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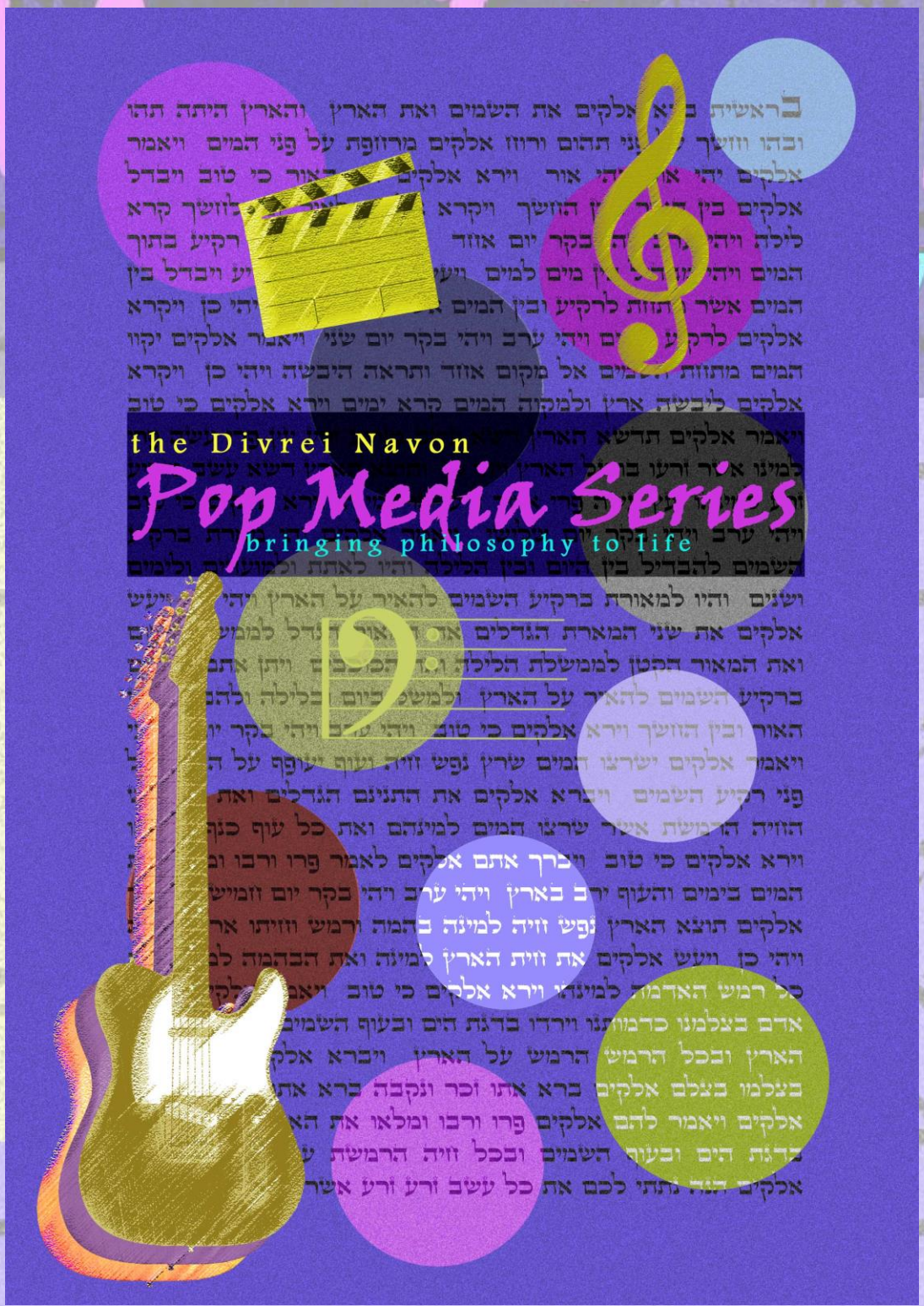

Vol. 5 / The Box – Man in the hands of the Devil

About the cover

The cover artwork was designed to express the approach of this series of essays which interprets popular media, primarily film and music, through the looking glass of Jewish philosophy. The intent of the essays is not to explain a particular pop-media piece *per se*, but rather to utilize its power to explain Jewish philosophy. In this sense the media serves as an *articulation* of Jewish philosophy whereby recondite ideas are brought to life in the "language" of modern man. Jewish philosophy seeks to understand man's world within the context of the Creator; as such the cover art rests on a backdrop of deep sky blue, *tekhelet*, the color of God's throne, upon which the entire creation rests. The blue is rendered chaotic through graphic noise, thus giving expression to the unfinished and imperfect nature of creation. Upon this amorphous substrate is the text of the Creation narrative, written in the typeface of a traditional Torah scroll, indicating that it is with reference to the ancient lore that we seek to derive meaning. Scattered around the page are ten circles modifying the base color, representing the ten *sefirot*. The *sefirot* are mystical lenses through which divine emanations reach the world and through which man perceives divinity. There is another circle in a very light *tekhelet*, around the word "*bereishit*" (beginning), symbolizing the *sefirah* of "*keter*" – God's crown itself. Overlaying these religious symbols are the more familiar symbols of film and music: the director's clapperboard, treble and bass symbols, and a guitar. The guitar is replicated three times; three representing permanence in Jewish thought. The guitar is no ordinary guitar but the 1950's Fender Telecaster used to record Led Zeppelin's Stairway to Heaven, a permanent classic in the music world and the subject of one of the essays in this series.

