

A HIDDEN LIGHT: JUDAISM, CONTEMPORARY ISRAELI FILM, AND THE  
CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE

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Throughout its brief history, Israeli cinema largely ignored Jewish religious identity, aligning itself with Zionism's rejection of Judaism as a marker of diasporic existence. Yet over the past two decades, as traditional Zionism slowly declined, and religion's presence became more pronounced in the public sphere, Israeli filmmakers began to treat Judaism as a legitimate cinematic concern. The result has been a growth in the number of Israeli films dealing with the realities of devoutly religious Jews, amounting to a veritable "Judaic turn" in Israel's cinematic landscape. As of now, this "turn" has received meager attention within Israeli film scholarship. The following, then, addresses this scholarly lack by offering an extensive investigation of contemporary Judaic-themed Israeli cinema.

This intervention pursues two interconnected lines of inquiry. The first seeks to analyze the corpus in question for what it says on the Judaic dimension of present-day Israeli society. In this context, this study argues that while a dialectic of secular vs. religious serves as the overall framework in which these films operate, it is habitually countermanded by gestures that bring these binary categories together into mutual recognition. Accordingly, what one finds in such filmic representations is a profound sense of *ambivalence*, which is indicative of a general equivocation within Israeli public discourse surrounding the rise in Israeli Judaism's stature and its effects on a national ethos once so committed to secularism.

The second inquiry follows the lead of Judaic-themed Israeli cinema's interest in Jewish mysticism, and extends it to a film-theoretical consideration of how Jewish mystical thought may help illuminate particular constituents of the cinematic experience. Here emphasis is placed on two related mystical elements to which certain Israeli films appeal—an enlightened vision that unravels

form and a state of unity that ensues. The dissertation argues that these elements not only appear in the Israeli filmic context, but are also present in broader cinematic engagements, even when those are not necessarily organized through the theosophic coordinates of mysticism. Furthermore, it suggests that this cycle's evocation of such elements is aimed to help its national audience transcend the ambivalences of Israel's "Judaic imagination."

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## PREFACE

I must first offer my thanks to faculty and staff members of the film programs at Tel Aviv University, New York University, and the University of Pittsburgh for their continued support of my work. To acknowledge each and every one of these individuals would take the length of this dissertation. While such a task may be too difficult to perform, I would nevertheless like to take this opportunity and single out in gratitude the members of my dissertation committee. Their advice has helped me beyond measure in navigating the turbulent waters of graduate school. Their generosity has made me feel at home in a field with which I was yet not too familiar. Their encouragement is what I take with me as I embark upon the next stages of my academic career. I could not have asked for a finer assembly of minds with which to discuss my project.

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Also invaluable has been the presence of my fellow graduate students, past and present. Of these, I am obliged to give the greatest vote of thanks to Ali Patterson, who has accompanied my project from its earliest stages, and who has tirelessly read revision after revision and suffered through my episodes of amnesia, when I forgot what I was writing and why. Ali was the first person I met when I came to Pittsburgh, but that is not the real reason for our close friendship. Rather it is because, by example, she has taught me that to be a scholar does not mean only to live a life of the mind, but also a life of the heart. Ali is one of the smartest people I know, but I don't think I have ever met someone with such a big heart.

Collaborators on and readers of articles and book chapters that emerged from this study have also been impactful on my professional development. Rachel Harris deserves special mention

in this context. During our first encounter, at a panel in the Association of Israel Studies conference, she informed me that we will become the best of friends. I was not sure of the validity of that prediction at the time, but now recognize it as uncannily clairvoyant. She has been the most vocal and persistent advocate of my work, and has made it possible for me to overcome my novice's hesitancy and share my ideas with the broader academic world.

Further endorsements of my scholarship, without which I would not have been able to complete this body of research, have come in the form of an Andrew W. Mellon Predoctoral Fellowship from the University of Pittsburgh's School of Arts and Sciences and a doctoral scholarship from the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture. Several travel grants from the University of Pittsburgh's Department of English, as well as the overall logistic assistance of Directors of Graduate Studies Troy Boone and Nancy Glazener, have also proved immensely helpful.

Perhaps most taxed by these years of continuous writing have been my family and friends in Israel. To Iris and Nadav I wish to say: not only did you provide a source of emotional comfort through this long period, but your ideas on my topic of study had a profound impact on my thinking as a whole. To my parents, Miki and Bracha: I will forever be grateful to you for believing that there are no limits to what I can do in life. Though I do not always share this belief, it nevertheless exists within me. It is the shape of love, a hidden light.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: JUDAISM AND CINEMA IN AN ISRAELI CONTEXT

In 2013, Israel's leading daily newspaper *Yediot Acharonot* asked ten local "cultural figures" to determine "who was their favorite God-fearing character on the Israeli screen."<sup>1</sup> The answers were diverse not only in their pick of character, but in the type of claims made about it. Amongst the accounts, respondents noted the merits of characters who honestly and painfully negotiate religion's strict edicts and mores, who arrest the flow of narrative action to approach God and ask for providence,<sup>2</sup> who exhibit "seriousness" and "contemplation" or rather "simplicity" and "naiveté," who capture with authenticity the details of religious life or alternatively embody its value system without adhering to all of its codes. Such a myriad of responses not only testifies to the presence of many "God-fearing characters" in Israeli films, but to the recognition that this presence carries with it a measure of significance that deserves our attention.

It may nevertheless come as a surprise to some that until recently this type of discussion would not have been possible. For the better part of its history, Israeli cinema paid little-to-no attention to the religious dimension of Jewish identity—i.e., to Judaism.<sup>3</sup> Judaic characters were few and far between, turning Judaism into a largely repressed presence within Israel's cinematic landscape. Over the past fifteen years, however, this landscape has seen the release of an unprecedented number of films which deal explicitly with Judaism and which entice and even force their audience to negotiate the Judaic ingredient of an avowedly secular Jewish-Israeli culture. This study operates under the assumption that this "Judaic turn" marks a meaningful stage in the development of filmmaking in Israel, if not in the modern history of Judaism's intersection with cinema. Its primary goal, then, is to outline the contours and investigate the implications of this shift on a sociocultural and a film-theoretical level.

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<sup>1</sup> Yitzhak Tessler, "Here He Comes: The Ultimate Dos in Israeli Cinema" [Hebrew], *Ynet*, February 26, 2013, accessed May 31, 2015 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4348615,00.html>. In this and all subsequent quotations from Hebrew sources, the translation is mine.

<sup>2</sup> In the context of this study, God would be referred to in a third person singular masculine form (upper-case). This choice is not made with the intention of affirming the androcentric tendencies of Judaic culture, which the articulation of God as male epitomizes and justifies. Rather, this perception and its attendant language are retained for the sole purpose of accurately representing the traditions that are the object of this study.

<sup>3</sup> This study subscribes to Nathan Abrams's assertion "that there is a clear distinction between Jewishness, as ethnic identity, and Judaism, as a religion or a set of rites." As a result it uses the term "Judaic" to designate the specifically religious elements of "Jewish" identity, experience, and history. See: Abrams, "'My religion is American': A Midrash on Judaism in American Films, 1990 to the Present," in *Religion in the United States*, ed. Jeanne Cortiel et al. (Heidelberg: Winter Verlag, 2011), 209.

The augmented presence of Judaism within Israeli cinema poses considerable challenges to Israeli film scholarship. The evolution of this academic subfield coincided with Israeli cinema's disavowal of the Judaic, and consequently scholars were not prompted to develop analytic perspectives with which to engage its filmic manifestation. Moreover, the secular-liberal orientation of Israeli film scholars also made them averse to relating to religion altogether, which in turn led to a dearth of questioning as to the meaning behind the structured absence of Judaism on the Israeli screen (as opposed, for example, to the intense questioning of ethnic structured absences, such as those of the Palestinian and the Arab-Jew). The overall result of these factors was that Israeli film scholarship has been late in noticing the turn in its object, and has yet to fully account for its significance. The present study is thus imagined as an initial attempt to address this scholarly gap, and offer tentative directions through which future research may expand on its reading of Judaic-themed Israeli cinema.

First and foremost, the following pages bear the recognition that Israeli cinema's Judaic turn reflects a shift in the attitude of Jewish-Israeli society to Judaism.<sup>4</sup> They therefore attempt to situate Judaic-themed Israeli cinema in the sociocultural moment of a strengthening in Jewish-Israeli identity's religious dimension, and interpret it as a manifestation of and a reaction to this change. Rather than collapse religion to other social categories (ethnicity, gender, class, etc.), this study wishes to highlight its formative role in shaping these categories, as well as Israeli culture as a whole. In so doing, it operates with sensitivity to the particular characteristics of Judaic life in Israel, as well as to the effects of their reshaping by audiovisual mediations which occupy disparate ideological positions on religion. It attempts to utilize the insights of previous scholarship, but also come to terms with their shortcomings, which have made it difficult, if not untenable, for Israeli film scholars to address this cinematic phenomenon. Drawing on scholarly work in other related

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<sup>4</sup> From a cultural standpoint, this study is primarily interested in the negotiations of religious identity by Israeli Jews. As such, it often reduces Israeli society to its Jewish majority and religion to Judaism, while excluding considerations of the religious identity in the Muslim and Christian Palestinian minority, as well as its relationship with Judaic identity. Such exclusion does not in any way indicate an understanding that Palestinian religious identity is unimportant within the Israeli context, or that it has not undergone similarly significant changes that merit scholarly attention. Rather, the reason for this measure is first and foremost one of focus, with the stipulation that the primary audience which these Judaic-themed Israeli films target, and which is supposed to benefit from their cultural work, is the Jewish-Israeli constituency. For more information on religious identity within the Palestinian constituency, see for example: Nuhad Ali, "The Islamic Movement in Israel: Between Religion, Nationalism, and Modernity" [Hebrew], in *Maelstrom of Identities: A Critical Look at Religion and Secularity in Israel*, ed. Yossi Yonah and Yehuda Goodman (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2004), 132-164.

fields within the area of cultural studies, this study will therefore attempt to offer new tools for understanding why Judaism has entered into Israeli cinema at this particular juncture and what becomes of it through its filmic re-articulation.

The current research also acknowledges that the Judaic turn forces Israeli cinema scholars to also contend with broader questions as to the relationship between Judaism and cinema. Such questions extend our scholarly interest beyond the realm of Israeli Jewish identity, and ask us to contemplate not only issues of cultural representation, but also those which pertain to the aesthetic and spectatorial foundations of cinematic experience. In this shift, then, one finds an opportunity to not only touch upon the “spiritual” dimensions of cinema that have preoccupied thinkers for over a century, but also assert the importance of Israeli cinema’s contribution to their understanding. Such measures are meant to offset Israeli film scholarship’s focus on thematic-symptomatic analysis, and its consistent reluctance to take part in the ongoing philosophical conversation surrounding cinema’s particular traits and effects. Accordingly, this study seeks to not only affect the ways by which film scholarship has thought of Judaism in Israeli cinema, but how it approaches the medium of cinema altogether.

In pursuing these goals, the writing presented herein is also acutely aware of the need for tentativeness in expressing its claims. The historical moment in which this study is produced has not yet seen the end of Israeli cinema’s Judaic turn, and therefore does not offer the writer the privilege of hindsight. It is thus impossible for the present argument to foresee the path which this turn will take, or even claim that the conclusions that have been articulated for what has already transpired on the Israeli screen will remain relevant to what will come in the future. Moreover, it is important to recognize the ways in which exegesis can sometimes turn into eisegesis—a threat which becomes particularly pertinent when one moves from specific to broader spheres of questioning, such as those of medium specificity in light of the intersection of cinema and Judaism. This difficulty is enhanced in this study because the field into which it intervenes—that of film scholarship on Judaism in Israeli film and in cinema in general—is rather limited in its scope, and therefore does not offer much by way of a well-developed discourse that can curtail any one author’s particular interpretive predilections. In the absence of such a system of checks and balances, it becomes even more crucial to articulate the cultural and scholastic context in which both this study and its object operate, so as to position their relationship more helpfully, and more candidly, for the discerning reader. Such contextualization is the task of the following chapter.

## 1.1 JUDAISM IN AN ISRAELI CONTEXT

While there are many ways through which to describe the history and evolution of Judaic life in the Israeli context, all must inevitably contend with the crisis of Jewish identity in the aftermath of Emancipation and the subsequent emergence of Zionism. Jewish existence in the European diaspora had traditionally been one of forced marginalization. De jure, Jews were considered lesser citizens, and were forced out of positions of power and influence within their Christian host cultures; de facto, these legal measures were supplanted by anti-Jewish antagonism that pervaded all spheres of everyday existence, circumscribing and often threatening the very possibility of Jewish agency. This state of affairs, however, began to gradually change during the 18<sup>th</sup> century as part of a wider recognition in European culture of the importance of human equality and rights. Beginning in Western Europe and then continuing to its Central and Eastern sections, such recognition led to increasing demands to abolish anti-Jewish bias and free Jews from their position of servitude and victimization. The resulting process of Emancipation, which lasted for close to two centuries, confronted Jews with a need to re-evaluate their own identity. Before, as Eliezer Ben-Refael and Lior Ben Chaim argue, the Jewish people lived as an ostracized “caste.” Rather than be defined by their own “othering,” however, Jews turned their social marginalization into a position of uniqueness, imagining themselves as a singular “collective whose role is to redeem the world through the personal and interpersonal performance of mitzvahs in everyday reality.”<sup>5</sup> Through this understanding, there evolved a distinct cultural identity that defined commitment to the Judaic God and His commandments as the ultimate bulwark separating and defending Jews from their inferior gentile “others.” Emancipation allowed Jews to escape their status as social pariahs and open up previously unheard of possibilities for integration and acculturation. Accordingly, for the first time in its diasporic history, Jewish identity lost its stability of meaning, becoming instead a site of intense negotiation and even deconstruction.

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<sup>5</sup> Eliezer Ben-Refael and Lior Ben-Chaim, *Jewish Identities in an Era of Multiple Modernities* [Hebrew] (Ra’anana: The Open University of Israel, 2006), 95.

Modern European Jewry supplied a variety of answers to the question of “what constitutes Jewish identity?” The crucial issue which separated the different responses was exactly the adherence to Judaism which was so valued in the traditional Jewish way of life. Judaism became particularly vulnerable in the process of Emancipation because of the latter’s role in the wider shift towards Enlightenment. Under Enlightenment, the very legitimacy of religion—any religion—became destabilized. As an institution, it came to be seen as a relic of a bygone era whose primary ambition was to prevent the processes of social mobility and equality that typified modernity. As a doctrine, it seemed increasingly incompatible with a radical philosophy which, as will be discussed further below, values thought over belief and proclaims the “death of God.” Within this challenge to theology and religious practice, Jews were made to realize that their liberation was not contingent on a change of religion but rather on its relinquishment. Some opposed the demands of Emancipation and secularization vehemently, and sought instead to seclude themselves into a life of extreme traditionalism. In contrast to this Orthodoxy, other avenues such as Reform and Conservative Judaism attempted to adjust the *Halakha* (Judaic law) to the contours of European modernity while not forsaking its formal framework entirely. Other alternatives followed the path of secularization more strenuously, to varying degrees. *Haskala*, the so-called Jewish Enlightenment movement that emerged in 1770, was the first to rethink Jewish identity in secular terms, often reducing its Judaic ingredient to culture and disconnecting it from the metaphysics of belief. The Bund labor movement then took these tenets, and in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, created a Jewish version of socialism that overcame *Haskala*’s lingering attachments to the halakhic world. Its vision of assimilation within the European proletariat, however, collided with the reality of increasing anti-Semitism, which in turn ultimately spelled the demise of the movement during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, another movement, Zionism, recognized in anti-Jewish antagonism the failure of European Emancipation, and captured the hearts and minds of Jews with its desire to build a national home away from the Continent. It was this distinction that ultimately allowed it to overshadow other movements, and become a preeminent force in secular Jewish culture.

Yet it would be unfair to define Zionism’s relationship with Judaism as monolithically secular, for as Ben-Refael and Ben-Chaim explain, the movement incorporated different voices that occupied a variety of positions along the spectrum between “civil nationalism and religious

primordialism.”<sup>6</sup> Essayist and Zionist leader Ahad Ha’am (1856-1927), for example, stressed the need to establish a homeland that would answer the Jewish people’s spiritual needs through the preservation of Jewish—and inevitably Judaic—culture. This position was later taken up by such thinkers as Martin Buber (1878-1956) and Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), who wished to use it as the basis for a Zionism that did not demystify Jewish culture, but which, in the spirit of fin-de-siècle neo-mysticism, accepted and cultivated its mysteries as a form of “religiosity.” And while they never equated such cultivation with the wholehearted acceptance of halakhic Judaism, another contemporaneous luminary, Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook (1865-1935), attempted to synthesize Judaism and Zionism more fully, regarding the Zionist project of national rehabilitation as a necessary step in the realization of divine prophecy. These and other positions of moderate or extreme primordialism were able to co-exist within an avowedly secular movement due to the atmosphere of pluralism that typified Zionism’s early stages. Yet as the Zionist project of nation building in Palestine became a pressing goal, such voices were gradually overshadowed by the political Zionism of David Ben Gurion (1886-1973), which leaned much more heavily on the principles of civil nationalism. Indeed, within this Zionist strain, a guiding principle was the “negation of the diaspora” (*Shlilat Hagalut*), with diasporic existence reduced to the traditional mode of Judaic living. Instead of diasporic existence, mainline Zionism sought to create another form of Jewishness that would be more suitable for the construction of a homeland. Under the influence of other nationalistic movements of the era, this form, this “New Jew,” was characterized by vigor and aligned with physical labor. It was this pioneer (*Halutz*), especially the Palestine/Israel-born Sabra pioneer, who acted, in the words of Eliezer Don-Yehiya and Charles Liebman, “as the bearer of the national mission, paving the way for national redemption.”<sup>7</sup> It was his strength, and not the frailty of the erudite old world Jew, that seemed capable of facing the challenges of nation building; and it was by his will, rather than God’s, that this nation would come into being.

According to Don-Yehiya and Liebman, political Zionism wished its “militant secularist ideology”<sup>8</sup> to be perceived as a radical alternative to Judaism, a “civil religion” onto its own. It created, in the words of Oz Almog, “an all-encompassing experience which supplied the Zionist

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>7</sup> Eliezer Don-Yehiya and Charles S. Liebman, “The Symbol System of Zionist-Socialism: An Aspect of Israeli Civil Religion,” *Modern Judaism* 1, no. 2 (September 1981): 121.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 126.



believer with a set of pre-determined existential explanations [and by extension] provided him [sic] with a basic sense of security.”<sup>9</sup> Building upon the pervasiveness of this message, Zionism then charged its secular values of physical labor, asceticism, class equality, and military heroism with appropriate metaphysical valences, and demanded that their realization within everyday reality be accompanied with a measure of reverence, if not outright devotion. The success of this vision, however, could not have been achieved without creating a sense of historical continuation between Zionism and previous iterations of Jewish culture. Consequently, Zionists were often behooved to draw on the traditions of Judaism, even as they paradoxically attempted to create their own secular nationalist ethos. To resolve this apparent conflict, as Don-Yehiya and Liebman explain, mainline Zionism “utilized symbols of traditional religion [while] transforming them and transvaluing them to suit its purposes.”<sup>10</sup> The examples of such adaptation are too numerous to mention. They exist, as Almog points out, in the use of such religious terms as *Mitzvah* (command) to describe the movement’s edicts, *Torah* to describe the Zionist ideology, *Aliya* (rising, in the sense of a pilgrimage) to describe Jewish immigration to Palestine, *Avodat Kodesh* (holy work) to describe pioneering, *Geula* (redemption) to describe its desired effect, and *Korban* (sacrifice) to describe its inevitable price. They also exist in the appropriation of religious liturgical texts such as the *Yizcor* funeral prayer, whose words were changed so as reflect a shift from “faith in the Lord to faith in the homeland.”<sup>11</sup> Traditional holidays were also incorporated in altered form, as in the case of *Shavuot* (Pentecost), whose original focus “was the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai” but which was revived as “a holiday of nature and agriculture [...] express[ing] the nationalist motif in the ceremonial ‘redemption of the land.’”<sup>12</sup> Lastly and most profoundly in this context was Zionism’s passionate revisiting of the Bible as a foundational text. As Anita Shapira explicates, Zionism, like the Haskala before it, “embraced the Bible as the story of founding a nation, the chronicle of its past glory on its own land, and its greatest creation, which it gifted to the world.” This use of biblical narratives allowed Zionists to imagine their efforts at nation-building, “not as an innovation, but rather as another act in a historical drama that has evolved through repetition

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<sup>9</sup> Oz Almog, *The Sabra—A Profile* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2004), 43.

<sup>10</sup> Don-Yehiya and Liebman, “Civil Religion,” 121.

<sup>11</sup> Almog, *The Sabra*, 48.

<sup>12</sup> Don-Yehiya and Liebman, “Civil Religion,” 138.

over millennia.”<sup>13</sup> At the same time, it also served to offset the significance given by traditional Judaism to the Talmud over the Bible, and by implication, suppress the substantial diasporic ingredient of that historical drama. This creative reimagining of Jewish history, which negated the diaspora while grounding modern Jewish nationalism in a primordial precedent, is arguably the boldest example of how Zionists selectively used Judaic symbols “to express conceptions or values in opposition to the very tradition from which the symbols spring.” With such manipulation, Zionism was able to create a necessary distance from Judaism for the assertion of its secular character. Nevertheless, as Don-Yehiya and Liebman rightfully pointed out, this “reliance on symbols from traditional sources” still revealed “a measure of attachment even among those who were ostensibly most antagonistic.”<sup>14</sup>

The mass immigration waves that followed the end of WWII and the establishment of statehood created the foundation for, in the words of Eliezer Schweid, “a society with a wide range of cultural heritages, different and alienated from one another in nearly all their ways of expression, language, manners and values.”<sup>15</sup> Amidst such diversity, it became clear that a sizeable part of the population did not locate itself within the largely secular framework of Zionism’s civil religion, and attempted to maintain a more pronounced presence of Judaism in their everyday reality. Scholars tend to isolate three major social constituencies within this part of Israel’s developing society, based on their (variable) observance of a halakhic lifestyle.<sup>16</sup> Of these, the ultra-Orthodox or *Haredi* constituency is most commonly regarded as “religious,” its literal (“scripturalist”) interpretation of the Halakha emerging as the standard in relation to which all other Judaic-Israeli identities are determined.<sup>17</sup> The origins of Haredism are often located in the aforementioned

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<sup>13</sup> Anita Shapira, *The Bible and Israeli Identity* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Don-Yehiya and Liebman, “Civil Religion,” 129.

<sup>15</sup> Eliezer Schweid, “Judaism in Israeli Culture,” *Israel Affairs* 4, no. 3-4 (1998): 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example: Yair Auron, *Israeli Identities—Jews and Arabs Facing the Mirror and the Other* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008), 315-317. A definition based on adherence to a traditional halakhic lifestyle is undoubtedly not the sole way of relating to the “Judaic,” yet its persistence in Jewish cultural history warrants its inclusion here as the principle prism through which religiousness has been imagined by Israeli scholars and laypersons alike. With that being said, the following pages will nevertheless reveal how Israeli-Jews, especially in recent decades, have at times resisted this definition of Judaism and opened it up to multiple interpretations and negotiations. See also: Yaacov Yadgar, *Beyond Secularization: Traditionalism and the Critique of Israeli Secularism* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2012), 12-13.

<sup>17</sup> The close identification of Judaism with Haredi scripturalism has resulted in the creation of a sliding scale of “less” and “more” religious, which in turn allowed for the devaluing and de-legitimization of non-Haredi forms of Judaism in the Israeli public sphere. The following study does not aim to replicate these biases, but also does not aim to deny this dominant perspective through which Israeli culture, Israeli cinema included, tends to operate. It will therefore refer to the sliding scale, but with recognition that it does not differentiate between more or less

emergence of Jewish Orthodoxy in Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which sought to reject “as much as possible the attractions of the host cultures” and present in their place a strict form of traditionalism wherein “books—especially codes of conduct—took on greater importance than ever before.”<sup>18</sup> Consciousness of external threat thus became Orthodox Jewry’s prime characteristic,<sup>19</sup> leading to its sequestering in courts (*Hatzet*) or schools (*Yeshiva*) that acted as bulwarks against the outside world. Such separation withstood the challenges of modernity, but failed to protect Orthodoxy when National Socialism commenced on its final solution to the “Jewish Problem.” The Holocaust decimated this world of courts and schools, killing many of its members and leaving the survivors with no home which to return. In the aftermath of this catastrophe, a large part of European Orthodox Jewry immigrated to Palestine, settling in cities like Jerusalem and Bnei Brak where Orthodox constituencies already existed. This resettling confronted Orthodox Jews with the crisis of bridging the gap between them and a secular-Zionist-led Jewish settlement (*Yishuv*), which at that point seemed insurmountable. Yet despite the Zionist leadership’s pessimistic appraisals, they managed to gradually rebuild their community, establishing their own enclaves within urban centers, creating an institutional support system for recent immigrants, and reviving the traditional lifestyle of yesteryear. Their strength was found and expressed through a hardening of exclusionist tendencies—a transformation from Orthodoxy to ultra-Orthodoxy. While the past Orthodox Jewry included a diversity of occupations that brought its members into a certain measure of contact with the modern-secular world, the Israeli Haredi community structured itself as a society where the sole purpose of every member was religious study—a “learners’ society,” to use Menachem Friedman’s influential term.<sup>20</sup> In the face

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religious, but solely between more or less scripturalist. This choice will hopefully allow to sustain focus on the main dilemma through which Judaism is imagined in Israel—i.e., between enclosure from and exposure to secular-liberal culture—while not succumbing to value judgments that define one answer as better or purer than the other. It will also not come at the expense of revealing the challenges to this sliding scale, especially within the contemporary Israeli religious landscape. See also: Yossi Yonah and Yehuda Goodman, “Introduction: Religiousness and Secularity in Israel—Other Possible Perspectives” [Hebrew], in *Maelstrom of Identities: A Critical Look at Religion and Secularity in Israel*, ed. Yossi Yonah and Yehuda Goodman (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2004), 19-20.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 19-20.

<sup>19</sup> Kimmy Caplan and Nurit Stadler, “Introduction: The Changing Face of Haredi Society in Israel: From Survival to Presence, Strengthening and Self-Assuredness” [Hebrew], in *From Survival to Consolidation: Changes in Israeli Haredi Society and Its Scholarly Study*, ed. Kimmy Caplan and Nurit Stadler (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2012), 12-13.

<sup>20</sup> Menachem Friedman, *The Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Society: Sources, Trends and Processes* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 1991), 75. It should be noted that this restructuring was made economically viable through various conditions that did not exist within the diasporic Jewish world: for example,

of mainline Zionism's secular ethos, Haredism wished to offer "an alternative challenge and ideal—total dedication to the Torah in the context of a monastic community."<sup>21</sup> Having experienced the reality of imminent extinction, it thus invested itself ever more fully in the task of "nurtur[ing] a counter life"<sup>22</sup> in defiance of the dominant secular reality.

The restructuring of Orthodoxy in the ultra-Orthodox framework of a "learners' society" had weighty implications on the shape of Haredi life. As Kimmy Caplan explains:

The origin of these implications is the gradual transition towards bestowing greater authority upon the written word, at the expense of a lessening in stature of the spoken word, and of oral traditions that have been passed along through the generations. This shift was so profound that the written word became the determining factor when one needed to settle discrepancies between it and oral traditions. The importance and centrality of the written word, which understandably worked against the behavioral-religious diversity of the Jewish diasporic world, caused a continued rise in demands for strict religious observance, and served as unique means of unifying the Haredi public around central texts. Moreover, the norms of strict observance which this public had to adopt were set to the standards of the yeshiva, where it was easier to place demands due to the sheltered living conditions within the institution itself.<sup>23</sup>

Inside the urban Haredi enclave, all residents are thus required to follow without fail the "standards of the yeshiva," from wearing the traditional garbs, to keeping the Sabbath, to preventing immodest appearances. The safety of a close community gives these Haredim license to show off their cultural uniqueness and demand visitors to abide by their rules. It allows them to insist on their presence as a society within a society—or rather, as a society in exile within its own homeland, as is the prevailing notion in many Haredi circles.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the ghetto also offers means of surveillance and regulation, which dissolves the barriers between public and private spheres and forces Haredim to behave as if "living in a glass menagerie."<sup>25</sup>

In spite of its drive towards unification vis-à-vis Israel's secular precincts, Haredi society can nevertheless be divided into three main populations: the Hasidim, the Litvaks, and the

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the allocation of public funds to support yeshivas and their members, and the expansion of observant women's social responsibility so as to include the role of primary breadwinner.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>22</sup> Heilman, *Defenders*, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Kimmy Caplan, "The Study of Israeli Haredi Society: Characteristics, Achievements, and Challenges" [Hebrew], in *Israeli Haredim: Integration Without Assimilation?*, ed. Kimmy Caplan and Emmanuel Sivan (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2004), 239-240.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>25</sup> Friedman, *The Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Society*, 126.

Mizrahim (or Sephardim). These groups are similar in size, and though sharing in the central tenets of ultra-Orthodoxy, they are also decidedly different in various ways that often result in clashes between them.<sup>26</sup> Hasidism was founded in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century around the radical teachings of Baal Shem Tov, which distinguished themselves from the doctrines of mainline halakhic Judaism. In Israel as formerly in Europe, its community is divided into a variety of courts, most of which carry the names of their original locations in the diaspora (for example, Ger, Belz, Satmar, etc.). Their members are easily distinguishable from other Haredim by their strict observance of traditional garments, which in the case of men are usually comprised of four layers of clothing (a white undershirt with sleeves, a white cloth shirt, the *Tzizit*, and then a black jacket or long overcoat) and accompanied by such accessories a special belt (*Gertl*) and a woolen hat (*Shtreimel* or *Spodik*). Men also refrain from shaving or even cutting their beards, while women cover the hair on their head. In both cases, they will not be seen carrying any fashionable modern items such as sunglasses and wrist watches. Their allegiance is to their leader, the Court Rabbi (*Admor*), whose right to guide was given to him by virtue of lineage, much like in a monarchical dynasty. The relationship between the Rabbi and his flock is much like that of a father to his offspring—he knows most if not all of his court members intimately, and often provides them with private audiences. Indeed, the apex of Hasidic social life takes place at the Rabbi’s table—the *Tish*—around which hundreds and even thousands of disciples congregate during Sabbath and holiday celebrations to sing and dance. The loyalty to the Rabbi is the necessary criterion to be considered a Hasid—and not so much Talmudic erudition, which is still highly valued in Hasidism, but not the extent of negating other modes of faithful existence. And though they are relatively accepting of the possibility of persons choosing to work outside of the “learners’ community,” Hasidim still attempt to maintain a stricter sense of enclosure than is usually found in the Haredi world, for example in an ultra-rigid abidance by modesty laws.<sup>27</sup>

The Litvaks originate in the part of Jewish Orthodoxy which opposed the emergence of Hasidism (hence their other title—*Mitnagdim*—which literally translates into “opposing”), and

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<sup>26</sup> Haim Zicherman, *Black Blue-White: A Journey into the Haredi Society in Israel* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot and Chemed Books, 2014), 21-22. “Sephardim” is a term often related to a particular Judaic tradition that originated in Spain’s Jewry, and is often the designation of choice for religious leaders of Middle-Eastern descent who associate themselves with this tradition. “Mizrahim” is a territorial reference to Jews of Middle-Eastern origins (*Mizrah* literally means east”), and is contrasted with the term “Ashkenazim” that refers to people of Western European origins. This study will employ the term “Mizrahim” because of its wider prevalence within sociological scholarship.

<sup>27</sup> Zicherman, *Black Blue-White*, 29-45.

was centered in the Lithuanian congregation of Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilnius (the Vilna Gaon). Paradoxically, however, the existence of a common threat—the forces of secular modernity—brought these two sects to cooperate in Europe as well as in Israel, though without erasing some of their major differences. By and large, the Litvaks tend to be more “modern” in their way of life. The men would be dressed in black and white attire like their Hasidic brethren, but their suits would be fashionable and up-to-date. Young men would often shave their beards, while women would use wigs to cover their natural hair as opposed to the standard Hasidic head gear. Talmud study is of the utmost value in this community, which accepts no other endeavor as worthy. As in the diaspora, the Israeli Litvak constituency is organized through a web of study institutions—the yeshivas—which are not as distinguished from one another as in the Hasidic communal court system. All young males are made without fail to join these institutions, and their stature in Haredi society would later be determined by the measure of their erudition. They will be expected to continue in religious work until death—either through employment in religious institutions, or through continued participation in religious study and ritual, preferably on an intensive basis. As opposed to the Hasidic world, they will not maintain direct relations with their religious leaders; the Litvak world is built on a strict hierarchy where the most learned are separated by multiple levels from the least learned. Operating within this strict structure requires Litvaks to act with a sense of fear and reverence, which unlike in the Hasidic world, is not counterbalanced by the values of joy and jest. In many practices the Litvak adhere with reverential strictness to the letter of Judaic law; for example, the task of eating a matzo in Passover would become an event where each detail is meticulously planned and executed, including the amount of matzos, the exact time that one will have to take in eating the matzo, the way of sitting while eating, the thoughts that must be contemplated during the sitting, etc. In this they fully occupy the literal meaning of *Haredi* (fearful), for rigid observance is offered as a measure of protection from divine wrath.<sup>28</sup>

While the Hasidim and the Litvaks brought Haredism from Europe, and thus may be rightfully considered the movement’s founding members, Mizrahi Haredism is a relatively new, Israeli phenomenon. The roots of this constituency are in those Jews of Middle Eastern descent who immigrated to Israel during the nation’s founding period. By and large, these immigrants had preserved a much closer relationship with Judaism than the majority of immigrants from Western

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 54-82; Yair Sheleg, *The New Religious Jews: Recent Developments Among Observant Jews in Israel* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 2000), 126-127.

and Central Europe (the so-called *Ashkenazim*). Anxious to strengthen Haredism's standing, the Litvaks especially attempted to recruit into its ranks many of these newly arrived Mizrahi Jews. The children were taken to yeshivas and provided with Litvak education, ostensibly giving them access to the privileges of membership within the Haredi world. At the same time, their Middle-Eastern origins made them inferior in the eyes of their Ashkenazi hosts, and as a result they were marginalized and discriminated against within the Litvak community. This marginal position prompted Mizrahi Jews to develop a "gentle Haredism," one in which the patterns of Litvak erudition are still held in high esteem but where there is also openness to non-Haredi forms of Mizrahi Judaism. It follows from this that, though emulating much of the characteristics of Litvak appearance and demeanor, Mizrahi Haredim are not as separatist and do allow members of different religious affiliations into their midst. Moreover, though Mizrahi Haredism has attempted to reclaim the importance of Sephardic religious traditions and make them the object of rigorous study (over and against the European traditions of Ashkenazi Haredism), it has also been able to accept more popular and folksy manifestations of Mizrahi religiousness that are not often considered worthy by the standards of Haredi scholasticism (for example, the use of talismans to ward off evil spirits), as well as provide more lax interpretations of traditional Judaic constraints. Finally, par Litvak and Hasidic Haredism, Mizrahi Haredim do not define the yeshiva as their binding social institution but rather the family unit. Indeed, it is not uncommon for these Haredim to live outside of the Haredi ghettos, in heterogeneous cities where family members reside, some of whom may not be Haredi or even religious. Yet this "partial assimilation" does not detract from the importance Mizrahi Haredim bestow upon the synagogue as a place of holy congregation, and upon their spiritual leadership, which unlike its Litvak counterpart, is often seen as having close contact not only with its followers, but also with the general population.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond ultra-Orthodoxy, the other community that is traditionally regarded as "religious" in the Israeli context is Religious-Zionism (or National-Religious). The origins of Religious-Zionism, according to Dov Schwartz, should be traced back to the foundation of the "Mizrahi" faction of the Zionist movement in 1902.<sup>30</sup> The Mizrahi party was founded in response to the Zionist leadership's increased investment in secular education. As concerned rabbis, the members

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<sup>29</sup> Zicherman, *Black Blue-White*, 83-98; Nissim Leon, *Gentle Ultra-Orthodoxy: Religious Renewal in Oriental Jewry in Israel* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2010), 1-67.

<sup>30</sup> Unlike its common usage, here "Mizrahi" does not refer to a Middle Eastern ethnic affiliation.

of this faction felt that such measures compromised the Jewishness of the Jewish people, yet they did not wish to serve as outside opposition like Orthodox Jewry. For them, the traditional diasporic way of life was “an anomalous episode, tantamount to the denial of the nation’s real identity, while the return to the national homeland and language was a ‘return to ourselves, to the roots of our individuality.’”<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, the Mizrahi leaders decided to operate as a religious force within Zionism, supporting the Zionist nationalist project while at the same time preserving what, in their mind, was its Judaic-messianic foundation. This Religious-Zionist strategy placed the followers of the Mizrahi party in an increasingly precarious position: on the one hand, their adaptation to Zionist doctrines over and against a separatist-traditionalist stance signaled a revolt against mainline rabbinical authorities, which in turn compromised their claims to being religious; on the other hand, their Judaic affiliation always situated them on the margins of a Zionist institution that avowedly rejected the tenets of religious life. In Palestine/Israel of the 1940s and 1950s, this precariousness evolved into a full-fledged crisis, since the dominance of the Zionist ethos threatened to not only make traditional Judaism a thing of the past, but also Religious-Zionism. As Yair Sheleg explains, during this time many of the Palestine-born Religious-Zionist youngsters associated their elders and educators with the diasporic-traditional model of Jewish living that was so despised by secular Zionism, and subsequently began to reject their religious identity. Some were “ashamed to walk around with yarmulkes; some wore flat caps or berets, so not to look conspicuously religious; others lost their hair covering completely; and if in grade school education they still attended religious institutions, upon graduating many opted for secular high schools.”<sup>32</sup> Faced with this attrition, Religious-Zionist leaders attempted to own up more fully to their difficult social positioning and foreground it as a strength rather than weakness: thus, in this new model, the Religious-Zionists matched secular Israelis in their commitment to Zionism, but also gave no reason to question their religiousness and devotion. This “Zionist child of the Torah” (*Ben Ha-Torah Ha-Zioni*) subsequently became the formative image for a generation of teachers and students who sought to legitimize their role in the newly-formed national homeland.

This generation of young Religious-Zionists walked the tightrope of participating in the Zionist lifestyle without relinquishing Judaic observance, at times in great defiance to naysayers on both sides of the secular-religious divide. The most ambitious example of this is the *Hesder*

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<sup>31</sup> Dov Schwartz, *Religious-Zionism: History and Ideology* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Sheleg, *New Religious Jews*, 30-31.



track of post-secondary yeshiva education. Starting in the mid-1950s, Hesder yeshivas were established so as to provide Religious-Zionist youths the opportunity to combine advanced Judaic scholarship with army service (though considered mandatory to all Israeli citizens, the ultra-Orthodox sector has largely been exempt from military service since the state's founding).<sup>33</sup> Out of the multi-year curriculum, the majority of the time is dedicated to Talmud study according to the Litvak educational system, as well as to Bible study which is generally missing from this system and is highlighted in secular Zionist pedagogy. The rest of the yeshiva period is spent in military training and active duty, either with the general soldier population or in special Religious-Zionist units. In offering this organic combination of Torah erudition and Zionist citizenship, Religious-Zionists felt that the fragile equilibrium between the two sides of their particular social identity would be preserved. Hesder soldiers thus became the poster boys for the Religious-Zionist project: in their uniforms they seemed like all other non-observant Sabras, yet with the important distinction of wearing a colorful knitted yarmulke (*Kipa Sruga*), the “badge” of National-Religious affiliation that separated them not only from the secular Israelis who do not cover their head, but also from the Haredi Israelis with their black untextured yarmulke and hat. They came to embody the dream of an inclusionary Judaic *modus vivendi* that could act as a rampart against the combined threats of secularization and fundamentalism within the Israeli context.

In contrast to Haredim and Religious-Zionists, a third Israeli constituency—the “traditionalists” or *Masortim*—is characterized by its association to Judaism but is not defined by scholars and laypersons alike as part of Israel's “Religious Sector” *per se*. The Masorti identity has largely been related to Israeli-Mizrahi Jewry, and its particular characteristics are said to have been profoundly influenced by this population's struggles in assimilating to life in the new Israeli state. According to Sheleg, within the Middle-Eastern diaspora, Jewish communities did not take Judaism to the extremes of literalism that typified European Jewish Orthodoxy; rather than isolate themselves from surrounding secular realities, these communities chose to integrate in them more

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<sup>33</sup> This exemption from military service was provided by Prime Minister David Ben Gurion to male Haredim who studied in yeshivas (and hence, for whom “religion was a profession” [*Toratam Emunatam*]) and to all women who proclaimed themselves to be “observant.” While at that period the exempt male population was not sizeable, it grew exponentially over time, causing many secular Israelis to protest against preferential treatment. Consequently, over the past fifteen years, several attempts have been made by the government to institute new laws that would encourage higher enlistment rates amongst Haredim. These efforts have often been thwarted as a result of political pressure from the Haredi sector; nevertheless, due to certain initiatives taken by the army itself, more and more Haredim now find themselves enlisting in order to benefit from better education and salary opportunities. See: Zicherman, *Black Blue-White*, 192-197.

fully through the creation of a relatively flexible version of Judaism that remained open to outside influences.<sup>34</sup> This openness became useful when, upon immigrating to Israel, many Mizrahi Jews found it impossible to continue sustaining their former communal-religious life. The older generation, Sheleg comments, “had a difficult time to learn the language and the secular-Ashkenazi mentality that was dominant then in Israel. [...] The children, however, came under the dominant influence of the secular ‘melting pot.’ Like children of immigrants from all over the world, they picked up the language much more easily than their parents, mainly through the school system, and as is always the case with children, they also wanted to integrate into society as rapidly as possible rather than stand out like foreigners. For that reason, the secular presence grew in their midst.” While their background allowed them the necessary openness to absorb secularity, it also gave them the tools to later recover the religious traditions of their parents, when their disillusionment from the Ashkenazi-secular establishment and the resulting sense of loss became more apparent. Through their oscillation between the outer markers of religion (ultra-Orthodoxy) and secularity (Zionism) in Israel, these Mizrahi Jews ultimately developed a “traditionalist identity, in which religious edicts are only partially observed, alongside basic beliefs in God.”<sup>35</sup>

Selection, according to Yaakov Yadgar, is the main staple of Masorti existence. Out of respect for tradition and God, the Masortim wish to maintain a Judaic identity. Yet they also wish to benefit from the advantages of secular culture and adapt to it successfully. To create this balance, they thus have to make conscious choices as to which halakhic edicts (*Mitzvah*) should be maintained in their religious identity and which should be discarded. Yadgar explains that this selection

has nothing to do with the “easiness” of the observed mitzvahs versus the “difficulty” of those that are not (as argued by many opponents of the Masorti lifestyle), but on identifying which mitzvahs are central to the definition and preservation of the collective self-identity (i.e., the identity of someone as a Jew). The Masorti preserves those mitzvahs which he [sic] sees as essential to his definition as a Jew. He makes it a point to observe the “essential foundation” of the mitzvahs, without which a person is not “really a Jew,” in a contemporary context that challenges his self-definition as a Jew. In contrast, the Masorti would also be lax in observing those mitzvahs that he considers as “supplements,”

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<sup>34</sup> Nissim Leon’s account of the Middle-Eastern diaspora similarly emphasizes integration into host cultures, but also notes the existence of reactionary responses to the demands for integration on behalf of certain Mizrahi rabbis. See Leon, *Gentle Ultra-Orthodoxy*, 23-28.

<sup>35</sup> Sheleg, *New Religious Jews*, 196.

“ornaments” or “exaggerations” [...] which Orthodox Jewry has built around this fundamental base.<sup>36</sup>

The Masortim thus opt for freedom from strict religious observance, adhering instead to what they usually define as the “necessary minimum” for being a Jew. This “minimum” is determined individually, in relation to both family/communal custom and personal sentiment (“what feels right”), though it often coalesces around a “basic system of Judaic norms [...] surrounding Sabbath and the holiday observance (especially Passover and Yom Kippur), keeping kosher and taking part in Jewish life rituals.”<sup>37</sup> Beyond this limited framework, Masortim will act in a manner that may seem to some as sacrilegious, as in the example of a “Moroccan Sabbath” where “one would light up the candles, perform the *Kiddush* and then drive [a car on the Sabbath] [...] publically one goes to the synagogue, but then turn the lights on upon coming home.”<sup>38</sup> This “inconsistency” by standards of strict scripturalism is often used by secular, Haredi, and Religious-Zionist Israelis as grounds for belittling Masortiut as a retrograde form of Judaism; yet for the Masortim it is a necessary condition for fulfilling their greater social role vis-à-vis Israel’s “dominant identity alternatives (religiousness and secularity).”<sup>39</sup> They see themselves “as balancing important principles [...] which often collide with and even negate each other,” and consequently, as rescuing Judaic identity from a restrictive binary social setting: where religious Israelis “have deprived themselves of selectivity by committing themselves to the extreme rigidity of their Judaic lifestyle,” and where secular Israelis, “through their alienation from Judaic tradition and their decision not to acknowledge it (in the spirit of a freedom to decide), have completely eradicated the possibility of choice from their world.”<sup>40</sup> By embodying the possibility of choice, the Masortim thus consciously and reflexively position themselves as role models for “preserving an authentic Judaic identity in a contemporary context.”<sup>41</sup>

Thus envisaged, the Haredi, Religious-Zionist and Masorti positions together serve to indicate (but do not fully encapsulate) a spectrum of Israeli identities characterized by a greater commitment to Judaism than has been found in the mainline secular-Zionist ethos and its various

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<sup>36</sup> Yaakov Yadgar, *Masortim in Israel: Modernity without Secularization* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, Bar Ilan University, and Keter Books, 2010), 84.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 97 (my italics).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-97.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

subscribers.<sup>42</sup> The evolution of this spectrum during the nation’s formative period forced Zionist leadership to make legal concessions that formalized Judaism’s place within the state. Starting with the “Status Quo” agreement of 1947, these concessions included making Saturday the official day of rest in Israel, during which Israeli Jews are not allowed to work in or operate businesses; establishing kosher kitchens in all government and military facilities; placing the responsibility for officiating in all matrimonial matters on the Israeli Rabbinical Court; exempting yeshiva students from active military service; providing almost complete autonomy to religion-based school systems that would operate parallel to the state-run secular system; and banning pig farms and the sale of pork products for human consumption. Within the protective parameters set up by these laws, which were also often heavily contested, the Zionist secular hegemony nevertheless did the utmost to force secularization onto Israel’s recognizably religious communities. Such efforts allowed this social and political majority to disavow its lingering attachments to diasporic traditional Judaism—and by implication, its rightful place in the spectrum of Israeli-Judaic identities<sup>43</sup>—while offering the Zionist civil religion as the basis for the new state identity of “Israeliness.”

As Schweid explains, the process of forced secularization inevitably “did not lead to dialogic meetings in the social-cultural realm. On the contrary, it increased the walls of hostility and alienation, particularly with regard to those values expressing the unique Jewish identity of all those belonging to a particular 'ethnic origin' unto themselves. So much so, that at times it seemed as if the only common Jewish characteristic of Israeli culture was the confrontation, friction and debate among the different forms of Jewish identity.”<sup>44</sup> Some religious communities were more vulnerable to these conflicts than others. The Haredim were often defined as the enemies of secularization by Israel’s more radical secular precincts (especially the *Kibbutz* movement), and this fact heightened their sensitivity towards any and all infractions of their Judaic traditions.

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<sup>42</sup> This study adopts the three-part categorization due to its heuristic clarity and its prevalence within both scholarly and public discourse in Israel. Yet it is important to note that this categorization tends to ignore or marginalize the presence of other clearly defined religious communities in Israeli society, such as Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, and Modern Orthodox. The relative smallness of these constituencies, and their resulting absence from the Israeli screen, serve as the immediate reasons for their exclusion from consideration in the context of this study. Yet their existence, as well as that of variations within the aforementioned main categories, should remind us to always treat essentialist conceptualizations of Israel’s religious landscape with a measure of qualification. For more on this need, see: Yonah and Goodman, “Introduction,” 9-38; Avi Sagi, *The Jewish-Israeli Voyage: Culture and Identity* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2006), 208-256.

<sup>43</sup> Yonah and Goodman, “Introduction,” 15.

<sup>44</sup> Schweid, “Judaism in Israeli Culture,” 12.

Sheleg notes in this context a few occasions when this sensitivity prompted Haredim to react aggressively to the secular majority's "militant attempt"<sup>45</sup> at imposing its own will: for example, beginning in 1949, Haredi protests led to violent conflicts over the question of whether milk trucks traveling from the kibbutzim would be allowed to pass through Jerusalem's religious enclaves during the Sabbath; and in May 1951, a group of Mizrahi Haredim was apprehended after it became clear that it was planning to bomb the Israeli Parliament assembly (*Knesset*) during deliberations on whether women—religious or otherwise—should be enlisted into the army. The boldness of these measures did not mark a sense of self-assuredness so much as panic at the thought that what the Holocaust started, the State of Israel would finish—the complete annihilation of a traditional way of life.

Also holding a precarious position were Mizrahi Masortim who immigrated during the state's earliest stages. The immigration forced Mizrahi Jews to not only overcome difficult financial challenges but profound cultural ones as well. They had to adapt to Israel's dominant Europeanized Ashkenazi culture that considered them, from a position of racial bias, as essentially inferior. Within this stigma of inferiority, religious identity was seen as a primary indication of the Mizrahim's "social stagnation." Accordingly, in a colonializing gesture, Mizrahi population had to undergo "Israelization," a process that was seen as more than just "assimilation in the dominant culture and accepting the hegemonic position of 'melting pot,' but a solution for the class-ethnic problem that needlessly burdened Israeli society."<sup>46</sup> The newly arrived Mizrahim found it difficult to withstand such assaults because of their ethnic marginalization; other religiously-affiliated groups such as the Ashkenazi Haredim at least had their European descent to give them some cultural capital in their struggles vis-à-vis the Zionist establishment. And indeed, it was the Haredi

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<sup>45</sup> Sheleg, *New Religious Jews*, 285-286.

<sup>46</sup> Leon, *Gentle Ultra-Orthodoxy*, 29. These processes are narrativized in Eli Amir's celebrated semi-autobiographical novel *Scapegoat* (1983), which traces the story of adolescent Nuri as he leaves his Iraqi family in the ramshackle immigrants' transit camp to join the kibbutz and become a "true Israeli." As Nancy E. Berg explains, the most traumatic part of this shift is not so much the "introduction to Israeli or Western culture [but] the introduction to Israeli secularism." Thus in the kibbutz, "the move toward the secular expresses a specific ideology. Secularization is part of the indoctrination of the prevailing Zionism of the day" (195). The realization of this fact arrives quickly, as when "Nuri and his peers who arrive on kibbutz from their [transit camps] are dismayed at the absence of Jewish space and time. Noticing the lack of a synagogue, they wonder whether they pray, and what to tell the parents" (196). While resentful of such secularizing efforts, the protagonist nevertheless gradually discovers that his religious affiliation must be abandoned as means of survival in this new "egalitarian" Zionist society—be sacrificed, as the novel's title indicates, and with it also the family that raised him and the traditional Iraqi society it represents. See: Berg, "*Sifrut HaMa'abarah* (Transit Camp Literature): Literature of Transition," in *Critical Essays on Israeli Society, Religion, and Government*, ed. Kevin Avruch and Walter P. Zenner (Albany: SUNY Press).

community that actively sent delegates to the camps of new Mizrahi immigrants in an effort to stir and support resistance to Zionism's secularizing efforts. On occasion, this initiative resulted in violent altercations, which ultimately prompted the government to cease and desist this initiative of forced secularization.<sup>47</sup> It also facilitated cooperation on a religious basis, which even in such dire times, was not always feasible due to doctrinal, political, and cultural differences between Judaic constituencies.

To the extent that these reactions and conflicts were present during the state's founding period, they did not turn the tide against the prevalence of anti-Judaic sentiment within Israeli society. As long as secular Zionists held the demographic superiority, and more importantly the cultural hegemony, they were able to force Judaic ingredients to become "limited, marginalized, or externalized in relation—friendly or hostile—to the identity of others in the nation, or even disappear entirely, leaving in their wake, like the smile of the Cheshire cat, a hazy memory of 'origin.'"<sup>48</sup> Yet as Israeli became more affluent and less committed to the pioneering ideal, the influence of the secular Zionist elite began to wane, and with it came a search for lost origins, "a process of coming closer and becoming more familiar with the *Jewish* people."<sup>49</sup> During most of the 1960s, Shapira notes, this process did not come to full fruition, as the civil religion of Zionism and the negation of the diaspora still held sway. The "watershed moment" that tipped the scales, however, was the Six Day War of 1967. According to Shapira, the memory of the Jewish diaspora was not commonly evoked during previous wars, since Israelis were still heavily invested in the image of the omnipotent Sabra who could withstand any outside attacks. Yet in the period of the Six Day War this image was no longer so dominant, and "suddenly it was felt as if the fate of the Jewish People had reached the shores of the Mediterranean, that the distinction between the fate of the Jewish People in the diaspora and that of the Jewish People in its homeland did not stand the test of history, that the state was no longer a guarantee against destruction."<sup>50</sup> Thus, rather than embodying a New Jew, many Israelis now saw themselves linked, albeit negatively, to their diasporic roots, and by implication, to the traditional lifestyle of Judaism that the diaspora came to signify. And while the strategic success of the war abated such anxious identification, the subsequent trauma of the Yom Kippur War (1973), which took Israel by surprise and nearly ended

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<sup>47</sup> Sheleg, *New Religious Jews*, 286.

<sup>48</sup> Schweid, "Judaism in Israeli Culture," 10.

<sup>49</sup> Anita Shapira, *Jews, Zionists and in Between* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2007), 102 (my italics).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

in a military defeat, brought it back to the fore of public consciousness with greater fervor. Consequently, as Yair Auron explains, if in the pre-1967 period mainstream identity was commonly defined as “Israeli first and Jewish second,” then in the aftermath of these wars it was largely defined “Jewish first and Israeli second.”<sup>51</sup>

As this transformation took place within mainstream culture, the marginalized religious minorities, which by then had grown considerably in size, found themselves able, for the first time in their history, to take on a more influential role in shaping Israeli society. In the 1970s and 1980s this process was most visible in the sphere of politics. Its beginnings are often traced back to the rise of the *Gush Emunim* settlement movement after the Yom Kippur War, which turned its Religious-Zionist leadership into a major power player in the Israeli political landscape.<sup>52</sup> The 1977 elections marked another stage in religious empowerment, when after ending the 30-year reign of the Labor Party, *Likkud* head Menachem Begin (1913-1992) reached out to the religious parties to join his coalition. In response, the Ashkenazi Haredi party *Agudat Yisrael* agreed to become a part of the government for the first time since 1951, but not before requesting unprecedented concessions to be made on behalf of various Judaic causes; and the Religious-Zionist party *Mafdal* demanded control not only of the Ministries of Interior and Religion, which were traditionally under their purview, but also of the much-sought-after Ministry of Education.<sup>53</sup> In the 1980s a new Mizrahi Haredi party, *Shas*, emerged on the scene with astounding electoral successes, originating from its grassroots efforts in mobilizing Mizrahi resentment against the Ashkenazi-Zionist establishment and its continued ethnic-based bias.<sup>54</sup> And in the 1990s especially, it became the practice of many top secular politicians to make highly publicized visits to local “holy personages” such as Rabbi Yitzhak Kaduri (1899-2006) to receive their blessings and garner their and their constituency’s support.<sup>55</sup> These changes not only “gave religion a dominant standing within Israeli society.” They did so by also shifting the definition of Judaism from a negative to a positive context. The Judaic was no longer strictly articulated in relation to a bygone lifestyle that had been destroyed and then replaced by secular Zionism; rather, it was presented as a thriving contemporary force that could potentially replace a declining secular

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<sup>51</sup> Auron, *Israeli Identities*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> Yonah and Goodman, “Introduction,” 16.

<sup>53</sup> Sheleg, *New Religious Jews*, 286.

<sup>54</sup> Yonah and Goodman, “Introduction,” 25-26.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Zionist ethos and realize more fully Israel's nationhood. In the words of Yossi Yonah and Yehuda Goodman, the radicalness of this shift was found in Israeli Judaism's reconstitution as "the authentic continuation of both Judaic tradition and the modern Zionist enterprise."<sup>56</sup>

The rise to political prominence of Israel's religious sector fueled, and was fueled by, a hardening of its positions vis-à-vis the secular value system of Israeli Zionism. One emblem of this Judaic radicalization is a forceful discourse of messianism that has dominated much of Israeli-religious public opinion, most notably in the Religious-Zionist settlement movement.<sup>57</sup> Messianic perspectives were not foreign to Israeli culture during the state's founding period, but their presence was relatively minor in comparison to the period after the Six Day War.<sup>58</sup> The postwar explosion of messianic views was led by a faction within Religious-Zionism that originated from the *Merkaz Harav* Yeshiva and proclaimed the teachings of its spiritual leaders, Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook and his son Rabbi Zvi-Yehuda Kook (1891-1982). As previously mentioned, Rabbi Avraham Kook believed the secular Zionist project to be a necessary phase in a divinely-ordained plan to redeem the Jewish people and its homeland. His offspring and protégé further elaborated on this view, defining the Holocaust and Israel's independence as preliminary stages to the creation of a halakhic state, and ultimately, the realization of a messianic utopia. The expansion of Israeli-ruled territories was understood by Kook and his followers as a return to the "Complete Israel" of ancient times, whose sacred wholeness must be preserved as a guarantee for the nation's redemptive process. It was this valuing of the Land above all else that became the staple of Kookism, and which propelled the settlement project into existence. As the project's successes grew so did the support given to it by the community as a whole. And soon, in the words of Gideon Aran, "Religious Zionism turned into Zionist Religion."<sup>59</sup> The reliance on the Kookist vision was so profound, that when territorial concessions became an integral process of peace talks since the late 1970s, many Religious-Zionists were prompted to virulent protests against the powers-that-be, at times culminating in premeditated violence. Such was the case of Yigal Amir, the Religious-Zionist who assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (1922-1995) for his role in the Oslo

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example: Shany Littman, "Following the Dream of a Third Temple in Jerusalem," *Haaretz*, October 4, 2012, accessed September 20, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/magazine/following-the-dream-of-a-third-temple-in-jerusalem-1.468221>.

<sup>58</sup> Auron, *Israeli Identities*, 39.

<sup>59</sup> Gideon Aran, *Kookism: The Roots of Gush Emunim, Jewish Settlers' Sub-Culture, Zionist Theology, Contemporary Messianism* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing, 2013), 107.



Agreements. The Rabbinical support for these and other acts marked a clear example of how a messianic logic has been used in contemporary Israel to justify acts of political extremism.

Another, interrelated manifestation of this process is the Haredization of Israel's self-avowed religious constituencies. This shift comes as a result of greater self-assuredness on the part of these constituencies to express their cultural uniqueness. It is paradoxically inspired by a zeitgeist that places an emphasis on multiculturalism over against a homogenous melting pot identity, and manifests fundamentalist resentment against the secular-liberal value system that brought this multiculturalism into being not only in the Israeli context but worldwide. Within the Haredi constituency, according to Haim Zicherman, this shift is clearly visible in "radicalized halakhic policies, especially on issues of modesty. These include 'Mehadrim' [restrictive] initiatives whose purpose is to enforce complete gender separation within Haredi-dominant geographical areas: on bus lines, in medical facilities, and in some cases—even in the streets of Haredi neighborhoods. Most often these practices do not just characterize marginal groups within Haredi society, but are taken up by the community as a whole."<sup>60</sup> In the Religious-Zionist sector, the scripturalist tendencies of Merkaz Harav brought about the emergence of a Haredi-Nationalist community (*Haredi Leumi* or *Hardal*), whose members link the messianic project of redeeming the land with a lifestyle of strict religious observance. Yet it wasn't so much this observance which marked the radicalness of the Haredi-Nationalist departure, according to Sheleg, but its thorough rejection of modern culture, especially in terms of the demand to keep religious schools gender segregated and without "secular" subjects such as "foreign languages, literature and the rest of the 'extraneous' arts."<sup>61</sup> Such hardline limitations were previously unheard of within the Religious-Zionist constituency, and their enforcement became a central point of friction with the constituency's moderate center. In the Masorti constituency, Haredization has been noticeable especially in the context of the Mizrahi Haredi enterprise of religious repentance (*Mifa'al Ha-Teshuva*). As opposed to Ashkenazi Haredism, where religious repentants are often separated from (and discriminated against by) the community's "original" members, for Mizrahi Haredim

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<sup>60</sup> Zicherman, *Black Blue-White*, 341.

<sup>61</sup> Sheleg, *New Religious Jews*, 28. Recently there has been an initiative by leading Haredi-Nationalist rabbis to force public universities to open gender-segregated tracks for members of their constituency. This move submits to the desire of young Religious-Zionists to study "secular" topics in institutions of higher learning, yet still boldly attempts to control the educational surroundings in which these topics are taught. See: Naomi Darom, "Supporters of Separation between Men and Women are Trying to Get to Universities" [Hebrew], *Haaretz*, June 6, 2015, accessed June 6, 2015 <http://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/tozeret/premium-1.2651674>.

“religious repentance [...] is an inseparable part of the constitution of Haredi identity itself.” One reason for this centrality, according to Nissim Leon, is the identity of their target audience; thus,

quite a few religious repentants from Mizrahi Jewry are no strangers to “tradition” and religious life. This does not mean that the processes of secularization are not profoundly present in their midst, but that they are not in an ideological conflict with religion and tradition. These are processes of distancing from religion but not of abandoning it completely. It is for this reason that one of the most widely used terms in the Mizrahi Haredi religious repentance vocabulary is “strengthening” (*Hitchazkut*), and many repentants describe themselves and are described by repentance agents as “strengthened” (*Mitchazkim*). The use of this verb or description is apparently based on the premise that religious repentance is not a process of conversion, which speaks to an alteration of past identity to something that is completely the opposite. Rather, religious repentance in Mizrahi Haredism is considered a process of religious empowerment, of raising the religious “volume” in the lives of the repentants, a procedure that seems to be contingent on prior religious knowledge.<sup>62</sup>

Taking Shas repentance as a prime example of the Mizrahi Haredi repentance movement, it is clear that its purpose is to change the lifestyle of repentants so that it would adhere to the strict terms of scripturalist observance, seen as a necessary counterforce to secular moral corruption.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, when placed under the title of “strengthening,” this repentance takes into account the need to preserve the repentants’ continuity with their former social identities, and as a result also “legitimizes partial observance of the behavioral edicts derived from the tenets of religious faith.”<sup>64</sup> Yet in spite of this measure of flexibility, the fact that “the Mizrahi religious landscape is undergoing a process of Haredization” nevertheless creates tensions in this community “between the Masortim and the Haredim or the Haredizing, between those committed to scripturalism but follow its demands selectively and those who diligently observe these demands on an everyday basis.”<sup>65</sup>

This fundamentalist shift, a move towards a more literal and severe observance of Judaic law, has also influenced life beyond the private and public spaces of Israel’s religious

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<sup>62</sup> Leon, *Gentle Ultra-Orthodoxy*, 113.

<sup>63</sup> David Lehmann and Batia Siebzehner, *Remaking Israeli Judaism: The Challenge of Shas* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2010), 113-125.

<sup>64</sup> David Lehmann and Batia Siebzehner, “Recruitment and Conversion in Israeli Haredi Society: Shas’s Religious Repentance” [Hebrew], in *From Survival to Consolidation: Changes in Israeli Haredi Society and Its Scholarly Study*, ed. Kimmy Caplan and Nurit Stadler (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2012), 221.

<sup>65</sup> Leon, *Gentle Ultra-Orthodoxy*, 143.

communities. While certain religious leaders, especially in Haredi circles, have returned to the separatist tendencies of Israeli-Judaic identity and called for a withdrawal from political affairs,<sup>66</sup> the dominant tendency over the past several decades has been for self-avowed Judaic parties and groups to unsettle the preexisting “Status Quo” and further solidify the presence of the Halakha on a national level. This exists, first and foremost, on the level of introducing new religious laws into Israeli legislation. Examples of this include the Matzo Holiday Law of 1986, which forbade the presentation and sale of leavened foods during Passover, and the law on the Closure of Institutions of Frivolity (*Batei Inugim*) on *Tisha B'Av*, which gave municipalities the discretionary capacity to shut down restaurants, cafes and cinemas during the Judaic commemoration day for the destruction of the First and Second Temples. Even farther reaching than these regulations were the attempts made to protect and even radicalize preexisting religious definitions within Israeli law. This pertained primarily to the definition of “Jew” in Israeli lawmaking, and especially in the Law of Return that granted citizenship and financial support to every Jew who immigrated to Israel. Conflicts on this definition came to a head during the 1990s in the aftermath of vast immigration waves from Ethiopia and the former USSR. State support for these immigrants was often suspended because their Jewishness did not correspond to the traditional halakhic standards that undergird the Law of Return. For their part, religious parties blocked any attempt to solve the situation by introducing a more inclusive definition of Jewishness into legislation. Not only that, but these struggles were also used as catalyst for sustaining the ultra-Orthodox definition of “conversion,” over and against Supreme Court rulings that gave leeway to include Reform and Conservative processes under this heading.

The radicalization of Israeli Judaism has been accompanied by a radicalization of anti-religious tendencies within Israeli secular discourse. This is especially evident in reference to political activities which secular Israelis defines as “religious coercion” (*Kfiya Datit*). Several measures in particular have provoked secular ire over the past thirty years: for example, blocking the civil marriage option, which would have allowed those who cannot marry by halakhic standards (LGBT for one) or those uninterested in Judaic rituals to legally wed in Israeli territories; prohibiting the use of public transportation and the services of cinemas, restaurants, shopping malls and other businesses on the Sabbath; providing benefits to Haredi yeshiva students such as additional governmental monetary support and waivers from mandatory military service; and

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<sup>66</sup> Zicherman, *Black Blue-White*, 342.

straddling governmental policies, especially those related of the Occupied Territories, to the messianic ideal and its terminology. Secular-liberal resistance on these and other pressing matters has taken place on a legislative level, most straightforwardly in the efforts since the 1980s to establish an Israeli constitution that would allow for religious freedom. While these efforts never yielded a constitution per se, they did lead to the legislation of two “basic laws” (*Chukey Yesod*) on “Freedom of Occupation” and “Human Dignity and Liberty,” which, although not referring to religious freedoms per se, gave the Supreme Court some latitude in overriding religious regulatory measures that undermined their constitutional spirit. This latitude was exploited by the courts on many occasions in the 1990s and 2000s, which in turn placed the Judaic sector on the defensive, stirring deep-seated fears of social alienation and persecution amongst its ranks.<sup>67</sup> In addition to these judicial steps, anti-religious critique also existed in the form of protests lodged in the media as well as public demonstrations against such causes as protecting gay rights and cancelling gender-segregated bus routes. (Demonstrations often led to violent behavior on behalf of religious participants, as when a Haredi man stabbed marchers at the 2006 and 2015 Gay Pride Parade in Jerusalem).

The polarizing of positions and resulting clashes are the foundation for the recurrent claim that contemporary Israel is undergoing a veritable *Kulturkampf* between its religious and secular dimensions.<sup>68</sup> Within this clash, it seems that “the centrifugal social forces are asking today for a dichotomous resolutions on all these questions: old or new, sacred or profane, particular or universal, for normalcy or for [ethnic] uniqueness.”<sup>69</sup> While the demand for such “dichotomous resolutions” was the order of the day since the foundation of the state, it was never as forcefully asserted as it has been over recent decades. This binary image of a secular-religious chasm seemingly conflicts with the aforementioned reality of a spectrum of Israeli attitudes towards Judaism. Yet, as Aviezer Ravitzky has cogently argued, the two phenomena can and do coexist. He asks:

Do polarization and alienation emerge only when the public is split conclusively between two camps? Could there not be a social and cultural divide even as there is also a gradual continuity between groups and in spite of the existence of mediating figures and groups? An Indian man walking in his [sic] country for several hundred kilometers would note a

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<sup>67</sup> Yonah and Goodman, “Introduction,” 34.

<sup>68</sup> Auron, *Israeli Identities*, 289; Daphne Barak-Erez, *Laws and “Other” Animals—The Story of Pigs and Pork Prohibitions in Israel* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Keter, 2015), 153-159.

<sup>69</sup> Aviezer Ravitzky, *Freedom Inscribed: Diverse Voices of the Jewish Religious Thought* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2000), 266.

change in the spoken dialect. Walking farther, he would note words that are foreign to his ears. And even farther off, he would soon be unable to understand the language of his (?) people, in spite of the linguistic spectrum and the gradation that are to be found in the transition from village to village. In other words: social polarization is not defined only by quantum leaps between different camps. It is also measured by the size and depth of the gap that distinguishes between the farthest extremes—assuming, of course, that these extremes represent culturally meaningful groups. This is even more the case when those groups represent the leading elites, the ones which hold the highest form of education, the moral hegemony, and the ideological dedication within a particular society.

While in the founding period of Israeli society there was really only one elite—that of the secular-Zionist hegemony—currently there are two: “a religious orthodoxy on the one hand, and a secular orthodoxy on the other, while the majority of the population expresses different degrees of proximity and distance from religious faith and tradition.” It is those two competing “orthodoxies,” according to Ravitzky, that are responsible “for the lion’s share of Israeli creation—in the literary, philosophical, scholastic, artistic, and journalistic fields—and not mediating groups.”<sup>70</sup> Their demographic presence may not be ample, but their hold on public discourse is significant. And through their discursive control, these “orthodoxies” have established a polarizing vision as the basis of Israeli society’s contemporary self-image, which in turn affects social operation on all levels, from governmental politics to individual behavior.

Nevertheless, even as Israel seems to be undergoing a polarization and radicalization of its secular and religious positions, it is also at the same time experiencing a move towards greater openness and cooperation between these positions, which in some measure bridges the divide and asserts the existence of an identity spectrum. This move is clearly noticeable in the Masorti community, whose identity is still invested in negotiating the religious and secular poles, even as it displays a growing tendency towards Haredization.<sup>71</sup> Yet within the parts of Israeli society that seem more oppositional to liberal secularity, one can also see gestures that contradict fundamentalist commitments.<sup>72</sup> In Religious-Zionism, for one, an openness to nonreligious dimensions of Israeli society has “caused a decline in the significance given by youths to the observance of Judaic edicts, considered a central parameter for the measurement of their

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>71</sup> Yaacov Yadgar, *Beyond Secularization*, 7-12.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example: Yair Ettinger, “Is Orthodox Judaism on the Verge of a Historical Schism” [Hebrew], *Haaretz*, July 27, 2015, accessed August 2, 2015 <http://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/orthodox/.premium-1.2690140>.

religiousness.”<sup>73</sup> This decline has resulted in a move towards renouncing religion (*Chazara be-She’ela*), but its most noticeable contribution to Israel’s religious landscape has been the emergence of a “New Religious-Zionist, who turns away from religious fundamentalism and towards an open dialogue with the modern world in a manner that surpasses sectorial identification.”<sup>74</sup> Sheleg notes some of the characteristics of this open dialogue: the unabashed adoption of certain leisure activities such as going to pubs, dance clubs, music festivals, cinemas and live theater, which were previously defined by Religious-Zionism as both “secular” and “hedonistic;” the affirmation of certain feminist tenets about gender equality, which has manifested itself, amongst other things, in an unprecedented number of women entering into political bodies and institutions of higher religious education; the inclusion of critical tools of “Jewish Studies” within yeshiva curriculums, as well as the integration of Religious-Zionists into “Jewish Studies” academic departments and informal study groups that favor a culturalist orientation to religion over a devotional one; the (moderate) revision of halakhic ordinances by young rabbis who are willing to look favorably upon certain aspects of secular culture; and the creative involvement of Religious-Zionists in various areas of art and communication, such as journalism, theater, poetry, and filmmaking.<sup>75</sup> Importantly, some of these changes have not been performed with the intent of lessening Judaic involvement, but rather with the desire of enriching and deepening it. Nevertheless, all aspects of the New Religious-Zionist identity are commonly understood as departures from the Orthodox standards of Judaic scripturalism that still hold sway in the Israeli context, and originate from current cultural trends that are commonly perceived as “secular.”

Though the most stringent supporter of these standards, the Haredi community is not devoid of secular influences either. Over the past several decades, Haredim have increased their friction with Israel’s secular precincts, partly due to their demographic expansion into secular areas,<sup>76</sup> and partly due to their desire to have greater influence on Israel’s public sphere. This friction has augmented the separatist rhetoric within Haredi leadership, which defines “Israeli

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<sup>73</sup> Yonah and Goodman, “Introduction,” 17.

<sup>74</sup> Ben-Refael and Ben-Chaim, *Jewish Identities*, 213.

<sup>75</sup> Sheleg, *New Religious Jews*, 54-93; Yair Sheleg, *The Jewish Renaissance in Israeli Society: The Emergence of a New Jew* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2010), 92-99.

<sup>76</sup> Lee Cahaner and Yosef Shelhav, “From Ghetto to Suburb: Transitions in the Haredi Spatial Organization” [Hebrew], in *From Survival to Consolidation: Changes in Israeli Haredi Society and Its Scholarly Study*, ed. Kimmy Caplan and Nurit Stadler (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2012), 252-272.

culture” as a source of threat, and facilitated the aforementioned processes of radicalization.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, it also promoted an appropriation of elements of this culture into Haredi everyday reality. This appropriation, which has been defined as “Haredi Israelization” or “Haredi popular religion,” manifests itself in a variety of ways: the development of consumerism, both in the sense of expanded window-shopping practices and a greater selection of Haredi businesses trading in luxury items (fashionable clothes, accessories, etc.); the legitimization of leisure culture, as seen in the rise of Haredi attendance in musical concerts (of Hasidic and cantorial music), water parks, museums, movie screenings and theatrical performances (of “appropriate” texts), as well as the increased use of DVD players and computers for recreational purposes; the vigorous use of mass media platforms such as radio, newspaper, television, DVDs and CDs, which, even when appropriated for ultra-Orthodox propaganda, is often implicated by representational patterns that exceed the strict norms of Haredi decorum; the growing participation in the workforce, not only by women who were always excluded from the Haredi “learners’ society,” but also by men who have found the yeshiva scholar’s life unsuitable for their personal and financial needs; the introduction of nonreligious topics like Hebrew and Math into yeshiva study, and the broadening of opportunities for women to receive advanced education in such fields as computer science, accounting, business administration, economics, social work and law.<sup>78</sup> The stakes of adapting to secular-Israeli culture are arguably highest in Haredim’s pedagogical-evangelical enterprises such as that of religious repentance or of kabbalist instruction, whose goal is to render Judaism attractive to their predominantly secular audiences using vocabulary, images, and technologies that are foreign to the traditional Haredi world. These enterprises also serve as the outer marker of Haredi adaptability, in the sense that as much as they are accepting of the “foreign” contents and means that ground their dialogue with non-Haredi subjects, these are still made subservient to the centrality of ultra-Orthodox values.<sup>79</sup> Such is the truth for many secularizing influences within the

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<sup>77</sup> Caplan and Stadler, “Introduction,” 16-18.

<sup>78</sup> Sheleg, *New Religious Jews*, 136-169; Ben-Refael and Ben-Chaim, *Jewish Identities*, 207-212; Kimmy Caplan, *Internal Popular Discourse in Israeli Haredi Society* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2007), 32-33; Tamar El-Or and Eran Neria, “The Ultraorthodox Flâneur: Toward the Pleasure Principle. Consuming Time and Space in Contemporary Haredi Population of Jerusalem.” in *Consumption and Market Society in Israel*, ed. Yoram S. Carmeli and Kalman Applbaum (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 71-94; Nurit Stadler, “Work, Livelihood and the Miraculous: Defining the Haredi Dilemma in Israel” [Hebrew], in *Israeli Haredim: Integration without Assimilation?* ed. Emanuel Sivan and Kimmy Caplan (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2003), 88-112.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example: Lehmann and Siebzehner, *Remaking Israeli Judaism*, 205-246; Marianna Ruah-Midbar, “Current Jewish Spiritualities in Israeli: A New Age,” *Modern Judaism* 32, no. 1 (2012): 105-106.

opened-up Haredi ghetto, whose radicalness is tempered by an overall instrumental approach to using external influences: i.e., elements are taken up for their useful purposes in furthering Haredi social-theological interests, while their secular/liberal applications are explicitly and thoroughly rejected.<sup>80</sup>

Concurrently, Israel's "secular" precincts—that is, those substantial parts of Israeli-Jewish population which traditionally did not hold Judaism as a major constituent of their identity and everyday practice—have experienced a shift from the past disavowals of mainstream Zionism to a more accepting attitude towards some of Judaism's basic tenets (though perhaps not in their traditional form).<sup>81</sup> This "Jewish Renaissance," according to Sheleg, has been motivated by changes on both the local and global spheres. The "dissolution of the previous social and cultural anchors, especially Zionism and Socialism,"<sup>82</sup> had affected the entire Jewish-Israeli population, but mostly the secular Zionist constituency that most adhered to them. Seeking a new social adhesive, this community subsequently reached out to Judaism, which now was recovered as the cultural power "that has maintained the People of Israel in its unique identity for two thousand years of exile and can continue doing so today."<sup>83</sup> These localized ingredients fed into, and were inspired by, a global crisis regarding the alleged inability of Enlightenment and capitalist materialism to provide access to certain "deep" and "metaphysical" levels of existence. Inspired by a liberal "subjective turn" that places the personal over the collective, this crisis led to the rise of "spirituality" in general, and "New Age spirituality" in particular, as a form of engagement with the Sacred that is "individualized, non-institutional, less to do with fulfilling obligations and more with pursuing techniques."<sup>84</sup> While opposing the organized forms of religion, this "de-traditionalized" spirituality does not distance itself from religious traditions altogether, but rather displays a perennial understanding of religions as all sharing a profound truth or spirit, which then allows "seekers" to pick and choose those religious elements that "feel right to them" in

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<sup>80</sup> Ben-Refael and Ben-Chaim, *Jewish Identities*, 212; Sheleg, *New Religious Jews*, 167-169; Sarit Brazilai, "A Double Life: Stories of Those Who Dance Between the Secular and Haredi Worlds" [Hebrew], in *Israeli Haredim: Integration without Assimilation?* ed. Emanuel Sivan and Kimmy Caplan (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2003), 196-223.

<sup>81</sup> See, for example: Yair Ettinger, "In Israel, God Has Almost Nothing to Do with Religion," *Haaretz*, September 14, 2015, accessed October 2, 2015, [www.haaretz.com/news/israel/.premium-1.675476](http://www.haaretz.com/news/israel/.premium-1.675476); Adam Klin-Oron and Marianna Ruah-Midbar, "Secular by the Letter, Religious by the Spirit: The Attitudes of the Israeli New Age to Jewish Law" [Hebrew], *Israeli Sociology* 12, no. 1: 59-61.

<sup>82</sup> Sheleg, *Jewish Renaissance*, 100.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



representing this truth.<sup>85</sup> This leads to the creation of new “glocalized” variations that provide certain accents, inspired by particular cultural-traditional contexts, to global spiritual understandings.<sup>86</sup>

The combined effects of these social phenomena did contribute to increased Haredization within the secular Israeli sector since the 1990s, as can be seen in the willingness by such movements as Bratslav and Chabad Hasidism to capitalize on culturist fascination and New Age terminology in their successful religious repentance enterprises.<sup>87</sup> Yet more often than not, the Jewish Renaissance, true to the anticlerical nature of its social origins, sought to redefine what it meant to be Judaic apart from the institutional standards of halakhic observance, which in Israel are still “a major indication as to the classification of religious identity (more than religious beliefs).”<sup>88</sup> What has emerged as an alternative to these standards are two interrelated categories which Sheleg defines as “Judaism seeking” and “God seeking.”<sup>89</sup> “Judaism seeking” Israeli Jews look upon their religion as a past tradition that has been largely neglected and repressed within their cultural world. They seek to connect to it as a culture rather than a lifestyle and belief system. Their interest in Judaism concentrates on “its earthly manifestations (texts, rituals, even prayers), even as their contents point towards the heavens;”<sup>90</sup> and these manifestations are taken up only to the extent that they do not commit the practitioners to strict observance and permit them to conform Judaism to secular-liberal values. The manifestations of this mode of revival are numerous, and include: study halls (*Batei Midrash*) and learning communities, which allow their members to “familiarize themselves and emotionally bond with the treasures of Jewish civilization”<sup>91</sup>—and especially the neglected area (in secular Zionist culture) of the Talmud—without having this be

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<sup>85</sup> Paul Heelas, “The New Age in Cultural Context: the Premodern, the Modern and the Postmodern,” *Religion* 23, no. 2 (April 1993): 103–116; Brian J. Zinnbauer et al., “Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzifying the Fuzzy,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 4 (December 1997): 549–564.

<sup>86</sup> Ruah-Midbar, “Current Jewish Spiritualities,” 104.

<sup>87</sup> Moshe Weinstock, for example, has cited this trend as a central cause for the rise of nonreligious Israelis’ interest in Bratslav thought and the expansion of Israeli Bratslav Hasidism, as indicated in the growth and diversification of the population of Israeli travelers who make the annual Rosh Hashana pilgrimage to R. Nachman of Bratslav’s tomb in Uman (Ukraine). See: Weinstock, *Uman: The Israeli Journey to the Grave of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot and Chemed Books, 2011), 360–370.

<sup>88</sup> Ruah-Midbar, “Current Jewish Spiritualities,” 103.

<sup>89</sup> Importantly, in *Jewish Renaissance* Sheleg traces the effects of these categories also to other sectors of Israeli society that have been defined as religious, yet states that these are “most noticeable” amongst secular Israelis (22).

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

the foundation for a life of scripturalist observance; unconventional “life cycle” rituals such as weddings and bar- mitzvahs, where traditional forms are altered so that they be in tune with “an egalitarian, liberal mentality;”<sup>92</sup> online initiatives to promote Judaic literacy, such as Project 929 ([www.929.org.il](http://www.929.org.il)) that builds a virtual community around reading a Bible chapter a day, or the Invitation to Piyut database ([www.piyut.org.il](http://www.piyut.org.il)), which aims to establish links between the traditions of Jewish liturgical poems and mainstream Israeli culture; popular festivals dedicated to Judaic themes, such as the “Lo-Bashamaim Celebration of Israeli Judaism” that has taken place in the Galilee since 1997; repurposed Judaic holidays, especially the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* celebrations, where communities and study halls in secular centers have taken a kabbalist tradition about the performance of reparation during the Shavuot holiday and turned it into an opportunity to “show their intellectual and experiential wares”<sup>93</sup> during an all-night festivity; the publication of titles central to the “Jewish Library” (*Aron Ha-Sfarim Ha-Yehudi*) in popular editions, such as the 27-title “People of the Book” (*Am Ha-Sefer*) series published by Yediot Acharonot Press in the years 2007-2009; and theological discussions in mainstream media, especially in newspaper columns dedicated to the weekly Torah portion (*Parashat Ha-Shavua*). Sheleg stresses that these manifestations are less motivated by globalized spirituality as they are by the local disruption of Zionist-Israeli hegemony, which seemed to have “hollowed out” the mainstream secular identity. As such, for secular Israelis, they represent an attempt to stabilize and strengthen their social identities as (also) Judaic, especially versus Israel’s religious precincts, whose fundamentalist-Judaic ethos gained further support from the collapse of traditional Zionism.<sup>94</sup>

In contrast, the “God-seeking” category, where the global influences are arguably pronounced, is less focused on acquiring cultural literacy as on reaching out to the beyond and achieving an experience of “spiritual transcendence.”<sup>95</sup> When placed under the heading of “New Age spirituality,” it becomes clear that this “reaching out” takes place in a variety of formats that are not all characterized as Judaic. Indeed one can note, for example, the heightened-yet-eclectic interest in meditation and yoga techniques, motivated in no small part by the experiences of many

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 103-104. See also: Naama Azulay and Ephraim Tabory, “The Jewish-Zionist Discourse in Young Task-Oriented Secular Communities in Israel” [Hebrew], in *Beyond Halakha: Secularism, Traditionalism, and “New Age” Culture in Israel*, ed. Gideon Katz, Shalom Ratzabi, and Yaakov Yadgar (Sede Boqer: Ben Gurion Research Institute, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 2014), 311-346.

<sup>95</sup> Sheleg, *Jewish Renaissance*, 110.

“twenty plus year Israelis” who travel to East Asia after their military service, “learn of other religious traditions, notably different than the Orthodox Judaism they had experienced in Israel, and attempt to re-experience them upon return.”<sup>96</sup> Yet certain manifestations of Israeli New Age spirituality aim to incorporate Judaic elements into their practice, motivated by the understanding that such elements are more central in the adherents’ cultural identity and thus can act as more potent catalysts for their spiritual transcendence.<sup>97</sup> These “Jew Age”<sup>98</sup> phenomena, to use Marianna Ruah-Midbar’s term, include for example: channeling, which can take an Israeli-Jewish accent through references to such Jewish figures as “Moses, the Prophet Deborah, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Nachman, etc;”<sup>99</sup> Jewish Renewal, which seeks to “renew Judaism, both intellectually and practically,”<sup>100</sup> by integrating Jewish symbols and rituals into New Age frameworks; pagan and shamanist practices, especially those drawing on the spiritual undertones of the Jewish calendar and of sacred Jewish sites; women’s circles, which often empower womanhood through veneration of such key feminine entities in Judaic cosmology as Lilith and the *Shekhina* (the female side of the divine); syncretic teachings that combine Judaism with other religious traditions, such as Buddhism (“JuBu”) and ancient Japanese culture (“Jewish Reiki”);<sup>101</sup> therapeutic methods that connect mental health with Judaism’s mysterious powers, such as the “Yemima Method,” named after its founder Yemima Avital (1929-1999) who counseled her followers through cryptic texts she received while in a state of trance;<sup>102</sup> Judaic healing and coaching systems which are taught by gurus and in various schools such as “Elima—the College for Alternative Medicine in the Jewish Spirit” and “Kavana! Jewish Coaching for Results;”<sup>103</sup> and various body/soul-oriented techniques that “are ‘converted’ to Judaism, in an attempt to identify them as being of Jewish origin or to offer a Jewish version of them.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Chava Weissler, “Performing Kabbalah in the Jewish Renewal Movement,” in *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival*, ed. Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2011), 82-83.

<sup>97</sup> See: Klin-Oron and Ruah-Midbar, “Secular by the Letter.”

<sup>98</sup> Ruah-Midbar, “Current Jewish Spiritualities,” 104.

<sup>99</sup> Marianna Ruah-Midbar, “A Channeler, A Healer, and A Shaman Meet at the Rabbi’s: Jewish Israeli Identities in the New Age” [Hebrew], in *Beyond Halakha: Secularism, Traditionalism, and “New Age” Culture in Israel*, ed. Gideon Katz, Shalom Ratzabi, and Yaakov Yadgar (Sede Boqer: Ben Gurion Research Institute, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 2014), 515.

<sup>100</sup> Weissler, “Performing Kabbalah,” 84.

<sup>101</sup> Ruah-Midbar, “A Channeler,” 516-518.

<sup>102</sup> Sheleg, *Jewish Renaissance*, 132.

<sup>103</sup> Ruah-Midbar, “A Channeler,” 519-520.

<sup>104</sup> Ruah-Midbar, “Current Jewish Spiritualities,” 107.

Of particular importance in this Israeli Jew Age phenomenon has been the increased reliance on Kabbalah, whether in its incorporation as a guiding system of symbols and techniques within New Age practices that are not solely—or even strictly—defined as “kabbalistic,” or in the work of institutions such as Rabbi Philip Berg’s The Kabbalah Centre and Rabbi Dr. Michael Laitman’s Kabbalah for the People, which bring the teachings of Jewish mysticism to the (predominantly secular) masses while adapting their contents to New Age mentality.<sup>105</sup> Boaz Huss makes the argument “that contemporary Kabbalah, the New Age, as well as other new religious and spiritual movements that emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century, are part of a global network of new postmodern, cultural formations, which can be best described as ‘postmodern spirituality.’”<sup>106</sup> Indeed, certain characteristics of current Israeli Kabbalah—for example, the simplification and focus on “surface” rather than depth, or the seamless integration between spirituality and the economic structures of late capitalism—seem to support this claim. Yet it is also important to recognize how the present revival of Kabbalah resonates with earlier chapters of Jewish-Israeli history, especially in the *modern* challenge fin-de-siècle neo-mystics such as Martin Buber posed against the hegemony of Jewish Enlightenment, and its subsequent impact on the burgeoning Zionist culture in pre-statehood Palestine.<sup>107</sup> Highlighting contemporary Kabbalah’s “embeddedness within a broader cultural trajectory”<sup>108</sup> that extends back to modernity not only provides a more historicized understanding of this phenomenon, but also unveils its collective aspects over against a postmodern emphasis on “self-spirituality.” Refracted through a modern lens, the rise of mysticism in the Israeli context may therefore be regarded, at least in part,

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<sup>105</sup> As Boaz Huss explains it, “many [New Age] themes, such as the anticipation of a spiritual cosmic transformation, the use of meditative and healing techniques to achieve such a transformation, psychological renderings of religious notions and the sanctification of the self, as well as the belief in the compatibility of spirituality and science, recur in many contemporary kabbalistic and hasidic formations.” Huss, “The New Age of Kabbalah: Contemporary Kabbalah, the New Age and Postmodern Spirituality,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 6, no. 2 (July 2007): 111. In this context, see also: Jonathan Garb, “*The Chosen will Become Herds*”: *Studies in Twentieth Century Kabbalah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing and Shalom Hartman Institute, 2005), 185-223.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>107</sup> Tamar Katriel, “Precursors of Postmodern Spirituality in Israeli Cultural Ethos,” *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival*, ed. Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2011), 319. See also: David Biale, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2011), 67-78.

<sup>108</sup> Katriel, “Precursors,” 314.

as also attempting to create “a community bounded by shared meaning and identity,”<sup>109</sup> a new consensus rooted in Judaism yet adjusted to the demands of post/modern liberalism.<sup>110</sup>

Thus envisaged, it becomes clear that the “strengthening of the religious sector’s political and cultural power [...] and of religiousness in Israel’s public sphere”<sup>111</sup> has had a profound impact on the nation’s sociocultural makeup over the past twenty years. On the one hand, it led to social polarization—an ever-widening gap between extreme versions of secularism and Judaism that seems to be splitting the country in half.<sup>112</sup> On the other hand, it brought about attempts to bridge this gap, bringing Israeli secularity and Judaism together into hybrid identities that re-define them both. The combination of these factors colors Israeli popular discourse with profound *ambivalence*, to use Sheleg’s definition<sup>113</sup>—a constant push and pull around the question of where Judaism fits within a national ethos that once marginalized its lived reality while appropriating its spiritual charge. This ambivalence reverberates through the various precincts of Israeli culture, which, burdened by the knowledge of its importance, attempt to negotiate its effects in a variety of ways. Such negotiations, it would be argued, stand at the heart of *Judaic-themed Israeli cinema*—a “filmic cycle” of sorts, which emerged as a direct result of Israel’s “Judaic turn” and serves as a central mode of commentary upon it.

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<sup>109</sup> Rachel Werczberger, “Self, Identity and Healing in the Ritual of Jewish Spiritual Renewal in Israel,” in *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival*, ed. Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2011), 99.

<sup>110</sup> In a sense, the balancing act between Judaism and the values of late modern/postmodern liberalism which this consensus represents is similar to that of the classic Masorti identity, and indeed, as Asaf Leibovitch argues, certain Israeli celebrities have attempted to draw both on this identity and the New Age to create a new “civil Israeli ‘spiritual’ republican integrative discourse.” . This movement notwithstanding, Sheleg argues that overall the Jewish Renaissance has yet to really contribute to “the formal strengthening of the Masorti identity.”. See: Sheleg, *Jewish Renaissance*, 175; Asaf Leibovitch, “Spiritual Traditionalists: A New Social Movement and the Israeli Identity Today” [Hebrew], in *Beyond Halakha: Secularism, Traditionalism, and “New Age” Culture in Israel*, ed. Gideon Katz, Shalom Ratzabi, and Yaakov Yadgar (Sede Boqer: Ben Gurion Research Institute, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 2014), 461.

<sup>111</sup> Goodman and Yonah, “Introduction,” 16-17.

<sup>112</sup> The sense of split is supported by sociological surveys that demonstrate the division of the population into two similar sized “blocks”: the “religious” (ultra-Orthodox/Religious-Zionist) and Masorti Israelis on the one hand, the nonreligious and anti-religious “secular” Israelis on the other. See: Auron, *Israeli Identities*, 291-292.

<sup>113</sup> Sheleg, *New Religious Jews*, 21; Sheleg, *Jewish Renaissance*, 167.

## 1.2 JUDAIC-THEMED ISRAELI CINEMA—AN OVERVIEW

As indicated in the opening to this chapter, Judaic reality—in the sense of the prevalent Israeli definition of an identity and lifestyle that place importance on halakhic observance<sup>114</sup>—were largely marginalized in Israeli cinema for most of its history. Accordingly, by Ronie Parciack’s count, only twenty fiction films out of over four hundred titles made during Israel’s first fifty years had foregrounded elements of this reality.<sup>115</sup> This situation drastically changed in the 2000s, with an exponential rise in the number of Israeli filmic texts taking Judaism as their central object of interest. The radicalness of this shift may overshadow preceding manifestations and disavowals of the Judaic within Israeli filmmaking, but it is only in relation to these that its particular characteristics and cultural significance can be fully appreciated.

During the pre-Independence and early statehood periods, films made in Palestine/Israel were largely devoted to the enthusiastic celebration of Zionist ideology and iconography. Early texts from the 1920s until the 1940s, in the words of Ella Shohat, “emphasized the pioneers’ achievements and the rapid pace of the country’s development” through “recurrent images of pioneers working the land, paving roads, and building towns [that] show the Yishuv as symbolically ‘making the desert bloom.’”<sup>116</sup> Following Independence, these characteristics served as the basis for “The Heroic-Nationalist genre,” which dominated the Israeli screen of the 1950s and early 1960s. True to its name, this genre asserted the importance of “national objectives: building a sanctuary for the Jewish people, protecting its rights, protecting its borders, populating and maintaining control over the land.”<sup>117</sup> In terms of narrative, it focused “on virtually mythic Israeli heroes: Sabras, kibbutzniks and soldiers, often within the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict, either as a backdrop [...] or at the center of the plot;”<sup>118</sup> stylistically, it relied on the “dynamism of American westerns and action films, the power of Soviet cinema, or the techniques

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<sup>114</sup> Ruah-Midbar, “Current Jewish Spiritualities,” 103.

<sup>115</sup> Ronie Parciack, “Beyond the Fence: Religious Sentiment in Israeli Cinema” [Hebrew], in *Fictive Looks: On Israeli Cinema*, ed. Nurith Gertz, Orly Lubin, and Judd Ne’eman (Ramat Aviv: Open University Press, 1998), 328.

<sup>116</sup> Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, rev. ed. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 21.

<sup>117</sup> Yael Munk and Nurith Gertz, *Revisiting Israeli Cinema: 1948-1990* [Hebrew] (Ra’anana: Open University of Israel, 2015), 24.

<sup>118</sup> Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*, 53.

of personal cinema” to “bestow glory and pathos upon an existence of building and struggle.”<sup>119</sup> Propagandist tools *per excellence*, these Heroic-Nationalist films were representative of a cultural landscape that was closely controlled and manufactured from the top down—“a new invention that developed with time based on various guiding principles and, most important, by an elite that steered the process.”<sup>120</sup> Indeed, as Yael Munk and Nurit Gertz have argued, the marginality of cinema within the cultural production of the pre-state and early statehood periods, together with its financial reliance on public bodies (international Zionist organizations at first, and later the Israeli government), made it particularly vulnerable to the “guiding principles” of this “elite.” As a result of this dependency, filmmakers and film distributors defined their work almost exclusively in terms of a “national project” and judged their success primarily in terms of the text’s propagandist value.<sup>121</sup>

It may therefore come as no surprise that even as certain precincts of Israeli cultural production such as plastic arts allowed for some consideration of Judaic identity and lifestyle,<sup>122</sup> the early films of Palestine/Israel were firmly devoted to denying these dimensions in accordance with the Zionist “negation of the Diaspora.” Recognizable religious characters were almost never presented in these texts, and when they were, their representation was reduced to Zionism’s image of the diasporic Jew as passive, static, and defeatist. In early statehood cinema, this reduction was also often performed in tandem with a collapsing of the religious Jew onto the figure of the Holocaust victim.<sup>123</sup> A seminal scene in Thorold Dickenson’s Heroic-Nationalist film *Hill 24 Doesn’t Answer* (1955) can serve as a case in point. In this scene, the sabra soldier David Amiram enters into hand-to-hand combat with a former Nazi officer Arthur Hasselhoff, who is now aiding the Jordanian army in its fight to prevent Israeli independence. Amiram triumphs over his rival, and the dying Hasselhoff subsequently confronts him with anti-Semitic slurs. Right before his death, the film shows Hasselhoff imagining Amiram as an Orthodox Jew, complete with traditional garb and a yellow patch attached to his lapel. This vision is fleeting, too short to have the audience make out its details. Its symbolic role in this context, like that of many other religious characters

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<sup>119</sup> Munk and Gertz, *Revisiting Israeli Cinema*, 25.

<sup>120</sup> Yaron Peleg, “Secularity and its Discontents: Religiosity in Contemporary Israeli Culture,” *Jewish Film & New Media* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 5.

<sup>121</sup> Munk and Gertz, *Revisiting Israeli Cinema*, 26.

<sup>122</sup> Gideon Efrat, *The Return to the Shteitel* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2011), 14-19.

<sup>123</sup> Nurith Gertz, *Holocaust Survivors, Aliens and Others in Israeli Cinema and Literature* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved and Open University of Israel, 2009), 16-41.

during this period of Israeli filmmaking, was to serve as a contrast to the idealized sabra figure. The comparison shows the Sabra as a modernized, virile, courageous Jew, and insinuates that he had to shed his diasporic attributes to become this way; it also ties these attributes to the failure of diasporic Jews to defend themselves against the Nazi final solution, and therefore proposes the transition from Old World to Zionist Jew as the condition for preventing a future Jewish genocide. The brevity of the Orthodox Jew's appearance seems to prove that he is only a means to an end in the greater scheme of Zionist self-validation—and not a target of serious inquiry.

