

**THE MASK OF BEING:**  
**Psychoanalytic Explorations of Identity in Film and Culture**

**“The Believer” (2001)**

**Director: Henry Bean**

**Presenter: Rosemarie Krausz, Ph.D.**

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I am going to discuss this film in terms of analytic group psychology by considering the following groups: Jews (with activist and orthodox subgroups); Arabs; and Nazis (with the neo-Nazi subgroup). Starting with what I feel is a necessary digression into the group psychology of the Middle East, I will follow with my interpretation of Danny Balint's identity development throughout "The Believer".

### **The Group Psychology of Chosenness...and Scapegoating**

While I was writing this paper, I received an email from a dear friend and analytic colleague from Montreal. It contained one of those letters circulated by Jews who might be concerned about the inflammatory situation in the Middle East. Essentially, it warned that growing European economic boycotts of Israel might impede Israel's self-defense against its Arab enemies. The letter entreated Jews to communicate with those who do business with Arab nations in order to fight back through boycotting the Arabs. The psychoanalytic meta-message was clear: Considering Jewish as well as non-Jewish passivity regarding the fate of the Holocaust victims of WWII, modern Jews now feel they must aggressively confront all racist actions before another unstoppable genocide takes place. *Not* acting, for a Jew, seems to be equivalent, in activist Jewish circles, to the Jewish passivity that led to death over 60 years ago. Simultaneously, pro-Palestinians consider Israeli militarism to be a racist identification with Nazi aggressors. One Arab academic teaching Middle East Culture at Columbia University (Joseph Massad, 2004) has even

gone so far as to refer to the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians as “The Palestinian Question”, echoing Hitler’s term for the Jewish genocide of WWII. He also pointed out that it is the Israelis themselves who use a common colloquialism for someone who is weak or passive: they refer to such a person as “soap” [*savonim*], a Nazi product developed from dead Jewish bodies.

It appears that modern Jews - and not only Israeli Jews - are in a double bind. If they simply submit to the laws of the Torah and allow the politics of their adopted nations to take care of themselves - as Eastern European Jews did before and during WWII - they, too, may become soap. If, on the other hand, they fight against what they see as anti-Semitism by becoming involved in world politics, they are departing from a 5,000-year cultural tradition of submitting to God’s will, the tradition that began with Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his own son. As activists, they are accused by orthodox traditionalists of being self-hating Jews because their politics precede the Word of God in importance, and further accused by Palestinian supporters of being Nazi-like racists with a total incapacity to view themselves in a self-critical manner - a skill that is vital to group development as well as to the development of healthy relations between groups. Indeed, for better or worse, justified or not, activist Jews are predominantly defensive about *any* outside criticism, labeling it *all* as anti-Semitism. This is unfortunate, as they seem unable to separate the wheat of genuine criticism from the chaff of racism. Where the limitations of both groups show themselves is in their mutual incapacity to see

the distress of the other group due to their personal longstanding suffering that has left them blind from too much looking inward at their own wounds.

Conversely, the orthodox Jews - the ones who most believe in submitting to God, are sometimes too willing to accept the unacceptable. An example of this is given by one of the Holocaust survivors in Danny's rehabilitative therapy group when he says: "Hitler was real. God created him to punish the Jews for abandoning God (Bean, p. 91)." Orthodox Jews have always interpreted traumatic events as punishment from God, stemming from the Old Testament's single-minded focus on proving the Jews to be deceitful, which has understandably lead to chronic group guilt and self-hatred.

Now, Islamic Arabs, also being one of the two Semitic nations, are also in a double bind: they have traditionally felt, like Esau, that they were robbed of their birthright when the Jews claimed that it was Isaac and not Ishmael who was sacrificed on Mount Moriah to the end of creating God's Chosen People. The Islamic Semites desperately want to be recognized by God's grace (and certainly by the rest of the world) as being the True Chosen People, and often express the wish that if the Jews do not give up their fraudulent claim to chosenness, then they are *asking* to be destroyed by the displaced Muslims. Their desire to reclaim the land of Israel is based on their belief that such ownership would finally and openly symbolize world recognition of their own "chosenness" by God.

Of course, we are familiar with the group of Christian anti-Semites who scapegoat Jews either for their independence in having resisted accepting

Jesus as the messiah, for their having been responsible for Christ's killing, or for their unrelenting and envy-provoking claim to exclusive chosenness by God.