The Box – Man in the hands of the Devil

The movie "The Box"[1] was nominated by the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films as the "Best Horror Film" of the year in 2010. The official synopsis of the film is as follows:

> Norma and Arthur Lewis, a suburban couple with a young child, receive a simple wooden box as a gift, which bears fatal and irrevocable consequences. A mysterious stranger [by the name of Arlington Steward], delivers the message that the box promises to bestow upon its owner $1 million with the press of a button. But, pressing this button will simultaneously cause the death of another human being somewhere in the world; someone they don't know. With just 24 hours to have the box in their possession, Norma and Arthur find themselves in the cross-hairs of a moral dilemma and must face the true nature of their humanity.[2]

It is our thesis that this film seeks to probe the human condition as presented primarily in the first chapters of the book of Genesis, from an acutely unique perspective: that of the Devil. As such, it deserves the title of "Best Horror Film", for there is little more frightening for man than to confront his true nature in his encounter with temptation. "The Box" is a film that is unsettling, and even unpleasant,[3] but nevertheless of the utmost importance.

Literary Criticism

Before starting an analysis of the film, a few words of introduction regarding the issue of literary/film critique are in order. Films are made of numerous layers – an outer layer, consisting of the conventional story line, below which lie various layers of meaning conveyed through imagery, words and symbols. Films often draw upon history, literature and myth to give depth to their story. And indeed, it is these underlying themes and messages which are really of significance, the plot serving merely as the vehicle to convey the messages in an entertaining fashion.

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan warned that "the 'content' of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat that the burglar throws to distract the watchdog of the mind."[4] The piece of meat thrown to distract the watchdog of the mind in "The Box" is the science fiction plotline with its allusions to Mars and Martians. All these references are merely there to provide a "rational" or "scientific" – i.e., non-spiritual, non-religious – explanation for the supernatural.

Indeed, the idea of aliens has been used more than once by the scientific community to explain phenomena that religious people see clearly as divine.

For example, in attempting to find a solution to the insurmountable odds that human life simply could not have evolved on earth, Dr. Francis Crick, who received the Nobel prize for discovering DNA, wrote that "[life must have been] sent here long ago in the form of germinal material, from elsewhere in the universe."[5] Similarly, Nobel Prize winning astronomer and chemist Sir Fred Hoyle and his assistant Dr. Chandra Wickramasinghe abandoned evolution in favor of "the seeding of space by intelligent beings from distant corners of the universe."[6]

Literary Themes

Below the sci-fi surface, a much more significant story is being told. To tell this story the movie draws upon Greek mythology and classical literature. These works add dimension to the story, but they are not the story itself. Rather, it is our contention that this movie is profoundly rooted in the Bible, with its primary message that the world can only exist if man learns to be moral and "love his neighbor".

Regarding Greek mythology, reference is made to Pandora's Box. Pandora was sent as a punishment upon man by Zeus, whose lightening bolt was stolen by Prometheus to provide man with fire.[7] She is described by the 8th century Greek poet Hesiod as follows: "From her is the race of women and female kind, of her is the deadly race and tribe of women who live amongst mortal men to their great trouble, no helpmeets in hateful poverty, but only in wealth." Clearly Norma, distraught over their financial, fits this depiction of woman as source of sorrow for man. The box she unlocks indeed releases great sorrow.

Drawing on classical literature, the movie makes numerous references to Sartre's *No Exit* which depicts the tortures of hell as the torment that people inflict on one another:

- Norma teaches a class on the play, quoting Sartre's statement, "Hell is other people."
- Norma and Arthur attend the play *No Exit* where the last scene is shown with the flames surrounding the stage.
- When Norma and Arthur leave a party, there is a valet parker standing behind the car and the windshield has the words *No Exit* written in the dirt.
- In the library, Arthur says, "I am looking for the closest exit."
- All the people "in the know" stare at each other in anger and disgust for, as in Sartre's play, each person knows and taunts the other for their sins and weaknesses.[8] This is seen in the motel when the babysitter goes to her room, in the library when everyone stares at Arthur, and at the party when the old lady stares at Arthur and Norma in disgust.

One of the primary messages of *No Exit* – that "Hell is other people" – emphasizes the overarching theme of the movie: that people destroy each other with their self-centeredness and, conversely, people make each other whole with caring and selfless giving.[9]

Ultimately, it is neither Pandora nor Sartre that is at the core of this movie, but rather the Bible. Set during Christmastime, a biblically religious tone is set – at least that of the holiday's popular theme of "Peace on earth, good will toward men". Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, writes of the time as follows:

> I have always thought of Christmastime, when it has come round, as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.

