

A NIGHT AT THE OPERA OF TALMUDIC REASONING: THE “JEWISHNESS” OF JEWISH CINEMA

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THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

Jewish cinema is a hybrid concept which invites a multitude of interpretations. It can stand for an anthropological or cultural classification, as well as for historical or film-studies perspective. Inasmuch as the term exists independently as a meaningful cinematic classification, the attribution of Jewishness to cinematic work is still murky and ambivalent. For it is often unclear what we should take the word “Jewish” to mean, and, accordingly, what it have to say about cinema.

What, then, is *Jewish cinema*? Two complementary approaches might apply here. First, one can take the word “Jewish” to allude to *the cultural (or anthropological) identity (and heritage) of an agent (or agents), whose mark on the cinematic end-result is singular and distinctive*. In this category we might include filmmakers such as Woody Allen, Billy Wilder, Mel Brooks, Steven Spielberg, Joel and Ethan Coen, Roman Polanski and Fritz Lang, who are known to be Jewish. Similarly, the Jewish heritage of dominant leading men like Danny Kaye, Adam Sandler, Marty Feldman, Peter Sellers and Chaim Topol is sometimes detected in their performance. Or, we can think about some of the most influential film producers in the American film industry — most notably Louis B. Mayer, William Fox, Harry and Jack Warner, Irvin Thalberg and David O. Selznick — whose stronghold over mainstream Hollywood, at least in certain points in history, has flamed the anti-Semitic dread of a Jewish conspiracy.¹ This list of film-industry agents, whose (sometimes rather loose) ties with the Jewish faith or heritage exists on a personal level is anything but conclusive. Their arbitrary natures, as well as its historical fluidity, suggest that this list is an insufficient way to approach the definition in question. A different way is needed to make sense of the term.

Turning elsewhere for a concise definition, we may take the word “Jewish” to mark *a group of topics, issues and problems that are, in one way or another, distinctively “Jewish.”* The overarching title, “Jewish cinema,” unites films that engage such topics in their narrative,

plotline or settings. In this category we would include, first and foremost, films about the Holocaust as the major traumatic event in recent Jewish history. While maintaining the historical perspective, ancient and modern alike, a long list of meaningful events (constructing both personal Jewish-identity and national entity) may be added, such as anti-Semitism, community life in the diaspora, the founding of the state of Israel, etc. From a theological perspective, we may list the various rituals, traditions and practices that are synonymous with the Jewish faith, such as the Passover “Seder,” Shabbat dinner, ritual circumcision (bris), the Jewish wedding, as well as some “Jewish” artifacts (like the yarmulke, mezuzah, and the distinctive fashion choices of orthodox Jews). A partial list of films that tackle these “Jewish” related themes includes films like *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Barney’s version* (2010), as depictions of Jewish communal life and individual growth; *The Dybbuk* (1937) and *The Chosen* (1981), as delving into Jewish mysticism; *The History of the World: Part I* (1981) and *The Hebrew Hammer* (2003), as parodying Jewish traits and histories; *Schindler’s List* (1993) and *Jakob the Liar* (1999), as portrayals of Jews in the Holocaust; and *Pi* (1998), as a cinematic homage to Jewish intellectualism; to name a few. Nonetheless, the fact that we can construct such a list, of films with “Jewishly” related themes, is not, by itself, a sufficient reason for tagging films that introduce such themes as being distinctively “Jewish.” Just like we would not call a film that introduces a scene held in a church “a Christian film” — we should be reluctant to do the same when it comes to synagogues.

Despite objections, both approaches seem to supply a more-or-less adequate account of “Jewish cinema,” insofar as we understand the “Jewish” attribute to stand for a cultural classification. However, and as noted before, this classification employs a rather narrow sense of “Jewishness,” which naturally overlooks other important aspects of the term. A broader sense of the term might include other constituting elements, such as theology, jurisprudence and psychology. Because such elements are not “cultural” per-se, they are ultimately overlooked by the above mentioned accounts. It is therefore imperative that we broaden the scope of our investigation, in order to elicit a broader sense of “Jewishness,” and, accordingly, a more comprehensive account of Jewish cinema.