Now, I wish to summarize just a few basic principles of psychoanalytic group dynamics that I feel are necessary to understand Danny Balint's fluctuating group identifications, which have everything to do with the double binds I have just described. (1) What identifies a working group is a shared task. When the group task changes, the identity of the group changes. *Each group member loses his individual identity to the extent that he submits to the group identity.* (2) When a group member expresses himself as being and acting somehow *different* from the rest of the group, he is expressing his *individual identity* as separate from the group identity. *In his expressed difference, he feels strengthened in his individual identity but lonelier because of the loss of group acceptance.* (3) When the aforementioned individual communicates solid traits of independence from the rest of the group, there is a strong probability that the group will respond with envious *scapegoating*, in order to try to eliminate that intolerable difference. There are two ways to deal with being scapegoated: one can submit to it passively by accepting the allegations or one can confront it actively and fight the false charges. However, scapegoating always involves a *mutual interaction* between the group and the scapegoated individual; there is no question of one-sided responsibility for this phenomenon. *The scapegoat needs to express his difference from the group so as to solidify his separate identity, and the group needs to try and destroy him out of intolerance of his difference from it.*

Having said all this, it becomes evident that anti-Semitism is an act of scapegoating based both on the anti-Semitic group's intolerance of difference as well as on the Jewish group's longstanding claims of difference. Jews in the Holocaust mostly submitted to anti-Semitism passively, whereas activist Jews - led by the militaristic Israelis - confront it actively. Yet, even Jewish self-hatred has been intensified by the scapegoating which is anti-Semitism.

### **And now...The Film**

"The Believer" (based on a true story) follows the twisted life of Danny Balint, a neo-Nazi who is Jewish. One can understand the paradox of why no major producer wanted to turn out this film while it won awards at Robert Redford's Sundance Festival and has produced serious shock waves since being released to the general public. The paradox is Danny's paradox and every Jew's paradox: How can the Jew not hate his Jewishness somewhere within himself when anti-Semitism has been, continues to be, and will always be a universal fact of life? *If everyone hates my Jewishness, maybe I am really hateful. Perhaps I hate my Jewishness as well.* It is also every non-Jew's paradox: How can the non-Jew deal with differences from himself without destructively envying desirable traits that are absent within himself or hating and projecting - usually into Jews who have always been a convenient scapegoat - those undesirable traits within himself that he cannot accept openly?

Danny's conflict is not really about hating his Jewishness; it is rather about hating the traditional *passivity* of Jews. In the opening scene, 12-year-

old Danny says: “*Fear of God makes you afraid of everything. All the Jews are good at is being afraid. And being sacrificed* (Bean, p. 31)”. Then in the next scene, I didn’t feel that he hated the Yeshiva student he was attacking; he simply wanted him to defend himself. Similarly, when the Holocaust survivor asks: “What should we learn from you, Daniel?” Danny replies, “Kill your enemy (Bean, p. 91).”

A typical child of Holocaust survivors grew up questioning the passivity of European Jews during the Holocaust. It was only too easy to argue from the smug safety of hindsight. Why didn’t they fight back? Why did they *go gently* into the concentration camps and the crematoria rather than *rage, rage against the dying of the light*, to borrow a line from Dylan Thomas? The survivor-parents always said: “We didn’t know it was really so bad. The Nazis kept the reality a secret. And when we heard the rumours about the camps, we just couldn’t believe it. So we believed them when they told us we were just being *relocated*. And once we got there, if we protested or tried to escape, we would surely have been killed.” And of course, if that child really pushed them to the limits by pointing out that *some* Jews - usually prominent and successful professionals like Sigmund Freud, left even *before* the war, *before* the Nazis revoked all Jewish passports (which was another of the survivor-parents’ favourite excuses for not leaving, along with “How could we leave our homes?”), they would back down and whisper defeatedly, “How could we have known that it would be so bad? After all, we had always lived with anti-Semitism. It was part of life. We were used to being hated. We thought it would pass if we just waited it out - like all the other times.” Like

Danny, this child hated his parents' passivity. This was not an uncommon experience in the post-Holocaust generation of Jews.

And even if this child of survivors did not go the concrete, absolute and extremist route of Danny's neo-Nazi functioning, just the act of questioning his parents about their passivity when faced with anti-Semitism got him labeled as an anti-Semite. Of course, any Jew who contradicts Israeli national policy today is also considered a self-hating Jew.

I want to focus on the scene of Danny wrapping a *tallis*, or prayer shawl, around his midriff so that the tassels at the four corners hang outside his pants, like the *tzitzis* of orthodox Jews. He then performs an extraordinary action: while raising his right arm in a Nazi salute, he recites the beginning of the Hebrew phrase- "*V'zot ha-torah...*" that is sung in synagogue when the Torah is lifted up after it has been read from (Bean, 2002) and points his raised pinkie finger as some Jews do to indicate the raised Torah. He is attempting to combine - and I won't say "integrate" - the militant symbol of Nazi group submission with a religious symbol of submission to Jewish orthodoxy. He seems to be communicating a wish to be a true believer who can also be part of a group that defends itself. A Nazi who believes in Torah... *and* a Jew who will kill his enemies.

I do not feel, therefore, that Danny is simply "identifying with the aggressor" in becoming a neo-Nazi. It is an impossible combination he seeks because of his simultaneous belief that certain things need to remain separate. Danny himself points out to Carla at one point that the believing Jew separates *everything* - mundane from holy, flesh from spirit, milk from meat, etc. I want to

add that the believing Jew unconsciously separates his capacity for loving from his capacity for destructiveness. The latter, which is unacceptable, he projects into non-Jews and God, both of whom seem to have the unopposed right to use that destructiveness against him. Then, with his aggression disavowed and projected outward, the believing Jew sees himself as a passive victim, and never as an attacker - not even in the service of self-defense.

