

# Confusion on every score

## The Believer, directed and written by Henry Bean

By Joanne Laurier  
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*The Believer*, the directorial debut of veteran Hollywood screenwriter Henry Bean, is the story of a young Jewish man who becomes a neo-Nazi skinhead.

The film, which won the Jury Prize at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival, drew criticism from Rabbi Abraham Cooper at the Simon Wiesenthal Center, who declared that the film's depiction of a Jewish Nazi "did not work." Thus branded as "controversial," *The Believer's* commercial distribution has been limited.

Danny Balint (Ryan Gosling) is a 22 year-old swastika-wearing skinhead in contemporary New York City who works as a forklift operator at a warehouse, although we never see him on the job. Balint links up with an underground neo-fascist organization run by Lina Moebius (Theresa Russell) and Curtis Zampf (Billy Zane). Danny argues passionately for a policy of assassinating prominent Jews, whom he calls "society's disease." He is initially seen by Lina and Curtis as a political liability with an obsolete obsession. His intelligence and oratorical skills, however, eventually land him in good stead not only with the party leaders, but also with Lina's apolitical, masochistic daughter Carla (Summer Phoenix).

Repeated flashbacks of Danny as an argumentative yeshiva student with an irreverent attitude toward God are presumably offered as part of the explanation for the Jewish youth's descent into fascism. Danny fiercely debates with his instructor about the legitimacy of an omnipotent God who allows evil to have his way against an impotent humanity. As a consequence, Balint apparently develops an extreme identification with the almighty aggressor.

Later, a court-enforced sensitivity training session with Holocaust survivors reveals the core of Danny's visceral anti-Semitism: his belief that the Jews were passive victims of the Nazis. A survivor's account of the butchering of his three-year-old son by a German soldier is for Danny a modern version of the biblical story of Abraham agreeing to kill his own son to prove his obedience to a malevolent God. In his yeshiva days Danny called God "a power-drunk madman ... a conceited bully." The Holocaust survivors, who exude a powerful internal strength, try to explain to Danny that they were not just victims, but were faced with circumstances that made resistance impossible. On the surface Danny seems unconvinced, but one senses that an internal conflict has been unleashed.

Director Bean's screenplay is inspired by the true story of Daniel Burros, a Jewish youth from New York City who became a leading member of both the American Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan. In 1965 a *New York Times* reporter exposed Burros's Jewish ancestry, leading to his suicide at the age of 28. In the wake of the suicide two *Times* reporters—Abe Rosenthal and Arthur Gelb—wrote an account of the episode which argued, legitimately, that Burros had been another victim of the Nazis.

*The Believer* attempts seriously to deal with a transition and a fate that is psychologically complex and historically multifaceted. Bean deserves

credit for tackling such historical and psychological issues. However, the character of the work and the conclusions he reaches speak to the political and intellectual shallowness and blindness of the American "intelligentsia"—if such a phenomenon exists—at this moment in time. The work simply does not hold water, dramatically, psychologically or historically.

The decision to transpose the story from the 1960s to 2001, without taking into consideration the vast changes that have taken place in American social life, suggests Bean's essential disdain for historical and social realities.

The events and circumstances in *The Believer* simply do not cohere. In 1965 American postwar liberalism was still at its full height. This was the period of the civil rights movement, in which many Jews played leading roles, and of the beginnings of the anti-Vietnam War protest movement. One almost wants to say that the kind of behavior exhibited by Burros, an obviously disturbed and, in reality, psychotic Jewish youth, was far more conceivable in the world before 1967 and the Six-Day War between Israel and its Arab enemies. His peculiar form of anti-Semitism, resentment against supposed Jewish "weakness" and "effeminacy," seems far less likely to occur today. Daniel Burros is more conceivable in the contemporary world as a Baruch Goldstein (mass murderer of Arabs in Hebron in 1994, born in Brooklyn) or a Yigal Amir (assassin of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995).

The notion that a neo-fascist movement, seeking to replicate Hitler's Nazi party and led by individuals of German extraction, might attract a large following in respectable circles in New York City on the basis of racist rants against Jews in 2001 is simply absurd. In any event, such an esoteric current would hardly represent a serious threat. The threat of fascism today comes largely from the Christian right (enthusiastic supporters of Israel, incidentally), the so-called militia movements and various trends with close connections to the Republican Party and the Bush administration. Bean has simply not thought any of this through. However, it damages the fabric of the work. It is not accidental that, aside from Balint, none of the characters has an independent or convincing existence.

Many of the seemingly inexplicable elements in the drama, including Danny's eventual reconciliation with Judaism and his girlfriend Carla's increasing obsession with Jewish liturgy and the Hebrew language, only become comprehensible in the context of Bean's own gravitation toward conservative Judaism, which he sets out in an essay included in *The Believer: Confronting Jewish Self-Hatred* (edited by Bean).

Bean explains that "From the start we [he and collaborator Mark Jacobson] thought of the film as a comedy. The notion of Danny hiding his terrible secret and, at the same time, compulsively revealing it was fascinating and darkly hilarious." Then Bean disturbingly writes "that it wasn't so much about a Jewish Nazi as simply about being Jewish.... Danny Burros was our own Jewish ambivalence and hybrid Americanness exaggerated into comic proportions."

The script was eventually transformed from a “comedy” into a “Samuel Fulleresque tale,” whose underlying premise was that “being a Jew was not a matter of faith or testimony, as in a normal religion; it was inscribed into your flesh, like numbers on your wrist.”

