

'Let's Be Rigorous': Cinematic Images of Orthodox Jewry

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Figure 1 *Kadosh*, (Israel, 1999), director Amos Gitai, producers Michel Propper, Amos Gitai, Laurent Truchot.

Introduction

Romanticized and often far from realistic, the picture of Orthodox Jews and the pre-war idyll of the East European Jewish communities has always been a favourite topic of cinematography. However, audiences in the last two decades were offered several movies approaching Jewish Orthodoxy in a different if not a totally opposite way. These movies - Amos Gitai's *Kadosh* (Israel, 1999), Karin Albou's *La Petit Jérusalem* (France, 2005) and Jeroen Krabbe's *Left Luggage* (Netherlands, 1998) - show Orthodox Jewry in confrontation with modernity which challenges them to maintain their identity or turn away from it. Mainly, these movies, as any other form of art, challenge peoples' values, examine their feelings and send a message. Therefore the question is what kind of message is sent about Orthodox Jewry in these films and how valid is it. With no intention to give a verdict and to justify or condemn any of them, the objective of the article will be to deconstruct the way the image of this hardly approachable community is built and to contemplate the main obstacles to representing it in contemporary cinema.

Kadosh

In reviews Amos Gitai's movie *Kadosh* was called a 'startlingly angry film'¹ and 'a harsh portrait of a community that crushes the spirit of its citizens'². The

¹ K. Fox, *Kadosh*, <<http://movies.tvguide.com/kadosh/review/134566>>, March 2009.

² S. Axmaker, *Kadosh's portrait of fanaticism goes beyond tale of sacrifice*, <<http://www.seattlepi.com/movies/kadq.shtml>>, March 2009.

movie tells the story of the unhappy marriages of two sisters. The older one, Rivka, is married to the love of her life, Meir, but is not able to give him a child for ten years of their marriage. The younger sister, Malka, is in love with an ‘inappropriate’ man Yakov who left their community in order to serve in the army. Despite this, Yakov considers himself to be ‘still a good Jew’, and yet he is repudiated by the Orthodox community. Thus, Malka is promised to another man, a repulsive zealot, whose devotedness is better seen in emotional gesticulation and frenetic vociferation than in his mode of behaviour. Amos Gitai pictures the Orthodox community of Mea Shearim, a neighborhood in Jerusalem, as being intolerant not only to the outside world but to its own members as well. The greatest pressure is on these two women, Rivka and Malka, who seem to represent the general trend of women’s lives in the Orthodox community: the lack of choice; the insignificant role within a patriarchal society; one’s duty to assist one’s husband in self-expression at the expense of one’s own self-definition. A wife is considered to be ‘the crown of her husband’, an object which he can ‘put on’ or ‘remove’ and expose as he pleases. Gitai explores the pervasiveness of this image of orthodox womanhood through the attitudes of the community: ‘the only task of a daughter of Israel is to bring children into the world’, states one character. Another declares that ‘a barren woman is no woman’, a condemnation interlaced with eloquent scenes of Malka’s first wedding night, a scene far more suggestive of rape than lovemaking. The theme, however, is further explored and inverted through Meir’s refusal to make love to his wife Rivka as he begins to find it sinful. Thus, the director leaves the audience with an image of an absolutely powerless and pitiful woman’s existence. The men, who are suggested as the perpetrators of this injustice (Milka’s husband Yossef, the rabbi, and the other men in Yeshiva) say ‘Let’s be rigorous’ and never seem to be anxious or compassionate.³ The debate about whether pouring the water on the tea on Sabbath is cooking or not evokes more passion in their speech than discussion of the woman’s choice to get married or to divorce. The only male character that conveys a sense of disturbance and pain is Rivka’s husband Meir who is torn apart between love for his wife and love of God. Nevertheless, the latter supersedes his mundane feelings and the pressure from his father, a rigorous rabbi, who pushes him to leave Rivka.

