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“All this, for a roll of bread with butter?”  
Cosmic Insignificance in the Films of Joel and Ethan Coen

There’s an old Yiddish story by Y.L. Peretz called “Bontsche Schvayg” (“Bontsche the Silent”). Bontsche, the protagonist, suffers every day of his life, from a botched circumcision as an infant to being kicked out of his house by his father and, later, his son. Upon dying, Bontsche is received in Heaven with jubilant fanfare and celebration. An entire celestial entourage – from angels to the Biblical patriarchs - awaits him, cheering; they’re all beside themselves with joy to reward this man whom they view as a beacon of patience in the face of adversity. They insist that anything Bontsche wants in the afterlife is his. The world is his oyster (or at least would be if oysters were kosher). Bontsche closes his eyes and says what he wants most in the world is “a warm roll with butter every morning.”

The Heavenly chorus is aghast. They hang their heads in shame, realizing that this man around whom they had built an image of righteous martyrdom was merely a simpleton. He wasn’t silent because he was a saint; he was silent because he was dumb.

It sounds depressing, but the story is actually quite funny. The revelation that all the angels’ excitement was premature and invested in a spineless simpleton makes one laugh in spite of one’s self.

This story makes a “blink-and-you-missed-it” sort of appearance in *Raising Arizona*, the 1987 film from the writing-directing team of brothers Joel and Ethan Coen. The film opens with a montage of what life behind bars is like for its recently prisoned protagonist played by Nicholas Cage. One of these prison life features is mandatory counseling sessions. The sessions are taught by an elderly, professorial type – tweed and all. Though easily missed, the counselor asks his visibly bored students, “And why would Bontsche want a roll of bread with butter?”

A throwaway inclusion of a Yiddish folktale is hardly shocking in the context of the Coens’ oeuvre. These are, after all, the brothers who gave the term “Shomer Shabbos” a place in the pop culture lexicon by having it shouted angrily by Walter Sobchak (John Goodman), the overly zealous convert to Judaism in *The Big Lebowski*, as he demands to be exempt from Friday night games in his bowling tournament. These are also the brothers who created Jack Lipnik, a Hollywood tycoon in the mold of Jack Warner, who delights in calling himself “the meanest kike in town” in their 1991 picture *Barton Fink*. Even in their most Christian film, the Golden Age of Hollywood spoof *Hail, Caesar!*, the two could not resist including a scene with a wisecracking rabbi who mocks the idea of an incarnated deity – “This God is a man? With a body? And a dog, maybe?”

Though Jewish references are something of a constant over the course of the Coens’ seventeen-film career, little else – on the level of setting or genre - is. The two have made period films (*Barton Fink*, *O Brother Where Art Thou?*) and ones set firmly in the present (*Burn After Reading*). They have made farces so riotous that lines of dialogue get swallowed by the audience’s laughter (*The Big Lebowski*) as

well as pictures so sinister that laughing is largely unthinkable (*No Country for Old Men*). They have dabbled in film noir (*The Man Who Wasn't There*), Westerns (*True Grit*), and even romantic comedy (*Intolerable Cruelty*). They have traveled all over the United States, making more than one film set in each of the following regions: the Midwest, New York, California, the Southwest, and the deep, deep South.

Despite this surface level volatility, the brothers' filmography does not feel erratic. On the contrary, there's a certain common sensibility that runs through all of their pictures. It is an easy sensibility to identify, but a harder one to nail down and articulate. This brings us back to "Bontsche Schvayg." The inclusion of "Bontsche" in *Raising Arizona* is not just another Jewish allusion for a knowing audience, but can be used as a map to better understand the view of the world that the Coens depict on screen. The tone and message of this somewhat cryptic Yiddish short story can be used to analyze their somewhat cryptic filmography. A good starting place for this investigation is a film that stands out by being their most overtly Jewish work: 2009's *A Serious Man*.

*A Serious Man* focuses on Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg), a mild-mannered Minnesotan physics professor. Without warning, Larry's life begins to disintegrate in front of him. His wife unceremoniously announces that she's leaving him for another man, that man then bullies Larry out of his home, someone mails anonymous hate mail to the tenure committee about Larry, his brother is arrested for gambling, and a particularly disgruntled and persistent Korean student tries to blackmail him for a passing grade. Larry searches high and low for a rationale behind his suffering. He consults with three rabbis, but each consultation is less

satisfying than the last. Eventually, his life seems to take a turn for the better; his son has a successful Bar Mitzvah, and he is granted tenure. However, moments afterwards, a tornado approaches his son's school and he gets an ominous call from the doctor, who hints that he has a very bad prognosis to tell Larry.

On the surface, the film seems to be the story of Job transplanted into 1960's Minnesota. Like Job, Larry is a seemingly moral man, without obvious vices or corrupt habits. Larry asks three deeply unhelpful rabbis for advice, recalling the unhelpful advice Job receives from three friends. Like Job, Larry rails against the Heavens, claiming he "tried to be a serious man," but is being unjustly punished.

