Sounds of Job in the American Midwest: A Jewish *Serious Man* Meeting a Christian *Tree of Life*

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The Book of Job contains little melody or song. Any mentions of musical instruments in it appear in a negative context.[[1]](#footnote-1) Only toward the end of the book, as the Lord begins to deliver his answer“from the whirlwind”, do we hear the evoked “cheering” of the “sons of God” against the “singing” of the “morning stars” (Job 38:7).[[2]](#footnote-2) What are these sounds? What are their meaning and function in this prelude to the divine answer—itself replete with the sounds made by the forces of nature and the animals of the wilderness ? The present article will not attempt to supply answers to these questions. It will also skip over Job’s three wondrous daughters who, in their metamorphoses in Job’s Testament (a pseude-epigraphic text from around the first century CE), become divine musicians. Yet the thread linking the themes of disasters piled up on a single man and the questions of faith they evoke, on the one hand, and their expression via the musical arts, on the other hand, does not end in antiquity. It winds itself through the reincarnations of Job in the Jewish and Christian traditions that have arisen through the millenia and continue to this very day.[[3]](#footnote-3)

At the heart of these traditions lies a controversy over Job, the “man of sorrows,” and his place in the “great chain of being.” Do Job’s plaints and stipulations deserve a place of honor in the theological space, or should they be kept outside its boundaries? The editors of the Hebrew Bible chose to include his strange book in their collection as part of *sifrei emet,[[4]](#footnote-4)* but the sages of the Talmud and the Midrash found it a hurdle (Hasan-Rokem 2005; Larrimore 2013; Mack 2004; Orbach 1978, 355–365).[[5]](#footnote-5), Their general attitude was to keep Job the man— who “was either real or only a parable”—separate from the nation of Israel. But the fate of Job became a promise. Anguish now, in return for suffering silently or even not so silently, would be recompensed in the future. Conversely, the early Christians—from the Epistle of James in the New Testament to Gregorius Magnus’s *Moralia in Job*—adopted Job as one of God’s chosen and even designated him as an harbinger of the Messiah, if not his outright precursor. The human “man of sorrows” became the promise of the suffering God in human form whose torments atone for the sins of mankind. This view of Job continued to dominate Christian thought and imagination throughout the second millennium CE.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This controversy, presented here in a rather schematic fashion, had some musical resonance. According to Christian thinkers, purifying torments make “the rough places smooth,” turning dissonance into consonance. The sons of God respond in harmony to the refrain of the morning stars. Jews, on the other hand, as evidenced by their long history, appear to be more willing to live with noise, with the suspended dissonance of exile, and with personal suffering. They can bear cacophonous heaven, delaying the resolution until the end of days, eventually even giving it up altogether.[[7]](#footnote-7) For despite being pushed aside or buried under flimsy justifications, Job resurfaced the moment these justifications burst under the pressure of reality. This they did—with great clamor—in the course of the disastrous twentieth century. The preliminary echoes of this great burst were heard the moment Nitzsche’s madman announced that “God is dead.”Both Jews and Christians were attending him (HaCohen-Pinczower 2019). Some even admitted their guilt along with the madman in the market square: You and I, Jew and Christian alike, have killed him.

From that point on, the Christian and Jewish viewpoints diverged, only to converge and divide again for over a century. Some writers, composers, and poets take on the burden of noise or the onus of silence—the double silence of Job—while others continue their search for saving and savoring sounds..

In this article, I examine two American films positioned on opposite sides of the divide: the Coen brothers’ 2009 black-comedy *A Serious Man* and Terrence Malick’s 2011 drama *The Tree of Life*. Both films are the works of widely renowned and esteemed directors who could not be more different. Surprisingly, however, in these two films, which were released within a relatively short span of each other, the Jewish and Christian auteurs delve into an autobiographical genealogy of the present wherein the figure of Job and his tones and intonations play a significant role. They transport their protagonists to the 1950s and 1960s, to the pastures of their youth in the central United States – the former to northern Minnesota, the latter to the south in Texas – and to the facsimiles of their nuclear families.[[8]](#footnote-8) In these parts of the world, disasters present themselves on the human scale. The characters must find a way to be included in the present of this past—the reality of life as it was back then—but also in its future, that is, the current present at the outset of the third millennium.

The first “Jewish” film is anchored within a modern Jewish community whose members live close to the neighboring “gentiles,” crossing paths with them but never really intermingling. It is ostensibly a film for “insiders”, with no hint of apologizing or attempting to mediate the Jewish terminology or zeitgeist to anyone outside of the covenant. The second “Christian” film takes place in a Jew-less space, and visible only on the margins are other vulnerable minorities—prisoners, African-Americans invalids. The work, like its maker, takes for granted the potential viewers’ ability to identify its main religious and cultural allusions and contexts. The Jew-Gentile dichotomy in the Coen brothers’ film, on the one hand, and the Christian sterility in Malick’s film, on the other, are woven into the cinematic texture of both on various levels. And yet, they remain very much American films—Jewish-American and Christian-American, respectively. Both carry hidden historical and cultural baggage that motivates their protagonists in ways that largely escape them and remain somewhat obscured even from their creators.

The article thus proposes a look at the long tradition of Job through the camera lens while listening to its accompanying soundtrack. This doubly double close-up—through time and through different media—has some advantages: it allows us to examine the familiar present, with its current sensibilities, through the diverse legacies of Job. The surprising parallelism between the two films shows that their preoccupation with the great question of Job, the “man of sorrows,” is no mere coincidence. The various ideological and sonorous answers—or lack thereof—to Job’s classic question, as I shall show, rely on Jewish attitudes and traditions in one case and on Christian perceptions and sensitivities in the other.[[9]](#footnote-9)

# Once Upon a Time in the Midwest

Joel and Ethan Coen’s film is set in a very specific past: May through June 1967.[[10]](#footnote-10) The timeline of the film is dictated by the preparations of the protagonist’s son, Danny, for his bar mitzva, which takes place toward the film’s end. This period overlaps with the bar mitzvah celebration of Joel Coen (who is three years older than his brother Ethan) which happened to coincide with a fateful, albeit unmentioned in the film, occurrence in the Middle East: the Six-Day War. The film’s central plot stays bound to that era and does not encroach on future times. However, its opening segment does venture back into the past, at least ostensibly, to some time ago on the old continent. It presents a somewhat grotesque horror show set in an Eastern European shtetl or a Jewish home at a crossroads in Russia or Poland. Or is it a scene borrowed from Yiddish theatre, from a play possibly put on later, in the New World? And accordingly, not a word of it is in English. Upon first glance, this opening segment has nothing to do with what comes later, as the film’s auteurs have claimed.[[11]](#footnote-11) Of course, we shall choose not to take their word for it.

In contrast, the plot of Malick’s film unfolds over twenty years or more, moving from the early 1950s to the late 1960s, with large narrative gaps. The bulk of it, however, takes place around 1956. The film presents its story as a kind of flashback from the parallel fictional present of the period when the film was being shot (around the turn of the third millennium) and from the point of view and voice of the central character, the young Jack (Hunter McCerson)—now older even than his parents were back then. Jack’s parents are in their thirties-forties during the main part of the plot, while his narrating self (Sean Penn) is in the latter stages of middle age.[[12]](#footnote-12) This contrast is highlighted at certain points in the film. Jack’s surroundings are completely different from those of his parents: a postmodern city of glass and metal towers, the high-tech spaces of an elegant architectural firm (of which Jack is the manager or owner) designed in the spirit of the times. The flashback expands and includes events and perspectives that young Jack could not have witnessed. At times it seems that the scenes featuring the adult Jack are positioned as a glimpse of the future from the vantage of the past, a flashforward to the present with full experiential force.

Both youths’ families—each “unhappy in its own way”—are marked by a disconnect between parents and children. In Danny’s Jewish family, the divide between him and his parents—Larry and Judith Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg and Sari Lennick) and his sister Sarah (Jessica McManus) —is portrayed as more severe and wide-reaching than in the *The Tree of Life*’s O’Brien family of Irish descent. However, the points of view on these divides in the two movies are different. *A Serious Man* centers around Larry, a middling professor of physics at a local university. The protagonist of and the focal point throughout much of the *Tree of Life* is young Jack, a teen who wins our sympathy with his charm and candor. He is also the Job character, as hinted by his name—Jack O’Brien (JOB), even though there are several other characters who share Joban traits. The son is a secondary character in *A Serious Man*, just as the father and mother are in *The Tree of Life*.

The relationship between the two brothers is central to the Christian film. “*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*”, the title of the renowned 2000 film by the Coen brothers, could have easily been a phrase whispered by the adult Jack as part of his lamentations over his dead brother R. L. and his search to reconcile with the past.[[13]](#footnote-13) The announcement of R. L.’s death, which takes place roughly a decade after the main action of the plot, is made to the mother relatively early in the film, as a momentary leap forward in time flashing before adult Jack’s eyes. The mental void produced by the announcement is embodied in the perfect fourth intervals that open Mahler’s First Symphony, accompanied by empty octaves that are left hanging for long durations.[[14]](#footnote-14) The grandmother comforts the grief-stricken mother by repeating the familiar formula from Job: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. That’s how it goes.” (The soundtrack of the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Aims for a different sort of consolation. It features the song “I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow,”[[15]](#footnote-15) whose protagonist is a Joban character from Kentucky (substituted by Virginia, Colorado, or California in various versions; Garst 2002). Forsaken, abandoned, and left to wander, he will meet his friends on “God’s golden shore.” The man of constant sorrow does not raise his voice in plaint over his bitter fate. What he does do in the course of the song’s stanzas, with their country bluegrass musical accompaniment, we will discuss further on.)[[16]](#footnote-16)

Thus we see a fundamental difference between the filmmakers with regard to their musical preferences: the Jewish auteurs, both children of the fifties and keen comedians, are deeply rooted in the American folk music tradition (both white and Afro-American). Malick, on the other hand, whom we might consider more fundamentally American, a decade older than his two Jewish peers, opts for a decidedly classical musical palette, most of it European, from the great masters—Bach, Mozart, Brahms—through Berlioz, Smetana, and Mahler, and on to twenty-first-century composers, such as Preisner, Townsend, and others. As a director-philosopher who tends toward the monumental and deals with “existential” questions head-on,[[17]](#footnote-17) Malick divides his composers, whether wittingly or unwittingly, into Catholics and Protestants in an almost dichotomous manner, a division that creates a clear structure of meaning. As we shall see, he favors the Catholics for the richness of their sound and the loftiness of their expression. He identifies Protestants with severity and discipline, perhaps even chastity and barrenness.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The analysis presented here assumes that the sound performances in both films are charged with meanings that have been absorbed by the Western musical language over generations and through its many incarnations and, as such, are accessible (at least on an intuitive level) to most viewers of the films in question.[[19]](#footnote-19) In both films, the music is not just a non-diegetic obscure semiotic mediator for the characters. They consume and create music and sounds, claim ownership of them, identity with them, activate others, or are activated through. The two kinds of sonoritiess, diegetic and non-diegetic, are interwoven into the dialogues, actions, and expressions of the films’ dramatis personae and play varying roles in their rich characterization. We must, therefore, read these sound performances while paying attention to the entire sonic array, harnessing them toward an understanding of the cinematic text as a whole. I would like to argue that the sound element in these films is essential to understanding these movies in general and establishing their connection to Job in particular.

