

NISHMA נשמה
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Hollywood and Sinai

Zodiac:
What Happens When Curiosity Replaces Justice

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WARNING: Spoilers Below

If I had to succinctly sum up *Zodiac* for the potential viewer I would state, without any hesitation, that it is a complete waste of time and it's about a man who completely wastes his time. That is not, however, what any movie blurb will say. The most fact-focused would probably tell that same potential viewer that *Zodiac* is based on the true story of a man – Robert Graysmith - who, against all odds, tenaciously devoted twenty years of his life to solving the Zodiac murders in California – and eventually solved the case that everyone else, including the police, had long given up on.

I stand by my summary.

If Mr. Graysmith had chosen to pursue his own investigation because he felt for the families of the murdered people, I would have applauded. If *Zodiac* was an acknowledgement that America's law enforcement officials are overworked and that the pursuit of justice is truly the work of every member of society, I may have even given the movie a standing ovation. But *Zodiac* makes sure to emphasize the reason why Mr. Graysmith gave up his job, his wife, and his children to solve this particular crime and it has nothing to do with justice or compassion; Mr. Graysmith liked puzzles. Serial killer Sudoku – that is all that the obsession behind this movie is about. Was about. And, so, when does it end for Mr. Graysmith? When the perpetrator is caught? On trial? Safely behind bars?

No. As the character himself tells his soon to be ex-wife, it will be over for him when he can go up to the killer, look him in the eyes, and know – really know – that this man is the one. In other words, it will end for Mr. Graysmith when he has solved the puzzle. And as to the lives of those that Zodiac killed? It is certain that Mr. Graysmith views these people and their tragedies as essential clues, but beyond that? No idea. Perhaps it is all a game to Mr. Graysmith, an illusive riddle that has no real bearing on actual life. That would explain why Mr. Graysmith ignores his wife's concerns that public pursuit of Zodiac might endanger their children. Or why he sees nothing wrong with setting up camp in the family kitchen and employing his children in "the project." Whatever might be the actual emotional link between Mr. Graysmith and the victims of Zodiac, it is clear that the relationship of priority is the one between Mr. Graysmith and Zodiac himself.

At one point in the movie, Mr. Graysmith corners the police inspector in charge of the Zodiac case. He asks the inspector how the inspector can just let the case, which remains (at least officially) an open and ongoing investigation, get so thoroughly buried by time. The inspector's response, to me, was the key moment of the film. He informed Mr. Graysmith of the many other murders that had occurred since Zodiac stopped his killing spree, and of the many non-homicide related deaths in the recent past – a number that far exceeded the number of lives claimed by Zodiac. There are two ways to read this exchange. If Mr. Graysmith is a hero, a man who never stopped trying to catch the bad guy that everyone else gave up on, then the inspector is a jaded idiot who is so obsessed with numbers and tally sheets that he has forgotten how precious is a single life.

However, if Mr. Graysmith is a self-involved and obsessed child, then his quest is nothing more than a selfish jaunt. And his self-righteous indignation at the police's stagnation? Nothing more than a complete disregard for the difficult task – to protect its citizens and pursue justice – that governments assign to their law enforcers.

You can probably guess which way I go but let me tell you exactly why I refuse to see Mr. Graysmith as any sort of a positive figure. It is true that every life is precious and it is true that many cases have unsatisfactory endings or no endings at all. Sometimes it's due to lack of evidence – a trail runs cold, a document gets shredded, a witness forgets.

Sometimes it's due to a technicality. Sometimes it just happens that justice is beyond our grasp. It is frustrating; it is unbelievably frustrating. I have no doubt that Mr. Graysmith's work probably brought some relief to the families of those murdered by Zodiac – his work offered them closure of a sort in that they knew who to blame. But once they have someone to blame, where exactly are they really? The murdered are still dead and the murderer is still out there. Nothing has really changed.

Justice is about change. When the world becomes unbalanced, justice resets the balance. When Avraham questioned God about His decision to destroy Sodom, he questioned the justice of the act. God's answer was a matter of balance – if there had been even ten righteous men in that city then they would have outbalanced the evil in the city. Ten is a minyan, a quorum, a community. Ten righteous men, standing together, might have been able to change Sodom. There is no justice to destroying a city that might be changed. Fewer than ten could not have such influence – and so, for the betterment of the world, a wicked city must be destroyed – just as one would remove a gangrenous limb.