In this light, I wish to claim that such an account cannot reside in Jewish history and culture alone, and must therefore acknowledge other important traits, most notably that which is often referred to as “Jewish intellectualism.” In other words, I wish to suggest that the possibility of “Jewish cinema” lies well within a broader sense of “Jewishness,” which in-

cludes the distinctively unique attitude that Jewish thought takes towards logic and argumentation. Accordingly, the distinctive trademark of “jewish” film is not to be found in their Jewish-related content, nor is it to be found in the personal identity of those whose effort elicited their production. Instead, what fleshes out the most essential characteristic of “Jewish” films, epitomizes not only the Jewish tradition, but most importantly the metaphysical and epistemological uniqueness of Jewish argumentation. In what follows, I will pursue this distinction further, and will elicit a new definition of the term at hand.

REASONING BY CONTRARINESS:

THE TALMUDIC CANON AND ITS UNDERTAKINGS

The Magnum opus of Jewish law, the *Talmud* (both Palestinian and Babylonian versions), is a prime source for rabbinical argumentation and hermeneutics. By argumentation, I refer to the polemic nature of the text, and to the means by which the various schools of thought — most predominantly the rival schools of *Hillel* and *Shamai* — employ logic and argumentative techniques in their debates. Accordingly, by making reference to Talmudic hermeneutics, I adopt the assumption that Talmudic argumentation, in whatever way it is practiced, is always underlined by a set of guiding rules of interpretation and authority. That is to say, any argumentative strategy employed in the Talmud is at all times committed to a given (and theologically oriented) hermeneutical framework. This hermeneutical structure is governed by the Talmud’s main goal, namely, to supply an adequate way by which the scriptures should be extended and interpreted.²

The Talmudic hermeneutical system is anchored in seven (or, in other counting, thirteen) guiding rules, that determine the ways by which a position should be argued, as well as the proper authority which is liable to make arguments. This list is partly conventional and partly oriented to engage the unique requests of Jewish theology. The so-called conventional part validates the hermeneutical role of prioritized argumentative mechanisms, like syllogisms, analogies, warrants and justifications — all within the respective strengths (and weaknesses) of deductive and inductive reasoning. Complementarily, the theologically oriented part focuses on the authoritative roles (and limits) of the interpreter, as he engages the divine words of the scriptures, but, and even more importantly, as he engages other inter-

preters (contemporary peers and ancestors alike). This part of the list includes precedents, the roles of explicit meanings versus implicit warrants, and the authoritative role of majority positions (as opposed to minority ones).³

This hermeneutical structure has been subjected to an incisive scrutiny, mostly by contemporary scholars, but also, somewhat surprisingly, by the Talmudic text itself. The most indicative case in this regard appears in one of the Talmudic debates, famously known as *Tanuro shel Achnai* (“Achnai’s oven”) debate.⁴ A debate over the purity of a specialized oven leads to a dialogue between two contradictory positions, a minority position (held by Rabbi Eliezer) and a majority position (represented by Rabbi Joshua). The former presents numerous arguments in support of his position, only to be constantly rejected by the latter. Rabbi Eliezer, upon being rejected, turns away from the conventional Talmudic argumentative means and elicits the forces of nature in his defense. He commands a tree, a stream of water, a wall, and, finally, the mighty heavens, to defend his minority position. Whereas they all oblige, Rabbi Joshua stands firm in his refusal, claiming that the tree, the stream and the wall had no authority in the debate. Employing a similar stand towards the heavenly voice, Rabbi Joshua famously proclaimed that the scriptures, despite being a divine text, are an earthly matter, and so, it is for the majority opinion, and not for the heavens, to decide such matters. Upon hearing this, the heavenly voice exclaims with delight, “my sons have defeated me, my sons have defeated me!” Punished for his stubbornness, but mostly for his attempt to break away from the hermeneutical constraints, Rabbi Eliezer was excommunicated from the group.