The efforts of these creators to control the elements of their works as much as possible, as part of the “auteur” tradition in which they developed, does not mean that they were necessarily the ones who initiated and directed every bit of dialogue and sound; they certainly did not feel obliged to give explicit account, neither to themselves nor to others, of every choice made either by them or by any member of their creative teams.[[20]](#footnote-20) It is enough to ascertain that they thought the musical or sonic choices suitable to the overall work they produced. The ascription of meaning to the sounds was left to us, their audience and students of their works, and these works are to us as an open book begging inquiry and investigation.

# Opening Verses

It is safe to say that Malick was probably unaware of the Coen brothers’ work and vice versa. True to his modus operandi, Malick had worked on the film for years, and his creative process seems to have preceded that of his colleagues, even though its product was released later (the initial scripts of the two films had been completed in the same month, June 2007, although significant changes were made subsequently).[[21]](#footnote-21) Yet, the two films make the same opening move, presenting a verse from ancient texts, written in white on a black background, as if to inform us of the creators’ sources of inspiration and the idea that guides their work.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The quote that opens *The Tree of Life* is taken from the first verses of the Lord’s reply to Job out of the storm:

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? (Job 38:4)  
When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:7)

Malick’s choice to use the New King James Bible version of the text makes it more accessible to a modern audience but also creates an anaphoric refrain—“where were you” / “where are you.” This refrain is repeated throughout the film in the whispers of adult Jack, teenage Jack, and his mother (Mrs. O’Brien). Each of them calls out to the brother, the son, the mother, God. They call out from the darkness, from the flame of the candle of remembrance burning in its depths, from the desert, from the “voices of many waters” (see Figure 1).[[23]](#footnote-23) The older brother, decades after the disaster, seeks to remember in the face of oblivion, to relive that past as the present, the moment of catastrophe, his parents’ grief, and to reconcile, to atone.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Images are skimmed through, mostly without sufficient information given about their cause and meaning.[[25]](#footnote-25) Malick tries to be true to the illusory nature of childhood memory, of memory in general —etched, then repressed, but seeking to resurface. This abundance of fragmented images that recur in variations, merging with each other, and combining times and landscapes in a multi-layered whirlwind, are pieced together by the music into sheets of consciousness whose logic is affective rather than narrative. In this respect, the role of the music in the overall composition of the film is critical.[[26]](#footnote-26) As for the motto, an interpretation of its two parts will appear later in the film in detail, and I will address it. As for the quotation at the beginning, both of its parts are given extensive interpretation later on in the film, which I shall address below.

**Figure 1.** Adult Jack lights a memorial candle for his late brother. Childhood memories rise up from the flame and emblaze his conflicted soul.

The Coen brothers chose to extract their opening quotation from an explicitly Jewish canon, those parts of it which are not usually exposed to Christian eyes. It reads:

Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you.

The quotation is attributed in writing to Rashi, and it is the directors’ translation of Rashi’s commentary on Deuteronomy 18:13: “Be wholehearted with the Lord, your God.” Rashi’s text reads: “Conduct yourself with Him with simplicity and depend on Him, and do not inquire of the future; rather, *receive with simplicity everything that happens to you,* and then, you will be with Him and part of Him” (my emphasis). This verse in Deuteronomy concluded the parable that prohibits witchcraft and fortune-telling. Do not try to guess your fate, do not seek to control it by these improper means, the scripture instructs. Not only that, adds Rashi—the Jewish sage of Troyes who lived in the shadow of the Crusades—accept your destiny (unlike Job) out of inner wholeness and with simplicity. These are the very virtue Job had been blessed with, as stated in the opening verse of his book, which describes him as a “whole (in heart) and straight (of path), and fearing of Elohim and turning from evil” (Job 1:1).[[27]](#footnote-27) The same word is repeated again in God’s conversation with Satan when the latter attacks Job’s character. We shall investigate the relevance of the verse to the theological quandary at the center of the Coen brothers’ film, whose protagonist is not exactly a classic Job figure. The theme of wholeheartedness or simplicity, as opposed to “bad faith,” is touched upon in both of the works under discussion here.

From this point onward,the authors’ creative directions diverge radically. While Malick chooses the path of religious drama, the Coen brothers invite us to enjoy a black comedy. Both, however, imbue their sequences with allegoric dimensions that simultaneously exceed the boundaries of their set time and place and are rooted in them.[[28]](#footnote-28)

# “I Have Heard of You by The Hearing of the Ear” (But “You Hid Your Face from Me”)

Before addressing the two works separately, it is worth delving briefly into the two aspects that anchor the act of comparison before us. The first aspect is atmospheric: the same latent, hidden dimension that is present-yet-absent in the two films. The second aspect is the sonic dimension that accompanies and establishes the first. Hans Gumbrecht (2014, 43–44) identifies this latent-absent-present dimension as an element that most characterizes Western culture in the decades after World War II, at least until the late 1960s. There was an elephant in the room, that no one dared to mention, and it was a heavy, difficult, distressful elephant at that. On the outside, life was good. The damages of the war had been repaired; the economy was booming. West Germany was experiencing an “economic miracle.” Yet it was the terror, associate with the Cold War, that dictated reality, feeding on the nuclear powder keg just underneath everyone’s rears. It was intensified by the post-traumatic situation of young people, war survivors in diverse countries, the survivers of murderous ideologies that had built, managed, and controlled the world at this time.

Another symptom of latency is the internal sentiment of bad faith, a notion developed in Sartre’s renowned essay bearing this title, writtin still within WWII. Bad faith is the opposite of the aforementioned virtue of simplicity (or wholesomeness): it is the hallmark of those who deny their own wrongdoings to themselves while rolling their eyes (Gumbrecht 2014, 71–111).[[29]](#footnote-29) Such people include Nazi war criminals pleading they were only following orders, collaborators, and war pimps in Germany and other countries. Yet they also involve criminals of much lesser magnitude—your everyday perpetrators of “misdemeanors.”[[30]](#footnote-30) These symptoms permeate literature and the arts in general as a state of mind, as a leitmotif. Let me add that the latent condition has its own particular characteristics in the Jewish context in the United States of America. It included the memory of the Holocaust, which in many communities had gone practically unremarked. It gave way to survivors’ guilt, which was still unspoken during those years, and to the partially denied heritage, a generation or two away, of hard-working Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Within this world, there was the American suburb where families, Christian as well as Jewish, lived in generally spacious houses surrounded by manicured, unfenced lawns. They drove big cars, fostered feminine sweetness and docility, and raised children who did not necessarily obey the norms imposed upon them. Those children, born after the war, may have been more sensitive to that ever-present latency than the adults and reacted to it in their own way.

The soundscapes in both films sometimes interpret and sometimes manifest the experience of that latency. They emerge and evolve, as mentioned, in diegetic and non-diegetic ways. Diegetic sounds are heard in the film’s fictional space as actual playing and singing, but no less (and perhaps more so, especially in the “Jewish” film) through contemporary technology—long-playing records and transistors.

*A Serious Man* announces itself as a sound-centric movie from the start: its main part (following the ostensibly disconnected overture) opens with a close-up of ears—Larry’s ear being examined by the lensed eye of the doctor, and his son Danny’s ear plugged up with an earphone attached to his stereo transistor. The device, as well as the weed he smokes, allows him to escape the tedious present, such as a Hebrew school language class and fills his ears with the latest hits by the Jefferson Airplane and others (he is also, as it turns out, an avid consumer of LPs). The third ear, revealed to our eyes in somewhat frightening anatomical detail, is that of the school principal—an old, hairy, wrinkled ear—in his attempt to listen to the music that holds so much of this child’s attention. Three generations of ears, hearing different things and united by sound in one single moment towards the film’s finale, leave a big question mark hanging over all of them.

**Figure 2.** A sound-centric movie: three generations of ears opening the main part of *A Serious Man*

Overall, *A Serious Man* is faithful to the ethnographic sound aesthetic (songs and music almost exclusively heard or sung by the characters and their community at that historic moment), whereas most of the music heard in *The Tree of Life*, which is much more varied than that of *A Serious Man*, is unfamiliar to its protagonists. Although not all the sounds that fill this fictional world are necessarily identified with the “cheering” of the “sons of God” mentioned at the beginning, some undoubtedly are; at the very least, they strive toward the “transcendent.”

This is the moment to venture more deeply into the echo chambers of the soundtracks they produce, and first into the depths of the more “earthly” and familiar of the two films—*A Serious Man*.

# *Dybbuks* and Ghost Sounds

Ghosts haunt the Jewish community in the town of St. Louis Park, Minnesota, a haunting that harks back to the distant days of Eastern Europe, which opens and illuminates the film (whatever its directors’ may claim).[[31]](#footnote-31) The “*Dybbuk*,” as the filmmakers call the segment, is not the familiar *dybbuk* of S. Ansky’s famous play of the same name. We are not dealing here with a dead spirit that enters a living person’s body, speaks from within it, and takes over its being. The haunting in question is by a dead man whose spirit reclaims the appearance of its former flesh and thus wanders the world, spreading evil (Chajes 2011).[[32]](#footnote-32) This is what happens to Velvel and Dora, at whose doorstop appears one Rebbi Traitle Groshkover, three years in the realm of the dead (according to Dora), requesting to repay with kindness a kindness that Velvel had previously done unto him. Dora is convinced that she is faced with a ghost. The proof: Groshkover, as is the way of *dybbuks*—a “demon” as she calls him—will not eat. The icepick she stabs into his chest does not appear to injure him, that is until the moment blood starts to appear seeping from the wound. Having so maltreated, Groshkover departs out into the snow and cold, while the couple worry that, whether *dybbuk* or not, there will be a corpse found in the morning, and the blame will be laid on them. Ghosts, fear and terror, deadly suspicion, and a lack of mutual responsibility. A play that seems to have come to its end. To be filed away and forgotten.