Only one part of Danny is a believing, submissive, loving Jew and, true to his own beliefs, embracing his Jewish heritage destroys him - as it destroyed the six million Jews in the Holocaust. In a distorted parody of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, Danny serves himself up to God as a human sacrifice and dies in the explosion he himself has set in his separate identity of the powerful, aggressive Jew-hater. He simultaneously saves all the Jews in the congregation. This is why, in his black-and-white fantasy of the Holocaust survivor whose child was killed, he takes both the identities of the killer Nazi and the heroic Jew who dies because he defends himself. If he had *not* defended himself, he would have been no better than Abraham passively willing to sacrifice his own son.

Danny's frequent flashbacks to his 12-year-old rebellious self, arguing with his Hebrew teacher, explain much about the later changes in his identity. At the age of twelve, Danny already understands that the submissiveness of Jews originates in the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Danny points out to his peers and teacher that Abraham defined his Jewishness by his masochistic submission to a jealous (read: enviously destructive and controlling) God. In Danny's mind, the Jewish trinity is Abraham, the father of all Jews; Isaac, the obedient and passive

son; and God, who is so powerful in his destructive potential that his name must not even be spoken outside prayer - as if the person speaking that name risks the possibility of identifying with the power and aggressiveness that it represents. Disobedience with regard to the unspoken law of submissiveness leads to ostracism and banishment from the Jewish ranks. Yet it is precisely the identification with power and aggressiveness that Danny is advocating for all Jews.

The one scene showing Danny's relationship with his own father is a clue to his seemingly lifelong hatred of Jewish submissiveness. His father makes a mockery of Jewish law in his comments about it being Friday (cf. "Do I give a shit?"), not mixing meat with milk (cf. "Do chickens give milk?") and not using electric switches on the Sabbath (cf. "...if alternating current's running through the wires every second of every day, and I throw a switch, send it here instead of there, how is that lighting a fire?") (all in Bean, p. 60). The way Danny interacts with his father makes it evident that father has always questioned Judaism in this manner; father obviously does not follow the Torah's injunctions, but at the same time, he did send Danny for a Yeshiva education, and he did read the Shalom Spiegel book exploring the story of the binding of Isaac. This discrepancy could account for a part of the split in Danny's identity. Now, although there is no mention of Danny's mother in the film, the published screenplay has father saying to him, "After your mother died, that's when you stopped going to shul. Doing your homework. Everything (p. 61)." This would suggest that Danny's open identification with Judaism crumbled after his mother's death, which he seemed to have handled in a pathological fashion by transferring his ideology to neo-

Nazism. One can only conjecture here: Was his earlier attachment to a Jewish identity, religious dissidence notwithstanding, tenable only because of his mother's attachment to it? And did his inability to mourn his mother appropriately account for his subsequent inability to "mourn" Judaism - if he truly wanted to give it up? Henry Bean, the director, comments in the DVD interview that he sees Danny as wanting to be *both Jewish and* an anti-Semite - but without choosing either one or integrating both of them. To me, that is a description of a split in Danny's ego - something Danny must have developed as a young child so as to cope with his parents' discordant attitudes toward Judaism in order to identify with both of them.

Typical survivor parents were terrified of the outside *goyische* world, seeing anti-Semitism understandably where it *was* as well as where it *was not*. They needed a defender against imagined attacks and often used one of their own children to help them defend themselves. The chosen child might become their *Shabbos goy*, doing what their beliefs disallowed them to do on the Sabbath. Or he might be their Nazi protector, disabusing others of their misconceptions about his parents. Most children of survivors did not, as Danny did, need to use their "Nazi" provocative nature in order to destroy their own loving nature. Some were able to learn, through the process of psychoanalysis, how to bring together that which the believing Jew needs to keep separate, so that they could temper their own self-avowed destructiveness with their love and acceptance of others and themselves. But this healing moderation of extremes would be a lifelong struggle.

Unfortunately, Danny gives up in a psychotic act of abstraction - something he told Guy Danielson earlier that Jews are addicted to. He understood something crucial about Jewish identity when he told, first, the skinheads, and then, groups of fascist supporters, that the best way to destroy Jews would be to love and assimilate them, since Jews have always survived by maintaining their individualist role of scapegoat in the world community. Danny gives up in an act of embracing his impossible double bind: he assimilates himself into the group of Jew-haters who destroy Jews, and then, as that Jew-hater, he kills his Jewish self who then surrenders to the experience - like Abraham and Isaac did on Mount Moriah. He allows himself to be turned into soap. Danny's last thoughts replay the flashback of his argument with his Hebrew teacher, but this time the teacher agrees with him, thus providing the embrace of assimilation which destroys him.