Throughout the film we are reminded that it is Christmas time, thus ever hinting at the ideal of forgiveness and charitableness. But this is just one of the many symbols that seek to convey the biblical ideal that "love your neighbor as yourself" is imperative for the survival of humanity. Let us now look more closely at the film.

Natural Morality

The plot revolves around a box and the dilemma it presents man, specifically for one couple, Arthur and Norma Lewis. The dilemma they face is not unlike that of the first couple, Adam and Eve.

In the Garden of Eden man was given the one commandment not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17).

The consequence of eating – death – is precisely the same as that of pushing the box's button. But whereas in the case of the Tree the command and consequence of eating from the Tree are stated explicitly, in the case of the button, the command and consequence are implicit. That is, man is expected to realize that, in the words of Arlington Steward, "There are always consequences." Man is expected to realize that one who murders is liable to the death penalty, as the Bible states, "Whoever sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God (*b'tzelem Elokim*) did He make man" (Gen. 9:6).

The reason that man is expected to realize that murder carries the death penalty is, as the verse states, *because* he is created in the image of God (*b'tzelem Elokim*). The notion that man was created in the image of God is understood to mean that there are immutable principles, a natural morality as it were, which man inherently knows to be true, and thus renders him culpable. The Gemara (San. 56a-b) learns this idea as follows:

> The Rabbis taught that there are seven commandments incumbent on humanity (a.k.a., "*bnei noach*"): (1) establish a system of justice, (2) refrain from blasphemy, (3) refrain from idolatry, (4) refrain from sexual immorality, (5) refrain from murder, (6) refrain from theft, (7) refrain from eating flesh cut from a living animal … and these are learned from the verse: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat."

R. Baruch Epstein (Torah Temimah, Gen. 2, n. 39) explains that the Gemara does not mean to imply that the seven commandments are learned literally from this verse, for clearly there is no simple relationship between the verse and the commands. Rather, the Rabbis used this verse to indicate that these laws were part and parcel of society from the outset of Creation. He explains "that each of these seven commands were known to the Rabbis to have been accepted norms amongst all the nations of the world … because they touch upon the primary and fundamental existence of the world and society, and without them, that is, in their inverse, [comes] destruction, ruin, and the end of all flesh."

R. Shmuel Keidar (Torat Ohel, p. 52-53) elaborates that the Rabbis understood that the seven laws were known to man, "if they would only peer into their conscience – their '*tzelem Elokim*'… The recognition of 'good' is stamped in man in that he was created in the image of God '*b'tzelem Elokim*'." It was this innate morality with which man was created that was to guide Adam and Eve in their test of the Tree of Knowledge. And indeed, in the movie, when Norma asks Arlington Steward what she is to do given that "the testing will continue," he advises simply, "Listen to your conscience." That is, listen to your *tzelem Elokim*, to your intuitive moral faculty.[10]

The Immoral Act

The box is similar to the Tree of Knowledge in that both are seemingly innocuous, apparently unrelated in form to the outcome of their use. There is no apparent cause and effect inherent in the physical object; rather each stands as an object of desire and moral trial. That is, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil has no explicit reference to a specific tree, because such is entirely irrelevant;[11] it is not the physical tree that matters, but the act of taking from the tree (*etz*).[12] R. Hirsch (Gen. 2:9) explains that "the tree of knowledge of good and evil was so designated … as the tree by which the decision of the knowledge of

good and evil was made, through which the man would decide how he wished to recognize what was good or bad."

So it is with the box, also made of wood (*etz*), having at its center a red button, perhaps recalling the proverbial red apple of the Tree of Knowledge. It is physically inert; there are no wires, circuitry or physical apparatus. Indeed much is made of this as Arthur disassembles the box and proclaims, "Nothing, no transmitter, no radio … it's a wooden box."[13] As with the Tree, it is simply the act, explicitly immoral, which triggers the inevitable consequence of death.

The act, whether eating from the Tree or pushing the button, demonstrates that subjective pleasure, having no greater goal than to satisfy the self, is what motivates the individual. This is the root of all sin.[14] R. Soloveitchik explains that, "What caused man's fall is his giving preference to the sensuous, delightful, and pleasing over the true, at both the intellectual and ethical levels."[15]

That is, on the intellectual level man was told by God, his Creator and source of wisdom, "on the day that you eat it you will die" (Gen. 2: 17); and on the ethical level man was *commanded* by God, his Creator and moral arbiter, "from the tree of knowledge of good and evil do not eat" (Gen. 2:16-17). Nevertheless, Eve disregarded these considerations in favor of the aesthetic, observing that, "the tree was good for food and desirous to the eyes" (Gen. 3:6).