There is certainly no trace of it in 1960s America, in a Jewish community whose members are successful representatives of the liberal professions: academics, lawyers, doctors, and dentists. There is no place there for the Yiddish tongue, along with its superstitions, ghosts, and ghouls. Yet these new Jews wear their Judaism on their sleeves—in their community, in the few words of Hebrew they do know. Despite residing in a free and liberal land, the Jew-Gentile dichotomy is still essential to their conduct in the neighborhood, at the university, in their worship, and in how they compartmentalize the world (Ophir and Rosen-Zvi 2018). Despite the filmmakers’ denials, we are not surprised to hear the song “Dem milners trern” (“The Miller’s Tears”) playing on the family record player and at key moments of the film (25’22’’). The Yiddish language song was written and composed by the Odessa-born Mark Warschawski (1848–1907) and is performed here by Sidor Belarsky, a Ukrainian-born Jewish-American.[[33]](#footnote-33) Larry and his “loser” brother Arthur (Richard Kind) look slumped and defeated as they listen to the song, which serves as a symbol of their condition. Later, the song will resonate in the imagined space of their consciousness, and it is also the music that seals the film. Its lyrics are:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **מקור (יידיש)** |  |
| אױ װיפֿל יאָרן זענען פֿאַרפֿאָרן זײַט איך בין אַ מילנער אָט אָ דאָ די רעדער דרײען זיך, די יאָרן גײען זיך, איך בין שױן אַלט און גרײַז און גראָ. ס'איז טעג פֿאַראַנען, כ'װיל מיך דערמאָנען, צי כ'האָב געהאַט אַ שטיקל גליק. די רעדער דרײען זיך, די יאָרן גײען זיך, קײן ענטפֿער איז ניטאָ צוריק.  כ'האָב געהערט זאָגן, מען װעל מיך פֿאַריאָגן, אַרױס פֿון דאָרף און פֿון דער מיל. די רעדער דרײען זיך, די יאָרן גײען זיך, אױ, אָן אַן עק און אָן אַ ציל.  מיין טרייע מינצע, מיין קינד, מיין שפרינצע, אוי, וויי, אַ יאָמער, אוי, אַ שרעק,  די רעדער דרייען זיך, די יאָרן גייען זיך, מיט זיי זייט איר אויך באַלד אַוועק.  װוּ װעל איך װױנען? װער װעט מיך שױנען? איך בין שױן אַלט, איך בין שױן מיד.  די די רעדער דרײען זיך, די יאָרן גײען זיך און אױך מיט זײ גײט אױס דער ײִד. |  |

Only with the last word of the last line do we learn that the song is about a Jewish miller, rather than just any old miller. (First heard in the movie isr a combination of the first and last strophes.) His whole family has perished in calamity, and he is left alone. The threat of deportation hangs over him and only the old millstone keeps on turning, while he is old, tired, and weary. Another Job for the collection. Unlike the man of constant sorrow from *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*,[[34]](#footnote-34) this Job laments his troubles, for a lonely Jewish miller has no promise of God’s golden shore with which to bolster himself. As the biographies of the song’s performer and Larry and Arthur’s ancestors demonstrate, there was, in fact, a golden shore beckoning to them on the western side of the Atlantic.

The same is true of Shemaria-Sam in Joseph Roth’s *Job: The Story of a Simple Man* who is born in the pale of settlement and dies as an American soldier in the Great War (Roth 1985). Yet Warschawski’s song contains no such hope. The author himself never left Europe; he returned to Kyiv and died there. Among his sparse legacy, he has left us this song, whose major key is but apparent gloss over its dour content (Example 1).

Musically, the song is sparse and composed of few elements: a rising melody (marked in blue) that resolves itself in two variants (purple and gray) and a cadence (yellow). The song opens with two identical repetitions of the arching melody in three-four time: these are the first two “grinds” that establish the reality of the song’s lyrics from the outside in (the passage of time, rumors, loneliness in the village, etc.). The passage to the two-four time signature introduces the more significant “grind”—the miller’s ruminations over his hardships. The grinding rhythm of the mill is prominent again in bar six when it underlies the repeating refrain of “di reder dreyen zikh, di yorn geyen zikh” (“the wheels move, where is my life going?”). The grind terminates in the arc-like cadence that accompanies the fourth and final line, with variations in each stanza.

**Example 1.** The Yiddish song “Dem milners trern” (“The Miller’s Tears”)

It is doubtful whether the old miller accepts his fate; at any rate, he consoles himself with his song. The same is true of the man of constant sorrow. What is it about this well-loved song of the Job of Kentucky, its seemingly simple melody, that makes it so resonant (Garst 2002)? Is it the use of mixtures —a kind howl, harmonized mostly in sixths—that rings out in a predominantly major key as an echo of the last line of every verse (a retort given by two friends to the song’s main speaker)? Is this mode of expression, devoid of self-pity, the best strategy for the sufferer to garner sympathy from his environment? If it is, our serious man, Larry, does not seems to adopt it. He seeks an explanation to his afflictions; he laments, perhaps even howls. Admittedly, he, too, is driven out of his home, like the man of sorrows from Kentucky and the old miller, and possibly also from his place of work, but the phenomenology of his catastrophe is fundamentally different.

# Other Bodies of Sound

If we extend the concept of a *dybbuk* to include voices emanating from bodies not their own (a kind of ventricular speech), we can identify a few more voices that operate within the scene of action and influence reality in the film. Danny is learning his Torah portion for the bar mitzva ceremony; the portion assigned to him is “*behar*,” the one before the last in the Book of Leviticus, which carries a social message. He studies alone. Neither his parents nor his teachers are there to guide him. They supervise him from afar, and there is no sign of their actual involvement in the process. Danny does not protest , perhaps because it is a well-established rite of passage, perhaps because his rebellion is taking place elsewhere. He has been given a record of the portion he is to read, and he lifts and replaces the needle on his player over and over again, repeating the strainss he hears, trying to absorb them.[[35]](#footnote-35) He does not seem to engage in this activity with particular reluctance, yet neither does he show enthusiasm. He is musical—he seems to know the melody from his visits to the synagogue—but it is clear that he sings without much understanding of the text or its meaning. On the cover of the record revealed to us is a picture and the name Yossele Rosenblatt, the legendary Jewish singer-cantor-composer. {Rosenblatt is a kind of “Menuchim,” returning to Joseph Roth’s *Job*. Like Rosenblatt, the fictional Menuchim becomes successful and famous all over the United States and beyond in the inter-war years, even though his style is markedly less Jewish.[[36]](#footnote-36) That seems like a rather neat connection, a pair of Jewish musicians, destined to give consulations to the Jobs-from-the-shtetls around them.. Yet, in the present case, there is no existing recording of Rosenblatt reading Torah portions.} A keen-eyed viewer will see that the record is titled “*Yomim Noraim Prayers.*”[[37]](#footnote-37) What is the meaning of this discrepancy? The Coen brothers must have been aware of it, and we shall seek to investigate it further.

The voice of the anonymous reader voice on the record is almost injected into Danny’s consciousness like a drug. At the crucial moment, Danny, despite the fog of weed that surrounds him, will be able to emerge from under its influence and launch himself into the “vocal community” of the town (HaCohen- Pinczower 2016). Larry, as the father of the young man, will be praised. The tradition continues. Whether it is Yossele’s voice or not, it does not matter much. The main thing is that Danny sings his portion correctly, in accordance with the rules of the ceremony, and that names and other cultural codes are preserved. This vocal community, the Coen brothers make sure to show us, is run in part by Jews who were born at the turn of the twentieth century and have not adopted the ubiquitous American accent. Yiddish may be their mother tongue—the older ones among them were born “back there”—but it goes unheard. Yet Yosele Rosenblatt is still a name with a living presence among them. After the boy finishes reciting his Torah portion with the correct melody and the breaking voice of an adolescent boy, the community unites in the standard singing of “Vezot ha-torah asher samMoshe” (“And this is the Torah that Moses gave”) and a cheerful customary rendition of “Adon olam” (“Lord of the world”). The community maintains a tradition; it is not Orthodox, yet nor does it opt for the Christian-tinged extravagance of an organ accompaniment. Danny passes the test; he completes the rite of passage, and as such, he gets to enter the Holy of Holies—to see Rabbi Marshak. But who is Rabbi Marshak, and what is the meaning of this meeting?

The key to understanding the encounter with Rabbi Marshak lies in the third “*dybbuk,*” the one lodged deep in Danny’s ear. Its name is Jefferson Airplane, four of whose songs are played during the film. The band’s main hit back in those days was the ubiquitous “Somebody to Love,” which reaches our ears against a dark screen with the opening of the second, main part of the film (the black image is actually revealed to be the end point of a reverse shot of Larry being examined by the doctor).[[38]](#footnote-38) The source of the music is then revealed as the boy’s rather more engaging alternative to the ridiculous Hebrew lesson conducted by the old Hebrew school teacher, who is completely detached from the lives of the boys and girls in his class. The standard topos of teenage films is presented here with an American Jewish-Zionist twist. The children do not follow the teacher, who writes the inflections of Hebrew verbs, similarly to the Latin lessons we have often seen in classic movies: “a-ni ho-lech ha-baita; at-ta ho-lech ha-baita; at ho-le-chet ha-bai-ta” (I go home; you (m.) go home, you (f.) go home),” etc. The teacher will discover Danny’s hidden device and confiscate it along with the twenty dollars he hid inside for the purpose of purchasing weed. Danny, in turn, will attempt to recover it with his friends by breaking into the principal’s desk. In the absence of this audio source, Danny will look for replacements. One of them will get his father into trouble.

# The Trials of Larry

Yet the wave of *dybbuks* to hit this community does not end there. The most common and least explicit *dybbuk* is the one that activates most of the characters. Judith, Sy, Sarah, the three rabbis, and the head of the physics department are all possessed with ventricular voices of others—the voices of banality and convention. Their gestures, body language, and worn-out expressions (as well as speech and intonation) all seem to come from a cliché warehouse. When applied to new and irrelevant situations, they produce what we call hypocrisy, pretense, and duplicity, or in short—a lack of simplicity and good faith. Almost no one in this world says anything true or honest. Larry fails to quite realize that everyone around him is performing roles in a kind of masquerade; they are empty characters looking for an identity or playing with various identities for their own needs. This is the situation Larry finds himself in and within which he is fully exploited. He is what they would call a “screw-up.” He is a screw-up because he believes everyone around him, like a chump. He is simple in the sense of stupid, like one of the four sons in the Haggadah.[[39]](#footnote-39) But he is also simple in the sense evoked in Deuteronomy, and so he is too innocent to recognize the bad faith around him. As such, Larry does not argue with his wife Judith when she announces she is having an affair with Sy and gradually kicks him out of the house.

Sy plays the character of a “serious man”—at least, that is how he is eulogized at his funeral; it is the brand on which he has built his image. But the real “serious man” in the story is Larry. Larry also does not realize that his oh-so-serious Korean student is playing a part and playing it well. He is calculating, determined and manipulative through and through.

Almost all the trials Larry endures are man-made. They are all human evils, big and small.[[40]](#footnote-40) There are his wife and her hypocritical lover who hound him and steals his property, even his livelihood; there’s the gentile neighbor who encroaches on his property; there’s his brother who burdens him with his exorbitant fines; there’s his son who signs deals with record companies. Perhaps the only heaven-sent disaster is the one left hanging at the end of the film: the threat of illness. But it, too, can be understood as the result of the man-made tribulations that befall Larry. Even the car accident in which Sy meets his death can be interpreted both ways.

Since he does not pick up on the bad faith rampant around him, Larry is convinced that God is tormenting him. He sees himself as Job, but he is not Job. All of his troubles, apart from maybe one, are the product of human evil, and these, have nothing to do with God. This much has been established not only by modern philosophers such as Kant (1996, 30) but also in Genesis, Judges, Samuel and the Book of Kings. God is in the picture at most as someone who did not give Larry enough common sense to understand this social arena, despite his knack for physics and mathematics. Because he does not understand it and no one bothers to open his eyes to what’s going on, he seeks the advice of the rabbis.

