

Article

Woody Allen's Broadway Danny Rose: Dialoguing with Jewish Tradition

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Abstract: It is the thesis of this article that a secular form of the biblical Exodus pattern is used by Woody Allen in his *Broadway Danny Rose*. In the history of the Bible, and its interpretation, the Exodus pattern is again and again used as a model for inspiration: from oppression to deliverance. It was an important source of both argument and symbolism during the American Revolution. It was used by the Boer nationalists fighting the British Empire and it comes to life in the hand of liberation theology in South America. The use of this pattern and its use during the seder meal is to be taken loosely here: Exodus is not a theory, but a story, a “Big Story” that became part of the cultural consciousness of the West and quite a few other parts of the world. Although the Exodus story is in the first place an account of deliverance or liberation in a religious context and framework, in *Broadway Danny Rose* it is used as a moral device about how to survive in the modern wilderness.

Keywords: actualization of classic stories; Woody Allen; New York; Thanksgiving; Exodus pattern; Passover; *Broadway Danny Rose*



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1. Introduction

“Rubin-Dorsky has written that Woody Allen in *Broadway Danny Rose* aims to show that egocentricity in the American world is not the solution and that for one moment in this movie Allen finds a nurturing spiritual connection to the Jewish past . . . ”. (Rubin-Dorsky 2003, p. 265)

That's an interesting observation, and thus it is not a surprise that *Broadway Danny Rose* is said to be one of the more Jewish films by Woody Allen (e.g., Pally 1989). However, the question is: what makes a film a Jewish film and, especially, what makes *this* film a Jewish film? Is it the context of Jewish secular comedians in New York, which is the framework for this film? Or is it the person of Danny Rose, who constantly refers to the wisdom of his Jewish relatives?

Somewhere in the middle of the film *Broadway Danny Rose*, main character Danny Rose compares himself to Moses. What might this comparison to Moses mean for an (not the) interpretation of this film? In this article we argue that Woody Allen, in his film *Broadway Danny Rose* (Allen 1984; Allen 1987), can be an example of the how the religious Exodus tradition can be translated to the secular world of the yuppies of New York in the 1980s. The reference to Moses is an important key to this article as an exercise in intertextuality.

That method is usually used for relationships between texts, but in this article the aim is to contextualize the image and story of a film by Woody Allen using Jewish interpretations of the Exodus story (for Allen and intertextuality, see Fortin 1996). What is important here is that, crucial to that Jewish tradition, from the beginning of the textualization, actualization belonged to the passing on of tradition (see only Fishbane 1985). The aim of this article is to elaborate on two elements of the way that Exodus tradition is presented in this movie: (1) actualization of the Exodus as a model for deliverance is related to eating together; and (2) it is fundamental that the wisdom of Exodus can only be passed on if it is actualized, which enables Woody Allen to compare his protagonist Danny Rose with Moses.

2. Broadway Danny Rose: The Story!

Allen directed the film *Broadway Danny Rose*, which was released in early 1984. He played Danny Rose, the character after whom the film was named. His opponent was his partner Mia Farrow, and another lead role was played by Nick Apollo Forte.

After his experiences as a stand-up comedian, Danny Rose has become manager of a rather special group of quite hopeless entertainers: a one-legged tap dancer, a lady playing water glasses, a couple folding balloons, and a rabbi dressed as a penguin—in one word, a group of schlemiels (Pinkser 1986). Danny spends a lot of time on Lou Canova, an Italian crooner who once made it to the hit parade, and who is addicted to (blonde) women and drink (and food?). During a period of nostalgia for types like Frank Sinatra, Lou gets the chance to straighten out his completely run-down career. However, the one who does the work is impresario Danny Rose, who does everything for his client.

Danny is a very *personal* assistant. Lou is married and has children. When he buys a white rose, he tells Danny that the rose is for his new lover, Tina Vitale (Mia Farrow; Vitale: *Nomen est omen?*). Lou wants Tina to accompany him to a big show. He asks Danny to pretend that Lou's mistress is *his* girlfriend, and he has to take her to the concert because, without Tina, Lou won't make it. Even though Danny quotes an aunt who says that having two wives is the same as sitting with an ass cheek on two horses, as an endlessly loyal manager he does it anyway. Tina, however, first takes him to Angelina, her mother confessor, and then to a party of her former lover, a member of an Italian mafia clan, "a mammy's boy" who writes poems.