Such choices are never pleasant and they often look to the wisest among us as acts of injustice. So the world is better because Sodom no longer exists but what of Lot? He was not an evil man (he wouldn't have been saved if he was) and yet he loses his home, his property and his wife. Can it possibly be justice if even one good man suffers? It would seem that the answer is yes. It is not a boisterous yes but it is an unequivocal one.

And it is a yes that tends not to feel right in the pit of our stomach. Nor should it. The Talmud tells us that every single life is like an entire world and the destruction of one life is like the destruction of one world. That is true. We value the rights and privileges of individuals – it is present in every aspect of Jewish law from property law to ethics. On the other hand, Jewish law is filled with cases in which it is not only deemed acceptable but is actually mandated that one life be sacrificed for the greater good. One is not permitted to pay an excessive ransom for an individual if it is believed that this will only encourage more ransom situations. A city must generally hand over a wanted criminal to the authorities rather than risk the lives of its inhabitants.

The inspector's response echoed this notion of justice. His time belonged to a community made up of many more victims than the victims of Zodiac and many more families than the families of those victims. His work had to be about efficiency – for the sake of compassion, not despite it. It may be impossible to achieve perfect justice, not every crime can be counteracted, not every wrong righted. All that anyone can do is strive to do as much as possible. How many crimes would have been ignored if the inspector had devoted as much time to Zodiac as Mr. Graysmith did?

And what did Mr. Graysmith lose? It states at the end that he has a healthy relationship with his kids – I'm very happy for him that he has such forgiving kids. However, when, in the film, he refuses to let his children see him in his state of frantic fixation one would think that, given the choice, he would have preferred his children to Zodiac. That is not, however, the choice he makes. His wife, too, is left by the wayside.

It may sound like I'm contradicting myself. Here I am talking about the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the greater good as a noble act but then I rebuke Mr. Graysmith for sacrificing himself to uncover the identity of Zodiac. Wasn't Mr. Graysmith really just doing exactly what I want?

No, he was not. And thus we return to the why behind the law. When justice can be served then God will injure one righteous man but no righteous man will be sacrificed on a whim. I do not believe that Mr. Graysmith's actions were wrong because of what he did, necessarily, but because of why he did them. Still, as a corollary to that, I think that Mr. Graysmith's actions might have been different if he had had the proper intent in mind. And if he would have shown some consideration of the time. Time is a very precious commodity and it is not to be wasted. Jewish law takes this very seriously and refers to it as "bittul Torah" or "bittul zman" which truly means that such uses of time nullify Torah and time because they steal time from worthwhile pursuits, best – but not solely – represented by learning Torah.

In the simplest terms, life is a complex game of rock, paper, scissors. The search for a killer, as an act in a vacuum, can be a righteous act. It may even be a just act. But, then

again, it may not. Time, an unrelenting and focused force, is in a constant tangle with Justice and, sometimes, Time trumps. Furthermore, when one allows obsession to fuel a potentially good pursuit then that pursuit may quickly shift from good to bad. A temporal being can only hope to achieve a modicum of justice if all these conflicting notions are kept in the forefront of one's mind.

It is quite clear that, in Mr. Graysmith's case, such thoughts occupied a dark corner, if any place at all. If he had considered Justice then he would have weighed the various duties fighting for his time. He would never have allowed curiosity to lead to twenty years of nullified time. And, he would never have allowed a potentially good quest to become twisted into the evil that it was, an evil that destroyed his personal life and prevented him from accomplishing the good that he might have done with the skills that God had given him.

Justice is a complex equation. It must incorporate individual rights as well as communal needs. It must account for mercy and truth but also efficiency and detachment. It must pit its idealistic equilibrium against the unwavering march of time. It is not something that any person can just feel out. It is not something that any person can just stumble upon. There is a very good reason why no government has been able to create the perfect justice system, why Law is always being tweaked and undergoes constant reform. It is Man's clumsy attempt to approximate perfect Justice. Sometimes we actually get close. Sometimes, I believe, the world actually feels more balanced.

Sometimes, however, it does not. Sometimes, one man takes it upon himself to waste twenty years of his life, the lives of his wife and children, the potential good he may have done with those twenty years and the world's chance at achieving greater balance just so that he can look a killer in the face and know that that man is, in fact, a killer. And then, to top it all off, sometimes, someone goes and makes a movie about that man. It is in moments like that, I believe, that I can almost feel the world move a bit more off kilter. It is then that justice, itself, becomes just one more victim.

