Moshe all the more, and he searches for the Divine (or G-D forbid Satan) in all the acts of his "Ushpizin" instead of viewing them simply as the conduct of the "lowlife" that they are.

III. The Tale.

The director is obviously conversant in Kaboloh and the basic Bratzlov doctrines and practices. He is an insightful cultural anthropologist who allows us to see-experience an exotic world and the fantastic fascinating external and internal life(s) of one of its inhabitants. He paints for us a masterful portrait of the "Beginner" and his travails. The humor, even when it "pokes fun" at Moshe, does not negate our empathy with him and his trials. The film evokes within the viewer a gamut of emotions; he simultaneously laughs and cries. He senses himself amidst the absurdities of the film's characters and that what befalls them.

What narrative form did the director choose to give form to his insights? Let us reexamine the "outline" of the story: Moshe is an "innocent" going through life encountering on his way "strange" situations, "strange" obstacles to the achieving of his goals, and "strange" people who perform amazing actions. He experiences the supernatural, i.e., Divine Providence both for good and for bad. He is a "Prince." His eponym, Moshe of the Torah was a Prince of Egypt and King of the Jews. His wife Mali is a "Princess". As is mentioned above, Mali is the diminutive of Malka which means Queen. Moshe and Mali are so distressed over being childless for so many years that Mali suggests that Moshe divorce her and marry another woman. The film ends with them being blessed with a son. (See above). After viewing the film this way, we can say that it is a Fairy Tale.

IV. The Tale and Rav Nachman

The tale plays an important role in the world of Bratzlov. We mentioned above that the Tales of Rav Nachman was the first book of Chasidus that Buber brought to the attention of the Western World. The Tales are studied in the Departments of Literature of various universities. The Tales of Rav Nachman are "different" than the tales of other Chasidic Rebbes: Whereas the tales of other Chasidic teachers are stories *about* the teacher; the tales of Rav Nachman are stories that *he composed*. Rav Nachman did not begin to tell these tales until relatively late in his career when he felt that his other efforts to bring about the Redemption failed. Many of the tales are fairy tales with the prince, the princess, magic castle, giant, etc al. with no transparent Jewish content. Rav Nachman said that there are Divine Truths and Secrets "hidden" amidst the folk - fairy tales of the "World" and that he is using them as the media for his Teachings. Thirteen of the Tales are canonical; the Bratzlover recite them on Shabbos. Scholars of various ilks work on "deciphering" the tales; some trying to show how the various characters are "facets" of Rav Nachman and his opponents and how the events portrayed therein are records of his mission in this world which will climax with the coming of the Moshiach, the Messiah, which is tantamount to the Hidden Light of Rav Nachman being revealed and seen by all -- not just experienced by the Faithful, (Whether Rav Nachman saw himself as the Moshiach is too complex an issue to enter into now).

In the State of Israel in recent years there have been claims by various people that they have received a "communication" from Rav Nachman. His "popularity" has increased amongst different groups of the population. His "teachings" and "practices" have been adopted (and adapted) by many. His message is being spread, and it is believed that he will be soon revealed as the Moshiach. With these perspectives we can say that the film, by adopting the form and content of the original tales, is giving us a parody of these current beliefs. Rav Nachman often compared himself to Moshe of the Torah and stated that even though he was opposed and ridiculed by many for his "strange" actions, he was the ruler over all.. This is the "role" given to Moshe in the film. Rav Nachman had

great Messianic hopes for his son who prematurely died.(according to some scholars, this event triggered Rav Nachman's decision tell stories), In the climax of the film the Moshiach, Nachman is born.(Nachman is, according to the Talmud, one of the names of the Moshiach.) The "Hidden Light" of Rav Nachman is revealed. The prophet Eliyohu the Harbinger of the Redemption and Joseph the Father and Representative of the 1st. Moshiach - who after his coming is killed - come to the bris of the Moshiach to herald his coming. They are, however, two convicts.

Dear Dr. Hoffman,

When Dr. Lothane told me of your request for reactions, I welcomed the opportunity and began to write thinking that this would be relatively short. When Dr. Lothane told me that even though you had submitted your paper,you were interested in reading my reactions I continued to write sporadically over the past few weeks and since I was writing as I thought, like Topsy " it just grew." Please write me your reactions to my reactions and call me when you come to N.Y.C. -212-9232724.

Sincerely yours,

Jay M. Miller