It is important to stress that no matter how sharply Amos Gitai portrays the relentless character of the communal laws, he never presupposes Torah or the religion itself to be the source of this misery. It is people, or the men to be exact, who interpret and implement the words of the Scriptures. One scene in which Rivka’s mother pleads with the rabbi to help save her daughter’s marriage, exemplifies this: ‘Please think it over again. I can’t do it [...] Rivka is all I have left. We’re not angels, we’re human beings, flesh and blood’. The rabbi responds, ‘Do as our religion commands’.⁴ One is left with a feeling that it is definitely not God’s but human being’s will to break this bond, and the rabbi’s words sound somewhat ironic and awry.

³ *Kadosh*, (Israel, 1999), director Amos Gitai, producers Michel Propper, Amos Gitai, Laurent Truchot.

⁴ Ibid.

La Petit Jerusalem

The second film under consideration is *La Petit Jerusalem* (Little Jerusalem) by Karin Albou (France, 2005). Although in an interview the director said she wanted ‘to show a new theme with Jews’ and for that reason chose to capture scenes of Purim (the Jewish festival celebrating the Jews’ deliverance from Haman) and Simchat Torah (biblical Jewish holiday) instead of the often pictured Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) or Shabbat, she did not quite apply the same requirement to the entire movie and the way she showed life in a Parisian Hasidic community.⁵ Reviewers mentioned the moodiness that implied something ineffable is going on⁶ and a challenge ‘to question the constraints (sic!) she has placed on herself as a Jewish woman and wife’ that one of the female characters experiences.⁷ I shall not disagree that the atmosphere and the emotional flounce of the characters is put again into well known and predictable restrictive frames of Jewish Orthodoxy.

La Petit Jerusalem is a story about a Jewish family living in suburban Paris, in a neighbourhood nicknamed ‘Little Jerusalem’. The main character, whose troubled search for self-identity the viewers witness, is the eighteen year old philosophy student Laura. She is a lost soul more drawn to the philosophy of Kant and secular studies than to the lore of her community’s religion. Her wish to be an independent and well educated woman living in her own apartment confronts the views of her family and their desire to find her a husband as soon as possible as a means to ‘dislodge’ such ‘extravagant ideas’. She struggles to live life and cogitate on it exceptionally rationally, embracing secular philosophy and trying to ignore the frame her family and community tries to impose on her as much as she can. However, it is not easy since her sister, her brother-in-law and her mother are exceptionally devout Jews that find it difficult to understand Laura’s uncongenial aspirations. Here, again, like in *Kadosh*, the most pious members of the community fail to conform to exemplary behaviour: Rivka and Meir in *Kadosh* fail to save their marriage, Yossef does not know how to treat his wife Malka properly, and in *Little Jerusalem* Laura’s sister Mathilde faces her husband’s adultery. This devout man supposedly is driven to this unacceptable step because of Mathilde’s inability to give him sexual pleasure. This topic of guilt, shame, prejudices and ignorance in sexual matters are readily explored in these movies. The mikvah, or ritual baths, provide a typical setting in which these concerns are discussed, a place where women open up to each other and to the audience.

Left Luggage

The third movie, *Left Luggage* (Netherlands, 1998) directed by Jeroen Krabbé, addresses different issues such as the guilt of a Holocaust survivor, coping with the past and the alienation from Jewish identity, whilst also grappling with the ‘realities’ of life in the Orthodox community. The movie is

⁵ Interview with Karin Albou by J. Hiller, <<http://www.bangitout.com/articles/viewarticle.php?a=1370>>, March 2009.

⁶ Owen Gleiberman, *La Petit Jerusalem*, <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1155172,00.html>>, March 2009.

⁷ Kevin Crust, <<http://www.calendarlive.com/movies/reviews/cl-et-petite5may05,0,2800927.story>>, March 2009.

set in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1972 and the story evolves through the eyes of a young Jewish girl, Chaja, who is absolutely indifferent to her ethnic or religious identity, but takes on a job as a nanny in an Orthodox family's home. The Kalmans, the family she works for, are typical zealous Hasidic Jews (a denomination or movement of Orthodox Jewry) of with a stereotypically severe father and a gentle mother with no particular right to speak her mind or contradict her husband even when he is being cruel to one of their sons Simcha who is four years old but still mute. Chaja is the one who helps him to utter his first words. However, when Simcha tries to surprise his father by asking him Seder questions (asked as part of the ritual of Passover), the latter criticizes him for making a mistake instead of rejoicing over the first words he has ever heard from his son. Chaja, being a compassionate and free spirit without any religious affiliations, tries to intervene and explain to Simcha's father how deeply wrong his behaviour is, but all she encounters is his post-Holocaust trauma, a trauma which Chaja already confronts in her own home.