I bring this fascinating tale in order to flesh out the severity of the Talmudic hermeneutical stand, but also, and even more importantly, in order to discuss the punishment imposed on Rabbi Eliezer. The punishment of excommunication is, undoubtedly, harsh. However, it fits the Talmudic lack of tolerance towards individuals who challenge the system and defy rabbinical authority. It is worth noting that Rabbi Eliezer is not the only one to suffer such a punishment. Though possibly unprecedented before his time, others, in later generations, were excommunicated, most notably a Talmudic interlocutor by the name of Rabbi Yirmiya. The circumstances surrounding the excommunication of Rabbi Yirmiya are of the utmost importance to our examination of Talmudic hermeneutics, and so I will recite them here.

Rabbi Yirmiya is mentioned as a predominant interlocutor in several Talmudic cases, where he is known for his vexing and somewhat provocative argumentative style. In one

such case, a young pigeon, found on the ground within fifty cubits from a cote, stirs a discussion regarding the nature and limits of private property.⁵ The debaters form a majority opinion, which sets the mark of fifty cubits as that which determines ownership (within this mark, the pigeon belongs to the owner of the cote; beyond this mark, it belongs to the finder). In addition, if the pigeon is found half-way between two cotes, it should equally be shared by the two cote-owners. Responding to this debate, Rabbi Yirmiya raises a question. Supposing, he asks, that one of the pigeon's feet is within fifty cubits and the other beyond. How do we decide who is its rightful owner? Still hanging in the air, the question is left unanswered. Instead, the Talmud is clear to mention, almost laconically, that Rabbi Yirmia was excommunicated for asking this question.

On face value, it seems that both the story of Rabbi Eliezer and the story of Rabbi Yirmiya follow a similar pattern regarding the structure of Talmudic reasoning. Both interlocutors challenge the hegemony of canonical hermeneutics, by pursuing a line of argumentation which exceeds and defies the rabbinical authority. As seemingly befit this stand, both are excommunicated from further debates. However — and here is where the two stories depart — Rabbi Yirmiya, after being excommunicated, is later readmitted to the group, and is even praised for his knowledge and wisdom. This dramatic change in plot overrides our previous notion regarding the similarity between the stories. What, one might ask, is the reason of this dramatic change of events? What is it that makes the challenge posed by Rabbi Eliezer so inexcusable? Similarly, what is it that makes the challenging style of Rabbi Yirmiya more tolerable (or, maybe, less threatening), to the point of readmission?

How are we to answer these questions? One possible way is to assume that the difference between the two challenges is a difference of degree, namely, that Rabbi Eliezer's challenge is more severe (and more harmful to the cause) than that of Rabbi Yirmiya. However, this assumption, whereas reasonable, does not give us a full account of the stories at hand. For if the difference between the stories is merely a difference of degree — why do we need the second story at all? In other words, if the moral of the story of Rabbi Eliezer is to set the boundaries of rabbinical authority, the story of Rabbi Yirmiya becomes redundant, as it supposedly aims for the same conclusion.

My point here is that the story of Rabbi Yirmiya advances something which is missing from the story of Rabbi Eliezer. Hence, the difference between the stories is not, as previously argued, a difference of degree, but a difference of type. Rabbi Eliezer challenges the

rabbinical authority by stepping outside the hermeneutical framework. To put it bluntly, his argumentative strategy dismisses the mere structure which sustains the Talmudic argumentation as a whole. Such an “external” attack on the fabrics of proper argumentation is, of course, irrefutably unacceptable. Therefore, and despite the fact that his position in the specific debate (regarding the purity of the oven) is ultimately the right position to take, his entire argumentation is categorically dismissed. As he refuses to accept the premises of canonical argumentation, the rabbinical authority has no option other than casting him away.

