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Hofshat Kaitis (My Father My Lord)

Abstract

This is a review of *Hofshat Kaitis (My Father My Lord)* (2007).

Hofshat Kaits is a movie by director and screenplay writer David Volach. Volach grew up in a haredi (“ultra-orthodox”) community in Jerusalem, until he decided to break with religion. This film deals with the topic of religious life and apostasy, and it uses a variety of religious forms of narrative to tell its story.

The film tells the story of 8-year-old Menachem Eidelman, the son of Abraham, an elderly rabbi, and his wife Esther.¹ The Eidelman’s family life revolves around religious duties: the studying of Talmud and Torah by the men of the family, the saying of the brachot (blessings), and the observance of the mitzvot (commandments and/or acts of piety). Esther’s duties as a woman include covering her hair with a headscarf or a wig, and keeping the home kosher. Volach’s depiction of religious life emphasizes the difficulties of observance, and the incompatibility of Menachem’s curiosity for life and the boundaries set to him by religion.

Menachem is very keen on going on vacation to the sea. But before actually going there, two scenes take place, which are key to the plot and the meaning of the film. In one of the scenes, we see Menachem in his religious school learning the Torah portion about the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). We see how Menachem repeats the words of his teacher, yet he is highly distracted by a pigeon in a nest in the window of the school. Later we see the schoolchildren fixing the different figures of the story of the binding of Isaac on a board: Abraham, Isaac, the fire, the lamb... Menachem is supposed to put the lamb on the board, but he can’t - it keeps

falling off. Finally, his parents arrive to pick him up, and he leaves without “providing” the lamb for the sacrifice in the felt board story. This is a *mashal*, a parable, for what happens to Menachem later on in the film. In this sense, it is no coincidence that Menachem’s father is also called Abraham. In the biblical story, Abraham is told by God that he should sacrifice his only son as a burnt offering. Yet God “calls off” the sacrifice in the last moment by providing Abraham with a lamb. In the movie, as we see later, Abraham goes off to pray the afternoon prayer and leaves Menachem unattended at the seashore. Menachem is struggling to bind his sandals, so he can go to prayer, and at the same time to catch some tiny fish from the river that flows into the sea. Menachem falls into the sea and is swept away by a storm that ultimately kills him. In the meantime, Abraham is praying passionately and is the last of the praying men to realise his own son is gone. The scene in the school is a prophetic parable of Menachem’s later “sacrifice.”

The other parabolical scene, which also takes place before Menachem’s death, is when Abraham and Esther arrive at Menachem’s school to pick him up to go to the beach. Abraham is asked to come into the school to speak out the *bracha* of “sending the mother-bird away.” Abraham needs to shoo away the mother pigeon, seen before in the school window, and speak out the appropriate blessing. This *mitzva* is based on a commandment in Deuteronomy 22:6, which promises a long life to him who sends a mother bird away before taking her offspring, but the

bracha is spoken even when the eggs or chicks are not taken. There are many interpretations about the origin and the sense of this bracha, but in the film it has the function of a parable. Menachem is very confused about the sense of the bracha of sending the mother-bird away. He is concerned about the fate of the squabs - what if the mother doesn't come back? His mother tries to reassure him - why would a mother not come back to her little ones?

When the family arrives at the beach, Esther must part from Abraham and Menachem to go to the women's beach, while they go to the men's beach. After the tragic accident occurs, Esther is overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness: She had had to leave her son on the beach out of religious duty, yet her absence, combined with the father's mental absence through prayer, had left Menachem to face the elements on his own. Esther seems to see herself as a "mother-bird" having been sent away by a meaningless religion: Esther has lost Menachem, and with her son, she has lost all comfort.² Unlike the biblical Esther, who was able to save her people through her faith and determination, Esther Eidelman was unable to save her son. Thus, she suddenly decides to reject the religion that had played such a fateful role in her life until then. In a last, very emotional scene, we see a synagogue service coming to an end, with Abraham as usual praying fervently even after everyone else is gone. Only Esther is there, crying desperately in the women's balcony. As she sees her husband sitting down underneath the balcony, she starts

throwing prayer books at him. With this, Esther seems to express her rebellion and her rejection of faith.

Hofshat Kaits is an auteur film, an individual story, and a general criticism of religion. David Volach's own biography and his own opinions about religion are interwoven into his film. Yet, as he made clear during the screening of the film at Berlin's Jewish Film Festival, the film is not a flat statement that "religious parents don't love their kids". Rather, it tells an individual story, which is a parable for Volach's deeper view of religion as an instance above morality - an instance that he rejects. Religion requires full obedience, and in Volach's eyes, this obedience is unconditional - no matter what consequences it may bring.

Volach's beautiful film aesthetics and his wide use of religious forms of narrative make this film worth watching. Even if the parables he uses might be quite disturbing to a believing audience, the content of the film is definitely something theologians and even sociologists might want to ponder about.

¹ The semiotic meaning of the names of the main characters will be explained later.

² Menachem means "comforter" in Hebrew.