The mafia family thinks that Danny is Tina's new boyfriend: his name Danny Rose explains the white rose given each day to Tina. During the party Tina's ex-lover collapses and the mother calls for a vendetta. This is the beginning of a series of bizarre events: Tina and Danny flee through a kind of swampy reed area. Eventually they are caught by the brothers of the ex-lover and tied up in an empty factory. However, Danny convinces the brothers that he was just a replacement for his client. When Tina and Danny finally get to the drunk Lou, Danny saves him with his panacea against drunkenness and Danny's show in the Waldorf Astoria becomes a success. On the same evening, after the big success, Lou and Tina tell Danny that he is fired as Lou's impresario. Lou leaves his wife and children and continues with Tina, and becomes a success as a crooner, but Tina has sleepless nights. She gets moody and tired. She feels guilty about inspiring Lou to fire Danny, the world's most loyal coach. In the night her conscience keeps her awake or gives her nightmares. She gets more depressed and leaves Lou. She finds a new lover, but even then, she remains depressed.

Then Thanksgiving arrives. Tina goes to the parade and Danny gives a party with all his "customers" there. During the Thanksgiving Parade Tina breaks down and runs away from her new lover. Her guilt leads her to Danny, who eventually forgives her and even seems to get her love.

3. Eating Together among Jews

One of the reasons *Broadway Danny Rose* is called a Jewish film is because it is set in the world of Jewish comedians in New York (Rubin-Dorsky 2003). The film is a frame story. A gathering of mostly Jewish comedians frames a number of shorter stories and one longer story about Danny Rose, manager of several remarkable artists. In *One Thousand and One Nights*, a famous example of a frame story, only one storyteller speaks, but like *The Canterbury Tales* or the *Decameron*, *Broadway Danny Rose* starts with a story in which different characters speak. In flashbacks they tell different stories from the past. In the end, however, there is still a story that will be told in extensive detail. Eventually the conversation at the table starts to focus on one figure: Danny Rose. At the beginning of the film two Jewish comedians sit together in Carnegie Delicatessen, an iconic lunch restaurant for the more secular Jews of New York and far beyond. The two exchange thoughts about why one joke works and the next one doesn't work at all. Other men from the circle of those Jewish comedians join them and they all have lunch together. The

special thing about these men is that most of them play themselves. In the end six Jewish comedians (Sandy Baron, Corbett Monica, Jackie Gayle, Morty Gunty, Will Jordan, and Howard Storm) and Allen's long-time producer, Jack Rollins, sit at the table, and they all play themselves. In the film Joe Franklin (a television presenter) also plays himself and the famous sports commentator Howard Cosell has a small role. Most of these men (where are the women? See [Del Negro 2013](#)) were somehow connected as stand-up comedians, managers, or producers to the entertainment business of Jewish organizations in, for example, Catskill Mountains (also called the "Borscht Belt" or "The Jewish Alps"). Catskill Mountains was a vacation resort not far from New York and its many hotels were where Jews from New York went on vacation. In the last century, this was mainly for secular and liberal Jews and there was (therefore?) much demand for entertainment in those hotels. The fictional Danny Rose has in common with the real Woody Allen that they both started their careers as a kind of stand-up comedian in the Catskill Mountains ([Deleyto 1994](#); [Rubin-Dorsky 2003](#)). Nowadays it is mainly Orthodox Jews like many Hasidic Jews who go to Catskills. [Rubin-Dorsky \(2003\)](#) outlines how, in this film, Allen reinvents the secular Jewish world of vacations in Catskill Mountains. At least that makes this film Jewish, because it is inspired by an important piece of the history of American secular Jews, especially those of New York. However, there is another reference to Jewish traditions and customs: these Jewish comedians eat together. Food is a theme that appears in several of Woody Allen's films. In his article about food in the movies of Woody Allen, [Abrams \(2013, p. 216\)](#) mentions that Jews and food have been long linked in American audiovisual imagination. He describes how Allen's movies abound with Jewish moments and food allusions and he argues that food or some allusion to food links the movies across his oeuvre. Often Allen's jokes about food are also a serious commentary about life. Abrams refers several times to the role of a seder celebration in an Allen film ([Abrams 2013, pp. 216, 221–22](#)).