This, by far, is not the case with Rabbi Yirmiya. Though delving in smarty argumentation and border-line sophistry, the argumentative strategy of Rabbi Yirmiya *is kept within the margins of proper argumentation at all times*. Contrary to the “external” challenge of Rabbi Eliezer, the challenge of Rabbi Yirmiya is held “internally.” Rabbi Yirmiya accepts the premises of the discussion, and then confronts these premises with an absurd case, thus challenging the system from within instead of challenging it from the outside. I take this to be a fundamental difference between the two attacks on the majority opinion, a difference which is important enough not only to justify the different punishment, but also a good enough reason for the mere inclusion of Rabbi Yirmiya’s story in the Talmudic corpus. In other words, we need the story of Rabbi Yirmiya to teach us something we cannot learn from the “external” attack of Rabbi Eliezer, namely, the vital importance of self-reflection, constant examination, and intellectual engagement with the system itself (up to the point of *reductio ad absurdum*).⁶

The “editorial” decision to leave Rabbi Yirmiya’s question inside the Talmudic corpus is hence a strong indication for the self-reflective nature of its argumentative methodology. Talmudic argumentation has an undeniable hold on logic and syllogistic reasoning. But this would be the more congenial half of the glass. The second, more subversive (and much more demanding) half, amounts to self-criticism, robust intellectualism and to the constant reexamination of logical foundations. And we owe it all to Rabbi Yirmiya, and to his “smarty” questions (which are much more than that).⁷

Talmudic argumentation thus embodies a dynamic tension. On the one hand, it rests on the employment of mainstream logic to conduct its argumentative discourse. On the other hand, it acknowledges its own limits, and is constantly aware of the absurdities which inhabit therein. With this conclusion, I turn now to discuss the ways by which Jewish cinema earns its title.

JEWISH CINEMA AND TALMUDIC HERMENEUTICS:
THE CASE OF THE MARX BROTHERS

In a musing, aptly titled “Nothing Goes without Saying,” Stanley Cavell explores the unique philosophical sense exhibited in the films of the Marx brothers. This sense, which Cavell identifies as a “recurrent reflexiveness,” epitomizes the brothers’ thorough engagement with the limits and self-destructive forces of language. This engagement, which more often than not is reflected in the obsessive and manic mannerisms of the characters (especially, yet not exclusively, Groucho), is, according to Cavell, the most distinctive trademark of the Brother’s cinematic craft. In the films of the Marx brothers, characters are always in a manic “linguistic” mode, whether in form of an unstoppable stream of one-liners (Groucho), an incomprehensible and misleading dialect (Chico), or in form of an utter and intentional silence, combine with indistinguishable honking noises (Harpo). In short, the brothers, in whatever way they choose to express it, are constantly “thinking about words, to the end of words, in every word — or, in Harpo’s emphatic case, in every absence of words.”⁸

Noticing this, Cavell goes on to argue for the entanglement of this philosophical approach to language with the American ethos, most notably that which embodies the works of Emerson (as well as Brecht and Beckett) with the immigrant culture which founded the American dream.⁹ Whereas I find Cavell’s analysis illuminating, I wish to add what I take to be missing in his analysis, namely, the Marx Brother’s everlasting debt to their Jewish heritage. Their engagement with language, whereas very much “American” (in ways depicted by Cavell), is, even more so, a compulsively maniacal manifestation of the tension presiding in Talmudic logic. The rushed pace, the aesthetic turmoil, and the constant leap from one absurd dialogue to another, are all but a cinematic way to implement (and amplify) this tension. With this, the brothers challenge the most basic structure of sense and meaning, and, following that, the most substantial fabrics of proper argumentation.¹⁰

Take, for instance, a memorable sequence from *A Day at the Races* (1937). Chico, an ice cream vendor at the race track, is trying to fool a gullible customer (Groucho) with a “hot tip” on a horse. In order to decipher the tip (which comes up as a code), the customer is required to purchase a proper code book, then a master code book (to decipher the code-book), then a guide, then a sub-guide supplementary to the guide, and so on and so forth. By the time the scene ends, the vendor’s tray — which, for some odd reason, inhabited

code books instead of ice cream — is empty, the race is long over, the tip is worthless (as it has always been), and Groucho collapses under the unnecessary burden of superfluous books, that exhibit nothing but their own demolishing redundancy. Noticing this comic extravagance, Cavell describes this scene as “a scrupulous union, or onion, of semantic and monetary exchanges and deferrals to warm the coldest contemporary theorist of signs.”¹¹