In a clear parallel to the three comforters of Job, the community happens to have three rabbis, all of them stereotypes. Like a character in a fairy tale, Larry approaches each one in turn, one after the other, in his search for the answer to his quandary. Each rabbi is bigger than his predecessor, invokes more awe, and gives more cryptic responses (like the three dogs in Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Tinderbox”). “Why is *HaShem* doing this to me?” he asks. He, who teaches his students about Schrödinger’s cat and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle is asking, like a child, for *HaShem’*s protection. There is no “God” or “Lord” or “Blessed be his name” in Larry’s or his community’s vocabulary. There is only *HaShem*, the household God of middle-class Jewish-American suburbanites. And even though, as mentioned, the source of Larry’s troubles is anything but *HaShem*, the Rabbis answer with clichés that only lead him further down the wrong path.

The first, younger Rabbi—Rabbi Scott—is the stereotypical up-and-comer. He tells Larry that it’s all a matter of perspective and if he adopts another way of looking at things, he will see *hashem* everywhere. He points at the parking lot as an example. If only Larry looks at it closely enough, he says with characteristic feigned enthusiasm, he will find *HaShem* there. The second, older rabbi, Rabbi Nachtner, who is the de facto rabbi of the community, with all the typical shticks and tricks that go with this role, offers a more sophisticated solution: we cannot fathom the ways of God; he acts in very mysterious ways—in fact, trivial or random ways—but which still indicate a hidden intention.[[41]](#footnote-41) He denies the *olam haba* (“the next world” or the beyond), as expected, in a speech into which he throws the expression *olam haba* in Hebrew again and again as a kind of magic word. The lack of meaning around which his words revolve creeps into his discourse, and it becomes meaningless as a whole. The third rabbi, the venerable and ancient Rabbi Marshak, is the wizard character. He is not accessible to Larry, but his son is invited to see him, apparently as part of the bar mitzva ceremony, at that formative moment.

# When the Truth is Found to be a Lie

And here we see Danny walking down the long corridor to the old rabbi’s room, which looks more like a seventeenth-century “curiosity cabinet.” He walks holding the trophy, the gift of the community, in his hand. He floats through a fog of weed, accompanied by continuous Baroque “ombra” sounds; he is not sure whether this is reality or a dream. Maybe it really is a dream. What does this baroque character have to say to a child suffering from severe emotional neglect? What he ends up saying, in a half-Shakespearean half-biblical tone and an Eastern European accent, is once again words in a voice not his own—the first lines of “Somebody to Love” by Jefferson Airplane:

When the truth is found

To be lie

And all the joy

Within you dies…”

Then what?

These are lines to which Job could relate, Job who begged his friends to have mercy on him.[[42]](#footnote-42) Intentionally, the rest of the refrain – Don’t you want somebody to love? – is omitted. Not clear is if there is one. And this is deepy connected with the opening sentiment, “when the truth is found to be lie,” descriptive of the state of bad faith as a whole, of all those who take the voices and gestures and movements of others, of false convictions. After all, this was exactly the problem with Job’s friends. The rabbi then recites the band members’ names as if they were a secret, ancient code, as if sharing some deep secret with Danny. As if they were a substitution of love, when he could not get it in his immediate surrounding. The only moral lesson rabbi Marshak gives Danny is the half-blessing, half-instruction: “Be a good boy.” This is the whole Torah in a nutshell (or on one’s foot, as the ancient Hebrew phrase goes). Danny, happy and good of heart, grabs the transistor, and yes, the twenty-dollar bill is still where he left it. Might this be the end of the *dybbuk*?

The end of the film remains open—there is no salvation, but there is a storm, perhaps an apocalyptic one, coming. Larry will probably be granted tenure, but at the same time, he learns, or so it is implied, that he has been diagnosed with a severe illness. His son Danny, on his way out of Hebrew class with his friends and the old Hebrew teacher, encounters a tornado.[[43]](#footnote-43) This is the Coen brothers’ way of cinematically signaling to us, the viewers, that we might be heading to the land of Oz any second now, or perhaps we have been there all along.[[44]](#footnote-44) We recognize the image of the horizon so familiar to us from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), the muslin fabric substituting for the funnel of the tornado, the old teacher’s struggle with the door, so perfectly analogous to Auntie Em and Dorothy’s struggle to get into the storm shelter (Rushdy 2008; see Figure 3).[[45]](#footnote-45) In a moment, Dorothy will give up and go home (“I’m going home…”), a home that is the opposite of shelter, a home that will be blown away by the storm. By the time it will have hit the ground in Munchkin Land, Dorothy won’t be “in Kansas anymore.”

**Figure 3.** The tornado as a portal to the Land of Oz. The closing scene of *A Serious Man* (2009) and the opening scene of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)

Is this also the story of the brothers, who will be lifted up and out of the suburbs of St. Louis Park and flown to the magical land of Hollywood? And what does this have to do with the big questions raised in the film? Perhaps the link lies in the fact that, like Dorothy, they can magically “go home” (as the Hebrew teacher instructs) from their wonderful land of Oz to these imagined childhood realms? This is a partial answer, at best, as it leaves us with the miller’s grindstone still turning, and the poignant question of why Larry failed the trials to which he had been subjected, and most importantly, with the quandary of Job: is it possible to reduce human tribulations to the consequences of the malicious actions of some toward others, to the bad faith they instill, to their superficiality and play-acting, and the rest to fickle fortune or coincidence (Sy’s fatal accident, for example, coinciding with Larry’s harmless one)? And to what extent, if any, are the roots of the present planted in that past?[[46]](#footnote-46)

# *The Tree of Life*—Nature and Grace

Let us now turn to *The Tree of Life*. As its name suggests, the film seeks to create a mythical space while at the same time giving itself the status of a sacred text: a scripture worthy of being read and reread. This is the interpretation given to it by quite a few of its Christian viewers. The cult film sets up an initial dichotomy that accompanies it throughout, that of nature versus grace. And even if this dichotomy is challenged at certain points, it does not fall apart or become confused. It is tempting to think that it presents an equivalent to the dichotomy embodied in the Tree of Knowledge, that of good versus evil.

The dichotomy, which is almost as old as the Christian Church, is first presented by the disembodied voiceover of the mother, still very young, recalling the well-loved lesson of the nuns at the school she attended as a child. They taught us, she says, that there are two ways, “the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you’ll follow. Grace doesn’t try to please itself. It accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. At the same time, it gives and bestows onto others.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Nature, on the other hand, only seeks to please herself. “She makes others behave this way toward it. She treats them with lordship so that everything is done as it pleases. She even finds reasons to be miserable when the whole world around her is shining.” They (the nuns) told her that “he who acts in the way of grace will never come to a bad or bitter end.”

# The Mother’s Grace in Her Melodies

The music that opens the film—the “Funeral Canticle” (1996) by the British composer John Tavener—marks the right, the worthy path.[[48]](#footnote-48) It marks the path of the mother through her girlhood and into her life as the mother of three young boys, a magical life judging by the look on her face, stemming—through the mediation of the continuous musical sequence—directly from the lesson of those nuns. The vocal harmonies of the mixed choir, repeated in hypermetric units with slight variations, and the diatonic chords devoid of tonal tension, produce a kind of refined, maternal, cradle-like, timeless static state.

Commentators tend to identify the two parental characters in the film—the father and the mother— with the principle of nature and grace, respectively, and this seems to have been the intention of the filmmaker as well. What does this mean in relation to the Job theme? Nature here does not refer to the laws of nature alone as formulated in the West since Epicurus and Lucretius, and more definitively, since the scientific revolution. This is a nature that omits, intentionally or unintentionally, the Enlightenment’s conception of nature. This nature is a struggle for existence, the contest for success, the survival of the fittest. Without the principle of kindness, we understand that the world’s creatures are doomed to perpetuate the cycle of endless war. The American concept of success, voiced by the director through Mrs. O’Brien, is tainted by this natural heritage, which is also partially identified with the Protestant tradition despite its claims of championing the “grace” element.

The laws of nature are set by God. “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” God asks Job, and Malick – all of us. Casually, the filmmaker gives an unequivocal answer: I, Terrence Malick, was not there. Yet look now and behold: even though I was not there, science has taught me something about the creation of this world, beyond the story of Genesis. This science, especially Darwin and his successors, has taught me about the foundations of the earth. I was not there, but man has, over many generations, accumulated knowledge of the creation of the universe and our planet, about its foundations and the proliferation of its innumerable creatures. And here I am, Terrence Malick, using technology invented and perfected by my predecessors and with the help of wonderful painters and photographers, giving you the history of that world in what amounts to, in the grand scheme of things, the blink of an eye (i.e., a cinematographic fifteen minutes).[[49]](#footnote-49)

And what a beautiful world it is, almost painfully so. It starts with a tear, the mother’s tear, the “Lacrimosa.” This part of the Catholic requiem appears here embodied in the composition of the Polish composer Zbigniew Preisner.[[50]](#footnote-50) For all its emotion and evocations of previous Lacrimosas (especially Verdi’s), this Lacrimosa has a climactic but narrow emotional range, with almost no dissonance, bordering on kitsch.[[51]](#footnote-51) The Lacrimosa plays during a sequence where the mother, in a reversal of the Job story, asks God: “Where were you?” And the answer? The Christian worldview posits that the world was created full of grace (Caritas) and harmony. Malick is faithful to this tradition and combines the sounds that produce the feeling of sublimity with the audiovisual spectacle of genesis that he places at the foundation of his work. Does he wish to tell us that in creation, as it is revealed to us, nature and grace, science and morality are bound together along with the aesthetic element?

From this audiovisual spectacle of creation, it seems that grace was not the lot of this world until the appearance of humanity. And humanity ponders this measure of grace. Continuing the primordial sequence, the large dinosaur pins a smaller dinosaur to the ground, then changes its mind and releases it. Is this the father dinosaur threatening its young? Or the mother, as implied in the script? The image can be interpreted along both of the film’s suggested pathways. Can a human parent abuse his child in this way? Will the son’s death be the result of beatings received from the father, as hinted at by the father himself? The world is given to human beings to fashion as a world of grace, a message that is not far from the world of classical Judaism. As we shall see, however, the ethical question is not the main one Malick wishes to explore, although it is an important one. The test is here is that of reconciliation after the victim is sacrificed, the test of transcendence and the redemption through sorrow, as will become clear further on.

