One of my favorite memories of being Jewish at this time of year was in 1983, and the second most anticipated event in the San Francisco Jewish community was about to take place, the Christmas day release of the Barbara Streisand musical Yentl. The release of the film was second only of course to my bar mitzvah 6 weeks prior. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were a distant third.

I remember going with my family to the Hyatt Theater, 600 Jews getting popcorn and soda, and piling in to watch Barbara play a transgender yeshiva bocher. The place was packed, my Rabbi actually stood in front of the screen just before the film began and greeted everybody like it was Rosh Hashanah, I half though he was going to give a sermon. I think maybe there were two non-Jews in the theater that Christmas morning and I can only imagine what they thought of all of us, all of us in the seats and all of us as a Jewish people represented on the screen, especially after the scene with the sheet on Barbara's wedding night. OY!

I remember leaving the theater, the sun, nearly blinding us as we exited and turning to my grandmother of blessed memory and asking her what she thought of the film. She had a one sentence review, her words, more powerful than a thumbs up or down, she looked at me and shook her head and said, "its not good for the Jews."

It didn't understand what she meant at the time, I mean I didn't quite get the film, Barbara was a girl playing a boy who was really a girl, and apparently in yeshiva everyone breaks in to song every 5 or 10 minutes or so, and why couldn't her papa hear her. But what did she mean it wasn't good for the Jews?

I would hear that same scathing review by her and my parent's generation for the rest of my life. When Ivan Bosky or Michael Milkan were convicted of securities fraud, you could hear the cry, "Its not good for the Jews". When Myer Lansky tried to emigrate to Israel to escape a mob conviction, "its not good for the Jews." When Henry Kissinger was the US representative in the negotiations to end the war in Vietnam, "Its not god for the Jews". Even positive things, when Sandy Koufax didn't pitch on Yom Kippur, though every Jewish little leaguer walked a little taller, our parents whispered, its not good for the Jews. When a Jew won a noble peace prize, "Its not good for the Jews." When Joseph Leiberman, was selected the democratic candidate for vice-president of the United States and we whisper to each other, "oh his mother would be so proud of him, but still its not good for the Jews." Alan Greenspan overseas the greatest economic growth period in our nation's history, and is replaced by Benjamin Shalom Bernanke and what do we say, "Its good for America, but Oy! I don't think this is good for the Jews, why did his middle name have to Shalom!

And so now we have Munich, Steven Spielberg's new movie about the 1972 Hostage taking and murder of 11 Israeli Olympic athletes. The film only opened this morning and already as Tom Tugend writes in his Jewish Journal cover story of last week, the film ranks among a select list of films that have been analyzed by so many yet seen by so few.

The big debate in my family is whether we should spend our sacred Christmas Day movie on Munich, there is nothing else worth seeing that we haven't already seen, and yet we don't know if we should see this movie. We don't know if it will be good for the Jews.

Its almost an absurd debate, a major motion picture, about Israel, by one of America's preeminent directors and one of the great Jewish artists in America, the maker of Schindler's list no less comes out on Christmas weekend, its could draw more than Yentl, and we are debating whether or not to see the film. "Is it good for the Jews?"

To answer the question, "Is it good for the Jews?" we have to first understand where it is coming from. The question itself sounds almost Talmudic, you can imagine in your mind's eye the rabbis of the Talmud sitting some place in b'nai barak, reclining on pillows, and talking with the hands, Beit shamai says its it not good for the Jews and beit Hillel says that it is good for the Jews and then a kol dakah a still small voice is heard from the heavens, the voice of God, and it says both are right, and then Hillel and Shamai argue over that.

In truth the question, is it good for the Jews, while it has been asked throughout Jewish history is actually a product of the post holocaust European Jewish immigration to the United States. Jews from Europe settling into a post-WWII way of life in America had an interesting perspective on things. Having survived The Holocaust, it just wasn't that important to them who won The World Series, or what the most popular movies were. An event was important only in so far as it could have a possible bearing or impact on the Jewish people. Having come through the fires of the holocaust the question was asked out of self preservation. An event was good for the Jews if it solidified their permanence in the United States but didn't at the same time incite the non-Jewish community to perceive that we were gaining too much power or influence.

