Jewish humor has long been a staple of American cinema; yet Jews themselves have been at best a sub-staple. One thinks of Felix Bressart’s Greenberg in *To Be or Not To Be* (1942); Everett Sloan’s Bernstein in *Citizen Kane* (1941); Rod Steiger’s Sol Nazerman in *The Pawnbroker* (1965); Richard Benjamin’s Neil Klugman in *Goodbye, Columbus* (1969); Barbra Streisand’s Jewish commie in *The Way We Were* (1973); Richard Dreyfuss’s hustling resort-hotel waiter in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974); Ben Stiller’s eponymous lead in *Greenberg* (2010); and of course Alvy Singer, Isaac, Cliff Stern et al., in the films of Woody Allen, raising urban Jewish neurosis to the level of an art form. But far more often, even as Jews write and direct films, the characters they depict are not Jewish at all. For instance, I would posit that at least half the Italians in 1950s/1960s American cinema were just Jews by other means—c.f., Ernest Borgnine’s Marty Piletti in Sidney Aaron “Paddy” Chayefsky’s *Marty* (1955), or Tony Curtis’s Sidney Falco in the Clifford Odets (né Gorodetsky)/Ernest Lehman *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). Alternatively, Jewish characters have often been rendered as ambiguously “ethnic”: see, for instance, Joe Morse, played by John Garfield (né Jacob Julius Garfinkle of Rivington Street) in Abraham Polonsky’s *Force of Evil* (1948), recognizable as Jewish to those who know the code, but never explicitly specified as such.
In contemporary American cinema a Jewish man can be the humorous sidekick, a Jewish woman the symbol of rapaciousness, as if Jonah Hill and Sarah Silverman were less actors than archetypes. The depiction of Jews in contemporary cinema is, sadly, largely confined to the secular dyad of schlubby guy/greedy gal.

Every once in a while, though, Jews are allowed to be Jews—which is to say, we’re like everyone else, and yes some of us are funny, and some of us are also depressed, and some of us have unfortunate hair growing out of our noses and ears, and some of us are even spiritual. Richard Gere’s Saul Naumann in *Bee Season* (2005), adapted by Naomi Foner from Myla Goldberg’s novel, is a professor of religious studies, one of those rare movie Jews who’s allowed to practice Judaism—the other exceptions being the title roles in *King of Kings* (1961), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). (But as Lou Reed would say, those were different times.)

Saul Naumann believes life should be lived by the precepts of his religion. In short, he is that *rara avis* among Jews in American cinema, a serious man (although his transformation from a cantor in the novel to a professor in the film is itself a form of secularization). But it took Joel and Ethan Coen to bring to the screen a character unabashedly serious, unabashedly Jewish, unabashedly intellectual, unabashedly spiritual, and unabashedly fucked. And it is this last that is, perhaps, the most noteworthy. Because while Jews in American cinema are often allowed to play *schlemiels*—Tony Curtis in *Sweet Smell of Success*, Mark Rydell in the Robert Altman/Leigh Brackett re-reading of Raymond Chandler’s *The Long Goodbye* (1973)—it takes the Coens to allow a Jewish character to go full *schlimazel*. Michael Stuhlbarg’s Larry Gopnik in the Coens’ *A Serious Man* (2009) is smart but not funny, a man facing his ruination with all the implacability of Buster Keaton standing in front of a falling house. His life is coming apart and he doesn’t know why—and that, the Coens seem to be saying, is humor enough.

Gopnik’s doomstruck character is the very embodiment of a form of Eastern European fatalism—or as my grandmother would put it, “If I were a candlemaker, the sun would never set.” This is not the Judaism of aspiration, or the Judaism of deep and abiding faith in liberation. This is the faith of those who know that things will only get worse. *A Serious Man* is sprinkled with more than a little Yiddish: an A to Z lexicon of Yiddishisms and Hebrewisms found in *A Serious Man* would include *agunah, bar mitzvah, bupkes, chacham, dybbuk, gett, goy, haftorah, hashem, kabbalah, macher, mazel tov, mensch, mitzvah, nu, rabbi, reb, shabbas, shtetl, shiva, shul, torah, and Zohar*. The words
are used to shackle, to burden, to remind Gopnik of the weight of the past, never to offer the promise of a more golden future. (Not on this shore, and likely not on the other, either.)