The act of placing one's own desires over moral demands makes man worthy of death and unworthy of the Garden.[16] It is this choice which turns the beautiful world around us, a veritable Garden of Eden, into Sartre's hell. In the words of Arlington Steward, "If you human beings are unable or unwilling to sacrifice individual desires for the greater good of your species, you have no chance for survival."

Why a Box

As mentioned, the box in the movie is analogous to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In the following conversation, this analogy is given further expression:

Martin Teague: Sir? If you don't mind my asking... why a box?

A. Steward: Your home is a box. Your car is a box on wheels. You drive to work in it. You drive home in it. You sit in your home, staring into a box. It erodes your soul, while the box that is your body inevitably withers... then dies; whereupon it is placed in the ultimate box, to slowly decompose.

Here a direct link is made from the box that serves as the source of moral dilemma to the "ultimate box" (i.e., the coffin), which symbolizes the result of

man's great difficulty in overcoming moral dilemma. The Midrash (Gen. R. 19:8) makes exactly the same observation regarding the Tree of Knowledge: "'Amongst the trees (*etz*) of the garden', R. Levi said: This was a sign for his descendants, that they would be placed in a wooden (*etz*) coffin."

The conversation continues, further hinting at the spiritual nature of the world:

Martin Teague: It's quite depressing, if you think of it that way.
A. Steward: Don't think of it that way… think of it as a temporary state of being.

Indeed religious belief holds that the soul is eternal and only comes into this world to take part in an effort to earn perfection. This is explained by R M. H. Luzzatto (Derech Hashem, 1:3:1,3):

> … man is a creature created for the purpose of being drawn close to God. He is placed between perfection and deficiency, with the power to earn perfection. Man must earn this perfection, however, through his own free will and desire. … God's goodness decreed that there be a limit to man's effort required to attain perfection. After this period of effort is completed, he attains his level of perfection and is allowed to enjoy it for all eternity.

The Snake

As in the Garden of Eden, so in the movie; man – or more precisely, woman – is brought to temptation by an external figure. The snake in Chapter Three of Genesis is poised as the tempter, holding out to Eve subjective aesthetic satisfaction, just as Arlington Steward held out to Norma.[17] Furthermore, the Ohr HaHayim (Gen. 3:1) explains that the snake is really the Satan dressed in the earthly form of the snake. Similarly, the Satan in the movie inhabits the body of one Arlington Steward:

Martin T.: Your colleague Arlington Steward was struck by lightning[18] … He's something else now. … Arlington Steward died shortly after being admitted to the Riverside Hospital. Several hours after his body was taken to the morgue … a nurse heard a voice laughing… Mr. Steward had come back from the dead and was laughing hysterically.

In short, Arlington Steward is Satan in the flesh.

The Midrashim[19] describe the snake's desire for Eve in romantic terms, and one finds similar hints as to Steward's attitude toward Norma. For example, the box contains a card addressed to Norma which Arthur says "looks like a wedding invitation." Later, Norma and Arthur have a jesting tiff as to who exactly Arlington Steward is, during which Arthur asks Norma if she is having an affair with him.

It is important to note that Satan is not some autonomous evil entity, as some erroneously believe, but rather an angel amongst the array of messengers in God's employ.[20] R. Avraham Ibn Ezra (Ex. 23:21) explains, "Every angel does the will of the God, not more and not less. And so was Satan an angel in the story of Job." That Arlington Steward is an angel is indicated when Norma offers him food, he says, "No thank you, I never have much of an appetite," for angels have no need for food.[21] That he is not autonomous is demonstrated on numerous occasions when he explains that he is merely in the employ of others.[22] But most importantly, Arlington Steward's wife explains of him, "He's testing you, he's testing all of us." So too the Zohar (Terumah 163a) explains that testing man is precisely the task of the Satan.

The Zohar (Terumah 163a) asks how can the Satan, who tempts and accuses God's creations (i.e., man), be in the employ of God? The answer is given by way of an analogy of a King (i.e, God), a prince (i.e, man) and a harlot (i.e, Satan). The King commands his son not to have any alliances with a woman of ill repute, for then he would be unworthy of the palace. In an effort to test the prince to ensure that he is indeed worthy and will not succumb to forbidden pleasures, the King sends a harlot as His agent to tempt his son. By testing the son, the King is gladdened that his son proves himself to be a moral individual, obedient to his Father's commands. The Zohar goes on to explain that, while one might think otherwise, the harlot herself is also worthy of praise. This is because in performing her task, she both fulfills the will of the King and causes great good to come to the prince. Thus the Satan is referred to as "very good."

Following Satan's testing to prove man's worthiness, he stands as witness in the heavenly court. R. D. Frisch, in his commentary on the Zohar "Matok MiDvash" (Terumah 163a), explains that the Satan enters heaven with the soul of man and testifies as to how the individual overcame himself. This is precisely what Arlington Steward explains in the dialogue with the agent Martin Teague:

Martin T.: What happens when you've completed the tests?
A. Steward: I submit the data to my employers and then your fate rests in their hands.

