BARBENHEIMER
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Sometimes world events demand to be addressed even in the context of a shabbat service.

This is not one of those times; and if it were this would not be the event.

And still, we need to talk about the Barbie and Oppenheimer movies that open this weekend.

Ok – I we don't NEED to talk about them, if there was a world event deserving of piercing the sacred veil of shabbat it would be the ongoing political crisis in Israel, and Rabbi Brown, who is just back from 3 weeks of studying in Israel will be talking about that tomorrow morning.

Which means – at least for a few minutes I get to talk about, what journalists and the internet have termed, "Barbenheimer".

Let me open with a basic observation - Barbie, the doll that no one thought was Jewish, was created by a Jewish woman, Ruth Handler, the daughter of polish Jewish immigrants, and her husband, Izzy Handler. Izzy would later change his name to Elliot, briefly partner with Matt Matson to form the Mattel Corporation (Matt+Elliot gets you Mattel).

Ruth and Elliot had two children, their daughter, Barbara, wanna guess what their son's name was?

Ruth observed that Barbara and her friends were playing with paper dolls and pretending to be adult women. In the 1950s, the only dolls on the market were baby dolls, presuming that girls wanted to play being mothers. But Barbara and her friends wanted to play being adult women, with careers, houses, cars, dreams and independent identities. A complicated and conflicting icon of feminism and assimilation to say the least.

I'll get more into all of that in a moment, but on a purely halachic level Barbie, was the creation of two Jewish parents – she's Jewish. Much to the surprise I am sure of many who respond with the classic Jewish stereotype, "She doesn't look Jewish" Oh yes she does says Ruth Handler, "and what does Jewish look like anyway?!" might be our snappy retort.

J. Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the Atom Bomb was also born to two Jewish parents, in 1904 in Manhattan. Julius Oppenheim and Ella Friedman (btw since names are so important here, anyone wanna guess what J the in J. Robert Oppenheimer stands for? If you wrote Julius on your Jewish Identity bingo card you win.)

Julius (the senior) and Ella never went to synagogue, never gave their son a Bar Mitzvah and instead, they aligned themselves with the Ethical Culture Society, an offshoot of Reform Judaism that rejected religious creed in favor of secular humanism and rationalism.

“The Ethical Cultural Society epitomized Jewish high bourgeois secular liberalism, concerned with the plight of the poor, guided by ideals of social justice, relentlessly hopeful, earnest, and progressive; Ethical Culture Society members promoted women’s suffrage and the prohibition of alcohol, and took part in the founding of the ACLU and the NAACP."[1]

It was there that he developed an interest in universal moral tenets and a firm distance from Jewish traditions. Yet much in the same way that many pre-war Jews gravitated toward utopian systems of governance, Oppenheimer found himself surrounded by like-minded people, most of whom also happened to be Jewish.

He could not outrun his Jewish roots and it followed him into his professional life. He was accepted to Cambridge after earning his bachelor’s degree at Harvard only after a Harvard professor wrote in his recommendation letter, “Oppenheimer is a Jew, but entirely without the usual qualifications.” Thus, skirting the schools anti-Jewish quotas. The same prejudice followed him to Berkeley, where while on faculty he tried to secure a position for his colleague Robert Serber and was rebuffed by his department head Raymond Birge, who said, “One Jew in the department is enough.” He did not push back on the decision, later hiring Serber to work on the Manhattan Project.[2]

I’m told the film doesn’t address the internal struggle Oppenheimer had with his Jewish identity or address the overt antisemitism that followed him no matter how hard he tried to hide his Jewish roots. According to one review I read, “In the film, characters repeat Oppenheimer’s insistence that the “J” stands for “nothing,” rarely interrogating him on his Judaism. He never encounters any overt antisemitism directed at him.” The review went on to explain that, “the movie’s version of Oppenheimer… doesn’t seem as tortured by his Jewish identity as…he was in real life. At several points in the film, Oppenheimer bonds with other characters in his orbit over their Judaism and expresses anger at Hitler’s treatment of German Jews.”[3]

So, this weekend we have the iconic Barbie, the scorn of feminism for most of her 60 years. An Anglo-Saxon woman with blonde hair and an unattainable figure. Gloria Steinem once said of Barbie, “She was everything we didn’t want to be.” But had she been asked about her creator Ruth and her vision for what the doll could inspire in children she might have concluded that she was actually many of the things’ women aspired to be but were being denied.

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[1] https://spartacus-educational.com/USAoppenheimer.htm
[2] The Jewish story behind ‘Oppenheimer,’ explained SHIRA LI BARTOV & ANDREW LAPIN JULY 19, 2023
[3] ibid

Barbie, created by a Jewish businesswoman, for her Jewish daughter, was an independent, working woman, who was not defined by her husband, in fact she didn't have one, the tag line for the movie is "She's Barbie, he's just Ken".

Starting in the 1960s Barbie had a dream house, which had no kitchen, a credit card, when women couldn't own them, a car, when women often didn't drive them and in one of her outfits, Astronaut Barbie would go to the moon 4 years before Neil Armstrong took one small step for MAN-kind.

When we really think about the values of inclusion, equality and even the Jewish diaspora's struggle with assimilation; Barbie represents something much more than her looks; which is of course a central tenant of women's liberation. Barbie is a Jewish heroine of the likes of Esther, Ruth, Devorah and the matriarchs – to say nothing of Ginsberg, Steiner, Golda, Abzug, Szold, Weil and so many more. Again, if names are important – being known by just one is truly a sign of being iconic.

Oppenheimer is equally misunderstood – perhaps most by himself. He spent his life distancing himself from Judaism and the Jewish community, science was his code and creed – I know many Jews like him.

But he was wrong to think the two were incompatible. (Look at me telling the great physicist he's wrong.)

But he was, science and Judaism are immensely compatible.

The medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides clearly says that 'we're given brains and the ability to do rational thought'. Judaism is inherently compatible with the idea of using your brain to understand how the world works, which is what physics is all about, or so I'm told I barely passed Calculus. Physics can help us see the beauty in the universe, and that beauty is part of what we're given as a responsibility to appreciate in Judaism as well.

Oppenheimer's life story is anything but Barbie Dreamland, motivated to create the bomb in part because of his realization that Jews, relatives of his were being murdered by the Nazis he was later plagued by a conflicting sense of relief that many American soldiers would be spared, yet haunted by the mass death inflicted on America's enemies by the bombs he created.

Shortly after the end of the war he finds himself again in a moral conflict, this time with US intention to create a Hydrogen Bomb. This ultimately leads him to a humiliating hearing before the Atomic Energy Commission where he is branded a communist and stripped of his security clearance. The man who leads the charge against him, Lewis Strauss, the chairman of the AEC, and past president of Temple Emanuel in New York City.

If Barbie is the outwardly atypical non-Jewish stereotype; Oppenheimer is the stereotypical Jew of his own two or three opinions. Internally, eternally conflicted and struggling like the rabbis of

our rabbinic tradition struggles with the moral complexities and contradictions of the human experience.

In the end both are complex and complicated characters, which is maybe the singular message of both movies; it's certainly one of the underlying messages of Judaism. We are neither empty plastic vessels, defined by our outward appearance, or limited by societies prejudice and bias NOR are we purely algorithms of scientific calculation that see the world in only binary choices between black and white, good and evil.

Barbie has dreams, and Oppenheimer had a soul, both were obscured by how the world defined them; that and their perseverance in face of such prejudice might have been the most Jewish thing about them both.