As much as I concur with his assessment, the need to acknowledge the Talmudic heritage presiding in the scene is, in my mind, imperative.¹² The scene begins with the promise of a tip, a valuable insight to the upcoming horse race, a dream come true for gamblers and sports fans alike. However, as the tip (which supposedly triggers this scene) is long forgotten, we are immediately drawn to the redundancy (and circularity) of the framework which allows the tip to exist in the first place, namely, the coding and decoding mechanism (which seem to negate itself in every step of the way). The inspiring hope that the tip will finally be unveiled, and that the knowledge it encapsulates will be unleashed, turns up as a farce. Our expectations are defied, inasmuch as the entire realm by which we formulated these expectations is turned upside down. The practice of coding, recoding and decoding *ad-absurdum*, echoes, in its indispensable futility, the challenge of Rabbi Yirmiya to the hegemony of canonical Talmudic argumentation.

Many such zany sequences inhabit the films of the Marx brothers, from the famous mirror scene from *Duck Soup* (1933) to the packed cabin sequence from *A Night at the Opera* (1935). I wish to stay with this latter film, as it includes one of the most paradigmatic examples to the way by which the absurd spirit of Talmudic reasoning infiltrates and then conquer the argumentation of the brothers. In this scene, Groucho and Chico are negotiating a deal to sign an opera singer (which Chico supposedly represent) to perform in a new-York theatre (which Groucho supposedly owns). The brilliant dialogue, which is brought here in full, is a masterful adaptation of the complexity of Talmudic thinking:

GROUCHO: Here are the contracts. You just put his name at the top, and you sign at the bottom. No need of you reading that because these are duplicates.

CHICO: Yeah. Is a duplicate. Duplicates?

GROUCHO: I say, they're duplicates. Don't you know what duplicates are?

CHICO: Sure, those five kids up in Canada.



A Night at the Opera.

GROUCHO: I wouldn't know about that. I haven't been in Canada in years. Go ahead and read it.

CHICO: What does it say?

GROUCHO: Go on and read it.

CHICO: You read it.

GROUCHO: All right, I'll read it to you. Can you hear?

CHICO: I haven't heard anything yet. You say anything?

GROUCHO: I haven't said anything worth hearing.

CHICO: That's why I didn't hear anything.

GROUCHO: That's why I didn't say anything.

[...]

GROUCHO: Here we are. Now I've got it. Pay particular attention to this first clause because it's most important. It says, "The party of the first part shall be known in this contract... as the party of the first part." How do you like that? That's pretty neat, eh?

CHICO: No, it's no good.

GROUCHO: What's the matter with it?

CHICO: I don't know. Let's hear it again.

GROUCHO: "The party of the first part shall be known in this contract... as the party of the first part."

CHICO: Sounds a little better this time.

GROUCHO: It grows on you. Would you like to hear it once more?

CHICO: Just the first part.

GROUCHO: What? "The party of the first part"?

CHICO: No. The first part of "the party of the first part."

GROUCHO: It says, "The first part of the party of the first part... shall be known in this contract as the first part of the party..." "Shall be known in this contract..." Why should we quarrel about this? We'll take it out.

CHICO: Yeah. It's too long anyhow. Now what do we got left?

GROUCHO: I got about a foot and a half. It says, "The party of the second part shall be known in this contract... as the party of the second part."

CHICO: I don't know about that.

GROUCHO: Now what's the matter?

CHICO: I don't like the second party either.

GROUCHO: You should have come to the first party. We didn't get home till around 1 a.m. I was blind for three days.