That is, he passes on the results of the tests, testifying, as it were, to the heavenly court wherein the final judgment is made, not by him, but by the Judge of all man. A similar reference is made at the end of the movie when Norma asks Arlington Steward, "Can't I be forgiven?" He answers, simply, "I don't know." For indeed, his job is tempter and accuser but not Judge.

His Name

Arlington Steward is the "Steward," or servant, from "Arlington", recalling the state of Virginia where the story takes place. The area of Arlington, Virginia makes up part of Washington DC, and notably contains the Pentagon, the facility charged with national security. That Arlington Steward is in charge of national security is further noted by his association with the National Security Agency (NSA). Thus his name connotes that he is in charge of the security of the nation in the deepest way possible – in charge of testing man's moral mettle, which he makes clear is critical for the security of society.

His Face

A. Steward: Please don't let my appearance bother you. I am not a monster. I am just a man with a job to do.

Arlington Steward's face represents the dichotomy that is the Devil. One side is disfigured with a repugnant scar indicative of the unsavory job which he must carry out. The other side of his face is handsome, calm and collected, projecting a sense of wisdom and purpose in line with the divine nature of his task.[23]

Nose Bleed Employees

Throughout the movie various people are shown having nosebleeds; but it isn't until the end of the movie that we are given an insight as to the nature of these nosebleeds:

Arthur:	Test subjects' free will… frontal lobe hemorrhage?
Jeffrey Carnes:	That's his weakness. He still doesn't know how to get into their heads without them noticing.
Arthur:	The nosebleeds?
Jeffrey Carnes:	You see lots of them?
Arthur:	Yeah.

The frontal lobe of the brain is believed to serve as the moral center of the brain.[24] As such, when one sins he has given in to the Satan, and in effect, allowed the Satan to take up residence within him, most significantly in his frontal lobe. The Zohar explains that "the spirit of impurity tempts the heart with allurements in order to take up its abode with him" (Terumah 128a);[25] and in so doing, "this accuser [i.e., the Satan] gets strengthened and overpowering when the wicked obey him, and thus he controls them" (Terumah 163a)." Consequently Arlington Steward gives expression to this power saying, "I have many employees."

Consequences

The movie emphasizes the fact that man's actions have consequences, as Arlington Steward explains, "There are always consequences." Each woman who chose to use the box to get money, and thus killed another, was killed herself. Though we don't always see the direct relation between deed and consequence, tradition teaches that God runs the world in precise "measure for measure" fashion. The Mishna (Avot 2:6) explains that upon seeing a skull floating on the water's surface Hillel exclaimed, "As you drowned others so you were drowned and in the end those who drowned you will drown." R. Kehati (on Avot 2:6) explains that everyone who does evil is paid "measure for measure" as the Gemara (Sotah 8b) states, "In the measure that a man measures it is meted out (literally, "measured") to him."

As Norma killed, so must she be killed. Suicide is not an option, as much as she would like it to be. For, while the act of pushing the button felt quite impersonal, murder is murder – an act which finds no expiation other than by the bloodshed of the murderer. "[Bloodshed] pollutes the land, and the land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it except by the blood of him who shed it" (Num. 35:33).

So fundamental is the prohibition against bloodshed that it is the first criminal admonition in the Bible: "Whoever sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed; for in His image did God make man" (Gen. 9:6). It is one of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shall not murder" (Ex. 20:12). And it is part of the divine order: "God will require a reckoning for human life, of every man for that of his fellow man" (Gen. 9:5).

Perhaps this is the message of the Santa Claus ringing his bell in the middle of the street. Santa Claus stops the car of the runaway murderer which is then hit by a truck consequently killing the murderer. That is, jolly old Santa Claus causes the death of the murderer, thus suggesting that religion, though full of love, joy and charitableness, demands justice no less.

The measure-for-measure dynamic is brought to bear with great weight in the final juxtaposition of scenes where the pushing of the button by the next couple (i.e., the Wellers) is interleaved with the tragic murder of Norma. Depicted graphically is the unfathomable gap between the seemingly simple act of pushing the button and the gravity of the consequence – as the scene from the Weller wife smirking upon pushing the button is cut to the deeply powerful and emotionally painful death of Norma.

Free Will

The final scene shows the Weller wife pressing the button as Arthur is saying his last goodbye, following which he then shoots Norma in the heart. This raises the

question of free will. Did the Weller wife cause the murder of Norma Lewis or did Arthur choose to kill her? And if Arthur intended to kill his wife anyway, did his prior decision to do this somehow cause the Weller wife to choose to press the button?