Like other parts of contemporaneous Israeli culture,<sup>124</sup> where Israeli cinema allowed a more decisive role to Judaism was in its selective usage of Judaic symbols as part of Zionism's aforementioned "civil religion." As Parciack argues, films from the pre-state and early statehood era often drew on quotations from the Bible to establish a connection between Judaism's founding figures and the pioneers. Concurrently, they incorporated well-known biblical symbols, as well as the occasional religious artifact, so as to reinforce this connection. While lending spiritual impetus and validity to Zionist ideology, these appropriations shed little light on religious tradition itself. Thus, the scriptural quotes were often presented in a truncated version in order to deny the fullness of its Judaic signification, religious objects were shot obliquely and countered with forceful Zionist iconography so as to offset their traditional importance, and classic biblical tropes were superimposed onto the activity of Zionist protagonists in a manner that undermined their religious interpretation.<sup>125</sup> One example for this strategy is found in the symbolic use of water within the Helmer Larski's *Avodah* (1934) and Aleksander Ford's *Sabra* (1933): as Yuval Rivlin explains, the films showcase scenes of pioneers digging wells as an opportunity to capitalize on the spiritual charge of water as an ancient symbol of supernatural power, while at the same time naturalizing this power by rendering the pioneer-digger as its master rather than God.<sup>126</sup> *Hill 24*, on the other hand, provides an exception to the rule that ultimately proves it: a symbolic invocation of Judaism that is not displaced but nevertheless submits religion to the ideological dominance of Zionism. Thus, during a scene set to the War of Independence and taking place at a Jerusalem synagogue-turned-makeshift-hospital, the wounded Jewish volunteer Alan Goodman enters into a heated

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<sup>124</sup> See, for example, the use of Jewish iconography in early statehood painterly and graphic arts: Alec Mishory, *Lo and Behold: Zionist Icons and Visual Symbols in Israeli Culture* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003), 117-277.

<sup>125</sup> Ronie Parciack, "The Religious Experience in Israeli Cinema" [Hebrew] (master's thesis, Hebrew University, 1995), 36-54.

<sup>126</sup> Yuval Rivlin, *The Mouse that Roared: Jewish Identity in American and Israeli Cinema* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Toby Press, 2009), 53-64.



debate with the residing rabbi. The rabbi asks Goodman to seek solace in God, but the latter is angered by the thought of a god that allows for this slaughter of Jews amidst war. In the face of such resistance, the rabbi goes to the Torah Ark and removes a volume, from which he recites medieval Rabbi Nahmanides's statement, made in reference to Jerusalem, that those things which are holiest suffer the most damage. When Goodman asks as to the logic of this claim, the rabbi explains that to believe in God is essentially to fight for good, and since the battle between good and bad is both ferocious and eternal, those who fight for good—for God—are bound to get hurt over and over again. "This is the choice we have to make," the rabbi summarizes, and then recites the famous lines of Psalms 23: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." These words remind Goodman of the time his grandfather used to recite them, and then, as the rabbi offers him a glass of wine, he manages to recall and utter the language of wine benedictions. This remembrance, taking place within the context of a Judaic ritual and in the presence of a representative of organized religion, seems to run against the grain of Zionism's ethos of negating Judaism<sup>127</sup>: not only is the presence of God powerfully evoked, but He is defined as that which connects diasporic past to Israeli present and provides solace and assistance to those Jews who choose to be with Him. At face value, then, it is the rabbi's way of life that seems to be validated, over and against Zionism's secular ideology. Yet a closer look reveals how a metaphysical discourse of divinity is traded in for an ethical discourse of evil vs. good, which when placed in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, makes the choice to believe in good/God essentially a choice to believe in Zionism (and it is *a choice*, an expression of agency, rather than something ordained from above). This move makes God the power behind Zionism, allowing the latter to draw on the spiritual power of Judaism and consequently set itself up as a modern-secularized divinity. Such dislocation is mirrored also through the transition from Nahmanides's statement—made in the context of the Jewish diaspora and with reference to post-Temple-destruction Jerusalem—to Psalms 23, a biblical poem related to David, the king who unified the territories of ancient Israel and thus a primordial role model for the Zionist project.

Though this paradigm of marginalized and/or sublimated representation would dominate Israeli cinema for decades, it did not preclude the production of texts where the Judaic theme was more pronounced. Starting in the mid-1960s a cycle of Israeli films featuring Judaic figures and

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<sup>127</sup> Munk and Gertz, *Revisiting Israeli Cinema*, 19.

rituals came into being, arguably because of a decline in social commitment to the Zionist ethos and in the state's power to enforce it upon its citizens.<sup>128</sup> Yaron Peleg divides this cycle into two categories: films that “depicted the ritual practices of Sephardi or Mizrahi Jews” as part of presenting their “credentials as bona fide Jews;” and “patronizing and dismissive portrayals of religious Judaism—usually embodied by the ultra-Orthodox community—as a bizarre sect, a comical and pathetic historical relic.”<sup>129</sup> The first group of films is a part of the larger *Bourekas* genre of popular comedies. The *Bourekas* film focused on the previously underrepresented lifestyle of Mizrahi-Israeli Jews, often foregrounding its tensions with the lifestyle and values of the Ashkenazi elite. Within this mode of representation, these films often used ethnic stereotypes to present the Mizrahi Jew as more colorful and authentic than the Ashkenazi one, who no longer possesses the heroic stature of the sabra pioneer. The legitimization of Mizrahi Jewry, however, was ultimately made to serve an integrative agenda, often manifested through happy endings wherein the Mizrahi protagonist marries an Ashkenazi woman and consequently becomes part of the Ashkenazi establishment.<sup>130</sup> This dual movement of revealing ethnic difference and “domesticating” it is clearly present in the strategy of certain *Bourekas* films to devote substantial screen time to the religious rituals of Mizrahi Jews. Peleg exemplifies this procedure through his discussion of Alfred Steinhardt's 1972 *Salomoniko*, a film about a poor Mizrahi<sup>131</sup> dockworker who wishes to remain in his rundown neighborhood rather than upgrade his social standing. The filmmakers devoted ten minutes of screen time to depicting the eponymous protagonist's Sabbath ceremony, a scene which for Peleg “has very little to do with the film's central drama.” The showcasing of religious ritual serves to highlight *Salomoniko*'s rootedness and commitment to tradition, over and against the Zionist model of rootlessness (at least in relation to diasporic culture). It thus helps explain to audiences why “he derives comfort from his old, decrepit, but cozy neighborhood, and justifies his return to it at the end of the film, after his attempt at living in an alienating new (Ashkenazi) suburb.”<sup>132</sup> Yet the true reason for this detailed depiction of the Sabbath ceremony, according to Peleg, is to reveal the children's apathetic responses to it. Through

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<sup>128</sup> Rivlin, *The Mouse that Roared*, 26.

<sup>129</sup> Peleg, “Secularity and its Discontents,” 5-6.

<sup>130</sup> Shohat, *East/West*, 122.

<sup>131</sup> The protagonist hails from Greece, and in this respect is not “Middle Eastern,” yet his non-Ashkenazi origins render him “Mizrahi” within popular public discourse.

<sup>132</sup> Peleg, “Secularity and its Discontents,” 9.

these reactions, the filmmakers expressed their expectations that “the religious antics of the older generation will eventually die out and disappear.”<sup>133</sup>

As an expansion and qualification of Peleg’s account of Bourekas comedies, it is worth noting the genre’s tendency to not only celebrate religious practices and belief but also mock them. A particularly telling example of this is Yoel Silberg’s *Marital Games* (1973), which centers on the Mizrahi religious sage (*Chacham*) Gamliel, a spiritual leader of a peripheral town, who attempts to marry off his only daughter to the Ashkenazi foreman of a nearby quarry. As a representative of Judaism, the film’s protagonist showcases a tendency within Bourekas comedies to “trade in religious rituals and religious faith for superstition.”<sup>134</sup> Thus, though continuously engaged in reading scripture, Gamliel, by his own admission, “is no rabbi.” Rather, as a “sage,” his craft is that of Judaic “black magic,” of potions and incantations, of warding away evil spirits and bringing good fortunes. The film does not present these practices for the purpose of recovering them as a separate tradition over and against the golden standard (in Israeli terms) of strict halakhic observance. Rather, it goes out of its way to paint them as ridiculous—not just by emphasizing their quaintness, but also by showing that they are performed for monetary profit and that they do not actually deliver on their promise of supernatural intervention (as indicated, for instance, during a scene in which Gamliel attempts to read the supervisor’s palm, and clearly fails to garner any “hidden knowledge” out of the procedure). This characterization ultimately reflects back on Gamliel himself. More than a classic “man of religion,” he strikes the pose of a local wheeler-and-dealer. He is willing to distort Judaic rituals (most clearly, matrimonial ones) for his own purposes, and legitimize this distortion through eclectic appropriations (or even inventions) of scriptural quotes and the occasional strong-arming. These measures do not go so far as to paint Gamliel in a negative light. At times, they even add color to his character, which remains throughout a largely positive force, with genuine love and care for his offspring and his community. Yet this affirmation is overshadowed by the way in which the film uses his “sageness” and the version of Mizrahi Judaism in which it operates as an object of ridicule.

Such depictions serve to partially bridge between Peleg’s two categories, in the sense that the derisive representations of Mizrahi religious identity in the first seem to parallel those of Israeli

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 10. See also: Rivlin, *The Mouse that Roared*, 32-33; Yael Munk, “Israeli Cinema’s Return to Judaism” [French], *Cahiers du Judaïsme* 20 (2006): 6.

<sup>134</sup> Rami Kimchi, *The Israeli Shtetls: Bourekas Films and Yiddish Classical Literature* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2012), 194.

Haredism in films of the second.<sup>135</sup> Yet while Bourekas comedy also allows for affirmative representations of Mizrahi observant characters, the Haredi protagonists of this comedic cycle are not allowed “to enjoy a moment of grace nor an ounce of mercy,”<sup>136</sup> arguably in reflection of the animosity felt by Israel’s secular sector towards the ultra-Orthodox monopoly over Israeli Judaism and its resulting policies of religious coercion.<sup>137</sup> The exemplary text within this group is Yoel Silberg’s *Koony Lemel in Tel Aviv*, the second installment in a trilogy that includes *Two Koony Lemel* (Israel Becker, 1966) and *Koony Lemel in Cairo* (Yoel Silberg, 1983). The film, in which two twin brothers—the secular Moony and the ultra-Orthodox Koony—look for a Jewish bride in the streets of Tel Aviv, offers many instances for “the Haredim to be ridiculed, mocked, derided, entirely made fun of, and completely discounted—treated literally as one big joke.” The character of Koony is particularly compromised, often being shown, in Peleg’s words, as “a smirking horny fool.” His figuration as a bumbling idiot is most visible in the musical numbers involving him and other Haredim, which “accentuate the odd quality of the religious men’s antics and prolongs the spectators’ gaze upon what would appear to outsiders as a curiously fascinating native dance.”<sup>138</sup> Parciack points to how these numbers, and the film at large, draws on classic anti-Semitic imagery which associates the Jew with grotesque physicality, obsession with money, and criminal-belligerent behavior. And while these manifestations occupy the foreground of *Koony Lemel in Tel Aviv*, implicitly the film also follows preexisting patterns of marginalizing religious ritual and applying Judaic verse to secular contexts, which dissociate ultra-Orthodoxy from its religious world and reveal a mistrust in both.<sup>139</sup> This strategy is taken to new extremes in the most outrageous and irreverent representative of Peleg’s second category, Benyamin Haim’s *The Black Banana* (1976). Haim’s film ostensibly follows the trials and tribulations of Abraham, a former Haredi turned hippie, who is forcefully taken from his American exile back to Israel to wed a local ultra-Orthodox girl; yet in its unlikely *mélange* of avant-garde techniques and slapstick comedy, the plot quickly breaks down into a series of grotesque situations, including one which shows a

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<sup>135</sup> This bridge may possibly be read along a shared rootedness in representational patterns of Yiddish literature. Such rootedness is relatively clear in the films of the second category—as can be seen in the transition between the “Yiddish” *Two Koony Lemel* and its “Israeli” sequel *Koony Lemel in Tel Aviv*—but according to Rami Kimchi, also exists in the less obvious context of the Mizrahi Bourekas films, imported via their Ashkenazi makers. See: Kimchi, *Israeli Shtetls*, 227-228.

<sup>136</sup> Peleg, “Secularity and its Discontents,” 7.

<sup>137</sup> Parciack, “Religious Experience,” 84-85.

<sup>138</sup> Peleg, “Secularity and its Discontents,” 7.

<sup>139</sup> Parciack, “Religious Experience,” 87-98.

group of Haredi men smuggling through airport security a box that holds Abraham, and another that shows a wedding ceremony turning into an all-out brawl after Abraham refuses to commit to the marriage. In these and other scenes it is clear that the filmmakers are thoroughly uninterested in a serious engagement with Judaic-Israeli reality, letting go of any guise of accurate or evenhanded depiction. This, in turn, was the reason why, as opposed to other like-minded films, *Black Banana* was subjected to cuts by the government censorship authority on the grounds of potential offences to Israeli Haredim.

While these two categories may be regarded as the main forms of Judaic representation in Israeli cinema of the immediate post-Independence era, it is important to also point out the existence of a few other relevant titles that escape Peleg's categorization. For example, the late 1960s saw the production of cinematic adaptations to classical Yiddish literature on *Shtetl* life, including *Two Koony Lemel*, *The Dybbuk* (Ilan Eldad and Shraga Friedman, 1968), *Tevye and His Seven Daughters* (Menachem Golan, 1968), and *Miracle in the Town* (Leo Filler, 1968). In the aftermath of a renewed interest in Yiddish literature within Israeli society<sup>140</sup> (as well as Western society at large<sup>141</sup>), these texts brought to the screen traces of diasporic existence, as it was captured by noted authors Shalom Aleichem, Shlomo An-sky, and Abraham Goldfaden. The release of these films represented a moment in which Israeli culture was confident enough in its self-definitions to loosen the hold of traditional Zionist ideology and permit a pro-diasporic image. Nevertheless, since the Judaic only appears in a diasporic context rather than an Israeli one, and since the representation itself is tainted by the exoticizing prism of classical Yiddish literature that reduces Judaism to a quaint and occasionally superstitious belief system, these films did not form a substantial risk to Zionism's antireligious stance.<sup>142</sup> Another group of films that should be mentioned here are biblical adaptations such as *Tamar Eshet Er* (Ricardo Farda, 1972), *Ish Rachel* (Moshe Mizrahi, 1975), and *Esther* (Amos Gitai, 1986). While these texts reveal an interest in the Bible that extends beyond Zionism's selective use of it, they too displace direct discussions of Israeli-Judaic reality, making it "seem irrelevant."<sup>143</sup> This disinterest seems in the first two films to be derived from their standing as European co-productions meant primarily for non-Israeli

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<sup>140</sup> Kimchi, *Israeli Shtetls*, 219-223.

<sup>141</sup> As indicated, for example, by the remarkable Broadway success of *Fiddler on the Roof*, the celebrated theatrical adaptation of Shalom Aleichem's stories, since the mid-1960s.

<sup>142</sup> Parciack, "Religious Experience," 83; Miri Talmon, "A Touch Away from Cultural Others: Negotiating Israeli Jewish Identity on Television," *Shofar* 31, no. 2 (2013): 58-59.

<sup>143</sup> Parciack, "Religious Experience," 83.

consumption, and in the latter from the filmmaker's desire to use the biblical source (Book of Esther) as an allegorical-political commentary on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Though the decline of the traditional secular Zionist ethos and the concomitant ascent of Jewish religion in the Israeli public sphere was in full swing in the 1980s, these transformations barely influenced Israeli cinema (as opposed to other cultural precincts such as visual arts, where Judaic themes were becoming much more prevalent since the mid-1970s).<sup>144</sup> It was only during the 1990s that these effects began to shift the nature of this relationship between Israeli cinema and religion. In her discussion of that decade, Munk argued that 1990s Israeli films reflected the growing fragmentation and “privatization” of Israeli identity under the combined weight of postmodernism, post-colonialism, and post-Zionism. This privatization was manifested in what Munk calls “liminal cinema,” which “focuses on the processes experienced by different subjects who are dispersed in various territories within Israel’s space: the deconstruction of the hegemonic Sabra figure, and the foregrounding of the narratives of those who suffered from the elite’s colonialist attitude, which forced them into the position of internal exile.”<sup>145</sup> As part of liminal cinema, three films—Daniel Wachsmann’s *The Appointed* (1990), Hagai Levi’s *Snow in August* (1993) and Yossi Zomer’s *Forbidden Love* (1997)—sought to engage the state of Haredi “internal exile.” This engagement was still tainted by exoticizing tendencies of past representations of Haredi life, though in this context the Haredi is not figured as an object of ridicule in a comedic setting but as a force of menace within a dramatic setting. In all three films, a forbidden romance that involves a Haredi subject draws the ultra-Orthodox community out of its seclusion to contain the danger. This act unveils most Haredim as agents of violence and coercion, who rely on the manipulation of mystical knowledge for their power.<sup>146</sup> In this sense, such depictions continued to represent the fear of their secular makers from Haredi fundamentalism and its role in religious oppression. Yet at the same time, by showing Haredim to have agency and cohesion, these films also recognized them as a force to be reckoned with, a constituency whose difference can no longer be dismissed and ridiculed during an era of increasingly privatized identity. This reluctant

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<sup>144</sup> See, for example: Efrat, *Return to the Shteitel*, 19-32; Mordechai Omer, “Tikkun: Shamanism in Art—The Israeli Option,” in *Perspectives on Israeli Art of the Seventies: Tikkun* (Tel Aviv: The Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, Tel Aviv University, 1998), 449-508.

<sup>145</sup> Yael Munk, *Israeli Cinema at the Turn of the Millennium* [Hebrew] (Ra’anana: Open University of Israel, 2012), 24.

<sup>146</sup> Interestingly, their depiction of Judaic ultra-Orthodoxy is very similar to the depiction in Darren Aronofsky subsequent film *Pi* (1998).

acceptance, in turn, is accompanied by a hint of appreciation and even envy vis-à-vis ultra-Orthodoxy's claims to have supernatural strength, which throws the supposed spiritual bareness of Israeli secularity into sharp relief.<sup>147</sup>

Another early milestone of this shift in the depiction of Judaic liminality is Shmuel Hasfari and Hanna Azoulai-Hasfari's landmark 1994 film *Shchur*. "The first experimental 'art film' associated with Israeli Oriental ethnicity,"<sup>148</sup> *Shchur* was often positioned as a counter-text to the Bourekas genre's problematic (mis)representation of Mizrahi identity. Focusing on the life of a Moroccan family within a peripheral town in the early 1970s, it thus attempted to trace the contours of this particular identity during a time when they were being eroded by hegemonic Zionist ideals. As part of this recovery, the filmmakers gave more consideration to the family's religious dimensions, which are manifested, on the one hand, by the father's memorization of biblical verses (in preparation to the Bible Quiz that takes place annually on Israeli Independence Day), and on the other hand, by the use of Judaic-infused black magic (shchur) by the mother and older daughter so as to stir the fate of family members in the right direction. The latter element overshadows the first, and is given legitimacy—as opposed to past Bourekas representations of "magic"—by showing that shchur can actually work. According to Yosefa Loshitzky, by foregrounding shchur, the filmmakers obliquely referenced the 1990s "manifestations of ethnic renewal [that] include the establishment of new sacred sites of Jewish saints; the nationalization of Jewish Moroccan celebrations (*Hilulut*) like the *Mimuna*; and the emergence of popular healers and practical kabbalists."<sup>149</sup> Their interest in this element, however, does not seem focused on exploring Mizrahi Judaism as a possible form of religious renewal, but on turning this Judaic tradition into another marker of ethnic identity and contributor to an overall "ethnic renewal." It is for this reason that the film seems caught in the representational paradigm of the Bourekas that often reduced the range of Mizrahi religion to its expression in incantations, magical charms, evil eyes, etc. (albeit from a pejorative standpoint). This reduction is also perhaps why the film was sometimes "bitterly criticized" for having "confirmed prejudiced images and perpetuated degrading stereotypes that

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<sup>147</sup> See also: Parciack, "Religious Experience," 84-86.

<sup>148</sup> Yosefa Loshitzky, *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 73.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 79. On these phenomena, see for example: Yoram Bilu, *The Saints' Impresarios: Dreamers, Healers and Holy Men in Israel's Urban Periphery* [Hebrew] (Haifa: University of Haifa Press, 2005).

inscribed the backwardness and inferiority of Mizrahim in Israeli society, symbolically extending this backwardness to the third generation.”<sup>150</sup>

Towards the close of the decade, this shift came to its fruition with the release of Amos Gitai’s *Kadosh* (1999), which may be considered as the film that ushered in Israeli cinema’s aforementioned “Judaic turn” in the 2000s.<sup>151</sup> The box-office success and critical acceptance of *Kadosh* revealed the topicality of Judaism, after two decades during which its presence gradually became more and more pronounced within Israeli culture. Also, beyond legitimizing a focused cinematic interest in Israeli Judaism, *Kadosh*’s achievements also sanctioned the film’s approach—a “realistic”<sup>152</sup> rendering of Judaic reality—as the “proper” form of engagement, over and against past reliance on genres such as comedy or suspense/crime. In the aftermath, more and more “straight” fiction and documentary films about Israeli-Judaic identities and realities were released, in what constitutes as a concentrated attempt to think through the role Judaism plays in Israeli society and ethos of the present age. Yet it was not only one film’s success that brought this phenomenon into being, but also major changes in institutional infrastructure. For example, the 1990s and 2000s saw the emergence of two filmmaking schools within the Religious-Zionist sector. The pioneering institution in this context was the Ma’ale film school, which opened its gates in 1989 with the intent of creating “a synthesis between traditional Jewish values and the relatively new visually-oriented field of media production.”<sup>153</sup> Since then, it has become a major player in the highly competitive area of Israeli student filmmaking, and also opened in 2014 a special extension for the training of Haredi female filmmakers.<sup>154</sup> The second school, Torat Ha-Chaim, was founded by Rabbi Shmuel Tal in an effort to cater to the growing Haredi-Nationalist community within the Religious-Zionist sector. Though more extreme in halakhic observance than

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<sup>150</sup> Miri Talmon, “The End of a World, the Beginning of a New World: The New Discourse of Authenticity and New Versions of Collective Memory in Israeli Cinema,” in *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion*, ed. Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 342.

<sup>151</sup> The claims presented here and in the previous two paragraphs consciously oppose Yaron Peleg’s narrative of the “Judaic Turn,” in which he ignores its 1990s precedents and argues that “the first film that can be said to engage much more seriously and earnestly with Judaism—certainly from a political perspective—is Joseph Cedar’s 2000 *Time of Favor* (Hahesder), a film that marks the dawn of the religious age in Israeli visual culture.” Peleg, “Secularity and its Discontents,” 10-11.

<sup>152</sup> Talmon, “A Touch Away,” 60.

<sup>153</sup> David C. Jacobson, “The Ma’ale School: Catalyst for the Entrance of Religious Zionists into the World of Media Production,” *Israel Studies* 9, no. 1 (2004): 31. See also: Neta Ariel, “A Home in Musrara” [Hebrew], *Ma’aleh—Film Magazine* (2009): 7.

<sup>154</sup> Shifi Charitan, “Haredi Women Make Films: This Is How It Looks Like” [Hebrew], *Behadrei Haredim*, August 30, 2015, accessed September 1, 2015 [http://old.bhol.co.il/article\\_old.aspx?id=88963](http://old.bhol.co.il/article_old.aspx?id=88963).



the moderate Ma'aleh, Torat Ha-Chaim nevertheless sees its role as both creating “original Jewish works” for the broad audience (including gentiles) and placing its students within the largely secular film and television industry.<sup>155</sup> As a corollary to these educational developments, increased institutional support became available during the 2000s for Judaic-themed film productions. The two major government organizations charged with providing financial support to Israeli filmmakers in accordance with Israeli Cinema Act of 2001—the Israeli Film Fund and the Cinema Project-Rabinovich Fund—have been pressured by government bodies over the past decade to push for a more comprehensive manifestation of the pluralism of Israeli identities on the screen. The resulting emphasis on the “periphery” (*Periphera*, a loaded term used to delineate all that is outside the hegemonic, metropolitan, Ashkenazi, middle class Israeli culture) led to greater funds being allocated to film projects dealing with Judaic communities, including those of religious filmmakers who until then had been neglected by these bodies.<sup>156</sup> Even more crucial in this context was the operation of US-funded NGOs whose mission was “to encourage Israelis to explore their Jewishness, thereby shifting Israeli identities and notions of religiosity.”<sup>157</sup> Avi-Chai Foundation’s Film and Television Project has been especially active in this field, disbursing approximately ten million dollars into cinematic and televisual productions since its inception in 1999.<sup>158</sup> Together with the Geshar Multicultural Film Fund, a close collaborator and heavy investor in the Israeli mediascape, Avi-Chai also formed project development labs for filmmakers on Judaic topics such as the Book of Psalms and the biblical sabbatical tradition.<sup>159</sup> Additionally, the Geshar Fund also initiated its own lab, “Open Screen” (*Ptichat Masach*), to help Haredi filmmakers develop their own projects and secure budgets for their realization.

The outcome of these measures has been a transformation of the Israeli film market from one which is almost exclusively secular to one which also features a significant Judaic element on the level of contents and creators. This change not only manifested itself in an increase in the number of films dealing explicitly with Israeli-Judaic reality, but also in the creation of a varied and multivalent cinematic vision of this reality. Within the sphere of mainline Judaic-themed

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<sup>155</sup> Segev Cohen (Torat Ha-Chaim Director), interview by the author, Yad Binyamin, July 26, 2012.

<sup>156</sup> Avner Shavit, “How and Why Secular and Bohemian Tel Aviv Disappeared from Israeli Cinema?” (conference paper, Cambridge University, Cambridge UK, June 3-5 2013).

<sup>157</sup> Galeet Dardashti, “Televised Agendas: How Global Funders Make Israeli TV More ‘Jewish,’” *Jewish Film & New Media* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 79.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

Israeli fiction films, which stand as the focus of this study, such diversity makes the task of creating a systematic overview extremely difficult to accomplish. Nevertheless, it is possible to locate a few recurring themes around which these texts coalesce, and which this study will touch upon directly or tangentially in the following pages.

One recurrent theme is the “explosive combination of fundamentalist religion and politics”<sup>160</sup> in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Titles such as *Time of Favor* (Joseph Cedar, 2000), *The Holy Land* (Eitan Gorlin, 2002), *Campfire* (Joseph Cedar, 2004), *Schwartz Dynasty* (Amir Hasfari and Shmuel Hasfari, 2005), *Disengagement* (Amos Gitai, 2007), and *Ruth* (Keren Avitan, 2008) all center on the settlement enterprise, often from a highly critical perspective. They often highlight the fanaticism that typifies Religious Zionist settlers’ relationship to the land, and the militant eschatological ideology which they deploy in order to achieve social cohesion and a sense of purpose. Importantly, and in contrast to the so-called “Palestinian Wave” of 1980s and 1990s Israeli cinema,<sup>161</sup> the actual reality of Palestinian life in the Occupied Territories is rarely shown in these films. As such, they function only as an examination of oppressors’ motives in oppression, either in an attempt to wholly discredit the community which breeds settlers (usually from an “outsider’s” secular-liberal perspective) or to partially redeem it (from an “insider’s” Religious-Zionist perspective).<sup>162</sup>

Another recurring theme has been that of feminist resistance to Judaic androcentrism. Films such as *Kadosh*, *Time of Favor*, *Campfire*, *Ruth*, *Slaves of the Lord* (Hadar Friedlich, 2003), *Avanim* (Raphaël Nadjari, 2004), *To Take a Wife* (Ronit Elkabetz and Shlomi Elkabetz, 2004), *My Father, My Lord* (David Volach, 2007), *The Secrets* (Avi Neshet, 2007), *Halakeh* (Abigail Sperber, 2008), *Bruriah* (Avraham Kushnir, 2008), *Fill the Void* (Rama Burstein, 2012), *Gett: The*

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<sup>160</sup> Peleg, “Secularity and its Discontents,” 11.

<sup>161</sup> Shohat, *East/West*, 215-247.

<sup>162</sup> Another Judaic-themed film, Eyal Halfon’s *In Sight* (2003) is worth mentioning in this context. An account of a *Hesder* unit soldier during the Yom Kippur War, *In Sight* offers a favorable image of Religious-Zionism as a valiant protector of national sovereignty from a pressing military threat, as opposed to a film like Joseph Cedar’s *Time of Favor*, which showed the violent endeavors of contemporary Religious-Zionist leaders and soldiers to realize—in the words of Yvonne Kozlovsky-Golan—the “dreams of establishing a renewed Kingdom of Israel and redeeming the land from its desolation.” As such, even though it was made by a secular filmmaker rather than a religious one (like Cedar), Halfon’s film became highly popular within the Religious-Zionist community, and was often seen—to quote a statement given to reporter Avichai Becker by Rabbi Yehushua Shapira—as “a relevant and proud validation of the need to build the Third Temple” (reported in Becker). See: Becker, “Against All Intentions” [Hebrew], *Haaretz*, October 20, 2003, accessed May 12, 2015 <http://www.haaretz.co.il/1.919079>; Kozlovsky-Golan, “The Arrangement,” in *Modern Jewish Experiences in World Cinema*, ed. Lawrence Barron (Waltham MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 379.

*Trial of Viviane Amsalem* (Ronit Elkabetz and Shlomi Elkabetz, 2014), and *Apples from the Desert* (Arik Lubetzky and Matti Harari, 2014) all deal with the circumscription of religious women's agency by the patriarchal structures of Judaic community life. Inspired by a growing feminist awareness to the importance of corporeality and sexuality in defining women's place in Judaic regimes,<sup>163</sup> many of these films focus primarily on issues of sexual "modesty" (*Tzniut*) practices and how they are used to deny religious women's control over their bodies. These texts often foreground the desire of observant female characters for sexual exploration, and show how this (natural) impulse stands in opposition to Judaism's (artificial) laws of sexual regulation. Imagined as agents of resistance, the desiring protagonists of these films are subsequently placed on a collision course with Judaism's power structures, a process which ultimately necessitates that they either abandon their religion or live in an unbearable tension with it. Their struggles, triumphs and failures unveil the various ways through which patriarchal power operates and achieves its goals within Israel's various religious constituencies.

Also related to Judaic sexual regulation is the theme of homosexuality within the Judaic world, which has been the focus of such films as *The Secrets, Eyes Wide Open* (Haim Tabakman, 2008) and *Thou Shalt Love* (Chaim Elbaum, 2008). Though the 21st century has seen greater openness towards queer identity within this community, as well as the foundation of Judaic gay associations such as Hevruta and Bat Kol, these films rarely recognize such transformations. Rather, they position gay men and women as the perpetual prey of a traditionalist society that resists any sort of diversity in sexual practice and identification. In these texts, religious society takes the place secular society once occupied in New Queer Israeli cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, as the bastion of intolerance towards the non-heteronormative. The protagonists are not offered an option of leaving the religious community, as happens in some of the aforementioned films dealing with female resistance to religious patriarchy. To be sure, as Nir Cohen states, "the inevitable question [of] why they are willing to bear that burden [...] is not even hinted at, let alone uttered." According to him, "an important part of what the films try to communicate, it seems, is that for a believer the option of opting out is nonexistent. Rather, they hold the belief that their way of life, and indeed their whole being, has been created by God's desire, and as such, it cannot possibly

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<sup>163</sup> See, for example: Rachel S. Harris, "Introduction: Sex, Violence, Motherhood and Modesty: Controlling the Jewish Woman and Her Body," *Nashim* 23 (2012): 5-11.

contradict His commandments.”<sup>164</sup> The result of this perspective, in turn, is that “the characters remain in conflict about their standing in relation to two opposite poles: the rabbinical institution at one end and their own credo at the other.”<sup>165</sup>

While the aforementioned films mostly deal with characters who are willingly or unwillingly entrenched within the confines of a Judaic community, other films partially or prominently explore Israeli Judaism in relation to its (relative) outsiders—the religious repentants. Films like *Underwater* (Eitan Londner, 2002), *Ushpizin* (Gidi Dar and Shuli Rand, 2004), *The Wanderer* (Avishai Sivan, 2010), *God’s Neighbors* (Meni Yaish, 2012), *The Wonders* (Avi Neshet, 2013), and *Magic Men* (Guy Nattiv and Erez Tadmor, 2014) are not so much interested in the various activities that make up the Teshuva enterprise, nor are they interested in detailing the psychological process by which an individual finds his or her way towards greater religiosity. Rather, they seek to pit the penitent community against the secular community so as to establish what exactly sets them apart, and what can bring them together. Here, emphasis is placed upon the role emotion plays in religious repentance (and especially in Sephardic-Mizrahi repentance, whose appeal to sentiment is often key to its articulation of Teshuva). Through interactions between penitent and secular Israelis, these texts often reveal the underbelly of devotional emotion, which can take the form of a belligerency that is directed inwardly and outwardly so as to solidify communal boundaries. At the same time, these films often expose the potentially redeeming qualities of penitent emotionality—especially the propensity for love, which has discovered God as its object, but which can also be used to bridge the gap between the communities of believers and non-believers.<sup>166</sup>

Certain films—like *Slaves of the Lord*, *Ushpizin*, *Campfire*, *My Father, My Lord*, *Halakeh, Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem*, *Shofar* (Daniel Sirkin, 2001), *Green Chariot* (Gilad Goldschmidt, 2005), *Shiva* (Ronit Elkabetz and Shlomi Elkabetz, 2008), *Shrouds* (Shalom Hager, 2010), *Chametz* (Alon Levi, 2010), and *Encirclements* (Lee Gilat, 2015)—may also be grouped by their pronounced use of religious ritual as a central axis for their dramatic and ideological

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<sup>164</sup> Nir Cohen, *Soldiers, Rebels, and Drifters: Gay Representation in Israeli Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 196.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>166</sup> Films about the realities of formerly religious subjects who have abandoned a life of halakhic observance (*Chozar Be-Sheela* or *Dati Lesheavar*) are rare in Israeli fiction cinema. Examples for those texts which explore the process of oscillating between religion and secularity include *Green Chariot* (Gilad Goldschmidt, 2005) and *Yengaleh* (Arieh Gur, 2006).

operation. Rituals in these texts become the prism through which the tension between personhood and institutionalization, release and regulation, are explored and addressed. More often than not, this tension is shown to be adversely affecting religious subjects, and as a result the coercive and constraining aspects of ritual are foregrounded without attention being given to its contribution to social cohesion and psychic integrity. On other, albeit rarer occasions the redemptive dimensions of rituals are maintained, and characters are shown to be facing the challenges of adjusting to their demands so as to reap their benefits. In either case, whether positively or negatively portrayed, these films never relate to ritual only as a praxis with which characters engage, but rather situate it as an overarching metaphor for their existential state in living a highly formalized and coded lifestyle. And in certain instances—such as those dealing with prayer—films also explore through ritual greater theological questions about the existence and nature of God, as well as the value of maintaining belief.

Finally, the presence of such questions, over and against Judaic-themed Israeli cinema's focus on religion as a sociocultural phenomenon, can lead to another form of grouping—a metaphysical one. Titles whose theological interest equals or outweighs a social concern include for example: *Ushpizin*, *My Father, My Lord*, *God's Neighbors*, *The Wanderer*, *Thou Shalt Love*, *Tehilim* (Raphaël Nadjari, 2007), and *Tikkun* (Avishai Sivan, 2015). These often use inconsistencies between personal wants or commonsensical perceptions and the strict demands of halakhic edicts to think of the latter's divine source of legitimacy. At times, when deploying a highly critical perspective, films raise doubts as to the existence of God, and even when conceding the possibility, declare its nature fundamentally unknowable (and therefore untranslatable to human experience as the ground for an ethical-legal system like the Halakha). On other occasions, when the perspective is more affirming of religion, the nature of God is adjusted in such a way so as to bridge the gap between the personal and the halakhic, in no small measure through a flexible understanding of Jewish theological tradition (a "religiosity" or even a "spirituality"). Importantly, it is in this category that revelation is often made present within Judaic-themed Israeli cinema, though only in moderate form that is not reminiscent of the Bible's famous spectacular miracles. These apparitions, in turn, are used as means of validating Faith or of further deepening a sense of uncertainty towards theological axioms.

Parallel to these developments in mainline Israeli fiction film was also a rise of interest in Judaism within the field of documentary filmmaking. Like their fiction counterparts, Israeli

documentaries have also been preoccupied “with searching and attempting to discover, illuminate, and define an Israeli identity fragmented by various nationalities, beliefs, and cultural traditions.”<sup>167</sup> And also like fiction cinema, Israeli documentary of the past twenty years has reacted to the nation’s contemporary identity crisis by “re-examining the foundations of Zionism and the ethos of the Jewish State,”<sup>168</sup> which in turn led it to interrogate various dimensions of Judaic-Israeli identity.<sup>169</sup> This interrogation has arguably been of a wider scope than that of Israeli fiction films, due to the fact that lower costs of production and greater availability of funding and broadcasting outlets (like the TV channels YES Doco and HOT 8) made documentary a more common mode of filmmaking in Israel. Yet the themes discussed above are still very much central to this documentary corpus as well. Thus, for example, Anat Zuria’s *Purity* (2002), *Sentenced to Marriage* (2004), and *Black Bus* (2009) all discuss the disenfranchisement of religious women within a largely patriarchal Judaic society, as it is manifested through their interaction with particular rituals such as purification-via-bathing, Judaic matrimonial ceremonies, and gender-separation practices in public spaces. Rituals are also prominently featured in other films which deal with the creation of a religious community and its regulation, such as *Ponevezh Time* (Yehonatan Indursky, 2012) in the context of ritualistic study or *Sacred Sperm* (Or Yashar, 2014) in the context of ritualistic abstention from non-procreative ejaculation. Films such as *I Am G-D* (Rino Tzror, 2014) and *Messengers of God* (Itzik Lerner, 2014) focus on the settlement project from a highly critical perspective that unveiled its messianic fanaticism, while other works like *The Settlers* (Ruth Walk, 2003) and *The Skies Are Closer in Homesh* (Manora Hazani, 2004) center more on attempts by settler families to maintain “normality” while still holding on to their religious and political ideals. The intersection between Judaism and homosexual identity stand at the heart of documentaries like *Keep Not Silent: Ortho-Dykes* (Ilil Alexander, 2004), *Say Amen* (David Deri, 2005), and *Probation Time* (Avigail Sperber, 2014), which highlight the challenges of gay and lesbians to live within religious society and/or abandon it. Processes of religious repentance are explored in documentaries such as *Seekers* (Yishai Oren, 2011), *The Holy Gathering* (Nahum Grinberg and Naamit Mor Haim, 2012), *The Big Leap* (Avner Ben Yair, 2013), and *Returning*

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<sup>167</sup> Ma’ayan Amir, introduction to *Documentally* [Hebrew], ed. Ma’ayan Amir (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2007), 12.

<sup>168</sup> Shmulik Duvdevani, “Contemporary Documentary Filmmaking in Israel,” *CoPro: Documentary Marketing Foundation* (website), n.d., accessed May 13, 2015, [www.copro.co.il/ItemPics/DuvdevaniEn.doc](http://www.copro.co.il/ItemPics/DuvdevaniEn.doc).

<sup>169</sup> Yael Munk, “Between Nationalism and Spirituality: Aspects of the Jewish Religion in New Israeli Documentaries,” *CoPro: Documentary Marketing Foundation* (website), n.d., accessed May 13, 2015, [www.copro.co.il/ItemPics/YaelMunk.doc](http://www.copro.co.il/ItemPics/YaelMunk.doc).

*Forward* (Dan Ben Chakon, 2013), which are also joined by films like *Let There Be Light* (Meni Philip, 2007), *Chaim Beshe'ela* (Tali Ben Ovadia, 2010), and *The Chaos Within* (Yakov Yanai Lein, 2014) that deal with the opposite process of secularization in the religious world. And there are also those works such as *My Faith* (Or Yashar, 2011), *Leibowitz: Faith, Country and Man* (Uri Rosenwaks and Rinat Klein, 2013) and *The Missing God* (Yoram Ron, 2014), which deal more squarely with questions of theology and belief, often as part of a portrait of particular philosophers and spiritual leaders.

Also significant in this context is the Haredi film industry which has developed in Israel over the past fifteen years. As opposed to films made by repentant Haredi filmmakers which are directed to the greater Israeli audience (for example *Ushpizin* and *Fill the Void*), “Haredi Film” is a term assigned to films which are made solely for the Haredi community, and which are largely removed from the financial infrastructure of the mainline Israeli film industry. Haredi filmmaking’s insularity has rendered its fate perpetually unstable, for the constituency’s leadership was and is still highly suspicious towards cinema as a medium associated with modern secularity. Nevertheless, in spite of opposition, Haredi filmmakers have been able to gain enough support from rabbis to receive the necessary “kosher” stamp of approval for their products, which in turn led to further growth and professionalization. Within this circumscribed space of operation, Haredi films are able to remain somewhat ideologically flexible. According to Yael Friedman and Yohai Hakak, the films’ flexibility is manifested, first and foremost, in their reliance on Hollywood’s “‘well regulated’ generic formulas” as the basis for its expression, which in turn “open up a ‘safe space’”<sup>170</sup> for them to interact with and even accept the non-Haredi other.<sup>171</sup> At the same time, Friedman and Hakak qualify, these appropriations are always “governed by specific ethical and moral codes that adhere to Haredi values.”<sup>172</sup> These values dictate, for example, that female characters not appear in films for male audiences, and male characters not appear in films for female audiences; that Haredi characters avoid expletives or any other form of excessive indecent behavior; that the narratives foreground Judaic content, especially through their use of ritualistic

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<sup>170</sup> Yael Friedman and Yohai Hakak, “Jewish Revenge: Haredi Action in the Zionist Sphere,” *Jewish Film & New Media* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 54.

<sup>171</sup> See also: Vered Elimelech, “Attitudes to the Other in the Haredi Society as Reflected in Haredi Cinema” [Hebrew], in *From Survival to Consolidation: Changes in Israeli Haredi Society and Its Scholarly Study*, ed. Kimmy Caplan and Nurit Stadler (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2012), 116–136.

<sup>172</sup> Friedman and Hakak, “Jewish Revenge,” 50.

artifacts; and that they never present doubts regarding the tenets of the Judaic belief system.<sup>173</sup> Such measures are necessary for rabbinical validation, which must be gained for each film that is shown, not only in order to secure its distribution but also to convince a distrustful Haredi audience that what it is about to see is not sinful. Filmmakers unable to achieve such sanction are heavily criticized, which may result in a failure to produce or release their works as well as in various forms of social ostracism.<sup>174</sup>

While speaking of “Haredi Cinema,” it is important to distinguish between its male and female variants. Male Haredi cinema—that is, Haredi films made by men for a masculine audience—was the first to emerge (around 2000). The filmmakers came from the worlds of information technology, business,<sup>175</sup> and the performing arts.<sup>176</sup> They capitalized on the penetration of digital cameras and personal computers into the Haredi community, which though turbulent and controversial, gave them sufficient infrastructure to both make and release their products. These films are largely characterized by low production values, and are almost exclusively distributed to home consumption. They are often considered as commercial entertainment products, which dictates their reliance on the popular action, adventure and suspense genres (as is apparent from the title of the film franchise *Jewish Revenge*, produced and directed by the auteur of male Haredi Cinema, Yehuda Grovais).<sup>177</sup> Though providing male Haredi cinema with initial successes, this reliance on entertainment content on the one hand and on DVD technology on the other is also what caused its more recent decline. The fact that “Haredi men are expected to immerse themselves in Torah studies during every moment of their lives”<sup>178</sup> made male Haredi cinema a particularly questionable form of leisure activity for rabbinical leadership, leading to more expansive attempts at cracking down on production and distribution. Concurrently, the growing use of media burners (from 2003) and the internet (from 2007/8) within the Haredi sector led to widespread pirating of Haredi DVDs, which in turn caused the male industry’s

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<sup>173</sup> Elimelech, “Attitudes to the Other,” 117; Marlyn Vinig, *Haredi Cinema* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2011), 93-140.

<sup>174</sup> Ariel Cohen (director of Haredi films), interview by the author, Tel Aviv, August 13, 2012. Efrat Shalom-Danon’s documentary *The Dreamers* (2011) reveals this process when it follows a Haredi female filmmaker whose film failed to return the investment after religious authorities managed to delimit its release.

<sup>175</sup> Friedman and Hakak, “Jewish Revenge,” 50.

<sup>176</sup> Ariel Cohen, interview.

<sup>177</sup> Friedman and Hakak, “Jewish Revenge.”

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.



business model, which was based on DVD sale profits, to collapse. The combined effect of these factors is the reason why today the male part of the Haredi film industry remains all but inactive.<sup>179</sup>

While male Haredi films were gradually vanishing from the cinematic landscape, female Haredi films were gaining more prominence. The key filmmakers in the field—for example Dina Perlstein and Rachi Elias—came from a background in education, and their first experiences in the audiovisual field were in making slide shows for school performances.<sup>180</sup> These origins have dictated the overall goal of their production, which according to Marlyn Vinig, is figured as educational rather than as entertaining.<sup>181</sup> This framing has helped female filmmakers to interact more comfortably with rabbinical authorities, which do not consider women’s time as being valuable as that of men, and thus have been willing to allow more creative leeway for female-oriented filmic recreation so long as its content is deemed “instructional.”<sup>182</sup> Mandated in such a way, the female Haredi film industry moved towards a generic formula that seemed most appropriate to its pedagogical operation: the all-female melodrama or woman’s film. This generic choice has not only permitted female filmmakers to follow modesty regulations by not including male characters on screen, but also to embed instructional insights into familiar social settings (mostly through an intergenerational conflict between a devout mother and a rebellious young daughter) and heighten their effects through an unabashed appeal to emotion (which female viewers often see as their own gendered form of devotion, as opposed to the cognitive-dominant forms of erudition that are the traditional purview of Haredi males).<sup>183</sup> The resulting products are only shown in public settings, usually in community centers or halls that a rented out for all-female screenings. Haredi women go to see films only a few times a year, if any, and every screening is considered a social event during which they and their families can gather and interact within a protected setting. The films themselves are made relatively long by mainstream standards (usually around 2.5-3 hours), so as to allow the spectators ample time to engage in conversation amongst

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<sup>179</sup> Ariel Cohen, interview; Vinig, *Haredi Cinema*, 45.

<sup>180</sup> Vinig, *Haredi Cinema*, 33-46; Tamar Rotem, “Who Will Follow Rama Burshtein to the Oscars?,” *Haaretz*, October 26, 2012, accessed September 20, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/who-will-follow-rama-burshtein-to-the-oscars.premium-1.472489>; Tamar Rotem, “And God Created Women (Directors),” *Haaretz*, July 12, 2007, accessed September 20, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/and-god-created-women-directors-1.225412>.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>182</sup> Ariel Cohen, interview. This of course does not mean that Haredi female filmmakers do not face challenges in negotiating the demands of the rabbinical leadership and the ultra-Orthodox community at large. For more on this relationship, see: Vinig, *Haredi Cinema*, 47-83.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-97; Ariel Cohen, interview.

themselves without fear of “missing too much.”<sup>184</sup> Beyond such public screenings it is virtually impossible to watch female Haredi cinema; its makers do not release copies for home consumption due to their desire to preserve the gender-separated basis of their work and avoid the financial ruin of their male counterparts.

Beyond these expressions of Judaic-themed cinema, and before concluding this section, it is nevertheless necessary to register parallel developments that have taken place in the area of Israeli television series. In no small part due to the high investment of the Avi-Chai Fund,<sup>185</sup> Israeli television has seen a proliferation of series which both augmented and redefined Judaic presence on the small screen. In the words of Miri Talmon:

Representations of the Jewish religious sectors in Israeli society have become one of the prominent themes, visions, and dramas on Israeli television. Whereas the old stereotypical representations articulated a conceptualization of the religious Israeli Jewish sector as a separate, othered, nonaccessible social group and life style, a subculture within society which is sealed away and distinct from the rest of “Israel,” current representations of religious Israeli Jews originate within these very communities. The culture, lifestyle, and everyday practices of religious Israeli Jews are re-presented on the Israeli screen from an “internal” authentic point of view, which is based not only on thorough research, which yields fascinating, realistic portraits of these subcultures in Israel, but, most importantly, is created by authors as an authentic discourse that comes from within the community and the subculture.<sup>186</sup>

Amongst the major examples of this new area of fiction Judaic-themed television making, which testify to the diversity of its engagements and the relative “authenticity” of its representations, one can include: *The Rebbe’s Court* (Daniel Taub, 2003-2006), dubbed “the first Hasidic telenovela,” which explores the dark secrets of a leading Admor’s family and has become a surprising hit with Haredi audiences; *Catching the Sky* (Roni Ninio and Yankol Goldwasser, 2000-2005), which chronicles the fragmentation of an Israeli-secular family after the father begins a process of religious repentance; *Jerusalem Mix* (Jackie Levy, Nissim Levy, and Udi Leon, 2004-2009), which follows internal tensions within a Masorti family, and covers such topics as ethno-religious conflicts, Haredization and secularization, and the place of the synagogue in Mizrahi community life; *A Touch Away* (Zafrir Kochanovsky, Ron Ninio, and Ronit Weiss-Berkowitz, 2006), “a universally appealing story of an impossible love between Zorik, a young man who immigrated to

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<sup>184</sup> Ariel Cohen, interview.

<sup>185</sup> Dardashti, “Televised Agendas,” 86-91.

<sup>186</sup> Talmon, “A Touch Away,” 63.

Israel from Russia [...] and a young Haredi woman, Rokhale Berman, his neighbor,” which “imports onto the television screen a social tension and cultural clash [that] is inextricably bound with Israeli life;”<sup>187</sup> *Srugim* (Hava Divon and Eliezer Shapiro, 2008-2010), which depicts the romantic entanglements of contemporary Religious-Zionist singles in the so-called “Jerusalem swamp,” and is in Peleg’s words, “a sexless version of the popular American TV series from the late 1990s and early 2000s *Sex and the City*;”<sup>188</sup> *Other Life* (Yosi Madmoni, Zafirir Kochanovsky and Erez Kav-El, 2010), which engages the theme of secularization through the story of a Religious-Zionist youth who received physiotherapy for injuries in the form of dance classes and ultimately succumbs to the “immodest” charms of the dance world; *Question Marks* (Ofir Babayof and Ido Dror, 2011), which is set to a “halfway house” for youngsters in the process of secularization, and foregrounds the difficulties of leaving the religious world in the contexts of sexual exploration, creative expression, and the preservations of familial ties; *Urim ve-Tumim* (Shuki Ben Naim, Elad Chen, and Ohad Zackbach, 2011), which explores criminal behavior within a Religious-Zionist yeshiva, in no small measure as a response to real-life controversies surrounding the gross misconduct of yeshiva rabbis and administrative members; *Katmandu* (Esther Vender and Yair Raveh, 2012), an account of a young Haredi couple which opens the first Chabad House in Katmandu, and through this endeavor, is forced to contend with the challenges of preserving a religious lifestyle while interacting with a non-Jewish environment and secular Israeli travelers; *Mekimi* (Noa Yaron-Dayan and Yuval Dayan, 2013), an adaptation of Yaron-Dayan’s autobiographic novel, which captured the sense of dissatisfaction from secular values that had prompted the writer and her husband, as well as several other key members of 1990s Tel Aviv bohemian life, to undergo a process of religious repentance; and *Shtisel* (Ori Elon and Yehonatan Indursky, 2013-), which centers on young yeshiva scholar and wannabe painter Akiva’s romantic entanglement with the standoffish twice-widowed Elisheva, and through it explores questions of “love, artistic freedom, and the pursuit of individual happiness” within a Haredi “society that purportedly does not subscribe to them.”<sup>189</sup> By and large, these series were created for general public consumption within mainstream television venues, even though the aforementioned transformations in the Israeli televisual landscape also included the formation of exclusive avenues

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>188</sup> Peleg, “Secularity and its Discontents,” 18.

<sup>189</sup> Yaron Peleg, “On *Shtisel* (or the Haredi as Bourgeois),” *Jewish Film & New Media* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 115.

for “Judaic content” such as the Techelet Channel (2003-2006) and Channel 20 (2014- ) (there, in comparison, most of the content was comprised of lifestyle, actuality and talk shows). This may serve as another indication of how Israeli audiovisual production, in television as in film, is attempting to contemplate the place of Judaism within Israel’s evolving *national* ethos and identity. While this process may occasionally lead to the elision of religious difference through imag(in)ing observant Israelis “as so-called regular people,”<sup>190</sup> such tendencies should not be overplayed. Rather, what emerges here is a highly ambivalent space of representation, where distances and proximities between the “Judaic” and the “Secular” are constantly measured and re-measured, negotiated and re-defined.

### 1.3 THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND FILM

The study of Judaic-themed Israeli cinema should rightfully be situated within the broader area of scholarship known as “Religion and Film.” The origins of this field can be dated as far back as Reverend Herbert Jump’s 1910 pamphlet “The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture,” which encouraged the harnessing of cinema’s affective capabilities for the enhancement of Christian practice and ritual. This “first significant document reflecting on the religious and cultural potential of film”<sup>191</sup> was followed by other texts written from positions of advocacy (for example, Vachel Lindsay’s *The Art of the Moving Picture* [1915] or Dr. Percy Stickney Grant’s 1920 *Photoplay* article, “What would Jesus Do?”) or apprehension (R. G. Burnett and E. D. Martell’s *The Devil’s Camera: Menace of a Film-Ridden World* [1932], Pope Pius XI’s 1936 Encyclical letter *Vigilanti Cura*, and Herbert Miles’s *Movies and Morals* [1947]). The 1950s and 1960s saw the beginnings of scholarly work on film and religion, represented in the revolutionary texts of critics André Ruzzkowski (*Religion and the Film* [1950]), Henri Agel (*Cinema and the Sacred* [1953]), and Amédée Ayfre (*God in Cinema: Aesthetic Problems in the Religious Film* [1953] and *Film and the Christian Faith* [1960]). A more substantial effort to theorize film’s connection to religion, particularly in its relationship to the Christian Church, was undertaken in

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>191</sup> John C. Lyden, introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 17.

the late 1960s and through the 1970s, with such studies as Neil Hurley's *Theology through Film* (1970), Robert Kahle and Robert E. A. Lee's *Popcorn and Parables* (1971), and Ronald Holloway's *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the Religious Dimension in the Cinema* (1977). It was not until the 1990s, however, that this field came into its own under the "Religion and Film" heading, as manifested in the increased number of books published on the topic, including three recent expansive anthologies (Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate's *The Religion and Film Reader* [2007], John Lyden's *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* [2009], and William Blizek's *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film* [2009]).

This historical trajectory shaped contemporary "Religion and Film" scholarship in two key ways. First, it resulted in the scholarly area being largely constituted of works from the disciplines of Religious Studies and Theology rather than Film Studies (which is also why, perhaps, it is called "Religion and Film" rather than "Film and Religion"). Over the past century Religious Studies and Theology scholars came to realize that in spite of the seeming decline of organized religion—so influentially described by the dominant Secularization Thesis—religious sentiment maintained a strong presence within post/modern society, albeit in a more diversified and fluid way than before. As a result, they grew more and more intrigued with popular culture in general, and film as a popular cultural medium in particular, with the purpose of figuring them as an alternative site where religious work is now being performed. As opposed to early moralistic writings, which attempted to redeem religion through cinema's debasement, these more contemporary studies subsequently attempted to "save" religion through cinema's "sanctification." Film Studies, on the other hand, did not share these fields' investment in the future existence of religion. Since its nascence in the 1960s, the discipline highlighted "the connections between film and historical reality in the interest of social understanding or progress,"<sup>192</sup> and their allegiances to an Enlightenment-inspired "critical method that privileges that which is already known—and hence the cognitive templates in which the already known is."<sup>193</sup> Within this disciplinary state of mind, religion was equated with pre-Enlightenment credulity, and received serious attention only when engaging with religiously-inclined filmmakers (for example, Bresson and Dreyer) or nations (for example, India and Iran). Absent in particular was theoretical discussions of "films' spiritual aspirations," which underwent "suppression, or translation to secular terms" at the hands of many

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<sup>192</sup> Jeffery Pence, "Cinema of the Sublime: Theorizing the Ineffable," *Poetics Today* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 32.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

film scholars. This tendency, as Jeffery Pence has argued, has come “at a great cost. Complex works that address spiritual topics in form and content [...] are treated as evidence by a self-affirming and secularizing critical method. For him at least, this tendency shows Film Studies to be “complicit with the worst features of modernity. A criticism that evades an open engagement with the limits of the knowable becomes instrumental; a criticism geared exclusively toward demystification ultimately produces reification”<sup>194</sup>

The other key feature of the “Religion and Film” field is its particular denominational affiliation. In her study of Indian religious films, Rachel Dwyer declares that “most books on religion and cinema are concerned with ‘religious’ films or with the depiction of spirituality in films, mostly drawing on Judeo-Christian thought. [...] There is yet to be a body of work that examines the non-Abrahamic religions in cinema.”<sup>195</sup> While Dwyer is right to highlight the scholarship’s bias towards non-Abrahamic religions—which several studies such have attempted to correct<sup>196</sup>—her attempt to figure Christianity and Judaism as holding equal standing within this body of work seems misplaced. In actuality, “Religion and Film” scholarship has been written predominantly from a Christian perspective, and in relation to ostensibly Christian cultures of filmmaking. Contrastingly, Judaism has been a relatively neglected topic in academic writing about Religion and Film or even cinema at large. This scholarly gap seems especially peculiar in the context of studies that deal with the cinematic representations of Jewish identity. Studies such as those have preferred to discuss Jewish identity through the prism of “Jewishness”: a category “not linked directly or necessarily to religious observance but is instead associated with what we might call the aesthetics of everyday life.”<sup>197</sup> Indeed, as Nathan Abrams has pointed out, though there is a great “volume of research that has been undertaken to analyzing the Jewish contribution to film both in front of and behind the camera, [...] it is possible to read entire books on these subjects but with almost no references to ‘Judaism.’”<sup>198</sup> Fine examples for this lacuna are two comprehensive accounts of Jewish identity in film—Patricia Erens’s *The Jew in American Cinema* (1984) and Omer Bartov’s *The “Jew” in Cinema: From The Golem to Don’t Touch My Holocaust*

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>195</sup> Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 5.

<sup>196</sup> See, for example: S. Brent Plate (ed.), *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>197</sup> Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>198</sup> Abrams, “My Religion is American,” 209.

(2005)—which both use non-Judaic categories as their central terms. Thus, the latter study organizes its discussion around the tropes of Jew as “perpetrator,” “victim,” “hero,” and “anti-hero,”<sup>199</sup> while the former is invested in “establish[ing] a typology of character types”<sup>200</sup> that includes “the Peddler, the Virginal Jewess, the Stern Patriarch (more often the Pathetic Patriarch in film), the Long-Suffering Mother, the Prodigal Son, the Rose of the Ghetto, the Jewish Arriviste, the Jewish Soldier, the Sabra Heroine, the Hebrew Warrior, the Holocaust Survivor, the Jewish American Princess, the Manipulating Mother (later the Suffocating Mother), the Benevolent Physician, the Neurotic Son, the Jewish Ugly Duckling, and the *Shlemiel*.”<sup>201</sup> Ultimately, even entries on Judaism in “Religion and Film” anthologies have tended to discuss both the Judaic *and* Jewishness, at times interchangeably.<sup>202</sup>

In light of the above, it may be unsurprising that attempts to map out the “Religion and Film” field have ostensibly been less comfortable with using particular cinematic categories, and often divulged investments in the world of Christian terminology and thought.<sup>203</sup> The following will attempt to provide a brief overview of this scholarship through cinematic terms, which will focus on two sets of concerns that are pertinent to this study as well as represent much of the writing on Religion and Film today: on the one hand, a “symptomatic” reading of films for their representation of particular religious themes and realities, in an effort of determining what they can say about a broader social and/or theological context; and a “theoretical” reading of films in light of religious terminology, whose purpose is to yield new insight on the nature of the medium and its experience. As with every typology, this one also does not consist of absolute terms, but of artificial constructions that may be useful in coming to terms with an unwieldy array of research activities. Nor do these terms presume to encompass all these activities without exception. Their use here is not to dismiss this complexity but merely, for heuristic purposes, to reveal the major

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<sup>199</sup> Omer Bartov, *The “Jew” in Cinema: From The Golem to Don't Touch My Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), x.

<sup>200</sup> Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 28.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>202</sup> See, for example: Allison Smith, “Judaism and Jewishness in Film,” in *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. William L. Blizek (London: Continuum, 2009), 167-176; Melanie J. Wright, “Judaism,” in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 91-108.

<sup>203</sup> For example, the reliance on H. Richard Niebuhr’s cultural typology from his *Christ and Culture* (1951) or on Paul Tillich’s from his *What is Religion?* (1969). See: John R. May, “Visual Story and the Religious Interpretation of Film,” in *Religion in Film*, ed. John R. May and Michael Bird (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 23-43; Christopher Deacy, “Film and Theology,” in *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide*, ed. Christopher Deacy and Gaye Williams Ortiz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 3-76.

areas in which writings coalesce, and whose definition would best serve in subsequently articulating the analytical framework of this current study.

In terms of studies of a symptomatic concern, two types of scholarship stand out. The first, constituting the “largest category of writing on religion and cinema,”<sup>204</sup> traces hidden religious themes, terms, narratives, and symbols in films that have no overt religious content. The basic premise behind this mode of inquiry is that such religious elements serve as a foundation of culture, of which film is but one manifestation. Accordingly, writings of this category are primarily preoccupied with placing contemporary films in relation to sacred texts so as to surface those elements. This mode of exegesis, at its most liberal, seeks to enact a meaningful dialogue between film and religious text. As George Aichele and Richard Walsh argue, the purpose of such analysis is not to prove the superiority of the source text, nor to reveal that its meaning is simply transported into the film. Rather, for them, “these contemporary rewritings of the Bible produce commentaries on the biblical stories and on the culture that produces and consumes both the Scripture and the movies.”<sup>205</sup> Thus, reading a film for its theological subtext allows the opportunity to reverse the “hermeneutical flow”<sup>206</sup> so that the original meaning of the religious source material is transformed in light of present understandings.

As can be expected, many instances of this brand of theological exploration run the gamut of religious terms,<sup>207</sup> from how film noirs evoke notions of redemption by engaging “in a highly focused and theological constructive fashion with the estranged, disaffected, despairing and fragmentary quality of human existence,”<sup>208</sup> to how visions of Armageddon are transformed in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) or *Pale Rider* (1985) so as shift attention from “hope for an eschatological

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<sup>204</sup> Pamela Grace, *The Religious Film: Christianity and the Hagiopic* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 63.

<sup>205</sup> George Aichele and Richard Walsh, “Introduction: Scripture as Precursor,” in *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections between Scripture and Film*, ed. George Aichele and Richard Walsh (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), ix.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>207</sup> See, for example: Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998); Albert J. Bergesen, and Andrew M. Greeley, *God in the Movies: A Sociological Investigation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000); Roy Anker, *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2004); Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); R. Douglas Geivett and James S. Spiegel, *Faith, Film and Philosophy* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007); Clive Marsh, *Theology Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Critical Christian Thinking* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>208</sup> Christopher Deacy, *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), 37.



kingdom [to] hope for this world.”<sup>209</sup> Other writers in this category have been preoccupied with “secular” characters that act intertextually as “Christ-figures,”<sup>210</sup> for instance when one “extends him or herself on behalf of another” or is associated with “a visual image [of] Christ, such as the cruciform position, the wearing of a cross, and/or walking on, near, or in water”<sup>211</sup> (cf. the way in which *Sling Blade* [Billy Bob Thornton, 1996] positions the protagonist Karl as the protector and redeemer of his young friend Frank, and associates him with eating-related Christological symbols).<sup>212</sup> Others writers still, rather than constructing their thematic-symbolic inquiry around a certain religious term or the Christ figure, take instead the oeuvre of particular creators of “secular” films for their central axis, as in the example of how directors such as Frank Capra, Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Martin Scorsese, Francis Coppola and Brian De Palma have all displayed an “indelible Catholic imagination.”<sup>213</sup>

Regardless of their focus, and their popularity notwithstanding, these studies into underlining religious topics within “secular” cinema have recently come under severe criticism from within the field. Robert Pope, for one, has argued that this kind of “Religion and Film” scholarship has at times unduly stressed the theological importance of filmic content, and a result, their investigation failed to benefit from the great richness available in traditional theology.<sup>214</sup> In contrast, Christopher Deacy has argued, within the context of a critique of Christ-figure scholarship, that by forcibly imposing Christian symbolism onto films with no overt Christian content, “we fail to hear what these motion pictures are saying in their own right. To call a film character a Christ-figure is, above all, dishonest if that identification is made without regard for

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<sup>209</sup> Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., “Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation,” in *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, ed. Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 62.

<sup>210</sup> See, for example: Peter Malone, *Movie Christs and Anti-Christs* (New York: Crossroad, 1990); Lloyd Baugh, *Imagining the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997); Anton Karl Kozlovic, “The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-Figure,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 8 (Fall 2004), [www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist.html](http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist.html).

<sup>211</sup> Adele Reinhartz, “Jesus and Christ-Figures,” in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (New York/London: Routledge, 2009), 431.

<sup>212</sup> See: Mark Roncace, “Paradoxical Protagonists: *Sling Blade*’s Karl and Jesus Christ,” in *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections Between Scripture and Film*, ed. George Aichele and Richard Walsh (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 279-300.

<sup>213</sup> Richard A. Blake, *Afterimage: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000).

<sup>214</sup> Robert Pope, *Salvation in Celluloid: Theology, Imagination and Film* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007).

the context within which the alleged Christ-figure appears.”<sup>215</sup> Thus, for Deacy, it becomes important to look at the theological position of the film on its own terms, and have it influence our understanding of traditional theology at large. Another form of criticism was raised by Colleen McDannell, who argues that in an effort to “look for hidden Christian themes embedded in films that are not specifically marked by religious characters or objects,” the scholarship on “Religion and Film” obscures the need for “historical examinations of the ways that religious individuals, objects, histories, and settings are represented.”<sup>216</sup> Although the harshness of McDannell’s criticism seems rather extreme, the point is well taken: possibly out of uneasiness as to the direct evocation of sacred images within a profane cinematic context, scholarly work in this field has tended to distance itself from the very sites of representation which seem to fall most clearly under its purview. Yet this is not always the case, as is evident by a significant amount of writings which comprises the aforementioned second type of scholarship on religious representations.

Those writings which take up the task of exploring literal cinematic representations of religion often do so in relation to films that evoke, to use Roy Anker’s term, a “holy history”<sup>217</sup>: i.e., films that retell stories from (or loosely connected to) sacred sources with the intent of offering pleasures of voyeurism into unseen aspects of well-known religious narratives, of being overwhelmed by the spectacle of miracles, and of affirming devotional impulses and beliefs. These texts, Paul Flesher and Robert Torrey explain, function in the ancient interpretive mode of *Targum*. The term Targum (in Hebrew, “translation”) refers to renderings of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Aramaic made between the second and ninth centuries CE. Such works, according to the writers, “have an unusual character; they translate the Hebrew text in a highly literal fashion, yet at the same time add new material into the literal rendering.”<sup>218</sup> Additions may be small as a word or a phrase and as long as several paragraphs; in either case, they represent a dissatisfaction on the side of writers with producing literal translations that fail to reflect their contemporary interpretive concerns. Consequently, to read an ancient Targum—and for that matter, a filmic Targum of a sacred narrative/text—requires a dual lens, one which accounts for the relationship

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<sup>215</sup> Christopher Deacy, “Reflections on the Uncritical Appropriation of Cinematic Christ-Figures: Holy Other or Wholly Inadequate?” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 13 (Summer 2006), <http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art13-reflectcinematicchrist.html>.

<sup>216</sup> Colleen McDannell, “Why the Movies? Why Religion?” in *Catholics in the Movies*, ed. Colleen McDannell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>217</sup> Roy Anker, “Narrative,” in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (New York/London: Routledge, 2009), 335.

<sup>218</sup> Paul V. M. Flesher and Robert Torrey, *Film & Religion: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 18.

between source and adaptation on a textual level, while positioning it in relation to the historical moment of translation. Judging by Flesher and Torry's assertions, this model allows "Religion and Film" scholars to truly "identify what this mix [of similarities and differences] means in a particular film."<sup>219</sup> Whether or not such a claim is valid, what is evident is that researchers of "holy history" films tend to oscillate between emphasizing the theological and the social-allegorical aspects of translation. Thus, as examples of allegorical analysis, Gerald Forshey's study of "American religious and biblical spectaculars" has focused on the way they allegorically reflect popular myths and "keep us aware of our traditions and responsibilities, imparting a sense of identity as both Americans and Judeo-Christians,"<sup>220</sup> while Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans volume on the same corpus sought to recover it as "a complex site of the tendencies and contradictions of American religious life."<sup>221</sup> Speaking from a less allegorical stance on the other hand, Theresa Sanders has investigated films made on Catholic saints in an effort to address such theological issues as the problematic relationship between spirit, body, sexuality, and death in the depiction of martyrhood,<sup>222</sup> while Pamela Grace's more expansive discussion of the "hagiopic" covered similar methodological ground by discussing, for instance, how *The Final Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988) and *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004) represent or undercut atonement theology.<sup>223</sup>

In comparison to the relative plentitude of literature on "holy history" films, only a few studies interrogate the cinematic representations of contemporary religious life and attempt to relate them to their respective social contexts. McDannell's edited volume (2008) has done much to offset this scholarly neglect by providing a series of contextualized readings of seminal films on Catholic modern life—for example, *Going My Way* (Leo McCarey, 1944) as a text which "reimagines and remakes the dense, complex and fractious world of the urban parish into an easygoing, supportive, and savvy community," consequently revealing its affinity with "a West Coast vision of big city Catholicism;"<sup>224</sup> or *The Godfather Part I & II* (Francis Ford Coppola,

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>220</sup> Gerald E. Forshey, *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 10.

<sup>221</sup> Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 33.

<sup>222</sup> Theresa Sanders, *Celluloid Saints: Images of Sanctity in Film* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002).

<sup>223</sup> Grace, *The Religious Film*, 138-156.

<sup>224</sup> Anthony Burke Smith, "America's Favorite Priest: *Going My Way* (1944)," in *Catholics in the Movies*, ed. Colleen McDannell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 111.

1972/1974) as using religion for “a convenient form with which to talk about identity and heritage”<sup>225</sup> during an era when Italian Americans felt forced by their assimilation to abandon past traditions. In a non-Christian context, a noteworthy example for the exploration of contemporary religious life is Gönül Dönmez-Colin’s sweeping survey (2004) of female imagery in a variety of Muslim cinemas. In an attempt to “find a possible unity in such diversity,”<sup>226</sup> Dönmez-Colin’s mapping of the intersection of women, cinema, and religion results in the claim that films offer privileged sites through which we may observe how femininity is negotiated (rather than simply oppressed) under the specter of an overbearing masculinist Islam. Also notable in exemplifying a non-Christian perspective are rabbi and media critic Elliot Gertel’s book-length study (2003) that discusses “the concoction, or, more often, the corruption, of Jewish customs and observances under the rubric of ‘creative media writing’”<sup>227</sup> in film and television, as well as Flesher and Torry’s discussion of *The Chosen* (Jeremy Kagan, 1981) and *The Quarrel* (Eli Cohen, 1991) as capturing the effects of 19th and 20th century Jewish Emancipation, specifically in the context of the conflict between “a traditional Judaism that has rejected modernism versus a ‘Judaism’ that has embraced it.”<sup>228</sup> Such reflections are as valuable as they are rare, going against the aforementioned tendency of Jewish-centered film scholarship to focus exclusively on “Jewishness” while forsaking any serious deliberation of Judaism.

Within the second branch of inquiry in “Religion and Film”—that which deals with theoretical consideration of the cinematic medium and its experience—it is also possible to recognize two main foci. The first of these deals with how film aesthetics may be able to “organize encounters with an invisible beyond, the realm of spirits or the transcendental”<sup>229</sup>—to act, in Mircea Eliade’s term, as a “hierophany” that manifests sacred realities.<sup>230</sup> Though Pence’s aforementioned point about the scholarly disavowal of cinema’s “spiritual aspirations” is quite justifiable, it nevertheless ignores a small number of works which have taken these aspirations as

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<sup>225</sup> Carlo Rotella, “Praying for Stones Like This: *The Godfather Trilogy* (1972, 1974, 1990),” in *Catholics in the Movies*, ed. Colleen McDannell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 183.

<sup>226</sup> Gönül Dönmez-Colin, *Women, Islam and Cinema* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 9.

<sup>227</sup> Elliot Gertel, *Over the Top Judaism: Precedents and Trends in the Depiction of Jewish Beliefs and Observances in Film and Television* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), 2.

<sup>228</sup> Flesher and Torry, *Film & Religion*, 259.

<sup>229</sup> Birgit Meyer and Jorada Verrips, “Aesthetics,” in *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 27.

<sup>230</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1957; repr., Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1987), 11.

their primary concern (most prominently, Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film* [1972]).<sup>231</sup> Such works, in the words of Sheila Nayar, tend to coalesce around "largely consensual arguments [...] concerning what sorts of films and, more crucially, what sorts of stylistic norms capture, impel, and or/stoke authentic transcendence."<sup>232</sup> The films placed in this category do not always deal explicitly with themes that fall under the purview of religious thinking, but they all display a common aesthetic language that certain theorists related to the religious world. This language—which will be referred to as the "spiritual style" for reasons that would later be explained—features the following characteristics: elimination or undercutting of cinema's expressive capabilities in favor of stasis and austerity; privileging of the mundane over the extraordinary as a site of revelation; and foregrounding mystery at the expense of intelligibility. These traits served as the basis for a canon of spiritual filmmakers, most of whom had affiliations with Christianity that mirrored those of many "spiritual style" theorists. This fact notwithstanding, the "spiritual style" paradigm was often figured as the underlying structure for all attempts at "spiritual" filmmaking, regardless of their particular cultural context.

It is this latter point which has been most targeted for criticism as part of contemporary attempts at redefining spiritual film aesthetics. Some voices wished to revise consideration of spiritual stylistics from within Christianity. Thus for example, Terry Lindvall, W. O. Williams, and Artie Terry have argued that film scholars view the "transcendental [as] characterized by darkness, silence, stasis, and the like because they are drawn a priori to those expressions of the Holy based upon their intrinsic religious sentiments, and they subsequently view the transcendental cinema expressions of all other cultures through those filters."<sup>233</sup> Accordingly, these writers contended "that a balanced conceptualization of the transcendent is suggested by a 'via positiva' (way of affirmation) that can be situated in cinematic representations of African American Christian rituals."<sup>234</sup> As shown in two such cinematic representations—King Vidor's *Hallelujah* (1929) and Richard Pierce's *The Long Walk Home* (1990)—these rituals display an exuberant quality, with their "almost carnival joy of freedom bursting out in ecstatic shouts and

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<sup>231</sup> See, for example: Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

<sup>232</sup> Sheila J. Nayar, *The Sacred and Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religious Film* (London: Continuum, 2012), 10.

<sup>233</sup> Terry Lindvall, W. O. Williams, and Artie Terry, "Spectacular Transcendence: Abundant Means in the Cinematic Representation of African American Christianity," *The Howard Journal of Communication* 7 (1996): 208.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

glossolalia.”<sup>235</sup> The spectacular power of such cinematically-rendered rites, for these scholars, serves as sufficient cause for not regarding filmic asceticism and sparseness as the only way for film to operate spiritually. Similar arguments have been made by other scholars, though constituted in an attempt to draw spiritual film aesthetics away from its Christocentric framework. Nayar, for one, has made a compelling argument about the “spiritual style” as “accommodating and oftentimes privileging—even if unwittingly—a more literately inflected worldview” that befits the context of Western “alphabetic literacy”<sup>236</sup> from which it has emerged. Wishing to expand the range of discussion, she then points to more “orally inflected”<sup>237</sup> social settings such as India where this “high-literate” stylistic mode of engagement would not be as efficacious. In these settings, in which textuality is not a privileged platform for the transmission of cultural memory, religious spectacles are understandably more present, as their “relations with the ‘Wholly Other’ are wholly material: tangible to the senses, augmented, and therefore, less likely to be misinterpreted—or, worse yet, forgotten.”<sup>238</sup>

While Cinema Studies scholars have often been the ones most preoccupied with spiritual film aesthetics in the “Religion and Film” field, their Religious Studies and Theology counterparts have alternatively been more interested in another theoretical focus: spectatorship. The prevailing paradigm here highlights the connection between spectatorship and religious ritual, specifically around the dominant cultural analogy between cinema-going and church-going.<sup>239</sup> In this framework, films are thought to function like religious liturgy, providing an external form of meditation through which private musings may be mobilized to support a collective sense of belonging and meaning. Importantly, the liturgical function of films is not limited to the use of particular religious symbols or themes. Rather, cinema acts *like* religion in the sense that each uses prevailing myths “to position its people within a perspective toward the world.”<sup>240</sup> This perspective can affirm the mythical order—a fact which “Religion and Film” scholars tend to highlight so as to strengthen the analogy between cinema and religion as means of ideological regulation. Yet studies in this field also occasionally point to the ways in which films can divert their viewers

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>236</sup> Nayar, *Sacred and Cinema*, 10.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>239</sup> See, for example: J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, “Idolmakers,” *American Film* (December 1982): 48.

<sup>240</sup> Thomas M. Martin, *Images and the Imageless: A Study in Religious Consciousness and Film* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1991), 161.

towards perspectives that are transgressive and even subversive of dominant myths. Beyond the particular content of cinematic myths, then, what seems most important for advocates of this analogy, is the fact that mythical positioning relates the spectator to a broader, even cosmological, frame of reference. As S. Brent Plate phrases it:

Religion and film are akin. They both function by recreating the known world and then presenting that alternative version of the world to their viewers/worshippers. Religions and films each create alternate worlds utilizing the raw materials of space and time and elements, bending each of them in new ways and forcing them to fit particular standards and desires. [...] The result of both religion and film is a re-created world: a world of recreation, a world of fantasy, a world of ideology, a world we may long to live in or a world we wish to avoid at all costs. As an alternative world is presented on the altar and on the screen, that projected world is connected to the world of the everyday, and boundaries, to a degree, become crossable.<sup>241</sup>

For advocates of this analogy like Plate, then, cinema's sense of profound relationality—of allowing spectators, through a filmic microcosm, to both reach out and *feel* themselves within the greater, “more real” cosmos—is what seems to draw audiences to the theater, repeatedly and frequently, like a congregation to a local church. In the eyes of such scholars, this is not only the reason why ritual and film-going have often been linked conceptually within popular discourse, but is also the catalyst for their actual intermingling, for example in the cult gatherings around such texts as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975) or in the incorporation of film themes into traditional lifecycle rituals.<sup>242</sup>

Its popularity notwithstanding, the analogy between film-going and religious ritual has been the subject of some scrutiny within the “Religion and Film” field. Of particular concern in this context was the model's reliance on myth as an explanatory category. This category has often been used as a platform from which to launch investigations of films' contents in an attempt to understand how they position spectators in relation to particular social themes, values, and operations.<sup>243</sup> Arguing against such use, critics showed how it risks delimiting the spectrum of spectatorial negotiations to the dominant ideological positioning of the text. Accordingly, in an

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<sup>241</sup> S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (Harrow, UK: Wallflower Press, 2009), 2-3.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-91.

<sup>243</sup> See, for example: Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

effort to test this model and qualify its results, several studies over the past few years have employed quantitative measures of audience research, both in the context of films that deal explicitly with religious themes and those that do not.<sup>244</sup> While providing a more nuanced model of engagement vis-à-vis particular films, these inquiries nevertheless have also distanced us from what this analogy can say theoretically about the nature of the medium and its experience. As such, they are no different from the wide majority of “Religion and Film” studies, in which “we could easily replace cinema [...] with sports, politics, popular music, the culture of celebrity, or a number of other practices and receive an equally satisfactory account of the persistence of mythic forces in contemporary life.” For Pence, what is needed to avoid such limitation “is an account of the particular features of cinema that distinguish its purchase on these questions.”<sup>245</sup> As part of this account, it may be required to move away from the analysis of particular mythical contents, or even from the category of myth in its entirety, so as to get to what cinema does *uniquely* on the level of experience that merits its continuous analogization with religious ritualism. .

For its part, Israeli film studies has largely avoided participation in these trajectories of the “Religion and Film” field, paying relatively little attention to the various symptomatic and theoretical intersections between Judaism and cinema. This may have to do with Film Studies aforementioned aversion towards dealing with religion, yet can also be explained as the result of the sub-discipline’s particular historical development. Thus, as academic writing on Israeli cinema was gradually developing through the 1980s, there were only a handful of Israeli films for a religiously-oriented film scholar to investigate. What emerged during this period as the defining paradigm of Israeli film scholarship was a post-colonial model whose purpose is to reveal how Israeli films have by-and-large pursued the Zionist project of othering the Palestinian and Arab-Jew (both considered inferior to the European-Ashkenazi Sabra). Since this model operated through overly-constrictive ethnic-political definitions, it did not leave its followers with any viable tools through which to think religiously about cinema. Consequently, when Israeli film

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<sup>244</sup> See, for example: Clive Marsh, “On Dealing with What Films Actually Do to People: The Practice and Theory of Film Watching in Theology/Religion and Film Discussion,” in *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 145-161; Amy Frykholm, “Catholicism Wow! *Dogma* (1999),” in *Catholics in the Movies*, ed. Colleen McDannell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 297-316; Christopher Deacy, *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 106-133.

<sup>245</sup> Pence, “Cinema of the Sublime,” 44.



began to turn its sights towards religious themes and representations over the past fifteen years, film scholars found themselves ill-equipped to address this shift.

This absence of clear methodological tools led to an outright reluctance to deal with religion in Israeli cinema. Two prominent examples may suffice in presenting this disavowal. The first takes place in Ella Shohat's 2010 postscript to her seminal study *Israeli Cinema*, which in many ways set the tone of Israeli film studies since its publication in 1989. As a post-colonial investigation of the othering of "Arabs, Palestinians, and Mizrahim" within Israeli films, Shohat claims to have avoided the "pitfalls of a positive/negative stereotype approach by offering a relational reading of the image."<sup>246</sup> This reading entailed an emphasis on "what came to be called the 'intersectionality' (Kimberlé Crenshaw) of diverse axes of social stratification, precisely those elements that fissure any nation-state and throw into question monolithically nationalist ethnographies and historiographies." The writer then goes on to exemplify her study's intersectionality by arguing that its "discussion of Mizrahi representation" has been performed with reference "multiple prisms—class, gender, ethnicity, nationalism, colonialism, and Third World—rather than through the single prism of class."<sup>247</sup> Interestingly, though very expansive in its use of social categories, this discussion nevertheless seems uninterested in relating to religion, even though it is a significant part of Mizrahi identity and its cinematic rendering, as previously discussed. The reader is consequently prompted to wonder why, even though the Judaic turn within Mizrahi-centered cinema was in full swing during the time of the postscript's publication, this particular "intersection" was not deemed significant enough to be included in the list of elements that "fissure the nation-state." A second instantiation of the same tendency may be found in Raz Yosef's 2010 volume *To Know a Man*. In his book, Yosef presumes to describe how Israeli cinema represented Jewish masculinity through the decades. Accordingly, his basic argument is that Israeli film has fashioned heterosexual masculinity by regulating, normalizing, and/or marginalizing other, non-consensual masculinities—and in particular, those of the queer and the Mizrahi. Interestingly, this praxis is unveiled in relation to cinematic texts which operate "in the context of pivotal discourses that have shaped the conception of masculine sexuality in Israel: the Zionist discourse, the war and military discourse, the ethnic-Mizrahi discourse, and the homosexual

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<sup>246</sup> Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*, 264.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

discourse.”<sup>248</sup> Films that operate within the discourse of Judaic masculinity, however, are not discussed in the framework of Yosef’s study, thereby leading the reader to erroneously deduce that religion has, at best, a secondary role in structuring the Israeli male.<sup>249</sup>

In recent years, however, Israeli film scholarship has slowly begun to redress this scholarly neglect. Groundbreaking in these efforts were the scholarly writings authored, together and separately, by Nurit Gertz and Yael Munk. In her *Holocaust Survivors, Aliens and Others* (2004), Gertz offers a narrative of Israeli cinema history from statehood until the 1990s.<sup>250</sup> Although this narrative is organized around the symbolic conflict between the Holocaust survivor and the Zionist Israeli, Gertz prefers to figure it through the broader terms of Jewish (*Yehudi*) vs. Hebrew (*Ivri*). In the first stage, titled “The birth of the Hebrew from the Jew,” Gertz shows that postwar Israeli films were interested in metamorphosis plots, in which Old World Jews—connoted with effeminacy and frailty on the one hand, and wildness and criminality on the other—are converted into pioneer Zionism. In these cases, the traumatized diasporic Jew is made to imitate his/her Hebrew/Israeli mentors, adopting their robust physicality, heteronormative sexuality, and stalwart morality. They have to disavow their own personal pasts while embedding themselves into a symbolic narrative that bridges between a biblical, pre-diasporic past and a utopian Zionist future. While clearly conforming to the dominant ideology of the time, these films, according to Gertz, display sub textual tensions which, if read against the grain, may divulge the muted voices of Zionism’s Others. At the next stage of filmmaking (1970s-1980s), that of “The birth of the Jew from the Hebrew,” these tensions were then taken up and addressed explicitly, albeit with varying degrees of complexity, so as to unseat Zionism’s hegemonic discourse. As can be gleaned from this brief outline, Gertz’s narrative, while foregrounding the category of “Jewish,” is of little help for those interested in Israeli cinema from a Judaic standpoint. Her definition of “Jewish” is synonymous with “Zionism’s Other,” and as a result, is determined solely through Zionism’s secular terms: traumatized, effeminate, weak. Even when affirming the importance of a filmic perspective that dismantles the separation between Hebrew and Jew, Gertz still implicitly asserts the importance of this dialectic: dismantling operates by facilitating a greater fluidity between the

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<sup>248</sup> Raz Yosef, *To Know a Man: Sexuality, Masculinity, and Ethnicity in Israeli Cinema* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2010), 15.

<sup>249</sup> For a countering view, see: Dan Chyutin, “Judaic Cinecorporeality: Fleshing Out the Haredi Male Body in Avishai Sivan’s *The Wanderer*,” *Shofar* 33, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 57-82.

<sup>250</sup> Gertz, *Holocaust Survivors*, 11-102.

extremes of the dialectic, and not by introducing entirely new categories to the equation. Such a new term, which could rescue the Jew from being imprisoned as the Hebrew's mirror image, could be the concrete reality of Israeli Judaism. Yet at this juncture, Gertz makes no mention of religion as a social framework and belief system. Her definition of "Jewish" is reduced to a vague image of an assimilationist Old Europe Jewish bourgeoisie that was caught in the throes of an ethnic—rather than religious—genocide. In her later work with Yael Munk (2007), and in Yael Munk's own work (2006), a greater attempt was made to address current cinematic representations of Israeli Judaic life.<sup>251</sup> Yet this discussion has been continuously handicapped by the writers' decision to maintain the aforementioned dialectical narrative.

Another groundbreaking line of inquiry included studies which unearthed the connections between Zionism and biblical symbols, as they appeared in Israeli cinema's ideological-tropical negotiations. A leading figure in this trajectory has been Anat Zanger, whose work since the 1990s dealt with filmic intertextuality in general, and Israeli film's intertextual connection with Judaic themes in particular. Exemplary of these efforts has been her attempt to decipher how Zionist and Post-Zionist films have reworked the so-called "Binding Myth." In Zanger's 2003 essay on the topic, she argues that "the biblical story of the binding of Isaac (Ha-ak'eda) has been identified as one of the central codes through which Israeli society communicates with itself about itself." Yet this narrative was not incorporated as is: while "Zionism, like God, promised the land to the people and demands the sacrifice of its sons,"<sup>252</sup> it does not avert sacrificial death through providing a substitute. Accordingly, within this revision, the binding scene is transmuted from a tale of substitution to that of martyrdom, an inevitable death that allows for the continuation of a nation-as-God. The tragic rearticulation of this myth, according to Zanger, is principally present in pre-state and early statehood Israeli films. Nevertheless, starting in the 1950s and culminating in the 1990s, it is possible to see a shift in representation wherein the binding scene is evoked ironically for the purpose of its de-mythologization; here, God/Zionism's demand of sacrifice and martyrdom is no longer seen to be justifiable, but rather absurd. Zanger subsequently traces the evolution of representation from its oblique modernistic renderings in Uri Zohar's *Hole in the Moon* (1964)

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<sup>251</sup> Munk, "Israeli Cinema's Return;" Yael Munk and Nurit Gertz, "Israeli Cinema: Hebrew Identity/Jewish Identity" [Hebrew], in *New Jewish Time: Jewish Culture in a Secular Age—An Encyclopedic View*, ed. Dan Meiron and Hanan Hever (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007), 269-276.

<sup>252</sup> Anat Zanger, "Hole in the Moon or Zionism and the Binding (Ha-Ak'eda) Myth in Israeli Cinema," *Shofar* 22, no. 1 (2003): 95.

and *Three Days and a Child* (1967) to its realistic and direct reference in Haim Buzaglo's *Cherry Season* (1991)—all of which are texts which operate within the largely secular framework of Israeli-Zionist social identity. In a later essay (2011), however, she expands her consideration to include a contemporary Judaic-themed film—*My Father, My Lord*—that uses the Binding myth, comparing it to Joseph Cedar's "secular" war film *Beaufort* (2007) for the purpose of indicating "a new phase of despair"<sup>253</sup> in Israeli cinema's attitude towards martyrdom. The analysis of Volach's film allows Zanger to discuss the binding scene in its "natural habitat"—i.e., the religious world. Yet here, as in Gertz and Munk's aforementioned studies, the prevailing frame of reference is still Zionism rather than Judaism. This in turn leads Zanger to argue for the definition of *My Father, My Lord* as displaying a "secular approach"<sup>254</sup> due to its choice to show the futility of binding-turned-martyrdom; yet in so arguing, she also avoids the theological nuances and implications of this choice that arise from its placement within a strictly Judaic narrative context.

More recent scholarship has largely countermanded past scholarly tendencies and began addressing Judaic-themed Israeli cinema on its own Israeli-Judaic terms. This move was foreshadowed in Ronie Parciack's graduate work during the mid-1990s, in which she mostly attempted to elucidate the sociocultural reasons for the relative absence of Judaic-themed films in Israel's cinematic landscape, as well as the profound ambivalence which typifies those rare texts that did deal with Israeli Judaism in some way or form.<sup>255</sup> However, it was only in the last few years that the seeds planted by Parciack finally came to fruition. Notable in this context has been the conference "Secularity and its Discontents: Religious Themes in Israeli Visual Culture," which took place at Cambridge University in May 2013, and which yielded an edited special volume for the journal *Jewish Film and New Media* in early 2015. Also significant have been separate articles and book chapters by such scholars as Yaron Peleg, Nava Dushi, Yael Friedman, Yuval Rivlin, Nir Cohen, Galeet Dardashti, Miri Talmon, Marlyn Vinig, Shai Ginsburg, and Yvonne Kozlovsky-Golan, which have dealt with the representation of Israeli-Judaic reality either exclusively or as part of a broader debate of another facet of Israeli society. Judaic identity has so far been explored in a variety of different ways, including its relationship to queer sexuality, gender relations, body regulation, Jewish theology, territorial occupation, and ethnic diversity. And while no book-length

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<sup>253</sup> Anat Zanger, "Beaufort and My Father, My Lord: Traces of the Binding Myth and the Mother's Voice," in *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion*, ed. Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 227.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>255</sup> Parciack, "Religious Experience."

survey of Judaic-themed Israeli films has yet to emerge, these explorations, too few and far between, nevertheless offer a sound basis from which to embark on a fresh investigative trajectory into this new cinematic development.

These works that have just been referred to, it should be noted, all fall in the category of “Religion and Film” symptomatic study. In contrast, Israeli film scholarship has almost never dealt with the theoretical implications of the encounter between Israeli cinema and Judaism. The only meaningful attempt in this category was, again, performed by Parciack in her now classic essay “Beyond the Fence: Religious Sentiment in Israeli Cinema” (1998). At the outset of this excerpt from her unpublished MA thesis, Parciack argues that the cinematic medium is closely related to the world of religion, both in terms of its ability to evoke transcendental meaning through the ascetic “spiritual style” and in terms of its power to enable “a spectatorial experience associatively akin to a religious ritual.”<sup>256</sup> Nevertheless for her, Israeli cinema in general, and its (then) meager Judaic-themed output in particular, tended to ignore this relationship as part of an overall attempt to block off “religious sentiment, such as the recognition of the grace or presence of the sublime, the pain of its absence and the desire to undergo mystical experiences.”<sup>257</sup> This blocking was in no small part due to secular Zionism’s ambivalent attitude towards Judaism and the association, taking place since statehood, of Judaism with the oppressive institutions of ultra-Orthodoxy. Yet on an even more profound level, Parciack sees this disavowal as the result of the supposed absence of authentic artistic language in dealing with the Holy within Judaism’s avowedly aniconic tradition. It is in relation to this absence that the writer makes her boldest claim: namely, that whatever presence of religious sentiment that remains within Israeli cinema, Judaic-themed or otherwise, is expressed through its channeling into a Christian context, which bypasses the limitations of the Second Commandment as well as the negative social connotations of Israeli ultra-Orthodoxy. Parciack seems to be aware of the theoretical ramifications of this claim, especially in terms of the status of the “spiritual style” within Israeli cinema and its links to “religious sentiment.” Yet those are rarely developed in her essay, whose lion’s share is ultimately devoted to a narrative discussion of how certain Israeli films present Christian characters as providers of powerful religious comfort and Judaic figures as lacking in spiritual potency. The theoretical potential of these claims is thus left to be explored—and in relation to the corpus of

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<sup>256</sup> Parciack, “Beyond the Fence,” 331.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

films that were released after the essay's publication, and which constitute Israeli cinema's contemporary Judaic turn.

#### 1.4 JUDAISM, CONTEMPORARY ISRAELI FILM, AND THE CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS AND INITIAL DEFINITIONS

The primary object of this study is contemporary Judaic-themed Israeli film. Before commencing on how this corpus would be read in the following chapters, it is nevertheless necessary to define its parameters and criteria for inclusion. Firstly, in the context of the arguments presented herein, “contemporary” relates to the period which begins in the 1999 release of *Kadosh*, and is still in progress during the completion of this dissertation. As with every act of periodization, this temporal bracketing of Israeli cinema's “Judaic turn” is also vulnerable to criticism on heuristic grounds. While acknowledging this limitation, it is posited that certain reasons already explained—the exponential rise in the number of Judaic-themed films, and the concomitant legitimization of dramatic “realism” as the proper mode of cinematic engagement with Judaism—give credence to the choice of 1999 as a starting date for this shift in Israeli filmmaking. As a result of this choice, the present study, with the exception of its introductory chapter, will rarely pay attention to Judaic-inflected Israeli films made before the 2000s. These, and the sociocultural contexts in which they were produced, will nevertheless remain as an important backdrop and implicit reference point for the claims included in subsequent discussions.

In terms of what constitutes “Judaic-themed,” this dissertation takes it to mean having a narrative emphasis on presenting and exploring Judaic identity and belief, understood along the lines of traditional halakhic observance. The use of halakhic observance as the parameter for the Judaic is neither meant to ignore the presence nor to undercut the value of other definitions of Judaism in Israel's religious landscape (such as adherence to a Judaic value system, or to a syncretic lifestyle that incorporates other religious and nonreligious traditions). Nevertheless, it does recognize the dominance of this parameter in the way Israelis, and specifically Israeli filmmakers, come to define Judaism and the Judaic. Accordingly, it is through this parameter that the borders of Israeli cinema's Judaic turn become particularly distinguishable. With that being said, for the purposes of this investigation, halakhic observance will not be collapsed into

scripturalism to the same extent that Israeli-Judaic identity will not be reduced to ultra-Orthodoxy. Rather, the following discussion will include representations of the primary varieties of Judaic identity—Haredi, Religious-Zionist, and Masorti—while being attentive to variations that exist within each category as well. Moreover, as may be gleaned from the above, this study will not explore the operation of Judaic themes within “secular” films that do not show the aforementioned narrative emphasis. Again, by framing the present inquiry in such a way, there is no attempt at discrediting studies that are interested in this critical procedure of surfacing hidden themes. Yet to follow such a path would risk losing sight of the coherence of the “Judaic-themed cinema” cycle, as well as of the exact nature of the particular interrelations that exist between its included texts. Furthermore, it will render the inquiry’s conclusions vulnerable to the same valid criticisms that have been directed against like-minded “thematic” inquiries outside of the Israeli-Judaic context.

As for “Israeli film,” the following chapters will address only fiction cinema made in Israel for general theatrical distribution and television release. The choice to focus on one audiovisual format is motivated by the understanding—often left unacknowledged in Israeli film scholarship—that different formats often require different tools and emphases for analysis, and that bringing them together may often result in methodological confusion. The choice of fiction cinema, in turn, does not wish to underestimate the importance of Judaic-themed documentaries and television series for example, but is made in response to the particular skillset and formal training that is the backbone of this dissertation. While such exclusions may seem self-explanatory, another—that of Haredi fiction cinema—requires further clarification. The reasons for excluding this part of Israeli Judaic-themed fiction film are twofold. Firstly, as will be explained further below, the dissertation’s main cultural interest is in films that wish to intervene in the general conversation about where Judaism fits within the *Israeli* ethos. Haredi filmmaking—i.e., films made exclusively for the Haredi market—are less interested in joining this conversation than having a separate conversation of their own, and as a result, are arguably less active in the types of negotiations that preoccupy this study. This reasoning, however, is not sufficient for their exclusion, for as has been already established, Haredi cinema’s “inward-looking” does not entirely exclude “explorations of the relationship with Israeli society.”<sup>258</sup> Yet to give proper consideration to this relationship, it would be necessary to investigate a broad spectrum of its products, and especially those of female filmmaking which represents the industry’s leading sphere of operation. Since these female-

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<sup>258</sup> Friedman and Hakak, “Jewish Revenge,” 54.

oriented Haredi films are only available for public screenings, and since those screenings are not open to male spectators, such investigation is therefore made impossible in this specific framework. Hopefully, future research will be able to both expand and qualify the insights on mainline Israeli fiction cinema drafted herein by bringing more consideration to Haredi fiction cinema, as well as Judaic-themed documentaries and television series.

This project pursues two intertwined trajectories of inquiry, which correspond to the two categories of “Religion and Film” scholarship detailed above. The first is centered on reading the corpus in question for what it says on the status of Judaic identity and belief within contemporary Israeli society. This reading wishes to expand on past scholarly considerations into Judaic-themed Israeli films, providing a broader perspective on the topic than has ever been articulated in Israeli Cinema Studies. Its fundamental goal is to show how the cinematic engagement with questions of Judaic social reality and theology expresses, and is bound by, an overall sense of *ambivalence* as to the place of Judaism within a national ethos once so committed to secularism.<sup>259</sup> Judaic-themed Israeli cinema, it will be argued, represents a cultural sphere of intense negotiation. While the prevailing dialectic of secular vs. religious exists as the overall framework in which these films operate, it is always countermanded by gestures that bring these categories into mutual recognition and even cooperation. Such gestures may not always be explicit or intentional, and are sometimes subsumed under a clear criticism of one category over another. Yet even in these cases, the filmic texts are not truly “one-sided” in their perspective on the relationship between Israeli Judaism and secularity. Ultimately, the Judaic turn in Israeli cinema is an attempt to come to terms with Judaism’s role in Israeli society, rather than an attempt at sustaining past one-sided disavowals of this role. To argue otherwise—that is, to claim that contemporary Judaic-themed films offer rejections rather than negotiations—would be to misrepresent their important cultural work. Not wishing to undertake such a risk, the following discussion aims to map out the constant push and pull undergirding, to paraphrase Andrew Greeley, Israeli cinema’s “Judaic imagination.”<sup>260</sup>

This line of inquiry, it should be noted, follows the general conceptual framework of “national cinema,” understood as “a cinema which is produced in a certain nation and, whether intentionally or unintentionally, represents its values.” This framework has dominated Israeli film

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<sup>259</sup> This study is particularly indebted to Ronie Parciack’s evocation of “ambivalence,” though her definition of this operative term is understandably incongruent with the one presented here, in light of the fact that she relates exclusively to the period before Israeli cinema’s “Judaic turn.” See Parciack, “Religious Experience.”

