

Miracle on 34th Street, A Christmas movie, A Jewish, Zionist Perspective

Believe the Impossible Dream

By Jerry Klinger



Every year, about this time of year, Christmas themed movies are flooding T.V. screens across the country. Ranked #9 out of 100 by the American Film Institute greatest films of all times is the 1947 beloved holiday comedy classic, *Miracle on 34th Street*.

It is a warm feeling movie with choking wet eyes for an ending. There is a universality about *Miracle on 34th Street* that happily is for those who will suspend disbelief with belief. We dispel our cynicism with the possibility of love.

Small wonder it is a holiday favorite rebroadcast year in and year out. *Miracle's* story is straight forward.

The annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade is just about to start. The man hired to portray Santa Claus on the main float is fired for being drunk. By chance, a kindly looking passerby, an elderly gentleman with a full white beard agrees to take the role of Santa for the Parade. The replacement Santa is wonderful. He is so well accepted by the public he is hired by Macy's to be the store's children's Santa for Christmas. The gentleman gives his name to the personnel office, Kris Kringle.

Business for Macy's booms. Kris brings cheer, good feelings, and hope to all who visit, especially the children. They believe he is Santa. They believe he can really make their dreams come true.

To believe is to believe. To believe is to make something impossible real. *Miracle on 34th Street* is believing the impossible is real.

What is Christmas? Kris explains. "Oh, Christmas isn't just a day. It's a frame of mind."

The frame of mind is the key to the story. Kris Kringle claims he is the real Santa Claus. Cynics accused Kringle of being dangerously insane. Kringle is taken to the Belview psychiatric hospital and held pending a sanity hearing. The expected, cut and dried sanity hearing does not go as planned. Kris is ruled sane. Even worse for the cynics, he is declared to be Santa Claus by the court.

How can a Christmas movie be a Jewish Zionist Classic all at the same time? It is not as hard a leap as would seem... if you believe...

The idea for *Miracle on 34th Street*, came to its creator, Valentine Davies, while standing in line Christmas shopping. It was an epiphany for him.

Davies approached 20th Century Fox chairman Daryl Zanuck with the idea. Zanuck recognized the potential and assigned the project to screenwriter George Seaton. The film would be produced by William Perlberg.

Filming began in 1946. It was released to the theatres in June 1947. *Miracle* came out one month before the Exodus sailed for Palestine carrying 5400

desperate Holocaust refugees each with their own dream of a home. It was just two years since the Holocaust ended.

Miracle on 34th Street was a super box office boom. People loved it. *Miracle* won three Academy Awards the following year. The movie won for Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Edmund Gwenn) as Kris Kringle. It won for Best Writing, Original Story going to Valentine Davies. And it won for Best Writing, Screenplay, George Seaton.

Miracle was also nominated for Best Picture of the Year but lost to *Gentleman's Agreement*, a major movie assault on American antisemitism. Today, *Gentleman's Agreement* does not even make the American Film Institute's top 100.

2005, *Miracle on 34th Street* was selected by the United States National Film Registry of the Library of Congress, to be preserved. The preservation citation read because *Miracle on 34th Street* was "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant".

Seaton read Davies proposal and adapted it with his creative insights to movie construction needs and messaging.

Seaton (George Stenius), a baptized Roman Catholic, was born in South Bend, Indiana. He grew up in a Detroit Jewish neighborhood. Seaton described himself as a "Shabbas goy". George would hold the money and buy the movie tickets on Saturday afternoons for his Orthodox Jewish buddies. He was so a part of the Jewish world, on occasion, he attended Yeshivah classes with his pals. Seaton quipped he was even Bar Mitzvahed.

William (Bill) Pearlberg was born in Lodz, Poland, immigrating to the U.S. in 1905. He worked for his furrier father but soon moved into the entertainment world. Over his long and successful career, Pearlberg worked with Seaton on numerous films. In 1943, Pearlberg produced *Song of Bernadette*. The screenplay was by Seaton. The movie was based upon the novel by Franz Werfel. Werfel, an Austrian Jew, had been the siren's voice to an uncaring world about the Armenian Holocaust. His novel, *40 Days at Musa Dagh*, horrified the world.

The Nazis paid close attention to Werfel. They astutely observed, if the world did not care about the mass murder of Armenians by the Turks, no one would care about the German "Final Solution" for the Jews.

The *Song of Bernadette* won four academy awards.

Belief is faith and faith is belief. A dream can be a belief or a child's fairy tale.

Fifty years before *Miracle* was released Theodor Herzl, the founder of Political Zionism, the progenitor of the modern state of Israel, wrote, *Wenn ihr wollt, ist es kein Märchen...If you will it, it is not a dream.*

Privately, in his diary Herzl openly expressed himself, about the First Zionist Congress he had organized in Basel, Switzerland the summer of 1897.

"At Basel, I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today, I would be answered by universal laughter. Perhaps in five years, certainly in fifty, everyone will know it."

Herzl dreamed a dream. Perhaps he had an epiphany. Most of the Jews, especially in the West, saw Herzl as a naïve madman pushing unrealistic childhood dreams, a charlatan at the least. They feared Herzl. He was very dangerous to them. They knew he was dangerous to all Jews who only recently were winning acceptance, and emancipation in their respective countries. They savored the sweet wine of, at long last, dying anti-Semitism.

Establishment Jewry refused to believe Herzl. Herzl died in 1904. Establishment Jewry forgot about the crazy man. The crazy man's dream would not go away.