The answer is that man is interconnected in ways far deeper than he can imagine. The mystical text Reisheet Hochmah (ch. 14) likens a nation to a taut rope made of a great many individual strands—"when one end of the rope is moved the whole rope is correspondingly moved."[26] Each of our free will decisions impacts on others in unfathomable ways. If one person chooses to act selflessly, such an act can produce a metaphysical change in the world, thus influencing others to be similarly disposed to choose selflessly. Kabbalistic writings teach that all of man's free will activities (i.e., thought, speech and deed) put in motion transcendental forces which in turn affect the physical world itself.[27]

Adam Follows Eve

As mentioned, in Chapter Three of the book of Genesis, the snake tempts Eve who then eats from the Tree. Subsequently, she makes the temptation known to her husband and he too then eats from the Tree. Both individuals make the choice to place egocentric desires above moral demands. But there is a clear difference in the act of Eve versus that of Adam.

> And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat.
>
> (Gen. 3:6).

Whereas Eve sees the aesthetic allure of the object of her desires and thereby eats, man only eats because his wife gave him to do so. He is certainly no less morally culpable, but there is clearly a distinction between the way the two come act as they do.

This fateful interaction between Adam and Eve is given expression in the scene when Arthur and Norma come home from the party, and again in the final scene when they must decide on Norma's life. Upon returning home in the evening, Norma tells Arthur to turn the tree lights off. Arthur sees this as extinguishing what the tree stands for, i.e., the spirit of love and kindness, and in the greater symbolic context of the Tree of Knowledge, it is the extinguishing of moral obedience. Norma argues that leaving it on is hazardous to their health – she is concerned for their own welfare. Generally, such concern is reasonable; however, taken in the context of the dilemma of the box, it emphasizes her

placing concern for the self over the morality that the tree represents. Subsequently Arthur, while having made his claim that the tree lights should stay on, complies with her request and turns them off. Like Adam's eating from the tree, Arthur's act is one of acquiescence to his wife. In this case Arthur has extinguished the moral light of the tree in favor of personal considerations.

This relationship is again brought to bear with greater consequence in the final scene when the couple must decide on Norma's life. The initial temptation made by the snake to Eve, is suggested by Arlington Steward offering the box to Norma, who then pushes the button, causing the murder of another. The choice of one million dollars versus another human life is a stark moral choice for which the answer is clear – no life may be taken. Yet, as depicted in the movie, selfish desire coupled with the sheer anonymity of the deed weigh heavily on man's decision center.

But for Adam's sin we must wait until the end of the movie. Upon failing the first test, a second, more tormenting choice is offered: to raise a child that has lost two of his primary physical senses or commit murder. This is not an easy choice, but again, murder has no justification, even in this context. Ultimately, as in the Garden of Eden, where the woman exerted emotional pressure,[28] the man acquiesces to commit the immoral deed.[29] Now the man, like the woman, has brought death into the world.

The second case may seem to have an element of noble sacrifice to it, but it is murder nonetheless. If a couple has a child that is lacking one of its senses, there can be no justification for one spouse to murder the other to heal the child. Indeed, even saving a life at the expense of another's life is unjustifiable (San. 74a). Murder is one of the three cardinal sins one must not commit, even at the cost of one's own life.

The movie makes clear that the second choice placed before the couple is no less a test of their moral character than the first: "If they fail at the first test, they will be given another test." Furthermore, the rationale that Norma gives for demanding her own death is selfish, for she does not say, "It's not fair that our child suffers" but rather, "I can't see him like that."

Visiting the Sins of the Parents on the Children

Given the emphasis on "measure for measure" justice and moral consequences, it is hard to understand the justness behind the physical impairment of the nine-year-old child, Walter. At first blush we might suggest that the child is made deaf and blind in that he was in some way culpable for hearing and seeing things he was not allowed. While he did watch a TV show with blatant sexual innuendo, was overly inquisitive regarding the box and said he doesn't believe

in Santa Claus, such acts seem petty in the face of the horrific punishment of losing both sight and hearing. Furthermore, according to Jewish law, a child below the age of maturity (12 for a girl, 13 for a boy) is not legally punishable.

Rather, I would like to suggest that Walter's impairments are a demonstration of the idea that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children. At the outset of the Ten Commandments we read: "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me" (Ex. 20:4; Deut. 5:9).[30]

Rashi (Ex. 20:4) explains that God is here named a "jealous God", indicating that He will not forgive the sin of idol worship.[31] But whereas Rashi writes that the offspring are only punished "if they continue in the ways of their forebears", Rambam (Guide, I:54) states that punishment for the sins of the parents is carried out "even though they are minors, for they are part of their parents and grandparents."[32]

Now, while Norma and Arthur do not actually indulge in idol worship per se, there is figurative idol worship. And while the trappings of idol worship may include bowing or burning incense, at the root of the sin of idol worship, of "serving other gods", is accepting the foreign deity's morality. A "god" is only significant inasmuch as he defines good and evil. Thus when one makes a choice based on egocentric desires, when one goes after one's heart and removes God as the moral arbiter, one has in essence "served other gods." The movie conveys the idea that for the sin of idol worship, albeit figurative, God visits the sins of the parents on the children.