<sup>260</sup> Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).



scholarship, in no small part because, as Munk and Gertz argue, “during the state’s founding period [...] cinema was used to define the identity of the nation’s new subjects [and] through it they came to know the national values, emphases, and language.”<sup>261</sup> Since much of Israeli film, and Israeli identity in general, operates in response to those initial attempts at consolidating national subjecthood, it stands to reason that the emphasis on “national” be retained in addressing more contemporary phenomena. At the same time, this emphasis also marginalizes consideration of the global dimensions of Israeli identity,<sup>262</sup> as well as those of Israeli cinema, Judaic-themed<sup>263</sup> or otherwise.<sup>264</sup> The choice to pursue the “national cinema” framework is not meant to downplay the importance of these dimensions, but does denote a desire to work out of the prevalent terms of previous scholarship rather than oppose them completely. Such continuation seems crucial if one considers the fact that this present dissertation is the only book-length study in existence today dedicated to Judaic-themed Israeli cinema. Thus, more than an intervention or a critique, it is tasked with charting new territory in a manner that would be consistent with the conceptual frameworks of other scholars and future travelers. This agenda notwithstanding, the included elaborations on Israeli cinema and culture—as is exemplified in the present chapter’s discussion of Israeli Judaic-themed cinema in relation to other similar phenomena within the global “Religion and Film” field—do attempt on some level to contextualize their objects of study transnationally, thereby laying the groundwork for subsequent research of a globalized nature.

This study’s second trajectory of inquiry is focused more on theoretical concerns that exceed, but do not leave behind, the particular sociocultural context of Israel. As such, it follows the types of theoretical investigations performed by certain scholars in the “Religion and Film” field, while attempting to offset their Christian-centric tendencies. From this perspective, the coming chapters use Israeli Judaic-themed films as a steppingstone from and guide through which to contemplate cinema and its experience in light of Judaism. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the dissertation’s Judaic focus does not reflect upon the entirety of a rich and

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<sup>261</sup> Munk and Gertz, *Revisiting Israeli Cinema*, 7.

<sup>262</sup> See, for example: Uri Ram, *The Globalization of Israel: McWorld in Tel Aviv, Jihad in Jerusalem* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>263</sup> See, for example: Nava Dushi, “Seeking the Local, Engaging the Global: Women and Religious Oppression in a Minor Film,” *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion*, ed. Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 213-224.

<sup>264</sup> See, for example: Alison Patterson and Dan Chyutin, “Teaching Trauma in (and Out of) Translation: Waltzing with Bashir in English,” in *Media and Translation: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Dror Abend-David (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 221-241.

diverse religious tradition. Rather, this line of inquiry will rely primarily on the aspect of Judaism known as “Jewish mysticism”—as well as its derivatives in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosophy—and use those parts that help illuminate equivalent dimensions of film ontology, aesthetics, and spectatorship. Judaic-themed Israeli cinema, it would be argued, mirrors the operation of its cultural milieu, which refers to and adapts the teachings of Jewish mysticism with great fervor. Motivated by this understanding, a principle objective of subsequent discussions will be to locate this operation within the films themselves and extend it—questioningly rather than dogmatically—to a reading of the medium itself.

The classification of “Jewish mysticism,” to be sure, does not arrive from within Judaic tradition but is in fact a scholarly heuristic used to group certain manifestations of Judaism throughout its long history. As expressed by Gershom Scholem, who originated the academic study of these manifestations, Jewish mysticism covers Judaic phenomena that are oriented primarily towards “the fundamental *experience* of the inner self which enters into immediate contact with God or metaphysical Reality.”<sup>265</sup> Around this axis, Scholem and the lion’s share of his followers charted out the historical development of Jewish mystical thought and practice. Its origins are usually found in the *Hekhalot* and *Merkavah* treatises of late antiquity (especially “The Book of Creation” [*Sefer Yetzira*]), and progresses through the pietists of Germany during the High Middle Ages (*Hasidei Ashkenaz*), Medieval Kabbalah (including the Provence Circle and its *Sefer Habahir*, the Girona School, Rabbi Abraham Abulafia’s “prophetic kabbalism,” and Rabbi Moses de Leon’s *The Zohar*), Rabbi Isaac Luria and the 16<sup>th</sup> century Safed school of Kabbalah, the Sabbatian messianic movement of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Hasidic movement, and the so-called “Contemporary Kabbalah” of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. For the most part, these developments marked the esoteric side of Judaic culture, and as such interpreted “every religious act as a mystery, even when the meaning was clear for all to see or was expressly in the written or oral law.”<sup>266</sup> This did not mean that Jewish mysticism constituted a decisive break from Judaic lore, even though it was sometimes figured as such by the supporters of authoritative Jewish theology. Rather, mystics sought to revitalize the traditional Jewish way of life, with its various rules and regulations, by anchoring it in a new mythology that favored the inexplicable over the strictly dogmatic. As will

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<sup>265</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 4 (my italics).

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

later be established, this non-dogmatic tendency, with its incessant courting of the indescribable infinite, captured the interest of 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosophers such as Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas, and Martin Buber, who saw in it a way of making Judaism relevant to the challenges of modernity. Such has also been the impulse behind the current uses of Kabbalah in the postmodern (or late modern) period, which have often been maligned in academic literature as a corruption of classic Jewish mysticism, but may arguably merit a more generous reading as a re-interpretation of that tradition.<sup>267</sup>

Out of the totality of Judaism's mystical world, whose richness cannot be exhausted in such a limited framework, this study focuses its examination on two elements. The first of these is the ineffable vision which confounds our basic categories of understanding the world. In his study of vision and imagination in Medieval Jewish mysticism, Elliot Wolfson has argued that "while the experience related by Jewish mystics may involve other senses, including most importantly hearing, there is little question that the sense of sight assumes a certain epistemic priority, reflecting and building on those scriptural passages that affirm the visual nature of revelatory experience."<sup>268</sup> For mystics, sight is principally directed inward, to a supposed vision of God "that is contemplative or spiritual in nature rather than an actual physical vision of some aspect or entity within the spatio-temporal world."<sup>269</sup> Yet its achievement also often involves using actual visual representations as perceptual aids and roadmaps. In the case of the internal vision, and especially in that of the external "guides," the act of mystical visualizing is theologically bound by the conflict between God's immanence and transcendence—by "standing before the face of God, yet being unable to describe or fathom it."<sup>270</sup> This conflict is negotiated at times through apophatic visions that foreground abstractness and diffusion, often using symbols such as dazzling light or all-enveloping darkness. Otherwise it leads to "an *almost* tangible object,"<sup>271</sup> one which can even be anthropomorphic but nevertheless is not fully encapsulated by our categorical thinking. Such negotiations, though theologically framed, also point to a basic phenomenological axiom: namely, that "human experience is such that the noetic content of consciousness is always tied to image

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<sup>267</sup> Boaz Huss, "Contemporary Kabbalah and its Challenge to the Academic Study of Jewish Mysticism," in *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival*, ed. Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2011), 357-373.

<sup>268</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 5.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 (my italics).

and form—even if the goal is to experience (or not experience) the imageless and formless.”<sup>272</sup> Yet what mystical visions also reveal is that an envisioning which seeks to transcend normative frames of understanding may not be only about form, but also, and most importantly, about its *unraveling*.

The second of this study’s mystical foci is a corollary experience: a posture of *Ekstasis*—of being pulled out of one’s self—that leads to a profound sense of interconnectedness, often described as a *Unio Mystica* where “we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness.”<sup>273</sup> In spite of their supposed prevalence in non-Jewish mystical forms, it has been a common argument within Kabbalah scholarship that Jewish mysticism is lacking in states of *Unio Mystica*. For example, as Scholem said in relation to mystical experiences in the Hekhalot and Merkavah period: “ecstasy there was [...] but we find no trace of a mystical union between soul and God. Throughout there remained an almost exaggerated consciousness of God’s *otherness*, nor does the identity and individuality become blurred even at the height of ecstatic passion. The Creator and His creature remain apart, and nowhere is an attempt made to bridge the gulf between them or to blur the distinction.”<sup>274</sup> In contrast to such accounts, Moshe Idel has argued for the existence of unitive experiences in Jewish mysticism, especially amongst those mystics belonging to the branch he calls “Ecstatic Kabbalah.”<sup>275</sup> In actuality, according to him, such experiences “are as present [in kabbalistic literature] as they are in non-Jewish mystical literature; and the imagery which kabbalists use is not so different from the most extreme forms of expression in other mystical types.”<sup>276</sup> Tracing the appearance of *Unio Mystica* within major phases of ecstatic Kabbalah, Idel points to such experiences where mystics felt like they were being “assimilated into”<sup>277</sup> or “absorbed in”<sup>278</sup> or “swallowed by”<sup>279</sup> the Divine. Yet even when not experienced in such extreme forms of interconnectedness, Judaic *Unio Mystica* seems largely related to a visionary practice that seeks to undermine mental concepts of coherence that describe the world as an assortment of discrete units.

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>273</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1917), 418.

<sup>274</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 55-56 (italics in the original).

<sup>275</sup> Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1993), 13-14.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 88.

While this dissertation uses the hermeneutic classification of Jewish mysticism to contextualize these experiences, it does not accept it unthinkingly or utilize it uncritically. Indeed, grounds for questioning the use of “mysticism,” itself a term with a certain genealogy that originates from the interrogation of Christianity, has been supplied by several contemporary scholars in the framework of Judaic research, of which Boaz Huss has been the most vocal. Huss’s criticism of this use was so scathing, that its only conclusion was “abandoning the category Jewish mysticism as the constitutive category”<sup>280</sup> in the study of Kabbalah and Hasidism. While not supporting this demand, it seems nevertheless important for this volume to take into account the reasons behind its posing. One reason has to do with the way in which this field of study exhibits an “a-historical tendency,” especially in its commitment to a perennial philosophy which “assumes that mystical and religious experiences are *sui generis* phenomena [irreducible] to social, economic, and political factors,” and is motivated by “the aspiration to reveal through comparative research the imminent element common to mystical experiences in various cultures.”<sup>281</sup> Huss’s concern seems warranted here. Perennial approaches to mysticism tend to suffer from essentialism, as is clearly visible in Evelyn Underhill’s classic study on mystical traditions (1920), which opens with the following questions: “what are the true essentials of mysticism? When we have stripped off those features which some mystics accept and some reject—all that is merely due to traditions, temperament or unconscious allegorism—what do we find as the necessary and abiding character of all true mystical experience?”<sup>282</sup> By treating specific cultural conditions as secondary, such queries not only denigrate particular traditions but also ignore the very real possibility that, in Wolfson’s words, “the [mystical] experience, and not merely the postexperiential interpretation, is shaped by preexperiential beliefs that are in some measure, unique to each mystic.”<sup>283</sup> Yet it is also important to remember that the “preexperiential beliefs” that point a mystic towards a particular experience are only idiosyncratic “in some measure” because ultimately they draw from a shared tradition, which itself is influenced by and influences other traditions across historical periods. As Wolfson also comments, this wide sphere of influence necessitates that we not “preclude the possibility of underlying patterns of experience or deep structures that may be illuminated through

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<sup>280</sup> Boaz Huss, “The Theologies of Kabbalah Research,” *Modern Judaism* 34.1 (2013): 19.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 (italics in the original).

<sup>282</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays* (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1920), 1.

<sup>283</sup> Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 54.

a comparative study of various mystical traditions.”<sup>284</sup> Rather than exchange one extreme methodology (perennial comparativeness) with another (anti-comparative, hyper contextualist), as is suggested in Huss’s claims, it may therefore be useful to find a more flexible middle ground from which to operate. Accordingly, even though they have often been described in this way, the following discussion will not treat an ineffable vision and a unitary experience as the key characteristics of a universal mystical condition. These dimensions will be discussed as limited phenomena within mysticism that are shaped and interpreted via historically contingent discourses and techniques. Nevertheless, this dissertation will also highlight their *commonality* across time in Judaism as well as in other “kindred” religions like Christianity, and by implication, defend the need for a comparative analytic framework that clarifies this shared base.<sup>285</sup>

Another point of criticism that Huss raises is the tendency within this scholarship to accept the theological underpinnings of Jewish mysticism. Thus, he argues that the very “use of the term ‘mysticism’ as an analytical category assumes that the contact with God or the metaphysical entity (i.e., ‘the mystical experience’) explains the behavior of human beings, the nature of their cultural productions, and their impact on historical events.”<sup>286</sup> While not discounting the presence of this tendency, which Huss is able to reveal through a close reading of central scholarly writings on Jewish mysticism, his statement nevertheless short thrifts the use of the category “experience” in this scholarship as a way of circumventing theology. Which is to say, it may be that the prevalence

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>285</sup> Implicit in Huss’s argument is a claim made by others in a more explicit way, which states that scholarship cannot and should not speak of mystical experiences because they are by definition indescribable and thus non transmittable to anyone beyond the mystics who experience them in the first place. Such a claim accepts a distinction between an inarticulate primal experience and an a posteriori articulation to which this study does not subscribe. Rather, the working premise of the present interrogation follows Wolfson’s aforementioned point, which is also mirrored in Joseph Ben-Shlomo’s assertion that “this distinction between the mystical experience and the mystic’s belief is too clear-cut and simplistic. More likely that the truth which manifests itself with great certainty [in the postexperiential description] is already somewhat articulated in the primal experience.” This does not mean that the experience is fully articulate, and that it is identical to its a posteriori account; indeed, as Ben-Shlomo argues, during the mystical moment its “truth” is still “not fully constituted through the religious and metaphysical beliefs and opinions which the mystic sets as the basis for his personal understandings” (13). Yet a relative inarticulateness also does not necessarily justify Moshe Idel’s claim that “the chance of successfully recovering the nature of mystical experience from written accounts is nonexistent” (53), or Robert Sharf’s statement that “it is a mistake to approach literary, artistic, or ritual representations as if they referred back to something other than themselves” (113). The discursive base of the mystical experience ensures that an a posteriori account would function as its “approximate expression, to use Elliot Wolfson’s term (66). The connection between the experience and the account can only be dismissed if one evaluates it on the basis of the needlessly stringent criterion of absolute accuracy. See: Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*; Idel, *Kabbalah*; Joseph Ben-Shlomo, *On Links between Religion and Mysticism* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing, 2012); Robert H. Sharf, “Religious Experience,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>286</sup> Huss, “The Theologies,” 4.

of the term “mystical experience” within this scholarship indicates a basic understanding that to state that one *experiences* God or metaphysical reality does not necessarily entail a validation of the existence of these entities. For its part, this dissertation responds to Huss’s criticism not only by focusing on experience, but also by dealing with those elements of mystical experience—ineffability and unity—that resist theological efforts at explaining away a transcendent sphere. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers such as Buber performed the same procedure, using these experiential elements of mysticism to largely bypass Judaism’s theological framework; the result, however, did not escape this framework altogether and at times even gave it further affirmation, often through its rearticulation in less doctrinal and less theocentric modes of Judaic *spirituality* or *religiosity*.<sup>287</sup> For its part, as will be established below, Judaic-themed Israeli cinema has arguably been influenced by such philosophical understandings, and often acted upon them for similar purposes. As far as it aims to chart out such maneuvers within film, this study, however, does not share in their basic premises and goals. Without ignoring the theological foundation of mystical experience, an act that would constitute a gross intellectual fault, it does read mystical states for its evidence on the structures of experience rather than on the supposed reality of a holy being.

At the same time, the experiential focus also enables this study to extend its conclusions, which are contextualized in Jewish mystical tradition, to a consideration of the cinematic medium and its experience, which are not commonly understood as mystical or religious. As experiential categories, ineffable vision and a sense of unity exist not only in mystical experiences, but in “secular” ones as well. Sociologist Abraham Maslow, for example, saw mystical revelation as only one manifestation of a broader category of “peak experience.” Though peak experiences are not limited to the sphere of religion, according to Maslow, “practically everything that happens in

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<sup>287</sup> These terms have been interpreted differently throughout their history, and the following chapters will provide specific definitions in relation to particular historical discourses (chapter 2 will use spirituality in reference to the Hegel’s notion of *Geist* and its elaboration within early 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenology of religion, while chapters 4 & 5 will use religiosity in reference to Buber’s articulation of the term). However, it is worth noting that most definitions of the two categories position them as an alternative to organized religion—as non-doctrinal forms of devotional practice that are more anthropocentric than theocentric, and whose idea of the transcendent does not conform to the rigid boundaries of a particular theology. To the extent that this study regards them as interchangeable, it is only in the context of this shared base. See: Paul Heelas, “The Spiritual Revolution: From ‘Religion’ to ‘Spirituality,’” in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, ed. Linda Woodhead et al. (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 357-359; Tim Murphy, *The Politics of Spirit: Phenomenology, Genealogy, Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010); Avraham Melamed, *Dat: From Law to Religion—A History of Formative Term* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2014), 189-205.

[them] could be listed under the headings of religious happenings, or indeed have been in the past considered to be only religious experiences.”<sup>288</sup> And in the basic aspects of these “naturalistic” experiences he includes both a “disorientation in time and space [...] [a] kind of timelessness and spacelessness [that] contrasts very sharply with normal experience,”<sup>289</sup> and a sense in which the “universe is perceived as an integrated and unified whole.”<sup>290</sup> To the extent that Maslow designates aesthetics as one site in which such aspects materialize,<sup>291</sup> his conclusions coincide with those of film studies’ meager theoretical output on the question of cinema’s “spiritual aspirations.” Yet these studies nevertheless moved beyond a certain qualitative similarity of film-aesthetic and mystical experiences to affirm theological beliefs, either through a non-reflexive demonstration of the filmmakers’ own devotional understandings, or through a direct evocation of (an often Christian) God. In other words, they remained too comfortably in a definition of cinema as hierophany—an inseparable connection between holiness (*Hieros*) and the act of bringing to light (*Phainein*). As previously noted, this is not the position adopted in these pages. In this sense, then, the current study relates more to *faith* as the act of consciousness that attempts to transcend analytical categories towards an overarching unity than to *Faith* as a theological system that understands this act as related to God or the Holy (a differentiation that is also suggested in Hebrew through the juxtaposition between *emun*, which translates as “trust,” and *emuna*, which translates as “belief”).

It may be clear from the above that this treatise is much more comfortable with tracing experience than with making ontological claims. To the extent that an ontological claim is *entertained as a possibility* within these pages, however, it is that categorical thinking, as a tool for parsing out phenomena into comprehensible discrete units, may deprive one of access to a greater interconnectedness that exists within the lived world. Corroboration for this position is found in phenomenology, and especially in the “phenomenological ontology” of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s last works. At the basis of these works, as M. C. Dillon cogently explicates, is the idea of the phenomenal world as “an interweaving, an *elementary* knotting, which is always prior to its

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<sup>288</sup> Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (1964; repr., New York: Penguin/Arkana, 1994), 59.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>291</sup> Abraham H. Maslow, “Lessons from Peak Experiences,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 2, no.1 (January 1962): 10.



unravelling in language and thought.”<sup>292</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, such primordial interconnectedness, most palpably expressed through the understanding of the lived world as “flesh,” is real and irreducible, yet its “ultimate truth” is often lost through incessant acts of conceptualization. Thus, in Dillon’s words, “to conceive the phenomenon as the product of the coming together of discrete, really disjunct domains of different kinds of being (the physical and the mental, the transcendent and the immanent, etc.) is to reify abstractions.” True to phenomenological form, Merleau-Ponty asks that these abstractions be bracketed out, replaced by what he defines as “perceptual faith,” the “belief in the veracity of perception, a belief ‘that our vision goes to the things themselves.’”<sup>293</sup> Though often distancing his works from any religious frameworks of understanding, it is in this “perceptual faith” that Merleau-Ponty is most mystical, and at the same time, most cinematic.<sup>294</sup>

If a phenomenology covers these “peak” or “ecstatic-transcendental” experiences and grounds them ontologically, why then should we bother bringing mystical tradition to broadly discuss the cinematic medium, which in itself is often seen as nonreligious? Why not just limit this mystical reference to texts that explicitly relate to it, or to the reception of films by those inundated in a religious interpretive framework? Why carry the risk, to borrow Huss’s terminology, of “theologizing” cinema and cinema studies? While recognizing the validity of these queries, and not discounting the dangers to which they allude, this study nevertheless postulates that to the extent that Judaic-themed Israeli films beg to be discussed in mystical terms, they also allow us to see the benefits of using these terms for the analysis of film at large. Cinema can provoke experiences that exceed our attempts to make sense of them—experiences which have traditionally been included in the provenance of religion, and which mystics and other figures have spent centuries attempting to elucidate. Rather than draw on this body of knowledge for possible experiential models, cinema studies—with the exception of “spiritual style” thinkers such as Bazin and Schrader—habitually chose to favor other, more secular models. “Affect Theory,” for example, has been used extensively in recent years to respond to the inadequacy of cognitive-

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<sup>292</sup> M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 155 (italics in the original).

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>294</sup> This claim for ontological grounding does not eliminate a need to understand mystical phenomena in relation to culturally contingent belief systems. If one were to entertain this possibility, then the belief system that exists a priori of the experience does not constitute it so much as guide it towards particular phenomenological-ontological features and shapes it in relation to them. In this respect, cultural tradition becomes highly significant for comparative study, not only in providing a shared frame of a posteriori interpretation for mystical experiences, but also in prefocusing the mystical search towards particular dimensions in the lived world over others.

formalist screen theory in accounting for cinematic experiences that undermine or exceed its basic parameters. This use, however, allowed the discipline to avoid taking its post-Enlightenment challenge of cognitive thinking to realms of spirituality, because emotion is considered secular (i.e., not explicitly religious) and subjective (i.e., cannot make broader claims about “transcendental” elements). Even the application of phenomenology was done in a manner that allowed it to emerge as a “secular” proxy to mystical thought. All its obvious connections with and inspirations from mysticism were severed or subsumed under a nonreligious heading so as to avoid “contamination.” Their importance notwithstanding, this study nevertheless wishes to offer an alternative to such theoretical underpinnings. Hence, though relating to affect’s relationship with mysticism at different junctures, it will not employ this category as the central axis of its discussion. And while the following pages make extensive use of phenomenology, its more overt affinity to mysticism will be foregrounded rather than disguised, turning it into a bridge between traditional film studies and the world of mystical thought.

To the extent that they aim to strengthen and legitimize its overall argument, the above caveats should not distract us, however, from seeing this study as a product of its time. It is influenced by the various expressions of postmodern epistemology and practice, including New Age spirituality. It responds to the ongoing crisis in the Enlightenment project, and represents an interest in the potential benefit of some form of “spiritual renewal”—not in the theistic-doctrinal sense that can be found in much of Jewish mysticism scholarship, but in the sense of unitive experiences that unravel normative categories of coherence. It has a personal agenda—one that does not accept its premises unthinkingly, and that is geared more towards exploration than proof, but an agenda nonetheless. Such statements may be regarded as irksome by scholars (like Huss) who prefer scholarship to be devoid of nonobjective “taintedness.” In response to this criticism, it may be worth recalling a statement made by Judith Mayne in a cinema studies context, which regards all analysis as “an analysis of one’s own fascination and passion.”<sup>295</sup> While this claim, like any other, should not be taken for granted, it does resonate at least with the practices and convictions of the writer of these lines.

The two trajectories of inquiry which have been outlined so far interact with each other in a variety of ways throughout the subsequent chapters. The second chapter deals primarily with the “spiritual style” paradigm and its deployment in two films—*My Father My Lord* and *The*

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<sup>295</sup> Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 84.

*Wanderer*. This use, it is argued, does not follow the traditional manner in which an ascetic minimalist aesthetic has been imagined—that is, the spiritual style here is not meant to serve as means of affirming divine existence but rather as a tool for its questioning. This questioning is performed differently in both cases. Volach’s film realizes it through a conflict between the style’s operation as a manifestation of God and the narrative’s attempt to dismiss halakhic understandings of what that God is. Sivan’s film goes one step further and locates a conflict within the style itself—a confrontation between materiality and immateriality that reflects on the unresolved tension between God as immanent (verifiable) and transcendent (non-verifiable). Regardless of these differences, the two films are nevertheless analogous in that their questioning never amounts to a denial of the possibility of divine existence; operating from within the spiritual style, theirs is an ambivalent stance, one of doubt rather than disbelief. These conclusions subsequently lead to a consideration of the meaning behind the incorporation into a decidedly Judaic-Israeli context of an aesthetic paradigm that has been articulated by mainly Christian filmmakers and theorists (e.g., Bresson, Bazin, Agel, Ayfre, and Schrader). Rather than see this use as further undermining Judaic theological understandings, it is suggested that in actuality, Jewish mystical tradition also carries iterations of the same stylistic patterns. The reference to these iterations not only points to potential ambivalences within Jewish mysticism, but also to the unitive experiences which were proposed as a remedy to such ambivalences.

At the heart of the third chapter are films dealing with religious women who challenge their oppression in a Judaic-Israeli patriarchal context. Mirroring Israeli-secular public discourse on gender relations and feminism, these texts isolate modesty as *the* site where female oppression takes place, and center their efforts on orchestrating scenes wherein sexual taboos are challenged. Yet in figuring feminist challenges only through the framework of modesty, these scenes also enact a “logic of striptease” whose aim is to lay bare the bodies of covered religious woman for voyeuristic pleasure. This focus on modesty, then, reveals a basic ambivalence in the secular attitudes towards Israeli Judaism, figuring it as “Other” so as to disguise shared patriarchal affinities. Nevertheless, in the case of two examples—*The Secrets* and *Bruriah*—an avenue is offered out of this ambivalence. Complementing chapter two’s discussion of spatiality in the framework of the “spiritual style,” this avenue is discussed in relation to temporality. Thus, drawing on Benjamin’s notion of “now-time” and Levinas’s concept of “unhinged time,” the chapter demonstrates how these films foreground a Jewish mystical-messianic temporal structure

that undermines common understandings of reality and the social categories which are derived from them. Through a time-based revelation, the terms of social otherness are arguably re-defined in a manner that allows secular spectators to recognize their relation to a representation of Judaic androcentrism and take responsibility for it.

The fourth chapter discusses the relationship between religious ritual and film in two ways. The first explores how the ritual of prayer has been articulated in several Judaic-themed films and what this says about the legitimacy of Judaism as a social and belief structure. It is argued that these films have been influenced by the modern discourse on the “Death of God” and its resulting crisis in prayer. This influence manifests itself in the ways through which the films relate to the two primary coordinates of prayer—the social dimension (communion with a society) and the mystical dimension (communion with God). Thus to varying degrees, these films criticize Judaic society as an inflexible and often abusive collective through their undervaluing of the social dimension of prayer. As a countermeasure, however, these texts also foreground the need for an individualized mystical communion with God that detaches the subject from its allegiances to this collective and possibly allows for personal redemption. The second part of this chapter examines the prevailing model in “Religion and Film” scholarship of analogizing between film going and religious ritual, and specifically between spectatorship and prayer. The discussion attempts to re-define and test the limits of this analogy by moving away from a discussion of (mythical) content to that of (ecstatic) experience. Drawing on Buber’s mystically-inspired definition of prayer and Viviane Sobchack’s phenomenological model of film spectatorship, the two experiences will be seen as privileged states where the subject is allowed to “step out” of itself and contemplate on the common structures of its being in the world. While elaborating on what this Ekstasis means in relation to the particular experiential and noetic features of film going and prayer, this section will also point to its extreme versions—those states in which the subject not only recognizes being’s common coordinates of coherence but also undergoes their unraveling. It is this unraveling, and the sense of unity that it may induce, which serve as a principal focus for the next chapter.

In the fifth chapter, the notion of “credulity” will be used to organize a discussion of three films—*Ushpizin*, *God’s Neighbors*, and *Magic Men*—that have adapted the literary Hasidic tale to the screen. Readings of these films have argued that they capitalize on the genre’s mode of credulous escapism to bypass the complexities of Judaic life and as a result, provide it with further legitimization in the Israeli-secular context. Contrary to these perspectives, this chapter argues that

the films use the Hasidic tale not for its supposed ability to escape reality but rather for its proven capacity to adjust religion to modern secular sensibilities. This genre is discussed as a traditionally flexible form of religious expression—as a religiosity—that resonates with the fluid devotional stance of the films’ protagonists, who are by and large religious repentants. Through its application, these filmic texts accommodate Judaism to the contours of modernity: socially, in imagining a shared ground of human complexity (and especially emotional complexity), in contrast to differences in doctrinal logic and communal practice; and spiritually, in favoring an experience of a diffused all-encompassing divinity rather than a clearly defined, theologically grounded, and unquestioningly verifiable image of God. It is with this sense of all-encompassing diffusion—one which is disclosed as a result of an unraveling of common categories of coherence and which subsequently promotes an overall impression of unity—that the closing section of this chapter is preoccupied. Focusing on “unitive experiences” that take place vis-à-vis the screen, this section attempts to draw them away from their commonplace association with “credulity.” Through the philosophies of Merleau-Ponty and Buber, it provides a firmer contextualization of the order of unity that such experiences foreground—not for the purpose of asserting its veridical standing, but only in order to entertain the possibility of it having a certain phenomenological-ontological truth value. This maneuver, in turn, is subsequently offered as a way of reconsidering our spectatorial responses to a cinema that—in Bazin’s terms—“bears away our faith,” and their potentially illuminating intersections with similar impulses in the mystical world.

Finally, the dissertation’s afterword will suggest in broad strokes a way of understanding the interaction between the aforementioned cultural-symptomatic and medium-theoretical aspects of its inquiry. Looking back on the argument as a whole, it proposes that Judaic-themed Israeli films appeal to mysticism as means of escaping the basic categories of religion and secularity that structure their aforementioned sense of ambivalence. And while this appeal often remains wedded to these overarching categories and adds to the overall ambivalence that surrounds them, it also points to their potential dissolution in a transformative moment of unity—a potential that is arguably enhanced by cinema’s ability to unravel conceptual separations and create unitive experiences. This study looks at the social vision that these films gesture towards and tries, in an arguably more rigorous and less theologically-encumbered way, to trace its horizon. In this capacity, it recognizes that this horizon is one of impossibility, for as previously stipulated, neither our immediate experience nor our thoughtful explications of it are capable of fully transcending

the discursive base that shapes and constricts them. Yet it also suggests that by following a path of impossibility, Judaic-themed Israeli cinema does not necessarily invite its spectators to partake in an exercise in futility, but rather directs them towards a (minor) liberation within impossibility itself—much like Bazin once did when describing, through mythical language, the cinematic medium's impossible journey towards becoming the reality it represents, which inevitably returns it to the moment of its inception and releases it from its origins.

## 2.0 LIFTING THE VEIL: JUDAIC-THEMED ISRAELI CINEMA AND THE “SPIRITUAL STYLE”

*There are moments in which, to use a Talmudic phrase, heaven and earth kiss each other; in which there is a lifting of the veil at the horizon of the known, opening a vision to what is eternal in time.*—Abraham Joshua Heschel<sup>1</sup>

In the opening to his oft-quoted essay on film and theology (1950), André Bazin elegantly stated, without resorting to qualification, that “the cinema has always been interested in God.”<sup>2</sup> What may be dismissed at first glance as yet another example of the French theorist’s notorious predilection to bold generalization, does in fact hold true to the annals of cinema. Thus, immediately following the first cinematic screenings, a host of Christian-themed films—including several Passion Play renditions—were produced for public consumption, turning “religious subjects [...] into an important genre for the early film industry,”<sup>3</sup> if not for film history in general.<sup>4</sup> Yet in Bazin’s eyes, the relationship between film and the language of religion did not stop at the level of subject matter; rather it encompassed also the spheres of filmic ontology and aesthetics. Thus according to him, cinema has not only “been interested in God” but “is in itself already a kind of miracle.”<sup>5</sup> Seen in this way, film emerges as a site of revelation of something that is not reducible to our normative cognitive and rhetorical understandings of reality—something that, as Bazin reminds us, has traditionally fallen under the purview of religion’s careful and elaborate consideration. By performing this act of revelation, the cinematic medium is used to provide something more than a familiar and immanent view of the world; as Jeffery Pence wrote over fifty years later, it “mediates between [the] otherwise opposed realms of transcendence and everydayness.”<sup>6</sup> To the extent that certain critics like Bazin and Pence wanted to make the realm of transcendence amenable to terms borrowed from religious nomenclature, such mediation thus came to encapsulate cinema’s “spiritual aspirations.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (London: John Calder, 1956), 138.

<sup>2</sup> André Bazin, “Cinema and Theology,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 402.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Musser, “Passions and the Passion Play: Theater, Film, and Religion in America 1880-1900,” in *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, ed. Francis G. Couvares (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 63.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Grace, *The Religious Film*.

<sup>5</sup> Bazin, “Cinema and Theology,” 393.

<sup>6</sup> Pence, “Cinema of the Sublime,” 40.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

Importantly, to speak of revelation in a “spiritual” way was not a dominant approach in the critical writings on film that preceded Bazin’s oeuvre. Read along the realist-modernist split, early film theory seemed predominantly concerned with whether the filmic text should duplicate or manipulate visible nature. Yet, as Malcolm Turvey explains, this split tends to obscure a shared belief amongst theorists on both camps in cinema’s revelatory possibilities. Taken together, realist and formalist theorists such as Jean Epstein, Dziga Vertov, Béla Balázs, and Siegfried Kracauer, may be said to represent a particular strand of thought which Turvey characterizes as “revelationist” and which evinced that “cinema’s most significant property, one which the other arts do not possess (or at least do not possess to the same degree), is its ability to uncover features of reality invisible to human vision.”<sup>8</sup> The framework of understanding this revelation, in turn, is avowedly scientific. Occupying a position of “visual skepticism,” these theories asserted that “our sense of sight fails to give us genuine knowledge of reality.”<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, they imagined cinema as a technological tool “that, rather than extending the power of the human eye, escapes its limitations” so as to make this genuine knowledge available for human consciousness. In so doing, films realize the promise of science to not only describe but also intervene in reality, and by extension—“to bring about a fundamental change for the better in human existence.”

Nevertheless, even such “secular” readings of cinema and its social mission were not devoid of “spiritual” undertones, as is evident in Turvey’s account of the “near-religious extremes of euphoria” that these theorists experienced in relating to film’s “awesome, even miraculous power.”<sup>10</sup> Further proof of this undercurrent may also be found in what Rachel Moore defines as early film theory’s “primitivist impulse”<sup>11</sup>: that is, the reliance of this corpus, in its explanations of film’s uniqueness as a medium, “on primitive beliefs in animism, the sacred, ritual sacrifice, idol worship, and sympathetic and homeopathic magic.”<sup>12</sup> Such vocabulary is used, for example, in Epstein’s writing, which describes the qualities revealed by cinema—the “photogénie”— as “hav[ing] little in common with human life. These lives are like the life in charms and amulets,

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<sup>8</sup> Malcolm Turvey, *Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Rachel O. Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



the ominous, tabooed objects of certain primitive religions.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, a realist-materialist take on cinema like Kracauer’s *Theory of Film* (1960), though discussing the medium as a scientific tool for interrogating reality, tends to nevertheless imagine this operation in quasi-religious terms: as disclosing the “hidden aspects of the world about us”<sup>14</sup> like “the magic of a leaf or the energies which lie dormant in a piece of cloth,”<sup>15</sup> that must be *redeemed* from obscurity. Such references to the primitive, says Moore, should not be discounted as intentionally naive, but rather understood as important paradigms through which these early film thinkers came to understand cinema’s role in the modern era. As much as film, under the aegis of modernity, has trapped its spectators in the snares of commodity fetishism, for them it could also offer a way out. Objective and passive, yet also artful and willful, the “‘camera-machine’ takes advantage of the distracted and fatigued modern audience, catches them unawares, and makes things come alive.”<sup>16</sup> Films alienate the screen from familiar views of visible reality while simultaneously allowing reality to retrieve its once lost aura. In doing so, cinema ceases to serve as “an advanced form of modern communication” and offers instead “a renewal of primitive faculties otherwise lost to post enlightenment culture.”<sup>17</sup>

While such references to cinema’s “spiritual aspirations” were often subsumed under a scientific jargon within early film theory, in the 1950s and 1960s several key film theorists in Europe and the US came to engage them outright and on their own terms. Their scholarly efforts coalesced around certain prominent filmmakers like Robert Bresson, Yasujiro Ozu, and Carl Theodore Dreyer, whose films seemingly shared a common formal aesthetic. This style did not extensively utilize such expressive measures as slow motion, fast motion, and montage editing, which early film theorists saw as key for maximizing cinema’s revelatory capacity. These filmmakers sought instead to work against cinema’s expressive capabilities through an uncompromising asceticism. As figured by contemporaneous theorists, the aim behind this stylistic strategy was to purify the image from elements that delimit spectators to the borders of the knowable—distractions that blind them from recognizing reality as a threshold onto an ineffable.

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<sup>13</sup> Jean Epstein, “On Certain Characteristics of Photogénie,” in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology 1907-1939*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 1: 318.

<sup>14</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 49.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>16</sup> Moore, *Savage Theory*, 88.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Different theoretical elaborations related to this style under different titles: “transcendental,”<sup>18</sup> “devotional,”<sup>19</sup> and “spiritual,”<sup>20</sup> to name but a few. The choice to foreground the title “spiritual style” in the context of these pages, however, is not meant to endorse one specific elaboration over others, but rather to shed light on three elements which these writings largely share. First is the claim that the ineffable which cinema evokes, at least for the “spiritual style” filmmaker, is more appropriately described through a religious conceptual framework than a strictly secular one. Second is the interpretation of this framework as non-doctrinal—in the sense of “spirituality” as “a generally exploratory resistance to [religious] authority,” and first and foremost, to religion’s overly constrictive theistic definition of what this ineffable should mean. And third is the impulse—in the sense of Hegel’s project of *Geist* and its continuation within Phenomenology of Religion—to extend the arguments about this ineffable beyond a particular (mainly Christian) religious framework towards a broader category of “enduring and universally acknowledged ‘practices’ that evidence the presence of ‘Spirit’ (not the Holy Spirit of the Trinity) in everyday life and are found in all world religions.”<sup>21</sup> In this context, then, Spirit may be seen as a “mediating term”<sup>22</sup> between the realms of religion and secularity, and indicative of the attempts of “spiritual style” theorists to expand their arguments beyond the sphere of religiously-themed films. Nevertheless, it is in relation to the latter category of films that the purchase of religious terminology is most clearly felt within this scholarship, and where it is most coopted by theorists in support of basic theological beliefs.

The surge of theoretical interest in the spiritual style befitted a postwar era of intense devotional commitments and explorations. Yet as the atmosphere changed in the 1970s, academic film scholarship, influenced by iconoclastic post-structuralism, gradually shied away from spiritual and religious concepts; and even when addressed within the discipline, it was often “with ideological discomfort,” if not “secularist disdain.”<sup>23</sup> Overshadowing such concepts is what Pence

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<sup>18</sup> Schrader, *Transcendental Style*.

<sup>19</sup> Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema* (Berkeley: Tuumba Press, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Susan Sontag, “Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson,” in *The Films of Robert Bresson: A Casebook*, ed. Bret Cardullo (London: Anthem Press, 2009), 29-44.

<sup>21</sup> Wendy M. Wright, “Religion, Spirituality, and Film,” *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. William L. Blizek (London: Continuum, 2009), 200.

<sup>22</sup> Pence, “Cinema of the Sublime,” 41.

<sup>23</sup> Nayar, *Sacred and Cinema*, 47.

described as Cinema Studies' "iconoclastic approach,"<sup>24</sup> whose primary "orientation [is] toward social and historical reality."<sup>25</sup> As already insinuated in the introduction, this

approach is inherently modern, carrying on a tradition of critique established in the Enlightenment. It is skeptical of illusion and the superstitious power of film to fascinate, and therefore manipulate, audiences. While one of the verities of postmodernism is that the emancipatory discourses subtending modern thought (Marxism and psychoanalysis primarily) are neither objectively true nor superior perspectives on cultural life, the tradition of critique remains the most important in contemporary film studies. As such, it also extends the affinity of criticism with an Enlightenment notion of reason as a privileged, scientific process that will lead us to truth.<sup>26</sup>

In the aftermath of this shift, the growth of a multifaceted discussion of spiritual film form was stunted. Whatever remained of this discussion, in turn, was dominated by certain influential continuations and affirmations of the spiritual style model, which effectively undercut other voices of theoretical dissent. This discursive stasis ultimately ensured that the spiritual style would maintain a dominant presence in the cinematic landscape and be available for incorporation by different contemporary "spiritually-minded" filmmakers into diverse cultural contexts.<sup>27</sup>

This chapter's objective will be to trace the migration of the "spiritual style" into contemporary Judaic-themed Israeli filmmaking and account for its theological implications. Using two films—David Volach's *My Father, My Lord* (2007) and Avishai Sivan's *The Wanderer* (2010)—as telling examples, the following pages will argue that the appropriation of this style in the Israeli context is not geared towards the unreserved affirmation of basic theological truths which film theory has often located in the oeuvre of Bresson and Ozu, and especially in their religiously-themed works. If anything, Israeli filmmakers who utilize this style seem to occupy a skeptical theological position. Yet because this position is articulated from within the spiritual style—rather than from without—their skepticism is always bound by its "theological" framework. Consequently, it never amounts to a wholehearted negation of a divine sphere, but rather remains fraught with ambivalence as to the possibility and nature of its existence.

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<sup>24</sup> Pence, "Cinema of the Sublime," 34.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>27</sup> Gregg Taylor, "Approaching the Cinema of Silence," *Post Script* 26, no. 2 (Winter-Spring 2007): 52-71.

## 2.1 THE SPIRITUAL STYLE IN FILM: DEVELOPMENT, CHARACTERISTICS AND THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The film theorist most credited for having initiated the discourse on spiritual film aesthetics has been André Bazin.<sup>28</sup> A practicing Catholic, Bazin rarely made extensive and explicit connections between film and religious terminology, yet as Bert Cardullo argued, religious belief has always been “the primary source of his inspiration.”<sup>29</sup> This inspiration is most apparent in Bazin’s account of cinema revelatory capability, which is inexorably linked to his theory of filmic realism. In his article “Painting and Cinema” (1950), he famously made a distinction about the different relations to reality held by a picture frame and the edges of the screen. For Bazin, “the essential role of the frame is, if not to create at least to emphasize the difference between the microcosm of the picture and the macrocosm of the natural world in which the painting has come to take its place.”<sup>30</sup> Within its borders, what is created is “a space the orientation of which is inwards, a contemplative area opening solely onto the interior of the painting.” The screen’s edges, on the other hand, operate differently: “They are the edges of a piece of masking that shows only a portion of reality. The picture frame polarizes space inwards. On the contrary, what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe. A frame is *centripetal*, the screen *centrifugal*.”<sup>31</sup> To the extent that Bazin defines the framed space as “contemplative,” he points not only to a form of artistic rendering but also to a particular mindset that seeks to confine the “universe” to the limits of contemplation—to the “knowable” as a category of thought and rhetoric. In its centrifugal push, the screen defies these limits and exchanges a “microcosm” that can be known with a “universe” that is, at least to an extent, unknowable and “indefinite.” These distinctions in turn, relate to Bazin’s argument, made in his foundational “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945) that the photographic can “give significant expression of the world both concretely and its *essence*.”<sup>32</sup> In Bazin’s eyes, the question then becomes not so much the extent to which photographic/cinematic realism can accurately capture the surface details of

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<sup>28</sup> Nayar, *Sacred and the Cinema*, 47.

<sup>29</sup> Bert Cardullo, *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* (London: Continuum, 2011), 4.

<sup>30</sup> André Bazin, “Painting and Cinema,” in *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 1: 165.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 166 (my italics).

<sup>32</sup> André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 1: 12.

reality. To think of such media in this way is to succumb to a “framing” mentality that turns reality into a knowable surface. Rather, what becomes significant in cinema’s capturing of the world in its absolute concreteness is exactly its ability to move beyond the boundaries of the known and onto an essence that is as infinite as it is unknowable. According to Cardullo, it is in this centrifugal action that Bazin finds the “spiritual” goal of photographic imagery: “to bear witness to the beauty of the cosmos [...] to render the reality of the universe and, through its reality, its mystery-cum-musicality.”<sup>33</sup> This goal, in turn, may also explain why he ultimately feels comfortable in equating photography and cinema with such religious/ritualistic/magical artifacts such as terra cotta statuettes, a clay bear, and the Shroud of Turin, which as representations are not so mimetic (at least in the traditional definition of the term).

For Bazin, the filmic potential of revealing the essence of the world can only be realized through a proper use of the medium’s means. Yet, as much as this essence is vaguely conceived in Bazin’s oeuvre, so is his articulation of these proper means, which is why Cardullo claims that with him “it would be more suitable to speak of filmic ‘realisms’ than of a single definitive realist mode.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, in his “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema” (1950-1955), Bazin places an emphasis on cinema’s ability to reveal reality’s inherent coherence, which can never be fully conceptualized. In this context, he argues that montage misrepresents this coherence by enforcing a structure upon it which “by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression.”<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, for him a deep focus-long take style does service to reality because it “reveal[s] the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the unity natural to them.”<sup>36</sup> Another relevant theoretical frame of analysis is found, for example, in his “*Le Journal d’un Cure de Campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson” (1951). There Bazin uses Bresson’s early masterpiece as a prism through which to explore, more explicitly than usual, matters of a religious nature. He analyzes this text as the intersection of particular forms of cinematic and literary realisms. In the film, reality is stripped bare. The “acting” is reduced to a minimum, consequently denying the impression of psychological depth and directing attention to “the physiology of existence.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Cardullo, *André Bazin*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> André Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” in *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 1: 36.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 38 (my italics).

<sup>37</sup> André Bazin, “*Le Journal d’un Cure de Campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson,” in *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968) 1: 133.

Concurrently, in adapting the literary origin, the filmmaker focuses on the text, treating it as “a cold hard fact, a reality to be accepted as it stands.” Brought together, these two realisms “reaffirm their differences;”<sup>38</sup> they produce a sense of unreality, where the dialogue seems to fall flat on the blank faces of the represented characters. Yet it is this very “ontological clash between two orders of events, occurring simultaneously” that reveals a third reality, a “supernatural storm.”<sup>39</sup> Contrastingly, in his aforementioned “Cinema and Theology” essay realism comes less in terms of style than of content. There Bazin rails against films which choose to manifestly represent the supernatural, or humanize it through superior figures that are fundamentally different from common mortals, thereby simplifying the mystery of Grace. To countermand such an approach, he argues for a cinematic tactic that “achieves a maximum rigor and efficiency [...] because it simultaneously respects the sociopsychological reality and the transcendence of the sacred.” For him, then, what is preferred is a filmic recognition that, “although the sacerdotal reality transcends the natural order, it nonetheless springs from a social and historical milieu.”<sup>40</sup>

Bazin’s oscillation between different realisms, according to Dan Morgan, “suggests that he never finds an account that satisfies him.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, such “ontological restlessness”<sup>42</sup> seemed warranted by the inherently elusive nature of Bazin’s object of inquiry—i.e., reality’s essence—and offered him a productive openness in relating to it. Following his premature death, this openness, however, was traded in for a narrower definition of spiritual film aesthetics, one which more decisively couched experiences of the ineffable in religious terms, and which increasingly reduced Bazin’s diverse engagement with realism to only one manifestation—his penchant for stylistic austerity whereby “sentimentality is eschewed in favor of filmic reality and transparency.”<sup>43</sup> This move, initially performed by Bazin’s collaborators Henri Agel and Amédée Ayfre in France and by occasional film critics Susan Sontag and Paul Schrader in the US, forged a consistent discourse surrounding the question of a spiritual film style.<sup>44</sup> This discourse, in turn,

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>40</sup> Bazin, “Cinema and Theology,” 402.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Morgan, “Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 451.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 452.

<sup>43</sup> Nayar, *Sacred and the Cinema*, 38.

<sup>44</sup> It should be noted that not all of these writers were similarly closed-minded. Out of the four, Schrader, the last to contribute, was also notoriously the most forceful in asserting a single spiritual style. In contrast, Agel, Ayfre, and Sontag were more willing to entertain different approaches to spiritual film aesthetics. Yet their sympathies seemed to be ultimately directed towards the ascetic stylistics that Schrader would later endorse, especially in the works of

would be sustained relatively unaltered by more contemporary scholars such as Michael Bird, Jeffrey Pence, Nathaniel Dorsky, and Gerard Loughlin. Through its gradual distillation and reification, the “spiritual style” paradigm received credence and accrued considerable staying power. At the same time, it also facilitated the creation of a canon of “spiritual” filmmakers whose stylistic predilections fit its parameters. In spite of criticisms that it is highly restrictive and unaccountably represents the particular affinities of central “spiritual style” theorists to “art cinema” this canon still remains influential today—an immediate reference point for contemporary cineastes who are avowedly interested in exploring cinema’s “spiritual aspirations.”

In accounting for “spiritual style” theory, one first needs to recognize the basic premise which its contributors share with Bazin: namely that there is a mysterious hidden presence within the real which could be sensed but not conceptually analyzed. Thus, in an analysis of the revelation in Bresson’s films, Ayfre argued that “we are dealing with immanent transcendence, or even, one might say, with radical invisibility. For the invisible world remains invisible, or rather appears only as invisible.”<sup>45</sup> His compatriot and collaborator Agel, in turn, described this presence in slightly different though no less immanent terms, as “a pure point, a *center of life* that neither degradation, nor despair, nor constraint ever completely consumes, whose homage man must assure and preserve, a point where he finds self-respect and the power to unceasingly regain strength.”<sup>46</sup> Contrastingly, in her foundational discussion of Bresson’s “spiritual style,” Sontag spoke of how it revealed the “physics [...] of souls.”<sup>47</sup> And decades later, Dorsky described this hidden-yet-palpable essence as “the depths of our own reality” that provides us with “a fuller sense of ourselves and our world.”<sup>48</sup> In either of its various definitions, the search for this hidden face of reality is figured as inherently beneficial and redeeming; in some accounts, it is even thought of as a necessary element of human existence and a manifestation of a fundamental human desire.<sup>49</sup>

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French filmmaker Robert Bresson. See also: Nayar, *Sacred and the Cinema*, 35-56; Brian Price, “Sontag, Bresson, and the Unfixable,” *Postscript* 26, no. 2 (Winter-Spring 2007): 81-90.

<sup>45</sup> Amédée Ayfre, “The Universe of Robert Bresson,” *The Films of Robert Bresson*, ed. Ian Cameron (New York: Praeger, 1970), 20-21.

<sup>46</sup> Henri Agel, *Cinema and the Sacred* [French] (Paris: les Editions du cerf, 1961), 8, quoted in and translated by Nayar, *Sacred and the Cinema*, 40 (my italics).

<sup>47</sup> Sontag, “Spiritual Style,” 38

<sup>48</sup> Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, 18.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Quicke, “Phenomenology and Film: An Examination of a Religious Approach to Film Theory by Henri Agel and Amédée Ayfre,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 4, no. 4 (2005): 241.

While this presence is often described “secularly,” the experience of it that the style evokes is systematically—and ontotheologically<sup>50</sup>—discussed in terms borrowed from the broader religious world and through theories that belong to the disciplines of Theology and Religious Studies (especially its “phenomenology of religion” branch). Of these, two have played a constitutive role. “The Holy” is one term continuously used by “spiritual style” theorists, often with reference to theologian Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), which has been very influential on the Religion and Film field.<sup>51</sup> In this classic volume, Otto sets up the premise that our idea of the Holy—and by implication, the structure of organized religion—is founded on the schematization of divinity, the clear and concrete definition of its attributes as well as their ethical valences. Yet these terms, according to Otto, cannot exhaustively account for the Holy, since the latter is, by its very definition, ineffable. This dimension of the Holy that escapes rational definition Otto refers to as the *numen*. Hence, if for him the Holy is “a category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religion,”<sup>52</sup> then the *numen* functions as a “special term to stand for ‘the holy’ minus its moral factor or ‘moment’, and [...] minus its ‘rational’ aspect altogether.”<sup>53</sup> From this term Otto extracts “a unique ‘numinous’ category of value and [...] a definitely ‘numinous’ state of mind, which is always found wherever the category is applied.” These concepts “cannot be strictly defined” but “can only be evoked, awakened in the mind.”<sup>54</sup> If spoken of, it is only by way of approximations and analogies, imperfect ideograms that stand for but do not exhaust their mysterious essence. They belong by definition to something “wholly other [...] that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the ‘canny,’ and is contrasted with it.”<sup>55</sup>

Another key religious term that has been employed extensively in this scholarship is “the Sacred.” Here the prevailing influence has been that of Religious Studies scholar Mircea Eliade, and especially his formative volume, *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957). Eliade begins his study

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<sup>50</sup> The origin of the term “ontotheology” is found in Heidegger’s critique of a certain “foundational thinking” that abides by the following conditions: “(a) foundational thinking is thinking that ultimately appeals to a ground; (b) that ground, to be ultimate, must be conceived as *causa sui*; (c) the characterization ‘*causa sui*’ uniquely specifies an absolute, the God of Western monotheism.” Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 51. See also: [chapter 2, note 145](#).

<sup>51</sup> See, for example: Sanders, *Celluloid Saints*, 14-16.

<sup>52</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 5.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.



with charting “two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history.”<sup>56</sup> One mode is the Profane, which keeps humans to the limits of physical space and historical time, and subjects all to interpretation in human terms. The other mode is the Sacred, which is founded on the belief that there exists an “absolute reality [...] which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real.”<sup>57</sup> The “primitive man” or “homo religiosus,” according to Eliade, lived within this second mode—within the Sacred—and hence was open to the world. This openness meant that the homo religiosus was in constant “communication with the gods” and “share[d] in the sanctity of the world.”<sup>58</sup> He or she perceived all reality—including his or her own life and body—as carrying a sacred dimension. Accordingly, this subject may know a stone as a stone, and never doubts its existence within the world of material things; but he or she also knows this stone as sharing in some absolute reality, and has no doubt that it is this reality which truly dictates the stone’s nature. To encounter this nature is thus to witness a “mysterious act—the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural ‘profane’ world.”<sup>59</sup> Such hierarchies, however, become inverted with “modern non-religious man”: for this subject profane existence reigns supreme, avowedly eradicating any trace of the Sacred. Yet, for Eliade, it is untrue to argue that “modern man” lives in a completely desacralized mode of existence, because he cannot but be defined as a descendent of his religious predecessor: as such, “to acquire a world of his [sic] own, he has desacralized the world in which his ancestors lived; but to do so he has been obliged to adopt the opposite of an earlier type of behavior, and that behavior is still emotionally present to him, in one form or another, ready to be reactualized in his deepest being.”<sup>60</sup>

In using these terms, “spiritual style” theorists assumed that objects at large, and cinema specifically, can reactualize an experience of the Holy and/or the Sacred within contemporary society. Here Eliade’s category of *hierophany*—translated from Greek as “revealing the Sacred”—became a crucial way through which to describe this style’s sacralizing operation. Eliade claims that within the religious mindset, all material objects in human life can occupy the status of

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<sup>56</sup> Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 204.

hierophany without losing their worldly connotations. Thus, for example, Eliade has emphasized how the organization of the “primitive home” was centered around a vertical axis (*axis mundi*) and a top opening that allowed the domicile to also be a gateway to other worlds, or how the choice to construct temples on higher ground was reasoned by the claim that a mountain “is the place nearest to heaven [and] because from here, from our abode, it is possible to reach heaven.”<sup>61</sup> In these instances, a profane space that “is homogeneous and neutral”<sup>62</sup> simultaneously becomes sacred space, creating “a break in the homogeneity of space” and “a revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse.”<sup>63</sup> To grasp this space as hierophany, for Eliade, should not be understood as an act of detaching oneself from reality but as an acute participation in reality, the manifestation of “ontological thirst”<sup>64</sup> for living “in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion.”<sup>65</sup>

Other key figures that “spiritual style” theory relies upon for its arguments have spoken more specifically to culture’s hierophanous operation. In several studies during his prolific career, theologian Paul Tillich discussed an infinite “depth” dimension to our world, at once in our midst and removed from us. This is “the unapproachably holy which is the ground of our being and breaks into our existence and which judges us and heals us.” Not only religion but cultural artifacts can reveal this depth. Through such revelation, the object and everything around it is transformed: “It is as in a thunderstorm at night, when the lightning throws a blinding clarity over all things, leaving them in complete darkness the next moment. When reality is seen in this way with the eye of a self-transcending realism, it has become something new. [...] It is no longer merely self-subsistent as it seemed to be before; it has become transparent or, as we could say, ‘theonomous.’”<sup>66</sup> Like Tillich, philosopher of religion Gerardus van der Leeuw also sought to investigate how human subjects encounter the Holy as a depth dimension within their culture, and especially in artistic creation. In *Sacred and Profane Beauty: the Holy in Art* (1948), he laments an apparent rift that has occurred between art and religion, and which overshadows their

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 78.

fundamental proximity as “spring[ing] from the depths of life.”<sup>67</sup> Van der Leeuw’s goal is therefore to recover this connection so as to reveal a basic truth: that “as soon as something ‘of the total meaning of life’ shines forth, the aesthetic experience has become a religious experience.”<sup>68</sup> Unlike religion, Art for him always seeks the ‘foothold in the finite,’ the closed form.”<sup>69</sup> Yet this does not prevent it from approaching the infinite. An artistic image, he argues, is therefore

not simply a thing, an object. It takes its nature from the fact that it tries to express, reproduce something, to be a likeness. An image is always an image “of” something, “representing” something, “meaning” something. If it does not do that, or if it does that no longer, then we do not speak of an image, but, at most, an ornament. The image is characterized by the fact that its reality coincides with another reality, with a “symbol,” that is, coincides in the literal sense. Your portrait is not only a piece of canvas with paint, it is also a reality which in mysterious fashion coincides with your reality [...] The relationship between both realities is neither accidentally nor purposely caused. The picture is not something arbitrary, but the essence of what is represented, its manifestation, its form of appearance.<sup>70</sup>

The essence which is captured in reality, as ancient cultures recognized, is a holy essence. And the image validates this kernel since “divine reality must ‘take place’ in this world, it must somewhere receive concrete contours, so that we can approach it and it can rule us.”<sup>71</sup> Art could never merge with this essence, unless it destroys itself in the process. Hence, it must recognize its apartness, through a “longing for a different image, a different song; for something which would be no longer ‘art.’”<sup>72</sup> Only artistic objects that express such a longing can be considered true in van der Leeuw’s mind. In this respect, as Nayar explains, he “advocates a shift away from the oft moral or ‘edifying’ (and always ancillary) turn that modern ‘religious art’ has taken, toward an art that, through the absence of such religiously counterfeit means, services *God* instead.”<sup>73</sup> Consequently, for him, there is also no doctrinal separation between artworks—to be an art of God rather than “religious art” is to be fundamentally universal.

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<sup>67</sup> Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art* (1948; repr., New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), 283.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>73</sup> Nayar, *Sacred and the Cinema*, 38.

These theories provided the legitimization for “spiritual style” theorists to claim cinema’s role as “true art” that can act as a material threshold onto a reality that is Wholly Other. Two prominent examples for their incorporation may be sufficient in establishing this influence. In his formative *Transcendental Style in Film* (1972), Schrader expresses an interest in discussing cinema not so much for its unique artistic achievements or for its elucidation of particular social-psychological realities, as for the way it can relate to “the Transcendent, the Holy or Ideal itself.”<sup>74</sup> This relationship, for him, can come in three forms:

(1) works which inform the viewer/reader/listener about the Transcendent, which by their very definition must come directly from the Transcendent itself since no man can know about the Holy; works such as untampered nature (common revelation) and ‘divinely-inspired’ Scriptures (special revelation), although this category may be only theoretical since even many theologians regard the various Scriptures as only expressive of the Holy, (2) works which express the Transcendent in human reflection, man-made, man-organized, or man-selected works which are more expressive of the Wholly Other than of their individual creators, works such as the Byzantine ikons [sic] or Zen gardens, (3) works which relate human experience of transcendence, which express not the Transcendent but the human who experiences the Transcendent, works such as expressionist paintings or of the many psychological novels about religious conversions.<sup>75</sup>

The sole category which interests Schrader is the second one, defined in this context as “transcendental” since it is of “human works [...] *expressive* of the Transcendent” rather than works by the Transcendent or those which reduce it to human terms. He acknowledges “the critical queasiness”<sup>76</sup> about analyzing transcendental art, which is derived from the understanding that such analysis must be “a self-destructive process” as it “continually deals in contradictions—verbalizations of the ineffable.”<sup>77</sup> To counter such questioning, he draws explicitly on Eliade’s claim “that there are such things as hierophanies”<sup>78</sup> and asserts in no uncertain terms that “although a critic cannot analyze the Transcendent, he [sic] can describe the immanent and the manner in which it is transcended.”<sup>79</sup> This assertion, in turn, leads to an even bolder claim, one which he

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<sup>74</sup> Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 5.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

explicitly draws from van der Leeuw—that transcendental art “is not sectarian”<sup>80</sup> and possesses a universal form that is respectful of the universality of its referent.

Similarly, Michael Bird also purports to examine how film can act as a hierophany—that is, “a disclosure of the transcendent or sacred precisely through the material of reality.”<sup>81</sup> The paradox inherent to the hierophany is obvious: how can a material object, an artistic representation, render visible that which is fundamentally ineffable? To this, Bird responds that “if art cannot give a direct representation of the dimension of the holy, it can nonetheless perform an alternative religious function: art can disclose those spaces and those moments in culture where the experience of finitude and the encounter with the transcendent dimension are felt and expressed within culture itself.”<sup>82</sup> To theorize this mode of artistic activity, Bird draws on two sources, which for him deal specifically a “*Real* that underlies the *real*.” First, he evokes Paul Tillich’s discussion of “belief-ful realism”: an artistic form that “is at once ‘realistic’ and ‘self-transcending,’ which in its seeking of the Unconditioned focuses upon the concretely finite, which perceives culture both as surface and as transparent to its religious depth.”<sup>83</sup> Then he discusses phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne’s notion of “sensuous realism,” in which a realistic representation provokes an experience “that leads the spectators beyond the level of reflection to the level of feeling;” this feeling, he argues, “enables an encounter with depth, rather than merely the surface of reality.”<sup>84</sup> Synthesizing the two, Bird goes on to argue that for both writers, “the object perceived turns out in fact to possess a subjectivity”<sup>85</sup>: that is, it speaks to the spectator through a voice that is not its own, but rather echoes that which both transcends and subsists reality. In this fashion, cinema becomes a “vehicle of mediation.”<sup>86</sup>

To perform this mediation, however, cinema must operate in a certain way—in a certain style that subtracts from reality all that obscures one’s view of its hidden dimensions. By privileging this austerity, “spiritual style” theorists exhibited an obvious affinity to the traditions of Apophatic or Negative Theology. At the basis of this theological discourse, which may be found

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>81</sup> Michael Bird, “Film as Hierophany,” in *Religion in Film*, ed. John R. May and Michael Bird (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 3.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 11.

in both Judaism and Christianity (mainly its Protestant variant), is the premise that all human modes of knowing God reduce Him to a worldly category and thus disavow His basic unknowability. Accordingly, apophaticism asks that we come to know God by way of negation, i.e., by eliminating from our view what God *is not*. Such an approach, however, should not result in a denial of God. Rather, as Paul Fiddes argues, it may be more appropriate to speak of God in this context as existing in a “place which is not-a-place,” in a state of hiding. In this framework, God is still transcendent, yet His transcendence “is not about absence, but about a mode of presence in which God cannot be confused with the world.”<sup>87</sup> It is thus a transcendence “which is not absolute but an accessible Otherness.”<sup>88</sup> This theological notion of a reduction of the worldly so as to allow an experience of “an accessible Otherness” can be exemplified in the writings of van der Leeuw, Jacques Maritain, and Simone Weil, which have played a distinct role in the theoretical engagement with the spiritual style.

Maritain’s most influential treatise in this context, “Religion and Culture” (1931), places culture within the finite kingdom of human life, which the writer defines as the “temporal sphere.”<sup>89</sup> This sphere’s source is God, however, since “It transcends every civilization and every culture. It is the supreme animating and beneficent principle of all civilizations and cultures, while in itself independent of them all.”<sup>90</sup> Culture can reveal its source or not, depending on what sort of “temporal means” it uses. Thus, a culture that is “engaged [...] in the density of matter” and “demand[s] a certain measure of tangible success”<sup>91</sup> would often use of “rich temporal means” for the achievement of its goals. These means, Maritain stresses, “are the proper means of the world; the spirit, as it were, ravishes them, they do not belong to it.”<sup>92</sup> In contrast, the “humble temporal means” are “the proper means of the spirit. [...] The less burdened they are by matter, the more destitute, the less visible—the more efficacious they are. This is because they are pure means of the virtue of the spirit.” Detached from the world of matter, they provide access to the essential Otherness of God; from this principle, Maritain argues that “the closer one gets to the pure essence

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<sup>87</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “The Quest for a Place which Is ‘Not-a-Place’: The Hiddenness of God and the Presence of God,” in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 45.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>89</sup> Jacques Maritain, “Religion and Culture,” in *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, ed. Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1956), 245.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 249-250.

of the spiritual, the more do temporal means employed in its service diminish.”<sup>93</sup> It is in these diminished means that civilization may find its salvation: thus, if according to Maritain, “the world is perishing of dead weight,” then it could only “recover its youth [...] through the poverty of the spirit.”<sup>94</sup>

Drawing on Maritain’s work, while orienting it towards visual art, van der Leeuw argues that there are only two permissible artistic attitudes to describe the Holy: either “a thoroughgoing realism, such as we are acquainted with from prehistory and from many primitive drawings of the hunt; or, on the other hand, to a thoroughgoing stylization and symbolization, as among the Egyptians who draw the figure of the king twice as large as that of ordinary mortals.”<sup>95</sup> In both attitudes the focus is on distancing the audience from a familiar and intimate understanding of the world: realism situates reality from afar, from a perspective of reverence, that figures it as different rather than natural, thereby allowing the viewer to “penetrate to the ultimate reality of what is represented;”<sup>96</sup> abstraction, on the other hand, reshapes reality altogether, thereby marking a gap between representation and reality, which in turn recognizes that the image is not a likeness, and by implication—that what it seeks to represent cannot be captured or “likened” through human means. Aesthetically, van der Leeuw shows a preference to elements of art which use “humble temporal means”<sup>97</sup> to create this distance. It is for this reason that he praises the presence of darkness and semidarkness in artistic works; in his words: “We come still closer to the holy through the influence of darkness and semidarkness. We are dealing here with a technique analogous to the *via negationis* in the development of the concept of God: by denying everything human and earthly, one comes closest to the nature of God... All earthly contours, all perceptible forms take flight and dissolve where the holy appears.”<sup>98</sup>

Similar theological arguments were presented in Weil’s posthumously-published *Gravity and Grace* (1947).<sup>99</sup> In this short book, Weil imagined the act of creation in radically negative terms: as one in which God has vacated Himself, creating a void in His absence, a void which is nevertheless the “complete fullness.” This absence leaves humans with the drive to reach out, to

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>95</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, 160.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 190-191 (italics in the original).

<sup>99</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (1947; repr., New York: Routledge, 2002).

grow beyond their natural borders. Such growth is influenced by the principle of gravity, which essentially bespeaks of an attachment to tellurian desires and ambitions, a raising of the worldly “self”. This attachment is motivated by the power of imagination, which seeks to fill the void only with the possible—not with the impossible, the transcendental. Yet an attempt to fill the void with an expanded self denies said self of the power of divine love—of Grace. Thus the human subject must imitate God through a similar act of retreat and vacation, which may also be seen as enabling and embracing a void. This act—which Weil dubs as “de-creation”—can only be performed through a destruction of the “self”, or rather its detachment from the powers of gravity. By this mode of absenting, the human subject allows God to transcend infinite time and space and fill the inner void with Grace. Human subjects must then paradoxically know God—through Grace—only through a *via negativa*, an elimination of all that is not Grace.

The common characteristics of the spiritual style’s different theoretical articulations coalesce around the foundation of an aesthetic *via negativa*. Spiritual style theorists operate under the assumption that for cinema to perform its hierophanic act of disclosure, it must first immerse itself within visible reality. It should not, as Ayfre once stated, be a symbolic work that attempts to shape real materials in such a way as to convey a message. Rather film should show the “things themselves” and “ask what they manifest through themselves”—a “mystery of existence [...] as a factual whole in all its inchoate fullness,”<sup>100</sup> which might also be interpreted religiously as “the transcendent Mystery of God” shown through Its “human face.”<sup>101</sup> This revelation is culled from concrete reality, through a movement which Agel described as “go[ing] from the visible to the invisible by means of a ‘forest of correspondences’ which we traverse not so much by ‘the paths of logic as by those of analogy.’”<sup>102</sup> Yet for film to allow for such a movement, as previously mentioned, there is first a need to subtract all those elements—relating to both narrative and form—which the medium adds to the “things” of reality. Ayfre, for example, speaks of this aesthetic approach in terms of an “ascesis of means,”<sup>103</sup> referring to the ability of certain films to undercut the psychological and dramatic structures commonly imposed on cinematic works. This process he analogizes to the phenomenological practice of “bracketing,” whereby all the

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<sup>100</sup> Amédée Ayfre, “Neo-Realism and Phenomenology,” in *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 185.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>102</sup> J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theorists: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 246.

<sup>103</sup> Ayfre, “Neo Realism,” 186.



explanations one forces upon reality are placed in “between brackets” so as to divulge “a total apprehension which is sequentially complete like existence in time, or like human events in which the whole mystery of the Universe is co-present.”<sup>104</sup> Along similar lines, Schrader makes the claim that the “general representative form”<sup>105</sup> in which all transcendental art shares is founded on a “stylization of elimination.” Adapting Maritain’s aforementioned terms, he sees this form as constructed on a progression from “abundant” to “sparse” means—beginning with a familiar and plentiful image of the world so “to sustain audience interest,” and gradually making it less and less embellished so as to “reject the empathetic rationale for that interest in order to set up a new priority.”<sup>106</sup> This priority, for Schrader, cannot come to be within a film that exhibits spectacular miracles or one that it is too removed from physical existence. A transcendental film must be in close contact with reality, but only in the bare form “of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living.”<sup>107</sup>

Robert Bresson’s oeuvre has often been described in this scholarship as epitomizing the apophatic stylistic tendency. Drawn to Bresson’s own definition of proper filmmaking as one aimed at cleansing film from those added elements—“screens”—which deny direct access to reality,<sup>108</sup> several of the “spiritual style” theorists traced through his work various features that captured cinematic asceticism at its purest form. The filmmaker’s choice to use non-professional actors, and his demand that they do not attempt to “act,” attracted particular attention. In his discussion of Bresson’s early films, Ayfre, for one, remarked on “an increasing tendency towards inexpressiveness in the acting,” whereby “anything which could be constructed as direct communication through facial expression or gesture [...] is avoided.”<sup>109</sup> This inexpressiveness, especially in faces, seems to represent nothing; yet “by expressing nothing,” Ayfre states, the actors “express precisely that which is beyond expression”<sup>110</sup>—that is, the “invisible dimension which can be felt in each character and even more in their connections with each other.”<sup>111</sup> Schrader describes the behavior of Bresson’s characters in similar terms: “given a selection of

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>105</sup> Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 8.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer* (1974; repr., Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1997).

<sup>109</sup> Ayfre, “The Universe,” 15-16.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 20.

inflections, the choice is monotone; a choice of sounds, the choice is silence; a choice of actions, the choice is stillness.”<sup>112</sup> This inexpressiveness, in turn, is complemented formally by an austere décor, resolutely inanimate or stubbornly slow camerawork, and flat and frontal mise-en-scène, which undercut the image’s potential to create lavish visions of the world. This representation of the everyday, in turn, “blocks the emotional and intellectual exits, preparing the viewer for the moment when he [sic] must face the Unknown. The intractable form of the everyday will not allow the viewer to apply his natural interpretive devices. The viewer becomes aware that his feelings are being spurned [...] [gradually he] recognizes that there is more than the everyday, that Bresson has put a strangely suspicious quality into his day-to-day living.”<sup>113</sup> Such features also appear in Sontag’s account of Bresson’s “distinctive form of narration,”<sup>114</sup> though with different inflections. She claimed that this form places an emphasis on the Word, particularly through a reliance on first person narration that doubles—rather than replaces—the action seen on-screen. One effect of doubling action through words is an arrest and intensification of emotional responses, particularly around “one of the traditional modes of narrative involvement: suspense.”<sup>115</sup> Sontag sees Bresson as deliberately undercutting suspense so as to make his films more anti-melodramatic, and by implication, more “spiritual.” This anti-dramatic impulse which prevents emotional involvement also manifests itself in scenes being cut short before achieving any marked catharsis, in the elision of anecdotal information, as well as in the chaste and self-effacing nature of the cinematography. Most of all, for Sontag as for Ayfre and Schrader, it is in Bresson’s “particular way of handling actors”<sup>116</sup> that one finds him at his most anti-melodramatic. She reminds her readers that Bresson uses non-professional actors, and undercuts their expressivity by having them speak out the lines rather than act them out, and by systematically hiding their motivations or making them opaque to any sort of psychological analysis. As a result these characters seem isolated from, and transparent to, the world. Aiding to this state is the fact that, though flirting with intimacy and love, these are not the characters’ main objects of desire; more than human contact, these figures are interested in “projects” of physical labor, which are emphasized in all their concreteness through close-up shots of hands incessantly in motion. These “projects” seem to empty out the protagonists, absenting

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<sup>112</sup> Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 39.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>114</sup> Sontag, “Spiritual Style,” 32.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

their “inner selves.” This emptying, for Sontag, is not meant to nullify but, in the language of Weil, to help these characters to “overcome the gravity that weighs down the spirit.”<sup>117</sup> Lacking in psychological profundity, immersed in detailed physical action, they become receptacles for Grace.

Importantly, in discussing the spiritual style, several theorists relate it to past religious aesthetic traditions that embody, in their eyes, a formal *via negativa*. A recurrent reference point in this framework is Byzantine iconography. As Schrader defines it, this iconography “was an art of fixed ends, and those ends were spiritual and ideal rather than human and sentimental.”<sup>118</sup> It is for this reason that Bresson, with his own “spiritual ends,” chose to incorporate the icon aesthetic into his works. Though the icon is much more ornate than Bresson’s “stylization of elimination,” Schrader recognizes that “frontality, nonexpressive faces, hieratic postures, symmetric compositions, and two dimensionality are common to both.”<sup>119</sup> This similarity colors Bresson’s films with the icon’s preference of “the deific over the humanistic.”<sup>120</sup> Accordingly,

the long forehead, the lean features, the closed lips, the blank stare, the frontal view, the flat light, the uncluttered background, the stationary camera, these identify Bresson’s protagonists as objects suitable for veneration. When Michel’s cold face stares into the camera in scene after scene in *Pickpocket*, Bresson is using his face—only one part of Bresson’s complex filmmaking—like a Byzantine face painted high on a temple wall. It can simultaneously evoke a sense of distance (its imposing hieratic quality) and a strange sensuousness (the hard-chiseled stern face amid a vast mosaic or environmental panorama). And when Bresson brings the rest of his filmmaking abilities to bear on that face, it takes its rightful place in the liturgy.<sup>121</sup>

Another instance of relating to Byzantine iconography appears in Gerard Loughlin’s discussion of Andrei Tarkovsky’s oeuvre. Loughlin begins his essay with the contention that “while the ability of film to tell religious stories with power and sometimes subtlety is not in question, its ability to be a spiritual medium is more doubtful.”<sup>122</sup> The homespun religious epics of Hollywood do little in terms of achieving the status of hierophany; rather, Loughlin recognizes the spiritual style as

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>118</sup> Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 98.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>122</sup> Gerard Loughlin, “Within the Image: Film as Icon,” in *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 288.

the key to the medium's power of evoking the transcendent, and as possibly being "the form that grace takes in the cinema, since in Catholic thought the supernatural is but the natural restored to its original beatitude."<sup>123</sup> In the films of Tarkovsky, this style's spiritual operation is crystalized in the context of the representation of nature. Tarkovsky's films tend to foreground the presence of nature, producing extended shots that linger on the rain falling on the ground, the wind blowing through the field. Spectators tend to interpret these images of nature as symbolic, yet for Tarkovsky this is not the case. The reason for this rejection of symbolic interpretation, according to Loughlin, is that Tarkovsky thinks "of the symbol as a stand-in, a substitute, and [he] wants something more immediate, something that does not point away from itself, but into which we are led. He wants something that is, as it were, a symbol of itself, and so not a symbol as we might ordinarily understand the term."<sup>124</sup> In bringing reality to our attention, Tarkovsky insisted on long shots, "pushing us beyond the point at which we might become bored, to one where the time itself becomes freshly present."<sup>125</sup> If these glimpses into nature "are their own reality, intensifiers of the world,"<sup>126</sup> then this reality nevertheless escapes a definitive meaning. It is for this reason, Loughlin argues, that we have to think of them "not as symbols but as icons" in the sense of images that "are just themselves but disclose more than themselves." They register a transcendence that is utterly material, following the logic of divine incarnation. They are "like representations without originals [...] images that have no model, in the sense that what they show cannot be seen except in the image itself." The icon, in Loughlin's definition, "is not just a picture of Jesus as he was, as he might have been if caught by a camera, but Jesus as he is, sitting on the right hand of the Father" Tarkovsky's images of nature function in a similar way: in his cinematic world, "the wind moving the grass is not symbolic of the god passing by, or a spirit drawing near, or of anything at all. It is simply the movement of the wind. But that is the movement of the god, for the religious imagination; not a sign of the god, but the god passing."<sup>127</sup> Thus, through an iconic shot, "the unseeable is shown,"<sup>128</sup> rather than merely symbolized.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 297.

On these terms, it seems that the spiritual style aspires towards transparency; it asks the viewer to move past the image as icon, or in reference to another artistic tradition—“to look not at it but through it” as one would with a Gothic stained-glass window.<sup>129</sup> But what is experienced through this translucent screen? Common to many of these accounts is, again, the profound sense of mystery. Here one encounters the lasting impact of Otto’s category of *mysterium tremendum* as the effect of the numen. This sense of mystery is always attached to things “whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own,”<sup>130</sup> and more specifically—in a manner that “most endear[ed] Otto to the religion-and-film field”<sup>131</sup>—to the negative sites of “nothingness” or the “void.”<sup>132</sup> The “unutterableness of what has been yet genuinely experienced” in the face of this mystery forces a sense of “blissful excitement, rapture, and exaltation verging often on the bizarre and the abnormal.”<sup>133</sup> From this arises a longing to convene—through private and public devotion—with the “wonderfulness and rapture which lies in the mysterious beatific experience of deity.”<sup>134</sup>

While at times the power of this mysterious presence is defined nebulously in the context of “spiritual style” scholarship, it also receives on occasion a more resolute articulation. Schrader, for example, referred to a sense of disparity inherent to transcendental cinema, “a growing crack in the dull surface of everyday reality”<sup>135</sup> which culminates in a “decisive action”: “an incredible event within the banal reality which must by and large be taken on faith [...] a nonobjective emotional event within a factual, emotionless environment.”<sup>136</sup> Such is the case, for example, in Bresson’s *Pickpocket* (1959): here, the protagonist “Michel is a pickpocket within a cold factual world. He displays no human feeling, either for his dying mother or for Jeanne, a family friend. He does, however, have a passion: pickpocketing;” nevertheless, when Michel is finally apprehended, his friend “Jeanne comes to visit him in prison and he, in a totally unexpected

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<sup>129</sup> Roger Homan, *The Art of the Sublime: Principles of Christian Art and Architecture* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 65. As a side note, it is worth mentioning that Gothic art is underrepresented within “spiritual style” scholarship. The most meaningful reference to it in this context is Schrader’s, which defines Gothic architecture as less transcendental than Byzantine iconography. See: Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 138-147.

<sup>130</sup> Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 28

<sup>131</sup> Nayar, *Sacred and the Cinema*, 23.

<sup>132</sup> Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 30.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>135</sup> Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 42.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

gesture, kisses her through the bars saying, ‘How long it has taken me to come to you.’ It is a ‘miraculous’ event: the expression of love by an unfeeling man within an unfeeling environment, the transference of his passion from pickpocketing to Jeanne.”<sup>137</sup> Pence makes a similar argument in the context of the last moments of Lars Von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves* (1996), in which the protagonist Bess’s funeral at sea is shot from a bird’s eye view, while invisible bells are heard in the distance. On the one hand, this scene follows the spirit—if not the letter—of Dogma 95’s “Vow of Chastity,” which called to expunge any trace of illusion from cinema’s representation of reality;<sup>138</sup> on the other hand, there is the implausible appearance of bells chiming as if from nowhere and everywhere, which seems to respond to Bess’s “reaching for dimensions of reality beyond or beneath normal apprehension.”<sup>139</sup> Through this collision between strict realism and an outer-worldly apparition, “the scene extends realism beyond the point at which its short-term gains of exposing and disabling power relations have begun to produce the negative effect of disenchanting the world”<sup>140</sup> and consequently allows for “the reenchantment of reality and the redemption of hope.”<sup>141</sup>

Ultimately, the question of how the experience of this presence relates to religion within “spiritual style” literature remains an elusive one. As is indicated by the above, these theorists believe that the terms of religious experience are important to the understanding of their objects of inquiry. This assertion has been motivated by the religious interest of the filmmakers, both on the level of thematic concerns and of their reliance on past traditions of religious aesthetic. It has also dictated that non-religious categories would be less frequent in discussing these films: for example, the category of “sublime,” which is not inherently connected to religion, yet which refers to the ineffable quality that interests this scholarship.<sup>142</sup> At the same time, one could also argue that these terms in particular were chosen because they were more amenable to be “wrested *from* religion, or

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 80-81.

<sup>138</sup> Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, “The Dogma 95 Manifesto and Vow of Chastity,” *P.O.V.: A Danish Journal of Film Studies* 10 (2000): 6-7.

<sup>139</sup> Jeffery Pence, “Cinema of the Sublime,” 50.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>142</sup> See, for instance, Philip Shaw’s definition of the sublime: “Whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, then we resort to the feeling of the sublime. As such, the sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits.” Shaw, *The Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2. For a rare example where the term “sublime” is foregrounded in this literature, see: Pence, “Cinema of the Sublime.”

at least from religious institutions proper.”<sup>143</sup> Thus, in wanting to make broader claims about films that do not deal specifically in religious content and across a wide spectrum of cultural contexts, it became necessary for this scholarship to discuss experience in a manner that is unbound by theistic notions or doctrinal distinctions, and is reliant on presumably universal states of being. In this capacity it has foregrounded a definition of the ineffable that is very theologically limited—one which, according to Sheila Nayar, is resonant with Peter Berger’s definition of the Sacred as “a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him.”<sup>144</sup> Nevertheless, as much as it has attempted to extract itself from religion, this scholarship still exhibits a certain slippage into basic theological tenets. It often relates to the experience of mystery as an experience referencing a certain (uppercase) entity with a “power” that may even be representative of a certain “will”—i.e., a perennial Spirit, “an ultimately metaphysical, transhistorical substratum [that operates as] an expressive agent with a uniform, essential nature.”<sup>145</sup> And this, in turn, allows certain scholars to also revert to explaining this experience as that of (an often Christian) God.<sup>146</sup> Such efforts seem most problematic when engaging “secular”

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<sup>143</sup> Nayar, *Sacred and the Cinema*, 11.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>145</sup> Murphy, *Politics of Spirit*, 4. By using the term Spirit, this study acknowledges the legacy of Hegel’s conception of *Geist* on religious phenomenologists such as Eliade, van der Leeuw and Otto, and by extension, on “spiritual style” theorists. As Tim Murphy argues, these phenomenologists “reformulate[d] the Hegelian concept of *Geist*, or Spirit, into the less metaphysically aggressive concepts of ‘Man’ or ‘consciousness,’” in a manner that permitted them to sidestep clear ontological claims about the existence of God while still allowing for the reality of a “metaphysical [...] expressive agent” (4). Yet even when grounding its metaphysics in seemingly nontheistic—and even radically human—terms, the “intellectual structure” of phenomenologists of religion—and arguably that of “spiritual style” theory—is “saturated by metaphysical-religious concepts,” and as a result may be seen as theological, or perhaps more accurately—as ontotheological (18). A result of this saturation, and the legacy of Hegel’s philosophy of religion, is the perception that religious experience is *sui generis* in the sense of it being able to fully capture in consciousness the activity of Spirit, and as such is “given greater value, reality, and being than others” (4). This privileging, it may be argued, subsists “spiritual style” theorists’ ideas of spectatorship, even as they approach films that are not explicitly “religious” in theme.

<sup>146</sup> One example of this is Craig Detweiler’s discussion of Bresson’s *Au Hassard Balthazar* (1966) and Abbas Kiarostami’s *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1997). In analyzing these films, Detweiler points to their “slow, ponderous meditations on the human condition [...] which purposefully slow viewers down long enough to awaken our senses to the beauty looming right before us.” This ability to “sharpen our vision” and lead us towards “ongoing transcendence and real transformation” (47) is not reduced to loose “spiritual” categories, but is rather firmly contextualized around “the ancient and enduring questions posed by theology: what does it all mean? Can film reveal the divine? Where is God, in both the creative process and the filmgoing experience?” (35). In another example, Ayfre speaks of a revelation of the “hidden face of reality” as the result of films which “successfully realized the maximum harmony of its meaning and its form, of its purpose and its means” (86). This success, in turn, is understood here in explicit theological terms, since for Ayfre “if a justification of films is possible, it must be as they contribute to enrich our knowledge of the world as God created it” (97). Thus, in the context of the spiritual style, “a stylization of reality, an indirect elicitation, with very sober gestures and extremely pure and simple elements” is understood primarily as an attempt “to evoke Him in his invisibility itself” (107). See: Craig Detweiler, “Seeing and Believing: Film Theory as a Window into a Visual Faith,” in *Reframing Theology and*

films where the theological framework is not readily available. Yet even with regards to films that do operate within a religious theme, the constrictive effect of this approach is evident in this scholarship's presupposition that the Spirit which the "spiritual style" evokes is meant to affirm, and become synonymous with, a more traditional notion of God. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if the affirmation must be total, matching the supposed totality of the god that is affirmed. Hence any sign of ambivalence or even criticism presented through the use of this style is marked as a failure: for example, when Schrader locates in the works of Carl Theodore Dreyer "a consistent thread of ambiguity," and interprets it as a sign of "his doubts about transcendental style [that] stem from fundamental doubts about the nature of the Transcendent in life and art."<sup>147</sup>

Yet it would be possible to define such ambiguous use of the spiritual style in other, less pejorative terms—not as a failure, but as an intentional project for which this style is particularly suited. Thus, to the extent that this aesthetic strategy is commonly understood as conjuring the experience of Spirit, it may be used not only as an effective means of supporting traditional theistic beliefs but also of questioning them. This questioning is ambivalent because its articulation through the spiritual style ultimately binds it to some form of religious framework, and thus prevents it from denying the possibility of God altogether. Yet it is this very ambivalence that lends more potency and complexity to subversion, precisely because its impetus of subversion arrives from *within* the world of religion rather than from without. Canonical "spiritual" filmmakers such as Bresson may not have been interested in the spiritual style's innate capacity to question theologization within the context of a religiously-themed film, but it has captured the attention of some of their current followers. David Volach and Avishai Sivan, as is argued in the following sections, use the style for this exact purpose.

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*Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007); Amédée Ayfre, *The Cinema and the Christian Faith*, trans. J.-F. Tiffoche (Master's thesis, Regent University, 1988).

<sup>147</sup> Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 112.



## 2.2 MY FATHER, MY LORD: SEARCHING FOR AN UNDESIRABLE GOD

*My Father, My Lord*, David Volach's directorial debut, is a work of autobiography to a certain extent. Volach was born to a distinguished Litvak Haredi household in Jerusalem, and spent his adolescent years as a member of the esteemed Ponevezh yeshiva in the religious enclave of Bnei Brak. Though destined to follow in the footsteps of his elders and become a distinguished figure in the community, he decided at the age of twenty-five to turn his back on the Judaic world and embrace secularity. This move came at a considerable cost, as his family refused to speak with him for many years; yet the greatest burden had been the shedding away of an entire way of life, a process which, according to him, has yet to be completed.<sup>148</sup> It is from this profound state of "limbo" that Volach, a relatively inexperienced filmmaker, made his first feature. In this work, which focuses on the religious community of his origins, he attempts to forge a critique of Judaism that is more theological than sociological. This critique, understandably, touches upon the most central of religious concerns: the existence of God and the value of belief.

Commenting on *My Father, My Lord*, several critics noted the strong similarity of its formal language to the spiritual style of Bresson.<sup>149</sup> This similarity is most evident in the approach towards the function of narrative. As in many of Bresson's works, the basic tale which Volach's film depicts is very lean in nature: Jewish Haredi parents prepare to go with their only son Menachem on a trip to the Dead Sea; at the end of this trip, the child dies by drowning, thereby prompting the parents to experience a crisis of belief. In adapting this bare-boned tale to the screen, Volach resisted the temptation of enhancing its dramatic potentialities by adding action-oriented storylines; instead, he effectively stretched this fiction out over seventy minutes, thereby slowing down the pace of the film and allowing for spectatorial meditation on the texture of imaged reality and its hidden dimensions. In a telling interview, Volach explained this narrative approach through a distinction between "story" and "plot." "What is plot?" he asked,

In still images you get a story and you don't need any plot. You see wrinkles, you see eyes. Every image is a story. Why can't cinema be like that? [...] In cinema things need to happen to the character in order for the spectator to become interested in its story, because the

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<sup>148</sup> Alon Hadar, "The First Secular Man" [Hebrew], *Haaretz*, August 22, 2007, accessed August 11, 2013, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/cinema/1.1436723>.

<sup>149</sup> See, for example: Meir Schnitzer, "An Artistic Miracle" [Hebrew], *NRG*, August 24, 2007, accessed August 11, 2013 <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/47/ART1/626/947.html>.

character cannot reveal its story unless something happens to it. Plot is a condition, a tool for telling the story. But it should not be mistaken with the story itself.<sup>150</sup>

In this respect, like Bresson before him (though perhaps not to the same degree), Volach supports a narrative strategy of elimination—or, in his words, a “skipping on plot so to flesh out the story.”<sup>151</sup> This strategy is supported, in turn, by an ascetic use of stylistic means: leisurely camerawork which lingers on character actions; a minimalistic mise-en-scène; a subdued color palette; and relatively non-animated acting, which relies on inexpressiveness of gesture and long moments of silence. Through these stylistic choices, *My Father, My Lord* emerges as a text which does not invite us to skip over the fabric of existence in a hurried race towards a cathartic ending; rather we are given the opportunity to appreciate the countenance of the visible world, not only for its physical attributes, but for the “story” which hides behind them, the meaning that transcends them.

Stylized through elimination, imaged reality seemingly becomes transparent, and we are thus made to perceive it as pointing to something else—as being referential. But to what does it refer? Ostensibly, but not exclusively, to a set of interconnected theological debates which form the basis of Jewish religious law. Throughout his film, Volach inserted scenes which overtly connote halakhic discourses, thereby setting up the conceptual framework for the appreciation of the symbolism of the narrative-at-large. This choice seems to position the film squarely within the traditions of Judaism; or as Volach explains: “the whole religious world is a world of symbols. [...] A man eats a matzo in Passover as a symbol for the exodus from Egypt, and I, who am making a film about religion, will ignore symbolism?”<sup>152</sup> Yet there is one fundamental difference between Judaism’s symbolic world and that of *My Father, My Lord*: in the former, religious discourses are referenced for the purpose of their wholehearted validation; in the latter—for their unequivocal de-legitimization.

One such discourse is that surrounding the hierarchy of creation. Midway through the film, we are shown a scene where the father of the family, a rabbi and representative of religious law, is giving a sermon on a common piece of Halakha wisdom: how only human beings have souls and enjoy God’s providence, and how only human beings who spend their waking hours worshipping

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<sup>150</sup> Pablo Utin, *The New Israeli Cinema: Conversations with Filmmakers* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008), 62-63.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

the Lord have superior souls and receive God's utmost attention.<sup>153</sup> This axiom is then undermined through other moments in the film. For example, in one scene, Menachem is seen observing an old woman being carried into the back of an ambulance. He notices the old woman's dog attempting to climb into the ambulance, only to be unceremoniously thrown out by the paramedic. The dog's desire to stay at its master's side, contrasted with the paramedic's heartless reaction, makes us question why the former would be regarded as soulless by the Halakha only because it is an animal while the latter would be regarded as soulful simply by virtue of being human. In another sequence, Menachem is shown trading picture cards with a child who is apparently mentally-disabled. In the Halakha, individuals with mental disabilities are considered lesser souls since they are unable to cope intellectually with the task of worshipping God; this understanding in part prompted halakhic authorities to put in place certain protective restrictions, such as the prohibition against trading with the mentally-disabled.<sup>154</sup> In the film, Menachem not only breaks this halakhic law regarding trading, but also treats his friend, not as a lesser soul, but as an equal partner. The same equality is not found, however, within Menachem's family. The father is depicted as the dominant figure in the household, owing to his Halakha-sanctioned position of superiority; in comparison, the mother is shown to be subservient, accepting the position of inferiority bestowed upon her by Judaic law.<sup>155</sup> Yet while presenting this hierarchy as part of the Israeli-Judaic world, the film also clearly attempts to subvert it by portraying the mother as the favorable—and thus, morally superior—character, which counterbalances the father's reserved and occasionally callous attitude towards Menachem with acts of compassion and tender nurturing.

Another related Halakha discourse *My Father, My Lord's* narrative evokes is that regarding idolatry. When the father discovers that the card Menachem obtained from his friend carries the image of a bare-chested African tribesman, he deems it an object of idolatry and demands that it be ripped up, reducing the child to tears as a result. The comparison between strictness of the father's demand and Menachem's empathy-inducing misery, as well as the contrast between Menachem's innocence and his halakhic definition as sinful, establish Judaic law as harsh and

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<sup>153</sup> For example, renowned theologian Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) argued that "of all living beings mankind alone is directly under the control of Divine Providence" and that "the greater the human perfection a person has attained, the greater the benefit he derives from Divine Providence." See: Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, unabridged ed. (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 289.

<sup>154</sup> Tzvi C. Marx, *Disability in Jewish Law* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 107-114.

<sup>155</sup> To cite one well-known example of this gender hierarchy: "In pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16).

inhumane. This discourse is further evoked by the choice to stage Menachem's death at the Dead Sea. The particular location is significant here because of its traditional role as a site for purifying vessels of idolatry, as is written in the Talmud: "If one finds utensils upon which is the figure of the sun or moon or a dragon [i.e., idolatrous utensils], he casts them into the Dead Sea."<sup>156</sup> The film reveals the falsity of the idolatry discourse by showing that Menachem, formerly associated with idolatry due to his involvement in the card incident, does not achieve redemption by entering the waters of the Dead Sea but rather forfeits his life.<sup>157</sup> In this, the Dead Sea delivers on the ominous promise inherent to its name, which stands in opposition to its supposed function as an "enlivening" force of purification.

The Halakha discourse on reward and punishment is also featured prominently within the film's symbolic world. This discourse appears through overt references to two noted stories within Jewish religious tradition. The first of these is the story of the Binding of Yitzhak (Isaac), which is explicitly referred to on two occasions in the film: initially, when, in a classroom (*Heder*), Menachem and his friends recite the story of the binding; and later, when in the same classroom, the children, Menachem included, pictorially recreate the binding scene on the blackboard. The second story is that of Elisha ben Abuya and the bird's nest. This reference is made evident in a sequence where the father is seen performing the task of *Shiluach Ha-ken*, as is written in the Book of Deuteronomy: "If, along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young, let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life."<sup>158</sup> The Talmud tells us that the notorious heretic ben Abuya once walked by a tree with a bird's nest and met a man who, like the father in the film, was intent on performing the mitzvah spelled out in Deuteronomy. The man had sent his son up the tree and he, after expelling the mother bird, fell down and died. It was this event—in which following an important religious command resulted in punishment rather than reward—that persuaded ben Abuya, according to the Talmud, to commit to a life of heresy.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3,3.

<sup>157</sup> This, in turn, makes for a self-reflexive comment denying the filmmaker's own "sin": that is, the creation of a film in direct defiance of the Second Commandment prohibition on making graven images (a topic which will be further discussed at the chapter's conclusion).

<sup>158</sup> Deut. 22:6-7.

<sup>159</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Hullin 142a.

Both these stories run parallel to the narrative of *My Father, My Lord* and illuminate its theological stance in significant ways. The binding story, in which Yitzhak's life was spared because of Abraham's uncompromising belief, inspired the halakhic maxim that those who trust in God and follow His law will be rewarded with divine protection. This form of providence, however, is absent in the film, where the father, a devout believer, is not rewarded with the life of his son as in the case of Abraham.<sup>160</sup> Rather, what we find here is a rendition of the story of Elisha ben Abuya and the bird's nest, in which a father's desire to abide by the Halakha does not save him from suffering the worst punishment a parent can receive—the loss of a child. Accordingly, the film gives further credence to ben Abuya's perspective, which it wishes the audience to adopt: namely, that the Halakha is wrong and therefore should be rejected. Yet it does not only lay blame on the Almighty Father of the Halakha, but also on the rabbi father who transferred his parental responsibilities onto Him. Thus, Menachem wandered off while being with his father, at the exact moment when the latter was too busy in praying to his Father and in being “enveloped in the wings of the Shekhina.” By assuming divine providence, and by extension relying on Halakha's cosmological understanding of reality, the rabbi committed a crime of neglect, for he willingly let himself to be cut off from the actual coordinates of existence. Importantly, this crime is not attributed to all devout subjects, but just to the male ones; in contrast, the film positions “the desperate, sometimes protesting voice”<sup>161</sup> of women and specifically mothers as expressing recognition of the need to bypass Halakha laws and their (patriarchal) enforcement. The father silences this voice twice during the film: first, during Shiluach Ha-ken, by separating the offspring from the female bird; and second, by separating Menachem from his mother, with the claim that the child had “grown too old” to go to the women's section of the beach and must therefore accompany him to the men's section. In both cases, separation justified by religious edicts causes needless suffering. And while the female bird is not given room to protest against such measures, the mother does show a measure of defiance when, at the end of the film, she throws volumes of scripture from the women's gallery onto her husband's table on the main floor of the synagogue

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<sup>160</sup> For a detailed discussion of the film's use of the binding story, particularly in the context of the story's role within Israeli Zionist mythology, see: Anat Zanger, “*Beaufort and My Father, My Lord*,” 225-238; Aner Preminger, “Between the Sin of Hubris in Greek Tragedy and Self-Righteousness and Self-Deprecation in the Binding of Isaac: An Intertextual Reading of David Volach's *My Father, My Lord* (2007)” [Hebrew], in *The Curator's Book*, ed. Erez Pery (Ashkelon: Sapir Academic College, 2008), 81-86.

