

Freedom Writers

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I love idealists, even the crazy ones, just so long as they don't harm other people and that's getting rarer nowadays. I've spent most of my life struggling for my ideals and dreams and I've always been amazed at how little support we idealists get.

This week I saw a film called *Freedom Writers*, starring the talented actress Hilary Swank. It is an excellent of cinema as a source for ideas about the challenges of life and social creativity, as opposed to just violence and titillation. The main plot is as old as the hills and I can recall seeing at least four films with the same story: Idealistic young teacher insists, against advice from experienced experts, on going to a failed inner city school where racial gang violence rules, pupils don't want to study, and school is just a holding camp in between life-threatening challenges. Teacher finds a way of breaking through and stimulating the failures to succeed. Of course, dedication to work comes at the expense of private life, but at least teacher is appreciated. Problems remain but solutions are possible. Feel Good. There's hope.

What marks this film out as different is the way the Holocaust is brought in to show how preconceived ideas about others, prejudice, and hatred can lead to the most awful consequences. Gang members from deprived parts of LA who have suffered from violence and crime come face to face with the records of murdered Jewish children. They meet survivors. They read about Anne Frank and they raise the money to bring the woman who sheltered her to visit their school. They learn that, instead of allowing themselves to be marginalized, it is possible to do something about hatred and prejudice. This against a background of obstruction and antagonism from jaded teachers and administrators, concerned only with their careers, seniority, and pensions, rather than the progress and welfare of the kids.

As I watched the film I thought to myself that it will simply not be shown in England or Europe. Perhaps in small artsy places like the LJCC or the Everyman in Hampstead, to a predominantly Jewish audience. But it won't go out on general release. Europe won't want to offend those Muslims who object to Holocaust Memorial Days. Besides, the Holocaust is now so indelibly associated with Israel that all Israel's enemies will do whatever they can to make sure this film doesn't get the publicity it deserves. At the Jewish Book Week two years ago I was talking to Mrs. Abecassis whose beautiful novella *Kadosh* was mangled into a film of that name that bore hardly any resemblance her original work of art. She also teaches philosophy at Strasbourg University and she told me that if you so much as mentioned the Holocaust in a French university you would be booed off the podium. In the charged political and academic climate of Europe today Israel, warts and all, is the lightning rod that attracts the hatred that unites left and right, Muslim and Marxist. In this atmosphere because the Holocaust did indeed directly and indirectly persuade many that the Jews needed a homeland, it is blamed for

all the ills that failed states and incompetent leaders like to heap on the so called Zionist entity. And that is why in the UK the main Muslim organizations refuse to participate in Holocaust Memorial Days. Of course there are Jews too linking arms with them, secular Israeli academics, Neturei Karta loonies, European and American radicals and anti War protestors. The only common cause that binds them is the animus they have for Israel. Why so much negativity?

As a young idealist I was told not to waste my time going into education or the rabbinate. But I had dreams that I could open closed minds, help kids and adults think for themselves, show them the beauty of Judaism. And from most all sides I got knocked and buffeted and discouraged by those who objected to my idealism, either because they did not want Carmel College to be a Jewish School (as opposed to a school for Jews) or because, as teachers, they resented change or having their comfortable mediocrity challenged. Not all of them, of course—there were some very good “Dead Poets Society” members. But I persevered, and I have to say that, despite it all, to this day nothing gives me greater pleasure than someone telling me that I opened their eyes to the value and benefits of Judaism, even if they have traveled other paths.

The sad part is that too often idealists are prevented from succeeding because of lack of funds and support. Too often communities and boards are peopled with those who obstruct rather than create, who see what’s wrong instead of what’s right. If I succeeded at all it was because I avoided bureaucracies and organizations, and did not allow myself to be beholden to those who couldn’t see the broader picture. But being a loner and a maverick has its disadvantages, too. It cuts you off from the major sources of support—those very organizations and corporations that have the means and the resources that they too often fail to use creatively.

The result is that synagogues and schools are usually peopled with the worn out, the disillusioned and the jaded. Place fillers and time servers wait out their years until its all over, battling with pupils and congregants instead of working with them. So that whether we are talking about schools or synagogues or communities, too often we are looking at failed organizations where minds are not challenged and excited but closed, dulled and turned off into apathy or rejection.

I was brought up in a world in which C.S. Lewis was an important influence. His work on English Literature, *The Allegory of Love* was a set text at university. He also wrote books in defense of Christianity. At home *The Screwtape Letters*, was compulsory reading. It’s a series of exchanges between senior devil Screwtape and young apprentice Wormwood on how to prevent people becoming religious. Wormwood writes in one letter that his Christian is beginning to enjoy praying. The advice he gets is to get him to think about all the other people around him in church and how they offend him in different ways and that will certainly put him off his prayers and probably the religion too. You can easily transpose that into the Jewish community.

If I focused on those who make Judaism a seething hotbed of narrow-minded prigs, needless hatred, moral superiority, arrogance, pride and treating religion as an obstacle course it drove me to distraction, to echo Baron

Corvo's Hadrian the Seventh who cried out in the play, "I love the faith but I hate the faithful." If I had allowed myself to be deflected by teachers who cared more for their pension rights than the success of their students, or clergymen who put the letter of the law and conformity above the sensitive souls of individual human beings, I would have given up on the spot. But what religion also gives as well as other things is a dream, a vision of a better world where individuals are loved and cherished and encouraged, and their lives are made fuller and better.

Just as Hilary Swank's character did not give up, so we who care must carry on, ourselves as best we can or find encouragement and support from those who have the means and the will if not the skills or the dedication. If the system is failing, change it. If you cannot change it, at least persevere. You never know what impact you may have. You'll get shot at but it'll be worth it. And the same goes for trying to live a genuinely religious life. It's a minority pursuit. If you focus on the others it will only put you off. Concentrate on making yourself a better person. If the rest won't join in that'll be their problem.

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