When one digs a little deeper, however, the Job comparison starts to crumble. The whole power of Job's story is that it is a perfect case of theodicy: when bad things happen to good people. Accordingly, it is crucial that the victim actually be an upright and pious person, as the Biblical Job is described to be. Larry Gopnik does not quite read this way. He certainly is not *bad*, but there's little he does that is unambiguously *good* either. He fulfills his duties – as teacher, as husband, as Jew – but is pretty ineffectual at each. His teaching style consists of writing so comically fast all over a blackboard so comically large that no student could hope to keep up. His wife loathes him so much she looks as if she's blowing smoke when she exhales. Even as a Jew, he comes up short, not having even heard of the *gett*, the ritual divorce his wife demands.

The truth is, the character in Jewish literature Larry resembles most is not Job, but our friend Bontsche. Like Bontsche, Larry responds recessively to his tribulations, taking them as they come rather than standing up for himself. When his

wife and her new paramour order him to leave his home, Stuhlbarg's raised eyebrows convey his incredulity at the unfairness of their proposition. Yet, with a quick cut, Larry is seen moving into a rundown nearby motel, presumably having agreed to living arrangements that he knows to be unfair to him. Stuhlbarg's fidgety posture and nasal voice further give off an impression of spinelessness. Whereas Job blasphemes the Lord for over forty chapters, Larry, when he attempts to denounce God for punishing him with no basis, can only sputter the following: "I am...well, I...have tried to be...a serious man!"

In fact, Larry's biggest defense is a wholly negative argument; "I haven't done anything!" This line is something of a mantra for Larry, coming up at several points in the film. He says it defensively when his wife tells him she wants a divorce, but also says it sheepishly when a colleague asks if he has published any articles to submit to the tenure committee.

Seen through the lens of "Bontsche Shvayg," the message of *A Serious Man* becomes much clearer. Like the angels watching Bontsche, those of us watching Larry's trials assume that his suffering is ennobling in some way or will at least produce some meaning. The Coens even dangle this prospect before us, as we watch Larry seemingly achieve some well-earned respite, as he and his wife put aside their squabbling to join hands as they watch their son read from the Torah at his Bar Mitzvah, and Larry gets the tenure he wanted so badly. A sigh of relief - knowing that some good, some reward has come out of the suffering - is exhaled. But that dangled meaning is quickly yanked away, as the Coens heap an even more egregious slab of suffering onto Larry in the closing moments of the film and, this time, his son

as well, plaguing them with an implied fatal illness and natural disaster, respectively.

In the film, Larry is adamant that the world has a moral order. He berates a student for trying to bribe him, insisting, "Actions have consequences. Always! Not just physically, but morally!" However, a main takeaway from *A Serious Man* seems to be that the world exists in some sort of a moral vacuum. Suffering occurs without any correlation to the behavior of the sufferer. Any attempt to extract meaning from such pain is foolhardy and futile. Like Bontsche's angels, we assume there to be correspondence between action and consequence, suffering and reward, but find nothing of the sort.

This notion of the inscrutability of the world and the futility in trying to read any moral order into it can even be seen on the level of individual scenes in *A Serious Man*. In one of Larry's useless meetings with clergy, a rabbi begins to recite a story. He tells Larry of a congregant of his, a dentist, who discovered Hebrew writing written on the inside of one of his patient's teeth – the teeth of a *goy*, in fact! He goes on and on about how the dentist, like Larry, was convinced God was trying to give him a sign. He searched every tooth in every patient he examined for years, looking for more letters. He studied esoteric Jewish texts, trying to ascertain some meaning from this message. Eventually, he came to this rabbi, just as Larry did. Larry sits on the edge of his seat – as the audience does as well – waiting to hear the answers behind this conundrum. But the rabbi, ultimately, is not even interested in the answers. He finishes the story prematurely and sips his tea nonchalantly. Larry begs to know what the meaning of the story is, practically squealing with

anticipation, “What did the message mean? Who was it meant for?” The rabbi asks, “Is that relevant?” Though the rabbi is depicted as being full of himself, he is also at peace. It is Larry – who insists that the universe must conform to some moral order – who is in anguish. The rabbi tells him that God doesn’t “owe us the answers.” He compares existential questions to a toothache, something that bothers one for a while, but eventually goes away.

The film’s musical choices also reinforce this theme. Danny, Larry’s son, gets in trouble in school for listening to Jefferson Airplane’s “Somebody to Love.” The song’s opens as follows, “When the truth is found to be lies/And all the joy within you dies.” This song – and that couplet specifically - is used as a motif throughout the film, culminating when they are spoken by Rabbi Marshak, the town sage, to Danny, Larry’s son. Rabbi Marshak returns Danny’s cassette player and tells him, to be “a good boy.” This is emblematic of the film’s message of moral vacuity. If the truth is found “to be lies,” the most you can do is be “a good boy” and stop questioning.

