Correspondence

T.E. Lawrence and the Zionists

To the Editors:

Martin Gilbert's "history by quotation" misses the main point about T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Judea," Azure 38, Autumn 2009). Contrary to Gilbert's claim, Lawrence was not a Zionist, nor did he have any great affection for the Palestinians. Rather, the desert Beduin exemplified his romantic ideal of the pristine, unspoilt Arab. A number of facts: Lawrence prepared the Cairo settlement—that is, the elevation of the Beduin Hashemites to rulers of the Arab world, albeit beholden to the British—and Churchill implemented it. The decision to appoint Abdullah as emir of Transjordan was not premeditated, but taken ad hoc as a desperate measure to stop his quixotic march to Damascus (designed to avenge his brother Feisal's eviction by the French). Churchill sealed the deal with Abdullah during several meetings with him in Jerusalem at the end of March 1921. In so doing, Churchill cut off Transjordan from the area originally allotted to the Zionists for their Jewish National Home—against the protests of the Zionists, first and foremost Chaim Weizmann.

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The Coen Brothers

To the Editors:

Benjamin Kerstein, in his review of the Coen brothers' film *A Serious Man* ("A Job Badly Done," Azure 39, Winter 2010), laments that the movie "appears, in the end, to have nothing particularly thought-provoking to say." Mr. Kerstein is disappointed that the film says so little to him, and yet is able to fill several pages elaborating on this nothingness. True, the answers to protagonist Larry Gopnik's problems may not be served up on a silver platter. Yet far from being "a depressingly cruel and empty film," it makes us ponder fundamental questions such as: How is a man to live a good life? What does a man have to do to be taken seriously? How does a man build a persona and a presence that command respect? While Kerstein's observations about the film are not necessarily inaccurate, his

conclusions regarding its worth are simply unjust.

We shouldn't be fooled by the Coen brothers' offhand remark that the prologue "has nothing whatsoever to do with the rest of the movie." In fact, the thesis of the film (which is anything but "vague," as Kerstein would have us believe) is encapsulated in the prologue. Everything we need to know is there, in the Yiddish dialogue, the wife's eye-rolling, and the triangle of relations created by Dora (the wife), Velvel (her husband), and Traitle Groshkover (the visitor). Indeed, the Yiddish dialogue itself is far richer than the subtitles reveal. Clearly, this is not the first time that Velvel has let his wife down, and clearly, too, it is his way to write off his failures by belittling her feelings. He, like his counterpart Larry Gopnik, is an ineffective and disappointing husband, and the results are tragic. Later in the film, when Larry is marking physics papers and his wife, Judith, tells him she wants a divorce, Larry, too, must feel as if he has been stabbed in the chest with an ice pick. But what does Larry do? He keeps on marking papers.

The Coen brothers have selected the suburban Minnesota Jewish community of their childhood as the context for their existential questions, but this is not a "vicious satire of Jewish American life," as Kerstein claims. Rather, it is a look at the fallout from North American society's obfuscation of gender roles and the unclear expectations it has of males growing up today.

Say what you want about Gopnik's neighbor, but he has a firm grip on his masculinity and on his role as father to his son. He does not "despise" Gopnik on account of antisemitism. Rather, he despises the way Larry has failed as a father. Indeed, Larry's family is, for most intents and purposes, fatherless. This explains the behavior of his children, who are completely self-absorbed: The daughter steals money for a nose job, the son ends up stoned at his bar mitzva. And their parents? Oblivious. It is interesting that when the father of the Korean student arrives unannounced at the Gopniks' home to give Larry a hard time, it is the neighbor who comes to Larry's aid, asking, "Is this man bothering you?" Manly camaraderie is something beyond Larry Gopnik's ability to either demonstrate or understand. Unfortunately, Kerstein mistakes such camaraderie for "ill temper."

It is easy to criticize the person who acts. But inaction can be just as damaging. Larry's mantra, "I didn't do anything," does not provide a solid foundation on which to build a family. Case in point: Larry allows his brother Arthur to add fuel to the

family's self-destructive fire. Arthur appears to suffer from schizophrenia, and it is significant that the same soundtrack plays when Arthur appears as when the *dybbuk* enters Dora and Velvel's home. Arthur is in need of assistance: medical, social, financial, and legal. But the Gopnik family is in no position to provide it. That Larry fails to see and act on this fact speaks to his inefficacy.