CHICO: Why can't the first part of the second party... be the second part of the first party? Then you got something.

GROUCHO: Look, rather than go through that again, what do you say... [Tearing a piece of the contract] Fine. I've got something you're bound to like. You'll be crazy about it.

CHICO: No. I don't like it.

GROUCHO: You don't like what?

CHICO: Whatever it is, I don't like it.

GROUCHO: Don't let's break up an old friendship over a thing like that. Ready?

CHICO: Okay. [Tearing another piece of the contract] The next part, I don't think you're going to like.

GROUCHO: Your word's good enough for me. Is my word good enough for you?

CHICO: I should say not.

GROUCHO: That takes out two more clauses. [Tearing two more pieces of the contract] "The party of the eighth part..."

CHICO: No, that's no good.

GROUCHO: "The party of the ninth..."

CHICO: No, that's no good, too. [Tearing two more pieces of the contract] How is it my contract is skinnier than yours?

GROUCHO: I don't know, you must have been out on a tear last night. We're all set now, aren't we?

CHICO: Sure.

GROUCHO: Just you put your name down there, and then the deal is legal.

CHICO: I forgot to tell you, I can't write.

GROUCHO: That's all right, there's no ink in the pen. But it's a contract, isn't it?

CHICO: Sure.

GROUCHO: We've got a contract, no matter how small it is.

CHICO: Wait. What does this say here?

GROUCHO: That? That's the usual clause. That's in every contract. That just says, "If any of the parties... participating in this contract... are shown not to be in their right mind... the entire agreement is automatically nullified."

CHICO: I don't know.

GROUCHO: It's all right. That's in every contract. That's what they call a sanity clause.

CHICO: You can't fool me. There ain't no Sanity Claus.

How can one even begin to analyze such a brilliant exchange of empty gestures, linguistic bombshells, and meaningless meanings? A closer look at this scene reveals what I take to be the major influence of Talmudic argumentation on the tendencies and approaches which reside in Jewish cinema. The focus of this scene is (obviously enough) the contract, a legal document which presumably stands for the coherency and substantiality of the juridical system. The contract is a legally binding structure, an instrument of law, which, as such, is expected to hold the agreement between the parties to be binding and congenial. When a contract exists (and is validated), we understand this to mean that the parties have reached the point of agreement, and that the various disagreements (which inhabited the preliminary negotiations) were settled. However, and contrarily, this conventional understanding of the way by which proper argumentation should lead to the signing of a contract is systematically challenged by the Marx brothers. This challenge exists in two ways: first, the negotiations (namely, the disagreements and the argumentation which supports the confronting positions) follow the already completed contract (instead of preceding it). Secondly, and more importantly, the contract itself is validated by ceasing to exist. The document is ripped, bit by bit, but, against all reason, is validated through and through with each tare. "Your word's good enough for

me. Is my word good enough for you?" asks Groucho. "I should say not," Chico answers, and another piece of the contract cease to exist. However, and despite its rapid demise, it is obvious (to Groucho, at least) that "we've got a contract, no matter how small it is."¹³

With this, the Marx brothers mirror the kind of meta-philosophical approach made famous, in the Talmudic context, by Rabbi Yirmiya. Notice that the breaking down of the various concepts which holds this structure — namely, the contract itself, the idea of parties, the practice of reading a contract (and hearing it), the idea of duplicates, etc. — is matched only by the final clause of the alleged contract, namely, the sanity clause. Both clauses, as is so common in the legal practice, depict the contextual framework of the contract. That is to say, these sections do not apply to the actual matter of the contract (the topic at hand, the issue being discussed, or, in our case: the future of the poor, yet promising, opera singer). Instead, these sections deal with abstract definitions, with constructs and concepts, or, to put it more accurately, with *the contract itself*. It therefore comes as no surprise that these exact clauses — the clauses which have nothing to say about the subject matter but only about the argumentative structure which allows it to be discussed — are the clauses which are deconstructed, reconstructed, mocked and ridiculed, by way of being torn down (literally) by the undefined parties.