Abrams does not elaborate on the special setting of eating together in *Broadway Danny Rose*. That is a pity because the meal at which the story of Danny Rose is told may hold a key to the interpretation of that film, because there are a number of elements in the story that can be connected to what happens at a seder meal.

The seder meal is the most well-known and religiously most relevant ritual in Judaism, the communal meal during Passover. In Exodus the commandment of remembrance is set (Exodus 12:1–27). The ritual which does exactly that is the seder just mentioned. (The Hebrew word "seder" means something like "order" or "regulation"). It is important to eat and drink and to make the past present. During the meal there are symbols for bitterness on the table, but also for sweetness. In the film Danny Rose argues that bitterness is part of life and living without pain is not life itself. It is important to have some laughs, no question about it, but you have got to suffer a little too, because otherwise you miss the whole point of life.

On the seder evening the promise of liberation is commemorated by connecting that experience with one's own life and thus reading one's own story in the light of the hope that that story conveys, even in the darkest days of Jewish history. Thus, the rules and order of the ritual are above all a channel that will make room for the participants' own experiences. Allen has used a number of elements in *Broadway Danny Rose* that are also important for a seder evening and for the story told during this meal. An important goal of the seder evening is to reintroduce the experience of liberation. Remembering also seems to be a very important part of the story of this film. It is shot in black and white and that alone evokes the past. Danny constantly refers to all kinds of sayings of uncles, aunts, and even rabbis from the past, even though they may have been dead for years: their wisdoms are remembered. [Rubin-Dorsky \(2003, p. 278\)](#) refers for this to Soloveitchik, who argues that the way to maintain connection to a spiritual community is through memory and thus she notes:

"Throughout the film, Danny remembers the ethical principles which ought to guide his life, principles that he was taught by his relatives, by his teachers, even

his rabbi. While at times Allen presents this idea through Danny's humorous riffs on family (like his digressive and largely irrelevant story about his Uncle Meyer who sold apples), and while he occasionally turns Danny into a parodic character through his exaggerated hand and facial gestures, the point is nevertheless clear: those characters who have forgotten or who have never learned, or worse, who know but reject the lessons from the past, perpetuate the film's greatest sin; like Lou, who leaves Danny because he's "gotta do what's right for [his] career", and like Tina, who encourages and abets his apostasy (before she is redeemed), they think only of themselves".

Remembering the Exodus as an act of liberation is fundamental to the seder evening. In Exodus, the fact that the Exodus is to become part of the collective memory of the Jewish people is mentioned and proclaimed *even before* this liberation is itself told. Exodus makes that remembering part of a meal. That is exactly the frame of the story of *Broadway Danny Rose*. Seven Jewish comedians eat together and reminisce. One of them seems to play the role of the father, the narrator of the story.

In the main story, eating on a holiday also plays an important role. That holiday is the most important secular holiday in the US: Thanksgiving. Rubin-Dorsky (2003, pp. 277–78) mentions that Allen has used Thanksgiving to mark significant and meaningful moments in other films, most memorably *Hannah and Her Sisters*. Thanksgiving is about remembering and is accompanied by certain dishes (turkey, mashed potatoes, pumpkin pie, sweet potatoes, etc.). It is related to all kinds of stories that are important to the perceptions of American identity. There is, of course, a link with the Pilgrim Fathers and their arrival in Plymouth and there is even a link with the commemoration of the liberation of Leiden on October 3rd during the Eighty Years War that the Republic of the United Provinces fought with Spain. Is it a coincidence that Tina's teshuva is evoked by a Thanksgiving Parade? Could it be that the moral appeal that comes from Thanksgiving as a celebration of community inspires Tina to repair her "betrayal"?

Along with that there are some parallels between Thanksgiving and the Passover night. Both feasts are connected with a history of the creation of a people, both revolve around remembrance, and at both feasts the meeting at the table with a fairly fixed menu is one of the most important characteristics. Abrams (2013, p. 222) notes that Allen mentions a seder meal several times in his story, but he remarks that "Allen's use of the Seder in his films, unlike most of his Judaic references, tends to defer to its foundational religious and familial significance." So, in a film where Jewish tradition is interpreted secularly, it does not fit that a seder meal is introduced. What Allen does then is that he places elements of that seder meal in a secular context, both in the frame of the stories (Carnegie Deli) and in the narrative (Thanksgiving) about Danny Rose.