Far from sudden or inexplicable, then, the implosion of Larry's life is wholly predictable. Life in post-World War II North America was good for everyone, including the Jews. Jobs and opportunities were plentiful. Avail yourself of the abundance, so the thinking went, and a successful family life will follow, without much effort or attention. Larry is the product of these wishy-washy societal expectations in general, and of the ones made of men in particular. He is—Jewishness aside—a passive man, husband, father, brother, and neighbor. He is a caricature. In 1967, Larry is already a loser; in 2010, his life is the end-product of the disastrous attempts to reformulate gender roles so as to strip men of their masculinity.

His wife's lover, by contrast, may be sleazy, but he *is* a serious man. Sy Ableman has a manly presence and manly hobbies, such as golfing. He is a capable man—certainly capable of impressing on Judith that she will have a complete, fulfilled life with him. Sy even writes anonymous letters to the tenure and promotions committee, showing that he can and will act to promote his self-interest. We don't have to like what he does, but no one can accuse Sy of passivity.

If it "seem[s] as if the entire world is conspiring against him, wreaking havoc on his already frayed nerves," it is because Larry can't or won't act, and if he is serious, it is about the wrong things. For example, he comes alive at the blackboard while teaching physics. Larry is serious about physics, and who (as Sari Lennick, who plays Judith, says in the film's commentary) wants to be married to that?

As far as his dealings with Mrs. Samsky, his sunbathing-in-the-nude neighbor, are concerned, Larry is provided with yet another opportunity to put on his little-boy hat and pretend that he has no idea what is going on. He can't even proposition her effectively.

Finally, Larry is wrong to expect any of the three rabbis he approaches to solve his problems. Just as Job had to brace himself "like a man" (Job 38:3), Larry needs to pull himself together. And nothing in his upbringing seems to have provided him with the skills, the wherewithal, or the license to do so. Larry's aggressive impulses seem to come out only in his dreams; awake, he is the Invisible Man. His

own family ignores him at the dinner table, speaking about him as if he weren't there. Larry allows Sy Ableman to enter his home and seduce his wife. He abdicates all control over his life before our incredulous eyes, all without so much as raising his voice. What viewer isn't embarrassed to have witnessed such a meek surrender?

Kerstein is disappointed that Larry's existential problem isn't solved with a tidy speech at the film's end. But the Coen brothers set themselves apart from other filmmakers—in a good way—by refraining from providing the viewer with a trite story line or a trite ending. Why does God make us ask the questions when we are unable to come up with the answers? Because the questions lie at the heart of the human condition. And it is these questions that make *A Serious Man* a seriously good movie.

Carol McNeil
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Benjamin Kerstein responds:

I thank Carol McNeil for her thoughtful and impassioned response to my review of *A Serious Man*. I regret, however, that I cannot agree with most of what she has to say. I think, in fact, that McNeil is imposing her own concerns and values onto a film that by and large does not contain them. Her ability to do this, and the ease with which she has done so, would appear to bear out my assertion that *A Serious Man* is essentially an empty film, upon which the viewer can impose whatever interpretation he wishes.

We see this in the very beginning of McNeil's letter, in which she seems to find great relevance and significance in the film's prologue, *despite* the filmmakers' own assertion that it is completely meaningless. Moreover, she asserts that the Yiddish dialogue is "far richer than the subtitles reveal." This may well be the case, but given that very few theatergoers today understand Yiddish, the overwhelming majority of viewers—myself included—would never know it. If the Coens had intended this sequence to be anything more than an elaborate pantomime, surely they would not have engaged in such deliberate obscurantism.

McNeil does make a fascinating point about the "obfuscation of gender roles and the unclear expectations [society] has for males" in North America. I hope someday to see a film on that subject, which is a very important and pressing one, but *A Serious Man* is not that film. In fact, I do not think the movie makes any general point about North American life, mainly because it is impossible to separate it from the Jewish milieu in which it is set. To the extent that

the non-Jewish world appears at all in the film, it is as something alien, threatening, and often simply inexplicable. It seems to me that any attempt to remove the film from the closed, minority world it depicts is doomed to failure.

