

NISHMA נשמה
The Corner of
Hollywood and Sinai

A Call to Arts

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I haven't written a review in quite some time. I would like to blame it entirely upon a busy schedule but, while my schedule does deserve quite a nice share of the blame, it does not deserve all the blame. I would like to blame it on the three weeks and, more particularly, the nine days, during which I tend to avoid seeing films in theatres. Again, such assignation of blame would not be entirely dishonest but it would not be entirely honest either.

There is something that runs deeper that has kept me from writing a review this summer. It has much to do with the appalling dearth of well-done films. No one ever said summer movies were about thought provoking dialogue (in fact, most people say quite the opposite). And I know that the summer is about blowing stuff up and blowing that stuff up quickly to a heart-racing soundtrack and with some really pretty people in the background. But come on! The closest thing we've got to a morality play is *Shrek The Third*? And, on that note, why do we constantly settle for making children laugh with jokes that would have made our great-grandparents blush?

But then there was one film, and when I read about it I thought that it was the answer to my prayer. Here was a movie that just had to have something to say. I mean, Meryl Streep was in it. Vanessa Redgrave. Natasha Richardson. Toni Collette. Claire Danes. Glenn Close. How could it not have substance? So, I went to see *Evening* hoping that I would be given something to write about. I went despite the plenty of bad reviews that the film got. I went despite the predominantly female cast – a fact that unfortunately often signals “chick flick” bright enough for Martians to steer clear. I went despite the fact that it is the summer and the summer is all about big in the adrenalin sense and not at all about big in

the historic sense.

It was a good film. It, of course, contained fabulous performances. But, more than that, it contained characters who spoke like grown ups, who suffered like grown ups and who, in two time periods that encouraged adults to play house rather than grow up (the 1950s and today) understood the necessity of being grown ups. Film critics found the language stilted – has it really been so long since anyone spoke in full sentences? Film critics found some of the characters overly hysterical – but shouldn't the question of the future force each of us to be slightly hysterical? Film critics found the film lacking a “so what” – well, they kind of got me there.

What *Evening* did was reverse the flow of power. Generally, the power of a movie is its ability to take a little story and make it magical, make it transcend its own mundane nature. Whenever I think about this power, *Frankie and Johnny* comes to mind. Here was a story about a waitress and a short order cook who fall in love. The story is old and it is common but the movie made it new and special. Suddenly it was the story of a Michelle Pfeiffer and an Al Pacino; suddenly it was a story of this miraculous thing called love that overpowers the soul and gives humanity a reason and a will to survive.

That is the power of cinema. It makes us think that music plays when two people kiss. It tells us that the underdog will win. It pulls us into a world like ours and then it shows us how a waitress, or a short order cook, or the mailman can change that world and make it beautiful – make it Technicolor and surround sound – make it somewhere so wonderful that we forget for a moment that waitresses' feet hurt at the end of the day. That the short order cook burned his arm and uses too much butter. That the mailman wears latex gloves now just in case. That is what the movies do.

But not *Evening*. *Evening* geared up for transcendence. It built up the notion of a tragic love story, of a life with one wrong turn, of the overwhelming importance of romance and art. And then it gracefully and bluntly let the real world in. I loved this movie when I saw it but, for the life of me, it took me a very long time to pinpoint exactly why. And, it took me even longer to write this review because, if there was one notion *Evening* truly

convinced me of, I could not say with certainty that seeing this movie, or any movie, could be argued to be a worthwhile endeavour.

For, truthfully, this column is an attempt to see the worthwhile in film – and to do so through the lens of Torah wisdom – to tease out of the *mashal* a precious enough *nimshal* that I can say: look past the swear words and the mini skirts because this movie gives you something worth taking. This summer, every week, I looked over the list of new movies and saw nothing that I could say that about.