The movie comes at us in distinct parts: a prologue, in black and white, set in the Old Country in an unspecified era, perhaps the late 1800s; and the main body of the film, in a desaturated color palette shot by the extraordinary Roger Deakins, set in Saint Louis Park, a suburb of Minneapolis, in 1967 (but a far cry from The Mary Tyler Moore Show’s Minneapolis of 1970–77).

The prologue has no strict narrative connection to the larger film: it’s a standalone, serving more to establish sensibility than causation. In the prologue—all in Yiddish, with subtitles—a man, Velvel, tells his wife Dora that on his way home in the snow he met, and was aided by, Reb Traitle Groshkover, Pesel Bunim’s uncle, from Lodz, who studied under the Zohar reb in Krakow. Her first words, succinct and sufficient: “God has cursed us.” Dora tells him that Reb Groshkover has been dead for three years, and that what he saw could only be a dybbuk. Bad enough for sure, until a knock comes at the door and there is Groshkover—whom Velvel, heavy with a sense and tradition of obligation, cannot fail to invite in. Reb Groshkover (played with sly, understated wit by the late Fyvush Finkel) maintains that he never died—what more proof be needed than that he is standing there? Dora, convinced he’s already dead, plunges an icepick into his chest. And contrary to her expectations, he bleeds. Says Groshkover to Velvel, “What a wife you have!” And sensing by the pick in his chest that he’s not welcome, Groshkover leaves Velvel and Dora’s house to venture out into the snowstorm (and, presumably, to die, of blood loss or hypothermia, whichever comes first).

Groshkover’s Parthian shot: “One does a mitzvah and this is all the thanks one gets?” After he departs Velvel says simply: “Dear wife. We are ruined.” She demurs unconvincingly—but the curse lingers, transmigrates, perhaps to land on the shoulders of Larry Gopnik, who has no apparent relationship to Velvel and Dora other than that he’s damned.¹

Gopnik’s woes are manifold. He’s a physics professor up for tenure, the certainty of which ebbs with each passing incident.² His wife is leaving him, having taken up with the bearded, platitude-spouting Sy Ableman. The goy neighbor next door is building a shed on his property. Accommodating his wife’s wishes, Gopnik moves out to a motel; and his brother Arthur, having failed at everything, moves in with him.³ When Gopnik’s wife’s fiancé dies in an accident, it’s Gopnik who’s stuck with the funeral expenses. His children are annoying at best, amoral at worst. In a dream he explains to his students:
“Even if you don’t understand any of this, you’ll still be responsible for it on the exam”—a sentiment that could be used, with little or no alteration, as an *explanation de texte* for his life. Climbing on the roof to fix his TV antenna he spots the other-side neighbor, Mrs. Samsky, sunbathing provocatively—and in giddy intoxication, falls off the roof. A subsequent visit to Mrs. Samsky—“Actually I haven’t been home a lot recently. I, uh, my wife and I are, uh, well, she’s got me staying at the Jolly Roger . . .”—couldn’t be more awkward. The rabbis whose help Gopnik and his son seek—Rabbi Scott, Rabbi Nachtner, and ultimately Rabbi Marshak—are each of them older, wiser, and more useless than the last. In short: it’s a modern Job story, with doctors and lawyers rather than prophets bearing the bad news. Gopnick is pursued by a student (and a student’s father) to take a bribe, which he at first refuses, keeping his honor but losing much else, and then, finally, accepts. And immediately following: a call from his internist, who wants to discuss, in person, the results of an X-ray. Just when things couldn’t get worse, a tornado approaches. The film ends.

