

WHAT IF “THE SOPRANOS” WERE TORAH?

Seven years later, like the seven years of “plenty” in the Joseph story (or the seven years of famine, depending on one’s personal taste), the sordid, humorous and very much provocative tale of Essex County’s Soprano family has finally come to, what can only be described as, an abrupt halt. *Abrupt* is certainly the correct word to describe the ending of the last episode. In fact, it ended so suddenly that most viewers actually thought that their cable had lost its connection (or their TiVOs had prematurely shut off). But it was all planned—some say *brilliantly*, and some say *sadistically*, and even others contend *stupidly*—under the direction of David Chase.

I cannot think of any other television production that has generated as much interest and devotion as has Mr. Chase’s “The Sopranos”. Even the termination of M*A*S*H or the “Who Shot J.R.?” episode of Dallas seem to pale in comparison to the frenzy surrounding the conclusion of the complex and enigmatic (and for some disturbing) themes and plot-lines of Tony Soprano’s nuclear and extended families. “The Sopranos” is in a class by itself, and if by virtue of thematic comparison with “The Godfather” which—as many contend—was the greatest film ever made, then “The Sopranos” not merely raised the bar for television, but bent it completely out of shape.

This was a drama whose protagonist was an anxiety-ridden sociopath who cried over lost ducks but dispassionately asphyxiated his nephew when his loyalty began to come into question. Violence, both verbal as well as physical, was so normative in each episode that social scientists will debate for years to come the influence “The Sopranos” has had on its viewers (especially in the hours immediately following a viewing). It had a narcissistic mother who put out a “hit” on her son, a wife who almost had an affair with her priest, a therapist who had fantasies about her criminal client, and any number of characters who slept with the fishes or fell prey to the knives (and sometimes chainsaws) of Satriale’s butcher shop. And the best part...was that it all happened right here. In New Jersey. In Caldwell, and Kearny, and Belleville. In the Pine Barrens. On the Glen Ridge Country Club’s tennis court. In the principal’s office of Montclair High School. And the last scene—clearly the show’s most provocative—right here in Bloomfield. Across the street. At Holsten’s.

I confess that it’s taken a bit of time for me to process the last episode of “The Sopranos”. At first I was non-committal. It happened so fast that I really didn’t know what to think. I vacillated back and forth between *awe* and *disappointment*, between wanting more and wanting to applaud. But now that a few days have passed, now that I’ve had a chance to speak to some friends, read a few reviews and think, I am of the opinion that the last scene—where absolutely nothing happens (or something does happen but we never find out)—was nothing short of brilliant. It was art. In the style of sacred literature.

Let me put it to you another way. What if it were Torah? If you saw that last episode and it left you feeling empty or even angry, if you found yourself with your mouth gaping open as your screen went just...blank...as the camera zoomed in on Tony’s eyes as Meadow walked into Holsten’s after what seemed to be an interminable effort at parallel parking (in a spot, by the way, that is a No Parking zone), would you feel as disappointed or perturbed...if you were reading a story from Torah?

Now this is not such an absurd idea. Television, like Torah, is about story-telling. And the truth be told, Torah, like television, is not above probing the depths of human depravity. Even if you don’t watch “The Sopranos”—either because you don’t subscribe to premium cable or because

you object to graphic displays of gratuitous violence—it is, I believe, worth exploring the equation of a series like “The Sopranos” with the sacred literature of the Torah. Heresy, you say? Maybe. But long before there were characterizations of sex and violence on TV, the Torah gave us stories of incest and murder and rape. Remember, we are the people who brought you the fratricide of Cain killing his brother Abel, and Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. Ours is the tradition that told how Simeon and Levi, to avenge the “so-called” rape of their sister, went and murdered—in cold blood—all the members of the tribe of Shechem after the Shechemites had voluntarily circumcised themselves (in order to become Jews). It’s in Torah that our namesake Judah is seduced by his daughter-in-law Tamar so that she might secure her late husband’s birthright. And let’s not forget the Golden Calf. Or Sodom and Gomorrah. In fact, Torah doesn’t just indulge in these tales of reprobation, Torah invented them. “The Sopranos” isn’t just TV—it’s *midrash*.

So if we can see that David Chase’s 7-year-long series about organized crime and family process is nothing more than story-telling, and if the Torah’s greatest literary virtue is its ability to weave narrative in a style so compelling that we continue to immerse ourselves in its interpretation thousands of years later, it seems to me more than valid to analyze the surprising conclusion to “The Sopranos” as if it were a text of Torah.

You see, stories with enigmatic plot lines are found throughout the Torah. By design, I believe.

