

Honor Thy Father

An Essay on the Film, "Footnote" by Israeli filmmaker, Joseph Cedar

by Geoffrey Clarfield (March 2015)

"Footnote," by film director Joseph Cedar is an Israeli film released in 2011. It is customary to write reviews of a film shortly thereafter and so I apologize to readers for this late review. However, recognizing that the Internet knows no time (as Freud once said about the unconscious) I feel compelled to write about the film once again, in the hope that those who watch Israeli films may better understand it.

(You may access the trailer at this link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1445520/>)

I have read many of the film reviews and of course they focus on the nature of academia and on father/son rivalry in Israel. But they fail to grasp the deeper, theological meaning of the film. And so in order to bring an essentially Talmudic insight about a film about the Talmud to the viewer's attention, I will summarize the film. The film has been out for some time, so I hope I am not spoiling the plot.

The first part of the film shows how a young, happily married Israeli scholar of the Talmud is inducted into the Israel Academy of Sciences, one of the highest academic accolades one can receive in the land. Although the young professor Shkolnick, who is receiving the award, publicly thanks his father, the senior professor Shkolnick, for serving as his role model and inspiration, his father is sick with remorse, envy, anger and frustration during and after the ceremony, for he has been bypassed by the academy and he now sees his son taking the honor that he so wanted for himself.

Eventually, we find out why this is the case. Shkolnick senior spent his life examining surviving manuscripts of the Jerusalem Talmud, in the belief that various scribal and copy editing mistakes suggested that the original medieval "mother text" was different from the one we have today. Unfortunately, his academic rival in Israel managed to discover the actual original manuscript in Italy, and published without acknowledging Shkolnick's marvelous detective work. As a result, Shkolnick senior was preempted, outflanked and relegated to the margins of scholarship in the Israeli academic world, leaving him bitter and emotionally scarred.

Then, one day, the elder Shkolnick is vindicated. He is contacted and told that he is a

recipient of the Israel Prize, the highest non-military honor that the State of Israel gives to its citizens for their various contributions to society. It is the Israeli equivalent of the Nobel Prize. Finally, his day has come. But, he has been down so long that it takes some time for him to adjust to his new circumstances and, he is not used to being on the receiving end of positive acclaim.

Soon after, his son is called to a secret meeting of the Israel Prize Committee. He is told that there was a clerical error and the prize was actually awarded to him. The son is beyond himself with anger and tells the committee that if they tell this to his father now, it will kill him.

For Israelis and Orthodox Jews who are watching this film, they know, instantaneously that this is an inversion of the story of the Sacrifice of Isaac. Instead of a father being told to kill his son, a son is told to kill his father. The younger Shkolnik cannot do it. Instead, he cuts a deal with the committee that he will never get or accept the Israel prize during his lifetime. To add to the bitterness, the committee tasks him to write the letter that gives his father the prize. He does so.

Meanwhile, the press is interviewing his father and Shkolnick senior publicly vilifies the quality of scholarship of his son, so that all the citizens of the country can hear about it. This ultimate paternal putdown makes the younger Shkolnick doubly depressed. As the film progresses and the time of the ceremony to bestow the award approaches, the elder Shkolnik, using a lifetime of detective like scholarly skill, finally figures out that his son wrote the letter. His own thoroughness as a scholar alerts him to the fact that the phrases and sentences used by his son were the same as those in the letter.

We the audience now realize that he now suspects that it was his son who was the one who should have gotten the prize. But, he goes through with the ceremony nonetheless and the viewer is left with the impression that he will receive the prize, but that it is indeed bitter fruit.

I have not read all the reviews of the film but the ones that I have read, including the review in the New York Times, did not seem to grasp the theological core of the film. Neither did the Wall Street Journal whose reviewer called the film, "a wise and playful comedy." That is what it is not. It is about one of the Ten Commandments. I quote it in full.

"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the lord your God is giving you."

The land referred to is the land of Israel. Israelis and Hebrew speaking readers will know that the people in the film have all been to the army. All of them have fought in wars that were designed by Israel's enemies to destroy and massacre its citizens as is now happening to the non-Muslim minorities of Iraq such as the monotheist Yazidi and their Christian neighbours. (Iraq was the place where the Babylonian Talmud was compiled before the rise of Islam).

Academics in Israel are aware that European and American academics are ganging up against them with their anti Semitic academic boycotts, their sanctions and 1930s like threats to the Jewish people. Bear in mind that the object of the father's research, The Jerusalem Talmud, the one written in the land of Israel, would hardly be considered the topic for a Nobel Prize for literature, nor would it interest post modern North American scholars who are so enamored of cultural Marxism and grievance group studies. And let us remember that during the European Middle Ages, it was common practice to burn the Talmud in state and church sanctioned bonfires.

No, the Talmud is still the living the possession of the Jewish people. They take it seriously. It s a record of the oral tradition that Orthodox Jews believe was given to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai itself, given by God to Moses and the elders of Israel and, it is worthy of endless study; lifetimes of study. The only place in the world where one could win a prize for its study is in the present day State of Israel. And Israel is the only place in the world where Joseph Cedar could direct such a gripping film, wrought with such subtlety and emotion.

And so the film is really about a commandment that cannot be violated. The son cannot kill the father. The son can only honor the father so that his days in the land, the land of Israel, shall be long. The younger Shkolnick makes the ultimate sacrifice, his own good name (by the way, the Talmud has much to say about this conundrum) in order to respect his own father and lengthen his life, the central value of Judaism.

The Israel prize can neither be given by nor taken away to a foreign country. It is eternally linked to the land of the Bible and the rebirth of the Jewish people, the authors of the Jerusalem Talmud, a city that is now the capital of an independent state of Israel. The son cannot transfer his own honor to Harvard and the father cannot take his glory to France, where he could so easily be killed in an orgy of anti Jewish street violence. This film a Jewish tale that can only happen in the land of Israel and in especially the City of Jerusalem, so near to where the Jerusalem Talmud was composed.

The son has, as they say, in the non-canonical book called Pirkei Avot, “The Wisdom of the Fathers.” Orthodox Jews who watch the film know this. Most Israelis also know this. Film reviewers in the West clearly do not know this. Joseph Cedar, the director of the film certainly knows this. Now you, dear reader, know this too.

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