I tried *Shrek* because it is a children's movie and even the most cynical moviemakers out there still have this thing about putting messages in children's movies. I was appalled. While I agree that it is important to teach children that everyone need not be the same, I do not think this means that we should tell them that mediocrity is the new cool. We want teenage boys to pay less attention to how many pounds they bench and teenage girls to pay less attention to how many pounds they weigh because we want them to fill their heads with more important information, not because we think it's wrong to engage in self-improvement. Self-betterment, when done wisely and healthily, is what life is about. It just shouldn't be restricted to the size of one's waist or biceps.

Evening was all about self-improvement however it was not about the kind of self-improvement that one usually finds in a movie. There was no rapid transformation set to a girl power anthem. *Evening* was about the type of self-improvement that weaves its way through a life that is not allowed to stop. It reminded the viewer that any talent is the product of sacrifice and effort and that it is, if the talented one is lucky, a way to pay the bills. And, while it is usually what the world determines makes a person great, a talent is not what makes a person good. *Evening* nonchalantly told the viewer that a hero is, after all, a person first and last and that being the best person you can be does not make you a hero but it does make you a person doing the best you can. This is commendable in most movies but in *Evening* it is expected, not belittled, mind you – the difficult task that is living is never mocked or underestimated in this film – but not raised to an action worthy of sainthood, either.

Still, to exit that movie and trumpet the worth to be found in that movie was difficult to do. It was the tale of a life. We all have lives. That the main character in *Evening* took charge of her own life is something we should all do. But I could not be certain that it was something we should all see.

Then I saw the pilot of the TV show *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*. That is a television show about making a television show. But it is also the creative offspring of Aaron Sorkin. So, it's really about something else. The pilot was about the responsibility that television has to take its role in a person's life seriously. The first few minutes of the pilot were about the downward spiral of the medium over the past few years. The focus on gossip, the commercialization of tragedy, the rampant spread of reality TV. All an attempt to turn life into a portrait of a sitcom.

Then, along comes *Evening*, a movie that tried so desperately to turn a film back into a portrait of a life. And succeeded. But still didn't rise to what Sorkin was crying out for. And, so, I got my lesson. I learned, in the midst of this summer of blockbusters and ballyhoo, that movies are important. The medium is important. I had forgotten that. It was why I began this column but I had forgotten it. I don't judge myself too harshly, though, because it took *Shrek the Third*, *Evening* and the pilot of *Studio 60* to remind me. I don't judge myself too harshly because I am not alone.

Because here is the point. *Shrek* had a lesson, one that our under-inspired and over-stimulated youth need desperately to be told but it was so carefully couched in cheap humour and half-baked philosophy that it was embarrassing. *Evening* flagged a nearly forgotten theme to existence but it made it one person's story instead of humanity's story so no one listened and even though it was talking earnest truth, it forgot that earnest truth has gone the way of Esperanto in recent years. And *Studio 60* was a television show that called to its brethren to recapture their potential but one of the main characters is the Jewish head writer of the show-within-the-show and the show-within-the-show airs live on Friday nights so, while it was saying the right thing, it wasn't really saying it to me.

If this column is to continue, if the idea behind this column is to survive, then we need

better movies, better television and better audiences. We just plain need to be better. Many people might disagree with me and say the answer lies in ending this column and the idea behind it, that those who don't own televisions, don't go to the movies and cringe if their children want to get involved in the performance arts, are headed in the right direction. But I say that no one ever learned good strategy from an ostrich. I say that Judaism is a religion of sweeping ideas and minute details. It works because we are created in God's image and His world is a breathtaking tribute to the delicate harmony of sweeping ideas and minute details. Let us at least attempt to live our lives as best we can. And let us use all that this world offers us to do so. I say that this medium has a power that cannot be ignored but that can be harnessed. Let's get our people, our artists, on that. Now.

As for me, after Tisha B'Av, I will once again begin reading over the lists of movies that enter theatres each week. I will keep sitting in darkened theatres waiting for that movie that gets it right. And when I see that movie, I will review it. Then I will wait for the next one.

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