4. The Exodus Pattern: A Way to Survive through Several Millennia: Danny Rose as Moses

In the previous paragraph, we tried to show how the meals in *Broadway Danny Rose* can be seen to contain certain elements that implicitly remind us of the seder meal and thus also implicitly of the Exodus experience. However, in this movie there is also a specific explicit indication that the history of Exodus is a model in the background of this film: the reference to Moses. That this reference is not always noticed is shown by the fact that it is missing from Gothard's list of Allen's literary, philosophical, and artistic allusions (Gothard 2013).

It is quite often stressed that nearly every film made by Woody Allen over the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s cast schlemiels as main characters (Feuer 2013, p. 222). However, Danny Rose is probably a schlemiel, but he is not only that. Several authors note that Danny Rose's self-sacrifice and great love for his clients gives him the appearance of a holy man. Some authors even interpret Danny as some kind of saint. Michaels (2017, p. 127) argues:

“What seems to be yet another tale of a lovable schlemiel, in other words, becomes, upon reflection, a homage to a secular saint unlike anything else in Woody Allen’s oeuvre.”

Therefore, Michaels typifies *Broadway Danny Rose* on the same page as “a parable instead of a farce!” One of the other commentators also knows which saint Danny Rose looks like. Rubin-Dorsky (2003, p. 265):

“Indeed, like Saint Francis, Danny does his utmost to shield the weak and the lame from the world’s cruelties, here envisioned as the harsh, cutthroat business of New York entertainment, as brutal, in its way, as the cold and indifferent universe of Hollywood, characterized by Allen in *Annie Hall* not as a “dog-eat-dog” world, but as a place “where dog doesn’t return other dogs phone calls.”

However, instead of the Saint Francis, there is a Jewish “saint” who is even more eligible for comparison with Danny: Moses.

An argument for this is Danny Rose’s allusion to Moses and his role during the Exodus from Egypt. Moses’ role for the slaves from Egypt is thus comparable to Danny’s role for his “troop”.

When you want to make an intertextual connection between two texts, the most obvious way to do this is to quote the source you want to refer to. In texts the connection is frequently made by a quote. In biblical traditions the connection is often managed by a phrase like “it is written that...”. A slightly less clear but still quite convincing way of an intertextual connection is an explicit allusion to a source text, and that is exactly what Danny does when he and Tina are on the run from the angry brothers who are chasing him. Together with Tina he walks through a kind of swampy area with many high reed palms and then Danny explicitly compares himself to Moses who leads the Jewish people through the Reed Sea:

“I never saw so many reeds in my life. I feel like Moses.”

With this sentence Danny Rose/Woody Allen uses a principle that quoting or alluding to a Bible text shows that you are interpreting it. With this reference to Moses and the Reed Sea an allusion is made to the most important theme of Exodus: the departure (from Egypt) and the sojourn in the desert that eventually leads to entering the Promised Land. When a band of slaves are united as a people under an encouraging and inspired leader who believes in liberation, there is a way through the desert to the promised land. The whole history is about everything that happens after the Pesach liberation, from the crossing of the Red Sea to the entrance into the Promised Land, and the forty years in the wilderness, where, like Lou, the bunch of former slaves who are liberated start to serve another God, the Golden Calf. Like Moses, Danny is again and again a mediator; like Moses, he leads his flock, doing everything he can for them, even sacrificing himself for his clients; and like Moses, he sees his flock make it to the Promised Land without him. Danny has to experience that one of his clients reaches Mount Olympus, but without him.

In *Broadway Danny Rose*, Danny is the leader. The group of schlemiels (Pinkser 1986) whom he has to lead is compared to the slaves in Egypt. Rubin-Dorsky typifies Danny as “the guardian angel of underdogs” (Rubin-Dorsky 2003, p. 276). Precisely in the last scene Danny shows how much he tries to mold those schlemiels into a kind of unity: together with his clients he celebrates Thanksgiving (Michaels 2017, p. 136). By this Woody Allen shows that he has tried to summarize the biblical motif of the Exodus for the secular world of the twentieth century in New York. Could this eating together of this peculiar group on such a special day even evoke the ritual of eating together by the community of enslaved persons on Pesach in Egypt and, as such, be comparable with eating together on Thanksgiving?