# The Father’s Lessons in His Music

As opposed to the maternal Catholic Lacrimosa, the father’s music is Protestant, severe, and classical music. It emanates from musical instruments, from various music-playing devices, from himself. Through it, he wants to conquer the boys, to discipline them, to make them observe the law. The law of the father will replace the tenderness of the mother. The modulation from the mother to the father within the “images of childhood” sequence takes place musically in the transition from the scene accompanied by Smetana’s *Má Vlast* (“My Homeland”)[[52]](#footnote-52), which is dominated by the mother, to a series of musical fragments identified with the father. From their mischievous exploits at the end of *Má Vlast*, the children are summoned home. There is a momentary pause in the music, called for by the shift in modes.[[53]](#footnote-53) The record is changed. Our ears pick up Brahms, his rather somber notes from the second movement of the fourth symphony. The predominant hue in the shot is brown. The pretty mother is also tinged with it; she is dressed almost like a nun. The music skips over the dead moments with us straight into a dinner scene. The grace before the meal. Jack didn’t say “sir” when asking to pass the butter. He didn’t do the yard work properly. The mother tries to soften the atmosphere, but then the father hears the musical notes playing in the background of the dinner and of the dinner scene. “What is that?” he asks his sons in a markedly heightened tone of voice. When they don’t know the answer, he reveals the record player and the album sleeve. “Braahhhms,” he roars, and we see it too: Fourth Symphony, conducted by Toscanini (even though, in truth, the performance we hear is conducted by Karajan).[[54]](#footnote-54) Later on, the father tries to sneak kisses into the regime of disciplining his unruly son. The son hardly responds. “Do you love your father?” he asks, a pipe in his right hand, a newspaper in his left. “Yes, sir,” the boy replies weakly. In a contrasting scene, the boys ask their mother: “Who will you love most of all?” “All of you, of course,” the mother answers. We may wonder if that is indeed the case, and the question will return to haunt us later.

The children are confronted with a grim reality. Disabled people, prisoners, the mentally ill. Their mother extends her kindness to them too. The young Jack feels the uncontrollable, brutal elements within him; he asks God for help. He talks to Him. François Couperin’s music, a fitting background for children’s games, seeks to soften his distress. But Jack’s malaise only exacerbates. His conversations with God intensify in his unhappiness. And into this moment erupts the fugue, the most severe musical form of them all.[[55]](#footnote-55) It is none other than Bach, with his most famous Toccata and Fugue, in D minor, BWV 565. Things are starting to become clearer. Unlike the mother, the father awakens them brutally, the sounds of the organ already floating in the air. It is the father himself who is playing, in church no less, on a colossal organ. The father and son are both wearing suits. Jack stands by him, possibly in admiration, possibly to turn the pages when needed. From this point on and for the next ten minutes, all the events before us will be incorporated into these notes. Are the images flashing through Jack’s childhood imagination as he stands by his father, or do they flicker through the memory of the adult Jack who relives them as he hears the music or imagines hearing it? We shall never know. For the spectator, the double perspective is at the heart of the viewing experience.

In a less severe episode woven into the fugue, the father is seen spraying the sons with a hose. He punishes Jack and orders him to close the screen door fifty times without slamming it. He plays “slaps” with them and, while doing so, confesses: “Your mother is naïve. It takes immense willpower to take hold of the world. If you’re too good, you’ll get exploited”; “Don’t let anybody tell you you can’t do what you can do”; “Don’t be like me, promise you won’t”—remembers adult Jack, who has learned his father’s lessons well (at the cost of forgetting his mother’s grace?). And here the cat is finally out of the bag: the father tells Jack, by the by, that he wanted to be a great musician but allowed himself to get distracted along the way. “He waited for the opportunity and missed his career. And that was life, and you lived it. Promise me you won’t be like me.” Places, people, a snippet of veiled affection, and suddenly, in the blink of an eye, a desert image—of the older Jack? Then, just as quickly, we’re back inside the church again. The organ is still playing. Thoughts and phantasms in the blink of an eye. The father wants the children to succeed.

# (Catholic) Job

Through the music, we are ushered straight to a sermon on Job delivered by the priest at the same church.[[56]](#footnote-56) It reiterates the words of the father in the spirit of Brahms’s *German Requiem* (and the prophet Isaiah, along with more than a pinch of Lucretius). I shall present it here in full, as it is the longest continuous dialog in the film and is situated almost at its exact center:

Job imagined he might build his nest on high, that the integrity of his behavior would protect him against misfortune. And his friends thought, mistakenly, that the Lord could only have punished him because secretly he’d done something wrong. But no. Misfortune befalls the good as well. We can’t protect ourselves against it. We can’t protect our children. We can’t say to ourselves, “Even if I’m not happy I’m going to make sure they are.” We run before the wind. We think that it will carry us forever. It will not. We vanish as a cloud. We wither as the autumn grass, and like a tree, we are rooted up.

The camera pauses on the handsome face of R. L., the brother destined to die, as he lifts his gaze up to look at an image of Jesus in the stained glass.

Is there some fraud in the scheme of the universe? Is there nothing which is deathless, nothing which does not pass away?

The gaze turns to Jack. The church is empty. The voice of the priest continues to resonate within it. From the Toccata and Fugue, we have moved on to a Fugue fromr the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The piano tones soften the severity of the mood.

We cannot stay where we are. We must journey forth. We must find that which is greater than fortune or fate.

The father kneels, the same father who had just said the opposite in the cinematic seconds preceding this moment. In Jack’s consciousness, he perseveres in his ritual. They exit the church together, and the voice follows them along with the music.

Nothing can bring us peace but that. Is the body of the wise man or the just exempt from any pain, from any disquietude, from the deformity that might blight its beauty, from the weakness that might destroy its health? Do you trust in God? Job, too, was close to the Lord. Are your friends and children your security? There is no hiding place in the world where trouble may not find you. No one knows when sorrow might visit his house any more than Job did.

The very moment everything was taken away from Job he knew it was the Lord who’d taken it away. He turned from the passing shows of time. He sought that which is eternal. Does he alone see God’s hand who sees that he gives? Or does not also the one see God’s hand who sees that he takes away? Or does he alone see God who sees God turn his face towards him? Does not also he see God who sees God turn his back?

Where are these theological questions coming from? Is this Malick making his voice heard? Or does he partially remake another well-known cinematic moment, from Ingmar Bergman’s Seventh Seal (1957), in which a preacher at the time of the Crusades and the Black Plague whips his listeners resting from the work of the “Dies Irae” sung in a procession of self-flagellations? And then we have the father, who, oblivious to it all, proceeds to talk about a member of the community who owns half of the city’s property and who considers himself the fourth vertex in the Holy Trinity! The father is restless. None of this has anything to do with him. The music fails to affect his consciousness, to infuse it with what it is supposed to impart: wholeness, harmony, peace, humility. Instead, he delivers a contrasting sermon: “The wrong people are hungry. The wrong people die. Don’t be too good!” A chasm has opened up between him and his wife. He wishes to toughen up his boys, to shape them to be hard and fearless. So they can stare life in the face without flinching.

The bitterness grows, the questions multiply. A child drowns in a pool. For a moment, it looks like it’s one of the O’Brien boys, an intentional misdirection, a foreshadowing of what’s to come. Mahler’s music from the moment the terrible knowledge revealed at the beginning of the film echoes in the minds of both Jacks—sometimes the boy, sometimes the man, sometimes both. The boy is full of Joban questions. Why is he tormenting us, the boy asks his God, referring to his father, in a whisper. And is he really tormenting them? He wishes to control them. He loves them. It is unclear either way. Jack fiddles with the record player; he speeds up the music—the music of the father—he tortures it, contorts it, just like he tortures living creatures, while in the background, we hear the “Tuileries” from *Pictures at an Exhibition* by Mussorgsky. To himself, he says: “He’s lying.” What’s real, what’s false? There is a lack of wholesomeness and good faith here too. Reality can be deceptive. Then another meal, the worst of them all. The father wishes to test the good son, the beloved R. L. The primordial father, the tormenting father. Just as “God tested Abraham” (Genesis 22:1) and later Job. The God of the Old Testament, God the father. The boy mustn’t speak for half an hour. The record player plays the first movement of Schuman’s Piano Concerto (from bar 35 approximately). It is a march-like, apiece in A minor, metered, restrained, civilized. The children try to stifle their uncontrollable laughter. R. L. tries to stand up to himself, but the father banishes him from the table in the most brutal scene in the film. The music cuts off at once.

# Jack and the (Sacrifice of) the Beloved Son

It’s the end of the world. The mother, wearing her most beautiful dress so far, looking like a princess, stays with the youngest son after the elder gets kicked out too. “You’re turning my children against me,” the father rages. “You undermine everything I do.” She slaps him. They fight by the sink, and he subdues her with his strong arms. For a moment, there seems to be an erotic element to the scene that has been almost entirely absent throughout the film. When she cries next to the sink with Jack looking on, we hear Tavener’s *Funeral Canticle*, which, as we may recall, accompanied the illuminated opening that showed us her as an innocent child, repeating the lesson of the nuns. This musical cue prompts us to think back on the dichotomy between nature and grace. Nature or grace, which has the upper hand? At this moment, it is nature, in a very real, physical way. Does grace give and bestow upon its practitioners as the nuns promised?

Jack sees a clown drowning in water, the giant father (cruel God?), and the tiny beloved brother before him in the mysterious attic. In the background we hear the sounds of *Tibetische Klangschalen* by Klauss Wiese. Then the father is away traveling. It is a period of light and joy for the mother and children. They play catch. The background to their games is *Keyboard Music* (*Pièces de clavecin*, Book II 6e Ordre N°5) by Couperin. It is now time for the mother’s religion. To love every leaf, to help. The religion of grace and love of all creation. The water reservoir of the ancient dinosaurs appears again.

The boy breaks down boundaries, breaks down fences, he enters the neighbor’s house, unable to control or comprehend his turbulent soul, his sprouting desires. The act of stealing the wealthy neighbor’s underwear is a manifestation of a potent mixture of boyish fetish, Oedipus complex, and envy of those who have more. And as a contrast to that, we see the noble brother R. L., pure of soul and pure of eye, the artist, musician, painter. Jack feels a desire to hurt him, to cause him pain, to destroy his paintings. There is no control here, not of the nature principle nor that of grace.And where should he go?[[57]](#footnote-57)

The music is absent now for large portions of screen time; there is nothing to mediate this naked and ruthless reality revealed to our eyes. When the score returns, we hear the chromatic, Passion-like tones of the fugue that opens Berlioz’s *Harold in Italy*. Heroic, tragic, catholic, it serves as a bridge between the pranks of the restless, suffering boy, whose mother has lost control of him, to the disappointing return of the father. Yet it too is a prefiguration of the final salvation.