<sup>161</sup> Zanger, “*Beaufort and My Father, My Lord*,” 226.

below. It is in this wordless gesture that she shows her mistrust of Halakha's proclamations on the nature of God and His laws.

Some would define this critique of the Halakha as arguing against the existence of God. Yet such an explanation arguably misses the subtleties of Volach's theological position. Thus, the filmmaker's quarrel seems to be with the interpretation of God and His desires by the Halakha; his critique is aimed at invalidating this interpretation, but not necessarily at invalidating the existence of a god that defies such an interpretation. In fact, it seems as if Volach goes to great lengths to allow room in his film for a possible experience of a hidden god. In referencing God, we see the film's reliance on the spiritual style, as a signifying system for a sacred spiritual presence, come to its fruition. This style, as previously described, conditions the spectator to perceive the imaged reality as being both object and reference. Typically, Volach situates this reality as referring to—and subsequently, invalidating—certain Halakha discourses. Yet the film also contains a number of shots which escape this allegorical framework. These shots are beautifully-crafted, poetic close-ups of commonplace objects, which appear so utterly irrelevant to what little drama taking place in the film that they cannot help but seem aberrant. Thus, for example, during an early scene we see Menachem at home with his father while the latter is studying. The rabbi has little time for his son as he works through the many books compiled on his desk. Consequently, the child becomes bored and distracted. At one aimless moment, he notices his father's teacup, its contents almost fully consumed. As he moves the cup on its saucer, we catch a glimpse at its bottom. The image is so close that the view becomes almost abstract. Every minute detail attracts our attention, from the glistening on the saucer's edge, to the effervescence where the cup meets the saucer, to the crepuscular hue of the background, to the water slowly consuming the surface of a piece of paper that once was part of the teabag. And after lingering on this vision for a while, the film returns to Menachem as he falls asleep and never revisits the teacup again. A similar moment occurs in a later scene, while Menachem's mother dresses him for school. Standing in the kitchen, Menachem shows his mother how he buttoned his shirt wrong. The two laugh, while the mother chastises the child's "naughtiness" in bemusing fashion. Then, while this exchange reaches its peak, the film makes a surprising cutaway towards a low angle view of the kitchen window. This vision is, again, abstract. Layers of depth permeate each other: painted tiles, a window frame, vertical bars overlaid on vertical banisters, horizontal ledges parallel horizontal stairs. Amidst this static tableau, overwhelming in detail, is also a minor drama: a window curtain fluttering in a morning breeze,

its gauzy texture catching the afterglow of morning sunlight. And as we take in this sight, it ends abruptly, cutting back to Menachem's face, his gazing eyes bespeaking a measure of calm astonishment. What do these lyrical images mean? Their referential status is unclear. They seem to be speaking of "something," but its exact nature remains elusive, at least in relation to common halakhic discourses.

A parallel phenomenon may be found in Ozu's works. As Schrader explains, Ozu tends to punctuate (and puncture) the dramatic flow of his films with seemingly irrelevant shots of everyday objects or outdoor landscapes. Each shot is paradoxically a disruption and an integrant of the natural order. It functions, according to Schrader, as a *coda* that "establishes an image of a second reality which can stand beside the ordinary reality; it represents *the Wholly Other*."<sup>162</sup> Dorsky had a similar experience while looking at Ozu's codas. In referring to Ozu's first sound film, *The Only Son* (1936), he provides a lengthy description of how codas constitute and unravel dramatic scenarios in the Japanese master's oeuvre. An elderly mother arrives to visit her son, only to discover that his life, for which she sacrificed so much, is lackluster at best:

We see the son and his mother settling down on an abandoned hill to talk. Below, not far in the distance, an incinerator billows smoke into the sky. Our characters, in a moment of vulnerability, finally open to one another with unguarded honesty and tenderness. He asks if she is disappointed in him and confesses to his own unhappiness. Perhaps he should never have left her. They sit and talk, and we feel the pain and the impossibility of their situation. Hearing the sound of a skylark, the son pauses and looks upward. Ozu cuts to a full-frame shot of the sky. We rest in this transparency and then cut to the mother sitting beside her son. Her head is lowered, weighted down by all that transpired. Then she too raises her gaze, and once more we cut to an open shot of the sky. We take in its lightness and then cut again. We see the incinerator, its large stacks spewing forth dark smoke. In a reverse angle, the mother and son walk away across the open field. There is no summation to all these elements, only the direct experience of poetic mystery and the resonance of the self symbol.<sup>163</sup>

In creating "self-symbols," the spectator encounters a reversal of the classic narrative logic: thus, while in a traditional film, still-life images are used as background to drama and as means of accentuating its affective force, in this and other Ozu scenes it is the emotional conflict that charges the still-life, establishing it as the main focal point. With our attention focused on these "things," we enter a mode of discovery where the world is seen anew. Dorsky equates this to the discovery

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<sup>162</sup> Schrader, *Transcendental Style*, 49 (my italics).

<sup>163</sup> Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, 40.

of the magic of one's hand: "If you have ever looked at your hand and seen it freshly without concept, realized the simultaneity of its beauty, its efficiency, its detail, you are awed into appreciation. The total genius of your hand is more profound than anything you could have calculated with your intellect." These still-life images thus invite us to experience transcendence through the materiality of the world—"to discover the self-existing magic of things."<sup>164</sup> The beauty of this "magic" is, in turn, what supposedly gives these things a dimension of sacred presence within the context of a cinematic rendering. In van der Leeuw's perspective at least, an artistic representation that is truly beautiful—that reaches "perfect form, beauty which rests in itself"<sup>165</sup>—is also fundamentally an expression of the Holy. "Beauty is holiness," he argues, "but holiness is not absolutely, not exclusively, beauty; it is more."<sup>166</sup>

Another filmmaker who employed the still life codas in a comparable fashion was Krzysztof Kieślowski. As Vivian Sobchack notes, Kieślowski's films are filled with images of objects strewn through their dramatic scenarios: for example, a sugar cube touching the surface of an overflowing coffee cup in *Three Colors: Blue* (1993) or a country landscape inverted through a glass marble in *The Double Life of Véronique* (1991). These images, for her, "assert a signifying power and mysterious autonomy that emerge through the hyperbolic excess of ontic presence created by both the camera's close-up framing of them and its hyperempirical detailing of their material presentness." Endowed with an "uncanny and oddly autonomous and intimidating claim on our attention," these objects "break the frame—and continuity—of the characters (and our) quotidian and mastering vision, their increased stature and imperiousness opening our own eyes to the broadened scope of existence."<sup>167</sup> The object "looks back" at us, and in so doing, raises awareness to "the limited scope and ontic finitude of human existence" by "slapp[ing] across the face of the very quotidian world it seemingly represents." In lieu of this "quotidian world," the filmmaker unveils a form of "concrete metaphysics," where materiality is expanded "beyond comprehension into the apprehension (and often apprehensiveness) of something more, something beyond, something other."<sup>168</sup> As a result, Kieślowski "articulates astonishment at the endless field

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>165</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, 286.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>167</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 91-92.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 96.



of possibilities offered by being's ultimate exteriority, by its materialized thrown-ness into a world that it cannot fully comprehend."<sup>169</sup>

Joseph Kickasola describes Kieślowski's still life images along similar lines, though with greater recognition of and reference to the filmmaker's sustained thematic interest in theological questions. He points to Kieślowski's use of close ups in an effort to chart out reality's liminal spaces, demarcating the apparent thresholds of metaphysical and physical, transcendent and immanent, eternal and temporal."<sup>170</sup> The extremeness of these liminal close-ups yields "an abstract image that may be conceived in phenomenological terms (form, dynamics, color, and essential properties), because the identity of the object is often indecipherable (at first)."<sup>171</sup> In their indecipherable mode, objects are forced "to lose all denotation" and acquire a "mysterious identity,"<sup>172</sup> consequently throwing all "signification into varying degrees of stasis."<sup>173</sup> The resulting abstraction, in turn, lends itself to a metaphysical reading, since "perception of abstract images works on a more primary, direct epistemological level in human consciousness, rendering a powerful impact" and "its suggestive dynamics paired with its rich mystery suits it to express theological ideas, which contain both rational and nonrational dimensions."<sup>174</sup> Predisposed via abstraction "toward a wider frame of reference for the perception,"<sup>175</sup> the audience is steered by Kieślowski towards experiencing "the idea of a wider reality, where cause and effect flow from a cosmic order—where time is timeless, and space is ever expansive and fluid."<sup>176</sup>

While Ozu and Kieślowski utilize their "codas" similarly, their approaches nevertheless differ on at least one major count: that is, Ozu's aesthetic operates so as to affirm the common metaphysical understandings prevalent in his culture (Zen Buddhism),<sup>177</sup> while for Kieślowski filmic aesthetic is used to question these very understandings. A clear example for this questioning is *Dekalog I* (1988), which intersects with *My Father, My Lord* in important ways. In the first chapter of his Commandments series, Kieślowski uses the relationship between a father, his son,

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 98-99.

<sup>170</sup> Joseph G. Kickasola, *The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski: The Liminal Image* (London: Continuum, 2004), x.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>177</sup> Schrader, *Transcendental Style*.

and their sister/aunt, to take to task the two main explanatory models of existence: science and religion. Famously the made-for-TV film shows the son as testing out the father's scientific mentality by skating on a layer of ice which the latter, through his calculations, deemed "safe." The child's death by drowning (much like Menachem's) reveals this mentality as incapable and even erroneous in articulating a cosmic order that governs our reality. At the same time, this death also challenges the ideas of providence and ethics that are espoused by the Catholic aunt—an affront to religion that is literalized in the concluding scene, where the father is seen destroying the altar of a neighboring church. Yet even if in this Kieślowski goes against his Catholic roots, he does not invalidate them completely. The codas which he disperses through the film's narrative—a frozen milk bottle, a dead dog, a steaming coffee mug—seem to manifest a mysterious presence, that makes room for an experience of a hidden Spirit even as Catholicism's claims to truth are undercut. Kieślowski's film thus exhibits "a sort of dialectic between metaphysical positions (the presence vs. absence of God)."<sup>178</sup> Consequently, at least in Kickasola's eyes, the filmmaker appears not so much an atheist but "a 'hopeful agnostic' who vacillated on the issue of God's existence throughout his life but philosophically believed, for the most part, that 'an absolute reference point does exist.'"<sup>179</sup>

It may be said that like Kieślowski, Volach also occupies a position of doubt, rather than utter disbelief, vis-à-vis the proposed reality of God. Yet it may also be argued that Volach's film is less agnostic in the sense that it allows for a more substantial theological framing of the mystery of the coda than one finds in *Dekalog I*. The justification for this claim is found, first and foremost, in their stylistic differences. While both deploy codas similarly,<sup>180</sup> Kieślowski uses them outside of the framework of the "spiritual style." Indeed, "this type of ascetic religious 'mode' throughout the form of a film cannot adequately describe the humanistic compassion and persistent vitality"<sup>181</sup> of Kieślowski's filmmaking as a whole. Accordingly, it seems that for the Polish cineaste, a challenge against the systems of theological explanation could not arrive from within an aesthetic framework that is often interpreted as affirming them, especially within a religiously-themed

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<sup>178</sup> Kickasola, *Liminal Image*, 34.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>180</sup> To the extent that Volach's aesthetic functions similarly to that of Kieślowski, its use of codas may be seen as intertextually referential; yet even as an intertextual reference, their excessive ontic presence overshadows this link and renders it suitably vague. Ultimately, rather than restricting themselves to a particular symbolic meaning, these still life images in *My Father*, *My Lord* provoke a gaze that is, as previously mentioned, open and unrestrictive.

<sup>181</sup> Kickasola, *Liminal Image*, 39.

narrative; such a framework, deployed within a religiously-themed narrative setting, would make mysteries seem too godly, too close to religion, for that criticism to seemingly achieve its aims. Volach, on the other hand, operates firmly in the spiritual style, and as such, attempts to show how a critique of basic theological beliefs can come—and perhaps even *should* come—from within the world of religion, without negating theology altogether. As such, the very force of style, which in Ozu's films turns codas into the climax of an ongoing project of affirmation, is utilized by Volach to present an almost unbearable equivocation on the question of God—which, if phrased differently, is tantamount to a simultaneous acknowledgment of godly existence *and* its inherent unfathomability.

In pushing for a theological interpretation of the film's mysteries, Volach's choice to typically designate codas as Menachem's point-of-view shots gains particular importance. By doing so, *My Father, My Lord* again aligns itself with Elisha Ben Abuya who, according to Jewish legend, believed that children stand closer to God since they have not yet been contaminated by years of studying religious law. Thus, the film seems to say, it is the child, and not the rabbi father, who can access this god to which the codas seem to refer (an understanding which is further underscored by the fact that the only point of view coda shot assigned to the father—during the film's final scene, when he looks up at a darkened synagogue ceiling in a state of mourning—conspicuously lacks the other codas' poetic beauty). And it is through Menachem's eyes, in turn, that the spectators are invited to imagine a possible higher power in a manner unencumbered by the perspectives dictated by religious law. The question that remains largely open at the end of Volach's film, however, is whether the spectator should attempt to reach out to this unfathomable god, this mysterious being whose only true "miracle" and sign of agency in the context of the narrative is to bring about Menachem's drowning in the Dead Sea—a body of water whose famously high percentage of salinity makes drowning almost impossible. In light of such human catastrophe, the film seems to say, perhaps it is better to ignore the existence of such an undesirable god than tackle the insurmountable task of understanding it.

### 2.3 THE WANDERER: VERIFYING GOD THROUGH PAIN AND VIOLENCE

Unlike David Volach, experimental filmmaker Avishai Sivan did not come from the religious world, yet like Volach, he too chose this world as the setting of his directorial debut. *The Wanderer* emerged out of Sivan's fascination with the fierce devotional commitment of religious Jews, which he avowedly sought to emulate in making his own art.<sup>182</sup> The film, however, does not amount to a paean to religious life, but rather serves as a harsh critique of it. At the center of this work stands Yitzhak, an adolescent Haredi Jew, who lives with his parents, both religious repentants, in the aforementioned ultra-Orthodox enclave of Bnei Brak. Forced out of the strict routine of Haredi life by a debilitating case of abdominal pains, Yitzhak acquires new awareness of the stifling nature of his surroundings. From this new position, he then embarks on a journey towards greater independence, which first takes the form of incessant wandering through metropolitan streets, and then transitions into the performance of rape upon an unsuspecting woman. Through this journey, the viewers are thus exposed to a vision of Judaic-Israeli life as one founded on repression and violence, specifically in relation to sexuality.

In depicting Yitzhak's tale of wandering, Sivan abandoned the techniques of avant-garde filmmaking that served him well in previous projects,<sup>183</sup> and chose instead to take his inspiration from Robert Bresson, the director he most admires.<sup>184</sup> Accordingly, the film carries the staples of the spiritual style: the use of inexperienced non-actors in order to foreground characters' "inexpressiveness;" the subversion of suspense so as to create an anti-melodramatic narrative; the deployment of a subdued *mise-en-scène* and lethargic performances, captured through extended static shots that foreground their physical textures. These formal attributes come to support the aforementioned critical characterization of Haredi reality as fundamentally repressive. The inert and vacuous nature of the performance reveals repression to be ingrained within Haredi physicality, and the anti-melodramatic structure and use of non-actors assert that this impression is "authentic." The choice to shoot both indoor and outdoor scenes from a stationary third-person

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<sup>182</sup> Avishai Sivan, interview, in *The Wanderer—Promotional Booklet for Cannes 2010* (Or Yehuda: Mouth Agape, 2010), 6.

<sup>183</sup> In comparison, Sivan utilized many of the staples of the avant-garde style—fragmentary narrative, startling juxtapositions between wildly disparate images, abundant use of titles—in a "pilot" short titled *Returnee* made in advance of *The Wanderer*, and in which he portrays "A", a religious Jew who undergoes a crisis of belief.

<sup>184</sup> Avishai Sivan, "Directors & Scriptwriters to Watch: Avishai Sivan," in *A Decade in Motion: The New Voice of Israeli Cinema*, ed. Avital Bekerman and Noa Mandel (Tel Aviv: Israeli Film Fund, 2012), 34.

camera perspective, in turn, further emphasizes the inhibited manner of Haredi corporeal behavior and implicates the frame—and by extension the viewing public—in the operation of Haredi panoptical surveillance.

This type of symptomatic reading of Yitzhak's journey, which situates narrative and formal choices in relation to a sociocultural context, is extremely valuable in illuminating the film's ideological operation.<sup>185</sup> Yet it would be a mistake to reduce *The Wanderer* to its social commentary. For as Haviva Pedaya explains in her study of the subject, Judaic wandering always transpires along two axes: horizontally, where the wanderer relates to societal demands; and vertically, where the wanderer relates to God.<sup>186</sup> It is this latter axis which is underrepresented in a strictly sociocultural reading of Yitzhak's narrative, yet may be crucial for understanding the film's overall project, especially in connection with its use of the spiritual style. In exploring this trajectory, an obvious starting point may be the question—why must Yitzhak's journey be linked to pain and violence? A possible answer may instruct us on the relationship between the protagonist's corporeal development and the supposed nature of God's presence, as well as on the spiritual style's capacity to affirm or question certain essential theological maxims

In her seminal study *The Body in Pain* (1985), Elaine Scarry attempted to articulate in corporeal terms the interdependency between humans and their God. Looking at the Old Testament, Scarry returns to the traditional Hebraic equation of human with body and God with voice. Within this paradigm, “the physical and the verbal run side by side, one above the other, as two distinct or at least distinguishable horizontal ribbons of occurrence.”<sup>187</sup> Here the presence of the Hebraic God in human life is not imagined through its materialization in bodily form; rather, the Scriptures render Him (problematically) visible only through the results of His commands, particularly in relation to two sites of human action: reproduction and wounding. The significance of this insight resides for Scarry in the fact that in both sites, the body in transformation serves to bridge the gap between the two ribbons of occurrence. Hence,

the Word is never self-substantiating: it seeks its confirmation in a visible change in the realm of matter. The body of man is self-substantiating: iteration and repetition (the

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<sup>185</sup> For such a reading, see: Dan Chyutin, “Judaic Cinecorporeality.”

<sup>186</sup> Haviva Pedaya, *Walking Through Trauma: Rituals of Movement in Jewish Myth, Mysticism, and History* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2011).

<sup>187</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 193.

material re-assertion of the fact of their own existence) is the most elemental form of substantiating the thing (existence, presence, aliveness, realness) that is repeated. But the body is able not only to substantiate itself but to substantiate something beyond itself as well: [...] the existence, presence, aliveness, realness of God.<sup>188</sup>

While in the creation of the physical world one could find confirmation to the presence of God, it is in the continued reshaping of this world—and especially, in its human bodies—that His providence is supposedly made traceable. Of the two types of re-shaping, Scarry asserts that violence, at least in the Old Testament, allows God’s presence to be more palpable. “In the scenes of generation,” she explains, “there is no fixed path imaging the passage from the upper to the lower ribbon: insofar as there is one, it must be improvised with each new instance of generative affirmation.” Scenes of wounding, however, provide a more constant and “easily available form of conceptualization”—the image of the weapon—to connect the two ribbons.<sup>189</sup> The manifestations of God’s presence as a weapon (fire, storm, whirlwind, rod, arrow, knife, sword, etc.) often take place in scenes of doubt, where procreation ceases to satisfy humans as sufficient proof for divine presence. “Unable to apprehend God with conviction,” Scarry explains, “they will—after the arrival of the plague or the disease-laden quail or the fire or the sword or the storm—apprehend him in the intensity of the pain in their own bodies, or in the visible alteration in the bodies of their fellows or in the bodies (in only slightly different circumstances) of their enemies.” These passages of hurting are often figured through the vocabulary of punishment. Yet this vocabulary tends to describe “the event only from the divine perspective” and as a result, “obscures the use of the body to make experienceable the metaphysical abstraction whose remoteness has occasioned disbelief.” Accordingly, the passages of punishment may be best understood, for Scarry, as “openly identify[ing] the human body as a source of *analogical verification*” and “specified forms of hurt [...] as demonstrations of His existence.”<sup>190</sup>

Following this logic, the biblical primal scene which connects violence to the structures of doubt, verification, and belief, without reverting to the rhetoric of punishment, is that of the aforementioned narrative of the Binding of Yitzhak. Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son in order to prove his belief in Him. This proof, however, is not produced for the benefit of God; He already knows the believers from the nonbelievers by virtue of His omniscience. Rather, the proof is for

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 201 (my italics).

Abraham, in order that he may extinguish those few remaining flames of doubt burning inside him. Appropriately, verification is offered through an undeniable physical alteration—the mutilation of the child, whose exposed entrails would overcome “the distance, dimness, and unreality of God” to make “the dimly apprehended incontestably present.”<sup>191</sup> Before this cathartic climax is met, the scene ends abruptly, with God offering a ram as a substitute, thereby transferring substantiating violence from human to animal. Yet even with this dislocation, the impact of violent verification remains so palpable that it was enough to reinforce Abraham’s belief in the existence of the Almighty.

But what of the young Yitzhak? Faced with the possibility of undergoing the ultimate test of God’s reality through his own flesh, was he left with no doubt as the blade moved from him to the sacrificial ram? Did he not secretly want further proof of his Maker? Since the Scripture hides the young boy from our sight, focalizing the narrative instead through his father, the question remains unresolved.<sup>192</sup> Yet it may be argued that this potential predicament, disavowed within the Old Testament, becomes a central concern for Yitzhak’s namesake, the protagonist of *The Wanderer*. From the film’s outset, the Haredi Yitzhak is shown to be questioning the reality of godly existence. This doubt, however, should not be confused with utter disbelief; if anything, by choosing to follow in the path of pain and wounding, Yitzhak does not attempt to assert the non-existence of God but to locate sources of verification to His reality. Thus, his movement from suffering to inflicting pain may be seen as a way of overcoming doubt, of a gradual upping of the ante in terms of embodiment so as to respond to an ever increasing suspicion that God does not exist. This process, however, ends in failure, since the moment of “presencing” God never arrives in the aftermath of the rape. Consequently, the film’s conclusion forces an understanding that substantiation through pain is a risky endeavor, if not for ethical reasons, then for the basic reason that the realms of God and humans are inherently distinct: since God may never be truly substantiated, analogical verification must be repetitive, obsessive, and—when violence becomes the means to an end—costly.

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>192</sup> Though the Bible remains mute on the topic, the Midrash does include interpretations of the Binding story which describe Yitzhak as taking an active part in his own sacrifice, even to the extent of asking Abraham to tie him well so that the involuntary movements of his wounded body would not somehow interfere with the father’s execution of divine will. See: Aliza Shenhar, *Love and Hate: Biblical Wives, Lovers, and Mistresses* [Hebrew] (Haifa: Pardes, 2011), 185.

How does one avoid an endless cycle of verifying-via-violence? Perhaps this is what troubles Yitzhak's mind, as he stands tearful in front of his parents' apartment during the final moments of the film. God's operation in the binding scene seems to suggest a possible solution, offering a sacrificial animal body so as to relieve the human corpus from the burden of verification. Another, less lethal solution to this problem, however, may be found in the category of artifact. Thus, artistic objects—especially, but not exclusively, figurative representations—can function as “a substitute for man's body which was originally itself a substitute for God's body;”<sup>193</sup> by their physical existence, subject to a process of initial creation and continual alteration (additions, deteriorations), they facilitate “a materialization of God and a dematerialization of man.”<sup>194</sup> This solution of an artificial intermediary may seem less appropriate for Judaism, read in light of the Second Commandment, than for Christianity, where the logic of transubstantiation engendered a rich visual culture centering on the figure of Christ, especially in relation to two major scenes of corporeal substantiation—birth (nativity) and death (the passion and crucifixion). This viewpoint, however, ignores the fact that the Second Commandment did not prevent Jews from creating an impressive material culture (a topic which will be discussed at length in the chapter's conclusion). As a product of this culture (though less committed to its religious tenets), *The Wanderer*, an artistic rendering of extreme embodiment, could be seen as engaging this role of artificial intermediary—of staging, if only fleetingly, the drama of making “the incontestable reality of the sensory world become the incontestable reality of a world invisible and unable to be touched.”<sup>195</sup> But therein lies the rub. Scarry's arguments apply to graven images which have a material presence in our “incontestable reality.” Yet a film does not have the same strong relationship to physical space that a sculpture, painting, or a theatrical piece have; unlike them, it is, in Christian Metz's words, “made present in the mode of absence.”<sup>196</sup> Consequently, we are left to wonder: can cinema respond to a potential desire for analogical verification, facilitating a supposed experience of God at critical moments of doubt?

A possible key to answering this question may be found in film's relationship with the most final of bodily alternations—death. Bazin, for one, was very adamant about the importance of this

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<sup>193</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 237.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>196</sup> Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 44.



connection, which he defined as “justif[ying] the term [...] of cinematic specificity.”<sup>197</sup> It is not coincidental that, as previously mentioned, he often compares the film medium to objects related to demise: Egyptian mummies, burial statuettes, Turin’s Shroud. This persistent analogy underlies his understanding of cinema as existing in relation to the denial of mortality. Film can, if desired, present the moment of death only to transcend it again and again; it can allow us to “desecrate and show at will the only one of our possessions that is temporally inalienable: dead without a requiem, the eternal dead-again of the cinema!”<sup>198</sup> Yet what this assertion also makes clear is that the filmic process of cheating death is performed at the price of bringing spectatorial attention to death. And not only death per se but everything in film that, in the words of Serge Daney, “simulates death: the sexual act, metamorphosis. More generally, the main nodes of a story, the decisive moments when, under the impassive eye of the camera, something is unraveled, someone changes.”<sup>199</sup> Even more broadly than these particular transformations, which seemingly relate to on-screen bodies, attention is diverted to the body of the film itself—that which sustains all represented bodies, and whose demise (“fin”) marks their end.

Film can thus bring awareness to the passages and transformations of bodily modes, and as such may be used as a platform for the analogical verification of God. The measure of awareness is contingent on the choice of subject matter; hence, films which specifically deal with death, as Bazin’s famous discussion (1950) of the documentary *The Bullfight* (Pierre Braunberger, 1949) clearly indicates,<sup>200</sup> may result in greater spectatorial engagement with bodily transformations than those that do not. Yet subject matter alone is not enough to make a spectator cognizant of corporeal reality through film. Aesthetics can work to render this reality palpable—and thus amenable to use for overcoming doubt—or to dismiss it. For Bazin, Daney argues, the basic aesthetic rule was that “we must not glide over the precise moment of transformation. It must be seen and ‘apprehended;’ it must not be read or let itself be imagined in the back and forth movement of montage.”<sup>201</sup> To

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<sup>197</sup> André Bazin, “Death Every Afternoon,” *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 30.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>199</sup> Serge Daney, “The Screen of Fantasy (Bazin and Animals),” in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 38-39.

<sup>200</sup> Bazin, “Death.”

<sup>201</sup> Daney, “Screen of Fantasy,” 39.

refuse this aesthetic rule, then, is tantamount to making death, or any other form of bodily alteration, generalized and invisible.<sup>202</sup>

The question of proper aesthetics subsequently affords us an opportunity to return to *The Wanderer* and discuss the operation of its spiritual style. Sivan's decision to shoot the characters in extended uninterrupted shots, usually from a distance, allows bodies to maintain their integrity of action in full view. Additionally, the non-acting, by Sivan's own admission, creates an "odd"<sup>203</sup> effect in comparison to that of professional acting, and in so doing, helps draw attention to the "microphysiognomy"<sup>204</sup> of human gestures. The minutia of physicality and its transformations are further highlighted through the minimalism of the film's décor and mise-en-scène, which throw each gesture into sharp relief. Finally, the insertion of gaps within the narrative, and the choice to exchange cuts-on-action for shots that function as "standalone scenes,"<sup>205</sup> undermine the film's linear flow, foreground the physical texture of the diegesis, and imbue it with mystery. Together, these characteristics function much like in a typical Robert Bresson film, which, in the words of Steven Shaviro, "exalts whatever it encounters, raising everything to its utmost level of carnal intensity, its highest possible degree of embodiment."<sup>206</sup> This description reminds us that the spiritual style is not merely a negation but also an affirmation—in phenomenological fashion—of "things [...] in their absolute, asignifying immanence, before they have been organized into stratified structures or organic wholes."<sup>207</sup> It thus may acknowledge, as Shaviro contends, "the radical impossibility of worldly and spiritual existence,"<sup>208</sup> but not at the price of eradicating their connection. Rather, with Bresson as with Sivan, a vision that binds the physical and metaphysical is evoked, manifesting an enigmatic Spirit—one which in the context of a religiously-themed narrative and in relation to common spiritual style theorizations, should be understood as godly.

Yet this aesthetic strategy also carries with it certain drawbacks in relation to the project of analogical verification. Shooting from a distance, for example, can sometimes block access to the particularities of imaged bodies. Similar distance is also created by the relative avoidance of

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>203</sup> Sivan, "Interview," 7.

<sup>204</sup> Béla Balázs, "Visible Man, or the Culture of Film (1924)," *Screen* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 93-108.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>206</sup> Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 251.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 249.

cutting, which can prevent cinema from penetrating reality, to use Walter Benjamin's provocative image, "like a surgeon [who] cuts into a patient's body."<sup>209</sup> And finally, Sivan's choice to fashion character movements as lethargic also alienates from corporeal experience by hiding the full range of bodily expression. As a result of these stylistic aspects, particular bodies occasionally dissolve into a generalized form; they stop acting as palpable effigies, helpful proxies for the viewers' physical body, and become imaginary and abstract, thereby undermining the promise of an experience of God's materialization established by other formal elements of the film. In presenting scenes of pain and violence through the spiritual style, *The Wanderer* thus ends up highlighting this style's inherent tensions vis-à-vis the (theological) prospect of materializing a supposed hidden divinity: a simultaneous push to locate God through the "things themselves" and pull away from these things in fear that such an operation would reduce Him into profane matter. Like the film's protagonist, this aesthetic strategy therefore seems at odds with itself, unable—or unwilling—to appease doubt completely.

Bresson scholars may have implicitly recognized this equivocation in the spiritual style—and in analogical verification as a whole—which *The Wanderer* emphasizes. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Schrader asserted the importance of a "decisive action," which countermands the style's proclivity towards absencing materiality by introducing an undeniable physical presence. Such an action, which allows corporeal transformation to be apprehended in its utmost intensity, arguably appears only once in *The Wanderer*. The moment in question, unique in its stylistic rendering, takes place in the office of Yitzhak's doctor, following the operation. Yitzhak is seen watching the doctor, when suddenly, he faints and falls to the floor. The collapse is shot from the general direction of the physician, and follows the transition into a loss of consciousness, only to cut after Yitzhak has fallen; concurrently, the frame, centering on Yitzhak's upper body in medium range, begins to shake, as if in identification with the protagonist's bodily transformation. Caught off-guard by this stylistic choice, the spectator is impelled to acknowledge the existence of two bodies. On the one hand, there is Yitzhak's body, whose unraveling is made tangible by the camera shaking. Rather than our usual removal from this body, we are now touched by it. On the other hand, however, we are aware that the shaking frame looks upon Yitzhak rather than strictly represents his point of view, thereby indicating the existence of another body: not the doctor's, but

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<sup>209</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 233.

that of the camera/film itself. Yitzhak's body then relies on the body of cinema to survive; they are linked by an invisible umbilical cord. Accordingly, each side is affected by the connection: as Yitzhak breaks down, so does the film; and when the film ends, Yitzhak is no more.

“An editor's cut,” Sivan once noted in an interview, “resembles the guillotine—one has to know where to cut, and when to let the frame breathe a while longer.”<sup>210</sup> Nowhere is this statement more apropos than in relation to the cut that follows Yitzhak's collapse. The awareness of the two intertwined bodies—the represented Yitzhak and the film object that contains and sustains it—unexpectedly makes them both appear in the flesh; and as the cut arrives, the editor's blade enters deep. For an instant, it may even feel for the viewers like the guillotine's lash can extend as far as their own bodies, resulting in some discomfort. It is in this moment of impact, where bodily transformation is effected on and off the screen, that doubt could potentially find appeasement. Its placement in a seemingly inconsequential section near the ending of the film—as opposed to climactic “decisive actions” of Bresson and Ozu—may work against this aim, and serve as a deliberate manifestation of the filmmaker's aforementioned ambivalence regarding the possibility and value of verification. In the diegetic world, at least, this instance does not offer Yitzhak a pathway to deliverance, perhaps because it seems to him insufficiently violent, inadequately corporeal; he thus is impelled to continue on wandering in search of other diegetic bodies whose pain may help him overcome his misgivings. Yet for certain inclined audience members in search of verification, the reverberation (and amplification) of Yitzhak's pain through a body of film may still seem potent enough to provoke the comforting experience of—in Peter Fraser's term—an “incarnational gesture.”<sup>211</sup>

## 2.4 SPIRITUAL AESTHETICS, JUDAISM, AND ISRAELI FILM

As previously discussed, *My Father, My Lord* and *The Wanderer* challenge the basic coherence and ethical character of Judaic theology and doctrine: in the former, the Halakha is revealed as fundamentally erroneous in its understanding of reality, and as undermining the humanity of its adherents; in the latter, the struggle to maintain halakhic commitments leads to a disastrous

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<sup>210</sup> Sivan, interview, 8.

<sup>211</sup> Peter Fraser, *The Sacramental Mode in Film* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 2.

preoccupation with suffering and inflicting pain. Unsparing in their critique, these films thus seem to tap into an undercurrent of distrust that has characterized much of secular discourse on Israeli-Judaic life. Yet the films' critical stance is complicated by the reliance on the "spiritual style" for the articulation of their claims. By using this style in the context of their religious discussion, they create mysteries and affirm the need to interpret them theologically. This theological understanding—of the experience of this mystery as an experience of a hidden god (or its traces)—is not tantamount to an acceptance of traditional theologizations. Indeed, Volach's film seems to resist such traditional models by contrasting the hidden god with the one articulated by the Halakha, while Sivan's film performs a similar resistance by revealing tensions within Judaic theology itself as to the possibility of making a hidden god amenable to physical manifestation and human comprehension. Yet as a form of critique, these measures do not culminate in a denial of the possibility of a god. By maintaining an ambivalence, the films seem committed to showing that an effective critique of Judaism can only grow from the bedrock of doubt, and not of disbelief—that only by not foreclosing on the possibility of God's existence can one avoid the reductive secular-religious binaries and truly come to grips with traditional theology and the social actions performed in its name. This may not have been the purpose of canonical spiritual filmmakers like Bresson and Ozu, who, at least in the minds of "spiritual style" theorists, aimed at affirming the basic tenets of their respective religious traditions. But, as will be discussed below, it does associate these films with a general tendency in modern Israeli art, which has drawn on divine imagery so as to bestow a measure of ambivalence upon the idea of God and religious belief.

Thus envisaged, it may be important to contemplate how the application of the spiritual style within this particular religious setting relates to Judaic aesthetic thinking, especially around the Second Commandment prohibition against the making of a graven image. Does the mere act of attempting to provoke an experience of a hidden God through image manifest an avowedly heretical stance on the part of Volach and Sivan? Does it exemplify their desire to distance themselves from Judaic tradition? Judaic history, at the very least, points to the contrary. The Second Commandment does seem to embody the biblical preference of the audible over the visual as a mode of divine revelation. Yet while this audible emphasis, in the words of Melissa Raphael, did not turn Judaism into "a markedly iconic tradition", it also did not lead to "a general and indiscriminate ban on visual images."<sup>212</sup> In actuality, the contemporary conception of Judaism as

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<sup>212</sup> Melissa Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image: A Jewish Theology of Art* (London: Continuum, 2009), 38.

aniconic has been the result of 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian anti-Semitic reformulation of Jewish culture as fundamentally inartistic and therefore inferior, which was then used by assimilationist Jews to assert their similarity to iconoclastic Christianity in a manner that made “virtues out of the vices attributed to them by the surrounding society.”<sup>213</sup> In contrast, Judaic discourse on the Second Commandment since biblical times has been remarkably diversified, and included many voices that were in favor of images, especially if these are not “made or treated as idols.”<sup>214</sup> As a result, though the prohibition of images has limited the output of Jewish artists in comparison to those of other cultures (at least in the pre-Emancipation era), it did not prevent Jews from developing an impressive visual culture that became “a significant constituent of Jewish thought and identity.”<sup>215</sup>

If *The Wanderer* and *My Father, My Lord* are not essentially incompatible with a Judaic culture that permits visual representations—even of God—then one also has to ask whether the representational strategy enforced in their representation—the “spiritual style”—should be considered endemic to Judaism or rather a foreign entity that is incorporated from outside of Judaism so as to “contaminate” it. Justification for the latter definition may be found in the “predominant disposition” of “spiritual style” discourse “toward a Christian idiom,”<sup>216</sup> taken from its theological and philosophical underpinnings and from the denominational background of many of its principal authors (some of whom, like Schrader and Ayfre, had also received extensive theological and clerical training). Does this mean, however, that the spiritual style is fundamentally anti-Judaic? Again, such an unequivocal assertion may seem unwarranted, since the spiritual style’s *mélange* of the material and immaterial does resonate with a certain Judaic approach to visualizing God. Contrary to common understandings, divine revelation in the Bible was not solely auditory, as the voice was often preceded by a visual manifestation that foreshadowed its appearance. This appearance of visual theophany, in turn, oscillated between presence and absence, masking and unmasking, so as to simultaneously maintain the sanctity of divine transcendence (God as spirit) *and* immanence (Man as made in God’s image).<sup>217</sup> Much of Jewish

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<sup>213</sup> Margaret Olin, “Graven Images on Video? The Second Commandment and Jewish Identity,” *Discourse* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 18. See also: Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>214</sup> Raphael, *Judaism*, 26.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>216</sup> Nayar, *Sacred and the Cinema*, 35.

<sup>217</sup> George Savran, “*He Came Upon the Place*”: *Biblical Theophany Narratives* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2010), 61-104.

visual culture maintained a similar oscillation, especially in relation to the representation of the human figure. In this respect, Judaic tradition resisted giving the represented figure a sense of fullness, because that would indicate an attempt to capture the completeness of God—which is futile—or to collapse it to materiality—which is blasphemous. At the same time, it also did not want to discard the phenomenal world, and the human body and face in particular, because these carry the traces of God’s visage. The result of this was the acceptance of an aesthetic rule whereby, in the words of Lionel Kochan, “if any material entity is to symbolize God, it must be of such a nature as both to disguise and reveal this relationship.”<sup>218</sup> This was often done by means of subtraction: by indicating in a visual fashion that the represented object is somehow incomplete (what Raphael terms as the “theology of the slashed nose,”<sup>219</sup> in reference to the practice of severing the noses of represented faces in order to create a distance between them and the complete face of God).

To illustrate this Judaic stylistic strategy it may be useful to refer to certain visual elements that have been used in Jewish mysticism to achieve a transcendent experience. As discussed in the introduction, the term “Jewish mysticism” refers to a tradition within Judaism that came into its own at the end of the twelfth century with the *Book Bahir* and the Provence and Gerona Schools, reached its apex a century later in R. Moses de Leon’s *The Zohar*, and was revamped after the Spanish Expulsion (1492) by the leaders of Safed’s devout community, the European Hasidic movement, and 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century kabbalists. Though not identical in their approaches, the various strands which make up this tradition are nevertheless largely unified by an interest in experiencing mystical visions of “a realm of divine truth that is beyond the senses, logic, and language.”<sup>220</sup> In explicating this vision, mystics articulated a complex understanding of God, the underlying principle of which, according to Gershom Scholem, was as follows:

*Ein-Sof*, the Infinite—that is the concealed Godhead—dwells unknowable in the depth of its own being, without form or shape. It is beyond all cognitive statements, and can only be described through negation—indeed, as the negation of all negations. No images can depict it, nor can it be named by any name. By contrast, the Active Divinity has a mystical shape which can be conveyed by images and names. To be sure, it is no longer a potential object of vision [...]; the stature and value of such visions become greatly diminished. Prophetic visions are mediated by infinite levels of theophany originating in deeper

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<sup>218</sup> Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image: A Jewish View* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 62.

<sup>219</sup> Raphael, *Judaism*, 38.

<sup>220</sup> Joseph Dan, *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 12.

regions, which are below the sphere with which the Kabbalists are dealing. However, the Godhead also manifests itself in symbols: in the symbol of the organically growing shape of the tree, in the symbol of the human form, and in symbols of the names of God.<sup>221</sup>

For Scholem, the symbols that manifest the Godhead should not be understood in the traditional sense of allegory: i.e., as “an infinite network of meanings and correlations in which everything can become a representation of everything else, but all within the limits of language and expression.”<sup>222</sup> Rather, it is the very boundary of language and expression which the kabbalistic symbol threatens to break. Accordingly,

in the mystical symbol a reality which in itself has, for us, no form or shape becomes transparent and, as it were, visible, through the medium of another reality which clothes its content with visible and expressible meaning [...]. The thing which becomes a symbol retains its original form and its original content. It does not become, so to speak, an empty shell into which another content is poured; in itself, through its own existence, it makes another reality transparent which cannot appear in any other form. If allegory can be defined as the representation of an expressible something by another expressible something, the mystical symbol is an expressible representation of something which lies beyond the sphere of expression and communication, something which comes from a sphere whose face is, as it were, turned inward and away from us. A hidden and inexpressible reality finds its expression in the symbol. If the symbol is thus also a sign or representation it is nevertheless more than that. [...] It is a “momentary totality” which is perceived intuitively in a mystical *now*—the dimension of time proper to the symbol.<sup>223</sup>

Of the various symbolic forms used as aides for a mystical vision of a (supposed) divine revelation, two merit special mention. The first of these is the Hebrew alphabet. In discussing the problem of the Second Commandment's legacy in Judaism, Moshe Halbertal explained how words as a symbolic form came to be seen as an appropriate representation of God while pictorial representations were considered less so. “A picture,” he explains, “is meant to capture the entire essence of what is being represented; it strives to create a full representation, leaving no gaps. Not so language: A verbal description is only partial, and the open spaces it leaves make language an appropriate medium for representing God.” Not only that, but as Halbertal continues on arguing,

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<sup>221</sup> Gershom Scholem, *On The Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah* (1976; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 38.

<sup>222</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 26.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.



a picture or a statue presents a stable, fixed situation. It takes the subject and makes it into an object, it freezes its presence (in the case of statues, literally ‘carving in stone’), and the object may come to replace what is represented in the consciousness of the person contemplating it. In contrast, sound and word are dynamic in their essence and do not create a fixed object capable of replacing the thing represented. The risk of visual representation, then, is that the thing represented will be replaced by its representation. The statue or picture meant only to symbolize what is beyond it will likely become itself the focus of worship, and worship of representations voids their representative nature. The statue acquires the characteristics of what it represents and ultimately replaces it.<sup>224</sup>

The logic of partiality and instability of meaning of which Halbertal speaks seems to have been what motivated Jewish mystics to use words as part of their meditative visionary practice. In the case of 18<sup>th</sup> century Hasidim, for example, “the beginning of the meditative practice [was] what can be defined as ‘entering the letters of prayer.’” During this process, as Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer explains, the Hasid experienced a “transparent vision through the object: the letters slowly lose their concrete form as the person concentrates on them, and then the divine spiritual qualities inherent to them come to be revealed.”<sup>225</sup> Another word-related meditative practice prevalent in different stages of Kabbalah history involves recombining the letters of God’s name. Kabbalists had hundreds of such combinations at their disposal, and were encouraged not only to articulate them repeatedly but also use them as grounds for the creation of new alphabetic juxtapositions. These combinations were often described in great detail within mystical texts: for example, R. Eleazar of Worms (1176–1238) in his *Sefer Hashem* and R. Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291) in his *Sefer Or Hasechel* featured extensive tables of different modes of assemblage. These tables, according to Idel, were clearly meant for meditative purposes aimed at an experience of the Divine—an experience which R. Eliezer himself attested to, and which R. Abulafia set as an ultimate goal for his followers, even as he warned them of the dangers of misapplication.<sup>226</sup>

Though Halbertal is right in recognizing the “partial” and “unfixed” nature of words, what these meditative engagements with *the alphabet* seem to highlight is the shortsightedness of his attempt to deny the word the status of a “visual representation.” Such has also been the main tendency within mysticism scholarship, where the Hebrew letters “have traditionally been

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<sup>224</sup> Moshe Halbertal, “Of Pictures and Words: Visual and Verbal Representation of God,” in *The Divine Image: Depicting God in Jewish and Israeli Art*, ed. Sharon Weiser-Ferguson and Ronit Šorek (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2006), 12-13.

<sup>225</sup> Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietist Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1968), 97.

<sup>226</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah*, 116-118.

interpreted as verbal symbolic systems rather than as visual imagery.”<sup>227</sup> To relate to letters visually, Leslie Atzmon argues, is to acknowledge that they function as forms of “figurative symbolism”<sup>228</sup> aimed at “overcom[ing] the Jewish proscription on the creation of graven images.”<sup>229</sup> This symbolic dimension of the letters is manifested through their anthropomorphic design, which provides them with “striking figurative qualities including a ‘head’, ‘body’ and ‘feet.’” As Atzmon explains:

These lines [of Hebrew letterheads] are organic rather than geometric—they are curved and shaped like two-dimensional renderings of fleshy creatures with torsos, arms and legs. Although there is a strong visual relationship among the letters—certain curves and thick to thin strokes, for example—each letterform is very distinct and each has its own recognizable visual character. *Koph* [...] has a head on top of a lengthy spine, in contrast to *Lamed* [...] with its long neck that ends in a curvy body. Each letter has its own recognizable visual temperament as well. The letter *Bet* looks like a seated creature, stolid and stationary, while the letter *Gimel* perambulates, one fleshy foot placed in front of the other. Looking at the complete alphabet, one could almost imagine the letters interacting with each other—some letterforms reaching out to, and some shunning, other individuals. These visual characteristics of the letters—designed artefacts that assimilate human qualities—make them ideal candidates for anthropomorphic attribution.<sup>230</sup>

Since “the Hebrew alphabetic ‘characters’ look and act like living creatures,”<sup>231</sup> and since the kabbalist was asked to “meditate on the visual qualities of the letterforms and carry out meditative rendering of the letters,”<sup>232</sup> it is important then to not only read them as components of abstract words, but as potential corporeal-material thresholds onto *Ein Sof*. They are formed through subtraction, as in the “spiritual style,” so as to assert their partiality (for theological reasons) and prevent the distractions of reality’s plentiful image (on experiential grounds); yet even under the influence of a negative aesthetic, these letters serve to highlight the Judaic need for a palpable image as a bridge towards a sacred mystery.

Even more figurative is the symbol of the *Sefirot*, which may be rightfully seen as “the clearest indication of a kabbalistic worldview and of a text’s reliance on kabbalistic traditions and

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<sup>227</sup> Leslie Atzmon, “A Visual Analysis of Anthropomorphism in the Kabbalah: Dissecting the Hebrew Alphabet and Sefirotic Diagram,” *Visual Communication* 2 (2003): 110.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

sources.”<sup>233</sup> Though central to Kabbalah, the Sefirot was never conceptualized in a unified way.<sup>234</sup> It is often described as a collection of ten “potencies”<sup>235</sup> that make up God, as well as means of divine emanation, through which holy light flows from *Ein-Sof* and animates creation. Most importantly, it served as a palpable and concrete way through which to understand and reach God. As Elliot Wolfson explains,

there is sufficient textual evidence to suggest that the study of the *sefirot* itself, as viewed from within the tradition, was considered an exercise in imaginary visualization. Speculation on the *sefirot* was intended to provide a vehicle for experience as the assumption of the kabbalists was that these emanations constitute the *deus revelatus*. [...] To put things differently, the *sefirot* constitute the theophanic image that represents the visible shape assumed by the hidden Godhead. The emanative process, therefore, should be viewed as the projection of the imageless divine into an image.<sup>236</sup>

This process of visualizing the Sefirot as the “visible shape of the Godhead” was not purely an internal process of conceptualization, and was not left entirely to the vagaries of each kabbalist’s imagination. Rather it was given form in the sefirotic diagram, which became a principal feature of Judaic mystical ritual. In an attempt to capture the logic of *harmonia mundi*—whereby God, cosmos, and nature are united by common structural elements—this diagram presents a seemingly abstract structure which, upon closer inspection, reveals a visual correlation to “the bilaterally symmetrical human figure”<sup>237</sup> and “an inverted Tree of Life.”<sup>238</sup> While reflecting common written descriptions of the Sefirot,<sup>239</sup> these “visual correlations,” according to Atzmon, “push the sefirotic system beyond existing verbally based interpretations of anthropomorphism and allow visually based abstract figurative associations.”<sup>240</sup> The abstractness of the visual aid insinuates the existence of a transcendental sphere of divinity that is at a stage of removal from the world of finite forms. At the same time, the invocation of humanity and nature within this visual aid purports to show that our world and God’s are still connected somehow, and that this connection should be

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<sup>233</sup> Dan, *Kabbalah*, 43.

<sup>234</sup> For a summary of the different definitions, see: Idel, *Kabbalah*, 151-168.

<sup>235</sup> These are: The Crown (*Keter*), Intelligence (*Binah*), Wisdom (*Chokhmah*), Greatness (*Chesed*), Power (*Gevurah*), Beauty (*Tiferet*), Endurance (*Netzach*), Majesty (*Hod*), Foundation (*Yesod*), and the Kingdom (*Malkhut*).

<sup>236</sup> Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 280-281 (italics in the original). On this role of the Sefirot system, see also: Moshe Hallamish, *Introduction to the Kabbalah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 1992), 97-100.

<sup>237</sup> Atzmon, “Visual Analysis,” 104.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>239</sup> For example, Kabbala’s attempts at delineating an anthropomorphic vision of the Godhead through the mystical term *Shi’ur Komah*. See: Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, 15-55; Hallamish, *Introduction*, 113-114.

<sup>240</sup> Atzmon, “Visual Analysis,” 103.

considered important, especially for meditative purposes. Perhaps even more than verbal descriptions, the diagram thus served in the kabbalist's mind as a concrete "mapping of the divine, an iconic representation by means of which one is afforded the opportunity to behold the luminous face of God."<sup>241</sup> This goal, and the aesthetic strategy through which it is supposedly achieved, associate the sefirotic diagram with classic theorizations of the "spiritual style."

To be sure, these equivalences between the Hebrew alphabet/sefirotic diagram in Jewish mysticism and the "spiritual style" in *My Father, My Lord* and *The Wanderer* should not lead us to claim that their shared aesthetic language is the only mode by which one can provoke the supposed experience of a hidden God. Though rarely providing a fully embodied vision of God, Jewish culture has nevertheless shown a remarkable variety in its visual representations of divinity, ranging from the fully abstract to the purely mimetic.<sup>242</sup> As a result, the current scholarly consensus asserts, in Raphael's words, that "the essentialist, normative accounts of Jewish art ignore irreconcilable differences and discontinuities between its histories."<sup>243</sup> Concurrently, it may also be unproductive to reduce cinema's spiritual aesthetics to the singular model of the "spiritual style." Indeed, as has been discussed in the introduction, several attempts were made in recent years to undermine the dominance of this paradigm and offer alternatives based on national and doctrinal differences.<sup>244</sup> What these qualifications seem to show is that in approaching the theological question of God in His hidden and revealed dimensions, cultural-historical context does matter. In the context of the specific audience of *My Father, My Lord* and *The Wanderer*—Israel's liberal intelligentsia—this question could only be broached through the apophatic imagery of Jewish mysticism, augmented via the spiritual style; solely through negative aesthetics can God-related concerns be discussed in a manner that would not upset this social group's traditional uneasiness with fully formed, unmistakable images of divinity.

Even if these films embody their audience's uneasiness in the same way that the Hebrew alphabet and the sefirotic diagram capture their kabbalist users' similar distrust in concretizing

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<sup>241</sup> Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 285.

<sup>242</sup> See Sharon Weiser-Ferguson and Ronit Šorek, "Depicting God in Jewish and Israeli Art," in *The Divine Image: Depicting God in Jewish and Israeli Art*, ed. Sharon Weiser-Ferguson and Ronit Šorek (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2006), 13-53; David Sperver, *This Is the God of Israel: Light and Sun in the Iconography of the Israeli God within Jewish and Israeli Art* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan University and The Leiber Center, 2006).

<sup>243</sup> Raphael, *Judaism*, 8.

<sup>244</sup> See, for example: Nayar, *Sacred and the Cinema*; Lindvall et al., "Spectacular Transcendence;" Tiago de Luca, "Carnal Spirituality: the Films of Carlos Reygadas," *Senses of Cinema* 55 (July 2010), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2010/feature-articles/carnal-spirituality-the-films-of-carlos-reygadas-2/>.

God, they relate to a “stylization of elimination” differently. Though they were pointed towards an ineffable “beyond the sphere of expression and communication,” Jewish mysticism’s visual aids ultimately served to account for and “domesticate” it within a systematic theology that bridged the gap between Godhead and Active God. This is also how many theorists imagined the operation of the “spiritual style”, which attempts to conjure up a mystery understood as Spirit only to collapse it onto traditional theological concepts of transcendent power and agency. In contrast, *My Father*, *My Lord* and *The Wanderer* work against this operation, highlighting its inner tensions around the incomparability of an ineffable and an explainable divinity. In this, the activity of these films parallels more the operation of several Israeli artists in the 1970s such as Etti Abergel, Pesi Girsch, Moshe Gershuni, and Moti Mizrahi, who arguably share the audience of Volach and Sivan’s films. Rather than affirming or denying God, these visual artists raise the question of His existence; accordingly, their works “exhibit a constant dialectic between absence and presence as well as a meditation on the very possibility of artistic representation and its material and conceptual significance.”<sup>245</sup> Unsurprisingly perhaps, this ambivalence is addressed through a largely negative aesthetic, and at times even with direct reference to the aforementioned kabbalistic visual symbols.

Much like in their Israeli art counterparts, the theological criticism of *My Father*, *My Lord* and *The Wanderer* seems irrevocably open-ended; its tensions surrounding the concepts of “divine knowability” and “divine inexplicability,” as well as the conflict between cinema’s “presence” and “absence” through which these tensions are stylistically evoked, ultimately emerge as irresolvable conceptual conundrums. Is this the intended result for these films? To expose an irrevocable ambivalence surrounding God’s existence and subsequently leave Israelis in a perpetual state of deadlock? Possibly, yet even if that is the primary goal, it does not invalidate the presence of a hope to move past such ambivalence. By pressing their dialectics to the limit, these texts inevitably look for where they could potentially be unraveled—where the separations between “God,” “science,” “religion,” “secularity,” “sacred,” “profane,” “spiritual,” “material,” “presence,” “absence” are radically dissolved, not into a synthesis, but into a state of existence where conceptualization no longer exists. This is the limit of *utter mystery*, rather than of *a definition of mystery as something or nothing*. It is an impossible limit, for all experiences and representations, even those of mystery, are arguably overdetermined by a discursive framework which, at least on

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<sup>245</sup> Irena Gordon, “The Body of Creation,” in *The Absent Body: Body Imagery between Judaism and Christianity in the Work of Eight Israeli Artists* (Tel Aviv: Beit Hatfutsot—The Museum of the Jewish People, 2012), 115.

some level, *tells us what they are*. Though Jewish mystics share a similar hope for an unraveling, it has always been subsumed under a desire to reinforce their basic cosmological system; “spiritual style” theorists and their predecessors within Theology and Religious Studies similarly attempted to cling to such hopes, but also often restored theological or ontotheological understandings. For *My Father, My Lord* and *The Wanderer* such hope still exists as a path worth travelling on even if one can never reach its final destination. It may well be, however, that in their avowed state of doubt, these two films are able to remain open enough so as to take mystery as far away as can be from its explanatory context—to lift a veil at the horizon of our known, if only fleetingly.

### 3.0 “WHO CAN FIND A VIRTUOUS WOMAN?”: FEMALE (IM)MODESTY AND MYSTICAL-MESSIANIC TIME

*Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.*—The Book of Proverbs<sup>246</sup>

*We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.*—Walter Benjamin<sup>247</sup>

In the latter months of 2011, the issue of female marginalization within Judaism became the focus of a heated debate in Israeli public discourse. During this period, the national press reported on a variety of incidents involving Judaic exclusionary practices: for example, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) male soldiers purposefully leaving a public ceremony because it involved a female singing performance; women being harassed on buses within religious settlements and neighborhoods for not observing gender separation by moving to the back; and ultra-Orthodox men spitting on a thirteen year old girl who was not dressed in accordance with Judaic laws of propriety. These and other similar occurrences were denounced publicly by secular politicians and media, and even prominent figures within the observant community spoke against the spread of anti-female segregation. Concurrently, Israeli citizens took to the streets on more than one occasion in support of the victims of Judaic discrimination.

The social uproar around this event marks the culmination of a growing awareness within Israel’s secular precincts to the patriarchal-oppressive nature of Judaic faith and practice. This understanding, which has achieved prominence since feminism gained a foothold in Israeli culture during the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>248</sup> recognizes the androcentric tendencies of the Bible as a text that was written by men in a masculine mode of linguistic address, representing their particular perspectives, desires, and needs. Within this text, a masculine God created Man as the embodiment and the carrier of His will. Woman, on the other hand, was engendered as a lesser being, one whose primary function is to accompany Man and alleviate the pains of his solitude. From this

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<sup>246</sup> Prov. 31:30

<sup>247</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 264.

<sup>248</sup> Tal Dekel, *Gendered: Art and Feminist Theory* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2011), 184-210.

foundational Genesis scene, the Scripture creates a narrative predominantly focalized through male figures, while female figures are often marginalized and undervalued. The current feminist critique also recognizes that the Bible's positioning of the female as the quintessential Other became the foundation for an institutional marginalization of womanhood that covers all aspects of Judaic life. Too numerous to be described in full, Judaism's discriminatory decrees include denying women participation in social leadership roles and access to certain public areas, defining them as the legal property of men (fathers and husbands), reducing their function to motherhood and childbearing/childrearing, denying them protection in cases of sexual assault on the grounds that the responsibility falls squarely on their shoulders, and preventing them from participation in major parts of religious ritual.<sup>249</sup> These and other limitations, in the eyes of many secular Israelis, make Judaism fundamentally incompatible with feminist demands.<sup>250</sup>

Israel's Judaic community has certainly not been oblivious to this criticism, and whilst extensive parts of the rabbinical institution have reacted with reactionary measures aimed at preserving the status quo, many observant women sought in turn to absorb some of feminism's tenets and challenge the religious system from within. These challenges have been most influential in different spheres of everyday Judaic life: for example, in revising ritualistic practices and synagogue spaces so as to represent a more egalitarian ethos; in increasing the scope of women's religious education, including the establishment of yeshiva-like all-women's educational institutions (*Midrasha*); in pushing for a more vigorous female presence in the public sphere, with religious women taking positions of greater authority in religious councils, in front of rabbinical courts, as teachers in schools, and even as rabbis; in demanding a more profound and explicit discussion of sexually-related issues, especially surrounding menstrual cycle, procreation, conjugal intimacy, and rape; and in promoting political activism for gender equality, as with the

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<sup>249</sup> Yakir Englander and Avi Sagi, *The New Religious-Zionist Discourse on Body and Sexuality* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2013), 115-82; Hanah Kehat, *Feminism and Judaism: From Collision to Regeneration* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ministry of Defense, 2008); Rachel Elijor, "'A Beautiful Maiden with No Eyes': Women in Jewish Language, Religion, and Culture" [Hebrew], in *Blessed He Who Made Me a Woman? The Woman in Judaism—From the Bible to the Present*, ed. Maya Leibovich, David Yoel Ariel, and Yoram Mazor (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot and Chemed Books, 1999), 37-56.

<sup>250</sup> It should be noted that this description is only a generalization which, for the sake of this argument, reduces the complexity and diversity that characterizes Judaic womanhood as a textual-discursive phenomenon and as a lived experience. For a broader, multifaceted approach to this topic, see: Noa Shesher Aton, "'Hebrew Woman—Who Will Know Your Life?': A 'Brief' Historical Overview" [Hebrew], in *Blessed He Who Made Me a Woman? The Woman in Judaism—From the Bible to the Present*, ed. Maya Leibovich, David Yoel Ariel, and Yoram Mazor (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot and Chemed Books, 1999), 57-74.



establishment of Kolech (1998), the first Orthodox Jewish feminist organization in Israel.<sup>251</sup> Additionally, on the fringes of Israel's Judaic society there have also been attempts to not only deal with the symptoms of halakhic androcentrism but engage the problem at its core. In this framework, devout academics have interrogated Judaism's sacred literature in an effort to create a new body of exegesis (*Midrash*)—to locate dissenting voices or provide new interpretations that would serve as grounds for shifting the Halakha towards feminist ends, without dismantling it completely.<sup>252</sup> The result of these combined efforts within the academic and non-academic spheres has been, in turn, “an unprecedented Orthodox revolution which is growing and expanding, stage after stage, a circle within a circle, allowing women to move between them and inside them and to create a lively, kicking, challenging, and at times threatening religious feminism.”<sup>253</sup>

As the events of 2011 clearly indicate, female modesty (*Tzniut*) is a site of heightened interest within feminism's appreciation of Judaism. It is also where the chasm between secular and Judaic feminisms is most acutely felt, with the former going to great lengths to denounce Judaic ideas of modesty, and the latter going to great pains to accommodate for these ideas within a pro-feminist framework. At the foundation of Judaism's modesty discourse, Shira Wolosky explains, is a premise which reduces women to the danger “of *'ervah*, a nakedness that contains an erotic element and requires covering.”<sup>254</sup> This danger provokes an image that is “rather grim: men are seen as sexually driven compulsives requiring utmost and constant vigilance to keep them in any kind of bounds, while women are seen as provokers of sin.” In protection of this supposed male vulnerability, the Judaic world has established “detailed disciplines of women, regulating their seating in the synagogue, eating at feasts, and positioning in recreational and educational settings, alongside myriad and multiplying regulations of dress, hair covering, greetings, deportment and,

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<sup>251</sup> Kehat, *Feminism and Judaism*; Caplan, *Internal Popular Discourse*, 197-244; Bella Layosh, *Women of the Threshold: Orthodox Women in Front of a Modern Change* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2015); Tova Cohen (ed.), *A Woman and Her Judaism: A Contemporary Religious-Feminist Discourse* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Kolech and Rubin Mass, 2013); Hagit Ackerman, *Making Seder: A Passover Seder for Women—Feminist Text and Ritual* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2012); Irit Koren, *You Are Hereby Renewed Unto Me: Gender, Religion, and Power Relations in the Jewish Wedding Ritual* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2011), 55-88; Tamar El-Or, *Reserved Seats: Religion, Gender, and Ethnicity in Contemporary Israel* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2006); Tamar El-Or, *Next Pessach: Literacy and Identity of Young Religious Zionist Women* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1998); Tamar El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant: On Ultra-Orthodox Women and Their World* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992).

<sup>252</sup> See, for example: Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* [Hebrew] (2004; repr., Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2007).

<sup>253</sup> Koren, *Hereby Renewed*, 86.

<sup>254</sup> Shira Wolosky, “Foucault and Jewish Feminism: The Mehitzah as Dividing Practice,” *Nashim* 17 (2009): 18.

in the ultra-Orthodox world, also work spaces and public travel.”<sup>255</sup> These measures, which may be collected under the general heading of *Mehitzah* (separation), engender Foucauldian “analytic spaces” that “provide fixed positions [...] and establish operational links”<sup>256</sup> as means of social regulation. Secular feminists assert the need to abolish these separations in an effort to empower the Judaic woman. Religious feminists, on the other hand, often reinterpret the *Mehitzah* in a manner that does not lead to its abolishment, and with it—the basic tenets of the Halakha. Thus, while recognizing it as a tool of coercion and domination, these feminists attempt nonetheless to fashion the *Mehitzah* in a manner that is consonant with their critical agenda: for example, by looking at modesty-regulated spaces as offering opportunities for women to “express and strengthen a self-conscious identity, out of which a sense of their own initiative and value commitments may develop,”<sup>257</sup> or by expanding the purview of modesty to the community as a whole so as to help people not “view themselves according to the images of each other that have been generated through generations of cagey anxiety and misguided notions, but in the far more forgiving gaze of the divine.”<sup>258</sup>

Judging by the public statements offered around the aforementioned events, it seems that for the most part, secular Israelis were uninterested in accepting Judaic feminism’s stance on the potentially redemptive aspects of modesty-regulated spaces. Rather, the only proper solution provided by them for the observant woman’s seclusion was to have her depart the Judaic world, leaving its modesty laws behind. This position, it should be noted, did not emerge *ex nihilo*. Rather, we find it mirrored in the recent proliferation in recent years of Israeli films (and television programs<sup>259</sup>) whose aim, so it seems, has been to stage scenes with Judaic women transgressing the taboos of modesty in sexual and romantic contexts. As a cycle, these media texts imagine religious women to not only be Israeli-Judaic reality’s principal victims, but also its primary challengers. Their challenge is imagined to emerge out of a desire for sexual exploration—a desire

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>256</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 143.

<sup>257</sup> Wolosky, “Foucault,” 23.

<sup>258</sup> Tova Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 61.

<sup>259</sup> Though this chapter focuses on Israeli cinema, it is worth noting a few televisual texts that share a similar interest in immodest Judaic women: for example, *A Touch Away* (Kochanovsky, Weis-Berkowitz and Ninio, 2007-2008), which stages a modern Romeo and Juliet narrative between an ultra-Orthodox teenager and a secular Russian-born immigrant; *Question Marks* (Babayof and Dror, 2011) and *Allenby* (Danon and Taub, 2012), which both feature female characters who left the religious world after being sexually molested, and then became exotic dancers.

that is deemed natural and thus inherently in conflict with Judaism's artificial laws of sexual regulation. Accordingly, these texts place their characters on a collision course with Judaism's power structures, a process which ultimately necessitates that they abandon their religiosity or live in an unbearable tension with it.

The following pages will evaluate this corpus of media texts in an effort to determine the nature of its feminist critique, and more importantly, to discuss this critique's underlying ambivalence as indicative of contemporary negotiations between Israeli Judaism and secularism. In this framework, the chapter will account for Judaic-themed Israeli films' alignment with a secular perspective that imagines feminist resistance to Judaic patriarchal rule almost exclusively through the lens of sexual taboos.<sup>260</sup> It is argued that this reduction facilitates a contradictory movement within many of these cinematic texts: on the one hand, it surfaces dimensions of Judaic patriarchal oppression and provides a critical deconstruction of their operation and influence; on the other hand, however, it fetishizes the Judaic as an Other, and by extension, allows the secular viewer (or at least its male variety) to simultaneously repress a shared patriarchal ground with Israel's religious sector and indulge in the voyeuristic pleasures of seeing modest religious women in immodest situations. In delineating this model, the discussion centers on two films in particular—*The Secrets* (Avi Nesher, 2007) and *Bruriah* (Avraham Kushnir, 2008)—that attempt to countermand tendencies of reductive “othering” by addressing Judaic patriarchy from within Judaism. Thematically, these films expand the range of feminist engagements by exploring other sites of contemporary resistance (mainly through scholarship) and by suggesting a new feminist Midrash through intertextual references to female role models within Judaic tradition. Yet in attempting to bridge the gap between religious and secular values, these films ultimately succumb to the dominant strategy of focusing on modesty, and to the intricate matrix of desire that it triggers by exposing women who are traditionally kept unexposed. While this level of narrative engagement ultimately unveils their conservative tendencies, these films' stylistic operation nevertheless poses a more radical challenge to the regimes of gendered and religious othering. This challenge, in turn, finds its potency in the supposedly redemptive potential of Jewish mystical-messianic temporality.

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<sup>260</sup> The texts discussed in this chapter are not all made by avowedly secular filmmakers, yet they are produced for consumption in predominantly secular markets and thus operate, to a lesser or greater degree, within the context of Israeli secular expectations.

### 3.1 GAZING AT THE IMAGE OF AN “IMMODEST” JEWISH WOMEN

As the formative text within Judaism, the Bible pays relatively little attention to the Jewish woman. Its aforementioned androcentric nature leads it to construct narratives almost exclusively around male figures. Women are often absent from these stories, or rather exist in their margins. The readers rarely gain access to their subjectivity, their feelings and desires, and their voices are seldom heard. What is privileged instead is the image of a Jewish woman as a male construct, a projection that caters to the Jewish man’s fertile imagination. As such, woman is reduced to the various stereotypes that make up the Eternal Feminine: the dutiful mother, daughter, and slave, always subservient to the men in their lives; or the shrewish mistress and harlot, constantly forcing upon men the actuality of sin.<sup>261</sup> Within this conceptual framework, the Bible tends to foreground scenes of an “immodest” sexual nature, which play into patriarchal fantasies about seduction, intercourse, and rape. Following Laura Mulvey, biblical scholar J. Cheryl Exum argued that this positioning places the Jewish woman at the mercy of a penetrating scopophilic gaze. This ocular economy is famously literalized in the story of David and Bathsheba. As Exum explains:

By introducing Bathsheba to us through David’s eyes, the biblical narrator puts us in the position of voyeurs:

...he saw from the roof a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful (2 Sam. 11.2)

[...] The narrator controls our gaze; we cannot look away from the bathing beauty but must consider her appearance: “very beautiful.” We presume she is naked or only partially clad, and thinking about it requires us to invade her privacy by undressing or dressing her mentally. The intimacy of washing is intensified by the fact that this is a ritual purification after her menstrual period, and this intimacy, along with the suggestion of nakedness, accentuates the body’s vulnerability to David’s and our shared gaze. A woman is touching herself and a man is watching. The viewing is one-sided, giving him the advantage and the position of power; he sees her but she does not see him.<sup>262</sup>

In placing Bathsheba at the end of a voyeuristic gaze, the Bible thus highlights her position of “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Consequently, the male reader is more than “invited to take David’s symbolic

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<sup>261</sup> See, for example: Shenhar, *Love and Hate*.

<sup>262</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 25-26.

position as the focalizer of the gaze: he can look through David's eyes; he can fantasize himself in David's place. The woman is naked for his pleasure."<sup>263</sup> Such is the compromised position, Exum argues, of many other women in Judaism's most sacred text.

For all their voyeurism, the Bible's descriptions of immodest Jewish women are often rather tame. Yet even in their unembellished state, these depictions succeeded in igniting the non-Jewish imagination with regards to the sexual qualities of "the Jewess." Of special import in this context is the trope of *la belle Juive*, which became prominent particularly in modern European public discourse as a way of relating to—and distancing—the Jewish Other. In occidental literature, the "beautiful Jewess" was "ubiquitously conflated with the Oriental woman, and recognized by her stylized sensual beauty: her large dark eyes, abundant hair, and languid expression."<sup>264</sup> Her beauty served as a marker of her purity, nobility, and loyalty, creating the image of an idealized Jew worthy of inclusion into civilized Western culture (e.g., Rebecca in Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* [1820]). Yet, as Sander Gilman asserts, it also functioned as "a visible sign of her danger to all human beings,"<sup>265</sup> aligning her with the seductive *femme fatale* archetype (e.g., Salomé in Oscar Wilde's eponymous play [1896]). This danger, in turn, connoted the Jewess, according to Jean-Paul Sartre, with the "aura of rape and massacre," as the one "whom the Cossacks under the Tsars dragged by her hair through the streets of her burning village."<sup>266</sup>

The hyper-sexualization of the Jewess within non-Jewish culture is particularly evident in Western pictorial tradition, which actualizes the Bible's voyeuristic gaze and heightens its effects. In the example of Bathsheba and David, their story provided, according to Exum, "both theme and pretext for artistic representations of a naked woman."<sup>267</sup> In these paintings, Bathsheba is placed on display in a manner that asserts her exhibitionism. At the same time, the spectators "are invited to identify with David's perspective by means of the woman's body, which signifies his sexual arousal."<sup>268</sup> By making Bathsheba the central figure in lieu of David, the painters are almost forced to provide her with a measure of complexity. Yet ultimately she is rendered without any profound

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>264</sup> Nadia Valman, *The Jewesses in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>265</sup> Sander L. Gilman, "Salome, Syphilis, Sarah Bernhardt and the 'Modern Jewess,'" *The German Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 201.

<sup>266</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 48.

<sup>267</sup> Exum, *Plotted*, 30.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 33.

subjectivity, functioning merely as an object of passive display. This visual strategy, which offered a way of controlling the threat of the Jewess to patriarchy's fragile sense of supremacy, came to be applied to the pictorial representation of not only biblical, but also modern Jewish women. It also heavily influenced the representation of biblical and modern Jewish women in other visual media within gentile-occidental culture, including cinema.<sup>269</sup>

As previously noted, Judaic culture drew from the Bible's description of immodest women a fervent demand for female modesty, and thus, in contrast to non-Jewish culture, sought to separate women from men using a Mehitzah. This physical barrier—whether it be a wall in a synagogue or a piece of cloth hung in the back of a bus—is founded upon and perpetuates a particular ideology of visibility. Within Judaic thought, Melissa Raphael argues, a clear dichotomy is established along gender lines: man is considered spiritual, while woman is “essentially physical and sexual” and thus “lacks the ontological complexity of the male body.”<sup>270</sup> In being more physical, the woman is also inherently more visible than the man. This visibility, in turn, marks her as a threat to Judaic masculinity, since it is liable to “draw men's attention away from God's presence, especially in worship, towards the finitude of nature.”<sup>271</sup> As a result, the real problem Judaism has with women seems less to do with “female sexuality as such, but the public *spectacle* of female sexuality,”<sup>272</sup> which brings them closer to the category of idol. Accordingly, in an effort to prevent the operation of idolatry, separation is introduced so as to hide the Jewish woman from sight.

This rule of separation—which seeks to correct the “ontological flaw or lack in women, namely that they, like idols, are an essentially visual, material lure”<sup>273</sup>—functions not only in the realm of everyday Judaic life, but also in artistic representation. Contrary to the aforementioned western paintings, where Jewish women are placed as objects of “to-be-looked-at-ness,” Jewish art, especially before the height of Emancipation, traditionally denied women visibility. Consequently, according to Raphael, within Jewish paintings the frame has often been dominated

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<sup>269</sup> Exum, *Plotted*, 19-53, 175-237; Nathan Abrams, *The New Jew in Film: Exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 45-46. While a comparison between the representation of immodest Jewish women in Israeli and non-Israeli cinemas may be highly instructive, it is beyond the limited scope of this chapter.

<sup>270</sup> Raphael, *Judaism*, 71.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

by the presence of devout men, who function much like Christian icons, “defining the Jewish posture in relation to God and properly hypostasizing or summarizing the appearance of Jewish worship.”<sup>274</sup> On the rare occasions when Jewish women were displayed during this period of relative paucity, their representation seemed detached from the Judaic world to which they belong. In the absence of a clear iconography, the Jewish woman emerged as “oddly un-Jewish” in assuming a blank expression and “an air of vacancy,”<sup>275</sup> as appearing “ordinary in relation to the specialness of the holy,”<sup>276</sup> as representing (especially after the Holocaust) the “dead body of European Jewry” but not its “activity of spirit.”<sup>277</sup> Even when visible, Raphael asserts, women remained a “visual lack”<sup>278</sup> in Jewish art.

The invisibility of women by means of separation and exclusion seems to subvert the Mulveyian model of the voyeuristic gaze; and indeed, religious apologetics have argued for the value of this invisibility as a protective measure against the harmful effects of female objectification. While this reasoning is not entirely specious, it nevertheless disavows the oppressive functions of female invisibility within Judaism’s patriarchal rule. Firstly, by keeping Jewish women invisible, they are denied the status of acting subjects, which is hitherto reserved only for men. Within this paradigm, the Jewish woman is taught to deny her own selfhood, her own body—even to the extent of disavowing the presence of her vagina.<sup>279</sup> For her, “an image of a holy woman is an image of an absence; it is self-erasing.”<sup>280</sup> Furthermore, while the actual-ocular voyeuristic gaze is denied in Judaism, its textual equivalent, which may be traced back to the Bible’s description of immodest women, continues to prevail. Thus, as Tova Hartman explains, the elaborate discussion around modesty within rabbinical literature “speaks incessantly about women’s bodies with great passion and specificity.”<sup>281</sup> This speech enforces upon women a process of “dismembering,” whereby they are “constituted neither by the fullness of their being

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 81. Importantly, so to avoid accusations of idolatry, these male figures are represented in a manner that asserts not their physical beauty but the “numinous impression” (83) of their faces, which renders them, to an extent, translucent and hence referential to a transcendental plane.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>279</sup> Michal Prince, “Religious Women’s Negotiation of Sexuality and Body after Their Wedding” [Hebrew], in *A Woman and Her Judaism: A Contemporary Religious-Feminist Discourse*, ed. Tova Cohen (Jerusalem: Kolech and Rubin Mass, 2013), 137.

<sup>280</sup> Raphael, *Judaism*, 80.

<sup>281</sup> Hartman, *Feminism Encounters*, 59.

nor the integrity of their inner selves, but by the potential effects of their parts upon the spiritual lives of men.”<sup>282</sup> Such measures not only allow Jewish men to reduce women into objects, but also to release libidinal energy under the protective guise of “modesty lawmaking.” In this respect, the textual engagement with the exposed female functions similarly to Foucault’s understanding of “Scientia Sexualis”—a medicalized sexual discourse “meant to evade the unbearable, too hazardous truth of sex”<sup>283</sup> while offering sublimated pleasures of “contacting bodies, caressing them with [one’s] eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments.”<sup>284</sup>

It is in relation to this religious regime of invisibility and objectification that the operation of recent Israeli films on Judaic women may be best understood. These texts seek to provide observant women with visibility after being deprived of such during the long history of Jewish art. This visibility, in turn, underlines a statement on the necessity for these women to challenge the patriarchal regime that rejects their subjectivity and accords them the disparaging status of object. Yet what may be made with the choice present in many of these texts to *expose* their observant heroines almost exclusively in contexts of a romantic, sexual and/or erotic nature? Does this strategy not draw Israeli cinema closer to the non-Jewish pictorial tradition, which capitalized on the thrill of unveiling the hidden, presumably de-sexualized Jewish woman, in the process of breaking sacred taboos? Is this not fundamentally a matter of moving from a “religious” to a “western male gaze,”<sup>285</sup> with the major difference being that the former denies female agency by forcing women to be “modest,” while the latter does so by forcing them to be “immodest”?

### 3.2 RELIGIOUS WOMEN IN JUDAIC-THEMED ISRAELI FILM

Israeli cinema has generally attempted to avoid a stereotypical representation of the Judaic woman as *belle Juive*, and has rarely aligned itself in any explicit way with the matrix of desire and anxiety

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>283</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (1976; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 53.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>285</sup> Hartman, *Feminism Encounters*, 51-59.



that this trope represents.<sup>286</sup> Rather than reducing her to a misogynist symbol, these filmic texts purported to provide a more elaborate, and affirmative, account of the Judaic woman, as she confronts the norms of traditional Judaism, particularly in the context of modesty. Yet as previously insinuated, the feminist critique embodied in these depictions often tends to backfire, implicitly drawing the viewers to the very assumptions that underlie the *belle Juive* stereotype. In this context, the image of immodest Jewish women—and particularly young women—becomes a gateway to understanding these texts’ broader commitments to the mindset of patriarchy, and by extension—the root of their ambivalence vis-à-vis the relationship of Israeli secularism to Judaism.

The topic of modesty is raised in Michal Brezis and Oded Binnun’s award-winning short *Sabbath Entertainment* (2003) through the depiction of a “sinful” act taking place on God’s holy day of rest. Rachel, the film’s protagonist, is an adolescent girl who is unsatisfied with the constraints on sexuality prevailing in her religious world. On a Friday night, she breaks the taboos of rest demanded on the Sabbath, as well as those related to proper sexual behavior, by secretly joining her two girlfriends for a night on the town. On the way to their destination, the car skids off the road, jettisoning the driver into a nearby cotton field. Terrified of being found out, Rachel leaves her two friends and hitches a ride with an inebriated man. At home, she divulges nothing of the accident to her parents and siblings. Rather, on Saturday morning, she joins the rest of her family for *Kiddush*, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Soon enough, however, the police arrive at the family’s doorstep and notify Rachel of her friend’s death as a result of the accident. The film ends with Rachel reduced to tears at the outcome of her “sins,” as she is taken away in a squad car through the streets of her religious neighborhood.

As can be gathered from the above, the film figures Rachel’s surroundings as a space of corporeal regulation, from which she desperately seeks to escape. These constraints are evident in Rachel’s attire: a rather shapeless wardrobe whose function is to cover all parts from sight, and which she would later exchange for a more revealing outfit. They are also manifested in Rachel’s need to hide from sight in fear that someone would see her driving on the Sabbath. This fear marks the religious environment as a panoptical structure from which escape is only made possible through invisibility. Crouched down in the back of the car, Rachel is able to use her invisible position to mock a young religious man on the street as one she once dated only to appease her

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<sup>286</sup> Daniel Wachsmann’s *The Appointed* (1990) may be an exception, with its portrayal of Oshra, the protagonist’s love interest, as a dark-haired, mysterious beauty who has destructive supernatural powers.

parents. It is clear that her desires are located elsewhere, in secular sites where romantic interactions with more “attractive” men can be conducted in full visibility.

The transition into the realm of visibility is marked by Rachel’s change of clothes, which she presumably performs in the car after departing her neighborhood. The filmmakers foreground this shift by shooting Rachel from close range in a scanning motion that begins with her (bare) thighs and ends with her face. This visual strategy sheds light on the character’s attractive physique and thereby stands the risk of her objectification. Yet the scene’s objectifying impulse is subsequently mitigated by an unexpected gesture on Rachel’s part, when after noticing the absence of a makeup kit, she reaches down to her crouch, draws menstrual blood, and then applies on her lips as a form of lipstick. The use of blood as a potent symbol is presumably meant to reference Judaism’s attitudes towards the issue of menstruation. Judaic tradition defines the menstruating woman (*Niddah*) as a locus of extreme impurity that may prove harmful to all who come into contact with it. As a result, Susan Sered explains, “couples are expected to refrain from sexual relations during the days of the woman’s menstrual flow and for seven clean days afterward, following which the woman meticulously washes herself and then fully immerses three or more times in a ritual bath.” In drawing her own menstrual blood, Rachel thus positions herself against a tradition which forces upon women a regime of obsessive cleanliness “in order to make [their bodies] kosher,” and which convinces them “that they themselves suffer because of some essential female weakness.”<sup>287</sup> Rather than see this blood as just cause for her marginalization (*Niddah* is etymologically related to the Hebrew word for “ostracism”), she “wears” it proudly, as a symbol of an empowered, “immodest” womanhood.

One could also understand this gesture through Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. Like feces, vomit, saliva, sweat, urine and other “bodily wastes,” blood belongs for Kristeva to the “abject,” the place where meaning collapses and where the separations that underlie the symbolic order are fundamentally blurred. Menstrual blood, because of its obvious ties to the female reproductive system, poses a particular threat to “the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference.”<sup>288</sup> In dissolving the sexual differences, the menstrual blood conjures the presence of a boundless

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<sup>287</sup> Susan Sered, “The Ritualized Body: Brides, Purity, and the Mikveh,” in *Israeli Women's Studies: A Reader*, ed. Esther Fuchs (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 152.

<sup>288</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 71.

womb that is not determined solely in relation to the penis, and which is the origin for “the phantasmatic power of the mother, that archaic Mother Goddess who actually haunted the imagination of a [Hebrew] nation at war with surrounding polytheism.”<sup>289</sup> By foregrounding her blood, Rachel then may be said to be tapping in to the abject powers of her womb, which Judaic patriarchy deems evil and seeks to regulate and . This liminal position, in turn, leads to a further dissolution of sexual boundaries, when Rachel, her lips tinted blood red, kisses her friend on the mouth. The quasi-lesbian moment—which is shot in soft-focus so as to emphasize its boundary-blurring nature—is thus foregrounded to assert the possibility of a female bond that defies patriarchy’s law of separation.

Indeed, this particular moment serves to highlight how the film uses the color red, especially in relation to the color white, in order to reveal the complex interplay between the abject’s redemptive operation and the proper’s attempts to contain it. In the car, the red of Rachel’s revealing blouse is contained by her white sweater, in a manner that bespeaks the suppression of sin by religious government. The adding of the menstrual blood ups the ante in terms of redness, leading to the collision, which, not coincidentally, takes place in a field of white cotton. The result of this conflict is the appearance of blood on Rachel’s white sweater, indicating that the proper and the abject, for all their differences, are implicated by one another—that they are inseparable, in spite of the former’s attempt to eradicate the presence of the latter. The reality of this co-existence is marginalized when Rachel cleans herself up, but later reappears during the Sabbath *Kiddush* ceremony, when, in the white living room, the father pours a glassful of red wine. Turning blood into holy wine is a way to contain sin within sacredness, transforming it into something that it is not; yet the conjunction of the appearance of wine with Rachel’s entrance in white attire into the white room seems to draw the power of sinful red out to the open and shows that its presence cannot be fully suppressed.

This questioning of Judaism’s order of modesty, however, ends up being subsumed under a more forceful attempt at affirming this order’s boundaries through a “crime-and-punishment” narrative framework. Traces of this attempt are clearly evident in the film’s use of the car crash, which severs the bond between women just as it is about to take them away from their sexual objectification. Literally understood as a *deus ex machine*, the non-accidental accident then replaces the menstrual blood, which was figured as a marker of defiance, with the blood of

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 100.

Rachel's wounded friends, which now appears as a "Mark of Cain" that the protagonist carries on her person and that exposes her sin to the community of believers. It also presents itself as a moral test, which Rachel subsequently fails by abandoning her friends and lying about it afterwards. These ethical lapses, in turn, lead to the death of the friend and Rachel's ultimate arrest—events whose interpretation as divine retribution are favored, or at least left uncontested, within the framework of the narrative. Thus envisaged, this punitive pattern associates the film with the traditional forms of relating to and restraining the abject. As that which "disturbs identity, system, order,"<sup>290</sup> the abject is a source of perverse attraction; it is also, however, a disturbing force, one that must be rejected, to be pushed away like body wastes so as to maintain the integrity of the structure, the "clean and proper"<sup>291</sup> corpus. It is for this reason that religions like Judaism set "rites of defilement" that "take on the form of the *exclusion* of a substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality),"<sup>292</sup> which is tantamount to its purification. In ejecting the abject bodies of Rachel and her friends out of the car, *Sabbath Entertainment* emulates a "rite of defilement," offering the pleasures of the immodest only to bring its spectators back to the fold of modesty. As a result, it is possible to draw parallels between this Judaic-themed text and modern horror films, which work, as Barbara Creed argued following Kristeva, "to separate the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies."<sup>293</sup>

Alon Levi's short film *Chametz* (2010) also takes up the issue of adolescent challenges to modesty rules, though situating it within the framework of a mother-daughter relationship. Ayala, the film's young heroine, leaves her girls' religious boarding school to spend Passover break with her mother Gila and younger sister Tutti (the unnamed father seems to have passed a while ago). Upon arriving at her home, she discovers that her mother has begun dating Eitan, a congenial divorcee. The unexpected presence of a man in the all-female household creates tension between daughter and mother. Gila's anxiety as to Ayala's potential promiscuity is heightened, and she constantly acts to enforce a modesty regime upon the daughter, for example by buttoning up her shirt or wiping away her makeup. Ayala, in turn, reacts to these measures by increasingly challenging the religious mores. As part of this agenda, she charges with sexual tension her

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 17 (*italics in the original*).

<sup>293</sup> Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 257-258.

seemingly innocuous relationship with Eitan. When the two go to purify their utensils in anticipation of Passover, he shields her when hot water accidentally splashes in her direction; she in turn, is so moved by the gesture, her expression revealing a fascination that extends beyond mere gratitude. Later, when both of them secretly purchase a wedding band for Gila, Eitan also buys a bracelet for her, and Ayala toys with it in a manner that discloses a desire to interpret the gesture as romantic. Later, after rising tensions cause her to leave the Passover dinner table in a storm, Ayala places her hand on Eitan's thigh as he attempts to console her, which immediately causes him to recoil. The following morning, Gila's anxious response to all these acts finally reaches a climax, and she collapses on the kitchen floor. Hearing the sound of dishes breaking, Ayala rushes to her mother's side. She explains to Gila that Eitan loves her, and that he bought a ring in order to propose. Gila, in turn, admits to having misjudged the whole situation, and Ayala then confesses to her part in creating this false impression. The film thus ends in a state of reconciliation, with Ayala calling Gila "mother" in a tender and loving voice.

*Chametz* evocatively dramatizes Judaism's understanding of the female as caught between two polar opposites: the saintly wife and mother on the one hand, and the whore on the other. The film argues that as a result of the extremeness of these categories, every transgression is placed under the heading of prostitution, regardless of the actual sexual manifestations. It also reveals that this paradigm, made to serve masculine whims and fears, is internalized by religious women. Accordingly, rather than give credence to the multivalent experience of womanhood, Judaic women are forced into the position in which they reduce each other, and themselves, into the saint-whore dialectic. This becomes clear from the first scene, which takes place in the bathroom of Ayala's school. During a conversation with other classmates, she demonstratively applies lipstick to her mouth. This measure seems a deliberate transgression of modesty laws, whereby Ayala inhabits the role of the prostitute rather than have that role thrust upon her; and appropriately, the response of her classmates is chastisement—an indication of the extent to which the modesty discourse has been assimilated by these young women. Ayala does not respond to this criticism by withdrawal, but rather, like in *Sabbath Entertainment*, proceeds to raise the stakes by kissing one of her friends on the mouth. The call for a female bond, however, fails to garner any support, partly because of the power of institutional regulation—as manifested in the subsequent scene through a teacher's request that Ayala button up her shirt and act more "modestly"—and partly because, in

over-inhabiting the role of a woman of ill repute, the protagonist cannot imagine a way out of the whore-saint dialectic.

In the family, this dialectic is repeated. Unable to recognize variation in female experience, Gila automatically perceives her daughter as a sexual threat. The mother's first response to seeing her child at home is to recreate the teacher's gesture of buttoning up her blouse so to make her look "decent." Following that, she explains that Eitan's presence has "changed the circumstances" in their household, thereby revealing how the entrance of a clearly identified male gaze automatically positions all the adult members of the female home in relation to the modesty discourse. Afterwards, when Ayala asks her mother to be transferred to a more liberal school, Gila refuses on the grounds that in that school she would be "less protected." This argument, in turn, is indicative of an internalized paternalistic discourse that disguises an understanding of women as a source of sin and men as vulnerable beings in need of protection. This underlying logic becomes evident later on, when, in a scene that resonates with the film's opening, Gila demands that Ayala take off the lipstick she applied upon herself and Tutti; and again, after being overburdened with suspicion as to Ayala's "loose" ways, the mother calls her daughter a "whore."

Where *Sabbath Entertainment* discussed the volatile nature of religious modesty through a celebration of the abject, *Chametz* performs a similar procedure by foregrounding acts of cleansing and purification. The film begins with Ayala cleaning the bathrooms—an activity which ceases once she decides to fashion herself as a lipstick-clad symbol of impurity; and then, in a later scene, she is asked to wash away her lipstick so as to restore her "modesty." The impulse to clean reaches its apex in the various Passover-related ceremonies of disposing the unleavened bread (*Chametz*)—the purification of the utensils through water, and the removal of bread from the home. These acts, supervised by Eitan, epitomize the Judaic desire, clearly established in Mary Douglas's famous discussion of Leviticus, of preserving "the unity, integrity, perfection of the individual and of the kind"<sup>294</sup>—or, in other words, of protecting the sanctity of the social body, which is imagined as a masculine body. The film undermines this fantasy by pitting the rites of cleaning against the growing sexual tension between Eitan and Ayala. In the scene when the utensils are cleansed the linking of the sacred and the profane, clean and unclean, is made especially evident, since it allows for physical intimacy between Ayala and Eitan in the context of

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<sup>294</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; repr., New York: Routledge, 2002), 67.

purification. This exposes the interdependency between the aforementioned polar opposites, and serves as proof to Douglas's claim that situations which have "to be handled with washing and avoidances" often provoke "norms of behavior [that] are contradictory." Most of all in matters of sexual taboo, such norms exemplify "a case of wanting to have your cake and eat it too."<sup>295</sup>

The film does raise, however, the possibility of a third space beyond this dialectic. In one important scene, Ayala is seen running after her sister Tutti with a garden hose, playfully splashing her with water. The resulting atmosphere of jest allows us to understand water as a vessel of intimacy rather than purification, one that enables female bonding in the face of patriarchy's rigid separation of women into saints and whores. The subversive potential is nevertheless soon curtailed, when Eitan intervenes in Ayala and Tutti's play. Upon seeing Eitan, Ayala showers him with her hose, and he, in turn, throws a bucket of water at her. The image of the drenched Ayala instantly causes Eitan to be alarmed, and leads Gila to order her daughter to remove herself from his presence. It is through Eitan's worried expression—and more fundamentally, through his intervention into an all-female setting—that the masculine gaze is powerfully re-invoked, and water is restored to its rightful function within a symbolic system of purity.

This scene seems to highlight *Chametz's* ambivalent stance towards the issue of modesty. The film does expose the ritual of purification as a mechanism that marginalizes women by positioning them as prostitutes. Yet at the same time, it portrays Ayala as conforming to this position, and in a way, justifying it. She is the one who initiates an "improper" intimacy, as when she hoses Eitan down in the aforementioned scene; it is her advances that determine the course of their relationship. And in this framework, Eitan, the representative of the Judaic male order, emerges as the victim of Ayala's sexual fantasies, while his contribution to her behavior is downplayed. Thus envisaged, the film's ending, in which mother and daughter overcome their differences, may be understood not as allowing for a radical space of female bonding but as a recapitulation of the patriarchal order. Here, Gila and Ayala unite through the recognition of their ascribed social roles: the latter admits that the former's fears of her being a "whore" were somewhat justified; and the former is reinstated in her matriarchal role when the latter finally calls her "mother." Thus if Eitan is absent from this scene, it is only because his physical presence is unnecessary, as the symbolic order which he represents is already embedded in Ayala and Gila's rhetoric.

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 194.

Also discussing modesty in a familial setting is Joseph Cedar's *Campfire* (2004). Set to 1981 Jerusalem, the film focuses on a Religious-Zionist family comprised of mother Rachel and her two teenage daughters Estie and Tammy. Rachel, who had lost her husband recently, attempts to reestablish her standing in the male-oriented religious community by joining a citizens' association that is about to found a settlement in occupied Samaria. In order to secure her participation, she is eager to make her family seem beyond reproach—for example, by trying to find herself a worthy candidate to remarry. Her search leads her to Yossi, a virgin in his forties, with whom she finds comfort, but not passion, and to Moshe Weinstock, a well-known cantor, who is unappealing but nevertheless presents the most suitable choice for the members of Rachel's community. As she struggles to make the right decision in this situation, Estie and Tammy encounter problems in conforming to the household's strict regime of propriety. Estie, in particular, finds it difficult to adjust, since Rachel's demand for modesty conflicts with her desire to be intimate with her young IDF soldier boyfriend. Yet Tammy also looks for refuge beyond the mother's system of constraints. She discovers it in a budding relationship with Raffi, a Mizrahi classmate who runs around with a disreputable group of boys. This attraction leads Tammy to Raffi's bonfire during the religious festivity of *Lag BaOmer*—an encounter which results in her being sexually attacked by the group. (As the attack is not depicted in full, its exact nature remains unclear, though it is evident that Raffi is a reluctant participant). When news of the attack becomes public, Tammy is immediately singled out as a “whore” and hence as the real culprit in this crime. When Rachel understands that this perspective is also espoused by Motke, the settlement's association chair, she decides to relinquish her dream of moving to the Occupied Territories. Instead, she returns to living comfortably with Estie—who by now has made it clear to her boyfriend that she is uninterested in “going all the way”—and Tammy—who has decided to forgive Raffi and forget all that had happened to her—while adding Yossi as her new husband and father of the household.

In this period piece, it appears that the primary concern for Religious-Zionist society of the early 1980s was to maintain communal integrity—or, in using the film's operative term, to flame the village “campfire” as a sustainable unifying force. The drive towards integrity, Cedar shows, is particularly strong within this part of the religious sector. Unlike the more secular precincts of Israeli society, where greater variation may be traced, the emphasis here is to achieve communal distinction via homogeneity; consequently to be without a community—as both Yossi and Rachel



confess at different points in the film—is to lead an almost unbearable existence. According to Cedar, the main axis through which the community establishes its coherence—which charts the boundaries between norm and taboo—is the sexual/erotic. Judging by the standards set out by Motke, who epitomizes the community’s hegemonic discourse, Religious-Zionism’s social boundaries are sustained solely through a commitment to the traditional, heterosexual family unit. To attempt sexual experimentation beyond this structure—especially when performed in observable spaces—is to risk severe sanctions. This is especially the case when the transgressor is a woman—as Tammy quickly finds out in the aftermath of the attack—since females are defined as the catalyst for sinful sexuality and thus carry the burden of proof in the face of accusations of sexual wrongdoing.

Secondary to the sexual axis, the film also establishes two other related foci—the ethnic and the economic—which are shown to be determinants of the community’s definition of social consensus. As emerges from several conversations between Rachel and Motke, the community’s claim to ideological integrity is founded on an ethno-economic bias, in which people of non-Ashkenazi, non-middle class backgrounds are excluded from the communal center (and in the process, associated with sinful activities). These marginalized entities, which are represented by Raffi’s group, do conform to the stigmas that are forced upon them. Yet, they are not essentially immoral, as the film’s largely affirmative representation of Raffi clearly indicates. Rather, the film points to the hegemonic, Ashkenazi, bourgeois consensus of Religious-Zionism as the site of all evil—a perspective that is emphasized through a scene in which Motke’s son, after hearing about Tammy’s sexual attack, attempts to force himself upon her, in stark contrast to Raffi’s reluctant participation in the previous assault. The working class Mizrahi is thus depicted as the hapless victim of a structure of power that couches its distinctions in cultural terms. In the hierarchy of dominance portrayed in *Campfire*, however, it is ultimately the single woman who is most marginalized, for as Tammy’s attack revealed, patriarchy dominates across ethnic and socioeconomic affiliations within Religious-Zionist society.