Michaels (2017, p. 136) concludes:

“*Broadway Danny Rose* stands apart from his other great works about nostalgia by preserving the humanistic ideal of authentic community and compensating for the regret that follows the passage of time!”

Marcia Pally (1989), in her discussions of the films of Woody Allen, refers to a passage from the Passover Haggadah where the story is told of five rabbis who, one Passover night, became so absorbed in discussing the Exodus that they stayed up till dawn. She argues that those rabbis “were not encouraging their congregants to recount Exodus for rote’s sake—but to remind that there is a pleasure in telling itself”. Pally argues that “the moral of this short story, the *Haggadah* tells us, is that whoever elaborates the story of Exodus shall be heaped with blessings”.

However, *Broadway Danny Rose* is also about how the ideal of the Exodus is not respected. As soon as Lou gets a chance to become a little bit famous, he leaves Danny and his troop and chooses another impresario for himself. Yet that doesn’t seem to hurt Danny. He continues to believe in his people. He even believes that life without suffering is not life.

In Exodus it is at least also about the people who must keep the unity. In fact, it seems that in *Broadway Danny Rose*, the unity of the group of actors is even more difficult to preserve than that of the Jewish people. When a loser becomes a winner, he or she abandons the other schlemiels. However, as one of the fellowship in Carnegie says very briefly at one point: “Danny has faith”. The film ends on a positive note. Danny’s Thanksgiving party may be sparsely attended, but it is an unforgettable event. It is even more beautiful that Tina is so sorry in the end that she apologizes to Danny and there even seems to be a new romance for her. There is even a kind of “eternal memory” (cf. Exodus 12:14): there is a sandwich named after Danny in the Carnegie Deli. (Once upon a time it was believed that Carnegie would be there forever. However, it closed some years ago!)

It seems that in *Broadway Danny Rose* the good is rewarded in the end and the film gives the audience, like perhaps the New York yuppies of 1984 in the first place, the message that good behavior is rewarded. Thus, Michaels (2017, p. 127) concludes:

“B.D.R. can be understood as a profoundly ethical illustration of faith, fortitude and transcendence.”

In this article, only one of the possible interpretations of *Broadway Danny Rose* as a narrative presentation of traditional Jewish values for the yuppies of New York has been presented. There would be other possibilities, such as the concept of tikkun as the care for the weaker persons of a community or the concept of teshuva, as Tina repents. Perhaps also at stake is the question of why “Bad Things Happen to Good People” (Kushner 2001).

Yet the reference to the Exodus story is one of the most solid interpretations because Allen, true to one of the more fundamental rules of referencing, explicitly compares himself to Moses.

Could that be why he is called Danny? Although the film primarily shows secular Judaism, Danny is faithful to the ethical principles of loyalty and care for the least. Ultimately, Danny does not follow the rules of the capitalist value of every man for himself. Thus, in a special way, he lives up to his name, Daniel: Hebrew, “God is my judge” (for the name Danny referring to this prophet, see Brook 2013, p. 9). In his suffering, he chooses the welfare of his group of artists for whom he feels responsible.

5. No Jewish Tradition without Actualization

It should come as no surprise that Woody Allen knows something about updating the Exodus tradition. He seems to be knowledgeable about the Hasidic tradition of storytelling (Allen 1970; Caplan 2013). The Hasidim are a movement within Judaism that originated in Poland/Lithuania at the end of the eighteenth century. To this day, a rebbe plays an important role in the Hasidic world. The rebbe must be someone who is able to show his followers/pupils his own great learning in a simple way. To make the great (and small) gems of wisdom of the written and oral teachings accessible to every pupil, even to the illiterate among them, Hasidic teachers were constantly looking for new stories. Following in the footsteps of Baal Shem Tov, their founding father, storytelling was one of their most important tools for teaching (practical) wisdom and even for solving the personal problems of their flock. They used it themselves, sometimes with the necessary self-mockery.

