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Introduction: ‘Totally Transformed’

Through several flashback sequences during the first season of Jill Soloway’s web television series Transparent (2014), the viewers follow Ali Pfefferman (Emily Robinson), the youngest daughter of a mostly nonobservant Jewish-American family, as she is about to celebrate her Bat Mitzvah – the Jewish traditional coming-of-age rite of passage for girls. The seventh episode, ‘The Symbolic Exemplar’, shows Ali as she refuses to wear the dress purchased for the event, declares that she does not believe in God, and brings about the cancellation of the Bat Mitzvah. The eighth episode, ‘Best New Girl’, depicts the weekend when the Bat Mitzvah was supposed to take place, with Ali left alone at home. A bartender (Mel Shimkovitz), who was not notified of the cancellation, arrives. Ali admits to her that the alleged crisis of faith was in fact just an excuse to avoid the ceremony, since she was not sure
she would be able to memorize the Torah reading. The Torah reading is the central part of the ritual in which the adolescent musically recites the weekly portion from the Pentateuch in the synagogue. Traditionally, and in most Jewish Orthodox communities today, only male adolescents perform the Torah reading. In liberal congregations, such as the one the Pfeffermans belong to, female adolescents perform it as well.

Immediately after her confession, however, Ali performs the Torah reading flawlessly in front of the bartender, who volunteers to be her ‘captive audience’. Ali does not perform the Torah recital in the same manner she would have done in the synagogue. While correctly following the traditional ritual’s text and the cantillation (the exact musicality of the text’s chanting), Ali’s choreography is far from traditional. As she stands up on the sofa and then hops onto the coffee table, Ali accompanies the recital with mock ballet moves and consciously over-dramatic arm flailing, ending by diving with much flourish into a deep bow. To this, the bartender responds with: ‘Oh my fucking God, that was brilliant. I have no idea what you just said but I feel totally transformed.’

In the synagogue, Ali’s bodily movements would have been far more restrained. It is evident in the scene that teenage Ali enjoys presenting herself and her body to a slightly older young person. Ali’s performance can therefore be seen as a theatricalization of the ritual, in the common meaning of ‘theatricalization’ as exaggerated self-display. Yet Ali also theatricalizes the ritual even more literally: she turns it into theatre, with the coffee table as stage and the
Bartender as audience. Her performance is theatrical also in the sense that she does not claim to conduct the ‘real’ ritual, but rather mimics it with much leeway for playfulness. Nevertheless, it does bring about a transformation in her audience – and arguably in her as well.

Being ‘totally transformed’ by this performance clearly resonates with the show’s ongoing concern with transformations and transitions, which are at the core of Transparent, a series that follows the lives of Maura, a transgender woman, and her family. Transformations and transitions are also central to the specific verses from the Pentateuch that Ali recites as she performs her unexpected Torah reading. These are from Genesis 12:1–3:

The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families on the earth shall bless themselves by you.’

Ali’s transitions during her rite of passage, as well as Maura’s journey towards realizing her identity as a transgender woman, both mirror the open-ended journey embarked upon by Abraham (then still called Abram). It is a journey to a promised yet unknown land. It requires leaving behind one’s former identity so that one may become ‘totally transformed’. By attaching the verses from Genesis to Ali’s performance,
the creators of *Transparent* studied the myth of Abraham’s journey in terms of contemporary female puberty. They inquired in which ways the ancient religious text may illuminate a modern adolescent’s journey, and how this adolescent body might unearth new meanings in the text through performance. Ali’s re-enactment of the Bat Mitzvah ritual, the text she recites, and the context of the scene all interpret one another. As we will see later in this book, Ali participates, however nontraditionally, in a longer Jewish tradition that posits texts and their interpretations in the midst of religious performance.

But what about another transformation, that which takes place between religious ritual and theatricalized performance? What, if anything, is transformed there? Ali’s impromptu performance of the Torah reading draws attention to the ways in which a specific individual body, with its particular concerns and anxieties, claims the scripted ritual as its own while performing outside the ritual context. At once freed from the demands of obligatory ritual and responsive to those demands on her own terms, Ali enters a multilayered bodily engagement with religious tradition – one that includes not just the text from Genesis, but also techniques of intonation and physical gestures. Theatricalization enables her to enter this engagement. It creates a playful space for her to reactivate the traditional ritual, perhaps more efficaciously than in the synagogue, in ways that are both distanced and dialogic.

This book explores the transformations that occur when Judaism meets theatre, especially concerning the
three layers in Ali’s scene: religious text, the traditional performance of it, and the theatrical performance of both. This is not a book about Jewish theatre, the boundaries of which are notoriously difficult to define. Rather, it is a book about the intersections and interventions between theatre and Jewish religious traditions. As we will see, theatre and Judaism are often conceived in terms of opposition and antagonism, but Ali’s performance demonstrates how both transgressive and productive these relations can be. In what follows, I ask what happens when Jewish religious traditions are rethought through theatre, and vice versa.

I believe thinking about Jewish religious traditions alongside theatre is important these days because thinking about theatre and religion more broadly is important. Religion has resurfaced in recent years as a prominent factor in people’s personal identities and in social and political debates worldwide. The 9/11 attacks and Western responses to them framed the political conflicts of the last two decades in religious terms. Immigration and growing multiculturalism brought secular and religious communities into greater proximity with each other. Following the rise of identity politics, religious people call to consider religion an identity category that requires representation, like gender, sexuality, or ethnicity. Religions worldwide, including Judaism, figure predominantly in the public sphere in ways that they did not a few decades ago. Consider, for example, current disputes in the USA as to whether declining to cater gay weddings is within one’s religious freedoms, or debates in France regarding the wearing of hijabs by Muslim female
students in the public school system. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas (2006, 2008) consequently suggested that we now live in ‘post-secular’ societies, that their secularity can no longer be taken for granted, and that the role of religion in civil society needs to be negotiated anew.

This short book is composed of two parts. The first (the next two sections) is historiographical in nature, and critically tackles how narratives about theatre in Jewish societies often address religion and secularity. The second part, the remainder of the book, offers an alternative to the common narrative. Rather than thinking about theatre in terms of secularization, I propose to consider it as a form of study, an embodied exegesis. These are concepts I borrow from Jewish religious traditions, but that also allow critical distance from these very same traditions. Like Ali’s performance, I will argue, theatre may offer a playful mechanism for engaging with and reinterpreting the presence of religion in contemporary society. I propose that through performance, theatre may register both ruptures and continuities with religious traditions, and thus enable a shared inquiry for society into the place of religion and secularity nowadays.
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