The modesty discourse which underlies this communal vision, and which is used to solidify its boundaries, does not eradicate the existence of sexual desires. Quite to the contrary: in a Foucauldian twist, the film shows that the very marginalization of sexual diversity forces a constant preoccupation—flirtation even—with the possibility of libidinous outbursts. One famous moment in the film which succinctly captures this understanding is the one where Tammy is seen

dancing around the apartment in her pajamas, provocatively gesticulating in full view of a nearby mirror. The scene seems to divulge an innocent attempt at playing with erotic behavior—an impression that receives support from the lyrics of the popular love song playing in the background (“Electricity Runs through Your Fingers”). Another notable moment in this context takes place in the morning after *Lag BaOmer*, when we see Tammy’s male classmates urinating on the fire, while her female classmates are nearby, with their backs turned. Here Cedar reveals how the separation between the sexes creates a shared space in which the naked body—and by implication, sex—is always courted, right on the verge of becoming present.

While the two scenes share a mutual flirtation with sex and eroticism, they are distinct in one crucial way: the former is performed in the private sphere, with this separation—enabled also by Tammy’s choice to close the apartment’s curtains—allowing for more elaborate erotic play; the latter, however, takes place in plain view, and therefore permits little leeway in eroticism. This distinction brings up the question of sex and public spectacle. The film seems to argue that the concern about sexuality as a major constituent of communal unity has less to do with matters of religion than of visibility: that is to say, the real problem is not that people are performing illicit acts, but that these acts may be publicly seen, thereby threatening to crack the veneer of social coherence. This claim is made explicit when Estie, in reference to her “shameful activity,” threatens on two occasions to undress in public (as opposed to, say, threatening to have intercourse). Visibility, for Rachel, cannot belong to the public sphere; in the private sphere of the home, however, it is necessary so as to ensure the regulation of bodies. Consequently, on one occasion, she breaks part of the door to Estie’s room in order to facilitate easier surveillance over the daughter’s goings on; and in another scene, she observes through a basement window as Estie and her boyfriend are being intimate. In this respect, Rachel relocates the panoptical gaze, as it exists in the public sphere, into the family home, as a defense mechanism against the threat of her own condemnation by this external gaze.

Raising the stakes of corporeal regulation in Rachel’s household is the death of the father and the subsequent destabilization of the family unit. The father’s demise forces upon the family a fluidity in gender roles: Rachel becomes masculinized, suggesting at one point that she can stand “as any man” in defense of the new settlement from Palestinian incursions; Estie and Tammy experiment sexually, the former with her boyfriend, the latter with her flirtations with the title of “whore” and her budding relationship with Raffi. These breaches of taboo ultimately empower the

all-female household, and lead to Rachel's decision not to marry Moshe Weinstock and her ultimate refusal to join the settlement group. Yet this empowerment is treated ambivalently within the film. Thus, since Tammy's rape may be seen as the result of an oppressive modesty discourse that necessitates cycles of repression and eruption, *Campfire* opens up the possibility of disavowing the culpability of the attackers—an attitude which Tammy herself adopts when deciding to forgive Raffi for his contribution to the rape and to resume fantasies of heteronormative romance with him. Furthermore, that the film shows Tammy as flirting and courting the attention of her soon-to-be attackers may allow for an interpretation of the rape as being somehow justified by her transgressions. Such a reading, consequently, seems to resonate with the Bible's archetypal depictions of rape (such as that of Dina), which legitimized attacks on the grounds of the victim's supposed promiscuity, and mitigated the victimizer's responsibility by arguing that the act was made out of love.<sup>296</sup> Similarly problematic is Rachel's decision at the film's end to partially relinquish her role as head of the household by entering into a romantic relationship with Yossi. In this, she reestablishes the legitimacy of the traditional family unit rather than sustain the explosive possibilities of an all-female household. Granted, Yossi is an elderly virgin, and therefore symbolically "castrated" and relatively unthreatening to Rachel's hegemony; but the fact remains that when given a choice, Rachel attempts to build a home according to terms and conditions of the very community she previously sought to denounce, and to which the Religious-Zionist Cedar actually belongs.

A site of particular interest in Israeli film's depiction of Judaic female (im)modesty is that of matchmaking (*Shidduch*) and marriage. An early example for a film which takes up this site as an important—albeit not primary—concern is Cedar's directorial debut *Time of Favor* (2000). The film centers on a love triangle between Menachem, the commander of a religious IDF company, Pini, a brilliant scholar who studies in Rabbi Meltzer's yeshiva, and Michal, the rabbi's daughter. The rabbi wishes Pini, his prized pupil, to marry Michal, but she is in love with Menachem; her refusal of Pini's marriage proposal leads the latter to hatch a desperate plan to bomb the Temple Mount, much in the spirit of Meltzer's sermons at the yeshiva. Menachem intervenes in time to stop Pini from following through on his intentions, and their conflict, which ends in Pini's death, is made to render visible Cedar's admonition of Religious-Zionism's fundamentalist

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<sup>296</sup> Shenhar, *Love and Hate*, 91-128.

messianism.<sup>297</sup> This rather explicit message, however, overshadows another point of contention—one related to Judaism’s marginalization of women.

The issue of female marginalization surfaces here in relation to the film’s detailing of Shidduch practices. The religious norm of matching young adults and pushing for consummation of marriage after a very short period of courtship may be said to indicate a pressing desire to sustain at all cost the observant family unit in its traditional, patriarchal form. Accordingly, the (male) religious establishment sees the matching system as ensuring that all men would be married to suitable females who would then be able to bear healthy children and take care of all quotidian concerns that may result in distraction from study; in this framework, the husband’s interests in the marriage are most looked out for, while the desires and reservations of the soon-to-be-brides are given only secondary considerations. Here this is clearly manifested in the attitude taken by Rabbi Meltzer and Pini towards Michal, treating her like a “present” that is given from mentor to mentee as a sign of appreciation. Rather than consider her opinion in the matter, the male authorities often confer their understanding on her behavior: for example, when Pini continues courting Michal even after she had asked him not to, simply because her father asserted that such efforts would not go unappreciated; or when Menachem treats Michal as “belonging” to Pini, even when Michal resists such appropriative terms.

Michal’s resistance, in turn, paints her as the complete antithesis to the acquiescent Judaic female. During an early scene where Meltzer is hosting a dinner celebration with Pini, Michal and his other daughters in attendance, this model is evoked through a song that glorifies the virtues of the Judaic woman. According to the song, the Judaic woman is not judged by her looks and sexual demeanor, which are seen as inherently false; rather, her virtue and modesty is what sets her apart and elevates her to the standing of an ideal female. Yet Michal is anything but virtuous in Judaic terms. Rather than assume a submissive role within Judaism’s patriarchal structure, she takes control of her own fate. She confronts Pini and her father about their nuptial plans for her. She also actively pursues Menachem, in spite of her father’s wishes, and in a manner that challenges standard rules of courtship (for example, she goes off with him to talk in a secluded locale, and later kisses him in public). The rabbi attempts to put Michal in her place, as in one scene when, when he rebukes her for wearing immodest pajamas. Yet Michal ultimately resists by leaving her father’s home against his wishes and moving to a seminary for observant Jewish girls.

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<sup>297</sup> See: Kozlovsky-Golan, “The Arrangement.”

Though she never leaves the Judaic community or fully abandons its rituals, Michal's behavior nevertheless embodies a critical viewpoint on the social politics of latter-day Religious-Zionism. She is the most astute reader of her father's and Pini's fanaticism, and is much readier to admit the faults of her religious world than the film's protagonist Menachem. Her only blind spot is Menachem, and she mistakenly trusts Pini when he claims that the valiant officer is involved in the bombing plot. This mistake, which leads to Menachem's wrongful detainment by Israel's security forces, serves to clarify that Michal's suspicious attitude towards her religious-Zionist surroundings may be excessive. In creating this impression, Cedar seems to hedge his bets by distancing himself from Michal's sociopolitical vision to a degree, and adopting instead Menachem's middle-of-the-road position as the innocent victim of a problematic system which he criticizes yet cannot reject.

The potency of Michal's challenge is also circumscribed in relation to the issue of modesty. Though she exposes the structures of objectification within the religious world, Michal herself is exposed to a scrutinizing gaze by the film's predominantly secular viewers. The choice to cast secular actress Tinker Bell to the role is telling in this context. A well-known figure in Tel Aviv nightlife prior to becoming a thespian, Tinker Bell carefully fashioned a reputation for being an alluring seductress who often defies social mores by exposing her body in public (using the language of the mysterious Eternal Feminine, one newspaper reporter once opined that those "who attempt to explain [Tinker Bell's] innermost soul use terms usually associated with forces of nature"<sup>298</sup>). By choosing this actress for the role, Cedar carries over Tinker Bell's allure of immodesty into the film, consequently eliciting voyeuristic desire around a possible breach of religious sexual taboos. In addition to casting, Cedar also activates this desire by shaping the character of Michal in light of the common androcentric tropes of womanhood: the seductress (vis-à-vis Menachem) and the harbinger of doom (vis-à-vis Pini). Thus envisaged, Michal, for all her defiance of patriarchal mythology, cannot escape in the end from being over-determined by the male fantasy of the *femme fatale*.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Arik Milman, "Urban Legend" [Hebrew], *NRG*, December 10, 2003, accessed October 24, 2013 <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/archive/ART/603/527.html>.

<sup>299</sup> Tinker Bell portrayed a religious character in another film—Chaim Tabakman's *Eyes Open Wide* (2008)—yet on this occasion, it is the trope of the dutiful wife rather than the *femme fatale* which was evoked. The disparity in representation may be explained in light of the time difference between the two productions, during which Tinker Bell's reputation for Lolita-like antics had waned.

Amos Gitai's *Kadosh* (1999) offers a more elaborate interrogation of matchmaking and marriage within the religious community, as well as a more scathing condemnation of this community's androcentric inclinations, specifically in the realm of sexual intimacy. The film focuses on two ultra-Orthodox sisters: the older Rivka, who is married to Meir, and the younger Malka, who has reached marrying age. After ten years of marriage, and in spite of her best efforts, Rivka has yet to give birth to a child. Meir, who is in love with his wife, nevertheless succumbs to the pressure placed upon him by his rabbi father, and divorces Rivka to wed a more "fertile" spouse. Though obviously pained by the process, and though she ultimately realizes that it is Meir who is infertile and not her, Rivka takes this decision in stride, and removes herself from her husband's life. Meir, however, cannot detach himself from his former wife, and on the night of the religious holiday *Purim*, he arrives at her apartment with drunken declarations of love. Rivka does not respond to Meir's advances, but at the end of the film, she goes to their home and makes love to him—a concluding gesture, as we soon discover that she had poisoned herself prior to the tryst. Interweaved with Rivka's fateful tale is the story of Malka's escape from the constraints of matchmaking. Malka is in love with Yaakov, who has departed the religious world to become a singer. Such a match is deemed unacceptable, and as a result, Meir's father, the community rabbi, decides that Malka would marry his prized disciple Yossef. Like Michal in *Time of Favor*, Malka is reluctant to go through with the wedding, but unlike her, she acquiesces in the end. Married life, however, proves even more difficult than previously imagined: Yossef's religious fervor, Malka soon discovers, translates itself into interpersonal violence, as manifested in their first intercourse, which seems more like rape than lovemaking. Further disillusioned, Malka goes to make love with Yaakov. When Yossef suspects her infidelity, he beats Malka with his belt. This, in turn, prompts Malka to flee her community, supposedly to join Yaakov in Israel's secular precincts.

As Shai Ginsburg has rightfully commented, Haredi society in *Kadosh* "is perceived as nothing but oppressive and repressive,"<sup>300</sup> especially in terms of its gender relations. With his "militant brand of misogyny,"<sup>301</sup> the rabbi clearly articulates the justification for gender inequality: while men are destined for a higher spiritual calling and therefore must study, women, as lesser beings, are meant to enable this study by earning wages, keeping house, and taking care of the

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<sup>300</sup> Shai Ginsburg, "Love in Search of Belief, Belief in Search of Love," in *The Modern Jewish Experience in World Cinema*, ed. Lawrence Baron (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 371.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

children. Rather than be “different but equal,” this separation denotes a hierarchy of patriarchal dominance. As the film shows, religious women are at the mercy of men: they can be matched to whomever, be beaten (Malka) and/or be disposed of (Rivka); they are seen as means of procreation and as property (as is clear in the discussion between the Rabbi and Meir, when the latter gives the former the *Ketubah*—the traditional marriage contract that determines the husband’s duties and privileges vis-à-vis his bride, his possession—after it is established that Rivka’s alleged barrenness makes her an unfit spouse in God’s eyes). No woman is exempt from this victimization: even Rivka’s elderly mother, upon the rabbi’s command, is forced to tend to her daughter’s replacement as she performs the purifying rites of watery immersion prior to the latter’s wedding. Ultra-Orthodox men may take different positions on this gender inequality: some, like the callous rabbi and the ferocious Yosef, faithfully follow Halakha’s patriarchal rule, while others, like Meir, are more reluctant to conform. But all ultimately submit to the demands of Haredi society, thereby suggesting that “the only possibility open to characters who wish to be true to themselves and realize their aspirations is to shed its yoke altogether.”<sup>302</sup>

Within this context of female oppression, *Kadosh* pays close attention to the Judaic attitude towards the female’s sexual body. This attitude, according to Jyoti Sarah Daniels, defines the female body “as impure, profane, and sexual.”<sup>303</sup> Impurity is stressed by several scenes of ritual purification that point to the religious woman’s collusion in a discourse which sets her apart as profane. The sinful nature of the female body is further conveyed through the choice to keep Malka and Rivka fully clothed even in domestic spaces. Within this mode of covering, Daniels argues, “the female hair takes on an erotic function,” as is clear in the few scenes where Rivka has her head exposed (without the usual scarf or covering), and in which “there is always a stress laid on [her] beautiful hair” so as to make it a potent symbol for religious female sexuality *in toto*. The burden of its symbolic function also makes it a target for social oppression, as becomes evident when Malka performs the customary cutting of the hair in advance of marriage: here, Malka’s oscillation between laughter and tears clearly indicates a painful recognition of “the potential independence and life she has just lost”<sup>304</sup> upon becoming her husband’s property. The repression of the female sexual body that is marked in this and other scenes leads also to the repression of

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>303</sup> Jyoti Sarah Daniels, “Scripting the Jewish Body: The Sexualized Female Jewish Body in Amos Gitai’s *Kadosh*,” in *Jews and Sex*, ed. Nathan Abrams (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2008), 84.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 82.

sexual knowledge, as is clear from Malka's questions to Rivka on the details of the latter's wedding night. Sexual exploration, concurrently, can end with an abhorring lack of intimacy, as is evident from Yosef's formality and violence on his wedding night with Malka. This need not always happen, as Meir and Rivka's case clearly prove. Yet to enjoy the sexual body in Haredi society, the film asserts, one has to have at least the guise of procreation, which Rivka's supposed barrenness does not allow. Without having a child, Rivka's and Meir's union is delegitimized, since a woman is first and foremost a vessel for reproduction—not a pleasure-seeking subject. Consequently, she is replaced with a more suitable receptacle for Meir's seed, and left to be ridiculed and chastised. While Rivka (and her mother) ask to recognize the sacredness of the union, the logic which favors the sacredness of the union's byproduct—the child—eventually prevails.

The female protagonists deal with their marginalization differently. Malka is clearly defiant from the start, recognizing the laws placed upon her as man-made, and geared towards her oppression. In one scene, she even verbally critiques such religious truisms as the conception of women as being of lesser intellectual prowess, and such regulations as the prohibition on women to handle the Torah. She reluctantly weds Yossef, and then transgresses traditional mores by engaging in an extramarital affair. Her path ultimately leads her away from the religious community, where she ends up renouncing God's existence, or at least disavowing the legitimacy of the Haredi interpretation of His will. Rivka, on the other hand, seems less defiant of religious law. She follows the rules and regulations, keeps away from her husband in their days of Niddah, and departs with no retort when claimed to be hopelessly barren. She has internalized the judgmental voice of patriarchal law and its resulting shame. Close to the end, however, Rivka confronts the impossibility of her standing as a sinful woman, marginalized and ostracized; she chooses, like her sister, to break away from God's law by sleeping with her ex-husband, and then taking her own life. Yet in contrast to Malka's physical departure from the boundaries of Jerusalem's religious sector, Rivka's departure from this earth still carries with it the markers of shame: the need to atone for performing an illicit act, which presupposes the existence of a deity that demands retribution.

Through Malka's and Rivka's trials and tribulations, *Kadosh* thus stages a critique of, in Ginsburg's words, "the seeming irreconcilability of piety and interpersonal love"<sup>305</sup> that turns women into perpetual victims. The potency of this feminist critique, however, is undermined by

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<sup>305</sup> Ginsburg, "Love in Search," 376.



Gitai's definition of "interpersonal love." By positing that the constraints of Jewish Law cause alienation between men and women, Gitai seems to implicitly celebrate an image of a "freer," secular mode of gender interaction—a "pure relationship," to use Anthony Giddens's term, where "a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another."<sup>306</sup> Yet in positing that secular freedom offers a suitable solution for the patriarchal oppression of love within Judaic reality, the filmmaker seems to deny the continued presence of gender inequality within the secular realities of romantic love.<sup>307</sup> Such inequality is particularly evident in the persistent model of *le grand amour*, which seems more at home in Hollywood melodramas such as *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls, 1948) than in Judaism's utilitarian take on interpersonal relations. This model is sustained in *Kadosh*, particularly through the figure of Rivka, who, like Ophüls's heroine Lisa, literally cannot exist without her lover. The film does seem to indicate that this self-annihilation is the result of religion's intervention, in a similar fashion to the way Lisa's fatal trajectory is explained as the inevitable response to bourgeois sanctions. Yet, for Rivka and Lisa alike, the filmic text never questions the very nature of *le grand amour* as woman's primary project in life, an experience to which she must surrender fully, at the expense of her own independence and subjectivity.<sup>308</sup> While Gitai rejects religion as something that obstructs a woman's way into love and leads her towards death, he nevertheless has no qualms with affirming a love where a woman would be willing to sacrifice all for her man, even if he would (reluctantly) sacrifice her to serve more "important" interests. For the filmmaker, then, Rivka's love is an ideal form; if Judaism is an obstacle, it is only because for the traditionally-defined enamored woman, as Simone de Beauvoir once suggested, love must become a religion.<sup>309</sup>

This choice to shape Rivka, and to a lesser extent Malka, in the patriarchal image of "the woman in love" seems symptomatic of a broader strategy in the film to reduce the ultra-Orthodox

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<sup>306</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 58.

<sup>307</sup> Lynn Jamieson, "Intimacy Transformed? A Critical Look at the 'Pure Relationship,'" *Sociology* 33, no. 3 (August 1999): 477-494.

<sup>308</sup> See also: Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 90-110.

<sup>309</sup> "She chooses to desire her enslavement so ardently that it will seem to her the expression of her liberty; she will try to rise above her situation as inessential object by fully accepting it; through her flesh, her feelings, her behavior, she will enthrone him as supreme value and reality; she will humble herself to nothingness before him. Love becomes for her a religion." Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 643.

world into an exotic spectacle of “otherness.” Thus the film’s stoic, poised, theatrical mise-en-scène may speak to the stringent formalization of Haredi body language, but also portrays it as otherworldly—as more anachronistic and odd than it actually is. Additionally, the slow pace of the film, which contradicts the typical animation of Haredi movement in public spheres,<sup>310</sup> seems geared towards singling Haredim out as strange, and towards giving more space for the display of this strangeness. This display seems to tap into a voyeuristic impulse most forcefully in those few scenes the film’s female protagonists are shown partially unclothed—for example, when Malka undresses before and during her sexual encounter with Yaakov, or when Rivka undresses on her last evening with Meir. These moments may serve the purpose of releasing that which has been repressed by Haredi society, but they also simultaneously cater to a secular desire to see previously hidden religious female bodies laid bare.

Like *Kadosh*, Rama Burstein’s critically acclaimed directorial debut *Fill the Void* (2012) discusses the challenges of matchmaking, though the filmmaker’s standing as a religious repentant filmmaker renders her perspective rather distinct than Gitai’s secular outlook on ultra-Orthodoxy. At the center of this film is a Hasidic family amidst a period of personal tragedy. Esther, the eldest daughter, has just died suddenly from post-delivery complications. In her absence, the husband Yochai is pressed into remarrying. Esther’s mother Rivka fears that a remarriage would mean that Yochai might leave the country with her grandchild. In an effort to prevent this from happening, she attempts to marry him off to Esther’s younger sister Shira. The adolescent girl, who was already in the process of being matched with a yeshiva student her own age, is at first highly reluctant to pursue such a marriage. In contrast, Yochai finds himself welcoming the idea, and attempts to persuade Shira that a wedding would be beneficial for the both of them. The film follows Shira as she negotiates family pressures and comes to terms with her own feelings toward Yochai’s courtship. Ultimately, the decision is made to pursue the nuptials, in no small measure, so it seems, because of Shira’s growing attraction to Yochai. Yet the film ends on a somewhat ambivalent tone, featuring Shira’s confused and alarmed expression as she gazes at her husband taking off his suit on their wedding night.

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<sup>310</sup> According to Gideon Aran, Haredim are taught to traverse public spaces in a “hasty and purposeful manner” so as not to be negatively perceived as “people of leisure.” Consequently, the possibility of aimless wandering is often negated in favor of “continuous movement, which creates the impression of very intensive and serious business.” Aran, “Denial Does Not Make the Haredi Body Go Away: Ethnography of a Disappearing (?) Jewish Phenomenon,” *Contemporary Jewry* 26, no. 1 (October 2006): 97.

As Burstein imagines it, Hasidic society displays a complex structure of power relations between genders. Again, this ultra-Orthodox world is shown to be male-dominated; in the various scenes of celebration and ritual, we see men as the foci of action, while women are relegated to a marginal position, situated as outside onlookers. Yet the film also highlights the agency which women do have within this architecture of power, particularly in controlling and orchestrating important decisions that pertain to the private sphere. This is manifested in relation to the film's prominent point of thematic concern: the Shidduch. Like *Time of Favor* and *Kadosh*, matchmaking emerges as an "arrangement" initiated and coordinated by religious men for the benefit of sustaining their community's traditional, patriarchal form. This understanding is made abundantly clear during an early scene which features a Purim celebration around Shira's family table. While the women are in the next room, separated from the center of activity, the rabbi father converses with members of his flock about their various financial needs and gives them money so as to alleviate the hardship. Importantly, many of these conversations center around marital issues: for example, when one young yeshiva scholar asks for monetary help in buying his fiancé jewelry, and when another older man complains of his need to support his mentally unbalanced wife, an affliction of whose existence he was unaware until after the wedding. At the end of this scene, the father is seen discussing a match of an orphan with the local matchmaker, during which he provides some money to help in the wedding's expenses. This short exchange of words reveals the Shidduch as a practice that is fully dominated and orchestrated by men—a fact that is further highlighted by the positioning of the two interlocutors in the foreground, while the women stand in the background and out of focus. Furthermore, the conversation also exposes the business-like nature of matchmaking by figuring it in the framework of a monetary exchange. In this respect, the scenes gesture towards the proprietary nature of marriage in the Judaic world, wherein the wife is considered as part of the husband's assortment of possessions rather than as having an equal standing in terms of rights and privileges.

Yet at the same time, and in stark contrast to the aforementioned two films, *Fill the Void* does not only show how women are victimized by the praxis of Shidduch, but also how they may gain some agency through it. Though men rule the public sphere in this film, women control the private sphere—a fact made visible when, before the Purim ritual, Rivka gives her rabbi husband the keys to family safe and asks to know how much money he intends to take out. From this understanding, it becomes clear that since the Shidduch exists on the fringes between the

private and the public, women may have an active role in shaping it. For the mother this means that, though Shira's entrance into the matchmaking world is a *fait accompli*, she can still exert some influence in determining the identity of the betrothed. This position of power, in turn, is not used so much for patriarchal interests as for her own desire in keeping Yochai and Esther's offspring close at hand—a plan to which Shira's father initially objects. Since the film ultimately fulfills Rivka's wish, it also at the same time affirms women's capacity to revise the patriarchal agenda of matchmaking for their own purposes.

In attempting to come to terms with Shidduch, *Fill the Void* forcefully confronts the question of female desire within the religious world. In this capacity, though raising the possibility that the Shidduch is in fact motivated by a cool business-like masculine logic, the film seems nevertheless intent on acknowledging the place of women's feelings within the matchmaking process. To understand the ideological impulse behind this commitment, it would be worthwhile to compare the two matches offered to Shira in the film. As previously mentioned, Shira is first matched to a man of her own age. Though the male object of this match has been decided for her, she seems excited about the prospect of this marriage, *as if she had made the choice to begin with*. The film explicitly accounts for Shira's attraction to a man she had never met as being based on a (romantic) notion of growing in a marriage with a partner who is equally inexperienced. Yet the underlining and implicit reason for this attraction seems to lie elsewhere—that is, in the fact that this match in particular makes room for Shira to exercise her desires in a more independent fashion. This is made clear in the film's opening scene, where Shira and her mother search for the groom-to-be in a neighborhood supermarket in order to assess his looks from afar. This candid moment highlights a different kind of visual economy than the one argued for in classic feminist film theory. Rather than act as the object of a voyeuristic gaze, as one would expect within the dominant model of narrative filmmaking, it is Shira who occupies the place of voyeur: she is the one who looks from afar at an unaware body, turning it into an object for her desire without fear of sanctioning. Religious women may reframe their forced invisibility, this scene seems to say, by using it as an “ideal” position from which to watch others without being seen—and to incorporate the images of men into their personal realms of fantasy through the power of eye and imagination.

While this form of ocular-based desire provides a way of challenging the Shidduch's patriarchal regime, the film does not seem to affirm its value. Rather, its support is given to a different type of matchmaking: that which is exercised between Shira and Yochai. The interaction

between the two seems decidedly different than Shira's interactions with other men her own age. With the latter, the distance that allows Shira to desire as voyeur also prevents from intimacy to be present during a face-to-face meeting; rather, the men in Shira's age group are particularly inept in delivering any sort of warmth in their interactions with women, having been told to always keep them removed from sight and mind. Yochai makes room for a different sort of interaction: as he is seasoned in the ways of marriage, his demeanor allows for far greater intimacy than Shira has encountered in her other liaisons with men. Significantly, this also entails clandestine encounters of an immodest nature (in religious terms), wherein the couple stands closer to each other than is traditionally permitted, and speak more frankly than is usually sanctioned. In these interactions, a desire structured upon distance is replaced by a desire founded on proximity. This shift does not necessarily entail a loss of agency on the part of Shira, if it were not for the fact that it is always Yochai who determines the course of their exchanges—it is he, and not Shira, who traverses the distance between them and places himself close by, demanding that his desires be met. It is at this position, where she loses her role of voyeur and becomes an immodest object of voyeurism for both Yochai and the film's spectators, that Shira also forfeits her freedom to desire. The film seems to trace the sacrifice of this freedom, as Shira rebels against the match and struggles to make sense of her relationship with Yochai. Yet in the end she avails herself to Yochai's perspective and makes it her own—a point made abundantly obvious when, near the closing of the film, she confesses to being a "bad person" and then silently accepts Yochai's definition of her as being essentially "good." This process is not figured as a loss in the film, because the economy of desire which Shira enters into is one with which secular audiences are familiar and comfortable. Yochai seems like the "real thing": he is handsome, somewhat risqué in his advances, but also very open about his feelings; he is the binary opposite of the pasty, introverted, immature Haredi men of Shira's age. The possibility that these feelings may only be his and not Shira's is ultimately disavowed, since the viewer is accustomed to interpreting romance that is founded on proximity and not on distance, on touching and not on gazing, as the only appropriate mode for exercising desire. For the non-religious eye, they are inherently "right for each other."

This ambivalence surrounding the place of desire in *Shidduch* reaches its peak at the film's dénouement. The wedding scene seems to validate the process by which Shira willingly conforms to—and confirms—a desire that has been dictated to her by a dominating male authority. Yet her frantic behavior during the ceremony, and particularly her bewildered expression at its end, may

be interpreted as signs for something more than mere over-excitement—perhaps even the realization of a forfeiture of agency and a misplacing of desire in the aftermath of becoming, legally speaking, her husband’s property.<sup>311</sup> The potency of this moment, accentuated by a deliberate use of hand-held camerawork, seems to open a potential site of critique; but then the scene ends all too quickly, and prevents its viewers from pursuing this line of inquiry further. It therefore seems that for Burstein the intent is not necessarily to destabilize Judaic reality as much as to legitimize it by drawing it closer to secular understandings of “appropriate reality.” Rather than emphasizing the loci where, within the patriarchal regime of modesty, women can find agency in desiring, it shapes Judaic reality in the image of an “immodest” secular one, thereby proving it worthy of the audience’s support. This move is anticipated from the beginning by the film’s particular style: unlike Gitai’s alienating aesthetic, Burstein pictures Israel’s Hasidic world in soft, low key lighting and deep, soothing colors that imbue it with a romantic aura and make it palatable for Israeli secular eyes—much in the same way as, for example, painter Maurycy Gottlieb’s (1856-1879) renditions of Polish-Jewish life used the formal language of romantic art to bridge the gap between Europe’s Jewish and non-Jewish constituencies, without reducing Jewishness to the category of exotic Other.<sup>312</sup> As a “born-again” Haredi filmmaker, Burstein thus attempted to fashion her own world as desirable—or more accurately, a world in which desire can operate in an immodest way, just as long as it is made to conform to male interests. If this economy of desire is perceived as legitimate by Israel’s secular audiences, it is only because the film both exposes and disavows the shared ground of patriarchy that ties religious and non-religious Israelis together.

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<sup>311</sup> Importantly, this moment takes place after the *Bedeken* ritual, wherein the groom walks up to the bride, looks at her for an instant, and then covers her face with an opaque veil. Susan Sered asserts the proprietary nature of the *Bedeken*, since “only the groom can uncover the face of the modest and pure bride” and therefore “ownership is manifested as the right to reveal what is hidden from others.” Additionally, Irit Koren emphasizes how this ritual is often associated in the religious community with Western-secular images of the royal, virginal bride, and its assorted commitments to patriarchal ideology. Sered, “The Ritualized Body,” 162; Koren, *Hereby Renewed*, 104-105..

<sup>312</sup> See: Ezra Mendelsohn, *Painting a People: Maurycy Gottlieb and Jewish Art* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2002).

### 3.3 FEMINIST CHALLENGES FROM WITHIN JUDAISM: *THE SECRETS* AND *BRURIAH*

While diverging in the specifics of their treatment of observant women's plight under patriarchy, as well as in the religious commitments of their makers, the films discussed above all seem to occupy an external position to the religious world. Thus, their criticism of Judaic reality ultimately captures a secular desire to reduce this reality to an essential Other, one which can be viewed from a distance both inquisitively and voyeuristically. Par this position of othering, two other filmic texts—*The Secrets* and *Bruriah*—attempt to articulate a feminist challenge from within the world of (patriarchal) Judaic traditions. The origin of this stance may not be attributable so much to the films' secular male directors as to their writer Hadar Galron, a self-avowed “woman of faith” who has sought to question the religious doctrines of her home community.<sup>313</sup> This critique follows a common practice within Judaic feminism, which reads Jewish religious literature against its (androcentric) grain in order to create a new Midrash, while foregrounding the importance of scholarly erudition in battling Judaic patriarchal regimes.<sup>314</sup> As such, it aims to adjust a nuanced understanding of religion to the standards of feminism that originated from within Israel's secular precincts.

*The Secrets*, Galron's collaboration with noted director of popular dramas Avi Neshet, unfolds the tale of Naomi, the erudite daughter of a yeshiva rabbi, who, after the untimely death of her mother, postpones her upcoming marriage to yeshiva scholar Michael in order to study in an ultra-Orthodox all-female school (Midrasha). There she meets Michel (Michal), a rebellious student who recently arrived from France. At first the two appear at odds with each other, but they later bond around a common cause: giving humanitarian aid to Anouk, a French-Christian woman residing in the city. In her past, Anouk served a prison term for killing her Jewish lover; now, while dying of cancer, she wishes to make peace with (the Jewish) God. Since the local rabbi refuses to provide assistance, Naomi, at Michal's request, constructs a series of repair rituals (*Tikkun*) in an effort to help Anouk achieve her goal. Their collaboration brings Michal and Naomi closer

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<sup>313</sup> Ya'akov Bar On, “Born Again with a Passion” [Hebrew], *News1*, April 2, 2011, accessed November 17, 2013 <http://www.news1.co.il/Archive/0024-D-58261-00.html>.

<sup>314</sup> See, for example: Henriette Dahan Kalev et al. (ed.), *A-Mythical: Social Justice and Gender in Jewish Sources* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot and Chemed Books, 2011).

together, and subsequently to develop a clandestine lesbian relationship. After word of the rituals gets out, the two students are reprimanded by the city rabbi and the Midrasha principal. This measure does not stop them, however, and following a last rite performed on Anouk's deathbed, they are expelled from the Midrasha. With their romance cut short, Michal and Naomi make a pact that after a suitable cooling-off period, they would share a home together in Tel Aviv. Nevertheless, Michal subsequently reneges on the promise, choosing instead to marry a klezmer musician named Yanki whom she met with Michal in Safed. Michal's decision enrages Naomi, but she then decides to attend her former lover's wedding, and the scene ends with the two enthralled in a festive dance.

The film takes as its background the relatively recent shift within the world of religious literacy, which has allowed devout women access to organized Judaic study, even in the traditionally masculine field of Talmud erudition.<sup>315</sup> The Midrasha principal describes this at one point as a "silent revolution" whose aim is to countermand the continued marginalization of women from positions of power within the male-dominated Judaic public sphere. Evidence to this marginalization is provided on numerous occasions during the film, particularly in the context of the androcentric religious discourse espoused by most of the film's male characters. Naomi's father, for example, defines female wisdom as only existent in relation to domestic concerns. Michael, the fiancé, also figures female intellectual prowess as limited, and defines the opinions of women through the derogatory term "female chatter." Both men seek to reinforce standard gender divisions, which is why they are reluctant to allow Naomi to choose a path outside of marriage. Their position is therefore representative of an establishment that is fundamentally hostile to attempts at crossing over, especially in terms of acquiring religious literacy. The revolution must be silent, the principal seems to argue, because the powers-that-be resist it so (as becomes evident when the Safed rabbi threatens to close down the Midrasha in response to Michal and Naomi's unsanctioned attempts at performing ritual repairs). It is for this reason that the Midrasha is also figured by its staff as a matchmaking institution: rather than act as a place for the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake, it becomes a tool for the containment of knowledge and for the preparation towards a better match.

At the outset, Naomi and Michal arrive at the feminist revolution from different starting points. Michal clearly stands at the margins of the religious world. She was sent to the Midrasha

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<sup>315</sup> See, for example: Koren, *Hereby Renewed*, 74; El-Or, *Next Pessach*.



so that it will function as a correctional facility for her: it is supposed to bring her back to the fold, securing her a proper match. Yet she remains defiant, as is clear in her use of a cellphone in the classroom, her smoking, her initiative to help Anouk, and her active courting of Yenki. Naomi, on the other hand, seeks the path of strengthening the connection with the religious world through scholarship. She feels stifled by a system that does not permit her to develop any intellectual faculties. As in several films previously discussed, she becomes a commodity in the male-centered practice of matchmaking—a gift to be given by the rabbi to his prized pupil. As her sister explains it at the film's outset, the path ahead for Naomi seems to spell out submission and acquiescence: she is to become the wife of a yeshiva head, patiently waiting for him to return from study while rearing their 3-4 children. Naomi dreads this future, which she associates with her mother's personal tragedy—a woman who was reduced to the role of housewife and silently suffered through a life of personal lack of fulfillment. Rather than escape this dire fate by departing the religious world, Naomi seeks a different way of entering into it—of becoming, perhaps, the first Haredi female rabbi. Yet this trajectory, she seems to know intuitively, is likely to result in an impasse, since it forces greater awareness of the Halakha's androcentric core.

The encounter with Anouk pushes this awareness to the fore, for both Naomi and Michal. Though she committed adultery and possibly murder, Anouk is not figured as a negative character, the reason for this being that what she did, she did for love. Yet the religious institution refuses to treat her as anything but a negative character, not so much for her felonious actions, but first and foremost—because she is not Jewish. The conflict between Anouk and the Safed rabbi comes to represent, then, a conflict between love and bureaucratic logic. It is the latter element, the film seems to say, which dominates Judaism, and is the cause of victimization along gendered and religious lines. In face of this insight, Naomi is forced to reevaluate her position as a religious person. Her decision is ultimately to follow love, to do—as both Michal and Yenki explain at different points in the film—“what feels right,” even if by some legalistic definitions it is the wrong thing to do. Yet the film seems to argue that such a direction, even if inspired by a Christian woman, is not antithetical to the spirit of Judaism. As a brief conversation in the first Midrasha lesson shows us, to treat God with love rather than fear reaps twice the reward. Jewish men seem to miss this insight, and their fear leads them towards an alienated form of observance—or as the Safed rabbi phrases it, he follows the letter of God's laws but does not think about His intentions. Yet women (and emasculated men such as Yenki, whose musical profession and overdependence

on his mother render him symbolically castrated) can arrive closer to God's true intentions by following a Judaism of love rather than of apathetic observance, of passionate prayer and song rather than impassionate bookkeeping—which in this case, as Naomi tells angrily to the principal in the end of the film, means not abandoning a dying woman, regardless of her specific denominational allegiances.

The way in which Naomi chooses to aid Anouk is significant in this context: rather than explore a solution outside of Judaism, she offers to perform a repair that would allow for Anouk's redemption from within the confines of religious tradition, while transforming its legalistic-patriarchal meanings. As a Tikkun founded on a challenge to halakhic patriarchy, it eventually encourages a bond of female solidarity. The spaces that are created between the women during the reparation ceremonies are founded on traditional symbols of femininity such as the circle and especially water. Like in *Chametz*, water again acts as a symbolic coalescing agent between women, for example in an early scene where the Midrasha students engage in a playful water fight in a local soup kitchen, or in a later sequence, where Naomi and Michal engage in lesbian intercourse to the sound of heavy rainfall. Most significant in this case is a scene where Naomi, Michal, and Anouk go to bathe in a ritual immersion pool (*Mikveh*) as part of the latter's process of purification. As previously mentioned, purification-via-immersion is associated with the Judaic perspective that equates femininity with impurity. By going afterhours into an all-male Mikveh, the three women seek to challenge this perspective without abolishing the practice to which it is attached. They do so by appropriating the ritual for their own purposes—or in the words of Haviva Ner-David, by “reclaiming *nidah* and *mikveh*” in order to allow purification-related rituals, “when interpreted in positive, feminist ways, to be[come] the source of spiritual expression and fulfillment for women.”<sup>316</sup> Within this reclaimed, womb-like setting, the Mikveh consequently becomes a site where a new form of female freedom may be achieved.<sup>317</sup> For Anat Zanger, this newfound freedom which a watery setting helps bring to the fore powerfully evokes the myth of the mermaid. The mermaid is a liminal figure that defies patriarchal rule: her habitat is in the amorphous and unregulated space of the sea, and her voice is so powerful that it moves her beyond the (masculine) symbolic order. In later evolutions of this myth, the radical power of the mermaid

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<sup>316</sup> Haviva Ner-David, “Reclaiming *Nidah* and *Mikveh* through Ideological and Practical Reinterpretation,” in *Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*, ed. Danya Ruttenberg (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 120.

<sup>317</sup> A similar approach is found in Galron's award-winning play *Mikveh* (2005).

is undercut by having her give up her aquatic habitat and her siren voice for the sake of living a mortal life with a male lover. *The Secrets*, Zanger argues, addresses and recuperates the loss of the water and the siren voice—i.e., a female agency unconstrained by patriarchal demands—by entering into dialogue with the myth. And while the relevance of an Assyrian and Greek mythical context to an analysis of such a Judaic text may be disputed, it does help draw out attention to how water is recuperated here “as an alternative to the monolithic-tellurian-masculine space.”<sup>318</sup>

The female bond made possible through water enables Naomi and Michal to explore new frontiers of physical intimacy: no longer inhibited by the fierce codes of religious conduct that regulate physical relations between genders, they find themselves free to explore their homosexual desires. The discovery of their lesbian attraction deeply unsettles both characters, as they find themselves torn, in the words of Nir Cohen, between “two opposite poles: the rabbinical institution at one end and their own credo at the other.”<sup>319</sup> Naomi’s response to this challenge is, again, typical of Judaic feminism: she studies rabbinical literature in an effort to find justification for her position. And indeed, she discovers that lesbian sex is not considered a mortal sin since it does not involve the wasting of sperm—that in terms of the Halakha, as Irit Koren explains, it is at worst a deviation from the norms of acceptable behavior and an obstruction of the sacred duty of procreation (which ultimately men are responsible for—not women).<sup>320</sup> While reassuring Naomi and Michal as to the possible legitimacy of their desire, the film also shows them strained by the possible implications of being taken out of the cycle of matchmaking, thereby highlighting “the immense hardship that both lesbians and gay men experience in the Orthodox community.”<sup>321</sup>

The realization of same-sex desire also helps to foreground an important biblical intertext within the film’s search for proto-feminist precedents: the Book of Ruth. The name of the film’s protagonist clearly references Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, to whom she made a solemn vow of faithfulness: “Wherever you go, I shall go [...] if even death will separate me from you.”<sup>322</sup> The Bible, and consequently traditional biblical scholarship, have interpreted this bond of female

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<sup>318</sup> Anat Zanger, “Between the Sea and the Mikveh: The Siren’s Voice in Contemporary Israeli Cinema” [Hebrew], in *Gender in Israel: New Studies on Gender in the Yishuv and State*, ed. Margalit Shilo and Gideon Katz (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2011), 536.

<sup>319</sup> Cohen, *Soldiers*, 197.

<sup>320</sup> Irit Koren, *Altering the Closet* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot and Chemed Books, 2003), 152-156.

<sup>321</sup> Cohen, *Soldiers*, 196.

<sup>322</sup> Ruth 1:16-17.

solidarity, where the foreigner Ruth follows Naomi into exile and takes on her faith, in essentially non-erotic and a-sexual terms. Yet as Exum explains, the

language in the book suggests the intensity of [Ruth's] devotion to Naomi. Ruth 'left [her] father and mother' (2.11) and 'cleaved [*dabeqah*] to her' (1.14). This is the language used of the first couple in Eden: 'Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves (*dabaq*) to his wife' (Gen 2.24). The appearance of terminology commonly understood to represent the marriage bond and its use (whether deliberate or not) to describe a bond between women sets the stage for the appropriation of the book for same-sex relationships.<sup>323</sup>

In the face of a paucity of lesbian role models within Judaic tradition, Jewish lesbians, as Rebecca Alpert explains, have found in the intense commitment between Naomi and Ruth a "logical place to look in searching for [their] past."<sup>324</sup> This kinship "point[s] to something greater than a relationship of loyalty and obligation between these two women"<sup>325</sup>—it points, perhaps, to love. And though the Bible does not present any clear indication to the existence of sexual relations, according to Alpert, lesbians must "read between the lines of the text and imagine Ruth and Naomi as lovers."<sup>326</sup> In so doing, they create a new interpretation of an old tradition—a new Midrash whose purpose is not "to prove that the story actually happened this way, but to make room for change within tradition while providing historical antecedent for the change."<sup>327</sup> Thus envisaged, *The Secrets* may be seen as responding to this demand for a re-interpretation, actualizing the lesbian relationship that was buried in between the lines of the biblical text. Accordingly, it intends to function as this new Midrash that gives the "nameless ancestors [of Jewish lesbians] [...] an opportunity to speak."<sup>328</sup>

As previously noted, Anouk's death and the final reparation forces a turn of events in which Naomi and Michal are separated and their lesbian romance comes to an end. Naomi chooses to follow her love to Michal, and thus to separate herself from her father's company. Michal, on the other hand, chooses to forgo with Naomi's affections and enter into matrimony with Yenki. At

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<sup>323</sup> Exum, *Plotted*, 138.

<sup>324</sup> Rebecca Alpert, "Finding Our Past: A Lesbian Interpretation of the Book of Ruth," in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, ed. Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 92.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

face value, then, these paths seem to position the two characters on opposite sides of a great divide. Yet in the ideological framework of the film, this contrast is figured as non-existent, since both women seem to occupy a similar approach vis-à-vis both emotion and Halakha. Naomi has chosen to follow her heart, but still devotes herself to the Halakha; she does not want to depart the world of halakhic Judaism, but rather to re-define it from within. Similarly, Michal has chosen to stay within halakhic Judaism, but not succumb to its supposed tendency to eradicate emotion. Therefore, although following the dictums of proper behavior—i.e., raising a family—she weds Yenki, who is aligned with the world of music—or emotion—rather than the categories of study and thought so valued within the ultra-Orthodox “learners’ society.” It is for this reason, the film seems to argue, that no real betrayal transpires between the two women, and they find their way to stay together in spite of everything. The ending, in which Naomi finally cries and the two women dance together, thus becomes a celebration of the possibility of retrieving an emotional, all-female space under Judaism's phallogocentric rule.

Such an interpretation, however, seems to disregard the film’s ultimate withdrawal from positing a strong feminist stance. By forcing a dissolution of the lesbian relationship, *The Secrets* closes ranks behind Ruth’s biblical narrative. Like her biblical namesake, the filmic Naomi gives up on her female love, sending her to the arms of a male protector (in the Bible, Boaz; in the film, Yenki). Since this is presented as a recuperable loss, *The Secrets* thus undercuts the radical potential of a lesbian reading of the Book of Ruth, and legitimizes a narrative wherein female spaces must function only in solitude (Naomi) or under surveillance of sympathetic and understanding men (Michal and Yenki).<sup>329</sup> Not only that, but through the resolution, the film also provides a conservative re-interpretation of another biblical tale: that of Michal, daughter to King Saul and wife to King David, Michal. In the Bible, Michal is primarily referenced in relation to two key scenes: In Samuel 1:19, she tells David of Saul’s plan to assassinate him, and organizes his subsequent escape; in Samuel 2:6, now as David’s wife, she emerges out of her room and angrily confront her husband as he dances in front of the Ark of the Covenant during a public ceremony. Exum interprets this biblical character as “seek[ing] to assert her autonomy [...] by

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<sup>329</sup> While recognizing the merits of J. Cheryl Exum’s point that in the Book of Ruth “all three main characters [i.e., Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz] participate in the symbolic transgression of gender and sexual boundaries,” and that this “eternal(ly unstable) triangle” (172) may invite readers “to collapse the gender distinctions with which they themselves operate” (174), this study nevertheless also argues that as a cinematic rendition of this biblical tale, *The Secrets* tends to foreclose on such radical interpretations by ultimately forcing this fluidity into a rather rigid patriarchal framework. See Exum, *Plotted*.

siding with her husband against her father in 1 Samuel 19 and by taking up the cause of her father's house against her husband in 2 Samuel 6."<sup>330</sup> In order to underplay the tension that arises from this woman's struggle to assert her autonomy within a system of heteronormative marriage that upholds patriarchal dominance, traditional biblical scholarship tended to paint Michal of Samuel 2:6 as the quintessential shrew and David "as the long-suffering victim of [her] ire."<sup>331</sup> In *The Secrets*, however, a modern Michal emerges as a female character who poses a legitimate challenge to patriarchal rule, and who is anything but a shrew. If the film recovers Michal as a positive figure, it does so, however, at the price of legitimizing the traditional institution of marriage. While the biblical Michal was the victim of domineering men who treated her like property, the filmic Michal finds her way into a loving relationship with an "accepting" husband. In light of such a fitting match—much different than the tragic union of Michal and David—the possibility of an alternate lifestyle that does not involve marriage is therefore swept under the rug. As a result of this procedure, the film stabilizes the regime of "compulsory heterosexuality," which Adrienne Rich described "as means of assuring male right to physical, economic, and emotional access."<sup>332</sup> What emerges as legitimate is that which lesbians have long sought to resist: "this *double life*—this apparent acquiescence to an institution founded on male interest and prerogative [that] has been characteristic of female experience."<sup>333</sup>

*The Secrets'* conservative agenda runs even deeper. Beyond its recuperation of heterosexual love and marriage, it also endorses an essentialist perspective on femininity as equated with emotionality, and thus participates in the patriarchal project of disavowing the reality of women by subsuming it under the myth of Woman.<sup>334</sup> In this framework, it is unsurprising that in spite of attempts to the contrary, the film ultimately submits the female body to the secular specular regime which reduces it to sexual categories and wishes it to be unveiled. In various instances, the film does shed light on the hatred that women, both religious and secular, experience in relation to their bodies: for example, in the continued references Naomi and Michal's roommate Sheine makes to her overweight frame, and how it will prevent her from achieving the goal of

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>332</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*, ed. Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 135.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>334</sup> See, for example: Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 9-20.

becoming a wife and mother; or when, in the Mikveh, Anouk refuses at first to disrobe because in old age, the figure she was once so proud of has “betrayed her.” The film’s solution to this problem is to fashion safe spaces in which female intimacy and corporeal love could grow independently of the attempts of religious government to hide women’s bodies and force them into submission. Yet paradoxically, it is in those very scenes that depict homosocial intimacy that *The Secrets* finds opportunity to disrobe religious women and expose them to a scrutinizing spectatorial gaze. Thus, when in one scene Naomi applies a rough textured fabric to her bare body as means of penance, the removal of this fabric allows for the revelation of Naomi’s naked upper body—the same body which she has sought to deny through a practice of self-punishment; and in the Mikveh, the camera scans the naked bodies of Michal and Naomi from head to toe, while leaving the body of Anouk—the self-avowed “aging” and “diseased” body that seems of little interest to the traditional male gaze—in an unexposed state, hidden within the depths of purifying waters. The paradoxical nature of this exposure becomes explicit during a scene in which Anouk shows naked portraits of herself, painted by her late husband, to Naomi and Michal. The two young women avert their eyes, proving how much they have internalized the religious male edict that forbids gazing upon the nude female. Slowly, however, they set their gaze upon the painted nudity, becoming aware of the pleasure of exploring it in a physical setting where only women are to be found. This seems to be the film’s self-reflexive comment on the possibilities of exposing naked bodies of women to women. But the scene, beyond its diegetic context, is not only viewed by female audiences, and could even be said to have been made by a male filmmaker for the benefit of male viewers;<sup>335</sup> consequently, its nudity is never simply nudity, but also spectacle.

Like *The Secrets*, Avraham Kushnir’s *Bruriah* provides latter-day commentary on significant proto-feminist precedents within Judaic literature. Here, as may be evident from the title, the precedent in question is the Talmud’s tale of Bruriah, daughter to the martyred Rabbi Hananyah ben Teradyon, and wife of Rabbi Meir, the great miracle worker of the Mishnaic era. The legendary Bruriah was described as a great scholar, who bested her male peers and even schooled the great Rabbi Meir himself. As such, she represented an anomaly—a female sage in an

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<sup>335</sup> Neshet gained a reputation for displaying nudity on the screen during the earliest stages of his career, when he created male-centered narratives that celebrated the values of 1970s Tel Aviv hedonism. This tendency continues in his current films, as can be witnessed not only in *The Secrets* but also in *Turn Left at the End of the World* (2004). See: Amir Chetroni and Shmulik Duvdevani, “On the Tel Aviv Hedonism of Avi Neshet’s Cinema” [Hebrew], *Resling: A Multi-disciplinary Stage for Culture* 7 (Summer 2000): 99-112.

all-male intellectual world. Her function within rabbinical literature, according to Rachel Adler, was to challenge the boundaries of the norm. In a context where women were thought of as inferior to men, the Talmud's male authors used the figure of Bruriah to investigate a crucial question to their belief system: "What if there were a woman who was just like us?"<sup>336</sup> Yet the potency of this challenge, so significant for modern feminists, was undercut in traditional literature's treatment of Bruriah's tragic end. Thus, enraged by his wife's claims to superior knowledge, Rabbi Meir sought to prove her frivolity by sending one of his students to seduce her. After frequent refusals, Bruriah finally yielded to the student's advances, and when the plot was revealed, she hanged herself. The sexual humiliation evident in this dénouement permits the patriarchal rabbinical institution to deny her any religious authority, since the matrix of rabbinical relationships upon which authority is founded—of schoolmates, teacher and student—is fundamentally de-sexualized (although not entirely de-eroticized). In this way, Bruriah is transformed from a possible role model to a mere cautionary tale.

Picking up on these themes, the film focuses on a religious woman named Bruriah (played by Hadar Galron), who lives with her observant family in contemporary Jerusalem. Thirty years before the diegetic present, her rabbi father wrote a book on the Talmud's Bruriah which raised controversy within the Haredi community and led to his ostracism and the public burning of his research. Haunted by this trauma, modern Bruriah dedicates her time to locating the last copy of this book, in an effort to vindicate the family name and, perhaps, find a potent retort to Judaic misogyny. The husband Yaakov is upset by this obsessive search, which he sees as indicative of his wife's frivolity. Lacking in spousal support, Bruriah approaches Yosef, an inquisitive colleague of Yaakov, in hopes that he may help her in this quest. When Yaakov discovers this relationship, however, he suspects the existence of an illicit affair. Subsequently he procures the last copy of the book from his father, who was responsible for the original burning, and gives it to Yosef so that he may use it to seduce Bruriah. In their meeting, Bruriah seems tempted, but retreats when Yosef tells her of Yaakov's attempt to recreate Rabbi Meir's morality test. She then dresses in provocative clothing and traverses Jerusalem's Haredi precincts, eventually joining her husband at a spring on the city's outskirts, where they bathe naked and in a fond embrace.

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<sup>336</sup> Rachel Adler, "The Virgin in the Brothel and Other Anomalies: Character and Context in the Legend of Beruriah," *Tikkun* 3, no. 6 (1988): 29.



Bruriah's challenge, like that of Naomi and Michal, serves to highlight the continued presence of patriarchal tradition that traverses millennia of Jewish culture. Perhaps too strongly, the film argues that the Talmud's legend of Bruriah was repressed within mainline Judaism for its explosive potential in empowering women—as is evident in the burning of the book written by the filmic Bruriah's father. Rather than explore this potential, contemporary Judaic institutions continue to rearticulate the Talmud's dictum that “women are flighty,” as well as maintain its resulting discriminatory practices. The film provides several examples for such practices. In one instance, Bruriah is shown to be helping a female friend to obtain a divorce through the local rabbinical authorities. Through this plotline, *Bruriah* touches upon the issue of divorce refusal, “one of the most difficult obstacles to gender equality in Israel.”<sup>337</sup> Within the Judaic system, only the husband can determine if a marriage is dissolved, and as a result, even if a woman lives separately from her spouse, as long as she is denied a divorce by him, every relationship she engages in would be considered adultery and every child she conceives would be deemed a bastard. Since marital issues in Israel are governed by religious courts, and since these courts are androcentrically-inclined, many women find themselves at the mercy of their husbands, who often exploit this situation for their own personal and financial benefit. Such is the case of Bruriah's friend, who simply wishes to be released from her obligations so that she may be able to bear a child who would be legally recognized by the religious authorities. In spite of Bruriah's best efforts in negotiating the particular sensitivities of the rabbinic decision-makers, her friend's request is ultimately rejected.

Another example for Judaism's discriminatory logic takes place during a scene which centers on the school *Chumash* service of Yaakov and Bruriah's youngest daughter. During this ceremony, in which first-graders celebrate being given the Book of Genesis by their teachers, the entire class of female pupils sings in unison so as to mark the occasion. After the ceremony ends, a male colleague of Yaakov approaches him and grudgingly complains about the inappropriateness of the performance, since the Talmud states that “a woman's voice is sinful” (*Kol Beisha Ervah*). Within this setting, the claim seems absurd even by religious standards. The Talmud's injunction against allowing women to sing in front of a mixed crowd relates to the risk of sexual temptation that the Talmud's sages associated with womanhood. Biased by definition, this perspective seems especially unfounded when used to define the performance of six-year-old girls as somehow

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<sup>337</sup> Kehat, *Feminism and Judaism*, 181.

sexual. The incongruity of the colleague's remark thus serves to explicitly critique Judaism's definition of the female body as a site of sexual threat. Yet at the same time, it also implicitly points to a slippage that also takes place in the case of the Talmud's Bruriah. Thus, what seems to really intimidate the patriarchal subject in this situation is the access women are given to Judaic knowledge, as marked by the entry of these young girls into the world of biblical study. Rather than face the threat of women gaining religious authority, these girls, like the Talmud's Bruriah before them, are therefore reduced by the men around them to sexual-corporeal terms so as to protect a patriarchal scholarly community that avowedly removes itself from the sexual sphere.

Interestingly, Yaakov's response to his colleague's claim is to dismiss it entirely, thereby situating himself in opposition to Judaic lore. Yet this opposition is only partial at best, for Yaakov's general behavior seems to embody a profound fear of destabilizing halakhic tradition. Such trepidation is evoked primarily in relation to his eldest daughter and wife. Like *The Secrets'* Naomi, Yaakov's first born wishes to go to an all-girls Midrasha in hopes of becoming a great sage. And while Yaakov was quick to defend his youngest child in a symbolic setting that connects females to Judaic knowledge, here his first response is one of negation. His justification for refusing to allow his eldest to attend a Midrasha is not that her mind is lacking in intellectual prowess; rather, his condemnation of her "fickle mind" is connected to her desire to "rock the boat": to disrupt a longstanding tradition and provoke communal sanctions, as was the case with the talmudic Bruriah. The same reasoning is used by Yaakov in relation to his wife's attempts at locating her father's book. Yet it seems like the crux of his fear regarding the filmic Bruriah's fickle mind has to do with her supposed sexual drives. Yaakov, the film seems to indicate, is caught within a conceptual framework whereby women are seen as over-determined by their sex drive. Accordingly, he becomes obsessed about the imminent threat of his wife's potential sexual eruption, and about the need to either prove or disprove this threat through sexual manipulation. It is for this reason that he cajoles Yosef to recreate Rabbi Meir's test of his wife: rather than promote her destabilization of the halakhic system, which in his mind may potentially lead to promiscuity (since becoming subject in femininity is associated in the Halakha with becoming sexually potent), he attempts to contain her in the manner of the Halakha.

Through Yaakov, the film openly questions the double-standard applied by Judaism in the question of sexuality. While accusing his wife of being "flighty" and driven by sexual desire, it is Yaakov who seems most sexually motivated. His manipulation seems thus to be a twisted mode

of sexual play within a context that dissociates masculinity from sexuality. Such play can only be justified by displacing responsibility onto the woman. As men, both Yaakov and Rabbi Meir are defined as susceptible to sexual urges, yet in their case these urges are implicitly regarded as necessary burdens that would be relieved through divine providence. In contrast, the stories of the legendary and modern Bruriah's shows that for Judaism, "women are assumed to be solely responsible for sexual behavior, even when pressured, deceived, or entrapped by men. Chastity is the measure of women's worth, and there are no extenuating circumstances."<sup>338</sup> For her part, the contemporary Bruriah comes to inhabit the role assigned to her by Yaakov and Judaic tradition, and the film shows her to continuously transgress the laws of modesty. Bruriah's penchant for transgression first appears when she exchanges her "appropriate" attire with her divorce-seeking friend's revealing outfit so that the latter will seem more respectful in the eyes of the rabbinical judges, and then, visibly excited by the whole situation, calls Yaakov to entice him with a description of her sexy attire. Her most provocative flirtation with sexuality, however, is in her relationship with Yosef. In a community that prohibits a man and a woman who are not married to each other to stay in the same room together unobserved, Yosef and Bruriah's proximity, although never explicitly sexual, is charged with eroticism. As a result, the filmic Bruriah's attempt to seek out Yosef figures her as a more active source of sin than the seduced Bruriah of the Talmud. Yet the film is not geared towards proving Bruriah as inherently sinful, as if by biological determination; rather it shows her to be a victim of a context in which women have no choice but to fully inhabit the position forced upon them by patriarchal Judaism—to collude in the act of their own annihilation, an operation which is literalized in the original Bruriah's decision to take her life.

The ending of the film, however, does not recreate that of the talmudic tale. Although close to being seduced, Bruriah nevertheless refuses fall into Yaakov's trap. Rather than follow in the legendary Bruriah's footsteps, and internalize the perspective of seductress, she appropriates the markers of the seductress—the revealing dress, the heavy makeup—for her own purposes, exposing them as masks rather than essential characteristics. The masquerade that underlies Bruriah's final march through Jerusalem's streets seems incompatible with Joan Reviere's formative articulation of the term: here the mask of womanliness is not worn as an "unconscious attempt to ward off the anxiety [of] reprisal" by "evoking friendly feelings towards her in the

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<sup>338</sup> Adler, "The Virgin," 103.

man,”<sup>339</sup> but as an act of defiance that forces religious men to avert their eyes and perhaps recognize their disavowed desires. In this respect, *Bruriah*’s pageantry of womanliness seems closer to Mary Ann Doane’s (mis)interpretation of Riviere’s definition: rather than defensively camouflage and naturalize female challenge, masquerade for her is founded on “a hyperbolization of the accoutrements of femininity,” on “an excess of femininity” that “confounds [the] masculine structure of the look” and “effects a defamiliarization of female iconography.”<sup>340</sup> Doane’s appropriation of the masquerade, more than anything else, seems to resonate with the parodic operation of drag, as means of revealing gender and sexual categories as fundamentally performative. The lavish hyperbolic take on femininity in *Bruriah* draws attention to the fact that, to quote Judith Butler, “hegemonic sexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations. That it must repeat this imitation, that it sets up pathologizing practices and normalizing sciences in order to produce and consecrate its own claim on originality and propriety.”<sup>341</sup> By imitating the signs of secular femininity, the protagonist’s drag “is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which the hegemonic gender is itself produced.” It expands the fissures within the traditional notion of “a natural woman,” so succinctly articulated in Aretha Franklin’s famous song; as Butler notes,

When Aretha Franklin sings, “you make me feel like a natural woman,” she seems at first to suggest that some natural potential of her biological sex is actualized by her participation in the cultural position of “woman” as object of heterosexual recognition. [...] There is no breakage, no discontinuity between “sex” as biological facticity and essence, or between gender and sexuality. Although Aretha appears to be all too glad to have her naturalness confirmed she also seems fully and paradoxically mindful that the confirmation is never guaranteed, that the effect of naturalness is only achieved as a consequence of that moment of heterosexual recognition. After all, Aretha sings, you make me feel *like* a natural woman, suggesting that this is a kind of metaphorical substitution, an act of imposture, a kind of sublime and momentary participation in an ontological illusion produced by the mundane operation of heterosexual drag.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as Masquerade,” in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), 37, 38.

<sup>340</sup> Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator,” in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 139.

<sup>341</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 86.

<sup>342</sup> Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele A. Barale, and David Halperin (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 317 (italics in the original).

In light of the challenge of Bruriah's drag to the act of heterosexual imitation and its naturalizing effect upon the cultural definition of "natural woman," the final bathing scene seems particularly perplexing. On the one hand, Yaakov and Bruriah's choice to bathe together in the spring seems, like in *The Secrets'* Mikveh scene, a radical re-interpretation of Judaism's purification rituals, which are founded on the separation of sexes. In describing the practice of bathing with her husband in a remote spring, Ner-David explains that this choice is not meant to "replace the ritual as a celebration and mark of [her] menstrual cycle" but "to add a new dimension to [her] monthly immersions"<sup>343</sup>—a dimension of greater intimacy between husband and wife. Accordingly, "by insisting that men also immerse before a couple can sexually reunite—rather than suggesting that mikveh immersion be perceived as being only about the woman's purification—it can become a ritual about the couple's purification for each other, and the renewing of their romantic relationship."<sup>344</sup> Yet whatever radical potentialities this challenge may inhere, they seem to be undercut by the way in which this bathing scene is realized cinematically. Thus, Bruriah's arrival at the spring is preceded by her husband's, and as she stands on the edge, visualized only through her exposed legs, the focus is on Yaakov, fully immersed in water, looking up at her. Her subsequent disrobement, shot through its reflection in the water, thus seems to be "only for him"—his exclusive right, activated by his gaze. In contradistinction to Bruriah's previous drag performance, this is an act which seeks male recognition. And this recognition comes by way of legitimizing her now fully naked body as the signifier of natural womanliness—of gender and sexuality "as biological facticity and essence."

This ending reflects how the film as a whole forecloses on the potency of Bruriah's feminist challenge to Judaic patriarchy. As previously intimated, if the Talmud's Bruriah was "subversive and unmanageable, a fifth column in the patriarchal domain,"<sup>345</sup> then the threat she posed was more intellectual than sexual, undermining an all-male learning system by proving herself the scholarly match of male rabbis. So to contain this threat, the legendary Bruriah was reduced to her sexual character, and as such she was made to cater to a system which figures women as bodies, first and foremost. Contrastingly, in the film, Bruriah is not discussed in relation to scholarly faculties. Granted, she works in a book store, but her interest there seems less to do with reading

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<sup>343</sup> Ner-David, "Reclaiming *Nidah*," 132.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>345</sup> Adler, "The Virgin," 31.

and more with ordering books in hopes of finding the missing Bruriah volume. For knowledge that may not be found in filing she requires the help of the bookstore's secular-male proprietor. Not an intellectual by any means, the filmic Bruriah is thus figured primarily in sexual terms. Again, this serves to illustrate how she is forced to embody the position allocated to her by Judaic patriarchy. Yet in not offering us a different perspective on Bruriah—or more specifically by not showing her as one able to challenge the bases of Judaic knowledge through intellectual prowess—the film does leave us only with a sexual definition of the film's protagonist. As such, *Bruriah* buttresses the very condition it seemingly seeks to critique: the condition in which “male superiority and patriarchal power are reinforced by reducing women to their sexual function.” Not only that, but in undressing the religious woman, the final scene indicates that the patriarchal power reinforced here is not so much that of Israeli Judaism as that of Israeli secularism, with its heavy reliance on a voyeuristic ocular economy. And what is lost in the process is precisely that which is forsaken in the Talmud's legend: namely, “Bruriah's specialness.”<sup>346</sup>

### 3.4 MYSTICAL-MESSIANIC TIME AND FEMALE AGENCY: BENJAMIN, LEVINAS, AND DISJOINTED TEMPORALITY

Judged by their narrative elaborations, *Bruriah* and *The Secrets* explicitly attempt to mount a challenge to patriarchy from inside Judaic society. Yet for all their feminist resistance, the films ultimately align themselves with the overarching tendency of Judaic-themed Israeli cinema to surrender its female characters to a regime of sexual objectification. As a result, what one finds implicit in their accounts of women's plight under religious patriarchy is a fundamental ambivalence vis-à-vis the actual necessity and value of the feminist project, not only in the Judaic-Israeli sector, but in Israeli society as a whole. However, while the films' plots exhibit conservative allegiances to patriarchal logic, and tacitly reveal the latter's existence on both sides of the religious-secular divide, their style seems to unravel such inclinations and by extension—open up new spaces for radical feminist criticism. This critical unraveling is made possible through the

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 104.

style's reliance on a disjointed temporality, which serves as the foundation for redeeming ethical encounters and the site of (utopian) hopes for female agency within Judaism.

Generally speaking, time has played a secondary role in the discourse on filmic spiritual aesthetics within cinema studies scholarship. As detailed in the previous chapter, theorists of the spiritual style have largely been interested with the function of space and action in cinema: the removal of “distractions” that are associated with spectacular *mise-en-scène* and melodramatic interactions between characters. When time was discussed, it was often under the rubric of Bazin's extended “shot sequence” paradigm. Thus, these scholars showed preference to a film aesthetic which allowed temporality to unfold continuously and without (authorial) interruption, creating a sense of “real time.” One exception to this trend has been filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, whose book *Sculpting with Time* (1986),<sup>347</sup> as may be understood from the title, produces a temporally-centered understanding of (spiritual) cinema. Like other theorists, Tarkovsky believed that the infinite lies within the shots themselves, waiting to be discovered; yet he did not see this discovery as being facilitated by a reduction of filmic temporality to the shot-sequence. For him, each shot has its own unique “rhythm,” which consists of various temporal activities, each exerting its own time pressure (behavior and intensity). The artists' role is to recognize in these time pressures a reflection of the facet of infinite totality which interests them, and then to orchestrate these pressures so that these may come to the fore. Consequently, through Tarkovsky's theory and films, we get a sense of a multilayered, heterogeneous, and disjointed temporality that complicates standard accounts of spiritual time in film. Such complexity, however, has often been marginalized in mainline spiritual film discourse in favor of emphasizing those segments of the Russian cineaste's work that foreground the aforementioned sense of “real time.”

Tarkovsky's challenge may prompt us to unveil the elements in *The Secrets* and *Bruriah* which defy an understanding of temporality as equated with linear “clock time,” and relate them to spiritual terminology. In performing this task, however, his theory may prove less helpful, if for no other reason than that *The Secrets* and *Bruriah* are embedded in a different spiritual context—Judaism—than the one that inspired the Russian-Christian filmmaker. As Jewish texts, these films draw on a particular Judaic temporal order, in an effort to both further situate themselves within the world of Jewish thought, and to mobilize this world for the advancement of their ethical goals. This order—which binds together spirituality, disjointed temporality, and ethical responsibility—

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<sup>347</sup> Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting with Time: Reflections on the Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

may be defined as “mystical-messianic time.” Its application in this Judaic-cinematic context, in turn, may arguably be best understood in relation to the influential articulations on messianic time of mystically-inclined Jewish philosophers Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995).

In an attempt to elucidate “the messianic idea” within Jewish religion, Gershom Scholem famously argued that rabbinic Judaism has “three kinds of forces [that] are active precisely at those points where it is the most alive: conservative, restorative, and utopian.” The first of these forces is “directed towards the preservation of that which exists and which, in the historical environment of Judaism, was always in danger.” Its presence, he claims, is established “most effectively in the world of *Halakha*, in the construction and continuing preservation and development of religious law.” The other two forces, in contrast, are conditioned exactly on the unraveling of this law and the redemption of the reality which it seeks to explain and regulate. Thus, the restorative impulse of Judaism is “directed to the return and recreation of [...] a condition pictured by the historical fantasy and the memory of the nation as circumstances of an ideal past;” while the utopian impulse “aim[s] at a state of things which has never existed.” Par Judaism’s conservativeness, these forces, “deeply intertwined and yet at the same time of a contradictory nature,”<sup>348</sup> fuel Judaism’s messianic aspirations, and divert them towards a particular end:

the vision of a new content which is to be realized in a future that will in fact be nothing other than the recreation of what is ancient, bring back that which had been lost; the ideal content of the past at the same time delivers the basis for the vision of the future. However, knowingly or unknowingly, certain elements creep into such a restoratively oriented utopianism which are not in the least restorative and which derive from the vision of a completely new state of the Messianic world. The completely new order has elements of the completely old, but even this order does not consist of the actual past; rather, it is a past transformed and transfigured in a dream brightened by the rays of utopianism.<sup>349</sup>

As a complex temporal vision that looks simultaneously towards an immemorial past and a paradisiacal future, the messianic idea is also a fundamental intrusion into our known present. In this respect it is intimately connected to the twofold signification of the term “apocalypse”: On the one hand, the common sense of an apocalyptic event, of a “transcendence breaking in,” which in the messianic context is understood as an upheaval that destroys the prevailing order as a

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<sup>348</sup> Gershom Scholem, “Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 3 (italics in the original)..

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 (italics in the original).



precondition for the establishment of a new-old/utopian-restorative reality; on the other hand, there is in the literal translation of the Greek word *Apocalypsis* as “revelation,” understood in this framework as “revelations or disclosures of God’s hidden knowledge of the End,”<sup>350</sup> to which only certain persons—a prophet or the actual Messiah—can gain access.

The presence of apocalyptic messianism, according to Joseph Dan, was largely marginalized in the first millennium of Jewish history; during that period, the emphasis was placed rather on the conservative impulse of Judaism, in an effort “to gain a closeness to God in this world and His favor posthumously.”<sup>351</sup> The situation changed drastically in the aftermath of the Spanish Expulsion (1492), which brought “the consciousness of Exile [*Galut*] back to the fore of Jewish experience, and with it—visions of the End and the feeling of immanent redemption.”<sup>352</sup> While the contemporaneous engagements with Messianism were multiple and diverse, none has arguably been more influential on future generations, and on the modern reclamation of messianism in particular, than that of rabbi-mystic Isaac Luria (“Ha’Ari Hakadosh,” 1534-1572) and the Safed school of Kabbalah. Luria’s engagement with Messianism spearheaded a process wherein “the messianic theme became a productive element in the speculations of the mystics themselves,”<sup>353</sup> and underwent important transformations as a result. One major change was the legitimization of the viewpoint that saw messianism as being an integral part of history. “The Messianic ideal of the prophets of the Bible and other classical Jewish sources,” according to Scholem, saw “the world unredeemed and the world in the process of redemption [as] separated by an abyss. History was not a *development* toward any goal. History would reach its terminus, and the new state that ensued would be the result of a totally new manifestation of the divine.”<sup>354</sup> These tendencies, Dan argues, were still largely preserved in early Kabbalah, which “conceived the prelapsarian divinity as perfection, and wanted to return to it while turning the proverbial mystical back to history;” Luria’s Kabbalah, however, “marched with history towards the apocalyptic End where perfection, both divine and earthly, would be attained.”<sup>355</sup> Thus, Luria argued against the traditional Judaic wisdom by stipulating that divinity had a basic flaw which emerged during a pre-creation catastrophe and

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>351</sup> Joseph Dan, *Apocalypse Then and Now* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot, 2000), 195.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>353</sup> Gershom Scholem, “The Messianic Idea in Kabbalism,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 42.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 38 (italics in the original).

<sup>355</sup> Dan, *Apocalypse*, 219.

caused “all being [to be] in Galut.”<sup>356</sup> As such, human reality is seen as an expression of divine reality, their fates irrevocably linked. Yet even as exile emerges as the condition of universal existence, there is also the possibility of Tikkun, which is “the Lurianic synonym for history—the ongoing process for achieving perfection, the reparation of the catastrophe and the realization of the world’s *raison d’être*.”<sup>357</sup> Transposing messianism onto history, Luria consequently imagines the Spanish Expulsion of his recent past as an important indication that the messianic age is upon him—as a decisive catastrophe that will undoubtedly bring about “a final push [to] finish history and open up the gates of redemption.”<sup>358</sup> It seemed, for him, that a divine unity from a primordial past could emerge at any given moment, eclipsing past imperfections and establishing “a flawless and harmonious world in which everything occupies its proper place.”<sup>359</sup>

From this, another revolutionary change which Luria’s messianic mysticism legitimized was the important role of human agency in facilitating redemption. “In the biblical texts,” Scholem insists, “the Messianic idea [...] is nowhere made dependent upon human activity.”<sup>360</sup> Luria, however, forcefully argued that “the struggle for the redemption of Man is part of the struggle to redeem divinity.”<sup>361</sup> Accordingly, redemption starts by individual effort of self-perfection, whereby “a man [sic] who observes a commandment is no longer observing a commandment: his act has a universal significance, he is amending something.”<sup>362</sup> It continues, however, with taking ethical responsibility for other members of the community, who must also be “made to follow the commandments so as to rectify the generation in God’s eyes and give rise to deliverance.”<sup>363</sup> For Dan, this means that reparation is “democratic in the sense that the scholar and the ignorant, the Lurianic mystic and the unschooled laborer participate in it and share the responsibility.”<sup>364</sup> Nevertheless, it would seem that the mystic does occupy a privileged position within this process, since he alone is able to experience a revelation of God’s totality and the means by which it will be restored. Like a true apocalyptic, he finds himself at any given moment on “an intersection from

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<sup>356</sup> Scholem, “Messianic Idea in Kabbalism,” 45.

<sup>357</sup> Dan, *Apocalypse*, 219-220.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>359</sup> Scholem, “Messianic Idea in Kabbalism,” 47.

<sup>360</sup> Scholem, “Messianic Idea in Judaism,” 14.

<sup>361</sup> Dan, *Apocalypse*, 150.

<sup>362</sup> Scholem, “Messianic Idea in Kabbalism,” 47.

<sup>363</sup> Dan, *Apocalypse*, 216.

<sup>364</sup> Dan, *Kabbalah*, 80.

which a vision of the past and of the future can be observed;” consequently it is for him, rather than anyone else, to “unify such elements into a cohesive and inspired vision” that could then be mediated to the masses and inspire them into action. The significance of collective redemption, in turn, prevents the mystic from becoming a Messiah. Indeed, because of its “democratic” inclinations, Lurianic mystical-messianism is only messianic in a limited capacity—the Messiah plays a minor role, for He only “comes *as a result* of redemption, crowns it, and certifies its achievement.”<sup>365</sup>

It follows from this that the constitutive role of apocalyptic upheaval is also transformed within Luria’s doctrines. Catastrophe, as previously mentioned, was related by Luria to a divine reality in a permanent state of Galut whose reverberation can be sensed in the Spanish Expulsion. Yet as an expression of apocalypse, the Spanish Expulsion remains the background to a reparation process that does not facilitate redemption through upheaval but via human acts of improvement. “This conception of redemption,” for Scholem, is “no longer catastrophic: when [human] duty has been fulfilled the son of David, the Messiah, will come of himself, for his appearance at the End of Days is only a symbol for the completion of a process [...]. Thus it becomes possible to avoid the ‘travails of the Messiah.’ The transition from the state of imperfection to the state of perfection (which may still be very difficult) will nevertheless take place without revolution and disaster and great affliction.” The absence of a final disaster testifies to Luria’s belief that the redemptive End has an “organic connection”<sup>366</sup> with human reality. The novel order that emerges within the human world does not demolish the old because it is fundamentally—and intimately—part of that “old.” Seen in this way, apocalypse is never entirely external to worldly existence and therefore its decisive appearance is never a replacement—only a transition.

Because of their positioning as means of working through collective trauma, Lurianic teachings had a profound influence on a generation of Western European Jews who had to face the traumatic challenges of early 20<sup>th</sup> Jewish existence. The failures of Emancipation forced these Jews to confront the lingering presence of anti-Semitism in their Christian-dominated surroundings. Concurrently, the advent of World War I prompted them to reflect on the fragmentation of Western civilization and question “the model of Newtonian mechanics, a time at once linear, continuous and irreversible” that was supposed to march human society “inevitably

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<sup>365</sup> Dan, *Apocalypse*, 221.

<sup>366</sup> Scholem, “Messianic Idea in Kabbalism,” 47.

toward its glorious completion.”<sup>367</sup> Drawn to unrelenting pessimism, many of this generation’s key intellectual figures looked for a new paradigm of thought and action that would inspire change and perhaps countermand the adverse effects of these phenomena. They found it in the concept of messianism, as it was articulated within Judaic tradition—the very tradition which they and their parents had to eradicate, or at least subsume under a more vital commitment to humanity, for the purpose of Emancipation and acculturation. Much of Jewish continental philosophy of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was thus preoccupied with resurrecting the messianic and adapting it to the circumstances of modern Europe. These efforts, as previously suggested, find their most emblematic expression in the works of Benjamin and Levinas.

“Reflection on the nature of history,” according to Stéphan Mosès, “seems to have been a constant element in Benjamin’s thought,” leading him to consistently grapple with such questions as “how can we talk about history?” and “how can a chaos of events be made intelligible?”<sup>368</sup> These queries, however, were not addressed in an effort to legitimize the prevalent methods of conceptualizing history. Rather, Benjamin recognized that such methods forced time into a debilitating Newtonian model “that claims to reconstitute the past by accumulating ‘facts’ and to predict the future by ignoring the role of radical novelty, that is, utopia, which constitutes its essence.”<sup>369</sup> A more honest historical consideration, for him, would bracket out this model, and all its attendant assumptions, from consideration. What arrives as a result of this bracketing, Peter Fenves explains, is an idea of time which does not function “as an irreversible motion along a straight line”<sup>370</sup> but rather as “a curve that is everywhere continuous yet nowhere differentiable: it is so sharply turned at every point that it proceeds without direction, neither progress nor regress, and every one of its stretches is not only like every other but also like the course of time as a whole.” Since this time “runs counter to history,” the task of a proper historical method is to look in the moment for that which “recapitulates—without ever exactly repeating—the whole of time.”<sup>371</sup> It does not wish, in Mosès’s words, “to follow the evolution of historical processes but to immobilize them, that is, to describe their privileged connections (in synchrony and not it

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<sup>367</sup> Stéphan Mosès, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (1992; repr., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 50.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>370</sup> Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 15.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

diachrony), to identify the utopian elements in these connections and to evoke them in the form of images, to decipher that utopian moment precisely in everything that challenged the established order in the past, and finally to read the figure of utopia in the double *theological* and *political* model of messianism and Revolution.”<sup>372</sup>

Benjamin’s “*theological paradigm* of history”<sup>373</sup> dates back as far as his early essays “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” (1916) and “The Task of the Translator” (1923). In these texts, the German philosopher contextualizes messianism through a discussion of “three stages in the biblical history of the genesis of language”: in the first stage, language is that of the divine word, “where it coincides perfectly with the reality it designates;” in the second stage, where Adam names the animals, “language and reality are no longer identical, but there is a sort of preestablished harmony between them;” and in the third stage, “this ‘paradisiacal language,’ invested with a magic power of naming, has been lost and degraded into a simple instrument of communication.”<sup>374</sup> The fall from originary speech is most felt in modern times, which represent the height of the third stage. It is therefore important for Benjamin to highlight the possibility of moving language away from its communicable functions and advancing it—through insightful translation—“to its utopian end, toward that ‘language of the truth,’ which is simply the language of the origins.” Here, according to Mosès, one finds the philosopher most indebted to Kabbalah: Thus,

the process, which Benjamin defines as “messianic,” and whose end simultaneously means a return to the origin, evokes the conception of history specific to Jewish mysticism, which has always conceived of the messianic end of history as the realization of the ideal plan implied in the Creation. In this sense, it means less a simple restoration of the origin than the realization, through the changes of human time, of all utopian potentials coded, so to speak, in the original program of the human adventure. This is a view of history that, although it is certainly not linear, is not cyclical either, since its end does not coincide purely and simply with its origin. [...] The restoration of the paradisiacal language goes through the movement of verbal invention itself, so that the return to the original is in fact produced through the creation of the new.<sup>375</sup>

As may be gleaned from the above, Benjamin’s theological paradigm does not see each moment as similar to the next in a mutual embeddedness with history’s telos, but rather defines them as

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<sup>372</sup> Mosès, *Angel of History*, 66-67 (my italics).

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, 68 (italics in the original).

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

qualitatively different. The moment, for him, carries the traces of “the original landscape of truth”<sup>376</sup>—the past of a communion with God, from which humanity has been exiled—and since these traces only offer a partial and particular view of that immemorial past, it also holds within it its own particular future—or, more correctly, an array of potential future trajectories. This is why Benjamin asserted the importance of remembrance in Jewish thought. Remembering is the activity of locating and actualizing/animating the past inside the present so as to realize an inherent horizon; in the spirit of Lurianic mysticism, it is a way of proving human agency vis-à-vis the unstoppable thrust of history, enabling it to realize the messianic within worldly reality rather than have it be the result of a transcendent force. Yet for remembrance to be so revolutionary and messianic, it must take on the form of engagement that does not succumb to History but looks for its meaning “in the breaks in its apparent continuity, in its flaws and accidents.”<sup>377</sup> Only through such a mystical perspective—or “auratic,” to use a well-known Benjaminian term—can a moment be revealed as a monad of time as a whole; in that experience alone, “temporality is presented to us simultaneously, so to speak, in the dimension of the past and the future.”<sup>378</sup>

Towards the end of Benjamin’s life, these theological ideas, which were present throughout his work, undergo a clear political turn. Such is the case of the formative essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), written during the philosopher’s Marxist phase and in light of the events leading to World War II. Benjamin’s principal claim here is that history has always been constructed by the victors, the ruling elites, so as to reflect their own story and values, and that in the process of this construction, the heritage of the vanquished—“a secret history, passed on from one age to another by the tradition of the losers”<sup>379</sup>—was repressed and hidden behind the (oppressive) idea of historical progress. This message is crystallized in the essay’s most enduring metaphor—the “Angel of History.” Addressing Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* (1920), Benjamin imagines the Angel, an ideal present-day perspective on the past, as being forced by progress to assume a position where it is unable to salvage moments of this “unwanted” history—hidden pockets of resistance—from behind the façade of historical continuity. The task of the historian, Benjamin states, is to succeed where the Angel has failed. This means, in his words, “seiz[ing]

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>379</sup> Mosès, *Angel of History*, 112.

hold of a memory”<sup>380</sup> – i.e., stabilizing a moment *into a dialectical image* that renders visible a trace of repressed history and, in the light of a present-day political context, projects towards a utopian future. This “image” (or “configuration pregnant with tensions”<sup>381</sup>) unveils history as “the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*],”<sup>382</sup> and subsequently allows the present to be seen, in Mosès’s words, as “both political—since it is in the name of today’s struggle that it takes up the heritage of the losers of history—and theological insofar as those sparks of hope hidden deep in the past are also ‘bursts of the messianic age.’”<sup>383</sup> To the extent that this theological-political “now-time” is, according to Hannah Arendt at least, “an equivalent to [...] the mystical *nunc stans* [Eternal Now],”<sup>384</sup> the historian is able play the role of the mystic, who experiences and mediates a revelation to his people. Like in Lurianic mysticism, this act does not make the historian-mystic a Messiah, but rather an enabler of messianic redemption in the here-and-now of human reality. Yet unlike Lurianic mysticism, and in reflection of the traumatic historical setting of the essay’s writing, the redemptive process is seen as founded on upheaval—on an “emergency situation” that can “make the continuum of history explode.”<sup>385</sup> Only upon the debris of such an explosion, Benjamin seems to say, can the oppressed shift the trajectory of the future, and perhaps achieve the ultimate Tikkun that was heralded in mystical-messianic literature.

Levinas’s messianism, Michael Morgan explains, is not “apocalyptic and catastrophic” as Benjamin’s, but it is “similarly redemptive and episodic or momentary.”<sup>386</sup> Accordingly, for Levinas as for Benjamin, “time becomes unhinged,”<sup>387</sup> and it is this very unhinging that allows temporality to work ethically in favor of those most vulnerable to its hazards. From his earliest works *Existence and Existents* (1947) and *Time and the Other* (1948), to his more mature and

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<sup>380</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” 257.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, 263

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>383</sup> Mosès, *Angel of History*, 114.

<sup>384</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” 261 (*italics in the original*).

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>386</sup> Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 221. The fact that Levinas’s first of many Talmudic readings were on messianism serves as evidence to the centrality of the topic in his thought—not only in relation to Judaism, but to philosophy in general, for as Shmuel Vigoda explains, interpreting the Talmud was for the French philosopher primarily a means of revealing universal-philosophical truths. See: Vigoda, “The Messianic Texts—The Beginning of the Talmudic Readings” [Hebrew], in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, by Emmanuel Levinas (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), 31-53.

<sup>387</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents* (1947; repr., Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2003), 36.

expansive volumes *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being* (1974), Levinas consistently pushed against two prevailing modes of temporal understanding: objective, where time is measured change, understood through reference to astronomical events or clocks; and subjective, the Bergsonian *durée*, where time is a stream of experiences understood from the perspective of the self. While recognizing the co-existence of both these temporal modalities in our everyday reality, Levinas nevertheless believed that they “do not tell the whole story of time.”<sup>388</sup> Rather, for him, there exists a different temporal modality, a modality of revelation, which gives meaning to time as a whole, and to our reality in general. The time that is revealed is exactly the Infinite, which can also be understood as an “ab-solute past with respect to everything that is shown, signaled, symbolized, announced, remembered, and thereby ‘contemporized’ with him who understands.”<sup>389</sup> It is also, in Levinas’s eyes as in the eyes of mystics, the divine absolute, that which “preceded all presence and exceeded every contemporaneity in a time which is not of human duration, nor a falsified projection, nor an extrapolation of duration, is not a disintegration and disappearance of finite beings, but the original antecedence of God relative to a world which cannot accommodate him, the immemorial past which has never presented itself, which cannot be said with the categories of Being and structure, but is the One, which every philosophy would like to express, beyond being.”<sup>390</sup>

To the extent that one can experience this temporal order, it is only through an “irreducible disturbance”: an “interruption [that] is not taken up by the context interrupted, to receive a meaning from it, [...] because it was already ab-solute.”<sup>391</sup> For such a disturbance to occur, however, “a stranger is [...] needed, one who has come, to be sure, but left *before* having come, ab-solute in his manifestation.” This fundamental Other can force upon us “*a divergency and a past* which no memory could resurrect as a present,”<sup>392</sup> but only at the cost of exposing its vulnerability in “the nakedness of a face that faces, expressing itself.” It is a humbled face of another that retains an enigma, “seeking my recognition while preserving his [sic] *incognito*, disdaining recourse to a wink-of-the-eye of understanding or complicity, [...] manifesting himself without manifesting

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<sup>388</sup> Morgan, *Levinas*, 167.

<sup>389</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Enigma and Phenomenon,” *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 75.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, 72 (italics in the original).



himself.” And in this enigmatic evasiveness, Levinas discovers the ultimate challenge: in its “defeatism, this dereliction, this timidity that does not dare to dare, this solicitation that does not have the effrontery to solicit and is nonaudacity, this beggar’s solicitation, expression no longer participates in the order from which it tears itself but thus faces and confronts in a face, approaches and disturbs absolutely.”<sup>393</sup> To respond to this challenge, in turn, is to assume moral responsibility for the Other, which in the philosopher’s perspective, means also to commit oneself to that Other’s preservation. For “only an extravagant response is possible” in the face of an Absolute Enigma that reveals itself in a face: a response that “is the generosity of sacrifice outside the known and the unknown, without calculation, for going on to infinity.”<sup>394</sup> By facing infinity with such generosity, the subject “restores to each instant its full signification in that very instant: all the causes are ready to be heard.”<sup>395</sup>

This charge of responsibility is not contingent on a particular moment in time, a particular encounter: rather, for Levinas, “*we always already have been* responsible; *we never are coming to be* responsible.”<sup>396</sup> In this respect, then, “an opening of the *time of suddenness*, which is the beating of the Other in the Same,”<sup>397</sup> does not only reveal an immemorial past, even if this past determines its meaning; it also opens up to an unending future. Such future-orientation should not be mistaken with that which finds meaning in the face of death (as in Heidegger’s philosophy); rather, Levinas believes that “dying may mark the end of my life, but the meaning of my existence reaches beyond my death.”<sup>398</sup> The future of which he speaks, then, is outside of profane temporality—it is a future of unending obligation, the condition of a (divine) commanding to which death is no limit. For Levinas, who had lost much of his family in the Holocaust and was himself interned in a Nazi prisoner camp, it was imperative to fix one’s eyes on this future. Only through its horizon can a sudden upheaval be justified, since it allows us to discover “what it means to us that our existence is temporally arranged, why recollection and anticipation have point and purpose;” only in its light can one find the contribution of time to “the meaningfulness of human

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<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>395</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (1961; repr., Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 23.

<sup>396</sup> Morgan, *Levinas*, 177 (italics in the original).

<sup>397</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time* (1993; repr., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 139 (my italics).

<sup>398</sup> Morgan, *Levinas*, 179.

existence, individually and collectively.”<sup>399</sup> In his mind, this was the way to redeem past trauma and reinterpret the deity that allowed its existence—a God now seen solely through a naked face, “without boldness, exiled because allied with the conquered, hunted down and hence absolute.”<sup>400</sup> This theological-political concern for redemption, in turn, reveals Levinas’s affinities to the post-traumatic mystical-messianism of Luria: in his demand for the restoration of an immemorial past that transcends our understanding of history but is not unconnected to our reality; in his belief that this restoration can be achieved democratically, through the face-to-face encounter of every subject with his or her Other; and most of all, in his insistence that such a meeting carries with it an ethical responsibility for the well-being of the Other, which one must undertake *ad infinitum* so as to substitute destructive apocalypse with utopian reparation.

How do these mystical-messianic temporal constellations—Benjamin’s “now time” and Levinas’s “unhinged time”—intersect with cinema? One possible answer is provided by Sam B. Girgus in a study of film through the lens of Levinasian philosophy (2010). There Girgus suggests the existence of a filmic category called “Cinema of Redemption,” which traverses genres and groups texts through their thematic focus on “a redeeming ethical experience that centers on the priority of the other.”<sup>401</sup> In these films’ depiction of ethical experience, he explains, “time plays a crucial role”: that is, “it becomes part of the very artistic structure of these films to present the ethical argument.”<sup>402</sup> Thus, the Cinema of Redemption often creates a sense of multilayered or disjointed temporality, an impression of excess beyond conventional time and an appeal for transcendence. This operation, according to Girgus, is particularly evident in American films from the 1930s to the early 1960s. In his account, these films’ commitment to messianic redemption operates on two levels: through their narrative structures, where “the hero undergoes a crisis of identity, culminating in a transforming or conversion experience”<sup>403</sup> that affirms the ethical charge of messianism; and through their formal unhinging of linear temporality, which opens up to the possibility of infinitude. These measures are exemplified in Frank Capra’s *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and especially in the montage sequence of Smith’s first visit to Washington.

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 180-181.

<sup>400</sup> Levinas, “Enigma and Phenomenon,” 70.

<sup>401</sup> Sam B. Girgus, *Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption: Time, Ethics, and the Feminine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 25.

The linkage between “shots of historic landmarks and sites, founding documents, and statues of the founding fathers” can be read as a mere condensing of linear time, the duration of Smith’s tour of the capital. Yet the symbolic charge that these images bring—the past of the nation’s founding fathers, colored by the myth of an idealized democracy—also irrevocably disturbs the linear flow. This intrusion is particularly evident in the recreation of John Hancock’s signing of the Declaration of Independence, which is superimposed at one point during this montage. As Girgus interprets it, this “enactment of the Hancock signing, seemingly out of nowhere, can be seen as a sign of transcendence, a form of summons or call to the movie viewer of a temporal world with a meaning and significance that exceed historical time.”<sup>404</sup> In this respect, then, he sees it as a realization of what for Levinas would be the enigmatic time of revelation which introduces into the present a significant past so as to alter the direction of the future. Brought away from Levinasian terminology, however, this scene also seems to crystallize Benjamin’s notion of “dialectical image,” in that it brings into a visual constellation disparate temporalities and asks characters and viewers to evaluate them like nontraditional historians—to see the past only in its ethical importance within a present political context, as it projects towards a potentially redemptive future. Such constellations arguably appear in *The Secrets* and *Bruriah*, and for similar ethical aims.

*The Secrets* unhinges temporality through a constant linkage between present action and a mythicized past—one that explicitly evokes the history of mystical-messianism. As previously noted, the film’s plot is set to the ancient city of Safed, where Luria and his fellow kabbalists developed their influential school of mystical thinking. In his study of the legends of Safed, Eli Yassif has argued that during the era of these mystics, Safed was considered a “mythical space” which served as threshold unto a transcendent sphere of divine presence and messianic temporality. Much like in the Benjaminian sense of “now time,” the mystics’ visions—their move from a “horizontal” to a “vertical” vector of existence—could be triggered at any given moment, through encounters with seemingly meaningless concrete sites and objects—a street, a house, a stone, or a tree. These served as “runways” from which mystics disembark towards a different realm; and accordingly, to this day, the city—and in particular, the graves of medieval mystics within it—are considered as having the ability to engender ruptures in time, and bring forth a measure of revelation. This sense of a mythical space appears in *The Secrets* through visual reference to sites of spiritual significance within Safed, including: “The Ari’s Mikveh,” where

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 56.

Luria's body was purified following his death; the Ancient Cemetery, where major figures in Judaic history are buried; and the "Cave of Shem and Ever," the oldest study hall in Jewish history, whose supernatural powers have been proclaimed by many, including Luria himself. These "magical" qualities are enhanced cinematically by the filmmakers' choice to shoot the sites (or their stand-ins) at night while relying on candle and torch light, as well as on ambient effects of fog and rain, so as to engender a dreamlike *mise-en-scène*. The delicate surrealism of these scenes, especially those which involve the reparation rituals performed for Anouk's benefit, seem to rupture a concrete understanding of the historical moment and suggest a bridge between the present, the past of the Kabbalah mystics, and the immemorial given of messianic temporality. This sense of disjointed time is particularly evident in the aforementioned scene where Michal and Naomi take Anouk to the Ari's Mikveh. During their preparations, Naomi explains to Anouk that the ritual they are about to perform serves to bring about "a different state of consciousness."<sup>405</sup> Later, during the ritual itself, it is Naomi who seems to undergo this shift in consciousness—she submerges in the water, and then after opening her eyes and seeing Anouk submerged as well, becomes overwrought and immediately resurfaces. This experience, the film leads us to believe, was one in which Naomi saw her mother's image present in the image of Anouk, thereby creating an evocative "configuration pregnant with tensions." In this respect, Naomi engages the holy Mikveh as a "liminal zone between the real and the mythical"<sup>406</sup> and uses it, like a Benjaminian historian, to reanimate a past in the here-and-now.

In *Bruriah*, a disjointed temporality that allows a past to intrude on the present is shown in a more literal fashion. From the outset of the film, we see the protagonist being plagued by incessant, fragmentary flashbacks to the occasion in which copies of her father's book were burnt in the outskirts of Jerusalem. These flashbacks apparently serve as catalyst for Bruriah's search for the lost book, and for her decision to ask Yosef for help in this quest. This prompting, in turn, leads Yosef to track down photographs that were shot thirty years before, during the actual burning. The arrival of these images creates a sense of rupture, not only because they bring a past scene into the present, but because they are visually aligned with Bruriah's flashbacks; additionally, the fact that the images are procured from real-life photographer Alex Libek, who is "interviewed" on-

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<sup>405</sup> In this context, it is worth noting that certain Kabbalah traditions privileged bodies of water as sites where mystical-revelatory states are prone to take place. See: Hallamish, *Introduction*, 69-70.

<sup>406</sup> Eli Yassif, *Safed Legends: Life and Fantasy in the City of Kabbalah* [Hebrew] (Haifa: University of Haifa Press, Yediot Acharonot, and Chemed Books, 2011), 105.

screen by Yosef, also adds to this sense of heterogeneity, by which a documentary quality intrudes into the fictional plot. This double intrusion sets up the most substantial temporal rupture, when Yosef presents the pictures to Bruriah. At this moment, the film's heroine sees herself as a young girl, and the resulting "dialectical image" then triggers a new and more complete flashback of the book burning scene. In confronting such multilayered temporality, Bruriah seems to go through a process of Benjaminian remembering, "which does not denote the preservation in memory of events of the past but their reactualization in the present experience."<sup>407</sup> Like with Naomi, the state of revelation is so overwhelming that it reduces her to tears. These anguished reactions seem to carry the traces of traumatic events (death, ostracizing); accordingly, they give credence to Benjamin's point that an awareness of now-time is always connected to an upheaval and colored by shades of the apocalyptic.