The Hasidim are exponents and heirs of thousands of years of thinking, ruminating, and sometimes even wrestling with wisdom (and, on occasion, stupidity) from the biblical tradition and its actualizations. These are part of the Jewish tradition that, generation after generation, asked itself the question of what God expects of us humans. They are also an exponent of the long history of Jewish storytelling, as already found in the Hebrew Bible and further elaborated in the rabbinic period and canonized (at least in part) in the various works known as Midrash.

The Jewish tradition is a learning tradition (Abram 1986). The experiences of all those generations have been handed down so that new generations, inspired and often supported by what has been experienced and learned, can set to work. It is the great strength of this learning tradition to be able to ask old questions anew. Old answers are not the end but the beginning of new discussions, and old stories are the inspiration and the model for new stories.

A fundamental basis for this dynamic conception of dealing with handed-down wisdom is that in the five books of Moses, the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, it already becomes clear that interpretation, and especially actualization of the biblical wisdom, belong to those biblical commandments and agreements. This can be illustrated by the fact that there are two versions of the text that have become known as the Ten Words (Hebrew: Aseret ha'Dibrot), as the Decalogue, or as the Ten Commandments. If we compare Exodus 20:17, the first version of the commandment not to covet things that belong to somebody, with Deuteronomy 5:21, the second version, we see that there are a number of subtle but fundamental changes. Both texts deal with not coveting other people's things. Exodus 20:17 is about "someone else's house, wife, staff, ox and donkey and everything else he has". In Deut 5:21 there are two remarkable differences: the woman is no longer part of the other person's goods and, between the house and service staff, property of fields is added. These differences show that the Deuteronomy version is younger and adapted to new circumstances. The people are no longer wandering, but they have become farmers (and thus they own fields!) and most likely a wife is no longer seen as a piece of household goods, but as a person. This could indicate a certain "emancipation" for women. However, it is the principle that is even more important here. In the Torah, which we could characterize as a kind of constitution of biblical tradition, the interpretation and updating of that tradition is one of the most important requirements. Michel Fishbane (1985) is one of the pioneers who catalogued and described the principles of inner-biblical interpretation.

Interpretation and, more importantly, actualization of the "Law" belong as a practice to that "Law" and thus become one of the most important features of the biblical tradition. Another significant concept in the rabbinic tradition related to this is the Hebrew term *Chidoeshee ha-Tora*.¹ Thus, in the Jewish tradition, renewal is always the passing on of what was already present through *actualizing* adaptations.

Not only is the law reinterpreted again and again, which leads to an actualization of the halacha as practical elaborations of life, but—as mentioned above—also the biblical stories as they come to us in the Torah are given new interpretations each time in the Midrash explanations of those stories. Michael Walzer, an American political philosopher, has shown that also in nonreligious contexts the Exodus story is actualized again and again. His analysis of the Exodus narrative reveals its connection with powerful political notions of deliverance from suffering and oppression: this-worldly redemption, liberation, revolution (Walzer 1985, p. IX). He argues that the Exodus story has been used to describe the meaning of liberation: "Read and expounded and interpreted the story: for every reading is also a construction, a reinvention of the past for the sake of the present" (Walzer 1985, p. X).

Walzer reads Exodus as being mainly focused on one theme: salvation from slavery. He makes a political history of it, often separated from its Jewish context. He shows how in the 1960s Exodus was used in South America by ministers to depict the Exodus from slavery and racism. He argues that Catholic theologians used Exodus as part of their liberation theology. He refers to the fact that Exodus "is an important source of both argument and symbolism during the American Revolution and the establishment

on these shores of “God’s new Israel.” (Walzer 1985, p. 6). Although Walzer uses the word “paradigm” for depicting the role of the Exodus in history, he argues that it is even more important to stress that it is a story and that this story made other stories possible (Walzer 1985, p. 7).

An example of the fact that the Exodus story also produces new songs is given by David Daube in his book about the Exodus pattern (Daube 1963; Dohmen and Ederer 2016, pp. 2–16). In the foreword Daube refers to Edith Piaf, the legendary French chansonnière who also sang about the Exodus. Daube himself sees connections between the story of Exodus and the patriarch Jacob’s abandonment of Laban and the history of the Ark: internal biblical parallels.