The director’s further evolution included coming upon the works of Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz [1903-94], who provided him with “a working explanation of Judaism that made sense.... What Leibowitz is describing, and implicitly advocating (and from which I have borrowed heavily to inform Burros’ thinking in *The Believer*) is obedience to the hallakah (the law), not because it ‘makes sense’ or improves life, but because the Torah commands it.... Here, at last, was a Judaism I could believe in, because it didn’t require belief. It was beyond theology, beyond psychology, beyond reason. It offered nothing except itself, and therefore could never disappoint. Its very lack of argument was what persuaded me: that precisely by dispensing with all calculations of cost, benefit and truth, it offered truly something truly beyond this world, a praxis, things to be done entirely for their own sake. One might ask, then, why these particular things instead of others? And, unless you accept the divine origin of the Torah, there is no answer except that this system links you to a tradition, and thus, to your ancestors.”

This is pretty foul stuff, an open embrace of the irrational and the appeal of the “blood.” What is Bean really saying? That the traumas and tragedies of the twentieth century simply proved too difficult and complicated for him, and so he chose mysticism and superficial, self-serving answers to complex problems. The real historical contradictions, including the contradictions within Jewish theology, stumped him and he took the easy road. This is not astonishing, given the cultural atmosphere in the US in the 1990s and the evolution of considerable layers of the upper middle class, including the Jewish upper middle class.

On the basis of the writer/director’s conversion, the script for *The Believer* evolved into a “Jew-obsessed work,” Bean writes, which made his erstwhile partner Jacobson “uncomfortable with what seemed to him an excess of Jewish content.” Jacobson withdrew from the project.

Bean’s essay reveals that he is most consumed with finding easy answers to profound historical traumas. Hence the film’s lack of concern with details, objective or subjective, that do not jive with the director’s schematic religious views. The key to making sense of the film’s irrational moments, such as Danny’s quick change from synagogue desecrator to guardian of the Torah, is to be found in Bean’s description of his own path from non-believer to believer.

With critical thinking and objective criteria out of the way, Bean has no responsibility to answer the questions raised by the subject matter of his film. More peculiar, almost sinister, is the explanation, which goes beyond the Burros story, that Bean advances for making Danny a Nazi. He expounds that Nazism was in part “a reaction against the dislocations of modern life” and conjoined to this truth is that the essence of the Talmud, and therefore Judaism, is its de-centered and indeterminate nature. “Jews seem[ed] to embody modernity in their very being ... [the] Jews have, in a sense, been post-modernists since Babylonian captivity.”

With this distorted view, Bean creates his main character to be more of a vehicle for his own psychological catharsis (of a sort) than a source of truth and insight. “When he [Danny] tells the gathering in Mrs. Moebius’ living room that the public ‘will be glad’ once they realize that Jews are being killed, is he saying that this is wonderful news for all of them as Nazis, or that it is the nightmare of his life as a Jew? He’s saying both, and the horror and delight can never be disentangled.... The very exuberance of Danny’s invective tells us that something complicated is going on. As Carla says to late in the film, ‘Oh, is that why you became a Nazi? So you could talk about Jews incessantly?’... I have to admit I believed in those rants, not in their literal truth (if there could be such a thing). But in the sheer visceral pleasure of hatred.... A Jewish Nazi who

didn’t enjoy his anti-Semitism, who was merely tormented by it, would make no sense; worse, he would be boring, and there would be no point in making a film about him.”

This helps explain why the scene with the Holocaust survivors is extremely perfunctory and not terribly convincing, as are the flashbacks. In these moments Bean appears to be going through the motions. As he states, “Danny’s long bursts of anti-Semitic invective were the core of the script and the easiest parts to write.”

Bean’s central character is a “living contradiction” who “liked being pulled in opposite directions. This was irrational, yet felt exactly right. And it excited me like nothing I had ever written.” This belongs in the “Please, tell us more” department. What are the opposite directions in which Bean likes being pulled? When he later writes about “our own fascist longings,” he should reveal exactly what he has in mind. In any event, he should speak for himself.

There is nothing seductive or delicious about anti-Semitism or racist rants of any kind. They are not the opposite of hypocritical liberal paeans to universal brotherhood. Such hatreds do reflect real things and processes, but what are they? In the final analysis, the social contradictions of capitalism, the ideological diseases of the period of its death agony, all the filth deliberately stirred up to preserve it.

Nor is there anything legitimate or fascinating about Jewish self-hatred or anyone else’s. If there is Jewish shame and guilt in regard to the Holocaust, this is due to the general lack of understanding of the tragic events. The so-called “non-resistance” of the Jews is bound up principally with two issues: on the one hand, the inability of many to conceive of the level of savagery to which the decay of capitalism would lead the German ruling elite and its human attack dogs, and, on the other, most significantly, the catastrophic betrayals of the European workers movement by social democracy and Stalinism which left humanity, and the European Jews in the first place, at the mercy of fascist barbarism.

Bean’s musings are confused and self-absorbed sentiments that shed light on why the film hints that being a Jewish Nazi may not be the aberration it appears to be. (After the failed murder attempt on the life of a well-known Jewish figure, Danny’s neo-Nazi companion astonishingly states that he was a Jew “in another life.”) Bean’s attitude toward fascism seems remarkably ambivalent. Above all, one has the sense that historical reality carries little weight with the director. What counts is his “personal development.” One simply cannot treat these issues in this shabby and irresponsible manner, in art or anywhere else.

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