There’s this great text in the story of Cain and Abel. Cain is clearly impacted by God’s choice of Abel’s sacrifice instead of his own. God tries to get Cain to put it in perspective (when God says to him “Sin crouches at the door but you can be its master”), but Cain will have none of it. Then the text goes on to say, “Cain said to his brother Abel...” but Torah never tells us what he said. Now some contend this is just a scribal error. That somewhere along the line of transmitting the oral tradition onto parchment the dialogue between these two brothers got misplaced. Dropped off. Accidentally excised. But true students of Torah will have nothing of these notions. For us Torah leaves us wanting more so that we can use our own imagination, so that we can include ourselves into the text.

It’s the same way in the Joseph story when the brothers complain about Joseph’s immodesty, all those dreams of his prominence—especially over them. All Torah tells us is that Jacob, their father, “...kept the matter in mind.” What does that mean? He kept the matter in mind? For the serious student of Torah, it’s *supposed* to be ambiguous. That’s the great power of Torah. Because it’s not simple. It’s not easily understood. Torah requires audience participation. All good story-telling does. And that’s what I believe David Chase was doing with the end of “The Sopranos”. He was making us a part of the show, or better yet, a member of the team of scriptwriters.

But there’s more. Because I believe that leaving the ending undefined is more than just good story-telling. I think that Chase’s abrupt ending, without resolution, has intrinsic value. It’s a lesson in and of itself. For me it reflects the most central lesson throughout all of the seven years of this Emmy award-winning series. Here it is:

The whole point of “The Sopranos” is that they were an *ordinary* American family.

That’s right, *Ordinary*. Okay, not everyone takes the gun and leaves the cannoli, but aside from their pathological lifestyle, Tony and Carmella and Meadow and A.J. were just another suburban family. They had *tzuris* like we do. They had dysfunction like we do. They had good times like we do. And virtually each season ended not with a blood bath (as opposed to the end of “The Godfather”), but around a table...eating. From *Vesuvio’s* at the end of the first

season to *Holsten's* in this the final season, "The Sopranos" was a series about ordinary life—among people who kill each other for a living.

Even more, the essence of the drama was not at the *end* but in the middle. Or as my friend Rabbi Don Rossoff said to me—particularly after reflecting on the ups and downs of that final scene as we slowly watched the Soprano family members make their entrances into Holsten's amidst the camera focusing on the possible identities of the various other characters eating there that night and speculating whether or not they were hit men or FBI agents or ordinary Bloomfielders—the thrill of the roller-coaster is not when it slides safely to its stop but in the ups and downs and twists and turns of the roller-coaster's path. That is, life—regardless of who you are—finds its meaning in the day-to-day thrills and spills of the journey, not in some Hollywood-made ending. Because the truth is, Hollywood endings are the antithesis of reality. And I think David Chase knows that. "The Sopranos" is a rebellion against the mythmakers of Hollywood.

Life never happens that way. You don't ride off into the sunset just like your parents don't die saying "I love you" with their last breath. Life isn't that neat. It's messy. Sometimes you don't get what you want most. Sometimes relationships don't get resolved. Some evil people get away with murder and innocent people get mistakenly executed. Life is not about fairness. Or completeness.

Last weekend I watched a very worthy film entitled "Freedom Writers", a true story about a bunch of inner-city kids who discover how to find meaning amid their desperate lives. One of the film's more powerful moments was when one of the students, after having finished reading "The Diary of Anne Frank", comes angrily into the classroom and yells at the teacher crying, "Why didn't you tell me she dies in the end?" Yet, of course, what makes Anne's diary so potent is that *despite* her fate, she was able to affirm life and love and hope in the days she *did* have. And that's why her story is so enduring.

This, I think, is what David Chase had intended for us. It doesn't make a difference if Tony and the Sopranos get *whacked* in Holsten's or they just get some reflux from those onion rings. Life is not about endings; it's about *moments*. That's all we have. That's all we will ever have. And that is why the most evocative prayer for us Jews is the *Shehecheyanu*. We thank God for bringing us into life and for keeping us alive—in order that we might experience and affirm and celebrate *this* moment.

"The Sopranos" ended the only way it could. The show ends—as should our lives—with no question more important than to wonder...what might have been? But the wondering ought to be less about how the story of our life ends and more centered on the days that combine to lead up *to* that end. And just as I feel as if David Chase enlisted us as scriptwriters in his epic series finale, so only *we* can write the ending to *our* lives—by fulfilling the sacred potential of all the moments we do have—especially the moments we have *now*.