From the moment we meet him, Larry Gopnik tries assiduously, dutifully, charmlessly to be a good man. His goodness does not seem to divert in any way the stream of catastrophe. At the end of the film, when in a moment of weakness he receives the envelope full of cash as *quid pro quo* for a passing grade, he is no more or less doomed than he’d been throughout. Is this the destiny of sun-never-sets, born in Lodz, now finding good home in Minnesota? Or is this a less specific, more pervasive curse: the curse of being human?

Jews in movies are funny. Larry Gopnik is not funny (although the film in which he resides most certainly is). Jews in movies aren’t really Jewish. Larry Gopnik is Jewish in every aspect. Jews in movies—again, with the exception of biblical epics—don’t typically concern themselves with questions of high moral seriousness. Larry Gopnik thinks of little else. Jews in movies are always searching for success (c.f., the character “Mark Zuckerberg” in *The Social Network* [2010]); Larry and Arthur seem to search only for the path of righteousness. Jews in movies can be side characters in the drama of someone else’s social mobility (Bernstein in *Kane*; Jerry Heller in *Straight Outta Compton* [2015]), but are rarely allowed, as here, their full subjectivity, surrounded by a world of their own. Suburbia, whether old-money East (*The Swimmer* [1968]), or new-money West (*Over the Edge* [1979]; *Edward Scissorhands* [1990]), are in movies populated by WASPs—but the Coens’ suburbia hardly has a one, save for the shed-building neighbor. (Even the home-wrecker Sy Ableman and the seductress Vivienne Samsky, contrary to movie stereotype, are bagel eaters.) But because this was, as Todd McCarthy uncharitably noted in *Variety*, “the
kind of picture you get to make after you win an Oscar,” the Coens were able to
tell the story of people not unlike themselves and those they grew up with. (The
film’s protagonist, like the Coens’ parents, is an academic.) Working within a
contained, constrained budget, they could exercise their sense of existential di-
saster to the fullest. Yet while the settings and characters are Midwestern, the
sensibility is pure Eastern European: the knowledge that at any moment, for
no reason at all, the pogrom might descend. As his personal world falls apart,
Larry Gopnik wonders, why me? The answer he receives is straight outta shtetl:
Why not you?

The Jews in American cinema bow more to Mammon than to God: if
cinematic Jewish protagonists yearn for anything, it’s assimilation, success,
or the canny conflation of both. When Charley Davis (John Garfield), in the
Polonsky/Rossen Body and Soul (1947) is told by his mother that it would be
better to shoot himself than to fight for money, he replies, “You need money
to buy a gun!” Moe Green (Alex Rocco, for once an Italian playing a Jew) in
The Godfather (1972) is depicted as a savvy businessman who built a city in
the desert; Hyman Roth (Lee Strasberg) in The Godfather: Part II (1974) is
the incarnation of capitalism itself. Even in the Sholom Alachem adaptation
Fiddler on the Roof (1971), Topol/Tevye’s most memorable song is “If I Were a
Rich Man.” But in A Serious Man the striving isn’t for upward mobility, unless
the “upward” in that phrase might connote heaven. And though the concerns
are typical mid-century suburban concerns—adultery, poverty, dentistry—
they’re presented here as text to a far more intrusive subtext, one defined by
Eastern European yeshiva bocher8 conundrums. The ultimate rabbi, Marshak
(played by the noted Beckett scholar/interpreter Alan Mandell), seems at first
to dispense neither wisdom nor advice to Gopnik’s son. Instead he quotes (or
Talmudically misquotes) popular song: “When the truth is found. To be lies.
And all the hope. Within you dies. Then what?” And, after several long mo-
Summing it up: “These are the membas of the Airplane.” He nods a couple of

His ultimate admonition goes all the way back to early cinematic his-
tory, to what is arguably the first feature-length talkie, The Jazz Singer (1927),
in which Warner Oland’s Cantor Rabinowitz’s son Jackie, instead of going into
the family business, wants to sing jazz. Jackie Rabinowitz—later Jack Robin (Al
Jolson)—has to decide between a Broadway opening night performance, and
returning to join his dying father, singing Kol Nidre at the Yom Kippur ser-
vice. Of course Jack becomes Jackie once more, forsaking for the moment the
lights of Broadway for the candles of his people. He has been, as Rabbi Marshak would put it, “a good boy.”