The primal model for the Exodus tradition is the Exodus from Egypt. Exodus is, after all, related to the Greek word for “leaving”. The book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible is called Shemot (Names) after the first words of the Hebrew text of that book. The people of Israel suffered in those days from heavy labor, slave labor. Moses did everything he could to convince Pharaoh to let those people go free. The ten plagues and certainly the last one, the death of the firstborn, would eventually force that ruler to do so. The death of all firstborns of those oppressors, that of the people and that of the animals, is told very succinctly (fortunately) in 12:29. This is the reason why Pharaoh let Moses and God’s people go (Exodus 12:30–32).

However, even before that liberation happens (see Exod 12:1–20), God asks Moses to teach the people to remember that day of liberation forever. Exod 12:14 can even be translated as follows: “This day will become a *monument* to you” (my translation). In this way the future is seen in advance as a past, but also as a key lesson for the future. The Exodus that has yet to happen is presented from the outset as a model for a festival to be celebrated by all generations. In this way the experience of Exodus, when it has taken place, is not treated as a moment in the past, but becomes the basis of an annually recurring moment in the lives of those people who one way or another recognize themselves in such a liberation story. God leads man out of slavery and when this is celebrated, it can happen again and again. To repeat the words of Walzer quoted above: “This story made it possible to tell other stories”.

6. Stories as Food for Thought

On the website of Chabad, one of the largest Hasidic movements in this century and thus relevant as a witness to that tradition, it says there’s no better way to make a point than to tell a story. They don’t get that from strangers. Caplan refers to the Baal Shem Tov, “who is as close to a founder as Hassidim has and who lived in the eighteenth century, was the storyteller par excellence whom the rebbes of the late eighteenth century modeled themselves” (Caplan 2013, p. 15).

That could also be Woody Allen’s motto as a filmmaker. His stories can evoke all kinds of different interpretations. He, like the Hasidic masters, is not afraid of the miraculous and the magical. In quite a few of his films, the impossible is part of his story. One example is *Zelig*, in which Allen can magically assume the identity of other men and is thus a personification of assimilation. Another example is *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. In that movie, a character walks off the screen into the real world.

But what is the message of *Broadway Danny Rose*? Of course, there is more than one. Several commentators on *Broadway Danny Rose* have shown that Allen is playing with the lifestyles of the Jewish entertainers of the Catskills. This is abundantly clear through all the allusions to that world, but also through the appearance of persons from that world playing themselves.

Yet it is possible to discover another way in this film in which Allen dialogues with Jewish tradition. There are indications that in this film Allen is taking the Exodus story, and perhaps the seder meal where that story is central, and updating it to its core so that the yuppies of New York in 1984 can take note of that message.

In the secular context of *Broadway Danny Rose*, a seder meal seems only implicitly present, but the message of Exodus seems entirely true and is explicitly referred to: unity under the guidance of a Moses-like figure who leads a group of schlemiels. In an emphatic way, this film asks questions about the ethical behavior of people, as individuals and as part of a community.

Allen uses quite a few references to Jewish traditions. However, he leaves God (explicitly) out of the picture. When Tina asks him if he believes in God, he says he doesn't, but feels guilty about it! It is a divine less traditionalism. In the Exodus-narrative Moses plays a major role as God's assistant (and sometimes even as his opponent). The seder narrative leaves him out of picture. It makes God into an almost single agent. In *Broadway Danny Rose*, the human figure takes back full agency and this, of course, fits the use of Jewish tradition in a secular way.

Finally, a note: This film, as quite a few of Allen's movies do, raises quite specific questions and can perhaps even be linked to the discomfort that Woody Allen, the director, evokes within his personal life.² Whatever truth may be in that, his own life does seem to suggest that Woody Allen succeeds every time in forcing his audience to think about why the good doesn't always go well and why the bad sometimes only goes worse. This makes him, whether willingly or not, one of those Jewish thinkers who contributes to the moral discussions of the twenty-first century and challenges the viewers of his film with questions such as: What position do *we* take? What values and norms do we hold? And who cares? God or the Mensch?

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Notes

- ¹ Jastrow, gives as one possible translation sub verbo chidoesj: (3) novel interpretation, novel idea, additional legislation (novellae), with a reference to Chagiga 3a: "It is impossible for a college session to pass without a novel remark". The modern dictionary of Alkalai gives new interpretations of the Law as a translation of chidoesjee ha-Tora.
- ² As background for writing this article, it was not possible to use Allen's memoirs because they were not made available by the distributors.

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