The plot is predictable and somewhat trivial: a Jewish girl alienated from her Jewish roots and repulsed by the Orthodox whom she calls 'idiots', and in who's dress and lifestyle she finds great humour, begins to understand the people who were so distant before and thus gets closer to her own family, the indelible horror of the Holocaust, and her own Jewish identity.

The main themes explored in these movies reflect an image of womanhood within Orthodox Jewry as confined and repressed by a patriarchal community. Indeed such repression prevents the expression of free will as well as the opportunity to define one's own destiny within the boundaries of the community and its expectations. For a woman, life is already mapped out with little or no opportunity for (re)negotiation. In contrast men are depicted as despotic and absolutely unconscious of the secret passions in the women's hearts. However, it is not only Jewish men, but Jewish Orthodoxy itself which is depicted as keeping itself aloof from the contemporary world. Thus the community is, essentially, the true embodiment of what Chaja's father in *Left Luggage* calls 'back in the ghettos of old Europe. Hundreds of years of confinement and being humiliated. They're walking around in their prison clothes of that time'.⁸ In these movies the Orthodox have difficulties in communicating not only with Gentiles (non-Jews), but also with other, non-Orthodox Jews. They disdain them as Simcha's father disdains Chaja or the way Yakov is alienated because of his choice to join the army. Moreover they unsuccessfully struggle to bring other, more secular Jews, back to the 'righteous', as seen in the character Yossef in *Kadosh*, when he shouts in the streets of Jerusalem: 'Jews, I love you! I am your loving Yossef. Tonight the gates of Mercy shall open. Come greet it with love. Come revive the Jewish soul! Come rekindle the flame of Judaism![...] Let us gather and work together.'⁹ However, no one listens to Yossef or even hears him.

I now want to consider how accurate these images of Orthodox Jewry are, although, of course, such conclusions can only be tentative. Conveying an 'authentic' image of the community was problematic even for the directors,

⁸ *Left Luggage*, (Netherlands, 1998), director Jeroen Krabbé, producers Ate De Jong, Hans Pos, Dave Schramm.

⁹ *Kadosh*, (Israel, 1999).

none of whom define themselves as Orthodox. In an interview in 2009, Karin Albou attempted to define her Jewish identity. ‘I am not religious now. I am Jewish. My father is Jewish. Later I converted and I was married in a synagogue. I became more religious when some of my friends became religious. I have always been interested in Judaism and religion.’¹⁰ It is clear then that Albou is not a part of the world which she explores in *La Petit Jerusalem*. Amos Gitai also defines himself as a secular Jew, and thus however much research he has done before making *Kadosh*, the director was unable to draw directly from his own experience. Although Jeroen Krabbé too is a secular Jew, he is also the child of Holocaust survivors, so the latter topic that he explores in *Left Luggage* is much closer and comprehensible to him than that of the realities of the Orthodox community.

