

# A Jewish Lens: Understanding and Digesting Themes in Current Jewish Film

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These materials have been created by **KOACH** for the enhancement of your on-campus programming. They are designed to be adjustable based on your interests and the available time. This packet contains: background materials, a facilitator guide and list of additional resources. The background materials and facilitator guide will help you build conversations around the text and create connections between the text and contemporary life.

## 1) Overview and Objective

The following materials are designed to offer a look at Jewish content and themes in current and recent films through the lens of text study and interpersonal discussion. It is expected that many students are intimately familiar with some of the films discussed. These materials are designed to educate using popular culture and to aid students to bring their own knowledge of film and popular culture into an educational setting.

## 2) Facilitator Guide

Film clips have been selected, where possible, to provide an appropriate summary of a certain subject without necessitating a full screening of any of the films mentioned. Should time allow for a screening of a complete film, please use the texts and discussion materials as desired. In some cases, where there may be challenges to current or future availability of clips, the content of the clips/films are summarized so that discussion is still possible. Additionally, these sessions can be conducted on Shabbat by substituting video clips with written summaries. Textual resources include biblical quotations and contemporary articles and film reviews.

The materials are divided up into two sessions. If you have half an hour to forty-five minutes, choose one session. If you have one hour to an hour and a half, begin with session one and then move into session two. Discussion questions can be used at the discretion of the facilitator.

## Session 1

### Film Clips 1 & 2

*Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009)

Film summary: In an alternate version of history, a group of American Jews hunt and brutally murder Nazis during World War II.

Clip 1 summary: Aldo Raines details his soldiers' mission to terrorize and murder Nazis is the film's teaser trailer.

Clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sQhTVz5IjQ> (1:44)

Clip 2 summary: The Jewish soldiers interrogate a Nazi officer less than willing to give up information.

Clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIja0yValiE> (1:40)

### Film Clip 3

*Borat* (Larry Charles, 2006)

Film summary: Anti-Semitic Kazakhstani reporter Borat exposes citizens of the United States to his ignorance, bigotry, and shenanigans.

Clip 3 summary: While staying at the home of two welcoming Jews, Borat discusses their greedy, murderous ways and later worries aloud that "the Jews are planning another 9/11."

Clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gS3IYeH5aJs> (0:31)

### Text 1

"The very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them in their power, the opposite happened, and the Jews got their enemies in their power. Throughout the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the Jews mustered in their cities to attack those who sought their hurt... But they did not lay hands on the spoil."

Esther 9:1-2, 10

### **Text 2**

“If anyone maims his fellow, as he has done so shall it be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The injury he inflicted on another shall be inflicted on him.”

Leviticus 24:19-20

### **Text 3**

“Most of us will understand that this is pure fiction; that this is simply not how it was. Some, though, will believe that there must be some basis in fact here (the principle of ‘where there’s smoke there’s fire’). Some may even see [*Inglourious Basterds*] as a form of Jewish cinematic revenge fantasy regarding WW2. From that point of view, it could be considered a dangerous piece of escapist fiction, likely to be misused by those who want to blur the distinction between aggressors and victims.”

“Fighting the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War All Over Again” by Russell Cohen, Maskil, Sep 2009

### **Text 4**

“The scene demands that you root for American soldiers as they mutilate German corpses and torture and assassinate prisoners of war, and that you take B-movie delight in the slaughter of the bad guys. But in the wake of Abu Ghraib, I’m finding it harder to laugh when GIs are shown taking the law into their own hands or, worse, carrying out war crimes under orders from the top... the message of ‘Basterds’ is, ‘See, Jews can be as cold-blooded and cruel as the rest of us.’ Well, thanks, Quentin. That will help Israel when the United Nations or the Hague sits down yet again to contemplate Israeli ‘war crimes.’”

“Tarantino’s ‘Basterds’: Revenge fantasy, or a reflection of the real world?” by Andrew Silow-Carroll, JWeekly, Sep 2009

## Discussion Questions for Session 1

1. What are the implications of *Inglourious Basterds* as a “revenge fantasy” for the Jewish people? Watch Clips 1-2, then read Texts 1-3. Talk about whether vengeance is an idea supported by Judaism, and how the texts can apply to a complicated subject like the Holocaust.
2. How can the events of *Inglourious Basterds* be understood today in conflicts involving the United States abroad and Israel? Read Text 4 and discuss the relevancy and implications of soldiers taking matters into their own hands and its effects on international relations.
3. How dangerous is making an “inside joke,” like that in Clip 3, that Jews can acknowledge as humor but that ignorant viewers might interpret as truth? Does making a film where Jews murder Nazis represent Jews in a bad light? Does it constitute *marit ayin* (the appearance of doing something prohibited) or *hillul haShem* (the desecration of God’s name) by misrepresenting the Jewish people?
4. What personal reactions to both *Inglourious Basterds* and *Borat* have students experienced from friends or acquaintances that are Jewish as well as those that are not Jewish? Encourage students to share any experiences that might relate to any of the above questions.