When the boy confronts the father with the harshest of words, we hear Mozart’s “light” *Sonata N. 16*: it is the second, gentle movement in G major, cantabile. Elegant, gallant, disciplined, though not emotionless. Malick chooses to bring us into the modulatory section of the piece (from bar 37 on), to the tragic, chromatic G minor. Mozart seems to serve here as a mediator between the Protestant and the Catholic worlds. Yet, at the moment of return to the major, the father is once again revealed as the diegetic source of the music. He is the one playing, instilling discipline, setting the emotional order of the day. It is the sonic background to the inverted Joban question asked by the son: “Why was *he* even born?” This is followed by the son’s death wish, his curse when the father is under the car. Jack yells out: “She only loves *me*!” And the father is left uncomprehending'where this is coming from. Before the brothers’ confirmation ceremony and after it, young Jack is flooded with suicidal thoughts. He imagines dying by rope, by train. The boy is seeking grace, which explains his attraction to the feminine: to the mother, the girl, the beautiful neighbor. As an adolescent, the link between sin and grace, between forbidden attraction and pure femininity, causes him intense emotional upheavals. Then it is the father stroking him lovingly. How confusing. The mother’s principle of grace seems to have broken through to him. The true, sweet reconciliation arrives after the father fails, after he admits his weakness, the error he made in making his life decisions. “I am more like you than her,” Jack says to him. Nature? Grace? Perhaps neither one. Reality is more complex than that. The family leaves their apartment, the home where they were raised. The brothers cry. Perhaps this is a foreshadowing of the weeping over the brother who will be killed (or commit suicide?), the brother who is the epitome of grace and wholesomeness.

The climax comes at the end, in the apotheotic vision experienced by the older son, in a watery-celestial space, a kind of “purgatory, or limbo in the language of Christian theology.[[58]](#footnote-58) He is led to this imaginary space-time by a female figure whose face we have already witnessed. He encounters himself as an adolescent, similarly to the protagonist in the Borges story “The Other” (1986), although devoid of Borges’s philosophical inquiry. This is an encounter that takes place in the cinematographic space alone. It is not the way memory works. Gradually, the younger brothers are revealed, as well as the boy who drowned and the boy who was burned in a fire, as children, joyful. Then Jack’s father and mother. The dead brother first hugged by Jack, then carried by the father who gives his to the pieta like mother. The young parents shake his hand, which is older and more weathered than theirs. He drops to his knees, watching the procession of people, both part of the scene and outside it.

Adult Jack is trying to process human evil, which in its tragic aspect, is the result of an inherent incompatibility between parts of the soul and the consciousness. As Paul Ricoeur (1960) puts it, he must work through it within himself. Yet we do not know how sincere and profound his attempt is. Beyond that, we witness the transfigurative process hinted at from the beginning. This process consists of the redemption of human suffering through the reconciliation between the human son and the part-human part-divine father through the innocent lamb: the beloved brother, the sacrifice, the divine boy and the graceful mother who together temper the rage of the father and allow for another kind of existence, a forgiving, accepting, comforting end.

This is where the circle of events comes to a close and where it intersects with Carl Gustav Jung’s *Answer to Job*. According to Jung, he answer to the horrors of World War II, to that terrible cataclysm of violence—in which he sees the realization of John’s apocalyptic vision—lies in the papal declaration (by Pope Pius XII) of the Assumption of Mary as the Church dogma (Jung 2011). Elevating Virgin Mary to the rank of a true deity, imparted grace to a brutal reality gesture, Jung maintains. The feminine element, the space where “Stabat Mater Dolorosa,” is similarly elevated in the film also to the status of divinity: the mother chooses her favorite son and gives him to God—the Father above all fathers. We, therefore, have here the Father, the Son, and the Mother. It remains unclear, however where or who is the holy spirit, the music, perhaps?

This entire scene unfolds to the sounds of the “Agnus Dei”—the Lamb of God—from the (catholic) *Requiem* by Berlioz, accompanied by the text from the opening movement “Introitus” and verses from the communion ceremony:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Lamb of God, Who takest away the sins of the world,. | Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi: |
| grant them rest | dona eis requiem sempiternam |
| et lux perpetua luceat eis. | et lux perpetua luceat eis. |
| A hymn, O God, becometh Thee in Zion; | Te decet hymnus, Deus, in Sion, |
| and a vow shall be paid to Thee in Jerusalem: | et tibi reddetur votum in Ierusalem: |
| hear my prayer; | exaudi orationem meam, |
| all flesh shall come to Thee. | ad te omnis caro veniet. |
| Eternal rest give unto them, O Lord, | Requiem æternam dona defunctis, Domine: |
| and let perpetual light shine upon them. | et lux perpetua luceat eis. |
| for Thou art gracious, Amen. | quia pius es! Amen. |

The music lifts these moments with passionate catholic splendor, full of majesty and grace, without even the hint of doubt or irony. It is a scene that invokes in many agnostics and non-believers a feeling of rejection and distance, while believers are filled with wonder and awe.

Is the father, Mr. O’Brien, an avatar of the cruel, vengeful God of the Old Testament—the same God that torments the righteous Job through Satan, his emissary? And does he, too, undergo a transformation into the merciful God of the New Testament? Malick’s allegory seems to point in this direction. Yet, like any good allegory, it oversteps its boundaries, for the father is also the product of his time and age, with his JFK haircut, his matching clothes and appearance, always clean-cut and elegant; his outer image betrays not what lies beneath. His trusting looks reflect a great weakness, originating perhaps from the events of the war. Like Kennedy, he too fought for the Allies, and who knows what he went through during those terrible, violent times. This past, however, remains sealed, unspoken; it is present and absent at the same time. The father is given to whims, his anger is terrifying. An example of bad faith, as he himself admits. Nevertheless, he is neither a sadist, nor a psychopath, but rather a victim of his own worldview. He is a father as in the tradition of confounding fathers, following up the harsh blow with a mild caress, and the child so thirsty for his loving touch, for his approval, allows himself to soften and cling to him, distant and closed one moment, recognizing himself in the father the next—like Job reflected in the engravings of William Blake—and despising him with renewed hate the one after that.

And where, in all this, is the cheerful shouting and trumping of the sons of God? Is it in the cosmic music of twenty-first-century composers, or in R. L.’s soft playing on the guitar? Perhaps Bach also finds his place in it, or are these merely approximations, transient epiphanies, even the most exalted of all—the Berlioz *Requiem*, alluding both to Bach’s severe Protestant principle and the sentimentality of Preisner’s “Lacrimosa”? The prodigal son is ejected from the purgatory reconciled, calm, into his glassy, high-tech city (Figure 4), looking out at the open horizon, returning to the burning flame. He has experienced redemption; the light of eternity has shined upon him. Son, father, mother, and spirit ascended united. This is the gospel of the film. And Jack can now get on with his life.[[59]](#footnote-59)

**Figure 4.** Adult Jack reconciles with his past and finds peace in his soul. The element of grace—the blue skies above—blend in with what he, as an architect, perceived as law and order, the well- constructed city.

# “Going To and Fro on the Earth”—A Look from Above

Let us now step back and take another look from above at these two Joban films. In *A Serious Man*, the gaze lifted upward at the tornado forming in the sky is left hanging without an answer from up high. Instead, it meets countless other gazes from the cinematic universe. This transference and transformation can perhaps be summarized as a transition from “bad faith” to “make-believe.” Both of these contain an element of “untruth,” but only the first—a lie. Bad faith leads oneself and others astray, while make-believe posits possibilities of a different, fictitious past in the realms of the imagination. By using the latter, the filmmakers seek to evoke the former, to shine a light on it and air it out for everyone to see, as an act of purification. Sounds are what link this past to the one that came before it—the sounds of the old miller, the fear of the *dybbuk*. Sounds tie that past with the current future-present—the songs of sixties psychedelic rock, of a different America, neither Jewish nor Gentile. Sounds that, even when experienced furtively, in hiding, led those adolescents to become the men they are today. Those diegetic, earthly sounds also served as an unlikely connection between the generations (Danny and Rabbi Marshak). From the vantage point of time, fiction, and irony, Larry-Job’s questions seem pathetic and irrelevant. Rashi’s simplicity has gone from the world, but the question of evil remains. Latency, too, is still among us, but luckily we have cinema and sound to resolve it, to deconstruct it into its arbitrary psychological, ethical, and moral foundations. The Coen brothers’ answer to Job is immanent: evil is human, all too human. It is an answer in line with the thought of some prominent Jewish twentieth-century thinkers. Physics (“nature”) has nothing to do with metaphysics and fate is fundamentally blind—it can only be understood as the result of circumstance. Yet there is an opportunity to reveal, expose, and avoid human evil. And that act alone can lead to a great improvement in the human condition.[[60]](#footnote-60)

The Malickian spectacle of splendor, with all its richness of sounds and swirling images, its flashes and whispers, leaves behind it a Cain whose offering was not respected, an Abel whom he did not kill but whose blood cries out to him, a beloved brother replaced by the fruit of his flock, the lamb sacrificed by the mother of grace thereby, ostensibly, saving her family from the curse of Job and from the rule of the law of nature. There is no remnant of the Darwinian principles of the father in the purgatory among Berlioz’s catholic generosity of sound that dictates the choreography of paces and movements, landscapes, gestures, and looks, in the final scene. Malick creates a new offering: the offering of glorious love for the beautiful, muse-like, deceased brother in the shape of the film itself. And with it he once again glorifies the aesthetic experience or the faith in its power to redeem the rememberer from the woes of the past, to serve as an alternate form of worship to that which can be barely untangled from guilt and repression, as a new church of religion.

The weakness of this new-old faith is evident. Anesthetization is exactly what distances the observer from the disastrous experience of the man or woman of sorrows. It prettifies it or scorns it, far from the dust and the ashes, and the scratch and the stench of Job’s wounds. In this sense, the two films are not so different from one another. The Northern-Jewish film may strive for the earthly while the Southern-Christian film strives for the heavenly, but they are both based on the entertainment/enjoyment/consolation that they are supposed to provide to their audiences. And therefore, they are no different than all other Joban works of art, be them paintings, poetry, drama, music, or dance, starting and ending with the Book of Job itself.

We will not fall into the trap of calling the Book of Job a tragedy. And not resort to explanations of fear, mercy, and catharsis from the school of Aristotle. But we shall address the offering, or to be more precise, Job’s prayer for his friends who had not “…speak about me in honesy as did my servant Job.” (Job 42:8; Greenstein’s translation). These friends, as we may recall, “offer up for [on their own behalf] a burnt offering” (ibid); however, it is Job’s prayer over their offering that makes the difference. But the difference is to Job’s situation, not the friends. The Lord “lift up his face” as an expression of his utmost grace. He restores all that he has lost; even doubled it. Nothing is written regarding the restoration of his friends. The verses that follow tell of the re-creation of Job’s community thanks to this act. Thanks to the people’s goodwill and many offerings. Job’s gesture, as a public servant who raises his voice in favor of his community, large and small, enables him to reconnect with the company of the human beings who had rejected him, allowing them to return to him.

Job is given “twice as much as he had before” only because he has completed this process (Job 42:10). This tells us that the story is less about Satan (who vanishes before the end of the story) and his mischief and more about Job and his “consolers.” Calamity drives man away from his community, his friends, his family. Sometimes the calamity itself, as we have seen, is the result of intentional shunning. The two films examined here overtly displace evil from the transcendent to the human level. The banal evil of Larry’s circle and the performative evil of Mr. O’Brien.