It is true, however, that the film does deal with the issues of masculinity and its discontents, albeit in a Jewish context. As I pointed out in my review, the portrayal of Larry Gopnik, while unrelentingly cruel, nonetheless scores some legitimate satirical points against a certain type of American Jewish masculinity, or lack thereof. I must confess, however, that I disagree completely with McNeil's conclusions on this subject. She seems to feel that because Larry is a passive, uncomplaining, ineffective man, he essentially deserves all the horrible things that happen to him, and characters such as his adulterous wife and the duplicitous friend who steals her away cannot be blamed for their treatment of him.

This is a point of view that I can only describe as somewhat disturbing. Larry's wife may be bored and discontented, but this does not justify the callousness with which she demands that Larry end their marriage. His friend Sy Ableman may be a man of action who takes what he wants, but this does not give him the right to covet another man's wife and destroy his family. Moreover, I do not think that Larry is nearly as useless a person as McNeil portrays him to be. He does not seem to be neglectful of his children or his brother, and while he may not know precisely how to help them, he certainly wants to. In the same way, his estrangement from his wife seems to be less a product of his indifference than the result of her already having an affair with another man.

As for the rhetorical question of who wants to be married to a man who is "serious about physics," this strikes me as an anti-intellectual cliché that not only denigrates the life of the mind—without which we would all still be languishing in the Dark Ages—but simply ignores historical fact. The recently revealed extent of Einstein's success with women, to give only one example, would seem to demonstrate that a great many women find brains just as attractive as brawn. Larry's wife may not be one of them, but if this is the case, the problems in their marriage would be the result of a bad match, not the exclusive fault of her husband's.

It may be that Larry is wishy-washy and effeminate in some ways. But he is also a kind, intelligent, and compassionate person who wants to do the right thing whenever possible. This is also, I think, a kind of action and a kind of manhood. The "manliness" McNeil proposes in its place is

a caricature and, I fear, a dangerous one. She seems, on this point at least, to subscribe to a quasi-Darwinian "might makes right" brand of morality, the repercussions of which are not pleasant to contemplate. Unfortunately, it also seems to be one to which the Coens themselves subscribe, and the ruthless cruelties they inflict upon Larry throughout the film seem to be more of a punishment for his good characteristics than a result of his shortcomings.

This is why I must disagree with McNeil's final point, in which she claims that my disappointment with the film stems from my desire for it to end with a neat solution to Larry's dilemma. "Why does God make us ask the questions when we are unable to come up with the answers?" she writes. "Because the questions lie at the heart of the human condition. And it is these questions that make *A Serious Man* a seriously good movie." Indeed it would, if the film did in fact pose this question. McNeil may well struggle with it, but *A Serious Man* does not. Indeed, as far as I can discern, the film poses no questions at all. Instead, it presents a kind of emotional pornography, the degrading and degraded spectacle of the slow evisceration of Larry Gopnik.

What bothered me most about the film's conclusion, however, was not its lack of an explanatory speech or some kind of pat solution to Larry's problems. A film need not end in such a didactic fashion in order to be taken seriously. The great Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, for example, ended his film *Ran*, an epic reimagining of *King Lear*, with nothing more than a shot of a blind man standing at the edge of a precipice, framed by the setting sun. Without words, without questions or answers, Kurosawa encapsulated a two-and-a-half-hour meditation on old age, war, family, betrayal, and man's inhumanity to man into a single image that is both an allegory and a lamentation for the entire human condition. *A Serious Man* contains nothing of this sort. It simply presents its cruelties, has a good laugh, and then ends. The ease with which viewers like McNeil can and do see what they want to see in this film testifies not, I think, to the profundity of such an endeavor, but rather to its overwhelming poverty.

Israel's Foreign-Relations Problem

To the Editors:

To be sure, the behavior Marla Braverman describes in "A State in Need of a Spine" (Azure 39, Winter 2010) reflects misapplied international relations—the "war without."

But there is another psychological (and hence, spiritual) dimension of Israel's impolitic responses to rogue states, one that reflects misapplied intranational relations—the "war within." Quite simply, Israelis have a tendency to either underreact or overreact in their interpersonal relations. In the field of electronic communications, they excel; in face-to-face communications, however, they are sorely lacking. One often has to be a mindreader to fathom their intentions. Much more attention needs to be paid to enhancing basic communication skills at home if there is to be any improvement overseas.

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