Significantly in terms of the Cinema of Redemption, the unhinging of temporality in both these films allows for epiphany that orients the subject towards taking responsibility for vulnerable *female* others. Yet to situate an ethical endeavor of this kind within Girgus's theoretical framework may raise problems, especially in light of the ongoing feminist critique of Levinas's philosophy. For Levinas, the Feminine is the absolute Other, and as such, helps draw the subject away from *Totality*, from the experience of *hypostasis* and *the Same*, towards ethical subjectivity and transcendence. Also, in his later work, the woman is figured as ensuring the future-orientation of the ethical subject through fecundity, allowing it to imagine a messianic horizon of redemption. Despite this privileged positioning, Levinas's articulation of femininity seems to undercut the legitimacy of his ethical project. For one, in his early writing, the woman functions just as a necessary condition to ethical transcendence, as the interruption through which a subject—written as male—achieves *his* subjectivity; she is not, however, part of this ethical transcendence but merely a means to someone else's end. Secondly, his later understanding of women in relation to fecundity may be said to straddle them to the role of motherhood, while seemingly denying them the possibility of experiencing ethical dimensions in relationships that do not involve procreation. Finally, in depicting these roles, Levinas often relies on sexist terms and language that reduces women to the patriarchal definition of the Feminine (woman as hospitable, woman as mystery, etc.). While not denying Levinas's problematic use of gender, Claire Elise Katz nevertheless argues that by juxtaposing his philosophical writings with his theological ones, we can locate "a

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<sup>407</sup> Mosès, *Angel of History*, 109.

space for appreciating his description of the feminine as positively inflected.”<sup>408</sup> In making this argument, Katz asks us to acknowledge that “Levinas derives his image of the feminine from the women of the Hebrew Bible”<sup>409</sup> and through them, applauds characteristics that “are not the usual, stereotypical traits of women.”<sup>410</sup> Thus, according to her, by reading Levinas’s philosophical writings in light of his studies of Judaism, one is better positioned to recover Levinas for feminism with the grain of his own work, rather than against it.

An example of this intellectual maneuver can be found in Katz’s reading of Levinas’s engagement with the biblical figure of Ruth. In his essay “Judaism and the Feminine” (1960), Levinas specifically names Ruth amongst his role models for femininity. As Katz explains it, Levinas regards the very fact that Ruth, as a biblical woman, is limited by a strict social positioning, makes her actions seem so extraordinary; he applauds this female figure, amongst others, for actually “advance[ing] the dramatic movement of the biblical [story]” and thus “exceed[ing] the passive roles that [she was] assumed to have had.”<sup>411</sup> Yet this recognition of excess, juxtaposed with Levinas’s philosophical writing, opens up the possibility of seeing how Ruth can exceed the philosopher’s own positioning of the Feminine in the ethical relationship. Indeed, we can see in Ruth’s hospitality towards Naomi, in her acceptance and faithfulness to her, “the very image of the Feminine”<sup>412</sup> in Levinas’s philosophy. Yet this hospitality exists in “excess” as it translates itself to Ruth’s clinging to Naomi, and her ultimate conversion to Judaism, in spite of past national and cultural commitments. Through her faithfulness, Ruth recognizes in Naomi a vulnerable Other, and thus emerges out of passivity to take an active part in a relationship of ethical responsibility. And not only does Ruth reveal herself as an active ethical agent, but she realizes her responsibility in the context of a relationship between women, which is unrelated to fecundity in the Levinasian sense. In this respect, then, Levinas’s use of Ruth, and her “traditional” role as a purveyor of hospitality, as the model of the Feminine, allows us to move away from certain lacks in his philosophical writing, and recognize that he does “create the conditions by which the feminine itself can and must participate in the ethical.”<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> Claire Elise Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

As previously noted, the tale of Ruth holds particular importance in the framework of *The Secrets*, and reading it through this revision of Levinasian philosophy helps us further understand the ethical possibilities inherent to its narrative. Here, it is Naomi's namesake who exceeds her passive role so as to assume the position of ethical agent. Though this shift is anticipated by her decision to attend the Midrasha, Naomi truly begins to take responsibility for the Other through her interaction with Anouk—and specifically, at the moment of temporal rupture when she recognizes the dead mother of her past in the present *face* of the living Anouk. It is at this moment that she sees through Anouk's eyes the other Others: her mother, Michal, and the rest of the disenfranchised women of Judaism. This recognition foreshadows the wedding scene at the end of the film. In this scene, the filmmakers place heavy emphasis on an exchange of glances between Naomi and Michal, a muted dialogue between vulnerable faces that takes place separately from the procedure of the matrimonial service itself. This exchange sets up Naomi's resignation, the forfeiture of her rights to Michal's love, as if demanded by Michal's tearful eyes. Yet this charge, in Levinasian terms, actually helps Naomi perfect her ethical positioning. Because, for Levinas, an ethical relationship can only exist in a state of asymmetry between self and other, where the latter is completely vulnerable to the former. In this sense, love, which is symmetrical in its requirement that emotions be reciprocal, can never be truly ethical. By accepting the charge of letting go, Naomi reintroduces a measure of asymmetry into her relationship with Michal, and as a result, according to Levinas, becomes responsible to her.

*Bruriah* also establishes the possibility of an ethical relationship between women, the likes of which is suggested in the tale of Ruth. The unhinging of time confronts Bruriah with an image of her younger self as Other; and it is this encounter with the younger self, removed and alienated through repression, and specifically with its face in both photograph and flashback, that acts as Bruriah's foundation for assuming responsibility for fellow women. This is manifested symbolically in her attempt to recover the true story of the talmudic Bruriah through the search for the book, as well as more literally in her attempt to help her friend get a divorce in the rabbinical courts. Such efforts may be overshadowed by her ultimate return to the fold of the family and her assumption of the role of wife and lover; indeed, it may be argued that the central ethical shift in the film is Yaakov's, whose encounter with the image of the younger Bruriah catapults him into a quest for subjectivity, which culminates in the reunion with his wife. Such a resolution may be deemed a failure for Levinas because he sees Eros as an impediment to ethics. Yet this sexual

encounter can also be seen exemplifying what Girgus, following Luce Irigaray's critique of and elaborations on Levinas's philosophy, would define as a "reconciling [of] the ethical challenge of transcendence with the immanence of the demands of [a woman's] own sexualized body."<sup>414</sup> By bringing ethics into Eros by way of an embrace, this film may thus suggest "the possibility of achieving transcendence in immanence rather than accepting experience as confined by the visible horizon."<sup>415</sup>

According to the Talmud, "three things come unawares: the Messiah, a found article, and a scorpion."<sup>416</sup> These are also the three main coordinates of mystical-messianic temporality, through its medieval kabbalistic and modern philosophical renderings. Mystical messianism is always about the restoration of an article once lost and now found: an immemorial past before creation as in Luria, which in Benjamin and Levinas is also doubled as the repressed past of the oppressed. This past is evoked within the present so as to countermand a prevailing temporal order that is ethically flawed. Consequently, the act of restoration is always marked by the impending threat of a scorpion lying in wait—by the sense of apocalypse which Luria and Levinas preserve as a shadow while Benjamin brings to the fore. Yet it is through this threat that the possibility of a better future—the future of the Messiah—can be realized. The responsibility of facilitating this messianic redemption, however, falls not on a superhuman, but on human beings; there may be those who are more skilled in obtaining the necessary revelation—a mystic, a historian—but the capability is there for all to exercise, in an act as easy and as revolutionary as a face-to-face encounter. The protagonists of *Bruriah* and *The Secrets* attempt to be part of this messianic revolution—to act as historian-mystics, to draw out a catastrophic past through disturbances in the flow of linear time, to use the power of disturbance and revelation for overcoming the dangers of change and achieving a future where Judaic women will not be oppressed. It may be that such a future does not materialize in the confines of the films' narratives, which ultimately capitulate to a powerful patriarchal mechanism. If anything, it exists in the fissures of this mechanism—in the instances of disjointed temporality that "flash up at a moment of danger" and leave an afterglow of utopia in their wake. These are invitations more than actualizations, meant to cajole an audience

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<sup>414</sup> Girgus, *Cinema of Redemption*, 191.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>416</sup> Sanhedrin 98a.



into pushing beyond the limits of the filmic text, and imagining a different sort of gendered relationship within Judaism.

### 3.5 LOOKING BEYOND (IM)MODESTY

In a recent discussion of “modesty” policies in Israel, law professor Zvi Triger has argued that gender-based segregation on public buses presents a clear case of “sexual harassment,” since “the relegation of women to the back of the bus is clearly ‘an insulting or debasing reference’ to them in connection with their gender or sexuality.”<sup>417</sup> Yet for Triger, these acts of segregation are not only morally flawed but also self-defeating, because in its desire “to ‘clean’ the public sphere from any manifestation, real or perceived, of female sexuality,” the religious community “in fact puts [this] sexuality at the center of attention.”<sup>418</sup> Though justified, this argument nevertheless fails to also acknowledge the contribution of the secular Israeli community to the sexualized imagination and libidinal economy surrounding the topic of gender-based segregation. While focusing on the segregation of secular women as a result of religious edicts, the public outcry surrounding the aforementioned 2011 events also expressed a not-so-secret desire that religious women would be released. Without disputing the legitimacy of this hope, the extreme fervor which typified the contemporaneous critical discourse of the non-religious constituency seems to indicate a more complex emotional motivation than mere indignation. In this respect, it may be argued that these events served this community (or at the very least, large parts of its male contingent) to perform two corollary movements: on the one hand, to realize a wish of exposing the “hidden” religious woman and making her a sexual object; and on the other hand, to disavow its own androcentrism by foregrounding the androcentric tendencies of a religious “Other.” As such, the forced hiddenness of the devout woman becomes the condition through which the secular mind can naturalize an impulse to see her immodest.

The films discussed in this chapter seem to perform a similar operation. Their focus is on religious women who challenge the constraints of Judaic patriarchy, and to this extent, their agenda

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<sup>417</sup> Zvi Triger, “The Self-defeating Nature of ‘Modesty’—Based Gender Segregation,” *Israel Studies* 18, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 24.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

embodies progressive feminist values. At the same time, however, these texts almost always reduce their protagonists' challenge to issues of sexual modesty while marginalizing or disavowing other sites of resistance. This focus inevitably plays into the craving to exoticize the religious woman, and ultimately, to unveil her mysteries. Such desire, in turn, is augmented by the fact that these films rarely expose the female body to full view. As Mary Ann Doane argues in the context of Rita Hayworth's famous striptease act in *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), the basic impulse here is not to see full nudity, since that will expose "the female body as the site of negativity, of lack and hence, of the possibility of castration." Rather, it is the "very process of peeling away accretions of layers" that will never arrive at its expected climax, the "continual flirtation with perception" that avoids the "full look", which ultimately sustains interest here, since it does not entirely undercut a woman's assigned role as fetish.<sup>419</sup> In a similar manner, it could be argued that the religious woman, possibly the last magical fetish in a society where female bodies are increasingly exposed and demystified, stands at center of these Israeli films' attempt to enact a "logic of striptease."

Avowedly feminist but pursuant of voyeuristic aims, manifesting secular androcentrism through the Othering of religious patriarchy—these are the cornerstones of Judaic-themed Israeli cinema's ambivalence vis-à-vis the feminist project, which they often attempt to repress in an effort to foreground their progressiveness.<sup>420</sup> This is not to say, however, that all Israeli films dealing with a feminist challenge by observant women succumb to disavowal: one film in particular—Keren Avitan's *Ruth* (2008)—seems to offer a valuable exception to this rule. Like other texts mentioned above, Avitan's film also focuses on a religious adolescent girl amidst sexual discovery, though here this exploration is uncharacteristically charged with political overtones. Like the biblical Ruth, the film's eponymous heroine, a resident of a Gush Katif settlement in the days leading to the Gaza evacuation, clearly sees herself outside of the dominant social order. She is besieged on the one hand by the constant demands to join the civil struggle to stop the evacuation, and on the other by the pressures of having to take care of her brother and father after

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<sup>419</sup> Mary Anne Doane, "Gilda: Striptease as Epistemology," *Camera Obscura* 11 (Fall 1983): 13.

<sup>420</sup> Such repression may not necessarily prevent a spectator from opening up the films' ambivalence so as to further their progressive potential beyond the limitations of their feminist critique; yet this effort will always constitute a "negotiation" (in Christine Gledhill's term) or "mediation" (in Caroline Bainbridge's term) of the films' meanings against the grain of their overarching mechanism of disavowal. See: Gledhill, "Pleasurable Negotiations," in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. E. Deidre Pribram (New York: Verso, 1988), 64-89; Bainbridge, *A Feminine Cinematics: Luce Irigaray, Women and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 32-60.

the death of her mother during a “terrorist attack.” Attempting to break free of such constraints, Ruth ultimately finds liberation in a romantic entanglement with Erez, a handsome secular photographer. When the father discovers the affair, he confronts her. She, in turn, becomes understandably upset, but her anger is soon redirected upon realizing that Erez had published a telling exposé about her in a national newspaper. The shock prompts Ruth to leave the settlement. Before departing, however, Ruth’s father tracks her down and convinces her to stay. The film subsequently ends as parent and daughter are in the car together listening to the news of Israeli troops entering Gush Katif; this image then transitions into a slow motion sequence featuring Ruth’s female classmates, as they pray for salvation from a fate seemingly worse than death.

Religious-Zionist society emerges in *Ruth* as completely committed to its totalizing and teleological idea of reality—a patriarchal vision that justifies the occupation of territory as the rightful possession of a divine husband to possess his virginal bride. In order to ensure the endurance of this vision, all members are required to fully believe in its validity and to inscribe it into their everyday lives; but, as the film shows, devout adherence is impossible to achieve without extreme regulation that sets apart and ostracizes those who espouse dissenting views. Interestingly, the community of regulation presented here is all-female: the young girls, and not the men, are the ones who voice and enforce their constituency’s patriarchal vision. They appear as those who believe in the religious militant rhetoric most fervently; they take on the tasks of putting up posters and handing out stickers, of attempting to confront the secular IDF soldiers and shaming them into submission. *Ruth* thus portrays the extent to which religious women assimilate a logic that, ultimately, works against their best interests—how they become willing soldiers in a struggle that will ensure not only the occupation of a land, but their occupation as a gender.

Ruth finds herself torn between commitments to this community of women, and a secular horizon of liberation. Her desire to rebel draws her away from the sites of regulation and towards liminal spaces: geographically, to the Gaza beach, far from the panoptical surveillance of the settlement’s streets; and audibly, to the words of Israeli secular pop music, which she sings alone, detached from the unison chanting of Jewish liturgy. Yet it is in sexual liberation that she finds her ultimate release. This approach seems justified narratively by the fact that the social setting in which she operates exhibits marks of suppressing libidinous desire. Such is particularly evident during a scene where Ruth’s closest friend confesses about having problems with her boyfriend, an army medic. When Ruth interrogates her about whether or not she ever wanted to kiss the

boyfriend, she evades the question, deeming it “unimportant.” This very idea of a carnal expression of desire seems to upset her, as if broaching a deep-seated taboo. The fact that this conversation is immediately followed by a scene in which the friend confronts a soldier at a bus stop seems to also suggest that this sexual taboo is closely connected to the community’s handling of its political concerns. Thus, the suppression of sexual energy leads to a displacement of desire unto political action, which is why the friend seems so passionate in her virulent attacks of the soldier and so tepid in discussing her erotic passions and their potential physical manifestations. Accordingly, the demand for all-out participation in the community’s resistance to territorial dispossession also serves as means of coercing the female participants into a religious order of modesty.

Ruth’s challenge to the prevailing modesty discourse is evoked on a corporeal level. She seems more liberated in her physical demeanor than other members of her cohort, and is often shown dancing in private and public spaces or rollerblading through the settlement’s streets. She also seems more comfortable with her body as a sexual vessel, as is indicated in a brief scene that depicts her masturbating in her bedroom. Yet Ruth’s clearest infraction of modesty laws comes, understandably, in her affair with Erez. For the young protagonist, Erez represents a level of corporeal liberty that she had yet to encounter. When they first meet on the Gaza beach, he is the one who first initiates casual physical contact, and then he also strips down to his shorts in front of her before going into the water. Subsequently he helps her in learning how to rollerblade, using this opportunity to exercise physical intimacy that exceeds the regulating norms of “observation of the touch” (*Shmirat Negia’a*). Finally, when she comes to visit him in his apartment, it is Erez who first caresses her face in a clearly sexual fashion. Significant in this context is the fact that following his caress, Ruth is the one who initiates the first kiss, as if inspired by the unknown environment of sexual liberation to pursue the very act her friend would later dismiss as “unimportant.”

If Erez represents the pole of secular bodily freedom, Ruth’s father stands for religious bodily restrictions. Upon discovering photos that Erez had taken of Ruth on the beach, he assumes the chastising perspective employed by Ruth’s friends during that particular encounter. Yet unlike these friends, who couch a sexual criticism within a political one, the father explicitly evokes the law of modesty. In Ruth’s presence, he forcefully points to the principal authority which would condemn her illicit behavior: God. He further justifies this condemnation by invoking the famous quote from Psalms which has been used to describe the ideal form of modesty-as-hiddenness: “In

her chamber, the king's daughter is glorious.”<sup>421</sup> Allowing himself to act as divine regulator, he then extends his demand for hiddenness and interiority to Ruth’s physicality, brutally cutting pieces of her hair. The hair cutting scene resonates with the aforementioned custom of ultra-Orthodox women to shave their heads in an effort to minimize their supposed role as begetters of sin; on this occasion, however, the de-erotization of Ruth is forced rather than voluntary, consequently revealing the fragility of a system that relies on female internalization of shame and self-contempt for its everyday operation. Moreover, the use of scissors in this setting highlights the basic fear which immodesty evokes in the heart of the religious man—that is, the anxiety of being castrated both physically and socially.

If the film finds the father’s oppression—as a symbol of religious oppression in general—thoroughly reprehensible, it does not glorify secular bodily freedom either. Thus, though believing that her trespassing of modesty taboos resulted in the creation of true intimacy, Ruth eventually discovers that in fact it only led her to being used by Erez for his own professional gains. He betrays her, not only by divulging her secrets, but by denying her subjectivity and reducing her to a Religious-Zionist stereotype fit for a newspaper’s back pages. This reduction retrospectively elucidates the objectifying nature of the lovers’ first encounter, which begins with the film camera taking the perspective of Erez’s camera, as he captures images of Ruth dancing on the Gaza beach. This inauspicious beginning anticipates the end in that it places Ruth as the object of a reductive, voyeuristic gaze. Concurrently, it designates Erez as representative of a patriarchal regime which seeks to liberate the covered woman by subjecting her to a process of undressing-via-imaging. By speaking to this operation through an image within an image, *Ruth*’s mise-en-abyme functions as a self-reflexive comment on the difficulty—and even the futility—of protecting a religious woman’s subjectivity through the filmic medium.

With secularity becoming a site of disillusion, the final embrace between Ruth and her father seems to signal the redemption of religious patriarchy. Yet the silence in the car while the news of the evacuation are heard in the background, as well as the film’s closing slow motion images of barricaded young girls that follow, accompanied by an English-speaking “secular” song, do not spell such a clear cut resolution. In this contested space, we come to recognize the film’s most substantial critical achievement: though focusing on Ruth’s sexuality as a religious woman, it does not naturalize but rather lays bare the process by which she is made a fetish object by *both*

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<sup>421</sup> Psalms 45:13.

secular and religious male perspectives. As such, the film denies its secular audiences the pleasures of exposing its protagonist while “saving” her from forced hiddenness, and as such, unveils the basic ambivalence underlying Judaic-themed Israeli cinema’s approach to feminism. Nevertheless, it does not offer a way to alleviate the burden of double oppression, from which Ruth—and any other religious or secular woman—seemingly cannot escape.

It is this pessimistic realization that arguably prompts Judaic-themed Israeli cinema to appeal to the anarchic experience of disjointed mystical-messianic time as an Archimedean point beyond the oppressive regime of (im)modesty. The Kabbalah often refers to the anarchy of messianism through the relationship between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. As Scholem explains,

The Tree of Life represents the pure, unbroken power of the holy, the diffusion of the divine life through all worlds and the communication of all living things with their divine source. There is no admixture of evil in it [...] no death, and no restriction. But since the Fall of Adam, since the time when the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was eaten, the world is ruled by the mystery of this second tree in which both good and evil have their place. Hence, under the rule of this Tree, the world contains differentiated spheres: the holy and the profane, the pure and the impure, the permitted and the forbidden, the living and the dead, the divine and the demonic. [...] But in the Messianic redemption, the full glory of the utopian again breaks forth, although characteristically and in keeping with the idea of the Tree of Life it is conceived as a restoration of the state of things in Paradise. In a world in which the power of evil has been broken, *all those differentiations also disappear which had been derived from it.*<sup>422</sup>

In the restoration of the Tree of Life, and the subsequent activation of “the antinomian potentialities which are latent in Messianic utopianism,”<sup>423</sup> one senses the possibility of a total unraveling of history and the structures of differentiation upon which it based. This final anarchy, which will render the term “Other” anachronistic, is what has attracted many to the messianic, even if for some like Benjamin it was associated with the threat of eschatological destruction. Yet what would be the nature of the reality that comes in its place? It seems that there is no guarantee for social justice to prevail. If one wants to qualify total anarchy and claim that it can never be removed from any discursive base—and specifically, from a theological base—then we may well return to the system of differentiations from which it stemmed. And if a total unraveling is possible, it cannot

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<sup>422</sup> Scholem, “Messianic Idea in Judaism,” 23 (my italics).

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 21.

by definition hold an inherent ethical position (removed, as it is, from the differentiation between right and wrong), and therefore cannot guarantee the desired Tikkun. Thus, the resulting messianic age may ensure the redemption of the disenfranchised, or it may also herald the vision promulgated by the settler characters of *Ruth*—a future in which the prophesized return of the Jewish people to its national home will come at the expense of ethnic and gendered Others. There is no possibility to tell which way the wind will blow. At the face of such uncertainty, hope for the vanquished can arguably be found only in the activity of persons who are conscious of the system of differentiations and its underlining ambivalences, and who can use the anarchic power of unraveling—complete or partial—to steer society towards a more constructive end. For Benjamin, it is a particular kind of historian who “will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past”<sup>424</sup> and fulfill the unrealized wish of the Angel of History: “to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.”<sup>425</sup> The same may also be said, perhaps, of a particular kind of filmmaker.

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<sup>424</sup> Benjamin, “Theses,” 255.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

#### 4.0 RITUAL IN FILM, FILM AS RITUAL: THE VICISSITUDES OF PRAYER

*“What the hell are you getting so upset about?” he asked her bewilderedly in a tone of contrite amusement. “I thought you didn’t believe in God.” “I don’t,” she sobbed, bursting violently into tears. “But the God I don’t believe in is a good God, a just God, a merciful God. He’s not the mean and stupid God you make him out to be.” Yossarian laughed and turned her arms loose. “Let’s have a little more religious freedom between us,” he proposed obligingly. “You don’t believe in a God you want to, and I won’t believe in a God I want to. Is that a deal?”—Joseph Heller<sup>1</sup>*

*In true prayer belief and cult are united and purified to enter into the living relation. The fact that true prayer lives in the religions witnesses to their true life: they live so long as it lives in them. Degeneration of the religions means degeneration of prayer in them.—Martin Buber<sup>2</sup>*

A well-worn joke, now prevalent on the World Wide Web, tells us of a strange ritual which inaugurated popes undergo before taking office. Following the successful resolution of the papal conclave, the Pope-Elect customarily gives audience to the Chief Rabbi. During their meeting, the latter presents the former with an ancient envelope; then, rather than reading its content, the Pope symbolically stretches out his arm as a sign of rejection, after which the Chief Rabbi leaves, letter in hand. While many popes accepted this curious rite unthinkingly, one—Pope John XXIII—decided to inquire as to its origins. Shortly after his election, and in anticipation of the meeting with the Chief Rabbi, he told his staff of Vatican scholars to research the rite’s nascence; but for all their best efforts, they came up with nothing. When the time had arrived for the Chief Rabbi’s audience, Pope John faithfully executed the ritualistic rejection. But then, as the Rabbi was about to leave, he called him back. “My brother,” the Pope said, “I must confess that we Catholics are ignorant of the meaning of this ritual enacted for centuries between our congregations. I have to ask you, what is it all about?” Astounded by the breach of protocol, the Chief Rabbi sheepishly replied, “But we have no more idea than you do. The origin of the ceremony is lost in the traditions of ancient history.” Upon hearing this, the Pope suggested to the Chief Rabbi that they retire to his private chambers and open the envelope together. The Rabbi agreed, and, following a glass of wine or two, slowly reached inside the envelope and extracted a folded piece of parchment. Then, as the

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Heller, *Catch 22* (1961; repr., New York: Everyman’s Library/Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 224.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1923; repr., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1950), 118.



religious leaders read the inscription on the parchment, both gasped with surprise: inside the envelope was the check for the Last Supper.

While its brand of humor may not be to everyone's liking, this joke seems illuminating in its disclosure of the precarious position that religious ritual holds in this day and age. Within a post-Enlightenment zeitgeist, the rite strikes one as the arcane trace of times past. At best, it is a colorful tradition; at worst, it is a pestering routine, obsessively repeated. Ultimately, its charm or annoyance lies in its claim to inexplicability. The point of ritual thus seems to be the obfuscation of its origins, making it appear quaint but also thoroughly inapplicable to the world of modern accountability and efficiency. Such mystery, for the devout, is necessary, since it relates to the unfathomable depths of holiness; but, the joke seems to say, the roots of rites are not so metaphysical, but actually derive from the cruder demands of economy and politics. Yet if the joke seeks to portray religious ritual as a sham, does it not also, at the same time, point to its lingering importance? Does it not reveal a desire to explain away ritual, which is brought about, paradoxically, by a continued cultural attraction to its elusive, mystifying nature?

Ritual, in the words of Timothy Nelson, "is one of those slippery words [...] which is so useful, but which, when you try to define precisely what it refers to, seems to deconstruct right before your eyes."<sup>3</sup> This slipperiness, however, did not prevent a throng of thinkers and scholars—including such luminaries as William Robertson Smith, Émile Durkheim, Bronislaw Malinowski, Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, and Victor Turner—to try to pin it down. While these scholars addressed ritual in a variety of religious contexts, and produced theoretical elaborations so diverse that they defy easy integration, their definitions of the term, according to Nelson, nevertheless coalesce around two, albeit rather broad, categories. These criteria, which arguably set ritual apart from other social activities, are "formality" and "expressivity."

Formality relates to the "repetitive nature of ritual, or to its temporally regular performance and the style of the act itself, often characterized as rigid, standardized, or invariant."<sup>4</sup> Thus, ritual is often imagined as a patterned event, which is distinguished from everyday actions by its high level of stylization and ornateness. In this respect, it is often associated with the performative, the

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy J. Nelson, "Transformations: The Social Construction of Religious Ritual," in *Understanding Religious Ritual: Theoretical Approaches and Innovations*, ed. John P. Hoffman (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

dramatic, and the theatrical. Also related to the ritual's formal nature is that it is often bracketed by certain devices or cues that allow for its extraction from normality. Occasionally there is close relationship between the ritual and a particular type of physical space (church, mosque, and synagogue are obvious examples). Temporal markers are also used to provide the ritual's sense of separateness from the everyday, most clearly in religious holidays and rites of passage. Finally, actions become ritualistic due to their reiteration, which serves to signal their importance as well as the participant's commitment to maintain this sacred standing.<sup>5</sup>

While formality relates to the quality of the actions and objects that make up the ritual, expressivity speaks to their overall signification. As such, religion is often related to a world view—a cosmology—which stands at its foundation. In this framework, Catherine Bell explains, “beliefs, creeds, symbols, and myths emerge as forms of mental content or conceptual blueprints: they direct, inspire, or promote activity, but they themselves are not activities. Ritual, like action, will act out, express, or perform these conceptual orientations.”<sup>6</sup> Such a relationship emphasizes the educational aspect of each element of the ritualistic action, its contribution to the dissemination and substantiation of an ethos. At the same time, ritual is not only an expression of a cosmology but its concretization. Accordingly, it emphasizes the link between abstract ideas and physical reality, and as a result, emphasizes the former's role in responding to particular existential and social needs (a role, which according to several scholars, preceded theology and occasioned its genesis). Thus envisaged, ritual often assumes not only a pedagogical but also a therapeutic function: a way of dramatizing real-life tensions and offering an interpretive and experiential framework through which the practitioner can come to terms with and perhaps overcome them.<sup>7</sup>

The inclusive nature of these two categories allowed scholars to extend the reach of ritualism beyond the confines of religion into a variety of “secular” activities. Such measures effectively revealed the existence of a ritualistic dimension within general human behavior, and helped challenge the definition of religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon. At the same time, this intellectual endeavor was not without drawbacks, for as Nelson explains, since “formality and expressivity are present to some degree in all types of social action,” then it becomes “virtually

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969); Ithamar Gruenwald, *Rituals and Ritual Theory in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); René Girard, *Sacrifice* (2003; repr., East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2011).

impossible to distinguish ritual and nonritual behavior,” causing the term itself to “rapidly diminish in precision or utility.”<sup>8</sup> Instead of rendering “ritual” an unusable category, however, he suggests that we relate it primarily to those activities whose practitioners perceive it as dominantly separate from everyday reality—a separation that demands the employment of an overtly differentiated, symbolic frame of interpretation. These activities become ritualistic by virtue of being “defined [...] in terms of *privileged* behavior [...] by the actors themselves.”<sup>9</sup>

As established in the introduction, an argument has been made in Religion and Film scholarship that the filmic experience should be defined as such a “privileged behavior,” and thus spoken of in terms of ritual. In his short volume *Religion and Film*, S. Brent Plate asserts this claim in no uncertain terms: “Cameras and rituals,” he writes, “*frame* the world, *selecting* particular elements of time and space to be displayed. These framed selections are then projected onto a broad field in ways that invite viewers/adherents to become participants, to share in the experience of the re-created world.”<sup>10</sup> In Plate’s framework, the bracketing of filmgoing through various devices (a special venue, particular screening times, darkness, previews), combined with the filmic text’s overt positioning as a mythical representation of “another world,” interpellates the viewer to employ a ritualistic frame of reference and interpret his or her experience as “symbolically dominant.” The film theater is thus imagined as an alternative site of worship, one which historically came into its own just as organized religion began its fall from (popular) grace. This, in turn, leads to the supposition that, as Edgar Morin once argued, “no one who frequents [cinema’s] dark auditoriums is really an atheist.”<sup>11</sup>

This chapter addresses the topic of ritual as it intersects with the filmic medium, both in terms of ritual on film and of film as ritual. However, in contrast to the preceding introductory comments, where ritual was discussed in generalized terms, the following pages will relate to this category through a narrow and religiously determinate lens: the particular practice of Jewish prayer, which has often been described as the essence of Judaism,<sup>12</sup> and by extension—as the

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<sup>8</sup> Nelson, “Transformations,” 12.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 13 (italics in the original).

<sup>10</sup> Plate, *Religion and Film*, vii (italics in the original).

<sup>11</sup> Edgar Morin, *The Stars: An Account of the Star-System in Motion Pictures* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 71.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Arthur Green’s statement that “prayer is the beating heart of Judaic belief” (97). For similar statements about prayer expressed outside of an exclusively Judaic context, refer for instance to Ludwig Feuerbach’s comment that “the essential act of religion, that in which religion puts into action what we have designated as its essence, is prayer” (193) or William James’s assertion that “prayer [...] is the very soul and essence of religion” (337). See: James, *Varieties*; Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841; repr., Amherst,

fundamental act of Judaic ritual, without which no such ritual can exist.<sup>13</sup> In this framework, two connected inquiries will be undertaken. The first involves a close reading of the representation of prayer in Judaic-themed Israeli cinema. Thus, if prayers are seen as privileged platforms for engaging in divine communication and expressing the faithful community's social ethos, then this analysis of their filmic rendering would seek to uncover Israeli cinema's perspective on the value of these objectives—a perspective that is tinged by profound ambivalence. The second inquiry focuses on drawing possible parallels between the praxis of Jewish prayer and that of film spectatorship. This comparative exercise would be used to bring to the fore the prevailing theoretical paradigm in the Religion and Film field, which analogizes film spectatorship with participation in typical religious rituals, for example that of Holy Mass. By displacing this discussion of film viewing onto the realm of Jewish prayer, the goal then would be to question and qualify this paradigm, while simultaneously setting the groundwork for a reclaiming of “faith” as a useful term for our understanding of the filmic experience. Ultimately, whether discussing prayer on the screen or in front of it, analysis would not be related to all facets of this ritual, a phenomenon whose full complexity could hardly be accounted for in such a limited frame. Rather, the discussion will center mainly on a single, albeit significant, characteristic: the relationship between personal and communal worship.

#### 4.1 JEWISH PRAYER: PERSONAL AND COMMUNAL

In so far as one looks at religion through its rituals, a definition of it as a cultural system would understandably emerge. From this systematic understanding, in turn, it may be stipulated, in the words of Ron Margolin, that “the religious phenomenon, like other phenomena of human culture, takes place on two planes: the external-communal plane, which is in plain sight, and the internal-

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NY: Prometheus Books, 1989); Green, *These Are the Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life* [Hebrew] (2001; repr., Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Abraham J. Heschel's claim that Jewish prayer is “the queen of all mitzvahs. No religious act is performed in which prayer is not present. No other mitzvah enters our lives as frequently, as steadily as the majesty of prayer.” Heschel, “The Spirit of Jewish Prayer,” *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America* 17 (1953): 167.

personal, which is focused on the individual's inner world."<sup>14</sup> Seen through its external-communal dimension, religion operates so as to provide a cohesive social identity to its adherents, one based on a cosmic sense of order and meaning, and from which a set of rules, values, and conceptual norms is derived. In this sense, it offers a totalizing vision of a reality, one that regulates and explains the life experiences of those who join (or are allowed to join) its collective boundaries.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, an emphasis on the internal-personal dimension of religion would highlight the "mental and therefore more subjective elements of religious life; that is, the conscious and direct contents of the individual's subjective life as they are shaped under the influence of religion, whether it be done through the social functioning of religion or whether it be done through personal choice independent of religious-social conditionings."<sup>16</sup> There is no straightforward distinction between these elements and the frameworks established in religion's external-communal dimension. Indeed they often work hand and hand, as when the interpellation of these communal frameworks allows the individual, in Peter Berger's words, to "identify himself [sic] with a role [...]. He *is* whatever society has identified him as by virtue of a cosmic truth, as it were, and his social being becomes rooted in the sacred reality of the universe."<sup>17</sup> Yet as Margolin insists, there are also "many instances where it is possible to note a gap between the external aspect of religious behavior and the internal aspect attributed to those behaviors."<sup>18</sup> Thus for him, though the distinction between external-communal and internal-personal may at times appear more artificial than organic, the existence of such gaps makes its employment both "justified and vital."<sup>19</sup>

Within the mainline tradition of Judaism, the external-communal dimension has been emphasized over the internal-personal one for the purposes of forging a collective of belief. As Margolin explains:

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<sup>14</sup> Ron Margolin, *Inner Religion: The Phenomenology of Inner Religious Life and its Manifestation in Jewish Sources (from the Bible to Hasidic Texts)* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan and Jerusalem: Bar Ilan University Press and Shalom Hartman Institute, 2011), 13.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example: Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967; repr., New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 29-52; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973; repr., New York: Basic Books, 2000), 87-125.

<sup>16</sup> Margolin, *Inner Religion*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Margolin, *Inner Religion*, 14. This gap takes place even at contexts where religious regulation is at its extreme: for example, in his discussion of "the relationship between human action and norm" (5) within a monastic setting, Giorgio Agamben suggested that we not resolve it "into perfect identity" but "look at the monastery as a field of forces run through by [these] two intensities that are opposed and, at the same time, intertwined" (xi-xii). Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

Through their biblical interpretation, the ancient Jewish sages (*Chazal*) articulated an image of Judaism based on the communal character of the biblical congregation. The clear social character of this religion, and even more so the centrality of commitment to a halakhic mode of living, which is evident first and foremost in the external behavior enforced by the oral Torah upon the Jewish people, raises doubts as to the place and importance of inner life within this religion. The central role of the Mitzvah in the sages' world [...], which glorifies the individual who operates on the basis of external edicts, strengthens the overall impression that internal willful life exists at best on the margins of the dictated religious life. This is to say that the heart of Judaism, as shaped by the sages, is in a person's fulfillment of God's external edicts within a Jewish social structure that is regulated by the Halakha. From this point of view, Judaism is a halakhic ritualistic external system, which is known and evaluated by the halakhic way of life that is shared by its members.<sup>20</sup>

This emphasis on the communal, it should be noted, did not eradicate consideration of the personal within mainline Judaism. Rather, as Margolin also notes, "it is possible to distinguish the parallel existence of both planes, the internal and the external, throughout Jewish history."<sup>21</sup> The recognition of the personal was largely meant to allow its incorporation as means of systematic support to the communal emphasis, or at least the prevention of its potentially disruptive effects upon this emphasis.

As the privileged sites for religious interaction (formality) and knowledge (expressivity), Judaic rituals are the *locus classicus* for this particular relationship where internal-personal religious life meets its external-communal framework. This is especially true for prayer, where the main triangular structure of Judaism—which binds "Man" with "People" under God—is most clearly evoked through words, and where, through an act defined as "relational," the demands on individuals to extend themselves towards the other foci of this structure are most pronounceably present. Hence, within the evolution of prayer practice in Judaism, the dominant tendency to regulate inner religious life through the collectivity of a communal form is very apparent. In the period of the First and Second Temples, the main form of worship was animal sacrifice, performed in Jerusalem by the priestly elite and witnessed by the multitude of laypeople. Prayer was not an integral part of this service, and occupied a marginal role in Judaic ritualism in general. The destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.), however, led to a major shift in its status. The absence of the Temple denied the Jewish people the possibility of worship through sacrifice; accordingly,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 36.

the Jewish leadership (*Sanhedrin*) offered prayer as its substitute. The rise in the stature of prayer also required the fixing of its form once and for all. As such, in ensuing centuries the staples of Jewish prayer became common law: the times of services (for example, the daily prayers of *Shachrit*, *Minchah*, and *Arvit*), the content of prayer (for example, the Eighteen Benedictions of the *Amidah* prayer), prayer behavior, prayer accessories, synagogue rules and regulations, etc. Though it was never fully finalized—which may be evidenced from the existence of various versions of the Jewish prayer book (*Siddur*)—as Jewish ritual practice became increasingly unspontaneous, according to Stefan Reif, it relied less “on the individual’s concentration during prayer time and more on the general standards of religious behavior, of which fixed prayer became an integral part.”<sup>22</sup> This accompanied a deliberate move to foreground fixed prayer as a congregational practice, founded on the ten-person quorum (*Minyan*) which only in its presence can major sections of prayers be recited, and on the synagogue as a gathering space from which prayers are best dispatched. In this “emphasis of the ‘we’ over against the ‘I’,”<sup>23</sup> the religious leaders were hoping to give a cohesive sense of a nation to a Jewry lost and fragmented in the aftermath of the Temple destruction and resulting exile.

In light of this history, it becomes clear that Jewish prayer is “essentially the prayer of the community and of the people as a whole. In principle, its structure, contents, and wording are geared to the needs, hopes, and sense of gratitude of the community, so that even the individual praying does so as part of the whole community.” This is undoubtedly true for congregational services, which combine the communal fixed form of the ritual with the physical presence of a community; there, the external-communal aspect of Jewish prayer receives its most powerful expression, which is arguably why they are foregrounded in Judaic tradition, even more decisively than in other monotheistic religions. Yet the same function also operates, albeit to a lesser degree perhaps, within individual prayers that take place outside of the congregational service and under its shadow. Thus, as Adin Steinsaltz comments, “even though a person praying alone is not present at that particular moment within a congregation, in a certain sense he [sic] nevertheless functions not as an individual, but part of an absent, invisible congregation.” This communal aspect receives concrete manifestation through the “physical orientation during prayer services: while

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<sup>22</sup> Stefan C. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer: New Perspectives on Jewish Liturgical History* (1993; repr., Tel Aviv: Kineret-Zmora Bitan-Dvir, 2010), 123.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

worshipping, all Jews face, not in a particular direction, but toward one specific point—the Temple site in Jerusalem;”<sup>24</sup> even more fundamentally, however, it is activated through the use of language—the ancient Hebrew, which is of sacred standing in the realm of Judaic thought—in a fixed form that asserts the collective affiliation of even the most secluded and individualized of prayers. Accordingly, in either of its forms, prayers have been imagined by traditional Judaic wisdom as allowing for a greater sense of national belonging in the face of existential solitude; or in the words of Elie Wiesel:

A Jew who prays connects with the whole of Israel. [...] The fact that [the Jew] recites prayers, which are heard by other Jews, in other places, marking the same time, is a source of strength. He [sic] is not lonely any more, his voice is no longer lost to oblivion. The fact that generations upon generations of Jews repeated these same words, and expressed through them the same anxiety and gratitude, will necessarily force upon the praying individual an understanding that he belongs to an enormous congregation, in which he is able to find not only his forefathers, but also his allies. When the Jew repeats the words of Rabi Akiva and Rabi Shimon in their time of dire need, when they found in the Talmud a source for awe of the Divine and Sabbath pleasure, he knows that he is no longer alone in the world of God.<sup>25</sup>

This is not to say, again, that Judaic lawmakers have not been aware of the possible adverse effects such dominance of the external-communal aspect can have on an individual’s inner religious life, especially within a congregational setting. This awareness is cogently explained by Steinsaltz in his overview account of Jewish prayer:

The person praying from the Siddur in a congregation is in a state of constant tension, which itself becomes a significant and positive component of the prayer. This tension is created by three factors involved in the communal prayer. First the worshipper himself [sic], when truly praying and not merely reading or mouthing the words, feels and thinks his own emotion and thoughts; even when he does not bring to his prayers all those personal concerns that have occupied him throughout the day, there are certain matters that he wishes to express and reflect upon in prayer. On the other hand, fixed prayer provides a train of thoughts, themes, and concepts imposed upon the individual from without, from the prayer to the worshipper. Yet a third component is the praying congregation itself, which, both as a whole and as a collection of individuals, affects each particular worshipper.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, *A Guide to Jewish Prayer* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000), 14.

<sup>25</sup> Elie Wiesel, “Prayer and Modern Man” [Hebrew], in *Prayer in Judaism: Continuity and Change*, ed. Gabriel H. Cohn (Ramat Gan: The Institute for Judaism and Contemporary Thought, 1978), 19.

<sup>26</sup> Steinsaltz, *A Guide*, 24.



In light of such a tension, mainline Judaism attempted to incorporate the personal dimension into the communal dimension, making the two work together synergistically while upholding the dominance of the latter. Thus, for example, out of their acknowledgement that the fixed prayer “can give voice to general sentiments, [yet] cannot express the finer sensibilities of the unique individual,”<sup>27</sup> the creators of the Siddur through the generations have allowed room for individual supplications to supplement the central prayer texts with their own private words and thoughts. More importantly, however, they also stressed the importance of “intentionality” (*Kavvanah*) in the fixed prayer. At the most basic level, *Kavvanah* marks a recognition on the side of the worshippers that they are standing in the presence of God and are aware of the true meaning behind the words uttered.<sup>28</sup> Beyond that, however, it marks the investment of a maximal effort in detaching from the mundane context which surrounds the praying individual. As such, it is an attempt to recreate the traits of “spontaneous, personal prayer, uttered in time of need, [which] is expressed with *Kavvanah*,”<sup>29</sup> in counterpoint to the depersonalizing effects of a rote participation in a rigid communal form of worship.

While representing the major thrust of Jewish thinking on prayer, this model was not without its challengers. A subtle opposition came in strains within Judaism which, while still adhering to Judaism’s communal dimension, stressed the importance inner religious life.<sup>30</sup> One principle example for this tendency has been Hasidic Judaism, “where inner religious life and patterns of inwardness of Jewish religious life had reached their apex.”<sup>31</sup> Hasidism’s interest in inner religious life was motivated by its principal mystical project of entering into intimate dialogue with divine reality. This dialogue was perceived as dependent on the sacred operations of personal devotion—operations which were potentially threatened by the incessant stream of communal demands and their binding of the subject to a (collective) structure of social needs and requirements. Accordingly, for Hasidim, it became important to champion “the redemption of the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>28</sup> In Heschel’s words: “*Kavvanah* is more than attentiveness, more than the state of being aware of what we are saying. If *Kavvanah* were only presence of the mind, it would be easily achieved by a mere turn of the mind. Yet, according to the Mishnah, the pious men of old felt that they had to meditate an hour in order to attain the state of *Kavvanah*. In the words of the Mishnah, *Kavvanah* means ‘to direct the heart to the Father in Heaven.’ It is not phrased, to direct the heart to the text or the content of the prayer. *Kavvanah*, then, is more than paying attention to the literal meaning of a text. It is *attentiveness to God, an act of appreciation of being able to stand in the presence of God.*” Heschel, “Jewish prayer,” 174 (italics in the original).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>30</sup> Margolin, *Inner Religion*, 36. See also: Reif, *Judaism*.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 33.

individual,” and specifically his or her internal capacity to work within a communal practice in a manner that “may elevate the soul, until reaching a *true clinging* to the divine being.”<sup>32</sup> This “clinging” (*Devekut*), as an intensified form of Kavvanah, was articulated in relation to the premise that God exists everywhere in the immanent world, as a sacred void or “nothingness” (*Ein*) that may be found within the visible “somethingness” (*Yesh*) of our reality. Since human beings are part of this reality, then it stands to reason that they too contain the divine void, but as long as they are caught in the throes of “somethingness,” that void is inaccessible. The task of the Hasid has therefore been to enter into an intimate relationship with concrete reality, including that of religious practices, as a steppingstone to its dissolution (*Bitul Ha-Yesh*). During those passing instances when such dissolution is made possible, Hasidim are supposedly able to overcome the barriers that separate them from divine essence, discovering inside their particular being the traces of a godly unity that embraces all levels of existence. In this respect, then, their Devekut does not serve “as an active realization of the concrete, but as a contemplative realization of the immanence of God in the concrete.”<sup>33</sup> Concurrently, and as opposed to Medieval Kabbalah, this endeavor does not entail a rejection of the physical world, but rather its valuing as a pathway towards the sought-after deity, as well as the site where Hasidim must implement lessons learned during their purported interaction with divine reality.

While such a process of personal Devekut may take place at any moment—since the doctrine of divine immanence argues that God can be encountered everywhere within the world of phenomena—Hasidism defined prayer as a favored setting for its execution. On this, Louis Jacobs remarked that “the Hasidic elevation of prayer over other religious duties, even over that of study of the Torah, is not in keeping with the Jewish tradition.”<sup>34</sup> Rather, prayer became for Hasidim *the* “exercise in self-transcendence,”<sup>35</sup> a ritual that should be pursued through deep reflection (*Hitbonanut*), one imbued by the proper Kavvanah that connects the individual’s innermost soul to the content of the prayer.<sup>36</sup> This procedure of being “completely absorbed in prayer, to lose the self and ‘strip off one’s corporeal nature’ (*Hitpashtut Ha-Gishmiyut*), to burn in longing for the

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<sup>32</sup> Yoram Jacobson, *The Hasidic Thought* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: The Ministry of Defense, 1985), 44.

<sup>33</sup> Gershom Scholem, “*Devekut*, or Communion with God,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism: And Other Essays on Jewish Spiritualities* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 216.

<sup>34</sup> Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (1972; repr., Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993), 17.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> Margolin, *Inner Religion*, 109.

divine,”<sup>37</sup> could and was performed in communal settings, for example in the Hasidic gathering space (*Shtiebel*). Yet such a framework made it difficult for the Hasid to maintain the level of complete concentration required in contemplation, often leaving him with “no option but to do his best in congregational prayer.”<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, in the spirit of legitimizing internal religious life, several Hasidic *Tsaddikim* like R. Nachman of Bratslav stressed the practice of seclusion (*Hitbodedut*), during which the Hasid sequesters himself in a remote (often bucolic) location to enter into a private meditation. In the quiet of nature, he is supposedly able to focus his attention on the physical surroundings and allow for the kind of “transparent seeing through the object”<sup>39</sup> that unveils the sacred void within the concrete. In turn, such intimacy, for R. Nachman at least, serves as grounds for a highly personalized form of mystical praying, where the Hasid would pour his heart out, using the language that seems most familiar, in direct address to God.<sup>40</sup>

Thus envisaged, the challenge of Hasidic prayer was not so much against the ritual’s communal dimension as against its emphasis, which was believed to proportionally reduce the individual’s spectrum of religious involvement and minimize the possibility of divine encounter; in this respect then, Hasidism entertained the risk of heightening the tension between the personal and the communal, not for the purpose of undermining the latter dimension, but *only* for the enhancement of its mystical potential. This delicate balance was nevertheless unsettled during the period of Hasidism’s formation as a movement, amidst the consistent proclamations about the “death of God.” Fueled by certain strands of philosophical writing (for example, the oeuvre of Friedrich Nietzsche), as well as catastrophic historical events (most notably, the Holocaust), this supposed “death” disconnected the communal-external systems of Judaism from their source of cosmic legitimization and consequently destabilized their standing as the premier meaning-making structure of Jewish consciousness and identity. In this context, then, for many Jews it became meaningless to pray, since the divine addressee was allegedly “gone,” and the human subject

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<sup>37</sup> Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, 93.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>39</sup> Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 97. Importantly, this seeing in Hasidism is enacted not only outwardly but also inwardly, towards the internal *Yesh*.

<sup>40</sup> Tomer Persico, “*Hitbodedut* for a New Age: Adaptation of Practices among the Followers of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav,” *Israel Studies Review* 29, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 101-103. Importantly, Zvi Mark argues against seeing R. Nachman’s model of prayer in *Hitbodedut* as aimed at having a quotidian conversation between human subject and a personal God, and stresses instead as this practice’s desired outcome the mystical unification of the subject with divine totality. See: Zvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness in the Work of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved and Shalom Hartman Institute, 2008), 235-254. Also, for a general discussion of *Hitbodedut* in Jewish mysticism, see: Hallamish, *Introduction*, 47-57.

ultimately became the center of the universe. Yet as is established below, the impulse to pray was not necessarily eradicated through this “death,” since the lingering presence of God still remained palpable in the collective memory of much of modern Jewry. What could then be done for these “prayer wounded” Jews, to use Avi Sagi’s evocative term?<sup>41</sup> One prevalent answer, which is particularly relevant to the present discussion, attempted to overcome this “crisis in prayer” by recovering God as an addressee, yet in a manner that was respectful of the contemporaneous delegitimization of Judaism’s communal form. Its solution was one that stressed the “subjective emotional contents of the religious individual as a way to allow the modern subject to come in personal contact with religious life while ignoring [its] institutional and social aspects.”<sup>42</sup> This valuation of the personal over the communal, in turn, was imagined as permitting the individual to search and potentially “re-discover” a god that is not wholly bound by the standard communal structure in which He has been located and from which He has “disappeared”—a god with which only a personal and intimate dialogue can be engaged, in mystical fashion.

Though such a view has been expressed by many Jewish thinkers, its clearest and most provocative expression within Jewish philosophy may arguably be found in the writings of Martin Buber.<sup>43</sup> In terms of contribution to western philosophical thinking, Buber is perhaps most known for his theory on dialogue as the basis of human relationality. According to Buber, humans function in relation to external entities: other humans, the world, and God. This relationship, for him, can work in two forms. In the first form, the “I-It,” one would meet another entity but fail to establish dialogue; there is no recognition of the other as equal. In contradistinction, the second form, the “I-Thou,” does fulfill the condition of true dialogue because it includes such recognition of equality. It is only in this context that a subject can achieve openness and overcome biases and expectations, engage in a deeper and more meaningful connection with all and become more whole in itself. These forms do not exist in an either-or system, but slip into and emerge out of each other. Yet out of the two, it is the “I-Thou” relationship that is most fleeting and rare. Its elevated status leads Buber to argue that when addressing the other as Thou, one encounters the perceptible presence of the “eternal Thou”—the unfathomable God, the Ein-Sof of mystical experience. Thus, for Buber, “every time we allow I-Thou relations to arise [...], we cease to be alone because we

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<sup>41</sup> Avi Sagi, *Prayer after “The Death of God”: A Phenomenological Study in Hebrew Literature* (Ramat Gan and Jerusalem: Bar Ilan University Press and Shalom Hartman Institute, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> Margolin, *Inner Religion*, 19.

<sup>43</sup> See also: *Ibid.*, 21.

allow the ‘spark’ of the Eternal that resides in us to connect with the ‘spark’ of the Eternal that is in the other.” By placing the eternal Thou in a dialogical relationship with “Man,” Buber then “*blurs* the commonly held conception of God as an entity transcendent to reality,”<sup>44</sup> and consequently risks the lowering of His stature to that of a “friend” or “partner.” For him, however, the greater risk was “the rapid rise of technology and sciences (especially during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century) [which] widened the gulf between human beings and God.”<sup>45</sup> By famously asserting a God “lived with” over a God “believed in,” Buber felt, in the words of Alexandre Guilherme, that “the re-connection with God is something that can be achieved despite the divisions and compartmentalizations of modern life, but only by approaching it with an open mind, with no previous pre-conception, and thus through the I-Thou relations.”<sup>46</sup>

Even with such a cursory summary of Buber’s philosophy, it may be possible to discern the immense influence Hasidic thought held over his work. Buber had a life-long affair with Hasidism, which resulted in his edited anthologies of Hasidic lore (for example, *Tales of Rabi Nachman* [1906]) and volumes of commentary on Hasidic life (for example, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* [1960]). More profoundly, however, his notion of dialogism was inspired by the Hasid’s encounter with a hidden God on the plane of immanence. As Israel Koren argues, Buber equated the I-Thou relationship with the Hasidic notion of Devekut, as a form by which the subject emerges out of itself to connect to a Wholly Other. He also drew upon the Hasidic recognition that Devekut cannot be pursued indefinitely to assert his understanding of I-Thou as a fleeting phenomenon, emerging out of the I-It only to return it shortly after.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, he took from Hasidism the notion that such the genuine dialogue, which is Devekut-based, must be performed through the world of things, through the “somethingness” that allows glimpses into a divine void. And accordingly, he foregrounded the Hasidic-infused belief that God may be encountered anywhere, and that in effect, “there is always *dialogue between a human being and God.*” In this framework, prayer also becomes for Buber “dialogical in nature.” Following the Judaic logic that favors praise over petition in prayer,<sup>48</sup> he did not regard this dialogue so much as

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<sup>44</sup> Alexandre Guilherme, “God as Thou and Prayer as Dialogue: Martin Buber’s Tools for Reconciliation,” *Sophia* 51 (2012): 369 (italics in original).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 372.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>47</sup> Israel Koren, *The Mystery of the Earth: Mysticism and Hasidism in Buber’s Thought* [Hebrew] (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 2005), 214-216.

<sup>48</sup> As Heschel phrases it: “in Jewish liturgy *praise* rather than *petition* ranks foremost. It is the more profound form, for it involves not so much the sense of one’s own dependence and privation as the sense of God’s majesty and

a conversation in the literal sense, where the subject asks for something and God answers. Rather, the dialogue of prayer is first and foremost, in Buber's mind as in much of Hasidism,<sup>49</sup> a human response to a standing invitation by God to become intimate with His presence and *see the world through His eyes*.

While Guilherme argues that "this understanding applies to 'prayer' as public worship or private devotion,"<sup>50</sup> it seems that the thrust of Buber's philosophy focuses on the "I" as the premier site of praying, rather than on the congregation. This inclination is consistent with Jack Cohen's claim that "Buber was not involved in group worship. He did not attend the synagogue, nor did he seem to be impressed with the liturgical aspects of Jewish tradition. Prayer for him was highly personal, an individual achievement."<sup>51</sup> This is clearly manifested in a telling passage from his formative treatise *I and Thou* (1923), in which Buber distinguishes between the relationality of the "living prayer" and the I-It nature of communal prayer's collective impulse:

Man's [sic] thirst for continuity is unsatisfied by the life-structure of pure relation, the "solitude" of the *I* before the *Thou*, the law that man, though binding up the world in relation in the meeting, can nevertheless only as a person approach and meet God. He longs for extension in space, for the representation in which the community of the faithful is united with its God. Thus God becomes the object of a cult. The cult, too, completes at first the acts of relation, in adjusting in a spatial context of great formative power *the living prayer, the immediate saying of the Thou, and in linking it with the life of the senses*. It, too, gradually replaces the acts of relation, when the personal prayer is no longer supported, but displaced, by the communal prayer, and when the act of the being, since it admits no rule, is replaced by ordered devotional exercises.<sup>52</sup>

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glory" (164; italics in the original). In the Hasidic context, this preference is the result of an "acute problem" vis-à-vis the sect's overall "attitude to prayer as an exercise in self-transcendence." As Jacobs explains, "prayers of adoration could effectively produce the desired aim; the Hasid could, by their aid, lose himself in reflection on the divine majesty. But what of petitionary prayer? In this type of prayer man [sic] entreats God to satisfy his needs, both spiritual and material. He prays for knowledge and wisdom, for bodily health and sustenance, for forgiveness of sin and redemption. This would seem to frustrate the whole purpose of prayer, since consciousness of need implies self-awareness. If man's aim in prayer is to see only the divine vitality, how can he petition God to attend to his own needs?" Rather than "reject all petitionary prayer as a hindrance," Hasidism re-defined petitionary prayer as geared not towards the needs of the self but towards the needs of God, allowing the subject to become "a 'vessel' through which the divine grace can flow to the material world" (24-25). See: Heschel, "Jewish Prayer;" Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example: Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 59-60.

<sup>50</sup> Guilherme, "God as Thou," 374.

<sup>51</sup> Jack C. Cohen, *Major Philosophers of Jewish Prayer in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 216.

<sup>52</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 114.

Drawing on this distinction, it may then be possible to read Buber's work as radicalizing Hasidism's stance on prayer—as taking its *emphasis* on a personalized engagement, mainly in Kavvanah but also occasionally in secluded performance, and making it the sole model for religious prayer. In this respect, then, he sees the solution to the modern crisis of prayer *only* in spontaneous, highly individualized relationality, one which removes itself from communal forms and settings—from the laws, forms, and language of religion—on the grounds that they do not augment an unmediated encounter with the eternal Thou but rather its ossification into I-It relations. Concurrently, the extent that Buber allows for a sense of communality in this paradigm, it is one radically different than that imagined through Judaic traditional thought, including that of Hasidism. Thus, his community is not one unified through a collective “cult” that provides a “people” with its rigid conceptual structures and boundaries; this, for him, is a false coherence that overshadows a deeper connection. Rather, in his mind, “it is not the periphery, the community, that comes first, but the radii, the common quality of relation with the Center;”<sup>53</sup> and therefore, the true communion is not one in which individuals collect themselves into a group, but where each one enters into a unique relationship with their common focal point—the eternal Thou—through its specific reverberation—the Thou.<sup>54</sup> In this respect, Buber highlights the uniqueness and freedom of the personal at the expense of collectivity, since, in order to truly say Thou in prayer, “man must come out of the false security into the venture of the infinite—out of the community, that is now overarched only by the temple dome and not also by the firmament, into the final solitude.”<sup>55</sup> This solitude paradoxically “guarantees the authentic existence of the community,”<sup>56</sup> one forged through personalized and unstructured mystical experience.

Buber's philosophy has held considerable influence over contemporary negotiations of Israeli identity,<sup>57</sup> and as such may serve as an important key towards understanding the ways by which Judaic-themed Israeli films have portrayed prayer as symbolic of the current state of Israeli

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>54</sup> This resonates with the definition of Devekut as a form of true communion that is performed alone. As Gershom Scholem explains, Devekut “is essentially a private experience [...]. The only exception, when *devekut* became an experience of the whole community of Israel, was—at least according to some Jewish theologians—the revelation at Mount Sinai, but even then it was more in the nature of a multiplied experience of many single individuals than of the community as an integrated whole.” Scholem, “*Devekut*,” 204 (my italics).

<sup>55</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 118.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example: Uri Ram, “Why are the Teachings of a One-Time Radical Leftist Enjoying a Resurgence in Israel?” *Haaretz*, June 25, 2015, accessed June 28, 2015 <http://www.haaretz.com/news/features/.premium-1.663086>.

Judaism. Thus these texts, it may be argued, function through recognition, implicit or explicit, of the “death of God” discourse and the resulting de-legitimization of devout prayer. Accordingly, they often utilize the representation of prayer as means of coming to terms with this discourse’s influence on Israel’s avowedly secular ethos and its relationship to Judaism—an influence which breeds ambivalence rather than simple Manicheism. As the following pages attempt to show, this symbolic use of prayer often achieves its objectives through a highlighting of the aforementioned tension between the personal and communal poles of Judaic worship. While not always carrying it to such heights of extremity, this tension is often articulated through the basic Buberian twofold stance: namely, on the one hand, the suspicion towards the institutionalized communal dimension of prayer, and on the other hand, the affirmation of a personal mode of piety as a mode of reaching out to a (mystical) god that is not wholly reducible to its halakhic-communal definitions.

#### 4.2 RITUAL ON FILM: CINEMATIC PRAYERS

In a theologically insightful moment from Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* (1961), the protagonist Yossarian enters into a conversation with his occasional lover, the wife of the aptly-named Lieutenant Scheisskopf, on who’s the better atheist. While both confess to not believing in God, their definitions of that deity, as the chapter’s epigraph clearly shows, are quite different: for Yossarian, it is a stupid God, an incompetent divine entity; for his paramour, on the other hand, it is a God of infinite wisdom and mercy. Though the absurd reality of war presented in Heller’s novel seems to support Yossarian’s view over that of the officer’s wife, the question of what kind of God one shouldn’t believe in seems to overshadow a more significant point: namely, that the characters’ atheism does not so much argue that God does not exist, but that He has abandoned the world of humanity. Even if the two interlocutors deny their belief in God, they are nevertheless both invested in some image of Him: an image that is very much influenced by the decline in His stature throughout the modern era, which has been perceived concurrently as the disappearance of His providence. Accordingly, the term “atheism” here may be misapplied. For as Sagi argues, the reality of atheism is not the same reality as that of the “death of God”: for the atheist, there has never been a God to be reckoned with, and for the person who experiences a “death of God,” that



divine entity was once present but has since removed itself from the immanent world. This sense of the past existence of a god now missing is traumatic, like “a bleeding wound that demands a response.”<sup>58</sup> Traces of this wound may be found in the tears of Lieutenant Scheisskopf’s wife, and arguably, in Yossarian’s anger towards the catastrophic conditions that determine his fate.

Heller’s vision of a troubled wartime identity, formulated during the spiritual renaissance of the postwar era, showed that even amidst a rise in devotion, the looming presence of an alleged “death of God” still had a profound impact on America’s cultural landscape. A similar impact may arguably be found in Israel’s cultural landscape as well.<sup>59</sup> As established in the introduction, Israel’s cultural ethos evolved from Zionism’s response to this discourse and the fracture in Jewish identity that it brought about. This response, while avowedly secular, was not necessarily atheistic in the strictest sense, as can be gleaned from mainline Zionism’s appropriation of Judaism’s spiritual power during Israel’s founding period. To the extent that even at this stage it is possible to sense a presence of a lingering trauma at the supposed death of God, such traces are even more noticeable in contemporary Israel, where this ethos’s traditional form has been destabilized by attempts to make it more open to the notion of religious life. It is within this traumatized reality that the question of prayer gains crucial importance. As the preeminent form of communication with God, prayer comes under strain as the site where all traumas related to “His death” become apparent. Yet such painful experience of absence, Sagi notes, has not excised a desire to pray, but often “intensified it.”<sup>60</sup> In this respect, then, the Israeli context is torn between the disillusion of God and the continued yearning for the past feeling of His providence, for the sense of transcending the boundaries of the self that was once made possible by addressing Him.

This ambivalence, in turn, has had a profound influence on the depiction of prayer within Judaic-themed Israeli cinema. Undoubtedly, these films focus on a religious community whose worldview seems to confirm the lived experience of God rather than His death. Yet, since such texts are largely made for consumption outside of this community (and within the general Israeli public sphere), they inevitably contend with the “death of God” as a frame of reference to their depiction of religious life. In order to negotiate the two seemingly opposing views, these films capitalize on the understanding that “a loss of faith can leave the metaphysical assertion of God’s

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<sup>58</sup> Sagi, *Prayer*, 18.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

existence intact: the atheist does not believe that God exists, while the person who experiences the death of God does not believe in God, does not trust Him anymore, even if He exists.”<sup>61</sup> As such, they open up the possibility of reclaiming God in the vaguely-defined “beyond” that this discourse has left in the wake of His death. In certain texts, this possibility can take the form of a complete reaffirmation of God’s immanent presence, while in others it appears only as a very distant prospect. At both sides of the spectrum, however, what is more common is the understanding that God cannot be fully reclaimed through the traditional external-communal framework of Judaism—the fixed laws, practices, language—that have been delegitimized within the “death of God” discourse and the Israeli ethos that has emerged in response to it; these forms do not emerge as the privileged sites where dialogue is made possible, and are often seen as geared towards social-communal needs—especially those of collectivizing through hierarchies and exclusions—rather than towards devotional “clinging.” Instead, what is gestured as an alternative avenue for “self-transcendence”<sup>62</sup> is a mode of address that stems from the personal dimension of religious life: from the innermost workings of the soul, which are imagined as having the potential to enter into dialogue with a god that does not necessarily conform in full to its rigid definitions by Judaism’s halakhic-communal dimension. These understandings, Buberian in kind, are exemplified in the films’ treatment of Judaic prayer.

A text that exemplifies this dynamic is the made-for-TV film *Shofar* (2001), directed by secular filmmaker Daniel Sirkin and scripted by the formerly Haredi writer Dov Elbaum. The film’s Haredi protagonist Amram Zakuta, a scribe (*Sofer Stam*) earning a meager income by copying *Mezuzot*,<sup>63</sup> finds it difficult to connect with his mentally-disabled son, Yitzhak Shlomo. One day, while staying with a neighboring woman, Yitzhak Shlomo blows the ceremonial ram’s horn (*Shofar*), and immediately after, the neighbor’s pregnant daughter reports that her water broke. This chain of events leads the neighbor to hail the child as a having “special” powers. As news breaks of this supposed miracle, people line up outside of the Zakutas’ apartment, asking for a prayer blessing from the father and a *Shofar* blowing from his offspring. While the wife Yaffa attempts to shield her child from exploitation, Amram becomes enamored with the new popularity

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>63</sup> “Mezuzah” (pl. “Mezuzot”) refers to a piece of parchment, often held within a decorative box, which contains several Hebrew verses from the Torah. It is affixed on the right side of the door of a Jewish household. Traditionally, Jews who wish to pass through a doorway must touch the Mezuzah before entering the household.

into which Yitzhak Shlomo has catapulted him. Spurred on by Elharar, a local wheeler and dealer, he then abandons his scribing duties and takes on the role of a “miracle working rabbi.” His dreams of glory are ultimately shattered, however, when during a synagogue meeting for the benefit of one of Elharar’s shady enterprises, Yitzhak Shlomo refuses to blow the Shofar, and is subsequently taken away by an angry Yaffa. Understanding that fame had corrupted him, “Reb Amram” leaves the synagogue to rejoin his family. There, in a moment of intimacy, he hears his son utter the word “Mezuzot” for the first time. So enthralled by this gesture, which seems to have bridged the distance between their two worlds, Amram takes the Mezuzah parchment and draws on it a caricatured face of a young religious boy, provoking a rare smile to extend across his son’s face.

The world of *Shofar* is one where the words of prayer have lost their sacred power. The main representatives of this world of religious language, Amram and Elharar embody different facets of this decline. As a scribe, Amram is surrounded by words, yet his relationship to them is not one of intimate understanding, but of thoughtless copying. Becoming a rabbi by popular demand, he understands his miracle powers as stemming from the power of his words. Yet the absence of a close bond to language, a particular *Devekut* that connects personal devotion to communal expression, seems to render his prayer powerless. While Amram fails to truly connect with language, Elharar, on the other hand, completely distorts its explicit devotional use. This is not only manifested in private quarters, when he uses language of religious discourse to fraud the people arriving at Zakuta’s doorstep; even publicly he seems to treat words like a smoke screen, as when he uses the time of congregational gathering in the synagogue to discuss business with an associate. These differences notwithstanding, for both characters the communal dimension of language, whether uttered in private or in public, has more to do with communal needs than with communal devotion. God has disappeared from the words of their prayers, arguably through a long tradition of collective use that is more about establishing social controls than about channeling the believers’ personal piety towards divine communication.

In contrast to profane prayer, Yitzhak Shlomo’s Shofar blowing seems to operate more spiritually. Zakuta’s son does not belong to the world of language, and is unencumbered by its use—or rather misuse—in the preservation and furthering of human interest. His “prayers,” then, originate from a pre-linguistic sphere, through the sonic workings of music. Since there is no mediation of words between Yitzhak Shlomo and the sound of the horn, one can assume a greater measure of connection of the former to the latter—an enhanced state of devotion, facilitated by a

communal form (the Shofar) that is devoid of profane-social appropriations. And through this clinging, the Shofar sound seemingly transports itself out of quotidian reality and onto a transcendent plane. This dialectic of the verbal vs. the sonic, in turn, resonates with Theodor Reik's interpretation of the Shofar's function in Judaic ritual. Reading the biblical account of the acceptance of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, Reik showed that within that foundational context, the sound of the Shofar was understood by the ancient Jews as embodying, rather than symbolically representing, the voice of God. This perspective, for him, unveils the totemistic roots of the Jewish concept of divinity, which the continued use of Shofar on the holiday of *Rosh Hashana* is meant to invoke. This totemistic God, as Reik explains it,

was represented as a bull or ram, [and] was worshipped by imitating the bellowing of a bull or the bleating of a ram, just as the noise of the totem animal is imitated by the savages. The same identification with the deity was obtained by wearing the skin of a bull or ram. The wearing of horns, as especially representing the power of the god, was regarded later as a sign of the same metamorphosis. A technical advance, besides other factors unknown to us, must have led to the horn, which was originally worn on the head, being used as an instrument for blowing by the believers; but in this way also it helps the imitation of the totemistic god, namely, by imitating his voice. Its original purpose is still shown by its role in the ritual, as well as in its descent from a totemistic animal. The concept of God goes hand in hand with this evolution in those who believe in him: Jahva no longer roars, he blows the ram's horn.<sup>64</sup>

Within Jewish tradition, then, the Shofar is used to hark back to a time when Jews found God in the form of a ram. From this perspective, the horn in early Judaism was not symbolic of voice but in fact was regarded *as* God's voice. Thus to blow the horn as Yitzhak Shlomo does is tantamount to an attempt to recuperate the divine voice, extracting it from a communal language that has been, so the film seems to argue, corrupted through its reduction to social uses. It is no wonder then that the first recipient of the Shofar sound, the pregnant neighbor's daughter, reacts in horror. For as Reik explains, the desired objective of Shofar blowing in contemporary Judaism is to shock listeners with memories of a time when objects such as a horn echoed the actual, incarnate presence of God on earth.

Thus envisaged, the film's resolution may be understood as allowing room for a change in the status of prayer language. If at the beginning of *Shofar*, Yitzhak Shlomo destroyed the blessings

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<sup>64</sup> Theodor Reik, *Ritual: Four Psychoanalytic Studies* (1946; repr., New York: International Universities Press, 1958), 257.

of his father's Mezuzah by blackening them out with ink, at the end he finds himself being part of the practice of uttering sacred language. This moment may be susceptible to psychoanalytic interpretation that can carry a somewhat pejorative connotation: accordingly, in Reikian terms, by exchanging the Shofar with words, Amram and Yitzhak Shlomo disavow the traumatic memory which the Shofar is meant to conjure, of a totem father God who was "murdered" so as to be replaced by the God of divine literacy that is embodied in the Torah; alternatively, in Lacanian terms, this exchange can mark Yitzhak Shlomo's departure from the world of motherly protection (the Imaginary) and entrance into the Symbolic Law of the Father, both the biological and the divine. Yet if one moves away from such readings, it may be possible also to recognize in Yitzhak Shlomo's mouthing of the word "Mezuzot" a reclaiming and re-sacralizing of language, and specifically the language of prayer. In this respect, the acquiring of language, outside of an oedipal narrative, marks an attempt to release it from the framework of formalized religious authority and its attendant profane interests, and draw it closer to the unmediated voice of God. This move, in turn, is signified by a corollary nod on the part of the father, who brings the material context of sacred language (Mezuzah parchment) but, rather than apply words to page, uses it to put forward an image. Thus Amram wishes to compliment his son's gesture, whereby the latter came closer to the verbal forms of Judaism, by distancing himself from the verbal towards a non-linguistic form that, like the sound of the Shofar, may avoid the trappings of communal words and manifest more authentically the presence of God. That this "coming together" takes place away from a group setting seems to underscore the film's point that a revolution in worship can only be realized in relation to individual effort—i.e., a personal Devekut.

Similar negotiations are also found in Religious-Zionist director Gilad (Gili) Goldschmidt's made-for-TV film *Green Chariot* (2005). At the center of Goldschmidt's film is Yair, a Russian-born immigrant to Israel and a young yeshiva scholar, who is on the verge of being betrothed to Dafna, a fellow member of the Religious-Zionist youth movement Bnei Akiva. In the beginning of his story, Yair—or Sasha, as he was formerly known—discovers amongst his late mother's personal effects a golden cross, which leads him to suspect that she, and by implication he, were not Jewish. He confronts his (Jewish) father, who admits that though Yair's mother followed the tenets of Judaism to the letter, even at times when that was not permissible by the Soviet regime, she was in fact born Christian. This revelation causes Yair to experience a crisis of identity, since, according to Jewish law, as a gentile he is no longer allowed to keep an observant

lifestyle. He attempts to convert, but discovers the rabbis apathetic to his preexisting intimate connection to Judaism on the one hand, and antagonistic to his newly-found standing as an outsider to their world of rules and regulations on the other. At the same time, he finds Dafna's parents to be intolerant to his desire to continue participating in religious ritual. As a result, he withdraws both from the religious proceedings of conversion and from his engagement to Dafna, returning instead to his secular Russian friends from before he joined his yeshiva. During a party, he tries to become intimate with a former girlfriend but she rebuffs his advances, noticing that he is ill-at-ease. Following that, he searches for Dafna during a Bnei Akiva beach activity and declares his love. Fortuitously, at Dafna's request, both her father and Yair's are there to officiate a ritual bathing—the last stage of Yair's conversion. Yair accepts the offer and enters the sea alone so as to complete his re-entry into Judaism.

As may be clear from this brief description, *Green Chariot* takes as its background the struggles many immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU) had to face in responding to normative Israeli definitions of Judaism. Thus, as Larissa Remennick explains, due to “the high degree of assimilation of Russian Jews and their growing rates of out-marriage in the FSU, many young repatriates [to Israel] were born of non-Jewish mothers.” These persons, in turn, were “not recognized as Jews by the religious establishment” and often experienced discrimination in the form of “problems in those matters of civil status (such as marriage and divorce) controlled by rabbinical courts.”<sup>65</sup> Religious-based bias, amongst other things, has caused many of the new immigrants to retain “a sharp feeling of their otherness [...], which prevent[ed] them from seeking contact with local youth even when their command of Hebrew has improved.”<sup>66</sup> Yair is shown to have experienced this sense of otherness first hand, though his choice was not to keep a distance from mainline Israeli culture. Rather, he makes a deliberate effort to assimilate into this culture, as is indicated in the decision to “Hebraize” his name to “Jewify” his lifestyle. Yet the discovery of his biologically innate otherness (in Judaic terms) causes him to mistrust this assimilation and recognize it as loss. Accordingly, the process of maturation Yair undergoes in the film is one in which he forges a hybrid identity where both his Jewish-Israeli (Yair) and his gentile-Russian (Sasha) sides can coexist.

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<sup>65</sup> Larissa Remennick, “The 1.5 Generation of Russian Immigrants in Israel: Between Integration and Sociocultural Retention,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 42.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

In undergoing this identity shift, the protagonist encounters a dual image of Judaism. On the one hand, there is the institutional Judaism that denies him the right to define himself as Jewish. This is a religion of bureaucracy, of rituals that are followed without reflection, which may lead to insensitivity and even outright discrimination. This disposition is represented, first and foremost, in the rabbi council that attempts to convert Yair. All through the process of conversion, the rabbis effectively dismiss Yair's past, even those parts that epitomized Judaic belief and practice; their interest, so it seems, is focused on having Yair be re-born into a new identity. But what is the nature of this new identity? For the rabbi council, as representative of institutionalized Judaism, what defines people as Jews are their adherence to a certain set of communal practices and conditions, rather than to their internal-personal religious life. The other side of Judaism, however, sees a Jew as one who engages God intimately, from his or her personal devotion, even when the traditions related to Him place such communication outside of the communal norm. This manner of Judaism is reflected through Yair's mother, who, although not being Jewish by the communal definitions of Judaism, is positioned as a truer Jew than most, if only because her devotion was tested at great risk for herself. Through this particular example, the film attempts to present a flexible mode of Judaism, one circumventing the inherent formal biases that deny a place to those who truly want to be a part of it. The fact that the film ends with Dafna and her father fully accepting Yair as a Jew on his own terms seems to indicate that, for Goldschmidt, such flexibility is achievable.

Within this vision of Israel's Judaic constituency, ritual is read as a neutral entity. Though there is recognition of the collectivizing impulse within the ritual itself, that which aims to say who is or is not allowed to communicate with God, it is insinuated that this inscription is not sufficiently powerful to block out those who are othered by Judaic communal ideology yet still aspire to become part of Judaism. Overcoming the ideological barrier in this case becomes a matter of appropriating the ritual while being self-conscious of one's personal place as Other within it. This, in turn, is imagined as a process by which the subject partakes in the ritual individually, detached from a congregational framework which would otherwise stress the ritual's ideological biases and confront this person with an image of a community that sees him or her as unfit. This distinction is made clear in the film's treatment of the bathing ritual. In the first scene, the bathing takes place in the formalized setting of the Mikveh, and is observed by a committee of three rabbis who provide Yair with commentary as to the meaning of the rite. Representing the congregation, the

rabbis essentially figure the bathing as an act that allows a new (Jewish) identity to subsume an old one—a cleansing of past sins, so to speak. They present Yair with access to a Jewish collective that demands the erasure of his past and a complete re-adjustment of his present self to the congregational mold. To this Yair resists, asserting in effect that such an elision, formalized into communal ritual, would require a loss of his selfhood vis-à-vis a community with whose laws he does not fully agree. This resistance disappears, however, at the end of the film, when Yair reverses his decision to perform the ritual bathing. It is at this juncture that he appropriates the ritual and makes it his own. Such an “owning” of the ritual is made possible through its distinct conditions: i.e., that it is performed alone and unsupervised, in a body of water that is not clearly associated with the Judaic community. Separate from both the “people” and its communal forms, the film seems to say, you can find a place for yourself within a ritual, even if it is traditionally coded to treat you as “Other.”

While the final bathing ritual drives this point home in clear and explicit terms, it is in fact foreshadowed early on through two meaningful scenes involving prayer. The first takes place shortly after Yair discovers his mother’s true religious identity. In the scene, Yair is shown entering the synagogue at an early morning hour, when it is entirely empty of worshippers. He touches the prayer shawl (*Tallit*), opens the prayer book and starts reciting the morning blessing (*Birkat Ha-Shachar*). He then stops at the line “Blessed are you Lord, King of the World, who did not make me gentile,” only to continue after a brief pause with the prayer. In interpreting this pivotal moment, it may be argued that the protagonist, at this early stage, had yet to internalize the ways by which Judaic ritual, though coded to discriminate against him, is sufficiently neutral so as to allow him to appropriate it for his purposes. Such an interpretation would see his continuation of prayer as mere matter of routine, peppered with a healthy dose of disavowal. At the same time, however, one could locate in this moment the key to Yair’s ultimate transformation: namely, that of realizing the manner by which communal ritual inscribes his difference, and from this othered position, of finding a way to re-enter and continue the ritual as if it is *his own*. As with the final scene, this appropriation is made possible through detaching the ritual from a congregational setting, which then permits Yair to function in independent and individualistic fashion. This setting, in turn, may then be contrasted to the second prayer scene, which shows Yair partaking in the Shabbat evening services with the rest of his yeshiva classmates. The scene emphasizes the collectivizing impulse of prayer, both through the text, which speaks in plural of God’s special



relationship with the Jewish people as signified by the Sabbath, and through the bookending establishing shots, which capture from a high angle the entirety of the praying congregation within the synagogue. With such an overbearing manifestation of the collective, it becomes impossible for Yair to make the prayer his own. Consequently, like in the first Mikveh scene but unlike in the first prayer scene, he does not follow through on the ritual but stops abruptly and storms out of the communal space. This narrow escape marks Yair's—and Goldschmidt's—fear that communal forms of worship have been reduced to social uses, and rarely allow for the activation of personal religious sentiment towards devotional ends. Yet, at the same time, the film does not wish to dismiss these forms entirely but rather push them into more individualized directions, where a person can find his or her unique voice in approaching both a tradition of social discriminations and a god that (hopefully) transcends them.

A comparable approach may also be found in Religious-Zionist filmmaker Chaim Elbaum's award-winning short *And Thou Shalt Love* (2007). Ohad, a young yeshiva scholar, is faced with the uncomfortable realization that he is gay—uncomfortable, because he has feelings towards his friend and former study mate Nir, in a manner that is clearly forbidden by the Halakha. Ohad attempts to fight against these emotions, amongst other things by contacting a hotline whose purpose is to aid closeted religious gays to overcome their “illness.” Yet when Nir arrives at the yeshiva during military leave, all of Ohad's best efforts are proven futile. Placed again in Nir's presence, Ohad finds his attraction overwhelming, and begins to question whether it should not be expressed. After long deliberation, he finally confesses his love to Nir, but the latter violently rejects these advances and strongly suggests that Ohad leave the yeshiva forthwith. Ohad, however, is not quick to depart, and even though Nir attempts to stop his participation in morning services the next day, such measures are proven to be insufficient in preventing him from taking his place amongst his fellow worshippers.

Like *Green Chariot*, Elbaum's film deals with the experience of being an internal other to Judaism. Yet Ohad's position of otherhood proves to be more complicated than Yair's, since he must not only contend with the Judaic prohibition of homosexuality, but also with the confusing fact that in spite of this prohibition, much of the reality of observant Jews operates within the realm of homosexual desire. As Naomi Seidman explains, Judaic practices of sexual segregation should not only be seen as undermining sexual gratification, but also as creating homosocial spaces—like the synagogues, the Hasidic courts, and the yeshivas—where a particular type of eroticism can

emerge. This eroticism, she argues, “is produced, or permitted, by the absence of members of the opposite sex, allowing for physical, emotional, and religious intimacies and connections forbidden in mixed groups—the shared ecstatic song and dance, common meals, and worship that is the peculiar genius of intensely religious or traditional societies.”<sup>67</sup> Such passionate moments of sublimated homosocial passions are found in the film in various acts of intense physical contact between study-mates whose homoerotic nature is normatively suppressed through their inclusion under the rubric of “passionate learning.” The film also unveils this displacement through intertextual reference, conjured in a moment of shared study between Ohad and Nir, to the story of the great sages and study mates of the *Amoraim* period, Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish (Resh Lakish). As the story goes, Rabbi Yochanan was bathing in the Jordan River when Lakish, then a brigand, came upon the place. As Yochanan was beardless and of handsome features, Lakish had mistaken him for a beautiful maiden, and jumped in the water to force his intentions upon him/her. Upon discovering the mistake, Rabbi Yochanan suggested that Lakish’s time and effort would be better invested in the study of the Torah than in fornication. Lakish submits to Rabbi Yochanan’s offer, but not before asking him for his sister’s hand. With Rabbi Yochanan’s agreement to the request, Lakish became his prized pupil and colleague, and between the two there evolved a storied relationship—one which was characterized by intimate camaraderie, and later, by strong disputes over religious matters that would last until Lakish’s death from illness and Yochanan subsequent death of grief at the loss of his friend. This evolving union, for Yehuda Liebes, stands as a clear case of “a sexual bond that was replaced by the Eros of Torah scholars. It begins with an attempted rape [...] [but later] the sex gets sublimated and becomes a spiritual Eros: halakhic debates, which turn into mutual banter and terrible fights that end in death—that of Resh Lakish—and whose other side is a love as passionate as death, that also brings death—that of Rabbi Yochanan.”<sup>68</sup> It is this kind of love—sublimated into study without ever losing its sexual allure—that also torments the protagonist of Elbaum’s film.

The predicament of his love to Nir inevitably leads Ohad to openly reflect upon his relationship with God. In many ways, Ohad’s love for Nir resonates with the love of a Jew towards

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<sup>67</sup> Naomi Seidman, “The Erotics of Sexual Segregation,” in *Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*, ed. Danya Ruttenberg (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 112.

<sup>68</sup> Yehuda Liebes, “Eros and Anti-Eros on the Jordan” [Hebrew], in *Life as Midrash: Reflections on Jewish Psychology in Honor of Professor Mordechai Rottenberg*, ed. Shachar Arzy, Michal Fechler, and Baruch Cahana (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot and Chemed Books, 2004), 153.

the Torah, and by implication, towards (the male) God—a form of clinging whose homosexual tainting is equally dismissed and displaced. Ohad feels love both to Nir and to God; yet the Halakha, which derives its authority from God, seems to deny this love a place within the community of worshippers. Accordingly, he is met with a problem: either the halakhic God exists, which means that he withdrew his grace upon the gay Ohad; or that God does not exist, or rather has disappeared and receded into transcendence, in which case how can one explain Ohad's love towards Him, this yearning to a seeming absence. Such is the conundrum that this protagonist, at one point, raises before Nir: once, he explains, they were told that God exists in the sky, and then later, they were instructed that he exists everywhere, so where exactly is He? The question of God's place, then, outlines a precarious path for the tortured Ohad: God must be somewhere else than the site and context where the Judaic communal language and form believe Him to be, but not nowhere, for then all is lost.

The evolution of this message is played out in *And Thou Shalt Love* through the treatment of prayer. The film begins with Ohad reciting chapters in Psalms as part of a 40-day reparation which is meant to influence God to change his sexual inclinations. The fact that this prayer is recited alone is an indication of Ohad's shame rather than his personal belief in the content of the prayer; the words betray the voice of the very community which would ostracize him. This understanding is rendered visible shortly after, when Ohad moves from his individual worship to participation in the congregational service, playing his role as a member of the priestly line (*Cohen*) and leader of prayer. The words recited by him and his two fellow priests speak of God's consecration of His people through His endowment of love. Yet it is the incompatibility of this notion of love with Ohad's that ultimately makes him feel unable to take part in the prescribed Judaic collective. And again, this shift is made explicit through prayer—or rather through a scene that shows the protagonist struggling to participate in communal prayer, clutching his *Tzizit*<sup>69</sup> in frustration until finally deciding to depart the synagogue and pray alone in a secluded location. Uneasy with the language of collectivity, Ohad must then transport himself physically from the gathering space towards a locale (the synagogue roof) that is liminal to the world of halakhic ordinates.

Yet the physical seclusion does not detach Ohad from normative Judaic definitions of the collective and the love that is permitted within them. Rather, as a subsequent scene shows, the

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<sup>69</sup> “Tzizit” (pl. “Tziziot”) refers to knotted tassels that are attached to the four corners of the prayer shawl (Tallit).

young protagonist continues to recite the verses of Psalms on his own, effectively repeating the biased communal language of his ancestors. On this occasion, however, the recited content echoes Ohad's feeling of being abandoned by God and His grace, forcing him to pause and reflect on his own conflicted position. The sense of abandonment here resonates for Ohad with the disappearance of the God he once knew, the God who loved him and which he loved before discovering that his desires made him ineligible for divine providence. It is in this absence that he must come to terms with the question of who to love: a knowable God who will undoubtedly forsake him, or an unknown God who may accept him. The answer comes later in the advice given to him by the yeshiva rabbi: since Ohad is of a priestly line, he is directly connected to God, and as such, can only find solace by "attuning himself to the voice of his own heart."

The heart—as the locus of personal religious life—ultimately leads the protagonist to put his faith in a (mystical) god that extends beyond the limits of its communal articulation—which receded from the collective frameworks of Judaic understanding, but whose traces can still be felt, and "lived with," through the love and yearning an individual feels towards it. But how to express this love? The communal language of prayer, whether recited privately or publicly, seems to force upon this sentiment a dynamic of repression and dislocation. Consequently, when Ohad at last recognizes that his love—to Nir, and by implication, to the infinite God—should not be denied, the intensity of his emotion is expressed not through sacred words but through a lone inarticulate shout into the night. Such is the sound of the heart speaking, the film seems to say, and is appropriately ascribed with a measure of personal authenticity and individuality. Yet the film does not want to leave its protagonist alone with his scream, entirely removed from the known frameworks of the Judaic community. Therefore, in a closing scene that resonates with the film's opening, Ohad returns to the synagogue to stand in front of his peers and recite the words of prayer. This, however, is not presented as a capitulation. Rather, by abandoning a state of self-denial, and finding a voice that speaks from the heart, Ohad is shown to insert himself as an individual within the congregation, and through its words, pray defiantly to a different god, one which may be unfathomable but at the same time might also be loving and accepting. This distinction may not be clearly evident in the repetition of communal prayer gestures, but is rendered explicit through the visual strategy: thus, when in the first scene, a wide shot shows Ohad from afar, as part of a group of three priests, all covered by prayer shawls and looking identical, the film's last shot shows Ohad in a close up, secluded from his peers, as if attempting to carve out a personal space of prayer

all to himself. Judging by his concluding smile, this attempt is proven effective, successfully allowing the protagonist to feel as if he has overcome some of the distance between himself and his inscrutable Maker.

Nachum, the protagonist of Religious-Zionist filmmaker Shalom Hagar's made-for-TV film *Shrouds* (2010), also finds himself struggling with the institutionalized communal form of worship, though in opposition to Gilad and Ohad, his liminality is elected rather than forced. At the outset of the film, Nachum finds new employment in the religious organization responsible for burial in Israel, *Chevra Kadisha*. He is taken on as a trainee and is taught the ins-and-outs of Judaic burial rites. As the plot unfolds, it becomes clear that Nachum's choice in seeking this position, which places him on the margins of religious society, involved a particular familial tragedy: some time before, his baby girl died of SIDS; now, as his wife is pregnant again and on bed rest, he feels the need to resolve this previous loss and find room for the new life that is about to enter the household. This negotiation of death on a daily basis takes an emotional toll on Nachum, especially when he has to take care of a couple whose infant had just died. Yet through the work, and his meaningful encounters with colleagues, the protagonist ultimately attains peace of mind, and after his child is born, also a renewed comfort in parenthood.

At the center of *Shrouds*, so it seems, is an attempt to unveil the hidden practices of burial preparation, which have rarely been shown on screen within a Judaic-themed film. In revealing these practices, the film also foregrounds their inherent ambiguities, which derive from the complex standing of the dead body within Judaism. The corpse is considered in Judaic thought to be the most profane form of human corporeality. Accordingly, the avowed function of Judaism's burial ritual is to re-sanctify the body before laying it to rest, while contextualizing the death to the deceased's loved ones through a meaningful framework of actions and symbols. Yet more than acts that attempt to facilitate a transition between existential states, these rituals seem to operate most in the form of containment. In the various scenes of bathing and cleansing the corpse, one can infer a desire to block away the spread of its contamination into the social body; the same desire operates in the Judaic custom of hiding the dead body for most parts of the burial procedure, including its interment covered in shrouds from head to toe, which seems to support a regime of visibility that denies the existence of profane death. For the practitioners of the preparation services, as the film clearly shows, the rote performance of ritualistic acts allows for a certain distance from the corpse's "taintedness." For the mourners, the ritual's assigning of symbolic

meaning to various parts of its process serves to sublimate raw emotion into thoughtful comprehension: or, in Judaic terms, to exchange “intense mourning” (*Aninut*), whereby the bereaved is exempt from his or her performance of religious duties due to distress, with “mourning” (*Avlut*), where finally grief is contained and composure is attained. Yet as Nachum’s case proves, the ritual, as a practice of bracketing, is insufficient in containing emotion to and intimacy with the deceased; rather, the act of containment delivers the promise of tranquility that is not realized, thereby creating a lingering sense of loss. Thus envisaged, Nachum’s journey therefore seeks to connect personal and communal religious life—to find the place of corporeal intimacy and unbridled emotion in ritualistic acts whose purpose is the exclusion of such elements.

The film’s emphasis on the minutia of burial preparation, which turn it into a “burial procedural,” exposes the challenges that this search is bound to encounter. For the mourners, their exclusion from intimate contact with the deceased (as opposed, for example, to open casket burials in Christianity), allows the ritual to perform its ordering tasks, setting up boundaries between the living and the dead so as to maintain communal decorum. These boundaries are breached only when grief demands a place within the ritual, as is evident in one scene, where a woman and her son go into the preparation room to identify the body of the husband/father, and at a moment of spontaneous emotion, the son moves out of the place assigned to him by the Chevra Kadisha employee and throws himself onto the corpse. If the ritual is able to minimize such points of interpenetration between live subjects and dead bodies, it is mainly for the benefit of mourners and not for the undertakers. The latter are bound by a state of constant proximity due to their intense handling of the body through rites of cleansing. While the preoccupation with procedural detail creates an invisible barrier between the mortician and the corpse, such separation is not complete, for as one of Nachum’s coworkers explains, some things, like the stench of death, cannot be washed away from one’s body. Nachum’s challenge within this ritual is exactly to negotiate the intimacy of a bond with the dead: to find a corporeal and emotional connection to the corpse, which is not blocked off through the concentration on ritualistic detail, but which also does not overshadow and disrupt meaningful connections with the living. It is a way of opening up a formalized communal ritual, with its inscribed social hierarchies and separations, to the fluidity of individual sentiment—or rather, recognizing the existence of such sentiment in ritual to begin with. In this respect, one can find resonance in the way another procedural film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), was described by its maker, Chantal Akerman: thus,

in contrast to many critics who interpreted the protagonist's quasi-ritualistic preoccupation with quotidian chores as an expression of the way women are programmed via repetitive action to conform to patriarchal-bourgeois ideology, Akerman nevertheless explained that these represented chores were not just markers of oppression but also "the loving gestures she was familiar with as she observed intently her mother and aunt making a bed, preparing food."<sup>70</sup>

The tension between the formal distance that the ritual creates and the place of intimacy that may be occasioned are also evident in the film's stylistic treatment of the burial preparation. Hagar goes to great lengths to foreground the beauty of ritualistic preparation, and uses film style towards its aestheticization in various ways: thus, the high contrast, low key lighting provides the corpse with an ethereal look, which is augmented by the flickering of light through the drops of purifying water that is frequently applied to the dead body; the proliferation of close-ups of isolated body parts, which accentuate the delicate and fragile nature of their anatomy; and the austere décor, which serves to separate the corpse from the background and give a sense as purity and symmetry to the ritual setting, suspending it from the time and place of everyday practices. Such measures seemingly turn the body into a work of art that demands spectatorial distance. In this respect, they correspond to the dead bodies in the opening of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), which are represented in fragmentation, placed against a neutral and blank background. The difference between the two texts, however, is that the bodies in Bergman's film are shown to be static, removed from the setting of ritual preparation, as *tableaux non-vivant*. The dead bodies in *Shrouds*, however, are presented amidst the process of their preparation, and accordingly, the abstracting qualities aestheticization bestows upon them are placed in constant friction with the movement of the undertaker's hands over skin, which brings concrete reality to bear. These movements, accentuated by accompanying camera movement, "dirty" the cleanliness of the hyper-aestheticized body of a Bergman corpse, and insert intimacy where once there was only alienation.

While the burial preparation scenes push these meanings aggressively to the fore, it is in the scenes of prayer that one finds their most nuanced and elegant treatment. Three of these scenes take on a crucial importance in this context. In the first, occurring at the beginning of the film, a Chevra Kadisha employee is shown teaching Nachum how to recite the *Merciful God* funeral dirge

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<sup>70</sup> Ivone Margulies, "A Matter of Time: *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*," The Criterion Collection, accessed August 7, 2014 <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1215-a-matter-of-time-jeanne-dielman-23-quai-du-commerce-1080-bruxelles>.

(*El Malei Rachamim*). The way by which this prayer is explained places an emphasis on its communal service to the mourners. Though God is the subject of the prayer, He is absent from the undertaker's consideration; rather, what is stressed is the performative elements of the recitation, and how they may respond to and affect particular emotional responses in the listening audience, bringing it together. Thus, at a certain moment in recitation, the coworker explains, an undertaker must pause so as to "let the family feel like [he] is totally with them;" and, when a time comes to include the deceased's name in the prayer, the recitation must be in a low voice, so as to indicate both respect and emphasis. The undertaker, by this account, is not emotionally invested in the prayer, but rather performs investment for the benefit of his audience; and then, as the coworker states, "after 15-20 minutes it's over and done with, and you can be at home drinking coffee." The communal language of prayer, in this context, is therefore meant to create the image of a bereaved collective rather than an appeal to God; but it is a hollow language, absent of a personal dimension.

The second significant scene involving prayer takes place later in the film. Here Nachum is faced with a couple who, as previously mentioned, has just lost their infant child. The experience of preparing the baby for burial proves unbearable for Nachum, considering his own tragic personal history. Consequently, he chooses to accompany the bereaving couple in prayer. The prayer, *Baruch Dayan Emet*, seeks to explain away the death as the result of God's true judgment, and thus contain the disruption of its effects on the regime of belief and the routine of observance. By asking the parents to repeat the words of the blessing, Nachum essentially forces upon them a framework of containment that denies their place of grief, deemed excessive and unruly by Judaic doxa. The parents, in turn, find it difficult to locate a place within this communal prayer for their emotion and intimacy with the dead; the language, which seeks to restore order to a collective-in-crisis, cannot account for their loss or their rage. It is thus in the gaps of the prayer, at the moments when the speaker needs to pause between the utterances of verses so to recover composure, that spontaneous, personalized sentiment and even *Devekut* claim a presence in the ritual. It is also where physical intimacy is achieved, over and against the distantiating procedures of burial, as is seen in Nachum's attempt to reach out to the mourning father by placing his hand on the latter's arm.

The entrance of emotion and intimacy into ritual reaches its apex in the third prayer scene, which takes place at the film's denouement. The meeting with the infant's bereaved parents had unsettled Nachum, and in returning home, he sits with his wife, and the two begin to weep together.