Therefore, I suggest that the two films should be seen as Joban offerings. Larry is ostracized from his community just as Jack is from his family, albeit more explicitly. Jack’s exclusion is internal, and the scene of the heavenly purgatory makes that clear. In fact, it is the ostracism of the father with whom he identifies. The father carries more than a grain of guilt for the death of his son. The filmmakers speak in the name of the fathers, a discourse that is, as mentioned, autobiographical (in the case of the Coen brothers, it is more a case of generational rather than familial autobiography). The sons (the filmmakers) are identified with both the sufferers and the tormentors, despite the lack of empathy in the Coen brothers’ film. Their creations are, therefore both the prayer and the sacrifice. And despite the vast differences between them, between the Coens’ Jewish cultural heritage and Malick’s Catholic one, between dissonant deconstruction and harmonic unification, between the non-salvatory fathers and Malick’s salvatory mother, the sons approach the altar and make their offerings. They ask for parents to be reconciled with children (Malick), or to fight their fight (the Coens). Malick’s prayer-sacrifice is answered. In the last minutes of the film, he descends back to the ground of reality, to the peaceful, non-Joban silence of culture and nature. To the burning candle. The Coen brother’s earthly prayer-sacrifice is sent out into the void with one last cry as the screen turns black: “Don’t you want somebody to love?” For that is all there is to man.

And all this can be expressed because it is not presented to us with “simplicity” but laid down before us in a complex network of images and sounds, actions and gestures, combining into experience and reflection and beckoning us in.

