

The In-Flight Holocaust Flick

By Robert Rabinowitz

The most stunningly inappropriate in-flight movie I think I have ever seen was Apollo 13, screened as we flew through very heavy turbulence on a stormy night over the Alps. Each swoop and swell of the plane disturbingly coincided with further disaster for the astronauts stranded in their tin can several thousand miles above the Earth.

My amazement at the aesthetic and moral sensibilities of the people who choose in-flight movies was increased recently aboard a transatlantic flight that had Roberto Bernigni's *Life is Beautiful* as its main feature. I saw the movie soon after its initial release. It was at once a terribly uncomfortable but quite beautiful experience that moved me to tears and rendered me mostly silent for a good part of the evening afterward. I could not face watching the movie again on the plane, even if I was sitting directly in front of the screen. I left the airline headphones in their plastic wrapper and started reading my book with excessive concentration.

I soon found myself, however, watching not the movie, but the reactions of my fellow passengers. Although I was convinced that it was inappropriate to show a Holocaust movie on a plane flight, a feeling began to grow in me that the decision to show the movie somehow created a duty for my fellow passengers to watch it. Of course, the comic first half of the movie, despite the disturbing, swelling undercurrent of impending horrors, is relatively easy viewing. Things only really start heading toward the unbearable with the blunt shift into the concentration camp. So I started a new round of surveillance when the concentration camp scenes began.

Within about ten minutes, the woman on the other side of the empty seat from me removed her headphones and began browsing a magazine. My feelings toward her, which were not altogether warm on account of a small tussle over seat pillows, turned distinctly cold. How could someone so casually switch from watching Jewish torment to flicking through advertisements for beauty products?

The insensitivity of the airline was further demonstrated when, in the agonizing closing half-hour of the movie, the crew began to serve dinner. Now I was watching my fellow passengers craning their necks to peer over or around the crew as they proceeded down the aisle handing out meals. One man several rows behind me, who had previously been transfixed by the movie, was suddenly captivated by the task of removing his cutlery from the brittle cellophane packet and snapping open his meal, forgetting about the man on the screen trying desperately to hide his child from Nazi soldiers. By the end of the movie, through smarting eyes--I had given up pretending not to watch the screen and I knew the plot so well from one viewing that I didn't need headphones--I could see just a few people valiantly persevering. To my satisfaction, at least two people to my left were wiping away tears as they ate.

My reflections on this experience have led me in a number of directions. Looking back, I seem to have felt a peculiar sense of personal responsibility for the movie. This gave me the license, as a representative of the Jews represented on screen, to make judgments about other passengers' reactions to it, in complete ignorance of their personal situation: whether they had seen it before, whether they had just ended a long-standing personal relationship, heard some bad or good news or were just plain tired from an exhausting business schedule. Indeed, anybody watching me might have judged me particularly heartless, reading my book, looking around and generally trying to avoid the drama unfolding on the screen not more than ten feet away. I also began to think about my experience as paradigmatic of a general phenomenon, the feeling of personal responsibility and sensitivity toward images of one's people (meant in the broadest sense) in the media. Did I have a responsibility to remain ever vigilant in order not to demonstrate indifference to the suffering of a particular group portrayed in a movie or show that I was watching?

After musing over this experience with my colleagues, one of them suggested that rather than demonstrating the airline's insensitivity, perhaps the incident reflected the conviction of its staff or owners that the issues raised by *Life is Beautiful* were so important that it needed to be shown at any opportunity. I was reminded of the story about a chasid and a mitnaged who were walking along together one morning. The mitnagdim were the opponents of the chasidim (the Hebrew word mitnaged literally means "one who opposes"), decrying their populism and emphasis on feeling over precise ritual practice. In contrast to the chasidim, the mitnagdim stressed the exclusive religious significance of intellectual study and punctilious observance of Jewish law. As the two walked together they passed a Jewish peasant, wearing tefillin, changing the wheel of his cart. The mitnaged expressed his anger that a Jew would carry out such an undignified and dirty task while wearing his holy tefillin. The chasid replied: "How great are God's people! Even while undertaking the most mundane of pursuits, they still wear their holy tefillin!"

The movie, like the tefillin to the mitnaged in the story, expressed something important about my own sense of who I am. And like the mitnaged, I therefore felt pain when somebody else appropriated the thing that symbolized my identity and treated it without the respect that I would have given to it. Part of me, so to speak, was exploited in a way

that I would not have countenanced had my permission been requested. But on reflection, and prompted by the chasidic suggestion of my colleague, I began to consider the implications of my initial response. What would a society look like in which permission had to be sought from some representative of any group whose symbols were portrayed in a movie? The most powerful developments in Judaism, ranging from early rabbinic Judaism to Zionism, renewed Judaism precisely by reinterpreting traditional symbols of identity. This does not entail that we treat the symbols of identity of other groups with disrespect. Nor does it mean that we should never protest when others abuse our symbols of identity. But it does mean that we have to risk--and perhaps even learn to celebrate--the pain that follows from accepting the freedom of our symbols of identity to be appropriated, creatively reinterpreted or even treated humorously by people with whom one deeply disagrees. I now feel myself bound to exclaim: "How great are God's people! Even while taking a tiring and uncomfortable journey, they still watch beautiful movies with deep moral messages!"

What is your response? Should airlines show Holocaust movies as in-flight entertainment? Is this something to celebrate? What responsibility do we have to respect the symbols of identity of other groups in society?