These tropes from Bontsche and *A Serious Man* – that people attempt to invest all events with a higher significance, but the world as we know it is devoid of such meaning – can be seen, albeit in varying forms, in almost every Coen brothers film. Take their 1998 farce *The Big Lebowski*: the film centers on a slacker, Jeffrey “the Dude” Lebowski (Jeff Bridges) who gets caught up in a series of crimes when he is mistaken for another Jeffrey Lebowski. The other Lebowski is a wealthy man whose wife owes money to a pornographer. The pornographer sends his goons to intimidate her millionaire husband, but they end up attacking Bridges’s Lebowski

instead. This mistaken identity is the source of much of the film's comedic heft. As the Dude's attackers shove his face in the toilet, he insists that they have the wrong man, but they yell, "You're Lebowski, Lebowski!" Like Bontsche, people make assumptions about the Dude based on the circumstances he finds himself in. Like Bontsche, the Dude is ultimately pretty shallow - interested in sipping white Russians, smoking marijuana, and bowling above all else.

The Coens' 2010 film *Burn After Reading* shares a similar construction to *The Big Lebowski*. The film focuses on two hapless gym employees, Chad (Brad Pitt) and Linda (Frances McDormand), who stumble upon what they believe to be classified CIA documents. They attempt to use their discovery as leverage to blackmail the government for cash. Their incompetent attempts at extortion start out small - a blackmailing attempt over the phone in which Pitt's Chad looks hilariously hurt when their intended target begins cursing him out - but quickly grow, involving break-ins, car chases, and Russian diplomats. While all this is occurring, the film keeps cutting to the actual CIA where a high-ranking official (J.K. Simmons) scratches his head as they keep tabs on the increasingly absurd situation. Eventually, they realize that not only were the masterminds behind the "stolen secrets" just a couple of hapless bozos, but that their "secrets" were just the memoirs of an alcoholic former CIA employee (John Malkovich). Simmons's official asks point blank -after everything is resolved - "What did we learn?" trying to extract some meaning from the events of the film, but is unable to come up with an answer.

These farces follow the general trend in Coen brothers films: events happen without any larger meaning behind them. People are attacked for actions neither they nor their nonexistent wife ever did and entire espionage plots occur without any actual government secrets being at stake. Though *The Big Lebowski* and *Burn After Reading* are not overtly concerned with the existence or lack thereof of a moral structure guiding the universe, they do pick up on man's mistaken tendency to assume all events have meaning and cosmic significance and then capitalize on that tendency for comic relief. In that way, the fingerprints of "Bontsche" can still be found.

The Coens do not only portray the lack of meaning in the universe through plot, however. They – and their frequent cinematographer Roger Deakins - also frequently convey a similar message visually. In 2007's *No Country for Old Men*, Deakins focuses on the desolate, dusty Texas deserts; even the more populated areas consist of lonely trailers, separate from one another. 1996's *Fargo* – from its opening on a gleaming white screen filled with snow, slowly pushed away by a lone snow mobile – stresses the frozen, harsh barrenness of the world the characters. The bleakness of the scenery is mirrored by the amorality of characters in each of these films. *No Country* features Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem): a psychopathic hitman with a bowl-cut who kills innocent people based on whether they call coin tosses correctly or not. *Fargo* has Gaear (Peter Stormare), the Swedish gun-for-hire who, in the film's most infamous moment, ends up killing his accomplice (Steve Buscemi) and feeding his body to a woodchipper. Both films' bare settings accentuate the moral vacuity of the populations within them.

Though consistent in the world lacking a moral structure and the futility of trying to read significance into every event, the Coens do provide varied models of how people can respond to such a world. For every amoral character in their filmography, there is one who believes that people are morally responsible for their actions. For every Anton Chigurh, there's a Carla Jean (Kelly MacDonald) who refuses to call the coin he tosses, saying that the choice of whether to kill her is in his hands. For every Gaear, there's a Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand), the perspicacious police chief who apprehends Gaear, while he is loading his partner's corpse to the woodchipper. *Fargo* ends with a scene of Marge and her kind husband Norm, snuggling in bed, happily anticipating the upcoming birth of their child. Ending the film on these beacons of Midwestern decency is one of the most optimistic and warm-hearted conclusions in the brothers' filmography. They almost seem to reassure the viewers, that though the world is a cold, hard place filled with brutal murderers, so long as there are good folk like the Gundersons, we might just be ok.

Thinking back to that throwaway allusion to "Bontsche Shvayg," it is not so much a perfect predictor of the message of every Coen brothers film – though its lessons of not assuming every sufferer is noble are deeply aligned with some, most notably *A Serious Man*. What the Yiddish folktale does, however, is open up a mischievous sensibility – one interested in subverting notions of a moral world in which every event has a meaning – which ties the brothers' wildly varied filmography together. Whether through mistaken identities, unjust punishments, or characters whose souls are as barren as the environments they live in, the Coens

never fail to undermine expectations of a cosmic order. Viewers who assume suffering will be rewarded, evil will be punished, and all events to have some larger meaning are likely to end up as disillusioned as the angels who turned Bontsche the simpleton into a grand symbol of martyrdom. However, those who are willing to accept that a vision of the world that is often bleak and has an empty center – morally and visually – will find that the Coens’ films can also be hysterically funny and even surprisingly warm, not unlike a “roll of bread with butter.”