This cathartic moment is then quickly followed by an extended presentation of Nachum's prayer the morning after. The prayer is largely shown in a long (90-second) static shot, from a relatively wide angle. The extended duration of the shot draws the spectator's attention to the changing rhythms of Nachum's movement in prayer. While the gestures presented are not separated from the norms of prayer, their intensity, heightened through a burst of music, underlies the presence of Nachum's emotional life in the ritual. This is not a case of performance without intimacy, as in the first scene; nor does it entail the breaking of ritual for the purpose of allowing emotion to surface, as in the second scene. Rather, what is presented is a seamless integration of emotion and intimacy into the ritual itself—the same holistic relationship between rite as a communal ordering mechanism and the personal as a vibrant, unruly force, which Nachum attempted to locate within burial practices. Importantly, for the first time in the film, the protagonist does not perform a ritual in relation to another dead or living being. This prayer is performed in seclusion from wife, mourners, or co-workers; and its words of prayer are recited silently, as if to further emphasize the absence of the community that is mirrored through them. It is a singular moment when Nachum attempts to enter into a personal relation with his God—a divine being that is not bound by the social barriers that Judaism continuously tries to uphold through its communal rituals. In this respect, to use Abraham J. Heschel's formulation, the film touches upon "our great problem" with Jewish prayer: namely, "how not to let the principle of Kevaa [fixity] impair the power of Kavvanah."<sup>71</sup> Its answer to this query seems to be that only through actively securing a place for the individual in a fixed collective ritual can one potentially activate intentionality and learn, through divine dialogue, "the art of awareness of God, the art of sensing His presence in our daily lives."<sup>72</sup>

If *Shrouds* and the other films discussed above express deep suspicion of institutionalized, communal prayer practices and language, it is never to the extent of their outright dismissal. Other texts, however, are far more dismissive, and accordingly, seem to emphasize more the trauma of God's disappearance, and the precariousness of any present attempt at communicating with Him. One such film is *To Take a Wife* (2004), written and directed by the sister-brother team of Ronit and Shlomi Elkabetz. Inspired by the filmmakers' childhood experiences, the plot follows a Masorti (traditionalist) family during a particularly challenging weekend. The mother Viviane and

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<sup>71</sup> Heschel, "Jewish Prayer," 165.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

the father Eliyahu are at odds with each other. She feels stifled by his overbearing behavior; he feels threatened by her constant pleas, complaints, and threats. Their apartment becomes a veritable war zone, with their children caught in the crossfire. The arrival of an old flame leads Viviane to imagine an alternate existence, beyond the constraints of her marriage. Yet she ultimately declines his advances, recognizing that running away would compromise her standing vis-à-vis her offspring. She thus stays put, and when Shabbat comes around, the marital feud erupts again, and in earnest. This time no resolution is met, with each side breaking away to its neutral corner, Viviane to her living room sofa, and Eliyahu to his seat at the synagogue.

As with their subsequent films (*7 Days* [2008], *Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsellem* [2014]), Ronit and Shlomi Elkabetz use *To Take a Wife* to highlight the tension between a rigid communal ritual and the demands of personal desire and interpersonal dynamics. Within their diegetic universe, rite is used internally to maintain peace, order, and harmony inside the home (*Shlom Beit*) and externally to keep up appearances and sustain a legitimate standing within the community. It thus appears to have less to do with divine dialogue and more with meeting mundane needs such as to seem respectful and demand respect on a familial and greater social level. This operation of respectability, in turn, is bound by a gender asymmetry—of charting out not only the outer borders of the community but also the inner boundaries that separate male dominance and female subservience. The weight of tradition, and the overarching presence of a masculine God, make it possible for the male characters of this and other Elkabetz films to foreclose on the liberties of the women in their lives, and force them into a position of marginality and disenfranchisement.

The sense of enclosure is foregrounded by the filmmakers' choice to shoot most of the film in the confines of the family's apartment, and mostly using close range shots. The constrained physical space that emerges as a result of this strategy seems to press Viviane into action. She is aware of her compromised place within her family; she understands that the religious authority, and the collective image that it sustains, give her little room to maneuver in achieving a greater measure of freedom. Yet with her back to the wall, she has no choice but to resist. This resistance comes, amongst other things, in the form of subverting rituals, and most visibly, those of the Shabbat. For Eliyahu, religious observance is key to setting himself apart from his wife as well as other people who are less devout; it is a hierarchal position from which to assert strength. Therefore, when he demands that his wife keep the Shabbat, and force the same observance on his children, it is with the intent of maintaining his stature as a ruler of the home who must be

respected. Viviane's challenge then comes in the form of nonconformity to the letter of the Shabbat rites. Rather than take on a position of marginality which is inscribed in a communal ritual that subsists patriarchal collectivity, she places herself outside of it, in an unregulated and personalized realm of operation.

It is this very challenge which so frustrates Eliyahu that he must retreat from his home to the synagogue—a space where an all-male congregation can still reclaim its collective identity through a communal ingathering and a common language of prayer. Fittingly, the synagogue scene is shot in an uncharacteristic wide angle, which shows the congregation that is solidified through the communal act of praying. Within this shot, Eliyahu is positioned in the middle, on an elevated podium; he reads the Torah scroll as part of the prayer rite, and thus situates himself as the voice of the collective. Yet the burden of carrying this voice seems too great, so he breaks down during the service and begins to cry. The recited words from the Book of Hosea, describing the way in which the prophet abused his “whore” wife amidst fears that she would leave him for a former lover, seem to demand his endorsement of an androcentric collective vision as a condition for his achievement of popular respect and support. Eliyahu, however, appears distressed by this demand, for reasons that remain unclear. Perhaps it is frustration at his inability to rise to the standards of masculine behavior, as prescribed by his people. Such seems too harsh a criticism towards a man who, after all, is affectionate enough towards his wife to not believe in the legitimacy of Hosea's unbearably harsh punitive measures. It thus appears as if Eliyahu's silence comes as an almost reluctant subversion of the constraints of collectivity, tantamount to Viviane's own dismissal of Shabbat as a ritual that places her at a disadvantage. He is absent of words that would express his subjectivity, and hence is only able to operate through silence—through non-language. As such, he severs, if only momentarily, all connection to the congregation, and the god to which it prays—a god whose good graces have now seemingly disappeared.

While the breaking down of communal prayer may be read as a mark of the trauma of God's disappearance, it does not necessarily invalidate prayer altogether. The experience of the “death of God,” according to Sagi, is dialectical: it is firmly grounded in the “feeling of a praying subject who cannot pray anymore, and is burdened by the muteness,” but also allows for “a moment of liberation, which creates a new avenue for life.”<sup>73</sup> This dialectic, according to Sagi, can turn the subject towards his own state of being-in-the-world. It can also, however, redirect the

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<sup>73</sup> Sagi, *Prayer*, 153.

subject towards religious life, as an experience that “removes God, but also returns and enlivens Him,”<sup>74</sup> though on different terms than those of the communal language of prayer. In Buber’s terms, at least, the openness that is the ground of true dialogue with the eternal Thou is paradoxically epitomized through silence, for “only silence before the *Thou*—silence of *all* tongues, silent patience in the undivided word that precedes the formed and vocal response—leaves the *Thou* free, and permits man [sic] to take his stand with it in the reserve where the spirit is not manifest, but *is*.”<sup>75</sup> To say that Eliyahu achieves this level of encounter may be placing too much weight on his moment of muteness. But it is in this silent pause, which manifests the taciturnity of trauma, that the film may signal the emergence of another form of prayer—an individual and personal mode of devotion, one addressed towards a mystical god that is not reducible to the androcentric tendencies attributed to him.

If the “death of God” remains an implicit theme within *To Take a Wife*, in French-born secular filmmaker Raphaël Nadjari’s *Tehilim* (2007) it becomes a central preoccupation. At the outset of the narrative, an observant family undergoes an upheaval: while driving his two children—the eldest Menachem and the youngest David—the father Eli drives the car off the road; after Menachem goes out to find help, he returns to the car to discover that his father has disappeared. This disappearance throws everyone into disarray. Eli’s father and brother demand that the family home be proclaimed “a place of prayer” where people could come and recite chapters from the Book of Psalms so as to hasten Eli’s return. On the other hand, Eli’s wife Alma, who is less observant, tries to close ranks with her offspring and reclaim the familial space for her own. Caught between the two factions, Menachem attempts to support his grandfather’s enterprise of prayer, which by now has evolved into the publication of prayer books under Eli’s name. In an effort to widen the circle of prayer, Menachem convinces David to distribute the prayer books together to passersby on the street, along with some money he stole from his mother, meant to be given to charity (*Tzdaka*). When his grandfather and uncle hear of this, they become infuriated with Menachem, claiming that the prayer books were meant only for Eli’s community members, and not for random people. Upset by their reaction, which he seems to interpret as a betrayal, Menachem returns home and asks for his mother’s forgiveness. In the end, Alma, Menachem, and

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>75</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 39 (italics in the original).

David are shown to receive a certification of Eli's missing person status, thereby signifying their resignation to the fact of the father's disappearance.

As a text about modern devotional existence, *Tehilim* deals directly with a crisis in prayer. This understanding is made explicit in the opening sequence that shows a Talmud study session, in which Eli and Menachem participate. At the heart of the discussion is the question of how to pray when one does not know the direction of Jerusalem. The rabbi proposes that it is God, and not His residence in the Temple, which is of import in the act of prayer. Accordingly, praying is a matter of directing one's heart not to a physical site but to a metaphysical center which defines the Jews as a community of belief; or in the words of the rabbi: "if one is standing in the East, he should turn towards the West; if one is in the West, he should turn towards the East; if in the South, he should turn towards the North; and if in the North, he should turn towards the South; and so, all of Israel shall turn their hearts to one place." This community, in turn, is defined differently than the collective known as the "Jewish People;" it is not bound by the collectivizing impulses whose symbol is the historical-religious capital of Jerusalem, but rather by a mystical unity that connects—in a Buberian sense—the *personal* experiences of God.

But what happens to attempts at sustaining a Judaic communal identity amidst a zeitgeist in which God is presumed dead? The film tackles this question through the family's response to Eli's disappearance, which becomes a metaphor for the disappearance of God. With Eli's father and brother, the process seems to revolve around the continued belief in the presence of the father/Father, as manifested through the continuation of communal ritual and the confidence in its ability to effect change in worldly matters. With Alma, on the other hand, this belief plays a minor role; hope may be there, but the negotiation is more pragmatic in nature, of tackling life's challenges in a world where a reappearance may not take place. Transposed onto a theological plane, for her there is only a perpetual "negotiation between the present—the age of God's death—and the past—when He was still alive,"<sup>76</sup> one which gives neither the solace of belief nor the freedom of atheism. In the face of these two avenues, the film's protagonist Menachem is asked to make a choice, and this choice is appropriately manifested through his evolving attitude towards the possibility of prayer.

While prayer in the film is mainly discussed by characters as a petitionary form meant to influence God's favor, its main function seems to be to create a sense of community, a "strength

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<sup>76</sup> Sagi, *Prayer*, 73.

in numbers” so as to overcome the fear that the disappearance will be permanent. Or at least this is the initial function of prayer for Menachem, who, when Alma asks his grandfather and uncle to take their prayers outside of the family home, shouts that they must stay and pray because he needs “a family.” This need for an expanded family, in turn, is also what motivates him to distribute the prayer books to people on the street, and thereby create a wider web of support. Yet in performing this act, he discovers the limits of Jewish prayer as a communal form. If, as the rabbi in the opening sequence claims, prayer allows “all of Israel to turn their hearts to one place,” then for Menachem’s grandfather and uncle, there is a need to delimit this fluid mystical communion to those who are found to be occupying the proper “devotion.” In this context, the grandfather is especially discriminatory, not only against people outside of Eli’s congregation, but also against Alma, whose religious education—and by implication, her moral fiber—he finds lacking. Though it takes him time to internalize this, Menachem subsequently comes to the conclusion that for his grandfather, his “spiritual guide,” a community of prayer is more about exclusion than inclusion, about collecting rather than communing.

In giving up on this vision, Menachem aligns himself with his mother and her pragmatic approach to life in the shadow of absence. This shadow has an atomizing effect on those who are unwilling to ignore it and pursue a sense of collectivity through a communal language of ritual. If God is dead, then humanity becomes the world’s center; to accept that, the film seems to say, is to accept a re-definition of communalism as one founded on the individual, or at the utmost, on his or her immediate family. Such is the message rendered visible by the final sequence, which ends on Alma, Menachem, and David sitting in silence at a Jerusalem bus stop after a visit to police headquarters. The immediate family becomes the universe, joined not by a shared tradition, but by a shared trauma, a painful absence that must be worked through but cannot be denied. Their bond at this moment is forged without words, perhaps because language, as displayed in prayer, has failed them. In a reality where God’s disappearance is proclaimed, prayer as petition is meaningless; and in any case, it seems to have always been more focused on solidifying a collective’s boundaries, and grounding them in discrimination, than in approaching God. But does this mean that prayer has no place in this universe, shrunk to nuclear family size? As in *To Take a Wife*, the silence, which is accentuated through the use of a lengthy take, seems to delineate a new mode of worship, one which draws strength from personal religious life and does not rely on the communal power of traditional rite to achieve its objectives of self-transcendence. In its sphere of

non-language, this silence arguably proposes that it is possible to isolate the halakhic God, the one defined by language, as the deity that has disappeared, and to reclaim the palpable presence of an unfathomable God as the center of a different kind of communion—one absent of the collectivizing impulses signified by the Jerusalem Temple as the symbol of the “Jewish People.” The extent to which this proposition is asserted as viable remains unclear, for the abrupt cut that arrives at the end of this shot-sequence seems to cast a doubt on its ability to provide a comforting resolution to the pain of God’s supposed death.

Even more disparaging in its dismissal of the communal dimension of prayer is David Volach’s *My Father, My Lord* (2007), which was already discussed in chapter two. As previously argued, this film seeks not to deny the existence of God; rather it wishes to expose the inability of Judaic practice and thought to understand a deity that may exist, but, for all intents and purposes, may not even be worthy of understanding. In the remoteness of God (which for human reality is tantamount to His absence), the halakhic worldview is shown to be arbitrary, and even worse—as immoral. This immorality, in turn, is not questioned within Judaism itself because ritual is performed through blind allegiance to the halakhic reasoning, in an unthinking manner that denies introspection into the praying individual’s soul and seeks only to consolidate the boundaries of the community and its attendant ideological hierarchies. This perspective is made abundantly clear in the film’s various scenes of prayer, of which three seem to assume a pivotal explanatory role.

The first of these takes place around the aforementioned ritual of Shiluach Haken. As the rabbi father expels the mother bird from its nest, he declares in prayer that his actions are meant to fulfill a holy edict, and are performed in the name of God, “for the sake of unification of the Holy One, by the One who is hidden and concealed, in the name of all Israel.” He then performs a prayer on behalf of himself and his wife, that He may sanctify their bodies and bless them with more children. When the child Menachem later questions these actions which led to the painful separation of a mother bird from its young, the rabbi provides the sole explanation that they were divinely ordained: the Torah, as interpreter of God’s will, said that such should be done to the mother bird, and that the reward for those who perform the task is to be blessed with many children. It is this absence of questioning that the film’s criticism defines as Judaism’s problematic core. The rabbi says his prayer willingly and in earnest. The fact that the task is performed in solitude, and that the scene itself is often shot from very close range, seem to stress that he is personally invested in the prayer text. Nevertheless, since the praying is devoid of true self-reflection, it also

seems absent of true *Devekut*, as defined by Buber, in which one comes to understand oneself as whole through an encounter with the Other as equal. Rather, by using the fixed communal language of prayer, even in an instance of personal petition, the father links himself up to the praying collective and its inherent biases, which unthinkingly condone the asymmetrical othering of a mother bird as a lesser being. Without the spontaneity of a true individual prayer—which indicates a profound connection to one’s soul that acts as the condition for meaningful and ethically-conscious encounters with the world—and without departing from the communal terms of the Torah that carry in them certain constraining biases, the devout rabbi cannot therefore achieve a relationship with the unfathomable God, the eternal Thou—a task which, as previously indicated, his son is able to do, due to an openness made possible by his lack of training and participation in the ritualistic practices of his community.

These distinctions become clearer in the film’s climactic sequence, during which Menachem disappears into the Dead Sea. As may be recalled, the rabbi father separates Menachem from his mother and takes him to the men’s beach, thereby replicating the gesture of expulsion previously performed on the bird. While on the beach, he is asked to join a Minyan of other Haredi Jews for evening prayer. Since Menachem takes his time getting ready, the father leaves him behind to join the others in time for services. Menachem, however, never joins up with his father but wanders off, and while the men are shown to be praying, he ultimately finds his own end. When news of Menachem’s vanishing reaches the praying party, it disbands to commence with the search; only the father remains last to pray, because, as he would later attest, the feeling of God had taken over him and he did not notice any occurrences external to the space of prayer. This statement, however, functions ironically within the plot, for divine providence seems to be absent here. Rather, what is present is the strength of the community in the process of ritual. The band of praying men at this instance is shown in unison from a high angle that captures it in its entirety. While one could argue that this angle represents a divine perspective, such a claim seems to ignore the more nuanced way through which the film manifests Spirit, as discussed earlier. If the angle were to present such a (vulgar) brand of symbolism, it would have had to be more extreme (compare, for example, to the final moments of Von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves*, which show bells tolling from the heavens over a diminutive oil rig). Rather the use of this angle seems more invested in revealing the ordered gathering of praying men, coming together as individuals to form a Minyan quorum that represents the “people” and its collective values. Thus, the irony here is that



the rabbi is not enveloped by God as by the community of belief and the communal language of prayer that represents it. This community, in turn, is founded on a hierarchy that places praying men at its center, while pushing women and children to positions of marginal importance. Consequently, in entering into communal prayer, the rabbi father affirms an order of exclusion, and thus in effect precipitates the death of his son.

The final prayer moment comes at the film's conclusion, and acts as a summation of the two instances detailed above. Following the funeral, Menachem's parents are seen alone at their apartment, with the father reciting the Sabbath liturgical poem *Soul Mate (Yedid Nefesh)*, an ode to the love a Jew holds for his Maker, and the bounty that results from this love. The presence of the text amidst an atmosphere of mourning is obviously meant to produce a counterpoint effect, yet also exposes the latent meaning of the first prayer scene: that even when performed in solitude, a worship which does not involve *Devekut* in the sense of openness towards oneself and one's Other, becomes more a perfunctory affirmation of ritual and community than a true act of personal devotion. In contradistinction, the mother's reaction to the father's prayer, which is to leave the anteroom and weep, seems to present the spontaneous spirit of authentic *Devekut*—of the personal seeking expression through a communal structure; tellingly, however, this reaction can only exist as an off-screen sound, since there is no room for it within a sonic sphere dominated by the language of formalized, collective, and masculine Judaic prayer.

The exclusion of the mother from the world of prayer is then re-addressed in the final sequence. Here, the father arrives at his synagogue but finds himself unable to lead the prayer service. Accordingly, while his wife watches him from an elevated women's section (*Ezrat Nashim*), he joins his congregation to commence in prayer. As in the aforementioned second prayer scene, the group prayer is again shown in a high angle that asserts its standing as a ritual performed by and strictly for the community. And though the film ultimately cuts in to show the rabbi, he is revealed from the back, like the rest of his peers, as another anonymous cog in the congregational praying machine. This position, however, seems to place the rabbi in a bind. The communal language of prayer forces him into the collective and its worldview rather than afford him a position of personal openness and, by implication, self-transcendence. Yet, unlike his wife, he has no other form of communication through which to express himself. The mother, who is marginalized by the community, seems to have understood the true nature of communal language and ritual, which is why, at the end of the film, she throws prayer books from her place of exile in

the upper balcony of the synagogue onto her husband, as he sits alone contemplating. Her loss of belief in the words of the Torah leads her to reach out through other means, not so much in order to reconcile with a god that has taken her son, but still in an effort to place demands upon it by way of a personal dialogue. On the other hand, the rabbi father, who has recently completed his participation in the congregational evening prayer, finds himself with no means through which to enter into such a dialogue. Without the language of the community, he does not locate an “I” from which to petition an explanation. Therefore, and perhaps for the first time, the rabbi must sit in silence, at moments looking up with a questioning glare that seems equally directed towards the god and the wife who have forsaken him.

At the end of *My Father, My Lord*, Menachem’s parents suffer the pain of being “prayer wounded.” They are faced, in Sagi’s words, with “a limbo between faith and its lack thereof, between the memory of prayer and the incapacity to recover it.”<sup>77</sup> Yet can prayer be renewed and this limbo overcome? The father’s desire to not abandon the communal language of traditional prayer and the congregational settings that amplify its effects seems to provide an insufficient answer; this form of worship, the film asserts, does not allow room for self-transcendence that is open and humane, but rather encourages further entrenchment within the boundaries of a particular communal identity. His ultimate silence, as that of the characters in *To Take a Wife* and *Tehilim*, highlights the bind he is in, the dialectic of being reduced to painful muteness but also the potential of discovering a new form of personal worship—of an I-Thou dialogue that emanates from an individual’s “innermost being [...] and core of existence.”<sup>78</sup> This potential is one which the mother has already known, possibly in her intimate relationship with Menachem, and certainly in her oscillation between cries and silences in the aftermath of the latter’s death. Yet with a god that has receded completely to a place beyond the immanent, this prayer-like “facing outwards” does not serve as guarantee for a remedy to the bleeding wound. As it is, this gesture may only accomplish a dialogue, not with God, but rather with the gap which His disappearance has left behind; yet even if this distance could conceivably be bridged, the god that would potentially be uncovered—a divine entity that is not reducible to its communal definitions, as reflected through traditional prayer—may not necessarily be one worth believing in.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 28.

While such films as *My Father, My Lord, Tehilim*, and *To Take a Wife* highlight the disappearance of God and the resulting crisis of prayer, others seem to counter such troublesome possibilities with affirmations of both God and prayer. The two films that exemplify this tendency—*Ushpizin* (2004), a collaborative work by secular filmmaker Gidi Dar and Haredi actor-writer Shuli Rand, and *God's Neighbors* (2012), directed by Masorti-born filmmaker Meni Yaish—stand as the focus of the next chapter, which discusses them—and their affirmations—as part of a cinematic adaptation of the Hasidic Tale literary genre; accordingly, the discussion here will be brief and focused, dealing only with those facets of the texts that relate directly to prayer. Both films center on born-again Bratslav Hasidim undergoing emotional and interpersonal crises: the protagonists of *Ushpizin*, Moshe and Mali Balanga, have been childless for some time now, are devoid of the necessary funds to follow the basic religious Mitzvahs, and are visited by unexpected guests who throw their life into disarray; the hero of *God's Neighbors*, Avi Bachar, is torn between commitments to a violent lifestyle, embodied in his best friends' aggressive enforcement of modesty policies on the residents of their peripheral neighborhood, and to a *modus vivendi* of compassion and love, offered to him through his budding romance with Miri, a local girl who challenges the laws of modesty. Faced with such trials and tribulations, these god-fearing characters are prompted to contextualize their dire situation in light of a cosmic order; and the operation of the diegesis in *Ushpizin* and *God's Neighbors* seems to advocate the rightfulness of such a religious outlook. Hence, the films' shared reality is one filled with a diffused sense of providence, which takes place in the most mundane contexts and benefits all in equal measure. This is not an existence where God has retreated into a transcendent sphere; rather, as if to counter the discourse of God's death, these texts advocate a position that God is, on some level, fundamentally approachable, and hence that the feeling of His "presence" is not the product of human miscomprehension but "reflects the movement of God Himself towards Man."<sup>79</sup> This movement, in turn, makes it seem as if everything is happening for a reason: every event is meaningful as a test to a subject's devotion and as a lesson waiting to be learned. Under such provisions, prayers become instrumental to the individual's weathering of testing times, as it offers an opportunity to vent frustration but also to receive divine guidance and assistance. Such is the gist behind Moshe's claim that "in a place where something is missing, it is either because it wasn't prayed for, or because it wasn't prayed for hard enough." Praying, if performed passionately, thus

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 132.

becomes a way of affecting God's movement towards the devout and, even more profoundly, of creating a point of true interaction where the latter can look at the world through the former's perspective.

Meaningful encounters with a supposed providential presence seem to take place in various places in the two films, but most would be defined as mere coincidences by a mind that is not predisposed to the texts' position on divine workings. Only a few of them seem to place such definitions under increasing strain, and unsurprisingly these come in the aftermath of prayer. In *Ushpizin*, two events fall under this category. In the first, Moshe and Mali pray for God's help to overcome their financial woes in anticipation of the *Sukkot* holiday. Their prayers are then followed by the fortuitous happenstance of a nameless benefactor having \$1000 to spare, and choosing Moshe out of a list of many names to benefit from this sum. The relationship between the two events is structured cinematically so as to indicate causality, mainly through rapid crosscutting between praying shots and shots of the benefactor picking Moshe's name. And if such filmic rendering is not sufficient affirmation of divine intervention, both Mali and Moshe later verbally recognize this handsome donation as a "miracle." The second event, taking place at the end of the film, sees Moshe, enraged by his guests' spiteful behavior, running to a remote forest on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and begging God for an explanation to his trials and for His unending mercy. This prayer, in turn, leads to another "miracle," where Mali subsequently finds herself pregnant after many years of bareness. In *God's Neighbors*, a "miraculous" event takes place only once. After a fight with his two friends over his reluctance to participate in violent regulation, Avi goes to the seashore and prays. He explains to God that he loves His rules but also loves Miri who flaunts these rules, and asks for a sign whether she is the one for him. Later, during a casual conversation, Avi tells Miri about how when one randomly opens the Book of Psalms to read a verse, this verse will testify to his or her existential state of being "like an x-ray photo." When Miri follows this operation, the verse randomly chosen is the foundational articulation of Judaism's position on proper womanhood—"In her chamber, the king's daughter is glorious." The sudden arrival of this well-known phrase, for Avi, comes as a divinely-ordained sign that Miri is right for him—that she is a favored child of God, sent to aid in his devotion rather than lead him astray.

Importantly, the prayers which "invite" these alleged miracles in the films do not exhibit the staples of Judaic ritual's communal dimension: they neither occur in the gathering space of the synagogue, nor are they articulated through the fixed phrasings of the Siddur and in the company

of a Minyan quorum. Such staples are foregrounded in other scenes, and are shown as giving the protagonists comfort and wisdom; yet they do not ensure divine communication and guarantee godly intervention. The ones that do, however, are those that emphasize the individualized-personal dimension of inner religious life. This emphasis is apparent in the fact that the prayers are performed alone, and often in a secluded location, following the aforementioned Bratslav practice of *Hitbodedut*. It is also shown in the language of the prayer itself, which takes on the unstructured and informal form of everyday address towards an entity that is defined (by Moshe at least) simply as “Father.” These conditions ensure that “the god, to whom the believer relates as ‘father’ or ‘tateh’ in Yiddish, is one with which a person can be in immediate relation and without recoil, as facing a close friend, as me facing you;”<sup>80</sup> they also make possible the release of personal devotion from the bonds of communal style, as is clear from Moshe’s and Avi’s tearful performance of the prayer, which disrupts the mediation of language and allows an emotional life to express itself.<sup>81</sup> Thus envisaged, this depiction exceeds the traditional Hasidic emphasis on the personal, which did not come at the expense of prayer’s communal dimension, denying its accessibility to mystical experience. Rather, in Neo-Hasidic fashion, personal piety is defined here as *the* privileged mode of spiritual engagement—as allowing “a more authentic and ‘true’ connection with the divine than that which is constructed by communal worship and delineated by tradition.”<sup>82</sup> As such, though not extracting themselves from the communal framework of the Halakha, *Ushpizin* and *God’s Neighbors* carry the traces of Buber’s project of adjusting Judaism, in neo-Hasidic fashion, towards a hyper-individualized form of devotion to a god that escapes the limits of its cultic definitions. As such, these films seem to operate in an often disavowed state of “unresolved tension.”<sup>83</sup>

While the films discussed so far respond differently to the question of God’s disappearance, they are nevertheless united in their (reluctant or wholehearted) support of a personalized mode of

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>81</sup> On the significance placed by R. Nachman and his contemporary followers on crying as spiritual work grounded in a personal-mystical connection between human subject and God, see: Weinstock, *Uman*, 312-314; Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*, 240-247. On the role of crying in Jewish mysticism in general, see: Hallamish, *Introduction*, 90-91.

<sup>82</sup> Persico, “*Hitbodedut*,” 100. See also Mendel Piekarcz’s point about the Neo-Bratslav emphasis on “a personal prayer, free in terms of content, schedule and language, an anarchic prayer, which is [...] the prayer for the messiah as opposed to the fixed normative prayers for the Fathers.” Piekarcz, *Studies in Bratslav Hasidism* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1995), 213.

<sup>83</sup> Persico, “*Hitbodedut*,” 112.

worship. An exception to this is the made-for-TV film *Halakeh*, directed by the formerly Religious-Zionist director Avigail Sparber, and written by Rabbi Mordechai Vardi, a teacher at the Religious-Zionist Ma'aleh Film School. The narrative follows a day in the life of religious parents, who take their only child on his third birthday to the tomb of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai so as to perform the Halakeh—a ritual haircut customarily done on the holiday of Lag BaOmer. The events of the day clearly reveal varied attitudes towards religion between the husband Yoni and the wife Yael: the latter is more at home within the lenient teachings of Religious-Zionism; the former, however, is stricter in his adherence to religious traditions, becoming a Bratslav Hasid after several years of secularized living. Yael, who first prompted Yoni to find his way back to religion, is concerned with her husband's newly-found orthodoxy, which she finds too restricting; Yoni, on the other hand, is challenged by his wife's refusal to conform to his strict demands, which he believes is causing the ruin of their marriage. The film seems to support Yael's perspective, showing that Yoni's devotion is prompted by a fanatic streak that has characterized his behavior in different areas at least since adolescence; concurrently, it does not wish to discount Yoni's belief system, nor does it wish to imply that a departure from the religious world is a proper corrective to these devotional excesses.

The main point of contention between Yoni and Yael is not so much denominational differences as strategies of child rearing. The son Yiftah seems to be under the sway of his mother, and their closeness is indicated by the fact that both have long hair: an act of mirroring that situates the boy in the pre-oedipal stage, where he perceives himself as the extension of his mother's body. The father's demand that the child participate in the ritual of shearing thus represents a threat to this mother-son symbiosis. The severing first occurs when Yoni takes Yiftah to the tomb, an area where the mother is not allowed to enter. Then, after that, Yoni cuts the child's hair and places the prayer shawl on him, thereby transforming the child into a smaller version of himself. This entrance to the world of men through ritual is not figured as a necessary step of maturation; rather, within the framework of the film, it is seen as a form of abandonment and loss. The recognition of this forfeiture seems to dawn on Yael during the film's last moments: she cries as Yiftah receives his haircut, and then wanders off alone, her expression manifesting a reluctant acceptance of the situation. The fact that the film ends with Yael's wanderings emphasizes that she is the actual protagonist of the film and that her despair is the primary topic of interest. In *Halakeh*, this despair is thought to originate from a woman's marginalized position within the Judaic social world—a

stance that is highlighted in the *mise-en-scène* through the contrast between Yael's solitary wanderings in the foreground and the nearby presence of an all-male Hasidic band in the throes of religious celebration. This celebration, the film seems to say, is meant to consecrate the founding of a community of belief on the basis of gender hierarchy—a triumph that is necessarily won at the expense of a mother-child bond.

This sense that Judaic ritual leads to child abandonment is literalized earlier in the film during a scene which shows Yoni praying in seclusion. Before going to Hitbodedut, Yoni tells Yiftah to join his mother, but then doesn't make sure that the child follows his bidding. In prayer, he commences in the Hasidic type of direct speech to a godly *Tateh*. Upon returning to his wife, he discovers that Yiftah is nowhere to be found. The child is later discovered hiding underneath a parked car, in a manner that Yoni deems "miraculous." Yael, however, expresses a different view, and sees this discourse of "miracle" as aimed at disguising a clear case of father's neglect. This neglect, in turn, gains an ironic charge when contrasted with the content of Yoni's prayer. Thus, in his intimate dialogue with God, Yoni mainly complains about how much he is disrespected by people, and especially by his wife, on account of his exuberant devotion; then, he asks God to help persuade Yael to become more devout so that the boy, Yiftah, "may be saved." Such a request, in light of subsequent events, appears self-serving: Yoni seems more interested in using Yiftah to solidify his social reputation as a true believer than he is about caring for the child's actual well-being. If the child is "saved," then, it is not from Yael's misguided child-rearing but from Yoni's egocentrism. The question of whether the saving of Yiftah is an act of divine intervention remains open; if one were to accept Yael's perspective as that which the film tries to adopt, then her refusal to accept this event as miraculous seems to highlight an ambivalence regarding the possibility of God's presence in the immanent world. What seems less in question, however, is that the form of communication which the aforementioned films discuss as overcoming the limitations of worship's communal dimension and gaining some sort of access to God—namely a personal prayer from the heart—reveals itself to be disingenuous and ineffective. The intervention that Yoni requests is founded on selfishness, rather than on the openness to which Buber refers in describing an I-Thou dialogue. As in another film that focuses on child abandonment—the aforementioned *My Father, My Lord*—prayer serves to replicate the androcentric tendencies of the praying community, even though on this occasion, these tendencies are expressed through individualized rather than collectivizing language and practice. The love of God which Yoni uses as the

legitimization to his request thus emerges as a way of loving himself and his communally-sanctioned (patriarchal) authority, elevating them above others more vulnerable.

In this respect, *Halakeh* presents its viewers with a limit to the belief in the efficacy of personal prayer in overcoming the trappings of a collective “cult.” The other films in this section, even those affirming God and religious life, distance the praying individual from the communal dimension of mainline Judaism, and hence to varying degrees, recognize the problematic aura of this dimension in large parts of contemporary Israeli society. Additionally, these texts respond to the trauma of God’s death, and the lingering desire for self-transcendence towards a “beyond,” by offering personal worship as an alternative to the communal one, as a viable or at least potential way to re-discover God and communicate with Him. Yet what can appear as the means through which a loss of ego and a true clinging with a divine Other is made possible, can also, as *Halakeh* shows, emerge as an ego-trip—even more so than in prayer’s communalism, where the language and physical presence of the congregation may arguably humble the individual by defining him or her as only one part of a greater whole. In Yoni’s prayer, then, there is not the triumph of a Buberian I over its “arbitrary self-will,” leading “the *Thou* [to] appear to the man out of deeper mystery, address[ing] him even out of the darkness;”<sup>84</sup> if Yoni asks at the outset of his address that God give him a “little hug,” this is certainly not the “embrace” (*Umfassung*) that Buber locates when the I truly opens itself to the Thou rather than submitting that Thou to an instrumental concept. Nor can one find here the Hasidic version of petitionary prayer, which “is not, in fact, a request to God to satisfy man’s [sic] needs but to satisfy His own needs;” this seems a prayer of self-interest rather than a “prayer for the sake of the Shekhina (‘Divine Presence’).”<sup>85</sup> One could argue that the failure of prayer here to achieve these ideals is not because of form but rather the nature of its use by one flawed individual, a necessary regression to an I-It relationship that does not invalidate the possibility of a re-entry into an I-Thou dialogue. Yet for a cinema which struggles with the role of Israel’s Judaic community in a reality where God’s existence is put into question, such human frailties become a substantial risk that may not be easily ignored or even tolerated—a meaningful obstacle to the practice of praying, which even if treated ambivalently, still holds sway on Israel’s self-avowed secular ethos.

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<sup>84</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 42.

<sup>85</sup> Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, 23. See also: [chapter 4, note 48](#).



### 4.3 FILM AS RITUAL: SPECTATORSHIP AND PRAYER

The comparison between the cinematic experience and religious ritualism has been widely discussed within Religion and Film scholarship, generally with the intent of showing that “the act of going to the movies [serves as] a participation in a central ritual of [contemporary] culture’s spiritual life.”<sup>86</sup> This, in turn, leads to the occasional comparison between filmgoing and partaking in liturgy within congregational spaces of worship (especially in the context of the rituals of High Mass).<sup>87</sup> Representative of these positions, and influential in their articulation on the subfield as a whole, has been the work of religious scholar S. Brent Plate. In several studies, Plate has countered religious tradition’s longtime rejection of cinema as dangerously secular, arguing instead “that religion and film are *like* each other, and that their similarities exist on a formal level.”<sup>88</sup> This formal similarity, for Plate, is founded on the operation of both as “worldmaking” activities; in his words:

Worldmaking is [to be] actively engaged with the raw materials that make up what is in the strictest sense called the “earth,” but importantly with the entire universe, the cosmos. Religions and films, as varieties of worldmaking enterprises, both do this. On the broadest, most abstract level, worldmaking makes use of the spaces and times that are available in the physical world, significantly incorporating common elements such as earth, air, fire, metal, wood, and water. Worldmaking is a performative drama in which humans are the costume designers and liturgists, scriptwriters and sermon givers, cinematographers and saints, projectionists and priests. All the world’s a stage and all worlds are stages. The dramatic activity is what humans partake in when we attempt to make meaning of the spaces, times, and people that make up our life. And it is what filmmakers, artists and religious figures offer to this human drama.<sup>89</sup>

As Plate sees it, the performative function of worldmaking is centered on re-creation, “a process of taking things apart and putting them back together, of reassembling the raw materials available,

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<sup>86</sup> M. Darrol Bryant, “Cinema, Religion, and Popular Culture,” in *Religion in Film*, ed. John R. May and Michael Bird (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 106. Other like-minded writings include, for example: Marsh, *Theology Goes to the Movies*; Lyden, *Film as Religion*; Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr. (ed.), *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

<sup>87</sup> See, for example: Lyden, *Film as Religion*, 47; Fraser, *Images of the Passion*, 2-21; Hoberman and Rosenbaum, “Idolmakers,” 48; Ayfre, *Film and Christian Faith*, 106-112.

<sup>88</sup> Plate, *Religion and Film*, vii.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

of dissection and analysis and of mending fragments.”<sup>90</sup> In this capacity, then, both film and religion re-create a “new world” from the materials of the “real world.” Yet these worlds are not detached but rather “have a mutual impact on one another.”<sup>91</sup> This impact, in turn, “puts people in touch with the world again in new ways. In both [religion and film], one is connected with their world only by experiencing another world.”<sup>92</sup>

On the basis of this understanding, Plate attempts to further strengthen the comparison between religion and cinema by arguing that myth and ritual, decisive terms in religious nomenclature, are also central to the operation of cinematic “re-creation.” In cinema and in religion, according to him, the re-created world is mythical in the sense that it operates as a cosmogony, offering “conduits of significance between the individual and the cosmic order of the universe.” As such, myth is played out in both spheres as means of “stav[ing] off meaninglessness”<sup>93</sup> while providing answers for central questions “about *where* we come from [and] about *who* we should be.”<sup>94</sup> Yet as Plate points out, “the worlds of myths (whether they concern, for example, the creation of the universe or tell the tale of a great hero) cannot be inhabited directly but can be participated in from time to time through the ritual retelling, re-enacting, and remembering of stories.”<sup>95</sup> Accordingly, this argument stipulates that films function like rituals, taking mythical content as their “expressive” dimension and actualizing it via concrete “formality.” This formality operates on the level of the filmic text, as when Plate argues that “filmmakers work with and manipulate a filmic space, time, form, movement, color and sound in ways that look and feel similar to how rituals are experienced through the use of sensual things like flowers, music, candles, symbols, cosmic relations and images.”<sup>96</sup> It also operates on the level of spectatorial context, separating film viewing from everyday experience and bestowing upon it, as in “the Jewish tradition of the Sabbath,” the ritualistic aura of “an active, vital time.”<sup>97</sup> Together, these elements stand as the foundation of Plate’s central analogy, where “the *altar* and the *screen* are

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

[...] structured and function in comparable fashion,”<sup>98</sup> presumably inviting the subject to partake in a liturgy, and assume the posture of prayer.

As far as the model presented by Plate relates cinema to a dynamic of religious ritual, and specifically a dynamic of prayer, it seems most vulnerable to criticism on the grounds that it equates cinema’s ritualistic expressivity with the category of myth. Plate’s reliance on myth allows him to surface a historical continuation between the sphere of religious tradition and that of cinema, arguing that the latter appropriates the myths of the former across time (“transmediality”) and updates them to the requirements of the here-and-now (“intermediality”).<sup>99</sup> The benefits of such a conceptual move are arguably overshadowed by the disadvantage of constricting the world re-created on screen to the contours of a religious myth—contours that assume some cosmic structure that is organized through a spiritual or godly being, and foreground a vision of a better reality in light of it. While Plate attempts to sidestep such constraints, they still largely loom over his argument, and at times appear explicitly, as in the following passage:

Through the medium of film, space and time are re-created by activities such as cinematography and editing, just as consecration rites and the mythological forces of religion reform the material “stuff” of the world, offering a *new ideal* world, projected for a community’s pleasure and indeed, for their very survival. Film, like religious myth and ritual, offers windows onto other worlds. The attraction and indeed, promise of cinema is the way it offers a glimpse of something *beyond*, “over the rainbow,” even if only for 90 minutes at a time.<sup>100</sup>

An argument that films always point to an idealized existence sanctioned by a spiritual beyond seems incongruous with the actual diversity of the cinematic landscape. Even films that relate directly to a religious framework do not necessarily function in this way, as the aforementioned representations of Jewish prayer in Judaic-themed Israeli cinema clearly indicate. Thus, in these texts, a divine being and its cosmic structure are often put into question rather than taken for granted and wholeheartedly affirmed. Furthermore, a utopian vision is rarely put forth in no uncertain terms, leaving us with a filmic depiction of prayer that is neither idealized nor eternal, but in fact foregrounds continued trauma and ambivalence. As such, more often than not, these cinematic texts do not offer their spectators the benefit of experiencing the world as it “ought to

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., vii (my italics).

<sup>99</sup> S. Brent Plate, introduction to *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 6.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 3 (my italics).

be” so much as the service of experiencing the challenges of the world “as it is” in concrete terms. As such they do not seem to neatly follow Plate’s definition of how film functions as ritual.

Should this mean, however, that the comparison between film and religious ritual is to be cast aside as ineffectual and even erroneous? Such an assertion would overly discount the lingering presence of a film-as-ritual relationship within popular discourse, as encapsulated in J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum’s statement that “purely as phenomenon, the cinema has provided the simulation of religious epiphany on an unprecedented, assembly-line scale.”<sup>101</sup> If this presence is taken as testament to some bigger truth about film experience’s cultural standing as “privileged behavior,” then perhaps it would be better not to dismiss the film-as-ritual comparison but rather recover it in a different, more qualified way. The following suggests one possible mode of recovery, which does not stress the specific contents of films/rituals and their relationship to myth, but rather focuses on their standing “as phenomenon”—i.e., on the experiential-phenomenological dimension, as it interlinks and defines their formality and expressivity. So as to render this comparison concrete and detailed, the category of religious ritual would be discussed only in relation to Buber’s Hasidic-inspired model of perception-based prayer, a decision that both recognizes the aforementioned customary definition of prayer as epitomizing religious practice and belief, and the particular relevance of praying that is linked “with the life of the senses” to comparisons with cinema’s specific sensorial operation. In terms of the category of film, the discussion will make use of Vivian Sobchack’s influential model of cinematic spectatorship, primarily for its emphasis on the phenomenological understandings of experience. Before commencing on a comparative description of these models, it would be worthwhile to first articulate its desired end result. Thus, through an analogy between film spectatorship (phenomenologically understood) and perception-based prayer, it will hopefully be revealed that both forms involve seeing the physical world as an introspective image (an internal vision “from the inside out”) of a transparent (if not outright disembodied) “body.” In this perceptual act, the relationship of conjunction and dissonance between world (as a physical continuum) and worldview (as a parcing out of this continuum) is unveiled in its utmost intimacy and intensity. As a result of this impression, and under the aegis of formal means that separate the experience from “everyday life” and heighten its effects, the participating subject feels as if he or she has gained a privileged perspective upon the intersubjective structures of being-in-the-world—a measure of

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<sup>101</sup> Hoberman and Rosenbaum, “Idolmakers,” 48.

*Ekstasis* or transcendence of the self towards a broader perspective on the modus operandi of human existence.<sup>102</sup>

A phenomenological understanding of film spectatorship is understandably grounded in phenomenology's perspective on the lived world and our worldly experience. At the risk of oversimplifying an already (and deliberately) elusive philosophy, phenomenology aims to provide an account of our known reality through an intimate engagement with the world of experience, with the "lived world" (*Lebenswelt*). This "lived world" is not reducible to an object (a planet, etc.) but is the plane where things appear as themselves—where they meaningfully cohere. This space, for phenomenologists, possesses a unity that evades definition and may only be sensed through the primal and primary operations of the body and consciousness. By virtue of being part of the lived world, human agents possess a unity which corresponds with that of the reality that surrounds them. Yet this unity is not one that can be simplified to "mirroring," which in turn indicates a certain fundamental separation between the human body and what lies outside of it, allowing the former to occupy a transcendental perspective over the latter. Rather, body and worldly objects are related through an intimate relationship which, while not abolishing difference, does collect them into an uninterrupted texture of existence. Within this bond, the human body, actualized first and foremost through perception, interacts with world in a manner that speaks of a tacit reciprocity. Out of the multiple possible modes of being-in-the-world, which make up human unity, a person projects himself or herself into the world *intentionally*, as if realizing a particular project. This intentionality makes manifest a particular facet of the world, a particular context, which gains meaning through the interaction (what Husserl explicates as the action of *Noesis* on *Noema*). In this, it is not so much that the subject constitutes the world as responds to an invitation to deal with the world in a certain way—to follow a possible path that is always already part of the unified horizon of possible experiences. The experience that is acquired herein is not reflective but perceptive, and serves as the foundation for all future thought that attempts to define and organize

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<sup>102</sup> Proposing a unitary model of spectatorship stands the risk of denying the plurality of historically and culturally distinct viewing positions. Nevertheless, this risk, as Miriam Hansen has cogently argued, should not necessarily deter us from pursuing such a project, "for even if we situate reception within a specific historical and social framework, and even as the category of *the* spectator has become problematic, we still need a theoretical understanding of the possible relations between films and viewers, between representation and subjectivity." The following argument attempts to answer this theoretical demand, while acknowledging the need for, in the words of Carl Plantinga, "a certain humility of outlook" in the presentation of its claims. See: Hansen, "Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Transformations of the Public Sphere," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 145; Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 16.

the world “objectively.” It discloses, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, a “world which precedes knowledge” and “of which knowledge always speaks.”<sup>103</sup>

Judging by the account above, it may seem as if phenomenology sees experiential familiarity with the world as achieved solipsistically. Yet this is not the case, since phenomenologists, while situating the embodied subject as the locus of “presuppositionless” experience, have also recognized the important contribution of intersubjectivity to a subject’s “being-in-the-world.” Robert Sokolowski sets up the terms of this relationship in lucid fashion:

When I experience a bodily object, such as a cube, I recognize it as an identity in a manifold of sides, aspects, and profiles. The manifold is dynamic; whatever perspective I may have on the cube at any moment, I can move myself or the cube and generate a new flow of sides, aspects, and profiles. [...] My experience is a mixture of the actual and potential: whenever certain sides and aspects are given, I intend those that are not but that could be given if I were to change my position, perspective, ability to perceive and the like. The mixture of actual and potential is heightened when other perceivers come into play. If others are present, then I realize that when I see the object from this side, the others do actually see it from some other angle, an angle that I would possess if I were to move to where they are. What is potential for me is actual for them. The object therefore takes on a greater transcendence to me: it is not only what I see and could see, but also what they see at this moment. Furthermore, I appreciate the object as so transcending my own viewpoint: I see it precisely as being seen by others and not just by me. That level of its identity is given to me. The object is or can be given intersubjectively, and it is presented to me as such.<sup>104</sup>

Though somewhat simplified for heuristic reasons, Sokolowski’s description serves to highlight the way in which subjective and intersubjective modalities are interweaved in our engagement with the world. On the basis of a definition of the lived world as this common manifold, a horizon of possible significances that all beings occupy, phenomenologists spoke of the self’s recognition of the other as “someone *like* me.” We are all somewhat undifferentiated, to the extent that our intentional agency is bound by shared organizations of existence. On the basis of this commonality arises an identification, or in the words of Merleau-Ponty: “if I am consciousness turned toward things, I can meet in things the actions of another and find in them a meaning, because they are themes of possible activity of my own body.”<sup>105</sup> On the most basic level, such identification is not

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<sup>103</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945; repr., London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), ix.

<sup>104</sup> Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 152-153.

<sup>105</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* (1946; repr., Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 117.

deduced; rather, I *experience* the Other through our sense of bodily and affective togetherness (what Merleau-Ponty described as “my twin or flesh of my flesh”<sup>106</sup>). And this experience allows me to perceive the Other’s embodied activity as manifesting an intentional project that may be different from mine, but nevertheless is not outside the realm of my pre-reflective intelligibility, and thus may be incorporated in some form or another into my own vision of being.

In spite of its importance, intersubjective identification has proven to be the most difficult challenge to the phenomenological desire of “returning to the things themselves”—which is to say, to our pre-reflective perception of “things.” Such a return is meant to divulge a realm of total sensory involvement that Merleau-Ponty termed “wild thought” and associated with a child’s engagement with the world. This immersion is gradually forsaken as the child acquires a notion of selfhood and enters into the world of culture. It is there that he or she appropriates the “natural attitude” which phenomenologists sought to “bracket out” of their philosophical interrogation. This shift is brought about by the pressures of an intersubjective communication through signs, which force in turn a move from an amorphous personal experience to one that can be reduced to clearly delineated concepts. Where a culture coheres, then, is in the employment of categorical definitions—a linguistic system—that seek to displace the unity of the lived world and our “embedded” experience of it. The resulting knowledge abstracts and distorts our experience, but does not entirely sever our ties with the lived world. Rather, it is this connection, tenuous though it may be, that makes ideational knowledge seem natural and all-encompassing (as if belonging to the world) instead of constructed and limited (as the product of intersubjective attempts at conceptualizing the world). It allows one the sense of (false) mastery over the world as a static whole, from an entirely “removed” and even “scientific” position that denies the reciprocity between world and subjects that underlies beingness.<sup>107</sup>

As previously stated, phenomenologically speaking, cinema is not removed from these structures of being-in-the-world. Rather, as Vivian Sobchack has cogently argued, “cinema uses modes of embodied existence (seeing, hearing, physical and reflective moment) as the vehicle, the ‘stuff,’ the substance of its language” and “the *structures of direct experience* (the ‘centering’ and bodily situating of existence in relation to the world of objects and others) as the basis for the

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<sup>106</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (1960; repr., Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 15.

<sup>107</sup> This is a different sort of mastery than the one possessed by (pre-reflective) children, which is founded on an attunement to the world, even when that world is perceived as being centered around their bodies.

structure of its language.”<sup>108</sup> Thus, the level of wild thought or meaning—“the pervasive and as yet undifferentiated significance of existence as it is lived rather than reflected upon”<sup>109</sup>—is what constitutes the foundation of film experience. The filmic text “perceives and expresses itself wildly and pervasively before it articulates its meanings more particularly and systematically as this or that kind of signification, that is, as a specific cinematic trope or figure, a specific set of generic configurations, a specific syntactical convention.”<sup>110</sup> It is this level to which viewers respond most profoundly, and which provides the cinematic form with its ground of legibility. Thus envisaged, for Sobchack at least, the cinematic medium presents a unique case in human communication.

In spite of this shared foundation of being, our experience of film is not equivalent to an isolated and direct human experience of reality. Rather, to the extent that film provides us with access to the lived world we all inhabit, it does so *intersubjectively*. In terms of the dynamics of seeing, Sobchack argues that as a carrier of vision, the film is perceived by the viewers as having a “body” of its own—a body “like their own”—that is made possible by, but is nevertheless irreducible to the technological apparatus of its making. In her words:

Whether human or cinematic, vision is informed and charged by other modes of perception, and thus it always implicates a *sighted body*, rather than merely transcendental eyes. What is seen on the screen by the seeing that is the film has a texture and solidity. This is a vision that knows what it is to touch things in the world, that understands materiality. [...] the film, therefore is more than a “pure” vision. Its existence as a “viewing-view/viewed-view” implicates a “body.” Realized by the physical presence of the camera at the scene of the cinematography yet not the same as the camera, the film’s “body” need not be visible in its vision—just as we are not visible in our vision as it accomplishes its visual grasp of things other than itself. Still the film’s “body” is always implicated in its vision, just as our whole being as embodied informs what we see and makes us present to the visible even as the visible appears as present to us.<sup>111</sup>

Thus envisaged, the cinematic experience functions as a doubled vision: as “a dialogical and dialectical engagement of *two* viewing subjects who also exist as visible objects (if of different material and in different ways [...]).”<sup>112</sup> Pace traditional “apparatus theories,” this interaction does

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<sup>108</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: Phenomenology and Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 5 (italics in the original).

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 133 (italics in the original). For a similar and more recent definition of the film’s body that draws on Sobchack’s foundational model, see also: Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 1-20.

<sup>112</sup> Sobchack, *Address*, 23.



not entail a domination of the film's vision over the spectator's. Rather, even as we incorporate the film's vision into our own, we recognize it as the experience of *an Other*,<sup>113</sup> entailing a certain gap, a "third" space of shared vision. Accordingly, as Sobchack explains it, "the spectator's significant relation with the viewed view on the screen is *mediated by, inclusive of, but not dictated by*, the film's viewing-view. The spectator's experience of the moving picture, then, entails the potential for both *intentional agreement* and *intentional argument* with the film's visual and visible experience."<sup>114</sup> Similar claims are also made by Tarja Laine, though from a perspective that privileges emotions over phenomenological perception. For her, "a film is not an immutable system of representation that is meant for one-way communication, but an *agential participant* in the cinematic experience as an emotional event. This means that cinematic emotions should not be considered in terms of what we see on screen, but in terms of how the film directs our attention toward what cannot be seen, that which can only be detected by means of *intersubjective sharing of experience*."<sup>115</sup> As such, our engagement with cinema takes on the process of interchange, during which "we 'take in' and respond to the emotions embodied in the film, but in such a way that the emotional sensation that we undergo remains our own, stimulated and influenced by our personal motivations, goals, preferences, memories and life histories. Cinema as an emotional event is conditioned not only by its aesthetic system, but also by the spectators' view of the world, their sense of self, their valuation of phenomena such as love that are important for their own well-being, and their willingness to accept the film in general."<sup>116</sup>

If our engagement of film appropriates the basic form of human intersubjective being-in-the-world, it is only to a degree. For, as Sobchack reminds us, intersubjectivity entails the recognition of a sentient other who is "like me." What is directly given to the viewing subject is only the other's visible body, which is acknowledged as the expression of a parallel consciousness.

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<sup>113</sup> This "Other," for Sobchack, should not be reduced to the filmmaker: "although initiated by and informed with the intentional bodily style of the filmmaker (who has embodied cinematic technology but also dealt with the hermeneutic instances in which his or her perceptual intentional through the machine required focus on and adjustment of the machine), the film emerges as having an *existential presence in its own right*. As it comes into being through projection, the film becomes. As it has being on the screen, the film behaves. It *lives its own* perspective and intentional life before us as well as for us, inscribing an invested and contingent response to the world it singularly (if still socially) inhabits, possesses, and signifies. Thus, the film is not merely a cartographic representation of the filmmaker's worldly explorations. [...] [Rather, it] is primarily present to our experience (and its own) as an *inscribing autobiography of exploration*." Ibid., 216 (italics in the original).

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>115</sup> Tarja Laine, *Feeling Cinema: Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 4 (my italics).

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 6.

That other's perspective on the lived world—its own internal “introceptive image”—is never experienced directly but instead is inferred from the latter's visible posture. Such is not the case of cinematic experience, however. There, my encounter “does not present me with the other's activity of seeing as it is inscribed through and translated into the activity of a visible ‘visual body.’ Rather the film's activity of seeing is immanent and visible—given to my own vision as my own vision is given to me. The film's vision does not visibly appear as the ‘other’ side of vision (the other's ‘visual body’) but as vision lived through intentionally, introceptively, visually as ‘mine.’” This is not a case of inferring an internal vision, then; in contradistinction to a “standard” intersubjective experience of manifesting a lived world, “the film's interpersonal and intersubjective visibility is given to me uniquely from the ‘inside out,’ inscribed and made *visible* as the *intrapersonal* and *subjective* modality of vision.”<sup>117</sup>

In presenting an introceptive image “from the inside out,” film allows us to occupy the impossible position of *literally* seeing through another's eyes: of *directly* experiencing, “not just the objective world but the very structure and process of subjective, embodied vision.”<sup>118</sup> As a result of this situation, we not only *perceive* but also *perceive perception*, arriving in turn at an awareness of the intersubjective manner by which we both experience and, even more importantly, establish knowledge of reality. Thus envisaged, this awareness understands the visible in film experience not as world but rather as worldview that arrives from and is given through the material of the world, a representation that emerges from but is still separate from the “thing itself.” This, in turn, allows us to produce, in Sobchack's terminology, “a *radical reflection* on the act of viewing and its relation to our being-in-the-world.”<sup>119</sup> It may be argued that such a reflection is not always salient: the binding of self to screen through a shared ground of embodied existence can give the spectators the impression as if they're viewing the world “as it is,” laid out as *their particular viewed* rather than as a distinct introceptive image of another. For Sobchack at least, it is only at points of rupture in film experience where the distance between “perceive perception” and “perception” becomes noticeable—where the former becomes, in our experience, the figure to the latter's ground—that we begin to consciously see our perception as founded on a dialogue with other internal perceptions which, though emerging from the stuff of the lived world, nevertheless

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<sup>117</sup> Sobchack, *Address*, 138.

<sup>118</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 149.

<sup>119</sup> Sobchack, *Address*, 54 (my italics).

present a limited vision of it.<sup>120</sup> At the same time, Sobchack's definition of this reflection as radical—which assumes critical distance as its only possible framework—may render it too narrow for engaging cinematic spectatorship as a whole. In contrast, a case can also be made that the immersive attention that typifies “normative” viewing is always accompanied with the acknowledgment that somehow, what I see is not entirely “mine” even as it appears as such, and consequently always produces a subtle reflection, an undercurrent of a “phenomenology of vision.” This operation is enhanced through the formal separations that are involved in cinematic engagement, which we *never lose sight of*, and arguably give—or at least contribute—to the impression that the experience itself is “privileged” and hence “ritualistic”: i.e., an event which, through the materials of everyday experience, detaches itself from this experience so as to offer a broader perspective on its mechanisms.

Prayer, at least according to Martin Buber's religious-existentialist account of the ritual, lends itself to a similar phenomenological description.<sup>121</sup> In Buber's terminology, the world performs “two primary metacosmical movements”: “an expansion into its own being and reversal to connection.”<sup>122</sup> These movements, which serve as the foundation for worldly relationality, are embodied in the two basic existential attitudes occupied by human beings towards what is external to them: “separation” and “meeting.” The first attitude does not involve a *true* engagement with reality; rather, it is performed internally, between the subject and an image of reality which must be dissected, analyzed, and possessed. In this mode, the subject “declares itself to be the bearer, and the world round about to be the object, of the perceptions,” causing “the barrier between subject and object [to be] set up.”<sup>123</sup> If separation denies the essence and particularity of the object by turning it into a “thing” that I “experience” (i.e., arrange) and “know” (i.e., appropriate), then these qualities are redeemed through a corollary gesture, that of a connection that takes the subject out of the boundaries of the self (without its dissolution) and towards a meeting in the world. This meeting does not entail a conceptualization of that which faces the subject; rather it is a measure of openness that is predicated on the gesture of addressing the Other. The relationship is direct in that “no system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy [...] intervene[s]” between the

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<sup>120</sup> See, for example, her discussion of spectatorial disorientation in *Carnal Thoughts*, 13-35.

<sup>121</sup> On the definition of Buber as a proponent of religious existentialism and on the relationship between existentialism and phenomenology, see: Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (ed.), *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1-6, 200-204.

<sup>122</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 116.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

participants. It is also dialogical, in that it is always founded on a reciprocal invitation to connect—or rather to actualize the movement of connection which undergirds the cosmological order of the world, “the streaming mutual life of the universe.”<sup>124</sup>

To be sure, for Buber both attitudes are not only natural, but necessary: separation is unavoidable, as Guilherme explains, because “we live in this worldly reality and require, to some extent, to manipulate nature, e.g. seek resources to fulfil our needs, and sometimes use people as means to an end;”<sup>125</sup> at the same time, to exist only in the realm of separation would be to deny certain basic human dynamics such as love and camaraderie, which could not be realized from a purely possessive perspective. The necessity of these attitudes, however, does not result in their equal valuation. For even if separation and objectification, by Buber’s own admission, are not “of evil,”<sup>126</sup> they still can be made “evil” by virtue of overreliance. In contrast, a dialogical meeting is the sole form of “real living” and can only exist in “grace.”<sup>127</sup> Foreshadowing Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological discussions of child psychology, Buber recognizes such inspired existence in the early stages of infancy: thus, before one acquires a sense of self, and establishes a separation of said self from world,

before anything isolated can be perceived, timid glances move out into indistinct space, towards something indefinite; and in times when there seems to be no desire for nourishment, hands sketch delicately and dimly in the empty air, apparently aimlessly seeking and reaching out to meet something indefinite. You may, if you wish, call this an animal action, but it is not thereby comprehended. For these very glances will after protracted attempts settle on the red carpet-pattern and not be moved till the soul of the red has opened itself to them; and this very movement of the hands will win from a woolly Teddy-bear its precise form, apparent to the senses, and become lovingly and unforgettably aware of a complete body. Neither of these acts is experience of an object, but is the correspondence of the child—to be sure only ‘fanciful’—with what is alive and effective over against him. [...] Little, disjointed, meaningless sounds still go out persistently into the void. But one day, unforeseen, they will have become conversation—does it matter that it is perhaps with the simmering kettle? It is a conversation.<sup>128</sup>

For Buber, then, the pre-conscious behavior of the infant clearly reflects a reality in which barriers do not exist. There, infant and world are bound by a togetherness that makes them respond to each

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>125</sup> Guilherme, “God as Thou,” 367.

<sup>126</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 46.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 27.

other in a meaningful way, without placing this engagement under conceptual restraints. It is from this particular “interobjective”<sup>129</sup> form of engagement that knowledge of the world comes to be: or as Buber describes the procedure, “in the instinct to make contact (first by touch and then by visual ‘touch’ of another being) the inborn *Thou* is very soon brought to its full powers, so that the instinct ever more clearly turns out to mean mutual relation, ‘tenderness.’ But the instinct to ‘creation,’ which is established later (that is, the instinct to set up things in a synthetic, or, if that is impossible, an analytic way—through pulling to pieces or tearing up) is also determined by this inborn *Thou*, so that a ‘personification’ of what is made, and a ‘conversation,’ take place.” Thus, out of the tenderness of mutual relation with the objects of the world comes an engagement that pulls things apart and tears them up—an engagement which is executed, first and foremost, on the level of society and its web of intersubjective relations (and codifications). For Buber, the effects of this synthetic practice are unavoidable, but may be mitigated if its non-synthetic grounding is “kept in mind.”<sup>130</sup>

As has already been established, this act of “keeping in mind” for Buber is bound by a certain verbal order—by the articulation of the word “Thou,” which speaks to a basic sense of connection over and against our tendency for separateness, verbally manifested through the word “It.” Buber chose *Thou* as the word of relation because of its spiritual connotations, realized most commonly within the context of prayer. Such connotations are important for him since, per his aforementioned theological perspective, “in every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us we look out toward the fringe of the eternal *Thou*; in each we are aware of a breath from the eternal *Thou*; in each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*.”<sup>131</sup> Such an encounter, in turn, does not take the subject beyond the world, for Buber believed that a person “is only an individual living really with the world [...] in real contact, in real reciprocity of the world in all the points in which the world can meet man.”<sup>132</sup> In light of the importance placed on this connection, it becomes understandable why he would also underscore the need to connect prayer, in true Hasidic fashion, to the “life of the senses.” Within the context of prayer, perception becomes

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<sup>129</sup> On interobjectivity, see: Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 286-318.

<sup>130</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 27-28.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>132</sup> Martin Buber, *The Martin Buber-Carl Rogers Dialogue: A New Transcript with Commentary*, ed. Rob Anderson and Kenneth N. Cissna (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 103-104.

the means to allow in those worldly things with which the praying subject must come into “real contact.”

Nevertheless perception-based prayer, worship with one’s eyes wide open, may not necessarily be successful in achieving this contact. Language is form, and as such stands in contradiction to the formless nature of lived experience; consequently, to engage this experience through words stands the risk of reducing this reality into the realm of It and denying access to its formlessness. Yet even if such level of experience is not achieved, what is nevertheless made more commonly available by this prayer is an awareness to the basic intersubjective mechanism of our being in the world. At the moment of transposing the word “Thou” upon a viewed reality, this reality ceases to be only my view, but also simultaneously an introspective image of it, attributable to a body whose physical posture is invisible to me. In sensing this simultaneity—of perceiving and “perceiving perception”—we come to intimately realize the ways by which the basic principle of “tenderness” in the world drives us to experience reality through the eyes of another subject. It also highlights how the introceptive image appropriated from others is essentially a frame of understanding, a “worldview” that emerges from the materials of the “world” but must be transposed upon them so as to render this world conceptually meaningful for human subjects. These dynamics of awareness, in turn, seem to prompt Guilherme’s assertion that prayers in a Buberian sense are not “attempts to bring about a change of outcome or of influencing the outcome of events,” but are means of providing us “with the ‘space’ to reflect upon ourselves and issues, to reflect upon our attitudes towards others and other’s attitudes towards us, as well as upon events taking place in our lives.” Such a definition, however, fails to recognize that before all else, prayer provides a privileged platform from which to reflect upon the structures of our intersubjective existence. It is this reflection—often more subtle than “radical,” and activated in part by the separation of prayer time from “profane time”—that serves as the foundation for Guilherme’s more “sophisticated” social and ethical reflection, as well as its resultant “pathway for ‘reconciliation’ with that which troubles us.”<sup>133</sup> It is also what relates perception-based prayer with the experience of film spectatorship.

As far as comparisons go, the one presented here between film spectatorship and perception-based prayer is susceptible to questioning on the grounds of obvious differences in kind. In these, two major dissimilarities may be put forward in an effort to further complicate and

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<sup>133</sup> Guilherme, “God as Thou,” 376.

qualify this comparison. The first asserts that there is a substantial difference on the level of phenomenological engagement between watching a film and reciting the words of a prayer. Such differentiation does not only signify possible dissimilarities on the level of agency, but even more importantly, on the phenomenological definition of the world as the self's interlocutor—as possessing another “body” which interacts with the subject dialogically. Thus, in film spectatorship, as noted above, spectators *directly* perceive a vision that is not their own; in a Buberian model of prayer, on the other hand, the praying subjects directly perceive a vision that is their own, yet one which, especially when the fixed prayer text is involved, has a “foreign” verbalized perspective superimposed onto it. Such differences are significant and should not be disregarded. Their effect, however, can be allayed by highlighting the features common to both modes of engagement. Accordingly, it is worth noting again the primacy of perception, not only in film spectatorship but also in Buber's model of prayer. For Buber, the ground of meaning-making is perception: this is where the I-Thou exists most purely, and from which the first acts of forming, of turning Thou into It, come to be. As a result, though placing emphasis on the “word,” he sees perception as the major axis around which both It and Thou revolve. This, in turn, leads to another basic similarity: namely, that the formlessness of perception in both film spectatorship and Buberian praying is placed in a dynamic relationship with a form that is ascribed to an Other. Both the film and the prayer are, to use Carl Plantinga's term, “affectively prefocused,” in the sense that they provide “a particular way of seeing events and characters [...]—a built-in gestalt or perspective.”<sup>134</sup> The conjunction—and disjunction—of these perspectives with the materials of experience, the basic sense of being-in-the-world as activated via perception, is what allows the two media, regardless of their medium-specific dissimilarities, to be uniquely capable of bringing awareness to the modes of our fundamental human experience.

The second major difference between praying and film watching, already established but requiring second mention, is that often the former is bound by an avowed recognition of a divine sphere, a god, while the latter rarely operates along these terms. This dissimilarity, again, is substantial, and may not be fully dissolved even through Buber's binding of the eternal Thou and a localized Thou into a metaphysics of the concrete. Nevertheless, its effects can also be lessened by reorienting our engagement with spectatorship and prayer so that the focus will fall more

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<sup>134</sup> Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 79.

strenuously on the nature of experiential action than on the question of addressee.<sup>135</sup> Such an emphasis would allow us, according to Sagi, to relate to prayer as a response to a fundamental desire to transcend the exigencies of experience and obtain “a moment of reflexivity, wherein a human’s being is exposed in its totality.”<sup>136</sup> A similar movement of Ekstasis—of transcending the self—exists also in film, allowing the subject in both media to acquire (or at least feel as if acquiring) a more comprehensive perspective on his or her state of being. By looking at this shared movement, it is possible to then offer a different reading of both film and prayer’s ritualism, one which distances its expressivity from reference to cosmological myth but does not make it lose its standing as “privileged behavior” in the process. This definition is not meant to dismiss the differences between the media’s conceptual frameworks for situating Ekstasis, but arguably allows us to still keep sight of their common ground, and by implication—maintain the legitimacy of a comparison between filmgoing and religious ritual that has held considerable purchase on modern culture.

Thus envisaged, the comparison between film spectatorship and prayer, as far as it can be extended, is not necessarily opposed to the terms of Plate’s analogical model of cinema-as-ritual, for the latter, before reaching for myth as an explanatory category, also speaks of an experience of transcendence arriving through conjunction of two interlinked “worlds.” Yet it is important to mention, as a concluding note, an additional twofold divergence between the comparative model entertained here and that of Plate. The first site of divergence centers on the question of personal vs. communal, which has functioned as the major theme for much of the discussion in this chapter. In making a claim that “religion and film are *like* each other,” Plate is not invested in their personal dimension but rather foregrounds “the role of cinema in establishing communal life, often usurping the role that religious traditions have had in previous times.”<sup>137</sup> While not dismissive of the

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<sup>135</sup> This move is performed by Buber himself, who, according to Paul Mendes-Flohr, “interpreted the central concepts of biblical religion—Creation, Revelation, and Redemption—not theologically, but [...] phenomenologically, as concepts that point to the experienced reality of dialogue” (266). Nevertheless, by working within the context of biblical religion, Buber maintains the addressee as a central focus of his existential philosophy, and the category of myth as authentically representing the experience of, in the words of Claire E. Sufrin, “events of the physical world in continual relation to the divine” (140-141). The presence of these elements points to Buber’s equivocation as to creating a human-centered, non-theological model of being in the world. See: Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1991); Sufrin, “On Myth, History, and the Study of Hasidism: Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem,” in *Encountering the Medieval in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. James A. Diamond and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

<sup>136</sup> Sagi, *Prayer*, 187.

<sup>137</sup> Plate, “Introduction,” 1.



collective functions of cinema and religion, which bind the subject to communal law, the comparative model proposed herein is interested in highlighting the existence of the personal in religious/cinematic experience. Buber's reflection on prayer affords us such an emphasis, for as previously explained, he regards its experience as highly individualized. This perspective, in turn, allows him to create enough distance between the religious community and its "cultic" collectivizing operations so as to provide a different image of it, not as a hardened collection of individuals but as a *shared* experience that links separate engagements with a *common* metaphysical center. This viewpoint, in turn, establishes a connection between Buber's philosophy and the phenomenological account of film spectatorship, which emphasizes the subjective and individuated nature of cognitive, emotive, and bodily encounters with a particular cinematic body. Such individuation seems to stem from the condition of the "public privacy" of theatrical screenings, to use V. F. Perkins's term, as created by certain specific elements—for example, the "self-forgetting darkness of the movie-house [where] we attain faceless anonymity."<sup>138</sup> This anonymity, facilitated by the formal measures that Plate stresses in his account of how filmgoing becomes a ritual, should not necessarily result in his reduction of cinema experience to participation in a collectivizing ceremony; rather, by being conscious of it, one is able to distinguish the personal agency of each spectating individual, of his or her inner life, as they commune in a Buberian sense, vis-à-vis a single screen. The act of locating a personal cinematic experience, in turn, also permits us to expand consideration of cinema beyond the theatrical exhibition setting, which was underscored by Plate and other scholars, mainly because of their desire to strengthen such analogies as that between film going and church going. This extension seems necessary in light of the turn in film experience towards increasingly individualized screening contexts, which bear more resemblance to personal prayers than to participation in Holy Mass, and constitute a community that is reminiscent more on a fluid and virtual Buberian communion than of the rigid collectivizing of religion's "cult."

A second point of divergence has to do with the central question of why we partake in film and prayer. For Plate, cinema and religion's preoccupation with worldmaking is meant to help its participants in *making sense* of the world by becoming aware of the conditions of being-in-the-world. This basic understanding, in turn, leads him to claim that in both film spectatorship and religious ritual, making sense takes on the form of adhering to a cosmological, utopian, and

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<sup>138</sup> V. F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (1972; repr., Boston: De Capo Press, 1993), 157.

moralizing order, as when he argues that “we go to the cinema and to the temple for recreation, to escape, but we also crave the re-creative aspects, maintaining the canopy of meaning over our individual and social lives as we imagine how the world could be.”<sup>139</sup> The model presented herein is aligned with Plate’s in so far as it presumes the act of *making sense*, of organizing the multiplicity of the world into terms (and more elaborately, worldviews) made coherent in light of language and culture, as the main goal for praying and spectating experiences. At the same time, as already noted, it does not claim that all these experiences are equally invested in collapsing the operation of “making sense” to the project of establishing the aforementioned order. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly for the present study’s overall argument, this model also does not presuppose that “making sense” is the *only* service that these experiences provide their participants. Rather, it accepts the possibility that prayer and film experiences are not only about worldmaking but about world-unmaking—not only about rendering a world *sensible* through the known terms of coherence, but about unraveling these terms so as to expose its participants to “the mystery of reality, *the sense of the ineffable*.”<sup>140</sup> Buber is particularly adamant about this function in the context of prayer. He is not fundamentally opposed to making sense through I-It and its sphere of worldviews;<sup>141</sup> indeed, though it may be downplayed in the writing itself, his model of self-transcendence makes possible a complex conceptual understanding of reality. Such understanding, however, is not the goal for Buber; rather, it can only be acceptable as a steppingstone for what he considers to be a deeper form of experience—an extreme Ekstasis that removes the subject entirely from the realm of I-It.<sup>142</sup> The concept—the word—of “Thou” encapsulates this process. “Thou” may capture intricate and profound conceptual understandings of its referent; yet these understandings, even when not “harden[ed] into an object,”<sup>143</sup> do not evoke the referent itself. In Buber’s mind, such evocation is made possible when one summons the whole of one’s being to the recitation of the word in prayer. At that moment the word-as-form—together with the terms and worldviews encapsulated in it—completely unravels,

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<sup>139</sup> Plate, *Religion and Film*, 13.

<sup>140</sup> Heschel, “Jewish Prayer,” 163 (italics in the original).

<sup>141</sup> As Clancy Martin explains, “Buber does not want to indict the I-It relationship as such. He rather wants to show us that it is only one way—albeit a common, seductive, and potentially dangerous way—of experiencing the world.” See: Martin, “Religious Existentialism,” in *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 201.

<sup>142</sup> Koren, *Mystery*, 124-127. Here one finds perhaps the inspiration of the Hasidic idea of *Katnut* and *Gadlut*, a worldly sphere of piety which prepares the devout towards a more spiritual one.

<sup>143</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 118.

supposedly allowing the subject to access a fleeting vision of a mysterious totality that perhaps even children and “early men” could not have been privy to.<sup>144</sup> This experience, in turn, is also accessible to film spectators under certain conditions. At moments when the terms of coherence break down—as has been suggested in chapters two and three—an opportunity arguably arises to sense “something else.” Sobchack provides one possible account of what this “something else” might be, when she writes that “the camera seeks [an] *ekstasis* in the ‘flesh’ of the world: it offers up a profane illumination of objective matter that, in its unrelenting ‘hereness’ and ‘nowness’ opens into an apprehension of something ultimately unfathomable, uncontained and uncontainable—not only in the thing on which we gaze but also in ourselves.”<sup>145</sup> Moments like these—when Ekstasis becomes so extreme that it no longer provides a wider perspective on how we come to know the world but completely disconnects the viewer from sensible terms or worldviews and produces a certain “unknowing”—may be said to actualize an aspect of film experience that bears some resemblance to the mystical facet of ritual, which focuses on facilitating privileged interactions with a persistent enigma.

Such a project of unraveling the expressive dimension of film so as to engage a mysterious totality of the lived world is difficult to realize, and no filmic text could arguably hope to provide such an experience on a sustained and comprehensive basis. But the longing for this kind of experience may still be there, lurking in the shadows of our sense-making endeavors, pushing us forward. Indeed, it may just be that the presence of this impulse, this hope, is what sustains the power of film-as-religion in the discursive zeitgeist of a “death of God.” For, as Buber reminds us in this chapter’s epigraph, religions degenerate when true prayer no longer lives within them: when one cannot summon the entirety of being so as to overcome—or bracket out—worldviews and enter into an unmediated rapport with a greater mystery. It may be that cinema is indeed uniquely positioned to provide this experience at an era where organized religions are no longer capable of performing the same task. To entertain this view, however, would require us to move away from perspectives on spectatorship that stress its relationship to categorical thinking, and look instead

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<sup>144</sup> Abraham J. Heschel speaks about true prayer along similar terms: in his mind, “the way to prayer leads through *acts of wonder* and *radical amazement*. The illusion of total intelligibility, the indifference to the mystery that is everywhere, the foolishness of ultimate self-reliance are serious obstacles on the way. It is in moments of our being faced with the mystery of living and dying, of knowing and not-knowing, of love and the inability to love—that we pray, that we *address ourselves to Him who is beyond the mystery*.” Heschel, “Jewish Prayer,” 164 (italics in the original).

<sup>145</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 298 (italics in the original).

for a paradigm that traces attempts at undermining these categories through an extreme Ekstasis. It is in this perspective that the term “faith” may become useful—not in the object-related sense of “belief” (*Emuna*), but in the phenomenological-existential gesture of “trust” (*Emun*), an openness to suspend categories and remain, uneasy and unfixed, in the unifying experience that supposedly ensues.

## 5.0 HASIDIC TALES ON FILM AND THE QUESTION OF CREDULITY

*Beyond the private tunes of any system of [cognitive] knowledge is the melody of faith—this song invests the light of Ein sof itself—R. Nachman of Bratslav*<sup>1</sup>

The ascent of Hasidism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century has been widely recognized as a significant transformation within Jewish history. Its beginnings were humble—small groups of devout believers that gradually coalesced around the larger-than-life figure of Baal Shem Tov (Besht), a mystic and healer. The generations after the Besht's demise (1760), however, saw the steady expansion of Hasidism as a religious movement, its rise in popularity amongst the masses, and its formulation of defining institutions (most importantly, that of the righteous leader [*Tsaddik*] and his court [*Hatzer*], as well as the dynastic structure which ensured the survival of the community). This evolution occurred, in no small part, due to a general dissatisfaction with the traditional mode of religious practice and a concurrent destabilization of the social orders that organized (European) Jewish life. Hardly heretical as their opposition within mainline Rabbinical Judaism (*Mitnagdim*) made them out to be, Hasidim did not wish to abolish the Halakha and its edicts but rather to revise and revive them in a manner that would make the experience of a presumed God, and emphatic devotion, more accessible. Hasidism's reliance on Kabbalah mysticism, with its promise of divine encounters, as well as its greater emphasis on the spheres of world and self as important ingredients of this encounter,<sup>2</sup> served as the cornerstones of this agenda. To a certain extent, these foundations allowed the Hasidic movement to unsettle the hegemony of erudition by legitimizing states of knowledge that transcend (in the case of the *Tsaddik*) or are ignorant of (in the case of the common Jew) the heuristic forms of Talmudic study. Such possibilities were explored more fully in the Hasidim's appeal to the general population, arguably in an attempt to provide it with a greater sense of agency and participation within the spiritual world. Quite appropriately, then, they appear

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<sup>1</sup> Nachman of Bratslav, *Likkutei Moharan* 64.5, quoted in Ora Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy in the Tales of Reb Nahman of Bratslav* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Jacobson, *Hasidic Thought*, 13-14. In this context, it is important to stress the diversity that has existed in the Hasidic world and that has made it particularly impenetrable to scholarly attempts at defining its main characteristics. Such diversity, for example, appears in the relationship to the immanent, which has been important to diverse Hasidic thinkers but for different reasons—for some, God was hidden within the immanent, leading to a valuation of the world as such; for others, God was trapped in the immanent, so engagement with the worldly was only significant for releasing divine sparks from within it. While for the purposes of this discussion the goal is not to give a detailed elaboration of this and other examples of diversity, it is nevertheless necessary for the reader to approach the descriptions enclosed herein as possibly glossing over differentiations that a more focused and qualified historical account would undoubtedly bring to the fore.

less in the movement's Midrash literature, which aimed to provide a complex and specialized theological framework for the Hasidic vision, and more in its folkloristic works, which held no such aspirations.

Of the variety of folklore creations within this cultural landscape, none was as prominent or influential as the Hasidic tale. More than any Judaic sect before it, Hasidism valued stories. Their narratives of righteous and lay persons undergoing trials of belief were used as means of attracting members to the movement from walks of life that were rarely attended to with such passion by the mainline rabbinical institution. Yet the story's function was not only one of expanding the Hasidic grassroots base of support. Rather as Tsippi Kauffman explains, Hasidim regarded storytelling, first and foremost, as "a holy activity."<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the Hasidic tale was seen as a revelation of certain foundational and hidden truths about reality, which is why for the Besht, telling a story was equivalent to investigating the secrets of *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, the ancient writings of mystical wisdom. As such, to make these stories available for the masses became less a matter of choice than of existential necessity—an unrelenting impulse that led to the formation of one of the richest repertoires of Judaic storytelling, both in sheer volume and in creative ingenuity.<sup>4</sup> And accordingly, for the Jewish world outside of Hasidism's courts, the story became the principal way through which one could gain insight into the Hasidic imaginary as it developed over time.

It was not a matter of chance, then, that the Hasidic tale stood at the focus of the Jewish Enlightenment's (*Haskala*) virulent attacks against Hasidism. As a movement, the *Haskala* emerged in the aftermath of European Enlightenment's 18<sup>th</sup> century heyday, and attempted to introduce its revolutionary message to the traditional lifestyle of the Jewish people. Its project, Shmuel Feiner explains, was to facilitate "the reconstruction of traditional society in light of Enlightenment values, the distribution of general knowledge on nature and humanity, the preparation of young Jews to become productive citizens with access to European social and cultural life, unearthing the enlightened ingredients of Jewish tradition, providing values of tolerance, love of human beings as human beings, and establishing a belief in the power of the human race, and the Jewish race in particular, to create a better, more decent and moral form of

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<sup>3</sup> Tsippi Kauffman, "The Hasidic Story: A Call for Narrative Religiosity," *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 22 (2014): 102.

<sup>4</sup> Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1994), 401.

existence.”<sup>5</sup> Haskala adherents saw Hasidim as the main obstacle in realizing these goals, and specifically that of introducing external scientific “wisdoms” (*Chochmot*) into Jewish life. For a mindset that edified a “reliance on rationalist thought” and a “denial of mysticism and the blind ‘Faith of the Wise,’”<sup>6</sup> Hasidism emerged as “an anti-rationalistic element, zealous and superstitious.”<sup>7</sup> This image was fueled to no small measure by the Hasidic folktales since these feature experiences that blatantly defy rational reasoning, and to which no alternative contextualization outside of the theological is offered in any methodical way. Consequently, so as to battle their influence, Haskala writers tended to create parodies of Hasidic tales, using the genre to lampoon Hasidim as bumbling fools, if not outright charlatans.<sup>8</sup> At their hands, the supposed ineffable truth that Hasidic tales were meant to expose became the epitome of credulity.

Nevertheless, the entrance of Hasidic tales into Haskala literature, albeit in parodic form, also signaled their subsequent acceptance by the precincts of “enlightened” Jewish secularity.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hasidism became a source of inspiration for many young Jewish intellectuals who grew disillusioned with the promise of progress and the edification of rationality inherent to Haskala’s Enlightenment project. While the Hasidic movement itself became more and more isolated, Neo-Hasidism thus foregrounded and reworked some of its ideas, making them accessible to a wider (secular) audience. Again a principle site where this transformation took place was in Hasidic folktales, which many Neo-Hasidic luminaries collected (in adapted form), studied, and/or wrote variations in their styles and themes. But where in previous years the folktale was used in parodic fashion to mock the Hasid while elevating the learned Maskil, here it was the other way around.<sup>10</sup> The potency of this re-fashioned image allowed the Hasidic tale to become a legitimate part of the general Jewish literary canon, and ensured that it would serve as the foundation for subsequent cultural creations—literary or otherwise—throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, even when their audiences were not necessarily observant or even Jewish.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Shmuel Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing, 2010), 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>8</sup> Nicham Ross, *A Beloved-Despised Tradition: Modern Jewish Identity and Neo-Hasidic Writing at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* [Hebrew] (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2014), 27-37; Nicham Ross, *A Pearl Hidden in the Sand: I. L. Peretz and Hasidic Tales* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2013), 4-9.

<sup>9</sup> Zvi Mark, forward to *The Complete Stories of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* [Hebrew], ed. Zvi Mark (Tel Aviv: Miskal and Beit-Hebrew Creation, 2014), 19-21.

<sup>10</sup> Ross, *Beloved-Despised*, 135-137.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example: Jennifer Caplan, “Baal Sham Tov: Woody Allen’s Hasidic Tale-Telling,” *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 42, no. 3 (September 2013): 11-19.

A clear testament to this gradual embrace of the Hasidic tale has been the popularity of several mainstream Israeli films that have adapted the genre to the screen, like Gidi Dar and Shuli Rand's *Ushpizin* (2004), Meni Yaish's *God's Neighbors* (2012), and Guy Nativ and Erez Tadmor's *Magic Men* (2014). The box-office success of these films was not lost on Israeli film scholarship, which attempted to account for its reasons and implications. In deciphering the appeal of such renderings, scholars occasionally also pointed out their appropriation of folktale elements: for example, in his discussion of *God's Neighbors*, Yaron Peleg mentioned elements such as the happy ending and the minimizing of social conflicts as "'Hasidic' or naïve narrative elements" that allow the film to be partially transported from a historical to a transcendent religious time;<sup>12</sup> and Shai Ginsburg alludes to the Hasidic tale when discussing *Ushpizin*'s "fairytale-like world of faith that overcomes all obstacles" as, in fact, an "escapist" attempt at overcoming "the allegedly oppressive traits of the Orthodox tradition and the havoc they wreck on the lives of those who choose to commit themselves to God."<sup>13</sup> While addressing diverse facets of different texts, these readings are nevertheless joined in their premise that the use of the tale serves the films' purpose of distancing the viewers from reality and allowing them to indulge in the unreal. In this sense, they seem to recapitulate the Haskalah's dismissive position on the Hasidic tale as a credulous form.

In his essay, Peleg suggests that *God's Neighbors* "marks a significant cultural moment in the legitimation of Jewish religiosity in Israel."<sup>14</sup> The following pages stipulate that this statement applies also to *Ushpizin* and *Magic Men* in the sense that all three texts arguably attempt to articulate an alternative mode to traditional religion, one which is agreeable to the modern sensibilities of Israel's national ethos.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, where the argument presented here differs

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<sup>12</sup> Yaron Peleg, "Marking a New Holy Community: *God's Neighbors* and the Ascendancy of a New Religious Hegemony in Israel," *Jewish Film & New Media* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 80.

<sup>13</sup> Ginsburg, "Love in Search," 376.

<sup>14</sup> Peleg, "New Holy Community," 65.

<sup>15</sup> The term "modern" as it is used in this chapter warrants a clear definition. Charles Taylor relates to two prevailing definitions of "modernity" in Western society: a "cultural" definition which reads modernity as a historical phenomenon that takes on varied characteristics according to its different social and geopolitical contexts; and an "acultural" definition which reads modernity "not in terms of its specific point of arrival but as a general function that can take any specific culture as its input" (154). The prevailing definition, according to Taylor, is the acultural one, which would read modernity as a necessary transition: where "social transformations, like mobility and industrialization, are thought to bring about intellectual and spiritual changes because they shake people loose from old habits and beliefs—religion or traditional morality—which then become unsustainable because they lack the kind of independent rational grounding that the beliefs of modernity—such as *individualism* or *instrumental reason*—are assumed to have" (155; my italics). The difficulty with this definition is twofold: it is founded on a value judgment whose relativism it seeks to negate by figuring the move from religion to rationality as "natural progress;" concurrently, it sidesteps the implications of a cultural definition of modernity—namely, the various negotiations of religion that have taken place in the modern era with response to the message of Enlightenment—



from that of Peleg and other like-minded writers is in its evaluation of the role which the Hasidic tale plays in this cinematic act of legitimation. Thus for them, the Hasidic tale elements make this religiosity palatable by paradoxically constituting it through a “credulous” escape (in modern terms) from the historical circumstances that condition it. The following chapter would nevertheless like to offer a different perspective on Hasidic tales and their adaptation. It recognizes the genre’s tendency to be—and to foreground its own being as—historically situated. This situatedness consequently attuned the traditional Hasidic tale to the subtleties of Jewish reality, as well as to the competing ways—traditional-religious and modern-secular—in which these subtleties were read. It is argued that such sensitivity made it possible for the genre to inhabit a position of religiosity—i.e., to adjust a religious-traditionalist outlook on reality to the standards of the secular-modern one. This capacity, in turn, serves as the foundation for the aforementioned cinematic Hasidic tales’ attempts, within the Israeli context, to adjust contemporary religious-traditionalist sensibilities to modern-secular ones. Such attempts, it should be noted, may still seem credulous to an Israeli modern mindset. The point here is not to dismiss readings of this kind but to qualify them in a manner that acknowledges the desire that motivates Hasidic tales—literary or cinematic—to ground their religiosity in historical reality and the competing discursive regimes that govern it, without dismissing one regime (modern-secular) in favor of another (traditional-religious). What is at stake in this exploration, then, is a rethinking of credulity in the context of contemporary negotiations of religion in Israel’s national ethos, where ambivalences seem to outweigh clear and unequivocal distinctions. Yet as the chapter’s final section will indicate, the results of such rethinking may also prove useful beyond the framework of Israeli culture, allowing us to revisit the terms of credulity as they have been conventionally applied to the practice of film spectatorship.

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by either ignoring them completely or regarding them as pre- and/or anti-modern. In the context of this chapter, the term “modern” would be used to designate the acultural position, which arguably still holds sway on much of Israeli-secular public discourse on religion, and that of Israeli film scholarship in particular. At the same time, this choice should not be seen as leading to an exemption of Hasidism, Neo-Hasidism, and their literary products especially, from the realm of modernity. Quite to the contrary—from a cultural standpoint, by which this study abides, the religiosity that is present in these social forms is modern per excellence since it attempts to adapt religion to the modern terms of Enlightenment. The foregrounding of modern in its acultural form is thus performed solely to acknowledge the standard to which Hasidic culture adapts, and more importantly, to point to the position from which such adaptation is occasionally disavowed and reduced to a manifestation of irrational credulity. See: Taylor, “Two Theories of Modernity,” *Public Culture* 11, no. 1 (1999).

## 5.1 THE HASIDIC TALE AND RELIGIOSITY

Like many folktale traditions, the original context of Hasidic storytelling was not that of written transmission. As Joseph Dan established, written literature during Hasidism's early stages was of the Midrash variety (*Drushim*)—i.e., didactic-sermonic explications of key theological and ritualistic ideas. This conservative and reputable literary form, Dan argues, was suitable as the public face of a movement in the process of establishing its reputation and legitimacy.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, under the influence of the Besht's affirmative approach, a practice of oral storytelling also simultaneously developed during this formative period. These stories originated from Tsaddikim such as the Besht and R. Nachman of Bratslav, who often recounted them in casual settings, and were later distributed by professional storytellers throughout the burgeoning Hasidic world, achieving great popularity.<sup>17</sup> In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the growth of the story's appeal—combined with the movement's expansion and a diminished need to rely solely on Midrash literature—eventually provoked a desire to move from oral to print tale-telling. The publication of the first Hasidic tale collections—*Praises for the Besht (Shivhei Ha-Ba'al Shem Tov)* in 1815 and R. Nachman of Bratslav's *Book of Tales (Sefer Sipurei Ma'asyiot)* in 1816—was perceived as a necessary and crucial step for the movement's expansion; indeed R. Nathan, R. Nachman's key disciple and the editor of *Book of Tales*, went so far as to define printing technology as one of God's good graces, placed on this earth in order to facilitate the distribution and amplification of Hasidic wisdom.<sup>18</sup> So monumental was the importance placed on the arrival of these volumes that they soon became central works in Hasidic lore, exceeding in their impact the Midrash literature that preceded it. Yet the significance and success of the two collections paradoxically also stunted the growth of printed storytelling, partially because of fear of adding to the Besht's and R. Nachman's authoritative voices, and of opening the movement up to scorn and parody by Haskala intellectuals.<sup>19</sup> It thus took several decades for new Hasidic story collections to

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph Dan, *The Hasidic Story—Its History and Development* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1975), 35-36.

<sup>17</sup> Mark, forward, 51; Yassif, *Hebrew Folktale*, 406-407.

<sup>18</sup> Piekarz, *Studies*, 17-18.

<sup>19</sup> Dan, *Hasidic Story*, 195.

appear on the scene, and when they finally did in the 1860s, their dissemination grew exponentially. Thus, as Eli Yassif describes it, during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century dozens if not hundreds of Hasidim busily collected, edited and published hundreds of volumes in cheap paperback editions, making printed materials the preeminent mode of Hasidic storytelling.<sup>20</sup> The importance of the founding two collections notwithstanding, it is ultimately the product of these Hasidim's work, especially in the period leading up to World War I, which scholars have come to define as the body of traditional Hasidic tale literature.<sup>21</sup>

It has been widely argued that though previous Judaic traditions utilized storytelling for their various social and theological ends, only Hasidism provided the tale with a preeminent position in its landscape of cultural creation.<sup>22</sup> This emphasis can be explained by Hasidism's aforementioned desire to achieve wider popularity, especially amongst sectors of the Jewish people previously unattended to by the rabbinical establishment and various mystical schools.<sup>23</sup> As opposed to Midrash literature, with its demand for a high level of religious and mystical literacy, the traditional Hasidic tale did not provide a complicated and intricate account of Hasidic theology, at least not on an explicit level, and consequently made Hasidism's spiritual message available for a larger audience.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the clothing of this message in story form allowed Hasidic writers to elevate known Tsaddikim to demigod stature and perpetuate their reputations, as well as act therapeutically on listeners/readers by "sweetening" the painful truths of religious observance.<sup>25</sup> Such pedagogical and propagandist objectives, however, do not fully explain the centrality of the tale within Hasidism, as they fail to account for its distinguishing attribute within the history of Jewish storytelling—its sanctity. Thus, drawing on the teachings of Medieval Kabbalah, Hasidism

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<sup>20</sup> Yassif, *Hebrew Folktale*, 405-406. Importantly, the rise of printed storytelling did not signal the end of oral storytelling. Rather, as Yassif explains, printed stories took their inspiration from oral storytelling, and once stories were printed, they continued to offer grounds for oral reworking.

<sup>21</sup> Dan, *Hasidic Story*, 189.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example: Gedaliah Nigal, *The "Other" in the Hasidic Tale* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Institute for the Study of Hasidic Literature, 2007), 11; Kauffman, "Hasidic Story," 102; Dan, *Hasidic Story*, 3-7.

<sup>23</sup> Yassif, *Hebrew Folktale*, 406.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Dan argues that since it does not explicitly touch on Hasidism's teachings like Midrash literature does, Hasidic storytelling should not be understood as means of their dissemination (4). Rivka Dvir Goldberg, however, makes the argument that Hasidism has not delimited its pedagogy to Midrash literature, and has regarded storytelling as an equally effective tool of dissemination, though through a different style—one which articulates theological messages implicitly rather than explicitly. See: Dan, *Hasidic Story*; Rivka Dvir-Goldberg, *The Tsaddik and the Palace of Leviathan: A Study of Hassidic Tales Told by Tsaddikim* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003), 9-10.

<sup>25</sup> Binyamin Shvili, forward to *When the Baal Shem Tov was Born, Hell was Burnt: An Anthology of Hasidic Tales* [Hebrew], ed. Binyamin Shvili (Jerusalem: 62 Publishing, 2015), 16-18; Yassif, *Hebrew Folktale*, 402-403; Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 13; Piekarz, *Studies*, 106.

emphasized the immanent presence of God within physical reality, and the need to cling to and expose this presence through material activities (*Avodah Bagishmiut*). Reading and telling stories were imagined as such activities, and accordingly, were imbued with distinct theurgic capabilities.<sup>26</sup>

The dynamics of clinging and exposing are not only limited to the mechanics of Hasidic storytelling but are often mirrored within the narratives themselves.<sup>27</sup> The narrative attributes of the Hasidic tale are notoriously difficult to pin down, and have resulted in a diversity of scholarly interpretations.<sup>28</sup> Scholars such as Dan, for example, concentrate on the primacy of the Tsaddik as a key defining feature of the Hasidic narrative.<sup>29</sup> While there are instances where the Tsaddik is related to obliquely through allegorical proxies, most Hasidic stories, such scholars claim, function in the mode of hagiography—a celebration of prominent figures as they execute their leadership duties and mediate between the divine and worldly spheres. These hagiographies should then be read as “spontaneous expressions of Tsaddik worship, worship that prompts Hasidim to recount all his deeds, those he actually performed and those attributed to him, without aligning them to specific theological norms.”<sup>30</sup> In contrast, other writers such as Yoav Elstein counter the Tsaddik-centered evaluation of Hasidic tales by highlighting stories in which ordinary Hasidim take on crucial roles. Particularly prominent in this framework are the tales of “Hidden Tsaddikim,” which are based on the legend that in every generation there are thirty-six Tsaddikim who manifest themselves through the bodies of commoners—cobblers, tailors, wagon drivers—and by their lowly actions redeem the world. These stories attempt to recover the value of the lower classes by showing that neither education nor wealth are necessary or even desired conditions for achieving privileged access to God; as such they function along the tension between a tellurian exterior and a spiritual interior, and claim that sanctity can also exist—and perhaps chiefly exist—in people and activities that at face value epitomize the profane. This position, however, does not come at

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<sup>26</sup> Joseph Dan, *The Hasidic Novella* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1966), 11; Yassif, *Hebrew Folktale*, 402.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Dan has argued against the value of analyzing narrative, deeming the story less important than the theurgic operations of storytelling itself. In contrast to Dan, Rivka Dvir-Goldberg has highlighted the significance of the story’s hidden messages, and claimed that such messages can only be uncovered through close analysis of narrative. See: Dvir-Goldberg, *Palace of Leviathan*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Yoav Elstein, *The Ecstatic Story in Hasidic Literature* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1998), 21; Mark, forward, 65-66; Dan, *Hasidic Novella*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Dan, *Hasidic Novella*, 8; Dan, *Hasidic Story*, 53-58. See also: Yassif, *Hebrew Folktale*, 402, 420; Dvir-Goldberg, *Palace of Leviathan*, 22-64.

<sup>30</sup> Dan, *Hasidic Story*, 55.

the expense of the overt Hasidic Tsaddik. Rather, as Elstein explains, the commoner-centered tales often orchestrate an encounter between the ordinary subject and the Tsaddik during which the latter—and only him—recognizes the hidden sacredness of the former. This recognition helps “solidify the authority [of the Tsaddik because] he possesses superior knowledge and can penetrate the external layers of reality so as to assess the true nature of an individual.”<sup>31</sup>

The definitional challenges with respect to the protagonists of the Hasidic narrative extend also to their plotlines, which are too diverse in kind to allow for a simple categorization. Generally speaking it may be argued that the Hasidic story, following the basic patterns of the folktale, often foregrounds a state of existential exile. This exile and resultant yearning (a form of *Sehnsucht*) frequently necessitate a journey of some sort<sup>32</sup>—whether that be an actual journey from a faraway land towards home (as in the popular Hasidic pattern of “the son who is exiled from his father’s house”<sup>33</sup>), or through more minor movements between the community’s interior spaces (familial or religious-institutional) and exterior ones (of labor, leisure, etc.).<sup>34</sup> This physical journey often involves trials and tribulations, culminating in human acts that disclose divine presence. Yet these stories are not only about godly revelations in physical reality, but also about the reception of such phenomena—about the internal process of achieving and manifesting devotion. Indeed, this is especially evident in narratives that focus on the journey of the Tsaddik between the worldly and divine spheres, his acquisition of sacred knowledge through visions and insight, and his transmission of this knowledge through speech and action.