The strength of this scene hence lies well within its absurdity. The one contract is duplicated, then united, then read (and reread) then torn, then revived, then signed (without being signed) — and then undermined by the need to face a sanity clause, which simultaneously challenges the sanity of the signees as well as the existence of Santa Claus. This Kafkaesque understanding of legal matters (and the conceptual framework which sustains them) is masterfully performed (or, shall I say: argued), to the point of utter destruction and complete annihilation of any logical or argumentative anchor. Once again, the challenged posed by Rabbi Yirmiya to the constructed structure of Talmudic argumentation is written (so to speak) all over the place.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I aimed to elicit a revised definition of "Jewish cinema." Following Talmudic guidelines, I offered a paradigmatic analysis of Jewish engagement with logic, the sustain-

ability of conceptual frameworks, and the versatility of knowledge. Once established, I used the films of the Marx brothers to demonstrate the way by which Jewish films embrace the Talmudic tendency to engage with smarty argumentation and subversive reasoning.

Evidently, the Marx brothers are only a case in point. Other instances of Jewish intellectualism, smarty argumentation and absurd logic, might include Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977), the cinematic interludes of Israel's "The Pale Scout" comedy group (*Ha'gashash Ha'hiver*), the Coen Brothers' *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003),¹⁴ and predominant scenes from the TV sensation *Seinfeld*. I leave the thorough analysis (and utter enjoyment) of these instances for others.¹⁵

1. See, e.g., Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988) as well as the amusing portrayal of the Jewish film producer in the Coen brothers' *Barton Fink* (1991).

2. See, e.g., Isaiah Sonne, "The Schools of Shammai and Hillel Seen from Within," in *Essays in Greco-Roman and Related Talmudic Literature*, ed. Henry Fischel (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1977), 94-110; Menachem Fisch, *Rational Rabbis: Science and Talmudic Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

3. See, e.g., Louis Jacobs, *Studies in Talmudic Logic and Methodology* (Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006). See also Hanina Ben-Menahem and Neil S. Hecht, *Authority, Process and Method: Studies in Jewish Law* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998); Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto and David Sackton, *Sheloshah Sefarim Niftahim: ha-lo hemah derekh ha-kodesh be-yam ha-Talmud* (Jerusalem: Feldhaim, 2004); Jacob Neusner, *Talmudic Thinking: Language, Logic, Law* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992); Aviram Ravitsky, "Talmudic Methodology and Aristotelian Logic: David ibn Bilia's Commentary on the Thirteen Hermeneutic Principles," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99.2 (2009): 184-99; Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Andrew Schumann, ed., *Judaic Logic* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010); Avi Sion, *Judaic Logic: A Formal Analysis of Biblical, Talmudic and Rabbinic Logic* (Geneva: Éditions Slatkine, 1995).

4. *Babylonian Talmud*, Bava Metzia 59a-b.

5. *Babylonian Talmud*, Bava Batra 2, Mishna 6.

6. The term *reductio ad absurdum* often stands for the argumentative strategy of reducing an opponent's position to absurdity by assuming the opposite. However, I wish to stress a more congenial sense of the term here, namely, the general idea of an argument being made absurd. There are various Talmudic examples that fit this particular meaning. See, e.g., Fisch and Yitzhak Benbaji, *The View from Within: Normativity and the Limits of Self-Criticism* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011); David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

7. See J. Bright, "Jeremiah's Complaints – Liturgy or Expressions of Personal Distress?," in *Proclamation and Presence: Old Testament Essays in Honor of G.H. Davies*, ed. Jon I. Durham and J. Roy Porter (London: John Knox Press, 1970).

8. Stanley Cavell, "Nothing Goes Without Saying: Reading the Marx Brothers," in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 183-92, 185.