Regarding the punishment itself, here too there is a message of moral significance. Hearing and seeing are the two primary senses with which man acquires information. They are mentioned on several occasions in the Bible as being the medium through which man gains knowledge of God – especially concerning the Ten Commandments where it says, "Out of heaven He made thee to *hear* His voice, that He might instruct thee; and upon earth He made thee to *see* His great fire; and thou didst hear His words out of the midst of the fire" (Duet. 4:36).[33] It could be that the physical impairment of these senses in the child symbolizes the figurative impairment in the parents. That is, just as they did not see God's signs nor listen to His word, so these senses are now impaired in their offspring.[34]

Two Trees

When Norma leaves the wedding, she goes from the warm, well-lit, palatial building out into the cold dark night, screaming for her son. As she stands at the

doorway, behind her stand two large trees. This could be representative of her leaving the Garden of Eden, the wedding "hall" of Adam and Eve, with its Tree of Knowledge and Tree of Life now inaccessibly behind her and the cold, post-sin world before her.

Norma's Foot

That Norma has an injured foot, causing her to walk in an unstable manner is an expression of her moral instability. Arthur's attempt to give it stability by giving her a prosthesis reflects his desire to help her gain balance, both physically and morally. Indeed during their discussions whether to push the button or not, Norma tries to rationalize the act and Arthur tries to dissuade her. Unfortunately, the prosthesis, like his arguments, do little to calibrate her moral compass, as seen by her decision in the final test.

Water

The Bible (Gen. 1:6-8) describes Creation wherein the upper waters were separated from the lower waters:

> And God said: 'Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.' And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

The Talmud (Hagiga 12a) explains that "Heaven", in Hebrew called *shamayim*, can be read *sham mayim*, "Over there", i.e., in the heavens, "is water".

Water in the movie is employed in a number of situations to be symbolic of heaven. When Arthur is in the library and must choose between salvation and damnation he enters a water column. [35] Upon entering it, he passes through a tunnel and reaches white light, suggesting a passage to heaven.[36] When he returns to the world he is encapsulated in water – from above – like the heavens themselves. He later describes to Norma his encounter with Heaven in euphoric terms, "a place that words can't describe."

Water is again used in the pool of the motel. There it serves as a "gateway" to the next world. Walter is taken there and returns soaking wet and physically impaired. Apparently he has been "reborn" with a modified physical body.

Conclusion

Arlington Steward: I understand that you admire the writings of John Paul Sartre. Perhaps these words will comfort you: There are two ways you can enter the final chamber, free or not free, the choice is ours.

The Mishna (Avot 4:16) puts it like this, "This world is like an entrance hall leading to the World-to-Come. Prepare yourself in the entrance hall so that you will be able to enter the banquet hall."

How is one to prepare? How does one "enter the final chamber 'free'"? Clearly a reversal of the choice made by Adam and Eve is required in the form of returning the function of moral arbiter back to God and ceasing to serve the idols of our heart's desires. One must accept God's word as given in the Bible as our moral guide. And, as R. Akiva explained, at the center of this guide lies the great principle, "Love your neighbor as yourself". It is imperative that we strive to live by this simple rule. This is the ultimate message of the movie, as articulated by Arlington Steward: "If you human beings are unable or unwilling to sacrifice individual desires for the greater good of your species, you have no chance for survival."

Notes

Edited by Jennifer Mayer

[1] For details see: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0362478/

[2] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0362478/plotsummary; http://www.darko-entertainment.com/index1.php

[3] Perhaps this is in part why it received less than enthusiastic reviews. The other reason may be, as one critic put it: The original premise, beautiful in its simplicity, takes a turn for the absurd by overdosing on science fiction (http://www.cinemablend.com/dvds/The-Box-4301.html).

[4] Quoted in R. M. Schuchardt, "What is the Matrix?", *Taking the Red Pill* (Texas, 2003), p.10.

[5] Quoted in Kelemen, Lawrence, *Permission to Believe*, [Michigan: Targum Press, 1990], p. 62.

[6] Ibid.

[7] The link to this story is made in that Arlington's wife in the library tells Arthur, "I am Clymene" – who is in Greek mythology Prometheus' mother. This would make Arlington Steward, who is her husband, the Greek Titan Iapetus, known as "the Titan of Mortal Life" – and indeed, Arlington Steward plays on man's very mortality.

[8] Character Garcin in *No Exit* says of hell: "… all those eyes intent on me. Devouring me."

[9] As for example in the scene when Norma's mother tells Arthur, "That was a really nice thing you did for Norma. I don't know what she would do without you." Arthur: "Well I don't know what I would do without her."

[10] It should be made clear that, while man is born with a *tzelem Elokim*, he can choose to ignore it and thus violate basic morality; conversely man can, and should, develop his *tzelem Elokim* by learning moral codes.

[11] The Midrash (Ber. R. 15:7) does offer possible fruit trees, but it does so to derive some additional moral lessons.

[12] R. Hirsch, Gen. 2:9, p. 58-9.

[13] Worthy of note is that, while the Arthur notes, that the box is sophisticated "they spent a long time designing it", and it is made of the finest materials, "anodized steel", the box itself is simply from "wood".