## Session 2

### Film Clip 4

*New York, I Love You* (Mira Nair, 2009)

Film/clip summary: An Orthodox Jewish woman about to be married fantasizes about a relationship with a Jain Indian man after the two discuss what their respective religions prohibit them from doing.

Clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pdVWmFMc8Y> (6:38)

### Film Clip 5

*Casino Jack* (George Hickenlooper, 2010)

Film summary: Lobbyist Jack Abramoff corruptly wheels and deals in Washington, all the while praying daily, participating in an interfaith bible study group, and planning to open a Jewish day school and a kosher steakhouse.

Clip summary: In one of the film's first scenes, Jack is being carted off to jail. He tells the guard he only eats kosher food and is mocked by all the other guards.

### Film Clips 6 & 7

*The Big Lebowski* (Joel Coen, 1998)

Film summary: A case of mistaken identity leads to considerable misunderstandings and confusion for Jeff "The Dude" Lebowski and his bowling buddy Walter Sobchak.

Clip 6 summary: Walter declares that he doesn't "roll on Shabbos" when his bowling league schedules a major game for Saturday.

Clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmULYr1nsZ0> (0:30)

Clip 7 summary: Walter objects to The Dude forcing him to "break Shabbos."

Clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZqYzqK1CnA> (1:06)

### **Text 5**

“At all events it is suggested here that one can speak of a man as having a strong moral character without him having any use for religion and the Rabbis are saying that such an assessment of human character need not be wrong since religion is one thing and ethics another, though, of course, for the Rabbis, Judaism demands both... By worshiping God, by obeying His laws, which all have the effect of benefiting man and encouraging virtue, man becomes more perfect, more God-like. God does want us to worship Him, as it were, but it is not the act of worship in itself that He requires but the effect it has on the human character.”

“The Relationship Between Religion and Ethics in Jewish Thought” by Rabbi Louis Jacobs

### **Text 6**

“It is far from ironic that Abramoff would be wearing an Orthodox hat to court. From start to finish his lobbyist career and his cover-ups have been cloaked in religious garb... Behind every corner of this investigation there is another right-wing rabbi or "observant Jew" ready to "kasher" Abramoff's actions... Abramoff's hat signals the extreme lack of self –reflection in his religious life. Before the Bible says anything about, black hats, abortion or kosher restaurants for Washington insiders, it says "Do not steal." What can be more Jewish than that?”

“Jack Abramoff: Not Kosher: An Edah Editorial” by Rabbi Eliyahu Stern

### **Text 7**

“However comic the scene may be, if you had told the Hollywood moguls of yesteryear that in just a couple of generations, a major character in a major film would proclaim his refusal to ‘roll on Shabbos,’ they would have thought you were dreaming. But in the words of Sobchak, paraphrasing Herzl, ‘If you can will it, Dude, it is no dream.’

*Heeb Magazine*, citing Clip #6 as #1 on the 100 Greatest Jewish Movie Moments list

## Discussion Questions for Session 2

1. How does representing a struggle with Jewish observance on film help to strengthen notions of observant Judaism? Watch clips 4, 6, and 7 and then read text 7. Examine what it means to be observant and how both films lend their own perspectives on observance.
2. What value is there in showcasing Jewish observance on film? Focus on clips 6 and 7 and text 7, and discuss the way these scenes might be interpreted by a Jew or non-Jew unfamiliar with observant practices.
3. Why are observant Jews usually only showcased in film when they are in conflict with some aspect of their religion? Consider clip 4 and text 5, highlighting the importance and meaning of observance.
4. What problems arise with the portrayal of religion on film when it is ascribed to an objectionable character? What responsibility do Jews have to defend “one of their own”? Discuss clip 5 and text 6.

### 3) Further resources:

Text 3 Full Article: <http://blog.maskil.info/2009/09/fighting-2nd-world-war-again/>

Text 4 Full Article: <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/39775/tarantinos-basterds-revenge-fantasy-or-a-reflection-of-the-real-world/>

Text 5 Full Article: [http://www.louisjacobs.org/index.php?pge\\_id=141](http://www.louisjacobs.org/index.php?pge_id=141)

Text 6 Full Article: <http://www.edah.org/sterna.cfm>

Recommended viewing/potential screenings:

Israeli culture:

*The Band's Visit* (Eran Kolirin, 2008)

*Lost Islands* (Reshef Levy, 2008)

Israeli army:

*Waltz With Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008)

*Beaufort* (Joseph Cedar, 2008)

*Lebanon* (Samuel Maoz, 2010)