

Missing Fathers, Lost Sons

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Special to the Jewish Week

The other week my in-laws gave us the best present new parents could ask for. They took the baby for a few hours while my wife and I went to see the comedy "Knocked Up." Everything from its title to the closing scene subverts expectations, and the movie is easily one of the best I've seen in a while. Yet with its portrayal of a lost generation of young Jewish men, it got me thinking about what unites some of my favorite movies.

Written and directed by Judd Apatow, creator of the smart (and criminally short-lived) TV show "Freaks & Geeks," this big-hearted movie charts the aftermath of an unlikely coupling: Tall, beautiful and altogether lovely, Allison Scott (Katherine Heigl) has just been promoted to entertainment reporter at the E! Channel when she hooks up with the shlubby, unemployed Ben Stone (Seth Rogen) at a nightclub. Eight weeks later Allison finds herself, to her horror, in the titular predicament.

While she decides in short order to keep the baby, Allison is not half as sure about Ben. He lives in a squalid communal apartment with a gang of goofy, adrift guys. His pals have elaborate plans for an Internet business that catalogs nude scenes by famous actresses, if only they could lay off their bong for awhile. As for Ben, he doesn't seem alarmed that he's down to his last pennies.

"Knocked Up" takes what sounds like a sitcom plot and turns it on its ear, allowing its main characters to be complicated people who change in believable ways (especially the women — a rarity in "guy" movies). Best of all, it doesn't

give in to easy answers. Turning to his dad at a moment of crisis, Ben finds little help. "I've been divorced three times. Why are you asking me?"

Though this scene is played for laughs — it's clear the elder Stone (affably played by Harold Ramis) loves his son — there's also something undeniably poignant about watching Ben grope his way toward maturity, nary a male role model in sight.

In a way, he is the latest in a line of lost Jewish guys that stretches out to another Ben, Dustin Hoffman's character in "The Graduate." (Though Benjamin Braddock's ethnicity is never made explicit, director Mike Nichols considered him to be "Jewish inside"). About the best thing the older generation can offer Braddock is the now-legendary career advice: plastics.

If Ben's father isn't of much help, then the father in "Lost Embrace" is literally absent. Set against Argentina's recent fiscal crisis, Daniel Burman's 2004 movie revolves around an idealistic young man and the band of quirky merchants who inhabit the run-down Buenos Aires shopping mall where he works.

What Ariel (Daniel Hendler) wants is a ticket out of town. But what he yearns for is some shred of the father he's never known, the man who hung around long enough to be a blur at his bris (literally: he flits by on a home video Ariel watches) before moving to Israel to fight in the Yom Kippur War.

The exception to these films may be Ben Younger's "Boiler Room" (2000), released during the final gasp of the last Internet boom, which stars Giovanni Ribisi as Seth Davis, a young hustler who, desperate for his father's approval, falls into an illegal brokerage scam that bilks millions from ordinary

citizens. The scenes between Seth and his dad, a stern federal judge with rectitude of an old world patriarch, are among the movie's most affecting.

Naturally, this litany of movies isn't altogether academic. The search for role models reflects my own experience, and that of other men I know. In a culture where there are relatively few examples of emotionally available, accomplished men, many of us seek viable models wherever they present themselves — mostly with mixed results.

My status as a father of an 8-week-old son makes this question once again pertinent. Back in the early 1990s, Robert Bly's "Iron John" suggested that contemporary men had been wounded by the lack of effective father figures. Though the ensuing men's movement was easily caricatured — Bly's brightly colored vests and lute-playing never helped matters — it seems to me he was onto something genuine. We have yet to be able to discuss men's real emotional lives without racing for cover — or for a punch line.

Which may be one reason that any real critique of contemporary masculinity is best found in a comedy like "Knocked Up." As it is, for now men will have to figure things out for themselves. Perhaps it's no accident that when Ben Stone finally gets around to finding a job and an apartment, there's no guarantee it will help him win Allison back. In the process, he falls back on his own instincts. It's the best role model many of us ever end up finding. ■



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