For decades this question has been asked, often whispered on every aspect of the American Jewish experience, from politics to the cost of produce in the market, there was a time when we could easily divide the good from the evil in the world by simply evaluating if it was good for the Jews; though many of us were careful not to portray ourselves in public as being that parochial, it was nevertheless a handy guide to issues, candidates and controversies.

All we had to ascertain was whether a specific proposal or candidate was favorable to Israel, to the rights of religious minorities overseas, to the separation of church and state, or to any other clearly identifiable "Jewish" interest -- and we had our answer.

The world was easily divided between good guys and bad guys: those who supported aid to Israel (and opposed arms sales to Arab countries) and those who didn't; those who favored linking trade with the Soviet Union to freedom for Soviet Jews and those who didn't; those who favored forcing Jewish school children to endure sectarian prayers in public school and those who didn't.

While there are still a few easily identifiable Jewish issues, it is getting harder and harder to play the good-for-the-Jews game. Why? The first reason: As a community that no longer thinks of itself as endangered, or as a minority we have lost the sense of crisis about political issues we once had. Indeed, many of our old hard-core issues, such as Soviet Jewry, have either been resolved, or like school vouchers, or American support of Israel they have become increasingly complex as our community further assimilates into mainstream American society.

The second reason why it is hard to play the good for the Jews game in our world today is that we no longer speak with one voice as a community about nearly anything. This is in part a result of our assimilation, or our strident resistance to assimilation, and it also a product of the general political, cultural and ideological polarization of our country.

I notice this particularly as a Rabbi. It used to be that all Jews were democrats, politically liberal, socially progressive and supporters of Israel no matter the charges. I know that is not my congregation today, indeed in my time as a rabbi it never has been.

To many questions about Israel, or political candidates, or propositions, we can honestly answer that it is good for some Jews but not for all Jews. As we as a community speak with an increasingly varied and diverse political, economic and social voice so to is the answer to these pressing questions. In fact one could reasonably ask on what can we as a community all agree?

What makes answer the questions "is it good for the Jews?" so difficult is that we don't agree on very much any more. As a community we pray differently, across movements and even within them. We vote differently, we prioritize the financial support of our institutions differently. Some view membership in a congregation as central to Jewish identity, some do not. Some view Israel as the pinical of Jewish interest and concern and some see it as a hindrance to larger global acceptance.

We may feel pressed to throw out the question all together. What measure of an issue is it really if we cannot all agree on the answer. But the question is still important, in fact it is more important now than it was when the answer was so easy to discern. Because in finding the answer we find ourselves.

Is the pull out from Gaza good for the Jews? Is federal support for faith based programs and initiatives good for the Jews? Is Steven Spielberg's movie, with its reported humanization of the terrorists good for the Jews and the Jewish community? For the first time in our history we must strive to not answer these questions both ways. Yes and No is not acceptable. Because the ambiguity of Yes and No furthers the dissolution of our own community and only encourages those who would seek to divide and conquer us. We have to discuss these thing as a community, across the growing religious, political and cultural divides, and like the rabbis of the Talmud, we have to come to an answer. I know it is hard, we joke that if you have 2 Jews you have 3 opinions, but it is essential that we continue the dialogue, that we try and find common ground amongst ourselves. We can agree to disagree, we Jews we are good at that, but we should also strive even

harder to agree to agree. It is a lesson for our nation as well. We don't work hard enough at finding compromise, and like any skill when you become out of practice it is harder still to do it the next time it is necessary.

The story of the mezuzah.

They hang only one way, it is not this or that, it is just this way. Let's see Spielberg's movie and then lets debate it, lets argue over it, and then let's let him know how we feel. We can't be sacred of debate, we are the people of the debate as much as we are the people of the book. This weekend see the move and then discuss it, don't back away from the controversy, work it through and find some common ground. Once you have done it with a movie was can do it as a community over even bigger issues.