9. It is worth noting here that Cavell's reading of the Marx Brothers, while loyal to the influence of early 20th century immigrant culture on the (mostly Jewish) post-vaudevillian comedies, is nevertheless original in putting philosophy of language front and center. As much as the vaudeville tradition is adamant in the brother's films — especially as it appears in their physical comedy, slapstick antics and visual gags — we are not to be fooled by its alleged centrality. The physicality of the brothers has led some interpreters to see their comedy as anti-intellectual. This, according to Cavell, cannot be further from the truth. For further discussion, see David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997); Lawrence J. Ep-

stein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001); Richard J. Anobile, *Why a Duck?: Visual and Verbal Gems from the Marx Brothers Movies* (New York: Darien House, 1971); Martin A. Gardner, *The Marx Brothers as Social Critics: Satire and Comic Nihilism in Their Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009).

10. See Maurice Charney, *The Comic World of the Marx Brothers' Movies: "Anything Further Father?"* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007); Alan S. Dale, *Comedy Is a Man in Trouble: Slapstick in American Movies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Allen Eyles, *The Complete Films of the Marx Brothers* (New York: Citadel Press, 1992); Martin A. Gardner, *The Marx Brothers as Social Critics: Satire and Comic Nihilism in Their Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009); Thomas H. Jordan, *The Anatomy of Cinematic Humor: With an Essay on the Marx Brothers* (New York: Revisionist Press, 1975); Paul A. Taylor, *Žižek and the Media* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2010).

11. Cavell, "Nothing Goes Without Saying," 186.

12. For further analysis of the scene, see Gardner, *The Marx Brothers as Social Critics*, 150ff.

13. See also Dale, *Comedy Is a Man in Trouble*, 132-60.

14. In *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003), we are introduced to Miles Massey (George Clooney), a successful and arrogant Los Angeles divorce attorney. After completing a long list of victories in the courtroom, Massey endeavors to achieve a challenging winner-take-all battle against Marilyn Rexroth-Doyle-Massey (Catherine Zeta-Jones), a beautiful and ambitious femme fatale whose goal is to con a man out of his money in order to gain her own financial independence. Massey and Marilyn then meet in court, as Massey represents Marilyn's battered husband, Rex Rexroth (Edward Herrmann). However, and before the battle even begins, we witness a humorous back-and-forth banter among Miles, his second-chair Wrigley (Paul Adelstein), and their client Rex. Rex questions whether or not Miles has ever sat before the presiding judge in their case. The answer he receives from Miles and Wrigley, might as well have been formulated by Groucho and Chico:

REX: Have you sat before her before?

MILES: No. No, the judge sits first. Then we sit.

REX: Well, have you sat after her before?

WRIGLEY: Sat after her before? You mean, have we argued before her before?

MILES: The judge sits in judgment. The counsel argues before the judge.

REX: So, have you argued before her before?

WRIGLEY: Before her before, or before she sat before?

REX: Before her before. I said, before her before.

WRIGLEY: No, you said before she sat before.

REX: I did at first, but...

MILES: Look, don't argue.

REX: I'm not. I'm...

WRIGLEY: No, you don't argue. We argue.

MILES: Counsel argues.

WRIGLEY: You appear.

MILES: The judge sits.

WRIGLEY: Then you sit.

MILES: Or you stand in contempt.

WRIGLEY: And then we argue.

MILES: The counsel argues.

REX: Which you've done before.

MILES: Which we've done before.

REX: Ah.

WRIGLEY: But not before her.

For further analysis, see: Shai Biderman and William J. Devlin, "Justice, Power, and Love: The Political Philosophy of *Intolerable Cruelty*," in *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 109-24, 123.

15. Another example, which reflects, somewhat unexpectedly, a similar attitude towards the Jewish intellectual corpus, is Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). In a recent essay, film studies scholar Nathan Abrams employs a Jewish Midrashic reading of the film, claiming that this mode of interpretation is practically embedded in all (or most) of Kubrick's features. See Abrams, "'A Double Set of Glasses': Stanley Kubrick and the Midrashic Mode of Interpretation," *De-Westernizing Film Studies*, ed. Saer Maty Ba and Will Higbee (New York: Routledge, 2012), 141-51.