Does this then mean that the representations of Orthodox Jewry which we find in these movies were the only available ones to a non-Orthodox director? It would be useful here to introduce another movie - Giddi Dar’s *Ushpizin* (Israel, 2005) - which could be viewed as a kind of ‘antidote’ for every articulated stereotype or cliché in the movies already discussed. Far from being extremely intellectually challenging or deeply shocking, *Ushpizin* is a vivacious fable addressing some very similar issues explored in *Kadosh*, *Left Luggage* and *Little Jerusalem*. It tells the story of an orthodox Jew, Moshe, who, together within his wife Malli, recently became Hasidic Jews. The couple have money problems and are not able to celebrate Sukkoth (a Jewish autumn festival) properly, but, more importantly, they do not have children and are constantly praying for a baby (preferably a boy). Moreover, they have difficulties dealing with the world outside their community which becomes obvious when unexpected guests, Moshe’s friends from the past, take them by surprise and stay for the Sukkoth. However, the essential difference between this particular representation of Orthodox Jewry and those found in the previous three movies discussed is the simplification and accessibility that *Ushpizin* possesses. The reason for that might be the fact that the screenplay is written and the main character is played by a well known Israeli actor, Shuli Rand, who himself became a Hasid, and that the movie itself was filmed in an authentic setting with the cooperation of the local Orthodox community and even a real Hasidic rabbi! For the first time this isolated community actually got involved in such a seemingly impossible venture.¹¹ Perhaps that is why there is hardly any criticism or skepticism in this movie. Even though there are several moments when Moshe’s and Malli’s guests question the *raison d'être* of the fundamentality of the strict observances of the Hasids, in the end they come to realize the significance and beauty of such a dedicated way of life and come to recognise that dialogue between the Hasidic and secular world is possible. The charm of this movie lies in its attempt to de-polarize the world of the Orthodox and non-Orthodox, or non-Jews, showing that the narrative about the Orthodox does not necessarily have to revolve round the challenge of being Orthodox, but can also address more universal and common issues in the Orthodox setting.

¹⁰ Interview with Karin Albou by J. Hiller, <<http://www.bangitout.com/articles/viewarticle.php?a=1370>>, March 2009.

¹¹ Interview with G. Dar by B. Balfour, <<http://www.g21.net/nystate58.htm>>, March 2009.

Conclusion

There are several main problems which are common to all three movies in the representation of Orthodox Jewry. First of all, the directors tell us about a community which basically cannot participate in the perception of these movies, thus, excluding itself from any contribution to the reflection of the director's ideas. However, the question as to whether these problems and issues that are represented to be so painful and prevalent within the Orthodox community, are actually the case, remains open.

The most explored path towards imagining this community and entering a world with which the majority of audiences are barely familiar, is the one through the religious rituals, which is the one all directors are willing to take. In *Left Luggage* the audience enter it through the ignorant eyes of Chaja. She is an outsider in the Orthodox community, closer to a Gentile viewer than to the Jews, and it is when she starts to explore the rules in the Kalmans' home that we begin to realize what these people are like. In *Kadosh* the audience is propelled into the Orthodox world from the movie's opening scene when Meir is waking up and the camera catches all the morning rituals of the devoted Jew. The director chose this ritual as it contains the line 'Blessed is our Eternal Father who has not created me a woman' and thus introduces the audience to what the main theme of the movie is. *La Petit Jerusalem* begins with the Tashlich (casting off of one's sins) ceremony during Rosh HaShana (Jewish New Year) and later shows us inner family relations during the Sabbath meal and mikvah. It seems that Jewish rituals are a picturesque manifestation of Jewish identity, and therefore are the most suitable for the cinema. However, the utilisation of Jewish rituals as 'shorthand' for Jewish Orthodox life often spares the director from going deeper into or even beyond them.

The stories of these movies are told by those who, like Yakov in *Kadosh*, consider themselves to be 'still a good [or good enough] Jew'. Ironically they are, essentially, about Jews who consider themselves to be the only truly 'good Jews'. The gap between these two perceptions might be essential when considering the validity of the representation of the Orthodox communities in the cinema, as this constructs an inevitable 'otherness' in the screen image of these people. Nobody would deny the fact that Hasidic communities are isolated and prefer to avoid unnecessary contact with the outside world, but it is perhaps somewhat narrow-minded to present them as totally clueless and alienated from everything that would be considered out of the limits of the Jewish law. It is likely, therefore, that this is just a very convenient framework when it comes to conveying a sense of an extreme and pressurized communal life, as well as providing a means to depict and create sympathy for struggling characters. However it is at the expense of showing a more diverse and versatile picture of the Orthodox. The directors use the Orthodox image as an extremity of Jewish identity; as one character in *Left Luggage* put it – 'very Jewish' Jews.

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