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1. על הרשעים אומר איוב: יִשְׂאוּ כְּתֹף וְכִנּוֹר וְיִשְׂמְחוּ לְקוֹל עוּגָב (איוב כא, יא). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Concerning translations (to be completed); henceforth: tbc): [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. מאמר זה הוא פרק מספר בכתובים הדן בכל אלה. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. An acronym of Eyov, Mishley, and Tehilim (Job, Proverbs, and Psalms) that also means “books of truth.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. הדיון של חז"ל מפוזר במקורות שונים: חלק חשוב ממנו מופיע בבבלי מסכת בבא בתרא טז ע"א-ע"ב. המגמה הכללית של חז"ל היא הקטנת דמותו וצדיקותו, בין אם על ידי השוואתו לגדולי ישראל ובין אם מתוך טענות ישירות כנגד תלונותיו. מעט מהם מלמדים עליו זכות אך אפילו אלה אינם רואים בו מופת (אורבך, שם, 363–364). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. באלף השני נעשית התמונה מורכבת יותר. ואצל הוגים שונים כרמב"ם, תומס אקווינס וקלווין, נושא הבשורה בספר מזוהה דווקא עם אליהוא (Larrimore 2013, 78-115). לותר אף מגדיל לעשות ודוחק את איוב החוצה מן המערך התיאולוגי הראוי (Luther 1960). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. על יסוד הרעש בגילומיו השונים במופעי ההצללה היהודיים ופשרם ראו HaCohen 2011, (תרגום לעברית: הכהן־פינצ'ובר 2021). גם אצל היהודים, תנועות וזרמים משיחיים ועממיים (או שניהם יחדיו) ידבקו בפתרונות הרמוניים לשאלת הגמול, הייסורים והסבל. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. הם שותלים רמזים: מאליק למד בטקסס (בחינוך אפיסקופלי) כשמשפחתו התגוררה באוקלהומה. קודם לכן התגוררה המשפחה באילינוי. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. כל אחד מן הסרטים, ושניהם יחדיו, נדונו בהקשרי איוב על ידי מספר כותבים. ביניהם ראוי להזכיר את Kalman, 2010; Kilbourn 2013; Zwick 2016. אין הם הסרטים היחידים מאז ראשית המילניום שאיוב הוא מקור השראה להם. קילבורן וצוויק מתייחסים לכמה מסרטים אלה. מאמרים אלו, ואחרים שנסקרו לצורך מאמר זה, שחלקם עוסקים בדימויים החזותיים בהרחבה, מתייחסים להקשר המוזיקלי לכל היותר בהערות אגב מזדמנות, ובכל מקרה אינם רואים בצלילים חלק ממארג המשמעות של הסרטים. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. האחים כהן משלבים בסרט אלמנטים אוטוביוגרפיים וכן אירועים היסטוריים מאותה תקופה. על מנת שאלו יחפפו בזמנים, הם מציגים גמישות יצירתית. אפשר להבחין בלוח שנה המציג את חודשים מאי־יוני 1967 תלוי במשרדו של הרב הצעיר, הראשון לקבל את לארי משלושת הרבנים. פרשת בר המצווה שדני קורא הייתה פרשתו של ג'ואל, והיא פרשת "בהר" שחלה באותה השנה ב-20 במאי, ימים שנחוו בישראל כימי "ההמתנה" הנודעים. אף כי אין אזכור למלחמה במזרח־התיכון (שהתרחשה בין 5 ביוני ל-10 ביוני 1967) ולהתרחשויות שהיא גררה נוכחותה חשובה להבנת התפיסה הדיאספורית המובעת באמצעות הסרט. הקשר לעניין הציוני כמעט אינו קיים (פרט לספרים **מצדה** של י' ידין [1945] ו-*Voice of Israel* של אבא אבן [1957] המונחים על שולחן הסלון); סופת הטורנדו המתרגשת בסוף הסרט היא הדהוד לסופת הטורנדו ההרסנית, 4 בסולם פוג'יטה, שהיכתה בדרום מדינת מינסוטה ב-30 באפריל 1967. משפך הטורנדו נע מ-Twin Lakes צפונה אל העיירה Owatonna הממוקמת 60 מייל דרומית ל-St. Louis Park, מוקד עלילת הסרט. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Interview with the Coen Brothers tbc [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. בעת תצלום הסרט היה שון פן כבן 50, אך הבמאי משווה לו חזות מבוגרת יותר. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. שמו המלא אינו מפורש, ג'ק הוא היחיד הנקרא בשם בסרט. שמות שני האחים הצעירים מופיעים רק במסמכים חיצוניים לסרט, כגון התסריט, ופירוט המשתתפים וכיו"ב. במסמכים הללו האב והאם מופיעים גם באלה רק כמר וגברת או'בריאן (מגולמים על ידי בראד פיט וג'סיקה צ'סטיין( [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. לינק לסצנה האמורה [https://tinyurl.com/TreeEx1a]. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. איש הייסורים (“The Man of Sorrow”) הוא מכינוייו החשובים של כריסטוס, ונתקבע ככזה במסורת איקונוגרפית שראשיתה בימי הביניים המאוחרים. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. מראשיתו, אי שם במאה התשע עשרה קהליו אוהבים אותו מאד. בגרסת הבלוגרס (bluegrass) שלו, ברגע הפריצה של הפולק רבייבל (folk revival) בשנות החמישים הוא הופך להיט. בבדיון הסרט (אחי היכן אתה), רגע פריצה זה ממוקם בתאריך מוקדם יותר, בשנות השלושים, שנות המאבק עם הKKK. הפיכתו ללהיט ענק היא מוקד מרכזי בסרט. השיר שב וניתק מן הסרט שובר הקופות כפסקול עצמאי והופך מיד, עוד בשנת 2000, ללהיט. מאז הוא זוכה לגרסאות כיסוי רבות. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. מאליק סלל את דרכו לראשונה בלימודי הפילוסופיה, וכזוכה במגלה היוקרתית על שם רודס (שבשנים האחרונות פועלו נודע לשמצה) היה תלמידו של הפילוסוף הנודע גילברט רייל (Ryle) באוקספורד. חילוקי דעות עמוקים ביניהם גרמו לו לנטוש את הדוקטורט ואת האקדמיה גם יחד. בתקופה זו הוא הספיק להוציא לאור את ספרו של היידגר, מהות הסיבה (1969). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. אפשר שבשימוש המאסיבי ביצירות קלאסיות ולא בהלחנת פסקול מקורי יש מצדו של מאליק (ביודעין או שלא ביודעין) מחווה לקובריק של 2001. אפשר לפרש גם את הזיקה האינטרטקסטואלית הזאת, מבחינה מוזיקלית, מעבר להקבלות עלילתיות וחזותיות מסוימות המתקיימות בין הסרטים, כפי שהראה קילבורן (Kilbourn 2014, 40). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. כולל אלה המצויים בגבולותיה, כשירה עממית ביידיש או כמוסיקה פופולרית לסוגותיה. כמו השפה המדוברת – אם כי באופן הייחודי למוזיקה – מערך המשמעות הזה הוא דינמי, מתחדש ומשתנה תדיר אך בעל מסד יציב ומובנה. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. יש לציין כאן שעל המוזיקה של עץ החיים הופקד המלחין אלכסנדר דפלה Desplat)) . אף כי בסופו של דבר זנח מאליק את המוזיקה המולחנת לטובת מבחר עשיר של קטעים קלאסיים עדיין נודע לו תפקיד. קארטר בורוולBurwell) ) הוא המלחין הרשום בקרדיטים של איש רציני. עם זאת, תפקיד המוזיקה המולחנת הוא בסיפוק לייטמוטיב אפקטיבי למדיי ופה ושם עיטורים לא דיאגטיים, זה ואלה אינם חורגים מן הקודים המקובלים. יש להניח שגם במקרה זה, את הצלילים מכווני המשמעות בחרו האחים כהן בעצמם, כחלק מתוואי העלילה הכולל. כאמור לעיל, הנחה זו אינה קריטית לבחינה הפרשנית הנפרשת במאמר זה. ראו בהקשר זה את הריאיון איתם סמוך ליציאת הסרט לאקרנים, Lidz 2009. וראו גם Power 2019, לעדויות על מתן מעט חופש ואימפרוביזציה לשותפיהם ליצירה. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. שני התסריטים (Joel and Ethan Coen, A Serious Man, 4 June, 2007; Terrence Malick, The Tree of Life: A Screen Play, registered with the Writers Guild of America, 25 June 2007) נמצאים במאגר התסריטים של אתר IMSDB. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. המוטו הפותח כלול בתסריט של האחים כהן, אך לא בזה של מאליק. היות שהתסריטים התפרסמו עם הפקדתם במאגר, אין להוציא מכלל אפשרות שבכל זאת השפיעו היוצרים אלה על זה ולהפך. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. למרכזיות של מושג הפזמון ומשמעויותיו בהקשרי איוב לאורך דורות של פרשנים, ראו תורג'מן, בהכנה. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. ג'ק הבוגר משוחח בטלפון עם אביו, שעודו בחיים (אך אין אנו רואים אותו כאיש זקן), ומתנצל בפניו, כנראה, על איזו פגיעה רגעית. ג'ק מבטיח לאביו שהוא חושב על בן המשפחה המנוח כל יום. אולם, רק לאחר שג'ק רואה עץ שנשתל בחצר המשרד, מתחילות המחשבות להתגבש ולהתעצם. כאן נכנס היסוד האוטוביוגרפי של מאליק עצמו , ששכל את אחיו (שהתאבד) באותו הזמן הביוגרפי לערך. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. כפי שעומד על כך גם פיטר לייטהרט (Leithart 2013). ספרו טיפוסי ל"קלט" נוצרי אדוק שנוצר סביב הסרט, כמו למשל במספר מאמרים שיצאו בכתב העת הלא שפיט Journal of Religion & Film: שלא אמנה כאן. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. ראו תסריט עמ' 18; לסריקת טיוטה ראשונה של התסריט עם הערות הבמאי ראו [https://tinyurl.com/TreeMa]. אחת הדוגמאות היפות בסרט היא רצף תמונות הילדות המוקדמת ועד להווה המתמשך של 1956. זוהי ילדות, ככל ילדות, אשר בה יש ללמוד מה מותר ומה אסור, אלא שכאן הכול חמור למדיי. המוזיקה מתחילה לאחר שהאב מלמד את בנו על הסגת גבול והיא תמה מרכזית ברצף זה. הסצנה נשלטת על ידי מוזיקת נהר הוולטאבה מתוך הפואמה הסימפונית מולדתי מאת סמטנה; כשהקונוטציות של מולדת, Heimat, חוברות לתכונות האיקוניות של המוזיקה הזאת, הסוחפת, המסחררת, הזורמת הלאה, עם הימים, והצמיחה, וסיפורי לילה טוב, ומשחקי הילדות. האם כולה אִתם, באהבתה, במשחקיותהּ, נערותה, היסוד האוורירי־מלאכי שלה. והם בשלהם, נערים צעירים מאד, במעין אושר שבשוליו מתגלה גם פראות לא נשלטת, ואִתה מתח וחרדה (כמו במוזיקה). מאליק, כפי שמספר בראד פיט בראיון, נתן לילדים המגלמים את דמויות הבנים להיות בשלהם. אף אחד מהם אינו שחקן, הם בתוך הרגע הזה שלא ישוב, של ילדותם, שאותו הם משחקים "על אמת". [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. I use here Edward L. Greenstein’s translation, which is the most meticulous and thought through that I know. The Hebrew word *tam* is translated in the New King James version as “blameless,” yet it comes from the same root as *tmimut*—“simplicity.” יש להעיר עם זאת ש-Simplicity אינה פשטות במובן הפשוט. היא מתייחסת גם לישירות, בהירות, כנות. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. תכונה זו של סוגת האלגוריה המשרשרת סמלים והירוגליפים אל תוך הקשרי זמן ומקום עכשוויים היא עיקרון יסוד בהבנת התנהלותה לפי ולטר בנימין (בנימין 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. גומברכט הולך כאן בעקבות המסה הידועה של סארטר, היש והאין (Sartre 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. הרמיזה לסרטו של וודי אלן, 1989 *Crimes and Misdemeanours* אינה מקרית (Lyden 2003, 45). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. לינק לסצנה [https://tinyurl.com/CoenEx1]. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. אני מודה לרותי אבליוביץ' על הפנייה זו. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. המקור ביידיש, דעס מילנערס טרערן, בזמרתו של סידור בלרסקי [https://tinyurl.com/CoenSidor]; לינק לסצנה [https://tinyurl.com/CoenEx2 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. השיר The man of constant sorrow שמוּשר בסרט בביצוע The Soggy Bottom Boys [https://tinyurl.com/CoenSor]. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. לינק לסצנה [https://tinyurl.com/CoenEx3]. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. יוסף "יוסל'ה" רוזנבלט (1882-1933) מופיע ומזמר ב'סרט המדבר הראשון', זמר הג'אז, The Jazz Singer, המתרחש וגם יוצא לאור בשנות המעבר הללו (1927) ממזרח (אירופה) למערב (ארה"ב). אולי יוצרי הסרט באמת מרמזים כך לזמר הג'אז, שנחווה על ידי צופיו הראשונים כמעין דיבור פיתומי. יש להם יותר מסיבה אחת להיאחז בסרט פורץ דרך זה כבאילן יוחסין: יהודי־אמריקאי ומוסיקלי, בתכניו ובגיבוריו, הוא הראשון שהצביע על המתח שבין המוסיקה הצעירה והשוצפת של ההוויה הכלל־אמריקאית מול זו הריטואלית והחמורה של בית הכנסת. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The *yomim noraim* or *yamim noraim* are the ten “days of awe,” the High Holidays stretching from the Jewish New Year to Yom Kippur. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. לינק לסצנה [https://tinyurl.com/CoenEx5a]. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. I refer here to a discarded version (nussach) of the Haggadah. See Goldsmith.. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. מקום זה בסרט רומז להתכתבות אפשרית עם *Crimes and Misdemeaneurs* של וודי אלן. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. סצנת השיניים, שהסתברותה אינה מתקבלת על הדעת, היא הדוגמה הקלאסית לכך. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. "חָנֻּנִי חָנֻּנִי אַתֶּם רֵעָי כִּי יַד אֱלוֹהַּ נָגְעָה בִּי" (איוב יט, כא). זו העצה שלארי משווע אליה. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. לינק לסצנה [https://tinyurl.com/CoenFin]. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. מפתה לחשוב שזו ארצו של איוב, אלא שהתרגום של Oz ל"עוץ" קיים רק בכיוון אחד; משמעות OZ לקוחה מעולם סמלים אחר (אף הוא מן המזרח הקדום). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. על הזיקה המודעת של היוצרים לקוסם מארץ עוץ תעיד הציטטה הבאה מפיו של אית'ן כהן שהתפרסמה סמוך לצאת הסרט לאקרנים על אודות רבי מרשק: Ethan: “The rabbi was loosely based on a sage-like figure we’d seen as kids, a Semitic Wizard of Oz. He never spoke, but he had great charisma.” (Litz 2009). בשלל הכתבות על הסרט מצאתי פרשנות מעניינת שהתפרסמה לאחרונה ואף היא מציינת את הזיקה לסצנת הטורנדו בסרט הקלאסי (Power 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. סרט איובי נוסף שהולך בכיוון זה, של הצבעת מקור האסון ברוע האנושי, אף ביתר הדגשה, הוא סרטו של הבמאי הרוסי אנדרי זויאגינצב (Zvyagintsev) לוויתן (Leviafan, Leviathan) מ-2014. סרט זה מלווה במעט מוזיקה, רובה של פיליפ גלאס. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. “Does not try to please itself … accepts insults and injuries [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. לינק לסצנה [https://tinyurl.com/TreeEx2a]; להאזנה מלאה למזמור לוויה (Canticle Funeral, 1996) של ג'ון טבנר [https://tinyurl.com/TreeTav]. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. לינק לסצנה [https://tinyurl.com/TreeEx3a]. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. לינק לסצנה [https://tinyurl.com/TreeEx4]. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. פרק אחר של היצירה, הדיאז אירה, נבחר על ידי יוצרי סדרת הכתר המצליחה של נטפליקס, לעטר את טקס נישואיהם של הנסיכה מרגרט ובחיר ליבה (עונה 2, סצנה 7). היסוד המתקתק של המוזיקה משחק שם באירוניה כפולה עם המעמד הדרמטי ועם המשמעויות של "דיאז אירה" ¬– יום הזעם. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. See footnote 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. לינק לסצנה [https://tinyurl.com/TreeEx5]. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Historically, Karajan’s recording of the work was made later than the scene's fictional time. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. לינק לסצנה [https://tinyurl.com/TreeEx6]. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. לינק לסצנה [https://tinyurl.com/TreeEx7a]. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. כשג'ק מתנסה בחסד, ומנסה לממש משיכה אדיפלית דרך תשוקתו לנערה, הוא נבהל, מתקשה להכיל זאת. על מנת להיטהר, הוא הולך לנהר (אותו נהר, מוטיב מרכזי בסרט, שקיים מהחסד הראשון שחס הדינוזאור על הקטן, ועד בריאת העולם וכלה בסצנות רבות בגוף הסיפור ומהדהד בכחול־עד של בנייני העיר בסוף הסרט). הוא לא חזק מספיק לחיות בדרך חסד, והוא נכנע אט־אט לטבע, לחוק, לסדר. כאשר יגדל, הוא יבחר בקריירה של אדריכל, הנתון לחוקי נוקשים למדי של ארגון מרחבי. אני מודה ליקיר אריאל על הערה זו. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. לינק לסצנה [https://tinyurl.com/TreeEx10]. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. אביטל: ההערה הזו מרובה במונחים מוזיקליים, את יכולה להשאירה בצד ואטפל בה אחר כך] השימוש של מאליק בצלילי ברליוז מרהיב. הוא מרשה לעצמו, כמובן, לדלג על פראזות לפי צרכיו, אך מבלי לשנות את המוזיקה עצמה. כך לדוגמה, את הפתיחה של הפרק, אקורדים משולשים ממושכים, לא פונקציונליים, עד נחיתת הרצף בסופו על רה מז'ור, בכלי נשיפה בהדהוד הוויולות, מפוסקים בפאוזות ארוכות, הוא מנצל להפרדה חגיגית בין סצנה זו לכל מה שקדם לה, ולהצבת מעין שער חגיגי, הדור, לחיזיון האפותיאוזי. הלחישה, אקפלה, של מקהלת הגברים, "אגנוס דאי" המעבירה אותנו – בצביטת לב – מן הסול מז'ור דרך השישית שלו אל הדומיננטה של סי מינור, לרעד היציאה המהוססת לדרך; עוד שער אנהרמוני (לסי במול מז'ור) מעביר את ג'ק המבוגר דרך שער ממשי אל הביאטריצ'ה שלו (פה מז'ור); מסך נוסף נפתח בשילוב ספט-אקורדים אל המצלול הזך הקודם (על נצח ה"”Sempiternam) אל הצללת סי במול מינור ממושכת. ושוב דממה ארוכה. מאליק מדלג על החזרה, וממשיך מן החלק [94] של "לְךָ דֻמִיָּה.." המפורש בלטינית כשיר – “Te decet hyymnus” (הייתכן שברליוז, ששתל דממות רבות בתוך הפרטיטורה שלו, ידע אחרת, דהיינו, שדומיה היא דממה?). התנועה המלודית, המיקסטורית, מרובת הקולות, הולמת את תנועת האנשים המתהלכים על המישור השמיימי, הציפורים המעופפות, בקלילות משקל שלושת הרבעים ותנועת שמיניות, כנגד מצלולים שוהים ארוכים בכלי הנשיפה. עדינות ההכרזה החרישית הסטאטית, זעה כרומטית, נשנקת, על ה-”defunctis Domine et lux perpetua luceat eis” מכמירה את מבע הדאגה של האם ומשווה רוך נוסף למחוותה אל הילד המת־החי. צפייה בסצנה [https://tinyurl.com/TreeSc22] [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. לביסוס מעמיק של תפיסה כזאת, מתוך הכתובים ותולדות הרעיונות ראו Tsevat 1980. טענתי היא שניתן לייחס תחכום מן הסוג הזה לאחים כהן, שאחד מהם – אית'ן - הוא בוגר לימודי פילוסופיה בפרינסטון. אני סבורה שמספיק לגדול בסביבה יהודית ולהיות חשופים לתרבותה, לרעיונות שליוו אותה בתקופת חיי האחים, בכדי לדרוש כך את סיפור איוב (שהאחים כהן, אגב, במחווה טיפוסית להם, מעולם לא הכריזו על זיקתו ליצירתם). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)