Miracle's main characters are Doris Walker, a divorced mother raising her six-year-old daughter alone in a small rented apartment in New York City. Doris is cynical, realistic, with "common sense". Her daughter, Susie, a precocious child, wants to do what is right, love her mother, follow her guidance but keep her childhood dreams of something better. She dreams of living in a house, a real home not a temporary apartment, with a yard and a swing set. For 2,000 years Jews have dreamed of a permanent home, on their own ancient land, too.

Frey Gayley, the attorney across the hall from Walker befriends her. He has eyes for her which certainly helps the story line.

Gayley becomes the Kris Kringle's lawyer. He is intent on defending Kris and keep him out of Belview. He does not know how but he intends to prove Kris is Santa Claus.

The sanity hearing became the central turning point of the movie. The United States Post Office delivers the official mail, 50,000 letters addressed to Santa Claus, Kris Kringle, during the hearing. The judge rules Kringle is not dangerous and is in fact Santa Claus. By law, the U.S. Post Office is forbidden to deliberately deliver mail to anyone but to whom it is intended.

The idea to deliver the letters to the courtroom and Santa Claus, Kris Kringle, came from Al Golden a Jewish postal mail sorter. Valentine Davies named him in his book specifically. He is not named in the movie.

The day after the sanity hearing is Christmas Day. Everyone is invited to Kringle's Senior Home on Long Island for a Christmas party.

Kris, a bit tired, and in his Santa Claus costume, greets everyone at the door. Kris' young helper, Alfred the janitor at Macy's, also in a Santa Claus costume, happily shakes hands with everyone. Shaking Mr. Macy's hand was a special treat for him.

The store "psychologist" tried to convince Alfred he was having mental issues for believing in Santa Claus. Kris helped Alfred get back on track. Kris and Alfred's interactions showed you don't have to be crazy to believe.

Alfred was a young Jewish character actor. His name was Alvin Greenman.

Presents are under the Christmas tree. A new X-Ray machine that Dr. Piece, the Senior Home's physician, had wished for is next to the tree. It was a deep personal wish Pierce had only told Kris about. Pierce's face is filled with amazement and gratitude.

Little Susie runs up to the tree searching for her present.

Doris – "There are lots of presents for you darling."

Susie – "Not the one I wanted. Not the one Mr. Kringle was going to get for me."

Doris – "What was that?"

Susie – "It doesn't matter. I didn't get it. I knew it wouldn't be here, but I thought there would be a letter or something telling me."

Kris walks up to Susie – “I don’t suppose you even want to talk to me.”

Doris – “Something about a present.”

Kris – “Yes, I know. I’m sorry Susi, I tried my best, but...but...”

Susie – “You couldn’t get it because you are not Santa Claus that’s why you’re just a nice old man with whiskers, like my mother said and I shouldn’t have believed you.”

Doris – “I was wrong when I told you that Susi, you must believe in Mr. Kringle and keep right on doing it. You must have faith in him.”

Susie- “But he didn’t get me the thing I wanted. That doesn’t make any sense Mommy.”

Doris- *“Faith is believing in things when common sense tells you not to.”*

Susie – “Huh?”

Doris – “I mean just because things don’t turn out the way you want them to the first time, you still got to believe in people. I found that out.”

Susie – “You mean it’s like if at first you don’t succeed try, try again?”

Doris – “Yes.”

Susie – “I thought so...”

Kris gives Fred Gayley instructions how to drive back to the city. Doris, Fred and Susie get in the car and follow the route. Along the way, Susie sits muttering to herself.

“I believe, I believe, silly, I believe.”

Suddenly, Susie sees something up ahead.

Susie – “Stop Uncle Fred...”

Doris – “Where are you going?”

Fred – “What is she doing?”

Susie dashes out of the car, up the hill and into an open for sale house. It is the exact same house she showed Kris from a magazine picture she had torn out and given to him. It was the home of her dreams.

Kris promised Susie to do what he could.

Doris – as Susie comes down the stairs from the second floor of the empty house.

“You know you should not run around in other people’s houses. You know better than that.”

Susie – “But this is my house Mommy, the one I asked Mr. Kringle for. It is. It is. I know it is. My room upstairs is just like I knew it would be. Oh, you were right Mommy,

Susie to Fred and Doris – “Mommy told me if things don’t turn out the way you want them to the first time you still got to believe, and I kept believing.

You were right Mommy. Mr. Kringle is Santa Claus.”

Susie’s impossible dream had come true. She found her home at last. As Susie ran outside to play in the yard on the swing set, Doris and Fred talk about buying the empty house, their eyes fix on a cane leaning up in the corner. It is the same type of cane Kris used to get around.

They are amazed, they are incredulous. Could it be... could Kris have made this possible? Doris and Fred embrace and kiss.

Perhaps it was a coincidence. During the filming in 1946-1947, Kris Kringle did a scene in Macy’s as Santa Claus where little children come to tell him their wishes.

A retiring, dark haired, dark eyed little girl is brought to Kris and sits on his lap. She can’t speak English to tell Kris her hopes, her wishes. She can only speak Dutch.

To everyone’s amazement, Kris suddenly strikes up a conversation with the little girl in perfect Dutch. Smiling broadly, they sing a little holiday song together.

Was it purely a coincidence that the *Diary of Anne Frank* was published in 1947? Was it a pure coincidence that Seaton chose to include the little girl speaking Dutch in the movie?

Or was it?

Is *Miracle on 34th Street*, A Christmas movie, and a Jewish, Zionist Classic?

It's up to us to believe the Impossible Dream.

If it is a stretch for you to believe or even if not,
Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to one and all.

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