

The Corner of Hollywood and Sinai

To Be A Parent – The Unending Task A Review of *August: Osage County*

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August: Osage County is a harsh movie – unforgiving, unrelenting – replete with characters that are equal parts tortured and torturers. It is, after all, a story about a family. And, while it may be true that most families do not have to deal with abuse, alcoholism, molestation, adultery, incest and drug addiction and that these melodramatic tools may seem to give the Weston-Aiken clan an air of absurdity and improbability, most families, to some extent, will, in the course of their existences, deal with cruelty, illness, indifference, favouritism, and disappointment. For, it is an unfortunate but potent fact that no one can hurt a person quite like one's own family can and, in turn, no one can hurt others quite like a person can hurt one's own family. And every family lives in the shadow of this truth.

Perhaps that is why movies like *August: Osage County* are so difficult to watch and, yet, if done well (as is the case here), are so important. Especially, I would argue, for the Orthodox Jewish community – a community that feels a particular entitlement, born of obligation, that is in fact, as evidenced by this film, a truly dangerous illusion.

To be clear, what I mean to say is: to have children, to create family, is not a right.

It is a privilege.

It is a doing that cannot be undone and that can, if done wrong, in a way that echoes the power of God, curse a family for multiple generations.

I think, oftentimes, this is forgotten in the tumult of that very first commandment, “be fruitful and multiply”. I think that, somewhere between Eden and birth control, we forget

that not a single one of God's commandments grants us an unreserved right. One cannot pray to God if one has inappropriate thoughts in one's head. One cannot make the blessing on the etrog with a stolen etrog. One cannot enter the Temple if one is ritually unclean. There are caveats for every commandment – conditions that one must meet before one can properly do what God has obligated us to do.

To have children is probably one of the most caveat-rich commandments possible. The underlying requirements stay with a person forever – once a child is born, one never ceases to be a parent and so one must never cease to merit being a parent.

To clarify my point, let's return to *August: Osage County* and the Weston-Aiken family. A cruel woman decided to have two daughters who, despite the emotional damage caused by their mother, decide to have four children between them, all damaged, one of whom, despite the damage done to her by her damaged mother, decided, too, to procreate – to have a daughter, who is, just as much as her progenitors, damaged. Worst of all, I began this with a cruel woman but could just as easily have extrapolated back based on the pattern and called her, not cruel but, damaged, like her daughters, grandchildren and great-granddaughter. A series of damaged individuals, all damaging each other – a family rotted from the inside out by its own simultaneous complacent acceptance of its own rot and irresponsible insistence on adding more rotted branches to the tree.

It is both of those realities – intertwined and equally present – that are the dark side of the obligation to procreate. The characters in *August: Osage County* reek of occasional good intent – the three mothers featured on screen throughout the film each admit, in some form or another, that they had, in becoming mothers, thought to be good to their children. They had never considered fully the vicarious risk of their own anguish. Sometimes, a person is not evil; sometimes, a person is merely damaged, or hurt, or suffering. It is difficult to blame a person for the pain that comes of being raised badly – the blame must reside with the parents. In fact, that is the point I'm getting at, isn't it?

And, yet. It is not that simple. A victim can become a victimizer in a moment – in the time it takes to fertilize an egg. And after that moment, after one has decided to be a parent, if one's claim is merely to do one's best but without really facing one's own failings and

limitations – then one is only a short journey away from Osage County. One cannot choose many aspects of one’s existence – one cannot choose the life one was born into – but one can, and must, choose carefully the life one bestows upon another.

There are many ways to hurt a family – adultery, addiction, abuse – yes, those are the big ones – but they are the easy ones to spot. What is much more sinister and common is the hurt caused simply by the sense that to become a parent makes one deserving of being a parent. That is simply not true. To be worthy of parenthood is a lifelong responsibility, not earned in a moment. And, be comforted, not destroyed in a moment either.

That is the true horror of *August: Osage County*: it is not simply the tragic tale of a family’s implosion, but it is the tale of a family driven down by its very own perpetual-ized cycle of self-destruction, a tale of irrevocable despair where even the glimpses of hope that flicker at the end still bespeak of, likely, an unchanging destiny. It is the story of infinite moments of potential change and infinite moments of failure to change.

I cannot possibly tell anyone to abstain from fulfilling one of God’s commandments. A person’s actions – both iniquitous and virtuous – are one’s own to define and control. I can, however, say that before one rushes off to fulfil that famed first commandment as if it were one’s due rather than one’s duty, please consider the familial tableau that is *August: Osage County* and consider the self-inflicted heartbreak of a family brought low, not by the obvious vices, but by the subtle arrogance of becoming and being a parent because one can and not when and how one should.

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