



Based on NPR's long-running radio show, THIS I BELIEVE, an eclectic group of City Congregation members offered their own reflections and joined this international conversation. Presentations were shared at Shabbat, Nov. 19, 2010.

I Believe in Lechner's Law
Jack Lechner

I believe in Lechner's Law. It's a principle I've observed over the 25 years in the film industry, and as far as I can tell, it's as inviolable as the laws of gravity and thermodynamics. Lechner's Law is this: "At some point in the development of any movie, someone will suggest cutting its most original element."

I first noticed this principle when I worked at a Hollywood studio and read a screenplay the studio was developing about a police bomb squad. The movie was narrated by one of the squad—which made it an enormously effective surprise when he was blown to smithereens in the middle of the story. A few months later, I read a rewrite which had no narration at all. The same character got blown up at the same point in the story, but it didn't have anywhere near the same impact. "What happened to the narration?" I asked the screenwriter. He replied, "Oh, that was the first thing the studio got rid of."

Since then, I've seen this pattern again and again. Lechner's Law happens because the most original element of any screenplay is the element nobody has tried before—which means nobody knows if it'll work. In Hollywood, that's reason to be afraid, because studios don't like surprises. The safest commercial bet is to make a movie that's a lot like another successful movie. That's why studios make sequels, and cookie-cutter romantic comedies starring Kate Hudson. Originality introduces an uncertain variable into what should be a familiar set of equations. You don't want to greenlight the only Kate Hudson movie that doesn't make money, because it departs too much from the formula.

But there's a catch to this philosophy: The biggest hit movies are almost always the ones whose creators refused to let anyone cut their most original idea. People told James Cameron he was crazy to make *Titanic* and *Avatar*. The most successful movies I ever worked on—*The Crying Game*, *The Full Monty*, *Four Weddings And A Funeral*—were unique, even if they had numerous imitators after the fact. Originality wasn't something to fear; rather, it was the reason each film broke through the clutter of the marketplace.

I think this principle might extend beyond the movie business, which is why I'm sharing it with you. Perhaps, to succeed wildly in any endeavor, you have to take a chance on something that might not work at all. Naturally, this can also be the path to failure—but the path to failure and the path to greatness are often the same path. Think of Steve Jobs, battling nay-sayers throughout the resurgence of Apple Computer; or even of America's Founding Fathers, surrounded by people who questioned whether independence from England was a good idea. You have to learn to ignore the voices that tell you to fear the new and the unknown, whether it's the schmuck in the conference room, or the schmuck in your own head. In the end, that's why I coined Lechner's Law—because, too often, that schmuck has been me.