But what the Coens are doing with their faith here is far more subversive—and I would argue, far more truthful. Good boys grow up to be good men, and good men suffer and die as all men do, and all good women, too. The redemptions of the new world can’t hold a candle to the curse of the old. Bad things happen, worse things happen, and then there’s a tornado. The setting may be Minneapolis, the music may be played by electric guitars, but in the Coens’ shtetl-cursed Saint Louis Park, righteousness is no guarantee of anything, and even the best among us will find ourselves visited by every misery—and worse, will never know why. It’s a Judaism older, less kind, than usually purveyed by American cinema, and for that reason alone, far more compelling.
Notes

1. On the smaller screen there’s Jerry Seinfeld in *Seinfeld* (1989–98), a show famously about Nothing; and *Seinfeld* co-creator Larry David in the crypto-autobiographical *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2001–11).

2. Members of the so-called “Jew Tang Clan” of Apatovian schlubbs would include Jonah Hill, Seth Rogen, Jason Segel, Jason Schwartzman, Michael Cera, and Paul Rudd.

3. The distinction between *schlemiel* and *schlimazel* has been defined this way: the former is the clumsy waiter who spills soup, the latter the hapless customer upon whom the soup is spilled. See Thomas Pynchon’s Benny Profane in *V.* (1963): “ ‘Ah, *schlemiel,*’ he whispered into the phosphorescence. Accident prone, *schlimazel.* The gun would blow up in his hands.”

4. Joel Coen, in a remark of no probative value whatsoever, says “It doesn’t have any relationship to what follows, but it helped us get started thinking about the movie” (“*A Serious Man* Production Notes,” www.focusfeatures.com/article/a_serious_man_production_notes?film=a_serious_man).

5. This is perhaps the only other American feature film to use tenure as a plot point, with the possible exception of the 1988 remake of *D.O.A.*

6. Arthur loses money gambling, scribbles gnomically in a notebook—could he perhaps, for all of his pain, be one of the *Lamed Vav Tzadikim,* One of the thirty-six righteous men who cause the Lord to utter, “I will spare all the place for their sakes”?

7. As Ethan Coen noted, ”When you’re making a movie about a Jewish Midwestern community in 1967 and Fred Melamed is the sex guy, they don’t give you a lot of money” (“*A Serious Man* Production Notes”).

8. Boy Torah scholar.
Works Cited


*Citizen Kane.* Directed by Orson Welles, written by Herman J. Mankiewicz & Orson Welles, performances by Orson Welles, Joseph Cotton, and Dorothy Comingore. RKO Radio Pictures and Mercury Productions, 1941.

*Curb Your Enthusiasm.* Created by Larry David. HBO, 2000–11.


*Edward Scissorhands.* Directed by Tim Burton, screenplay by Caroline Thompson, story by Tim Burton & Caroline Thompson, performances by Johnny Depp, Winona Ryder, and Dianne Wiest. 20th Century Fox Film, 1990.

*Fiddler on the Roof.* Directed by Norman Jewison, screenplay by Joseph Stein, from the play by Joseph Stein, adapted from stories by Sholem Aleichem by special arrangement with Arnold Perl, performances by Topol, Norma Crane, and Leonard Frey. Mirisch Production Company and Cartier Productions, 1971.


*Straight Outta Compton*. Directed by F. Gary Gray, screenplay by Jonathan Herman and Andrea Berloff, story by S. Leigh Savidge & Alan Wenkus and Andrea Berloff,


To Be or Not to Be. Directed by Ernst Lubitsch, screenplay by Edwin Justus Mayer, original story by Ernst Lubitsch and Melchior Lengyel, performances by Carole Lombard, Jack Benny, and Robert Stack. Romaine Film, 1942.