[14] R. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart* [Toras HoRav Foundation, KTAV, NJ, 2003], p.43. And even though the movie depicts Norma's desire for the money in order that she can give to her family, this is still "selfish" in that it is all about her family at the expense of another human being.

[15] Soloveitchik, p.47. Similarly R. Hirsch (Gen. 2:16, p.62).

[16] R. Hirsch (Gen. 2:9) describes it in the positive, "There is only one condition for the earth to be able to form a paradise for us, and the condition is this: that we only call that good, which God stamps as being good, and bad, which He declares as such. But not that we leave the decision between good and bad to our senses."

[17] And it is worthy of note that Arlington Steward always made his proposal to the woman of the house.

[18] This appears to be a reference to the New Testament statement: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18).

[19] Gen. R. 20:4; Sotah 9b; Zohar (Hayei Sara, 126a); Rashi (Gen. 3:1).

[20] Zohar (Terumah 163a; Bo 32b-33b).

[21] Angels do not eat. And when they do, as when they visited Avraham (Gen. 18:8), the Gemara (Baba Metzia 86b) explains: it is only for show.

[22] Also the Zohar (Ber. 28b) that there is more than one Samael.

"Kill me if you like, they will simply send another to replace me."

"I submit the data to my employers…"

"My employers will be forced to expedite your extinction."

The Zohar (Bo 32b) explains that in giving Satan permission to move against Job, "permission was given to the powers [plural] of the "other side".

[23] Appropriately, one critic wrote of actor Frank Langella's performance of Arlington Steward, "[he] supplies the audience with a character that is at once eerie and unsettling while also compassionate, endearing and mystifying" (http://literaryramblings.com/blog/?p=22).

[24] See for example: The Journal of Neuroscience, April 1, 2002, "The Neural Correlates of Moral Sensitivity: A Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging Investigation of Basic and Moral Emotions", (http://neuro.cjb.net/cgi/content/abstract/22/7/2730).

[25] Similarly Ber. 47b.

[26] See also Talmud Shvuot 39a.

[27] See R. M. Luzzatto (Derech Hashem, 1:5:4-6); R. Hayim MiVolozhin (Nefesh HaHayim, 1:3).

[28] "His heart was lured by her words" Seforno (Gen. 3:6). See also Alshich (Gen. 3:6).

[29] Indeed God punishes Adam, "because you listened to the voice of your wife" (Gen. 3:17).

[30] Also Exodus 34:6-7; Numbers 14:18. In contrast see Deuteronomy 24:16 for which the Gemara (Ber. 7a) answers that children are punished when they cling to the deeds of the fathers, otherwise they are not so punished.

[31] Similarly Rambam (Guide, I:54), Ramban (Ex. 20:4) explain the application only to idol worship.

[32] This opinion is supported by the Yalkut Shimoni (Ruth, 600) which explains that up until 13 children bear the sins of the parents, but upon coming of age, they are judged according to their deeds. (See also endnote 34).

[33] See also Deut. 5:20; 29:3.

[34] Interestingly, the Levush (see Be'er Heiteiv, 225: 4) explains that the blessing a parent makes upon his child coming of age "*baruch sh'patarani m'onsho shel zeh*" is to express the relief that the child will no longer be punishable for the sins of the parents.

[35] Interestingly, of the three water columns for Arthur to choose from, it is water column number two that leads to Heaven. Perhaps this is an allusion to the heavenly waters which were separated on day two of creation.

[36] See R. Moody, *Life after Life* [Bantam Books, NY, 1976].

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"The Box" is a horror film in the true sense of the word for it provides a look at man from the horrifying perspective of the Devil. Completely bloodless, the tension is developed in Hitchcock-like fashion, building on the fears of our own psyche. The plotline follows the moral dilemma placed before one couple and the consequences their actions have on themselves and all of humanity. Laden with deep symbolism and references to myth, classical literature and the Bible, this film provides invaluable insights into the human condition. The film's ultimate message is perhaps best summed up by the character Arlington Steward, "if you human beings are unable or unwilling to sacrifice individual desires for the greater good of your species, you have no chance for survival."

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About the author

Mois Navon has successfully bridged the secular and the religious, the modern and the traditional, into a cohesive and complementary whole. Growing up on the beaches of California as an avid surfer, it wasn't until his years studying for a degree in Computer Engineering at UCLA that he honed his logical reasoning and analytical thinking. During this time he was also introduced to the Arts which inspired a personal journey to spirituality. While obtaining a minor in Art History, he learned that man speaks profoundly in the language of symbol. Raised in a traditional home, it didn't take long before he began to find philosophical depth in the symbols of the Torah and build them into logical constructs in essay form. From that time on he dedicated himself to delving into Jewish Thought, writing prolifically and teaching passionately on the subject. His journey brought him to Israel where he obtained rabbinic ordination, and where he continues to write and teach – all while maintaining a notable career as a Computer Engineer.