The emphasis on *personal* devotion and epiphany within the Hasidic tale, according to Elstein, points to a “society-breaking” tendency, because it affirms a mindset that bypasses normative social understandings and codes.<sup>35</sup> This tendency, Kauffman argues, is inherent to the medium of storytelling itself. In her mind, the story intrinsically includes a variety of voices and viewpoints because it “centers on the specific person, the existential condition, relationships, and emotions, rather than on the norm, the law, the always-true abstract maxim.”<sup>36</sup> An intrinsic dwelling in the contingency of the here-and-now and the specific, in turn, invites a particular form

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<sup>31</sup> Elstein, *Ecstatic*, 183. See also: Yassif, *Hebrew Folktale*, 423-427; Dan, *Hasidic Story*, 86-87.

<sup>32</sup> Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 47-48, 80-82.

<sup>33</sup> Dvir-Goldberg, *Palace of Leviathan*, 51-64.

<sup>34</sup> Yassif, *Hebrew Folktale*, 435-436.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-111.

<sup>36</sup> Kauffman, “Hasidic Story,” 111.

of “contextual thinking,” whereby the audience member can “participate in developing [the story’s] spiritual message in a way that suits his [sic] personality and existential state.”<sup>37</sup> The unprecedented foregrounding of the tale within Hasidic culture, in Kauffman’s mind, signals the movement’s desire to make room for relative flexibility in message and experience—to create “another polyphonic religious focus, equal in value to the Hasidic *derashot* [Midrash literature], on the one hand, and the halakhah, on the other, both of which represent the normative and general perspective.”<sup>38</sup> Though polyphony exists in the Hasidic tale even when there is a strong authorial voice—one which naturally represents the edicts of Hasidic Judaism—it is heightened within narratives that undermine this voice by emphasizing the “spontaneity of the religious act, the importance of *kavvanah* (directing of thought), the importance of the here and now and of concrete circumstances as a platform for spirituality.”<sup>39</sup> The personalized and subjective nature of these elements, epitomized by the moment of ecstasy, “is subversive, if not necessarily transgressive.”<sup>40</sup> While never unsettling religion, the tale does reveal a deep awareness to the prevalent Judaic-secular binary understandings of reality at the particular moment of its making, and gestures towards the potential of overcoming—or at least tempering—these dialectics through a historically-situated foundation of religiosity.

With its inherent fluidity and attunement to the here-and-now, the Hasidic tale not only found a receptive audience with devout Jews but also in Jewish society’s secular precincts. Indeed, it was there, under the aegis of Neo-Hasidism, that Hasidic storytelling became a highly visible and recognizable genre for Jews and gentiles alike. The origins of Neo-Hasidism as a cultural phenomenon date back to a profound crisis that had affected young European Jewry during the fin-de-siècle period. Jews of this period were fearful of losing their Jewish identity, for they “acquired mastery of different European languages, but could not read Hebrew and therefore had no longer access to their ancient customs. They adopted the high culture of the West, and from Judaism there remained only some shards of tradition, a watered-down folklore, and, as the poet Heinrich Heine once confessed privately, a secret longing to mother’s Shabbat dinners.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 118 (italics in the original).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Progress and its Discontents: The Struggle of Jewish Intellectuals with Modernity* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2010), 31.

Additionally, within a European zeitgeist that still valorized rationality over devotional experience, these Jews felt unable to access “the irrational sphere of spirit”<sup>42</sup>—a shared realm of being from which, it was believed, the deeper truths about life emerge. Neo-Hasidism responded to this bifocal challenge—of the painful alienation “from the traditional definition of ‘who’s a Jew’” and “from God, or the sacred dimension which gives human life meaning”<sup>43</sup>—by placing blame on the most visible product of Jewish Enlightenment: the Haskala movement. And accordingly, it sought to undermine the Haskala’s position by vindicating that of this movement’s principal object of ridicule—Hasidism.<sup>44</sup>

While recognizing the shortcomings of the Haskala’s modern outlook, Neo-Hasidic thinkers nevertheless did not wish to discard it altogether. As such, their validation of Hasidism never amounted to religious repentance, but only served as “a form of external identification, of a modern subject gazing in appreciation at a non-modern movement.”<sup>45</sup> From this perspective, Neo-Hasidic writings popularized a highly selective image of Hasidic Judaism, one which disproportionately highlighted “a small number of specific traits or foci from the conceptual and folkloristic world of Hasidism.”<sup>46</sup> These characteristics were chosen on the basis of their capacity to act as a source of inspiration for modern-liberal Jewish society. Such was the case, for example, of the Neo-Hasidic emphasis on Hasidism’s valuation of inner religious life, which served to affirm for modern Jews the possibility of a spiritual experience without having to commit to theological erudition and the observance of halakhic laws; or its emphasis on Hasidism’s appreciation of worship through physical acts, which gave modern Jewry the occasion to disassociate God from a position of absolute transcendence and make Him part of the everyday world; or its emphasis on Hasidic anthropocentrism and populism, which allowed the Jewish diaspora to imagine a religious stance that takes its lead from individual needs rather than institutional (rabbinical) demands. These and other traits were foregrounded at the expense of other traits that did not sit well with the outlook of modern Jews of that time, like Hasidism’s adherence to a devout traditional lifestyle, its avowed elitism (in the form of Tsaddik dynasties), its reliance on kabbalistic theosophy and resulting systems of symbols and practices, and its quietist tendencies that countermanded any

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>43</sup> Ross, *Beloved-Despised Tradition*, 300.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 93.

wholehearted sanctification of the immanent world. The result of this reductive re-visioning was a model of religiosity that is both Jewish and universal, and that does not force upon the subject any rigid religious constraints in experiencing and understanding reality; or in Nicham Ross's words, for the Neo-Hasidic "new Jews,"

Hasidism provided the opportunity and legitimization for a more comfortable and relevant definition of Jewish identity, as well as for the emotional affinity to old traditions, but also the opportunity to articulate and revive a specific dimension of spirituality or religiosity, of the kind which the new skeptical Jew could use as a relevant spiritual avenue in his [sic] personal life. But the Hasidic inspiration allowed more than isolated responses to each of these specific needs. The original Hasidic movement's charging of Jewish identity with the particular contents of a distinctly Jewish spirituality served as inspiration for the new Jew's attempt to articulate Jewish belonging and identification within the borders of the spiritual sphere. In such a way, this Jew not only answered the universal spiritual need for a dimension of religiosity, but also strengthened his Jewish identity by preserving the religiosity of past iterations of Jewish identity.<sup>47</sup>

In its attempt to articulate this modern "Jewish belonging and identification," Neo-Hasidic thought inevitably drew its inspiration more from the religiosity of Hasidic tales than from the rigid and convoluted religious system of Hasidism's Midrash literature.<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, the careers of many Neo-Hasidic luminaries such as Isaac Leib Peretz, Micha Josef Berdyczewski, Samuel Abba Horodezky, Yehuda Steinberg, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Elie Wiesel have featured intense interest in both publishing collections of traditional Hasidic stories and in writing original stories within the parameters of the genre. Of this group of writers, however, none was more instrumental than Martin Buber in bringing the Hasidic tale to the fore of not only Jewish culture, but European culture at large.<sup>49</sup> Buber's first major publications were, in fact, collections of Hasidic stories: *The Stories of R. Nachman* (1906) and *The Legend of Baal Shem* (1908). In preparing the collections, Paul Mendes-Flohr explains, Buber did not wish "to translate these creations—these legends and symbolic fairytales related by the Hasidic masters—but to 'retell' them. Selecting various motifs from Hasidic stories, which in his judgment captured the distinctive message of Hasidism, Buber would 'relieve' these motifs and the message they conveyed, retelling them as he experienced

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 300. For a similar approach that traces the roots of the modern "New Jew" back to Hasidism, and specifically the Hasidic tale, see Shvili, forward, 11-13.

<sup>48</sup> Ross, *Beloved-Despised Tradition*, 323.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 78.



them.”<sup>50</sup> Through this process of “retelling” and “reliving” the “distinctive message of Hasidism,” Buber was able to articulate the basis for his modern philosophy on Judaism and universal spirituality. Thus, in his stories, simple Jews are often elevated to the level of Tsaddikim, and both are removed from the institutional contexts of rabbinical Judaism<sup>51</sup> in a manner that indicates Buber’s own valuation of subjective religiosity over structured religion (two categories which he explicitly pitted against each other as early as his 1913 essay “Jewish Religiosity”).<sup>52</sup> This religiosity, in turn, is most visibly articulated in these stories through devotion via everyday activities, a rhetorical gesture which served to shift the focus towards the human experience of sanctity, colored by modern notions of personal freedom and individual agency.<sup>53</sup> In his introduction to *The Stories of R. Nachman*, Buber places this experience under the heading of “mysticism,” understood as “a temporary conscious reaction against the dominance of the rule of the intellect” that allows for a vision where “in the midst of an unspeakably circumscribed existence, indeed out of its very limitations, there suddenly br[eaks] forth the limitless.” By highlighting the populist nature of Hasidic mysticism, Buber expanded the purview of this mystical system—this extreme ecstasy that unravels the limits of coherence towards an image of the world’s underlying unity—so as to include the commoner and not only the enlightened mystic. Concurrently, through this expansion, he was able to further his claim that although mysticism may be a universal quality, it is found most potently in Jews, as “an original characteristic of the people.”<sup>54</sup> As a result of this argumentative maneuvering, then, Buber was able to propose a form of religiosity that is both universal, in that it is unbound by particular religious edicts, and ethnically specific, in that it *is* bound to a particular Jewish “spiritual sensitivity,”<sup>55</sup> while referring to a divine presence that is suitably vague and worldly so as to not incur insurmountable modern resistance.<sup>56</sup> These ideas would subsequently be developed in Buber’s formative theoretical

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<sup>50</sup> Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions*, 91.

<sup>51</sup> Ross, *Beloved-Despised Tradition*, 105-107, 125.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 301-302; Melamed, *Dat*, 191-195.

<sup>53</sup> Ross, *Beloved-Despised Tradition*, 116, 342-343; Melamed, *Dat*, 194.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Buber, *Tales of Rabbi Nachman* (1906; repr., Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1988), 4.

<sup>55</sup> Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions*, 88.

<sup>56</sup> While the focus on mystical experience arguably sidestepped the issue of divine ontology, it may be wrong to assume that Buber at this stage was advocating an atheistic standpoint (as Gershom Scholem famously stipulated). Rather, it seems that the early Buber wished to dissociate himself from the traditional definition of a transcendent God and attendant kabbalistic cosmologies, but did not wish to let go of the possibility of God altogether. If one accepts this premise, then the transition from early Buber’s emphasis on pantheism, which conveniently dissolves God into Being or the mysteries of the world, to his later emphasis on panentheism, which recognizes a separate

elaborations *Ecstatic Confessions* (1909) and *Three Lectures on Judaism* (1909-1911), yet it was their elaboration and simplification through stories that seemed to have made the most impact on modern Jewry, at least initially. As Mendes-Flohr explains,

Buber's Hasidica seemed to have held a specific attraction for Jews estranged from Judaism. They tended to view the Baal Shem and Rabi Nachman, as portrayed by Buber, as adumbrating an alternative Jewish identity. They found Buber's image of Judaism as essentially a spiritual sensibility compelling—no doubt, because this sensibility had little to do not only with bourgeois rationalism and materialism, but also with traditional Jewish law and religious practice. Buber's Hasidica allowed them an *aesthetic* affirmation of Judaism.<sup>57</sup>

On the basis of the distinction between Hasidism and its Neo-Hasidic reworking, it would be tempting to define the two as largely distinct phenomena, the former belonging to the Orthodox Judaic world and the latter to spiritually-inclined modern Jews. Such a distinction is given further support by the gradual move towards reactionary traditionalism and cultural seclusion which has typified much of Hasidic society's response to the challenges of modernity and postmodernity. Yet not all factions of Hasidism were so opposed to the modern message of Neo-Hasidism, at least in principle. In Israel for example, particular factions such as Bratslav and Chabad Hasidism, which have spearheaded the Hasidic enterprise of religious repentance, have drawn on the message of Neo-Hasidism so as to appeal to spiritual seekers within the nation's secular constituency. Tomer Persico defines this Neo-Hasidism as "nomian," as opposed to Buber's brand of Neo-Hasidism, which he terms "antinomian." The antinomian Neo-Hasidism, Persico maintains, "will interpret the Hasidic sources as legitimizing a kind of inner-directed spirituality, often not only indifferent to the heteronomous authority of the Jewish law or the traditional authority of the Rabbis as interpreters of the law, but also clearly opposed to these social structures (marking them as 'dry,' 'soulless,' 'archaic,' or 'tyrannical')." In contrast, proponents of nomian Neo-Hasidism are "aware that traditional forms of worship are unattractive to new generations of modern Jews, try to enrich the practice they offer by tapping into the thrust and innovation of the budding

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God (eternal Thou) that exists in unity with the world and can be approached by way of dialogue, becomes less jarring. See also: Ross, *Beloved-Despised Tradition*, 82, 333-338; Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions*, 237-282.

<sup>57</sup> Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions*, 100 (italics in the original). Importantly, Buber not only wanted his story collections to create a Jewish revival amongst modern Jews, but also to act as an apologia on the value and worth of Judaism vis-à-vis European gentiles. The decision to publish these volumes in German (as opposed to Yiddish or Hebrew) was very much influenced by this latter objective. See: Ross, *Beloved-Despised Tradition*, 77-78, 297-298.

Hasidism movement's sources, often while engineering the methods they develop with the help of knowledge they acquire from non-Jewish authorities which are influential, or simply in vogue."<sup>58</sup> Yet in spite of professing different goals vis-à-vis the Halakha, the two strands of Neo-Hasidism are nevertheless united by a "very modern view of religion," which "places mystical experience as the heart and soul of religion, and the believer's inner life as the focal point of the religious drama."<sup>59</sup> This commitment to a modern "turn toward the subjective" takes nomian Hasidism beyond the origins of Hasidic anthropocentrism in the sense that it destabilizes the supremacy of a transcendent God and endows "psychological and emotional states [...] not only with religious significance, but indeed with religious authority."<sup>60</sup> At the same time, since it is not as committed to this destabilization as antinomian Neo-Hasidism, the nomian variety is more acutely challenged with tempering the ambivalence of combining traditional-religious and modern-secular outlooks on existence that is embodied in its brand of religiosity.

This ambivalence pervades the three films discussed in the following sections, which adapt the representational patterns of the Hasidic tale to the screen. As adaptations, these cinematic tales adopt their source material's aforementioned tendency towards exhibiting a flexible religious perspective that offers "a model for a unique life, one situated in the here and now."<sup>61</sup> This tendency, in turn, is enhanced by the fact that all three films feature born again Bratslav and Chabad Hasidic characters, whose process of repentance forces upon them a keen awareness of the secular-religious conflict and a concomitant desire to mitigate its effects through a Neo-Hasidic form of religiosity. Differences between the films exist in the manner by which this Neo-Hasidic position is articulated as antinomian or nomian, and may be attributable to the dissimilarities in the filmmakers' religious identity. All texts, however, seem equally supportive of their characters' Neo-Hasidic religiosity and committed to their basic impulse of accommodating Judaic understandings to a modern sensibility. This accommodation, it will be argued, structures their treatment of both "reality" as a site of struggle between largely opposing social forces and "fantasy" as a site of struggle between avowedly conflicting systems of belief.

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<sup>58</sup> Tomer Persico, "Neo-Hasidic Revival: Expressivist Uses of Traditional Lore," *Modern Judaism* 34, no. 3 (October 2014): 289.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>61</sup> Kauffman, "Hasidic Story," 125.

## 5.2 REALITY

The popular definition of the Hasidic tale as escaping reality—as being non-realistic in the sense that it produces a diegesis that is incongruent with the commonsensical understandings of reality by a modern mindset—is often related to the genre’s reliance on mythopoetic archetypes. This reliance, while present within Hasidic storytelling, should nevertheless be qualified. The corpus of Hasidic tales includes many texts that foreground the symbolic characters and narrative arcs of past mythologies. The *Book of Tales* by R. Nachman of Bratslav exemplifies this inclination, in its extensive use of legendary tropes drawn specifically from biblical stories, Lurianic Kabbalah mythology, and non-Jewish fairytales.<sup>62</sup> These elements did not deny the tales’ claim to historical situatedness, as they often referred allegorically to specific events and social tensions;<sup>63</sup> yet the connection to a particular here-and-now was largely obscured by the overall “dreamlike, unreal atmosphere”<sup>64</sup> that pervaded R. Nachman’s diegetic world. Such unreality, however, was not shared by all Hasidic tales—a fact that the immense popularity of R. Nachman’s foundational stories might cause us to forget. Indeed, as Elstein argues, traditional Hasidic storytelling often structured its narratives “on a distinctly realistic ground; the stories depict the unmistakable characteristics of Eastern European Jewish life, including recognizable names, occupations, toponyms, person-home and person-livestock dynamics, landscapes, living arrangements, rituals and holidays.”<sup>65</sup> This, for Elstein, is a clear indication of the measure by which the traditional Hasidic tale shaped its diegesis so as to evoke a sense of intimate familiarity with its Hasidic audiences.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, introduction to *Six Stories of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* [Hebrew], edited by Adin Steinsaltz (Tel Aviv: Dvir Publishing, 1995), 12-16; Wiskind-Elper, 50-55, 135-142; Piekarcz, *Studies*, 132.

<sup>63</sup> R. Nachman was influenced by current events and attempted to work through their tensions obliquely, as in his allusions to Napoleon’s upstart challenge to monarchy in “The King’s Son and the Maidservant’s Son Who Were Switched.” See: Mark, forward, 52; Steinsaltz, *Six Stories*, 17

<sup>64</sup> Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 160.

<sup>65</sup> Elstein, *Ecstatic*, 94.

<sup>66</sup> In a sense, this distinction between stories that highlight the mythopoetic element and those that do not corresponds to R. Nachman’s own distinction between “tales of ancient days,” which are primordial and timeless, and “tales in the midst of the years,” which speak of earthly reality and are bound by temporality. See: Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 44.

As a more flexible genre than Midrash literature, the Hasidic tale was able to adjust with greater effectivity to the demands of an evolving reality, as well as produce an image of it that was multivalent and nuanced rather than reductive and sanitized.<sup>67</sup> Within the confines of an attempt to “apologetically”<sup>68</sup> legitimize a Hasidic perspective, stories tended to foreground the intricacies of conflict between Hasidim and opponents from both the Jewish and the non-Jewish communities. Hagiographic stories often focused on the episodes in a Tsaddik’s life during which he was viciously persecuted. Notable examples of this narrative tendency are “The Miracle of the Nineteenth of Kislev,” which centers on the incarceration of Chabad founder R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi following accusations of subversive behavior from disciples of the great Mitnagdim leader Gaon of Vilna, and “Rabbi Nachman’s Journey to Palestine,” which outlines R. Nachman’s pilgrimage during Napoleon’s Middle-Eastern campaign and his dangerous encounters with hostile gentiles vying for control over the region. These two stories, which are sacred to Chabad and Bratslav traditions respectively, are constituted as chronicles so as to establish an aura of historical factuality and accuracy.<sup>69</sup> Other stories that are less Tsaddik-centered focus more on generic social conflicts: for example, around the exploitation of poor Jews by rich Jews, or the abuse of Jews by gentiles (and especially gentile nobility). In these cases, according to Yassif, the Tsaddik functions as an “intermediary figure,” in the sense that he elevates the poor and topples the rich Jews, challenges the gentile elite and rescues the Jewish community from harm.<sup>70</sup>

*Ushpizin, God’s Neighbors, and Magic Men* refer back to this particular tradition of Hasidic storytelling and emphasize its “realistic” tendencies in Neo-Hasidic fashion. They avoid the criticism of “utter incredulity” by sidestepping the mythopoetic—especially in terms of kabbalistic symbolism, magic, and cosmology—and by stressing the immanent over the transcendent as their site of primary operation. At the same time, their depiction of this immanent reality shows awareness to the nuances of social conflict and avoids reducing them to the Manichean schemes

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<sup>67</sup> Elstein, *Ecstatic*, 196-197.

<sup>68</sup> Nigal, *The “Other”*, 12-13.

<sup>69</sup> According to Eli Yassif, the issue of facticity in depiction was important for Hasidim, since they believed that all actions made by the Tsaddik carry spiritual importance and thus must be represented in complete faithfulness (*Hebrew Folktale*, 404-405). This tendency, according to Dan, is taken to an extreme within Bratslav storytelling, whose raconteurs saw themselves as “historians in the business of conveying to the next generation with complete accuracy every action, movement, feeling, and saying of their rabbi” (*Hasidic Story*, 184). “Rabbi Nachman’s Journey to Palestine,” with its dry and detailed account, is for Dan exemplary of such inclinations, “remain[ing] surprisingly faithful to historical fact” (*Hasidic Novella*, 22).

<sup>70</sup> Yassif, *Hebrew Folktale*, 434. See also: Nigal, *The “Other”*, 19-56.

of myth (which occasionally dominate modern perspectives on social reality as well). From this awareness, these films mobilize the details of a conflicted reality so as to put forward the side of Israeli-Judaic life that would be admissible (if not entirely acceptable) by Israeli-secular definitions of what life is and should be. These measures seem to reveal the three films as aiming, like their literary antecedents, to find room for religion within a modern understanding of (probable and proper) reality rather than to claim that no such room exists through an escape from this understanding. Their image is thus one of religiosity, as flexible as it is ambivalent, which emerges from the stuff of Israeli social existence so as to capture a possible common ground for integration across traditional/religious-modern/secular perspectival divides.

Unsurprisingly, this integrative religiosity, itself a derivative of Hasidic tales' fluid understanding of reality, is articulated through, grounded in, and enhanced by the actions of Bratslav and Chabad religious repentant characters. Mainstream ultra-Orthodoxy, and mainline Israeli Hasidism in particular, follow the prevalent perspective which sees secularity and religion as "a cultural binary," a zero-sum game where the religious subject must "choose a side: that of spirituality or of materiality; of Haredism or of secularity; of the 'great sages' or of the 'celebrities.'"<sup>71</sup> In contrast, the position of the "born-again" Israeli Haredi, as exemplified in the practices of the major Hasidic repentance movements Chabad and Bratslav, is far more intricate. Rather than be fully absorbed in their host communities, these Hasidim operate as "liminal personae," straddling both the religious and the secular worlds and embodying the resultant ambivalences.<sup>72</sup> Consequently, as Yehuda Goodman explains, their mode of repentance

creates new religious identities which are not secular but are also not Haredi in the common or familiar sense of "Haredism." The identity which is created and sustained by religious repentance agents—including organizations, rabbis, and various activists—is different from that of the secular Jew, and is geared towards, at least avowedly, negating secularity and "traditionalism" and bringing the repentants into the ultra-Orthodox fold. Nevertheless, these agents and repentants create in actuality new Haredi identities that manifest themselves in a [unique] worldview, religious ethos, leadership patterns and social activities. The identity displayed in religious repentance events is not that of becoming-Haredi. It expresses *ambivalence* that is derived from the particular situatedness of repentants, and even repentance facilitators, between secularity and Haredism. [...] The

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<sup>71</sup> Zicherman, *Black Blue-White*, 306.

<sup>72</sup> Shlomi Doron, *Shuttling Between Two Worlds: Coming to and Defecting from Ultra-Orthodox Judaism in Israeli Society* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2013), 54-55, 142-144.

target audience of these events [...] lives through conflicting, paradoxical, and ambivalent sequences of Jewish-Israeli identity.<sup>73</sup>

While the avowed rhetoric of religious repentants such as certain Chabad and Bratslav Hasidim is structured on “marking the ‘secular’ [Israeli-Jews] as ‘other’ for the purpose of negation,” their reality includes practices “that blur the boundaries between the established categories of ‘secular’ and ‘religious/Haredi.’”<sup>74</sup> This blurring, in turn, creates a *de facto* proximity to modern-liberal sensibilities that “softens” the repentants’ commitment to ultra-Orthodoxy’s “strict religion.”<sup>75</sup> As a result, in bringing the tales of Hasidic repentants to the screen, these films are able to render palpable and confront us with the ambivalences of living on the fault-line between the seemingly opposing forces of Israeli religion and secularity, and with the possible sites where such opposition may be mitigated through a Neo-Hasidic religiosity that is cognizant of modern definitions of reality and attempts to integrate itself into them.

As outlined in the previous chapter, *Ushpizin* follows a born-again Bratslav Hasid couple—Moshe and Malka—as they make preparations to celebrate the holiday of Sukkot. Moshe and Malka are experiencing financial difficulties, which add tension to a relationship already strained by the couple’s inability to conceive a child. As Sukkot approaches, however, their fates suddenly appear to improve—they receive a considerable sum of money by way of donation, and a friend even locates a seemingly abandoned Sukkah<sup>76</sup> for them to use during the holiday. Most auspicious in this happy turn of events is the arrival of two unexpected visitors—Eliyahu, Moshe’s friend from the pre-repentance days, and his partner in crime Yosef—who have escaped prison just in time to help Moshe and Malka perform the required task of hosting guests (*Ushpizin*) in their Sukkah. What seems fortunate at the outset, however, quickly turns out to be disastrous—the Sukkah, which was thought to have been abandoned, is shown to be someone’s actual property; and the *Ushpizin*, who were so happily welcomed into Moshe and Malka’s home, abuse their

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<sup>73</sup> Yehuda Goodman, “Religious Repentance and New Religious Identities in Israel of the early 2000s” [Hebrew], in *Hard to Believe: Rethinking Religion and Secularism in Israel*, ed. Aviad Kleinberg (Tel Aviv: Keter, 2004), 102-103 (my italics).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 129

<sup>75</sup> Asaf Sharabi, “‘Soft’ Religion and ‘Strict’ Religion: The Teshuva Movement in Israel” [Hebrew], in *Beyond Halakha: Secularism, Traditionalism and “New Age” Culture in Israel*, ed. Gideon Katz, Shalom Ratzabi, and Yaacov Yadgar (Sede Boqer: Ben Gurion Research Institute, 2014), 434-460. See also: Weinstock, *Uman*, 326-331, 337-340.

<sup>76</sup> A Sukkah is a temporary hut constructed especially for Sukkot. During the holiday, Jews sleep and dine in the Sukkah rather than in their permanent domiciles. They are also bound by law and tradition to welcome guests (*Ushpizin*) into their huts in a general spirit of hospitality.

hospitality by creating problems for their hosts, pitting the whole apartment building against them. Tensions rise until Eliyahu and Yosef cause a disturbance in the atrium of the building, which prompts residents to call the police, and Malka to go to her parents. In an attempt to appease his longtime friend, Eliyahu makes his “famous” vegetable salad and unknowingly destroys in the process an expensive Sukkot citron (*Etrog*) that Moshe bought with the donation money. This enrages Moshe, and he is able to contain his anger only through the performance of secluded prayer in the woods. Hitting rock bottom, his spirits are nevertheless finally elevated when, while dismantling his Sukkah, Malka arrives to let him know that she is carrying his child. The film ends in the celebration of the child’s *Bris*, to which Eliyahu and Yosef also arrive, bearing gifts.

*Ushpizin*’s various narrative twists and turns are set to the background of Me’ea Sheaarim, a Haredi neighborhood in Jerusalem, which in this context becomes a metaphor for Israel’s ultra-Orthodox society. At the hands of filmmakers Dar and Rand, this religious enclave is figured as an intricate web of alleyways, whose enclosedness contributes to the creation of a tightknit community bustling with activity. This sense of “living in close quarters” is most visibly manifested in the architecture of Moshe and Malka’s apartment building, a two-story structure with a large open-air atrium. Inside this building, the lives of the inhabitants interpenetrate each other, particularly in the shared courtyard that seems to inevitably force human interaction. This interaction may not always be devoid of friction, but the film seems to show that constant contact causes at worst, an opportunity for forgiveness, and at best, a chance for helpful cooperation. In this sense, the courtyard, and the neighborhood and world that surround it, do not function negatively along the lines of a Foucauldian panopticon, but rather positively, as a Hasidic court that affords its members protection and sustenance.

The landscape-as-court of *Ushpizin* creates an impression of religious insularity, which is emphasized by the filmmakers’ choice to rarely present geographical spaces that are associated with Israeli secularity. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Peleg argues for a definition of the film as essentially “a story about an ‘eternal’ community, one that exists in a timeless zone of religious rituals and practices, disconnected from historical time in any meaningful way.”<sup>77</sup> But while this argument may have merit in relation to the film’s spatial organization, its explanatory power seems limited when it comes to discussing narrative action. Thus, rather than detach itself from the contemporary realities of religious life into “a timeless zone,” this film seems cognizant of the

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<sup>77</sup> Peleg, “New Holy Community,” 79.



timely challenges of maintaining insularity within a largely modern-secular national setting, and wishes to dramatize and potentially resolve them through the intrusion of Eliyahu and Yosef into Moshe and Malka's courtyard. In this sense, though *Ushpizin* does aim to "to paint a more positive picture of [the ultra-Orthodox] community for a generally hostile secular Israeli public," this effort does not come necessarily at the price of pure escapism. Rather, as much as the Hasidic tale is not as socially naïve as Peleg would have us believe, so is this narrative not as "neat and attractive"<sup>78</sup> as his argument makes it out to be, exploring real-life social conflicts with great nuance rather than suppressing them completely.

At face value, the film seems to present social tensions between secularism and Judaism in the Manichean dialectic of evil vs. good that undergirds mainline ultra-Orthodox ideology, yet a closer reading reveals a much more complex and equivocal understanding of these tensions' underlying conditions. The representation of physical space, for one, includes only two distinctly secular sites—Eliyahu and Yosef's prison and a Jerusalem restaurant where they dine. This choice, in turn, seems to allow the reduction of the secular landscape to the categories of criminality and leisure that are vulnerable to moralism and dismissal. Yet in fact these sites are not necessarily presented in a negative light. Thus, we are never given glimpses of the prison from within and are therefore relieved from experiencing the often brutal conditions of imprisonment; instead, what we do experience is the beautiful desert landscape that surrounds the prison, and which lends beauty and even sanctity to this secular site. Concurrently, the restaurant is not a place of debauchery or even wastefulness, but rather is a modest establishment whose sole purpose is to answer basic nutritional needs. As such, it is "kosher" enough to make it possible for a Bratslav Hasid to come in and ask Eliyahu for donation to religious charities. Similarly, the characterization of main secular figures also seems to feature equivocation and nuance, even as these are couched within an explicit binary structure of reference. Thus, at the outset these characters are clearly shown to be a disruptive force within the peaceful ultra-Orthodox neighborhood—a disturbance that is associated with their social standing as criminals. Eliyahu Scorpio, as Thomas Hoffman describes him, is "eponymously scheming, mistrusting, acrid, and malicious," and is most active in "attempts to cynically poison the holiday as well as the relationship between Moshe and Malkah." In this respect, he is the exact opposite of his namesake, the prophet Elijah, who "in Talmudic and Hassidic literature is also the consummate unexpected guest, usually bringing good

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 78.

tidings or moralistic advice.” Though not always as belligerent, Eliyahu’s partner-in-crime Yosef is also an unsavory character in principle: he “serves manifestly as the fool foil to the sly and scheming Scorpio,” and therefore raises difficulty at times even without knowing, as when “he mistakes the ritual citron for a lemon and gives it to Scorpio to cut up into the salad.”<sup>79</sup> These negative traits, however, are counterbalanced by positive and redeemable features, even if those take time in revealing themselves: thus, Eliyahu’s antics seem ultimately to be motivated by a mistrust of Moshe’s intentions, and when the latter becomes hurt by his actions, he attempts to offer reconciliatory gestures; and Yosef, in his childlike demeanor, often exhibits an openness to Moshe and Malka’s lifestyle that Eliyahu lacks, and at times mitigates his friend’s belligerency out of respect for their hosts. Accordingly, these characters, like the spaces that are most related to them, seem to render the film’s position on Israeli secularity and its attendant modern valuations as multivalent rather than monolithically damning or even demonizing.

Nor is the religious community presented in one-dimensional terms. Spatially, the film does present us with a human landscape that is colorful and vibrant, filled with alluring images that render it appealing to the eye. At the same time, it also presents us with images of abject poverty that collapse the spiritual to base needs, and highlight the ways in which capitalist mentality and practices pervade the lived realities of religious characters (for example, in the business of selling high-priced citrons, the constant panhandling for charity money [*Tzdaka*], and the obsession with private property and ownership of Sukkahs).<sup>80</sup> Indeed, of the various religious characters, only one—Moshe’s rabbi—seems a true Tsaddik, “a holy man who turns nights into days immersed in study and prayer.”<sup>81</sup> Other characters are nevertheless flawed: for example, the Hasid Ben Baruch, who despite his good natured and loving personality, is guilty of neglect in not discovering the true proprietary condition of the Sukkah he takes for Moshe; or the Hasid Gabai, owner of the Sukkah, who does forgive Ben Baruch and Moshe for their “crime,” but with a grudge that seems excessive in light of the fact that he has another newer Sukkah of his own. And finally, the residents of Moshe and Malka’s building are often characterized as intolerant and cantankerous in a manner that is not entirely justified by the intrusion of secular Jews into their insular

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<sup>79</sup> Thomas Hoffman, “Reparation, Forgiveness, and Redemption in a Sukkoth Parable: Movie Review of *Ushpizin*,” *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 19 (2010): 187-188.

<sup>80</sup> Interestingly, in one deleted scene, the film shows Moshe haggling with a small Hasid boy about the exuberant price of branches to be used for roofing his Sukkah.

<sup>81</sup> Ginsburg, “Love in Search,” 373.

community. It therefore stands to reason that at the aforementioned climactic moment of his existential crisis, when Moshe cries to God for help, this act is performed outside of the neighborhood's limits, in a bucolic setting that connotes purity over and against the impurity of the community's ghettoized existence.

Indeed, it is this fiction of the necessity and merits of complete insularity that the film subtly attempts to critique. The entrance of secular Jews into the religious community exposes the desire of Hasidim to use insularity so as to fortify a position of moral superiority over modern secularism. Accordingly, at the instances when Eliyahu and Yosef collide with the residents of Moshe and Malka's building, their similarities become even more noticeable than their differences. For example, close to the end of the film the two escaped prisoners decide to have a party in the middle of the courtyard. They fire up the grill, put their music on in full volume, and start drinking and dancing. The residents shout at them to stop, and one Bratslav Hasid in particular gets so riled up that he calls out "animals" to their faces. Another resident intervenes and asks the Hasid to temper his anger, offering to speak with Yosef and Eliyahu more politely so as to appease them; but the two criminals at that point are far too intoxicated and energized to respond to such subtle pleas. Malka descends down the stairs and attempts to negotiate between the factions, but she quickly finds herself shouting both at the two "guests" and at the indigent neighbors. As the spirits gradually run higher, Yosef draws out a meat skewer, and Malka, in retaliation, grabs one too and forces him and Eliyahu to cease their disturbance. Though stopping before any violence was perpetrated, the altercation lasts long enough to undermine unequivocal claims to Hasidic moral superiority. It may be true to say that the Hasidim's indignation was provoked, and that some of them even wanted to resolve the clash peacefully. But at the moment of altercation, when push came to shove quite literally, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the behavior of religious and secular Jews. As one of the residents tells another, after the latter blames Yosef and Eliyahu for being blasphemous—"actually, it is you who are committing blasphemy."

In this sense, *Ushpizin*—as a Hasidic tale about "guests"—does not wish to escape the conflict between secularity and religion; rather, this conflict is seen as not only unavoidable, but also necessary for the process of Judaic self-introspection. Such self-introspection is made possible due to an inversion in the usual power relations of the secular-religious conflict—i.e., in this film, we are not given the traditional image of a religious minority that intrudes upon a secular majority, but rather the opposite vision wherein a secular minority intrudes upon a religious majority. This

position of strength defuses the sense of persecution that fuels ultra-Orthodoxy's binary mindset, forcing a more elaborate contemplation of the relationship between Haredi and non-Haredi Israelis, while containing it within the protective limits of an internal religious drama. The film's spatial organization supports such an understanding. In one scene, for example, Yosef, Eliyahu, and Moshe are seen celebrating inside the Sukkah. They drink too much, and Eliyahu provokes Moshe's ire; the two exchange words, but the fight culminates in a warm embrace and subsequent singing and merriment. The scene then ends with residents of the building, standing outside of the Sukkah and looking at it with a bewildered gaze. The position of religious Jews standing outside the Sukkah marks its walls as a physical barrier between the Judaic and secular worlds. But such separation is not clear-cut, for if the apartment building acts as microcosm of religious life, then like the Sukkah that is found within the atrium, so is the presence of secularity understood as being *within* religion, as an integral part of Judaic existence rather than a foreign intrusion. In this telling moment, then, the bewilderment seems motivated by a frightening realization on the part of religious Jews that these secular brethren are perhaps *like us*—perhaps *part of us*.

It is through this particular process of recognition, where religious Israelis acknowledge a shared ground of human complexity with secular Israelis, that religious repentants like Moshe and Malka play a decisive role. As “liminal personae” who have made the transition from the secular to the religious world, they are acutely aware of the actual blurring of the boundaries between traditional-religious and modern-secular perspectives, even if their avowed rhetoric often places them in a binary discursive structure. Their existence, in fact, is determined by constant struggles to negotiate such ambivalence within social reality. *Ushpizin* seems to say that the self-consciousness that emerges out of such struggles—that which yields an understanding of religion and secularity as kindred in their underlying human complexity, or even as being implicated in one another—is crucial for Israeli Judaism's coming to terms with the modern ethos of Israeli society. Moshe and Malka, who carry secularity into their religious existence, and who therefore epitomize the complexity that is shared by both religious and secular Israelis, are thus the only ones who can offer keys for the film's religious community to overcome its bewilderment. Predictably, they are also the principle characters shown to be moving between the Sukkah and the surrounding atrium and building. In this spatial sense, they become mediators, offering their religiosity as possible proof that certain social chasms may not be as deep as to prevent their bridging.

*God's Neighbors* proposes a similar interrogation of the secular-religious conflict, though through a different cultural setting and inflection. As noted in the previous chapter, the film centers on the figure of Avi, a born-again Bratslav Hasid, who together with his two repentant friends Kobi and Yaniv, enforce religious observance upon the residents of his urban working-class neighborhood. During their various run-ins with Halakha violators, Avi and his friends meet Miri, who becomes a target for harassment as a result of her "immodest" attire. The young Hasid protagonist quickly discovers that he has feelings for Miri, and begins courting her, to the great chagrin of his vigilante squad mates. The budding romance causes a rift between the friends. Consequently, Avi is not present when Kobi is stabbed by two Palestinians amidst a turf war altercation. Struck by remorse, he agrees to join some local gangsters on a revenge spree into Jaffa. At the height of this rampage, however, he is faced with the choice of shooting a Palestinian local, and in spite of his friends' urging, decides not to. This decision, in turn, leads him at the film's conclusion to forgo the path of violence and build a loving relationship with Miri instead.

As opposed to *Ushpizin*, the plot of *God's Neighbors* is not set to an isolated religious sector. Rather, the city of Bat Yam, where Yaish's film takes place, is characterized by a great diversity in social identities, which results in an atmosphere of heightened conflict. This conflicted setting is not evaded through escapism but engaged directly from the film's first scene, which shows Avi and his posse attacking a group of young Russian Israelis after the latter were playing loud music in defiance of the laws of the Sabbath. The distinction between the Mizrahi members of the modesty squad and their Russian adversaries is clearly meant to evoke a well-known religious difference between their respective ethnic communities: namely, that Mizrahim are often thought to have an affinity to Judaism to varying degrees, while many Russians are seen as not having a strong bond to Judaism, the result of having been born of non-Jewish mothers and subsequently discriminated upon by Israel's religious establishment. Yet in its presentation of the fight, the film seems intent on fleshing out its nuances rather than reducing it to some mythical Manichean scheme. Thus, as much as the two groups emerge as different in the altercation, they also disclose their similarity in sharing a penchant for violence, and hence also correspondingly (and in the case of Avi's squad, ironically) breaking the taboo of Sabbath rest. This similarity is given visual poignancy in the second altercation scene between Avi's squad and young Russian-Israelis. Here, the catalyst for conflict is graffiti that the Russians plaster over a neighborhood wall already occupied by Bratslav inscriptions. The difference in content—between the Bratslavs'

“Nachman of Uman” and the Russians’ “without religious Jews there won’t be any bombings”—serves to illustrate a dissonance between Judaic and non-Judaic perspectives on the sanctity of religion and religious understanding. Yet this explicit dissimilarity also obscures a more fundamental proximity in the mode of expression—i.e., both parties, Russians and Mizrahi Bratslav Hasidim alike, take over public space and use it forcibly to assert their supposed cultural uniqueness. With this in mind, it is thus unsurprising that the new Russian graffiti has been almost superimposed on the previous Bratslav one—an indication that the two are, in fact, one and the same.

Such proximity is clearly heightened when Avi and his friends attack people of their own ethnic constituency, for example a Mizrahi street vendor of pornographic DVDs or a Mizrahi hairstylist who does not close his shop upon the Sabbath’s entrance. Here the similarity in accents and mannerisms only accentuates the closeness in violent actions and re-actions of both parties. Yet the analogy between religious and secular Israelis does not only extend to negative qualities, but also to positive ones. In this respect, like *Ushpizin*, Yaish’s film attempts to provide a glimpse into a shared human complexity—a coincidence of both admirable and non-admirable traits—between the two sides of the secular-religious divide. This dynamic appears most clearly in Avi and Miri’s relationship. A common proclivity for aggression seems to draw these two potential lovers apart: Avi, with his fierce allegiance to modesty laws, clearly threatens Miri’s well-being at first; but she is also prone to aggressive actions, as when she confronts Avi after hearing that he defaced the shop window of the hairstylist, her uncle. Yet while these disputes color the two characters negatively (though perhaps not to the same degree), they are countermanded by acts of compassion and forgiveness that redeem them both. One telling example of this takes place early on in the film: Miri discovers a kitten trapped under the hood of a parked car, and fearing for its well-being, leaves a note cautioning the car’s owner; Avi subsequently spots the note, rescues the cat and gives it to Miri as a gift of reconciliation for his past wrongdoings. The caring kindness with which both handle the kitten indicates a shared ability to act not only in an aggressive and destructive manner. Indeed, the name which they choose for the kitten—“Little Panther”—seems to succinctly crystalize the basic complexity they both occupy: their constant oscillation between soft and rough, embracing and attacking.

Yet out of the two, and arguably out of all the characters in Yaish’s film, it is Avi who seems to most acutely sense this shared ground, and the need to negotiate the ambivalences that

arise when it is juxtaposed with a strictly binary understanding of traditional/religious-modern/secular relations. This awareness seems in large part to derive from his position as a religious repentant, which places him at the meeting point of secular and religious social lives. His lifestyle clearly reflects an oscillation between these lives, encompassing activities that are exclusively religious with those that are not: thus, in one scene we see him place *Tefillin*<sup>82</sup> and pray, while in another he is shown hitting a punching bag with great ferocity; in one scene we see him attending a Judaism class at his local synagogue, while in another he is shown smoking pot and composing electro-trance music on his home desktop. Such movements and conjunctions are “wilder” than those of religious repentants Moshe and Malka in *Ushpizin*, whose life is largely “sheltered” from constant friction between religion and secularity. Avi does not enjoy such “luxuries,” and his repentant religiosity therefore appears far more fluid and more adapt in addressing this friction. This flexibility is the reason why Peleg would have us see him as “an Israeli Everyman;”<sup>83</sup> yet if such a stature applies to Avi, it is not because he is *like every other Israeli*, but because he is uniquely obliged to stand at the nexus of seemingly opposing forces that encompass *the entirety of Israeli society*. Importantly, the film seems to stress that such obligation is not taken up in a similar way by all religious repentants. Yaniv and Koby, for example, choose to repress a shared complexity and deny certain avenues of behavioral negotiation for the sake of glorifying oppositional (and destructive) stances. Only Avi is able to avoid such a fate, which is why he stops Yaniv and Koby from beating down the Russian kids responsible for the graffiti, arguing that “they are merely kids.” Thus, it seems that for *God’s Neighbors*, a true religiosity, which is able to adjust religion to a modern-secular outlook, should not be seen as a necessary phenomenon, but one which must be willed into existence through consciousness to a shared ground, and sustained through continuous commitment to work within the ambivalences that such consciousness engenders.

*Magic Men* pursues a similar interest in the role of the repentant within the religious-secular tension, yet unlike *Ushpizin* and *God’s Neighbors*, its protagonist is not a born-again Hasid but a secular Israeli. Avraham, who escaped Greece during WWII and settled in Israel, has just lost his wife. Following the funeral, he consents to go on a trip to the Greek town of Arta to represent his

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<sup>82</sup> “Tefillin” is the collective name for two black leather boxes containing scrolls, which are donned—one on the arm, the other on the head—during weekday morning prayers.

<sup>83</sup> Peleg, “New Holy Community,” 79.

municipality in a “twin cities” celebration ceremony. Upon arriving there, he discovers to his great chagrin that his estranged son Yehuda, a Chabad Hasid with whom he had no relations since the latter’s repentance process, was asked by the mayor to accompany him on the visit. Rather than follow the prescribed itinerary, Avraham evades Yehuda, and attempts to locate an old magician friend who saved his life during the war. His search leads him to meet Maria, a prostitute, who agrees to help him. The demands of the visit get in the way, however, and Avraham is forced to go with Yehuda and their chauffer to Arta. On the way, he quarrels with the chauffer and the latter leaves the two passengers on the side of the road. Maria helps them to get to the ceremony, but ultimately departs, partly due to Yehuda’s objection to her relationship with Avraham. Maria’s departure causes a further strain on the relationship between father and son, and the two have a fight, only to reconcile later at a wedding party that both of them attend uninvited. Following that, Avraham and Yehuda join forces and locate the long lost friend, now a nonresponsive resident of a retirement home. They sneak him out and deliver him to his son with a sum of money that would allow for his continued home care. While looking at old photos, however, they come to realize that this old man is not, in fact, Avraham’s friend. They leave him with his offspring and embark on the journey back to Thessaloniki. As it gets dark, they stop on the wayside and engage in a candid conversation, during which the son receives a message that his wife delivered a baby girl. Avraham announces that he will visit the infant and the rest of Yehuda’s children, and the two go to sleep. The following morning, Yehuda wakes up to discover that his father has passed away. He then accompanies Avraham’s body to Israel, and recites the Kaddish prayer over his grave.

Through its detailed depiction of the conflict between Avraham and Yehuda, *Magic Men* is able to trace the effects of religious repentance on a secular family more closely than the other films discussed herein. Religious repentants, as Shlomi Doron explains, often “experience tension and crisis in dealing with their parents, because their incorporation into the Haredi world (as opposed to the Masorti religious world where the disconnect is not as harsh) is contingent on their willingness to shed their secular past.”<sup>84</sup> Within such cases of repentance, in turn, it is subsequently “the father of the secular family who attempts to maintain contact with his son and take part in his process of repentance, while the mother usually shows resentment.”<sup>85</sup> In *Magic Men*, however, the father is the one who actually severs relations with his son, even as the mother continues to visit

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<sup>84</sup> Doron, *Shuttling Between Two Worlds*, 125.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.



him monthly. The reason for the break is ostensibly Yehuda's choice to inform on his father, who opened his butcher shop for business on the Sabbath even as it carried a "Kosher Certificate." Yet it is Avraham's disdain for religion that seems to be the decisive factor in the lingering feud. This disdain emerges, for example, when he denies his son the right to say Kaddish over his mother's gravesite at the beginning of the film. It also appears when, on the drive to Arta, he protests when Yehuda makes the chauffeur stop to rest until the passing of the Sabbath, and then proceeds to eat non-kosher food during the Friday meal. So ferocious is Avraham's contempt, that it seems to be motivated not only by an act of filial betrayal, but by the way in which this act was undertaken—the very choice of abandoning the world of secularity for that of religion.

The film's inner-familial religious-secular conflict is played out largely away from its primary geographical landscape of Israel. In this, *Magic Men* follows the Hasidic tale's use of a physical journey to a faraway land as means of facilitating change in the characters' lives and perceptions. The trip to Greece serves to isolate Avraham and Yehuda from the cultural context that places further pressure upon their conflicting positions and circumscribes any effort of reconciliation. It also provides challenges and obstacles through which the characters are given opportunity to reappraise their relationship. Yet unlike many Hasidic tales, where the "faraway land" is foreign so as to mark the return to the land of origin as "a coming home," here the journey takes the protagonists to a more familiar location. Greece, in this respect, is not an unfamiliar territory, but one which is closely connected to the characters' past—to the wartime experiences of Avraham, which he attempts to retrace, and to the traditions and stories that were shared with the infant Yehuda, and whose memory the Greek landscapes help evoke. As a result, *Magic Men* seems to mark the past—a distant past, so distant that it seems virtually foreign—as a site that needs to be recuperated so that father and son, secularism and religion, may be able to come together.

Importantly, the past in this film is marked by a traumatic break with ramifications on the question of religious affiliation. Between the two main characters, this moment may have been that of Yehuda's informing on Avraham's "non-kosher" business practices. Yet such betrayal is but a reverberation of an earlier moment of trauma, Avraham's wartime travails and subsequent displacement, which caused him to neither visit Greece nor speak Greek for decades. If Avraham is fundamentally anti-religious, it is perhaps because this watershed period in Jewish history—World War II and the Holocaust—made him question the need and legitimacy of Judaism. In this

respect, his attitude is related to a broader Jewish disillusion of religion in the aftermath of WWII, which was channeled into mainstream Israeli secular-Zionism's not-so-tacit resentment of religious Jews during the nation's founding stages. Thus envisaged, *Magic Men* seems to say that for this resentment to be appeased, one must go further back than the past moment of trauma, and reclaim a time where perspectival oppositions were not so pronounced. In this sense, Avraham's and Yehuda's recuperation of the Greek past is also a recuperation of childhood as the period before the familial feud. Avraham's search for his long lost friend allows him to re-experience the joys of his young self, be it love (for Maria) or magic. It also allows him to regain his place as a father and allow room for his son to relive his childhood as well. This maneuver is manifested in a pivotal scene where Avraham searches for Yehuda after leaving him on the side of the road, and discovers that the latter has joined a wedding party. The merry Yehuda invites Avraham to join in the festivities, and the two lock hands in dance. Later, after a night of immoderate drinking, we see Avraham washing an intoxicated Yehuda in the bathtub and then tucking him in. This moment of regression to infancy then facilitates for Yehuda a more decisive reclaiming of his earlier days, as when he subsequently joins his father in an impromptu magic performance and rehearses tricks they did together in their distant past.

This rejoinder, it should be noted, does not seem to necessitate an agreement on matters of devotion. Indeed, what becomes apparent through the evolving relationship between father and son is not so much a familial similarity—which is often obscured by a dissimilarity in physical appearance and mannerism—but rather a shared capacity for aggression and compassion, a common human complexity that needs to be surfaced over and against perspectival differences for a reunion to take place. It is in this surfacing that Yehuda takes on a decisive role. He does not frame his desire to reunite with Avraham as geared towards religious proselytizing, but rather as motivated by a more human-relational need to show *Kvod Av*—respect for the father. By sidestepping doctrinal concerns, he is then able to re-conceptualize their divide as bridgeable rather than not, and pave the way for a reclaiming of their past bonds. His decisive contribution to this process is signaled symbolically during the aforementioned wedding scene, where it is he who invites Avraham to join the communal dance, and by implication—to bridge the physical and mental distances that separate them. Yehuda is able to perform this task, the film seems to say, because as a born-again Chabad Hasid who maintains secular contacts through his work as a rap musician, he has acquired a measure of sensitivity to conflicting positions and an ability to locate

common grounds from which to negotiate them. From this liminal position, Yehuda is not only able to oscillate between the religious-traditional and modern-secular worlds but inspire Avraham to do the same—to imagine a form of existence in which he comes close to the son’s position, close enough to acknowledge and take part in his observant family life without his secular inclinations suffering for it. This transformation, however, is not achieved easily or without cost; rather, *Magic Men* seems to argue that the task of facing the ambivalence that ensues when attempting to mediate oppositional perspectives is a difficult one, which can result in alienation, strife, and even death. As such, it is far less confident than the other aforementioned films in the possibility of achieving a workable religiosity that would bring religion and secularity to some form of cohabitation.

Like *Ushpizin* and *God’s Neighbors*, *Magic Men* is attuned to the subtleties of social conflicts, and through this attunement, is able to single out a common ground—a shared human complexity—that underlies the religious-secular divide. Yet this shared ground is only the basic condition for creating an integrative vision, a religiosity that may overcome perspectival differences between traditional Judaism and modern secularity. So as to achieve social integration, the films seem to say, it is necessary to not only locate a shared ground but to mine it for emotional elements that can effect a reconciliation. This emphasis on emotional life is arguably derived from Hasidic lore, whose interest in personal piety and devotion-via-worldly-activities led it to valorize the role of the affective in religious existence. Neo-Hasidism subsequently foregrounded this dimension of Hasidic culture in an effort to define the latter in strictly affective terms.<sup>86</sup> These terms not only appealed to the Romanticist impulse of Neo-Hasidic thinking, but also helped it imagine “the effective manifestation of the Jewish identity as pure feeling, i.e., as liberated from the bonds of ideational or halakhic dogma and centered on an internal emotional connection to the soul.”<sup>87</sup> This focusing of religious identity on emotion served as a catalyst for assimilation since it allowed Jews to be “Jewish” but without those Judaic rites and laws that made them clearly distinguishable from members of their host cultures. Furthermore, for some Neo-Hasidic thinkers, Hasidic emotion became less a marker of Jewish uniqueness than a crystallization of universal feelings, thereby making it an experiential bridge between European Jews and gentiles. It is this potential for bridging that the aforementioned three films attempt to draw out in the context of the

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<sup>86</sup> Ross, *Beloved-Despised*, 118.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

relationship between traditional-religious and modern-secular postures in Israel's sociocultural context.

In showcasing emotion's ability to overcome perspectival divides, love is given particular attention as the integrative feeling *per excellence*. The law in *Ushpizin* is, as Ginsburg puts it, "not the 'learned' legal one, but the Law of Love."<sup>88</sup> Though their relationship is far from perfect, Moshe and Malka love each other dearly, and this love is depicted as the bond which helps them overcome the adversities of poverty and childlessness. Additionally, this capacity for love is what undergirds their hospitality towards Eliyahu and Yosef, whose graciousness is put to the test on numerous occasions, and what draws out a similar capacity in these guests, and permits them to integrate into the religious community, as symbolized in their arrival at the Bris ceremony during the film's dénouement. One can also draw parallels between these *Ushpizin* and Avi, the protagonist of *God's Neighbors*, who at face value seems not much more than a neighborhood thug but at heart is abundant with love. Like with Moshe and Malka, this love is first manifested within the Judaic constituency—between Avi and his friends Yaniv and Kobi. Such camaraderie, forged in violence, seems to be stronger than blood; indeed, the three form a family cell that is marked by extreme loyalty, to the extent that when Avi decides to forge his own path, it is deemed by Kobi as a betrayal. Yet the love that truly allows Avi to transcend the chasm which separates him from secularity is the one he has for Miri. Indeed, as Peleg explains, when Avi falls for Miri, he "is transformed by his love into a kinder and less vengeful religious person."<sup>89</sup> This transformation, in turn, allows for their subsequent match, in spite of initially occupying opposing positions on the matter of religion. In *Magic Men*, differences in religious perspective precipitated a decline in familial love between father and son. Of the two characters, it seems that the father is the one most devoid of loving feelings. Avraham is incapable of showing love towards his son, has cut himself off from his grandchildren, and even with his wife, as the film's opening scene clearly shows, he is incapable of anything more than apathy. The meeting of Maria, however, opens up for him an avenue for love—one which seems less sexual than humanistic, founded on a proximity of national culture (Greek) and secular outlook. On the basis of this love, Avraham is ultimately capable of responding to Yehuda's affection, and traverse the distance once created as a result of religious observance and lack thereof.

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<sup>88</sup> Ginsburg, "Love in Search," 374.

<sup>89</sup> Peleg, "New Holy Community," 65.

The religious repentants' affective capacity to love is associated, in turn, with their musical inclinations. Music was a very important ingredient of Hasidic lore, and Hasidic tales often featured musicians and musical settings as part of their narratives. This emphasis often served as means of sustaining congregational integrity—as in Bratslav Hasidism where, according to Wiskind-Elper, “music and the joy it arouses [...] became, in the hands of the tsaddik, a potent weapon against the social and economic hardships that weighed on his community.”<sup>90</sup> More profoundly, however, music became emblematic of the desired form of “worldly” devotion, a piety that arrives in the interaction between inner life and everyday reality. This definition appealed to Neo-Hasidic storytellers and thinkers, who used it in their creations so as to support an emotion-centered religiosity, with its inherent potential for integration between the Judaic and non-Judaic worlds.<sup>91</sup> The aforementioned films pick up on this Neo-Hasidic understanding of music as an emotional medium that facilitates integration in various ways. *Ushpizin* does not feature any musician characters prominently (even though the actor and co-creator Shuli Rand is also a singer of great repute within Israel's religious sector). A few sequences, however, do include a symbolic use of music that is worth noting. In an early scene, for instance, a depressed Moshe encounters a “Bratslav van,” which drives through his neighborhood blasting rock music while surrounded by dancing Hasidim; and later, Malka is seen happily singing along to the words of a devotional pop song (by the born-again Bratslav singer Adi Ran), before she lets Moshe know of the anonymous donation that was given to them. In both cases, the music combines Judaic content and popular tunes in a manner that speaks to its creative ability to bridge the worlds of religion and secularity. This ability is then manifested in an explicit way when in the final Bris scene, we see Moshe and his former Ushpizin locking eyes while another Adi Ran religious pop song is playing in the background; the music here seems to both capture and amplify the affectionate connection that has developed between these three characters, and projects it symbolically, through its association of sacred words and profane music, onto the greater plane of religious-secular relationships.<sup>92</sup> *God's*

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<sup>90</sup> Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 196-197.

<sup>91</sup> Ross, *Beloved-Despised*, 500-501.

<sup>92</sup> Tellingly, a deleted scene reveals in a more complex way the ambivalence that undergirds this integrative vision of music. During this sequence, which takes place in the Sukkah, Malka is reciting words of scripture, while Eliyahu and Yosef start singing a popular tune by a superstar of the Mizrahi “Mediterranean” music genre, Avihu Medina. Malka is clearly upset by the guests' singing, since it is seen as a profane interference into her sacred praying. But this separation between religion and secularity, prayer and music, is then complicated by the fact that the song's lyrics come from Psalms, thereby marking it as a vehicle for proximity rather than distance. Accordingly, this scene shows the slipperiness of music's promise of bringing religion and secularity together, and the fear that

*Neighbors* also functions in the same way. Avi is a musician who spends much of his time preparing religious Trance tunes. Indeed, the film shows the actual preparation of one track, and the way in which Avi incorporates not only religious lyrics, but also the sound of the Shofar, into what would otherwise be deemed secular electronic music. This tune, in turn, is not only used as a conduit of emotional bonding between himself, Kobi, and Yaniv—i.e., as means of forging a religious community; rather, Avi gives it to his friend and advisor, the driver of a “Bratslav van,” who promises to use it to make secular “Tel-Avivians” dance. Such is also the goal of *Magic Men*’s Yehuda, who is shown to be a prominent Hasidic singer. His music, as can be understood from a video that is incorporated in the film, deploys evangelical messages through a rap style. In this sense, like the protagonists of the other two films, he makes an attempt to bridge the gap between the profane and the sacred for the benefit of religious and secular audiences. Yet unlike the other films, and in keeping with the filmmakers’ secular orientation, here the musician is less committed to the traditional frameworks of Judaism, as indicated in the fact that his songs are mostly sung in English rather than in (holy) Hebrew. This inclination is most noticeable in a scene which shows Yehuda and Maria in a hospital waiting room, while Avraham is being treated for a fainting spell. Though occupying seemingly opposite positions—Yehuda, the consummate Jew, and Maria, the prostitute—they succeed in creating an intimate bond. The bonding is made possible through recognition of both Yehuda and Maria’s similar love for their children, and is then sealed musically when the former shows the latter how to play on his didgeridoo (an aboriginal instrument). Like in the other films, this scene reveals music as a platform of expressing emotion, which can appeal to a common affective capacity and therefore realize the possibility of communion between religious and secular individuals. In this instance, however, the filmmakers did not find a need to symbolically express this communion through the meeting of Judaic lyrics and non-Judaic musical style; in actuality, the marginalizing of religious content to the periphery (in the form of a lonely Chabad sticker on the didgeridoo’s body) appears as the condition for enhancing the integrative function of music’s emotionality.

Related to music, the films’ central repentant characters are therefore marked as having an a priori emotional capacity, which in the context of a relatively loose Judaic religiosity, allows

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if allowances are made for secular culture, even if only on the level of musical style, then the religious content would be compromised. The scene’s excision, in turn, seems geared towards denying this fear, while at the same time legitimizing Bratslav music—with its affiliation to the scripturalist ultra-Orthodoxy—over Mizrahi music—with its associations to the more lax religious form of Masortiut.

them to bypass doctrinal distinctions and achieve a loving communion with the secular world. Yet this love is not self-activated so much as prompted by a feminine presence. Thus, to the extent that Moshe is the protagonist of *Ushpizin*, his turn towards love is clearly made possible through his emotional commitment to his wife Malka; she curbs his isolationist, depressive, and even violent tendencies, and draws out his affection and consequent compassion and forgiveness. Miri's love to Avi, as previously noted, also makes it possible for him to feel love not only to her, but also to his others—for example the Russian vandals, to whom he refers affectionately as “kids” while his friends attempt to thrash them senselessly. Maria's role in *Magic Men* is also to serve as such a facilitator. During the aforementioned conversation, she is the one who brings out and legitimizes Yehuda's love by stating that his attempts at making amends were not lost on Avraham, much in the same way that she brought out Avraham's love by offering to help on his search for the long lost friend; and appropriately, in the next scene she departs their company, having built the emotional foundation for their subsequent communion. Such images of womanhood thus situate the feminine as the catalyst of integration, in a manner that reflects not only the tenets of Romantic drama, but also many Hasidic tales such as those of R. Nachman, which foregrounded the role of women—as representatives of the female aspect of divinity (Shekhina)—in achieving “an awesome reconciliation, a dramatization of the mystical union between cosmic masculine and feminine valences.”<sup>93</sup>

Importantly, if female love allows the religious repentant to move beyond Judaism towards its seeming opposites, this movement is not only confined to Jewish borders. In fact, only the most stringently Judaic of the three films—*Ushpizin*—confines its integrative vision to that of secular and religious Israeli-Jews. *God's Neighbors*, on the other hand, expands integration so as to include Palestinian Arabs. Peleg rightfully points out that the film does not devote nearly as much time to deal with the Arab-Jewish divide as it does with that between secular and religious Jews. Yet his conclusion that the Arab presence therefore “constitutes a minor and insignificant part” of the film, an element that needs to be briefly addressed only for the purpose of its subsequent suppressing, begs some qualification. Pace Peleg, it could be argued that the placement of the key symbolic

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<sup>93</sup> Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 103. The question of whether this role actually provides agency to women remains open. In the context of R. Nachman's thirteen tales, Ora Wiskind-Elper, for one, argues against the possibilities that their image of womanhood “is paternalistic, stereotypical, sexist, or ‘gynofocused’” (103-104), claiming instead that it represents “the evolution of centuries of Jewish thought on the supremacy of femaleness” (109).

moment of the Arab-Jewish conflict—Avi’s decision not to shoot the Palestinian during his Yaffo raid—as the film’s climax speaks to the significance given by the filmmaker to departing the boundaries of Jewish-Israeli communion. To accept this conclusion, in turn, is to also recognize that the early-on presence of “Arab gang members [...] driving occasionally by the kiosk where Avi and his mates hang out and play backgammon” is not merely a rhetorical foreshadowing, a “Chekhovian gun.”<sup>94</sup> Rather, the film seems intent on showing the similarities between the behavior of these gang members and that of Avi’s modesty squad, and using it as indication for a shared ground of human complexity that may cause their future cooperation to occur. For that cooperation to take place, however, the affective quality that is to be drawn out from this shared ground must be inclusive and integrative rather than exclusive and alienating. This quality, as previously noted, is introduced through Avi’s acceptance of love by way of his relationship with Miri. By not firing at the Palestinian, then, Avi is tacitly offering the merger of secular and religious Jews that has been effected through his romantic relationship as the basis for a future integration between Jews and Arabs. This offer is not without its caveats, since it implies a Jewish-Judaic base for integration, wherein Jewishness is imagined—in a Buberian way—as an affective universal. Yet even if such hidden conditions are ultimately disavowed, this climactic moment still seems to constitute a nuanced attempt at confronting the contemporary realities of the Jewish-Arab divide, rather than simply, in Peleg’s words, “an attempt to suspend ‘Zionist’ historical time and return, at least partly or temporarily, to mythological, religious Jewish time.”<sup>95</sup>

*Magic Men* presents an even bolder attempt at extending a model of affective integration and reconciliation beyond the Israeli secular-religious conflict. Here the filmmakers return to the most prominent tension of the Hasidic and Neo-Hasidic tale—that of diaspora life and the conflict between European Jews and Christians. This tension is made visible in one short scene which shows Avraham traveling alone on a Thessaloniki bus. On the bus he encounters a group of delinquents whose tattoos and dress indicate their support of the Greek fascist-Christian party Golden Dawn. In this setting, both sides refuse to commence in conversation, and instead perform acts that mark their defiance of and contempt for each other—the gang members with painting fascist insignia on the bus walls, and Avraham with using an obscene hand gesture. Yet if this moment seems to reveal an inability to communicate, it is not strong enough to rule out an

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<sup>94</sup> Peleg, “New Holy Community,” 77.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.



integrative gesture. Rather, Avraham and Maria's relationship proves that such a gesture is possible, if one is willing to trade in national and religious differences for supposed affective universals. Indeed, the film appears to assert the greater importance of this relationship through the choice of names—i.e., Avraham, the father of Judaism, and Maria, the mother of Christianity. Such juxtaposition makes a symbolic statement, not only about the possibility of inter-religious communion between the two major Western religions, but also reminds the audience of their shared Jewish origin. This origin is further asserted through Maria's fleeting communion with Yehuda, whose name derives from the Hebrew word for "Jew" (Yehudi). Clearly a more challenging relationship, the fact that both parties are able to have an intimate rapport in spite of their clear gender/cultural/religious differences, serves to indicate the possibility of a proper Judeo-Christian agenda of cooperation. This agenda marks a broader horizon than that of *God's Neighbors*—a difference that may be explained by the filmmakers' lack of clear religious commitments. Yet like the latter film, *Magic Men* does not show a satisfactory realization of the integrative vision beyond the limits of the Israeli secular-religious dynamic, and in this sense similarly shows its acute awareness of the challenges of creating such a bridge.

Should this integrative vision be necessarily placed under the heading of "credulity"? Does the films' proposition of an emotion-based religiosity, one which surfaces a shared ground of human complexity and capitalizes on the affective potential of reconciling within and beyond the Judaic-secular relationship, epitomize an overall attempt to escape the circumstances of social reality? Peleg, for one, does not seem to think so. In his readings of *Ushpizin* and *God's Neighbors*, he nevertheless does recognize an impulse to validate this vision by minimizing certain conflicts or providing their clear and positive resolution—measures that, upon his critical reflection, would be defined as enabling credulous escapism, and are derived from the intertextual influence of the Hasidic tale. Though not unfounded, such a claim, however, should also not be carried too far. It would be unfair, for example, to claim that the Hasidic tale constructs its religiosity through an escape from social conflicts. In fact, as has already been established, Hasidic tales have been profoundly interested in constructing their religiosity from the materials of conflicted historical reality, and as such have represented the this-worldly aspect of Hasidic belief. This interest serves as the basis for the films' explorations of social reality, which are always marked by an acute awareness to the tensions and ambivalences that underlie it. Even in *Ushpizin*, where an integrative vision is most validated, there is constant acknowledgement of divisive anger as a complementary

phenomenon to conciliatory love. Moshe's ire is often referred to, and his struggle seems to be focused on attempting to keep it at bay. In this respect, then, *Ushpizin* does not wish to detach an integrative vision from the particular reality to which it is supposed to respond; rather, its goal seems to "test out" religiosity within the sphere of Israeli social life and assess the elements in that life which may threaten its success. Such elements, in turn, are more noticeable in the other two films. *God's Neighbors* is very clear about how a reliance on emotion can lead down the path of violence as easily as—or even more easily than—the path of love. The presence of hatred and anger is there from the very first scene, and its traces can be seen overshadowing even the most cheerful and life-affirming scenes of the film. And *Magic Men* is even more committed to showing that any attempt at integration would be fraught with ambivalence, and can easily fall apart. Accordingly, angry and even violent behavior typifies the film's main relationships, and love as a force of reconciliation never fully achieves its goal, certainly in the Avraham-Maria-Yehuda triangle, but also between the two protagonists, whose coming together is followed by a death.

The issue of "happy endings" seems more vulnerable to the accusation of credulity through a modern commitment to instrumental rationality. Indeed, the not-so-happy ending of *Magic Men* appears to indicate a basic mistrust of such positive resolutions, deeming them a departure from a sober rational understanding of social relations and divisiveness. Yet even if one agrees with this position, it is worth noting the arguably incredulous attempt at making such resolutions fit the modern understanding of plausible reality. This attempt is closely connected to a redefinition of the act of Tikkun—of reparation of a conflicted and even shattered state of affairs. In Hasidic lore, Tikkun is discussed explicitly as a cosmological act, one that is affiliated to particular Judaic doctrines and rituals. Hasidic tales, however, tended to downplay such affiliations in favor of a more worldly and quotidian definition of Tikkun. This tendency was strengthened in Neo-Hasidic tales, due to their desire to dissociate Hasidism from kabbalistic cosmology and re-orient it more strenuously towards a tellurian context. The films discussed herein follow through on this Neo-Hasidic tendency, and even further detach Tikkun from its current ritualistic frameworks within Hasidism.<sup>96</sup> Instead, and in keeping with the affective articulation of religiosity championed in these films, this category now becomes representative of a basic human drive towards achieving

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<sup>96</sup> See: Zvi Mark, "The Contemporary Renaissance of Braslav Hasidism: Ritual, *Tiqqun*, and Messianism," in *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival*, ed. Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2011), 101-116.

psychological-emotional equilibrium. By focusing on the proximity between kabbalistic and psychoanalytic concepts,<sup>97</sup> these cinematic texts thus frame their resolutions through the latter terminology, which is familiar to the modern sensibility, even as it is subsumed under a regime of rational interpretation.

Also helping in the adjustment of such resolutions to modern expectations is their positioning as the result of individual effort by a non-Tsaddik subject. Here one sees the legacy of the Hasidic tale's interest in the hidden Tsaddik, and especially the Neo-Hasidic desire to adapt this legacy to the modern emphasis on individualism, allowing it to undercut the traditional significance of religious institutions and center attention on the subject "so as to find in it—in us—sources for attributing meaning, quality and hierarchical value to the outside world."<sup>98</sup> This adaptation, in turn, carries over to the three films and marks their intention to adjust to modern sensibilities—though to varying degrees, depending on the measure of the filmmakers' commitment to a traditional-religious perspective. Such variation can be traced in their disparate renderings of the relationship between the non-Tsaddik individual and representatives of the religious institution. *Ushpizin*, the brain-child of born-again Bratslav Hasid Shuli Rand, acts rather conservatively in its commitment to giving a prominent presence within the narrative to the religious establishment. Thus, the film's rabbi, as a symbol of the religious institution, is shown on occasion to provide Moshe with spiritual and marital guidance, and seems to occupy a superior position of knowledge. But, as Ginsburg argues, *Ushpizin* "does not privilege the learned over the simpleton,"<sup>99</sup> and in this sense still adheres to a moderate Neo-Hasidic "modernization" of the hagiographic Hasidic tale that one finds also, for example, in Buber's collected volumes.<sup>100</sup> *God's Neighbors*, directed by a filmmaker who had "undergone some process of *Teshuva*,"<sup>101</sup> provides its audiences with another representative of the establishment, a neighborhood rabbi who accompanies Avi, Koby, and Yaniv in their path towards religious illumination. While the rabbi is presented as helpful to the protagonist, he is far from a "radiant figure [...] conversing with

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<sup>97</sup> See, for example: Hoffman, "Reparation," 188-190; Joseph H. Berke and Stanley Schneider, "Repairing Worlds: An Exploration of the Psychoanalytical and Kabbalistic Concepts of Reparation and Tikkun," *Psychoanalytic Review* 90, no. 5 (October 2003): 723-749.

<sup>98</sup> Persico, "Neo-Hasidic Revival," 300.

<sup>99</sup> Ginsburg, "Love in Search," 373.

<sup>100</sup> Ross, *Beloved-Despised*, 106.

<sup>101</sup> Tal Barkai, "Deadly Mission: A Script About Violence Born Out of Faith" [Hebrew], *Ynet*, June 20, 2013, accessed March 11, 2015 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4395123,00.html>.

God”<sup>102</sup> like *Ushpizin*’s rabbi. Thus this figure seems more folksy than holy, an entertainer more than a learned sage, who continuously prides himself on his ignorance, and in this sense does not seem to act as proper support for Avi’s quest. Finally, *Magic Men*, made by self-avowed secular directors Nativ and Tadmor, occupies what Ross would define as an “extreme Neo-Hasidic stance,”<sup>103</sup> in the sense that it does not present any representative of the religious establishment, and subsequently leaves the two main characters to their own devices in constructing their form of emotion-based religiosity. In this case, as in the other two, the lessening of the institution’s stature in comparison to traditional hagiography opens up a space for the protagonists to exercise their agency and become a “source of meaning.”

This is not to say that these cinematic texts—and for that matter, Hasidic tales—are completely aligned with the values and perspectives of modernity. They all support a traditional-religious agenda, with each giving it its own particular inflection. In the explicitly nomian *Ushpizin*, religiosity is Judaic-Hasidic and more closely associated to the rituals and sensibilities associated with this sect. In the more moderately nomian *God’s Neighbors*, religiosity allows for a wider spectrum of participants and a looser form of affiliation to religion; yet the basis is still firmly Judaic, as indicated in the final scene which shows Miri partaking in a Havdalah ceremony<sup>104</sup> with Avi and his father. In the relatively antinomian *Magic Men*, however, the base of religiosity is broader still and does not even require the appropriation of particular customs, befitting the filmmakers’ avowed secular outlook. Such variations on a singular theme all require different interventions in reality. There are clear omissions, for example the way by which these films all ignore the fact that repentants are not only rejected by secular Israelis, but also by ultra-Orthodox Jews who find them insufficiently religious.<sup>105</sup> There are also clear choices of emphasis, as is visible when one compares the ideological implications of delimiting the diegesis of *Ushpizin* to a Jerusalem neighborhood versus setting a journey through Greece as the background to *Magic Men*’s narrative. Such decisions may provoke accusations of escapism, and in a sense such criticism is not without justification. Yet whatever one may think of the real-life possibility of an emotion-based religiosity reconciling the worlds of religion and secularity, it seems clear that these

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<sup>102</sup> Ginsburg, “Love in Search,” 373.

<sup>103</sup> Ross, *Beloved-Despised*, 104-105.

<sup>104</sup> Havdalah (“separation”) is the term given to the religious ceremony that marks the end of Shabbat and Jewish holidays and separates them from the profane time to come.

<sup>105</sup> Zicherman, *Black Blue-White*, 119-120.

films, as Hasidic cinematic tales, attempt to construct this proposition from the stuff of Israeli social life, and work through its various ambivalences so as to make the resulting vision acceptable to modern definitions of plausible and proper reality rather than simply abandon it to the sphere of naiveté.

### 5.3 FANTASY

While the influence of the Hasidic tale on these films' representation of social reality may leave them vulnerable for criticism, it is their reliance on the genre's predisposition to "fantasy"—to apparitions which "neither the reader nor the character (who shares the same ontological assumptions) can explain by the logic of [a rationally understood] world"<sup>106</sup>—that seems to most provoke charges of credulity. For Hasidic tales, of course, that which exceeds the logic of instrumental reason and its categories of coherence is not fantasy but "the higher, divine world, ontologically truer and eternal compared to the transience of the lower world familiar to human quotidian experience;"<sup>107</sup> it has therefore been their goal, in part, to affirm belief in this "higher world" by staging scenes of revelation that disclose its presence in the "lower world." From the perspective of modern Enlightenment such as the one adopted by Haskala, the only true world is the one contained by rational categories, and to affirm a different belief is to indulge in the fantastic and to promote naiveté. To the extent that *Ushpizin*, *God's Neighbors*, and *Magic Men* depart from this logic, they are thus susceptible to the same type of disapproval leveled against their literary antecedents by Haskala and its derivatives. Yet the reduction of "revelatory" moments to "fantasy" may cause us to miss the ways by which these films shape revelation so that it be deemed acceptable by, or at least not offensive to, modern sensibilities. The roots of this adaptation may arguably be found in the traditional Hasidic tale itself, and certainly in Neo-Hasidic elaborations on the genre.

A helpful starting point for this discussion would be a story attributable to R. Nachman of Bratslav, which is recounted in *God's Neighbors* by Avi's local rabbi:

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<sup>106</sup> Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 117.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

By multiplying lies the truth is hereby discovered. And this is illuminated in the holy conversations with our late Rabbi [Nachman], who told a parable about one who traveled along a road and met a brigand who took him for all he had. The person robbed pleaded to the robber: “I have traveled far and wide for too long a time in order to get this sum for my family’s livelihood, and now upon arriving at home empty-handed I will lose all face, since no one will believe that I encountered a thief. So I must ask you to mark me in such a way that would prove I was attacked.” Then he took off his coat and asked the brigand to fire at it so to show that he was indeed robbed. And the brigand complied. Then he asked the brigand to shoot at his hat, saying that they may not put their trust in only one mark. And the brigand complied and fired again. Then he asked the brigand to shoot at other parts of his wardrobe so that there will be many marks to show, and the brigand did as he wished. Then he asked the brigand once more to shoot, and the latter responded: “I am out of gunpowder!” Upon hearing that the brigand was no longer in possession of gunpowder, the man grabbed him by the neck and threw him to the ground, took away what was robbed, and went home in peace.<sup>108</sup>

Though it may be lost on contemporary film viewers, for Hasidim in the age of Haskala the meaning of this tale was quite clear. As members of a burgeoning sect, they often felt attacked by those enlightened Maskilim who sought to discredit their beliefs and practices. The tale tells them exactly how to act in this situation—by letting enlightened modern Jews use up all the rational categories of coherence at their disposal, the Hasid can reveal their supposed inability to account for the supposedly truer, “higher” dimension of reality. This message is indicative of Hasidism’s “anti-wisdom” discourse, which sought to show “that Descartes’s view [*cogito ergo sum*] inevitably leads to a destructive dualism between mind and body, to a proliferation of splintered systems that no logic can reunite.”<sup>109</sup> R. Nachman, for one, expressed such sentiment in his famous and recurrent statement “I don’t know,” recognizing that the “human intellect” can never “capture the infinite light” but only reveal, at best, “the edge of its ability, its inability to attain.”<sup>110</sup> Similarly Chabad lore spoke of “the bounds of knowledge” and their fundamental incapacity to deliver “the unknowable, inconceivable realm.”<sup>111</sup> In both cases, then, the position that is advocated is one of

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<sup>108</sup> Nachman of Bratslav, “The Brigand Who Ran Out of Gunpowder” [Hebrew], in *The Complete Stories of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav*, ed. Zvi Mark (Tel Aviv: Miskal/Beit-Hebrew Creation, 2014), 382-383.

<sup>109</sup> Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 22. See also, for example: Hillel Zeitlin, *In the Grove of Hasidism and Kabbalah* [Hebrew] (1965; repr., Tel Aviv: Yavne Publishing, 2003), 11-14.

<sup>110</sup> Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Studies in Hasidism, Sabbatianism and Gender* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2015), 119. For a detailed description of R. Nachman’s doctrine on the limits of cognition and intellection in achieving mystical revelation, see: Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*, 111-174.

<sup>111</sup> Elior, *Paradoxical Ascent*, 180.

“faith that transcends intellect and comprehension”<sup>112</sup>—a mystical Ekstasis, a radical epistemological shift that purportedly reveals an ontological truth.

What is this supposed truth? At the most basic level, it is “that God is invisible yet omnipresent in His created world, that the world is thus clothed in an endless variety of guises, all of them equally illusory, all of them in fact disguises, concealing the single, too awesome countenance.”<sup>113</sup> Thus envisaged, perceived reality is permeated by a divine adhesive that undergirds and unifies all its various elements—those that our categorical thinking mistakenly deems as discrete. As such, God is seen as present in everything equally, and therefore it becomes “a human obligation to lay bare the divine element in all things and gain knowledge of the unity of existence despite the multiplicity that greets the eye and to nullify the distinct and separate existence of things in one’s thought.”<sup>114</sup> Such an understanding R. Nachman, like other Hasidim, defines as musical. For him, as Wiskind-Elper explains, music was “a complex vehicle: most basically, it is a precious component of human creative experience; yet it serves, as well, as a metaphor to speak of the most esoteric truths.”<sup>115</sup> These two functions were inseparable in R. Nachman’s eyes. The metaphorical power of music resided in its ability to effect unity in a manner that is not easily amenable—and that could actually be seen as defiant to—categorical conceptualization; accordingly, it was convenient for R. Nachman to speak of the sphere of divine oneness as a melody that orchestrates the variety of songs existing in nature. At the same time, playing and listening to music allowed the subject to acquire a certain attunement to the divine oneness that is unconditioned by the intellect. This attunement, in its most complete form, leads to an unraveling of separations, not only within what is perceived but between the perceived and the perceiver—or in other words, to the achievement “of the nonrational peak of the *unio mystica*.”<sup>116</sup>

Importantly, the process of *unio mystica* is not simply about nullifying worldly distinctions so as to catch a glimpse of divine unity, but also in surfacing this unity within the worldly itself. Thus, according to this mystical worldview, social integration is contingent on the unifying nature of the divine cosmos that undergirds it, and can be sustained through attunement to this unity; concurrently, by working towards unity within reality, one can support the revelation—and even,

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>113</sup> Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 115.

<sup>114</sup> Elior, *Paradoxical Ascent*, 14.

<sup>115</sup> Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 93.

<sup>116</sup> Elior, *Paradoxical Ascent*, 179 (italics in the original).

in kabbalistic terms, the reparation—of cosmic unity. One can see the relationship between the spheres in reference to the operation of emotion, and specifically love, in Hasidic theosophy. R. Nachman, for one, saw love as leading to a union between man and woman, which resonates more universally with a profound unity that exists in divinity itself.<sup>117</sup> As such, to love is to be susceptible to the unifying forces of the universe and potentially be open to unification with them; and in turn, to experience this cosmic unity may enhance the integrative potential of love and bring the community together. This integrative capacity, in being reliant on a shared human-affective ground, is open to everyone; indeed, this was the conceptual foundation for the movement's ethos of social inclusiveness, over and against more elitist and esoteric approaches by certain branches of Jewish mysticism. Yet just as emotion is only a condition but not a guarantee for radical Ekstasis, so is the ability to truly bridge the higher and lower worlds not considered the property of all but only of a privileged few—of the Tsaddikim. They are the ones who have the ability to avoid remaining locked in a state of emotional attunement—to perform a “back and forth” movement (*Ratso Vashov*), intermittently “transcending” our categorical understanding of the world and “returning” to translate the experience to their followers and have them partake in it to some weakened form.<sup>118</sup>

As previously noted, storytelling has been a principal mode through which Tsaddikim were able to surface divine unity and allow audiences to engage with it more strenuously. In telling stories, the Tsaddik takes on the role of divine creator, but only to a lesser degree—that is, not in the sense of creating something *ex nihilo*, but rather as reworking and reordering past literary forms (Jewish and non-Jewish) in a manner that exposes their shared divine ground and sustains it theurgically.<sup>119</sup> In his revelation of this connecting thread, the Tsaddik thus unites literary origin and reworked presentation,<sup>120</sup> while in the recounting of the stories, he binds his audience members

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<sup>117</sup> This unifying impulse is extended to the linguistic level, with R. Nachman “remarking that the word ‘one’ (*ehad*) is numerically equivalent to ‘love’ (*ahava*) (=13).” See: Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 84.

<sup>118</sup> See: Mark, *Mysticism and Madness*, 117-129; Ron Margolin, *The Human Temple: Religious Interiorization and the Structuring of Inner Life in Early Hasidism* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2005), 158.

<sup>119</sup> The Hasidic tale draws on a variety of sources, for example biblical texts, kabbalistic symbolism, Jewish and non-Jewish folktales, and even 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic literature. The act of reworking a narrative so as to expose the underlining layer of sanctity is most potently figured as repair when it comes to the appropriation of gentile stories: in this case, these tales are considered initially broken, with the Tsaddik's role being to mend and redeem them through their revision. See: Mark, forward, 34-35; Dan, *Hasidic Story*, 46-52; Piekarz, *Studies*, 111, 132; Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 24-25, 51-103.

<sup>120</sup> Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 60.



into a mystical union, and “even from the filthy depths of heresy he pulls them upward, confident that their eyes may be opened.”<sup>121</sup> This dynamic is doubled within the narratives themselves, which bind social to cosmic drama through moments of revelation. As Wiskind-Elper explains with regards to what occurs in R. Nachman’s thirteen tales, but which can easily be applied to the genre as a whole:

Moments of revelation lived by Elijah, King David, and Isaiah, in which God’s presence is suddenly and unexpectedly made manifest, expand into dramatic scenes. Natural phenomena, human actions, and entire events that prophets and figures of rabbinic invention may have understood and interpreted only in flashes of intuition, engulfed in a broader expanse of unawareness, become in the tales nearly continual experience, transparently and naively symbolic. Yet though the curtain is pulled away many times to reveal the face of the King, it always falls back in place, and He is hidden once again. This dialectic between concealment and revelation, between symbol and the symbolized, between the natural and the supernatural, is an intrinsic element of mystical experience as a whole. It is central in the corpus of Jewish sources—the Bible, Midrash, Kabbalah—and Reb Nachman, heir to this multicolored tradition, makes it the cornerstone of his own worldview.<sup>122</sup>

Quite expectedly, the Tsaddik is the character in Hasidic tales who is able to experience and invite a revelation. It is through his figure that divine unity within the immanent is mediated for the benefit of the reading/listening audience; and it is through the exposition of his soul that, according to Elstein, the narrative becomes one of a radical Ekstasis beyond the familiar coordinates of our everyday experience of reality.<sup>123</sup> Such departure is not presented monolithically however. Rather, as Joseph Dan details, Hasidic tales present different forms of revelation that correspond in varying degrees to the modern understanding of the “fantastic.” The least fantastic in the sense that it can be explained as a subjective phenomenon is what Dan calls “wondrous experience”—namely, an experience of revelation which the Tsaddik undergoes and then recounts, but to which there is no proof outside of, perhaps, its toll on the Tsaddik’s physical state. More fantastic is the “wondrous knowledge,” where revelation is manifested through the clairvoyance of the Tsaddik, which allows him access to secrets from the past, people’s innermost thoughts, things that are taking place in the cosmic sphere, or events that will occur in the future. Most fantastic, however, are “wondrous deeds,” in which the Tsaddik “operates in material reality and changes the laws of nature,

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>123</sup> Elstein, *Ecstatic*, 16.

performing veritable ‘miraculous’ acts.”<sup>124</sup> Yet even here there is a hierarchy in the level of fantasy, with some miracles being more modest and “simple” in nature, while others more “exuberant.” This distinction allowed the traditional Hasidic tale to create variations on the larger-than-life figure of the Tsaddik, at times glorifying his powers through connecting him to spectacularly fantastic miracles (like in many presentations of the Besht) and at times understating them as if to argue that the Hasidic leader, in all his failings and weaknesses, is a great wonder onto his own (like in the hagiography surrounding R. Nachman).<sup>125</sup>

At the heart of the fantastic, Wiskind-Elper comments, there lies a fundamental “uncertainty” surrounding the following questions: “Is this departure from the standards of rationality essentially an unknown yet true aspect of reality? Or is it only an illusion, the result of faulty perception, with no connection to outside reality at all?”<sup>126</sup> To the extent that it foregrounded mythopoetic imagery (for example, that of kabbalistic symbolism) and supernatural agency, the Hasidic tale heightened this uncertainty and rendered the movement’s credos and leadership vulnerable to dismissal by the Haskala. While avowedly situating itself as an opposition to the modern Enlightenment ethos, such disapproval however was not fully courted by Hasidism, as R. Nachman’s frequent dealings and conversations with Maskilim clearly exemplify.<sup>127</sup> Hence, though not explicitly discussed along such terms within Hasidic literature, the downplaying of fantastic elements in certain tales could be considered as a nod to modern sensibilities, mitigating the uncertainty between the aforementioned questions and affording the Tsaddik and his revelations a position of lesser credulity. This incredulous adaptation to modern standards of incredulity became even more extensive, as well as less defensive, within Neo-Hasidism. As Persico explains, the subjective turn which Neo-Hasidism applied to traditional Hasidic lore, implicitly or explicitly, strengthened the “reliance on [individuals’] inner worlds in order to make sense and verify the truth of their religious life,”<sup>128</sup> and by implication, destabilized the standing of God as an ultimate source of authority. This destabilization, in turn, led to an emphasis on ecstatic experience as opposed to an exploration of kabbalistic cosmology, and subsequently to a more quotidian and less fantastic articulation of revelation that better fits the modern rational

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<sup>124</sup> Dan, *Hasidic Story*, 90.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-185; Dan, *Hasidic Novella*, 22-23.

<sup>126</sup> Wiskind-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 117.

<sup>127</sup> Piekarz, *Studies*, 21-55; Dan, *Hasidic Story*, 172.

<sup>128</sup> Persico, “Neo-Hasidic Revival,” 301.

mindset. The measure by which this revelation is attributable to God is expectedly different between nomian and antinomian Neo-Hasidism. With antinomian Neo-Hasidism, the main objective has been to counter the excessive rationalism of the Haskala and affirm a spiritual dimension in human experience. Yet this did not mean a wholehearted recovery of Judaism, nor a wholehearted denial of modern Enlightenment. Rather, antinomian Neo-Hasidism chose to provide a vague definition of divinity, one which is less aligned with the halakhic God and more with “a hidden dimension of being that does not assume another metaphysical entity.”<sup>129</sup> In contrast to this brand of Neo-Hasidic thought, for which “the quest for ‘inner truth’ is undertaken in opposition to compliance with the heteronomous law, using Hasidism’s focus on the inner worlds in order to question the relevancy of the outer,” nomian Neo-Hasidism “is challenged with tempering this fundamental tension, so as to risk as little as possible doubts among their adherents about trading the loyalty to the Law for raw experience.”<sup>130</sup> Such negotiation requires that revelation be attributable to the Judaic God. The characterization of this god, however, tends to sideline mystical symbols that the modern mind may find fantastic, and concentrates on its fundamental Hasidic articulation as an overarching unity—one that creates a world “in which there are divine laws, spiritual meaning, and an exalted overall order for things, which connects the physical and metaphysical realms.”<sup>131</sup> Concurrent with this articulation of diffused godly presence, nomian Neo-Hasidism also often diminishes fantasy by moving away from the actual possibility of intimate contact with God—which serves as objective proof to the latter’s existence—to the experience of God—which makes revelation more personal and inner-directed. As a result of this maneuver, divine revelation is constituted as that which a modern perspective may define as a particular “subjective” (i.e., irrational) interpretation of something in “outside reality” that can also conceivably (and more correctly) be defined in “objective” (i.e., rational) terms.

As previously discussed, the films in question focus on living embodiments of religiosity—Hasidic religious repentants—and affirm their way of life as the foundation upon which Judaic and secular communities can possibly come together. Such affirmations are related not only to the social conflict between religious and secular Israelis, but also to their differences on matters of “cosmic” belief, as per the logic of revelation in the Hasidic tale, which sees the social and the

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<sup>129</sup> Ross, *Beloved-Despised Tradition*, 335.

<sup>130</sup> Persico, “Neo-Hasidic Revival,” 301-302.

<sup>131</sup> Elijor, *Paradoxical Ascent*, 160.

cosmic as interconnected spheres. In attempting to resolve these dissimilarities, or at least negotiate them, the aforementioned cinematic texts draw on Neo-Hasidic understandings from across the nomian-antinomian spectrum. As pointed out in the previous chapter, *Ushpizin* presents a reality where divinity is always immanent, “a world that revels in the presence of God in everyday life.”<sup>132</sup> Moshe and Mali attempt to make His presence known in reality through a prayer that is decidedly emotional, and that throw into sharp relief the dominance of feeling in these characters’ life. And not only feeling, but specifically love—“the love between a husband and a wife [that] is but a reflection of their love for God.”<sup>133</sup> The emotional openness of the characters thus seems to act as the condition for reaching God, and facilitating His revelation by way of providential intervention—for example, through the sudden donation of a thousand dollars or through Mali’s unexpected-but-much-welcomed pregnancy. In this sense, the film is indeed nomian, and can be regarded by a modern sensibility as verging on the implausible. Yet it is important to look at the ways through which the film, in Neo-Hasidic fashion, tempers this God-awareness and adapts divine revelation to the modern-rational mind. *Ushpizin*’s revelations, for one, do not fall in the category of “wondrous act,” nor do they rely on some spectacular imagery that is conventionally associated with the manifestation of divinity. They are also dissociated from the realm of mystical operation of the Tsaddik rabbi, who is present in the film as a benevolent character, but is not shown to have any direct link to the alleged miracles. Within this state of affairs, God emerges as a diffused entity—an “endless light” as Moshe refers to it—and consequently the emphasis moves from Him towards the *experience of Him* as an overarching unity in the hearts and minds of the main characters. Thus envisaged, even as the film attempts to establish a causal paradigm of “prayers being answered,” it also opens up the possibility for a modern-secular audience to “accept” revelations as “objective” events which can and should be interpreted through rational categories (for example as coincidences), or at the very least divert its attention from these revelations through focusing on their subjective (i.e. biased) acceptance by the protagonist. This adaptation to the modern boundaries of plausibility is what perhaps caused one secular Israeli film critic to laud *Ushpizin* for “treating each of its ‘miracles’ with a slight irony—as a humorous chain

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<sup>132</sup> Ginsburg, “Love in Search,” 372.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

of misunderstandings and happenstances—and as such, avoiding a didactic or missionary presentation.”<sup>134</sup>

*God's Neighbors* is similarly preoccupied with divine presence in immanent reality. As with *Ushpizin*, it also sets emotional life as the condition for experiencing revelation. This is expressed explicitly by the neighborhood rabbi in a religious lesson given to Avi and his friends. Supporting the “anti-wisdom” discourse that would later also be presented through R. Nachman’s aforementioned story, he declares that “he doesn’t know anything!” Yet as with R. Nachman’s related proclamations, this statement is not meant to show that he is ignorant in the sense of lacking in knowledge, but rather to claim that the all knowledge should be suspended in gaining access to divine revelation. What then would be helpful in gaining this access? According to the rabbi, once intellectual tools are discarded, the “heart” emerges as the site from which self-transcendence may be achieved. And, again as in *Ushpizin*, it is love that serves as the most effective emotion to achieve revelation, for both allowing openness that transcends categorical thinking, and an impulse to integrate with an “Other,” be it physical or metaphysical. Yet emotion may also be a double-edged sword, for it can breed a countering force to love in the form of hatred and anger. Indeed, the rabbi’s sermon demonstrates how easy the oscillation between the two emotional poles can be, as he seamlessly transitions between a sermon about love and a Bratslav story about violence. This is the very oscillation that dominates Avi’s personal story, as he attempts to negotiate between his commitments to the modesty enforcement policies of his gang on the one hand and his affections towards Miri on the other. The difficulty of balancing these two domains ultimately forces him to choose love over anger, which according to the film, also makes him more sensitive to the existence of God in immanent reality.

This dilemma is outlined explicitly in Avi’s prayer scene, discussed in the previous chapter. Avi speaks to God about his difficulty in being with Miri whilst trying to follow the demand for religious action that is outlined by Kobi and Yaniv, and asks Him to give a sign as to whether she is the one for him—the proper catalyst for a decision to pursue love over anger. This “sign” arrives later when Miri responds to Avi’s suggestion that she look in Psalms for advice on her existential state, and chances upon the most famous statement on ideal Judaic womanhood. Importantly, however, such revelation does not take on any spectacular-fantastic features. In fact, its attributes

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<sup>134</sup> Shmulik Duvdevani, “A Great Miracle Happened Here” [Hebrew], *Ynet*, August 5, 2004, accessed March 17, 2015 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-2958697,00.html>.

are even more quotidian than the “miracles” of *Ushpizin*. Also in contrast to *Ushpizin*, the film does not stress a clear causal connection between prayer and revelation, such as through a cross-cutting editorial pattern. This leaves the interpretation of Miri’s gesture as revelation vulnerable to accusation of subjective bias; what for one person would be a sign, for another may be an elusive event that can be explained by rational categories, but is not by default divinely-related. This skepticism of a theological explanation is not abolished but actually maintained by the film in a later scene, where just before his Jaffa rampage, Avi again opens Psalms for a divine message, and reads in chapter 144 David’s prayer before combat: “Praise be to the Lord my Rock, who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle.” The status of Psalms as providing objective proof of revelation is less clear here than in the former scene. On the one hand, the appearance of David’s prayer seems too opportune to be rationalized as coincidental. On the other hand, since Avi does not follow the literal meaning of the “sign” as he did with Miri, and since this choice is validated in the context of the film, does this mean that it can be seen as a “sign” at all? Ultimately, *God’s Neighbors* is not interested in resolving the question of divine existence conclusively. As such, the only possible proof of revelation one can put forward is the experience of God, or in the words of R. Nachman that were chosen for the film’s epigraph—“for the true believer, Faith is evidence.”

What does this mean in terms of the film’s religiosity? Firstly, it undermines the traditionally “exuberant” image of God, both by avoiding the common tropes of biblical and kabbalistic theophany and by negating the requirement of understanding sacred texts literally. Even more than *Ushpizin*, these measures then make possible a diffused understanding of God as an overarching presence rather than a concrete yet stupefying apparition—as an “endless light,” in the words of the neighborhood rabbi, which unifies all and demands that one unite with it. In the absence of a bounded image of God, the emphasis is then transferred to the personal experience of Him and its resulting interpretation. “What do *you* want?” is the question that the rabbi asks Avi, indicating that a person’s subjective understanding of the world, motivated by his or her own desires, is the parameter for determining the presence of divine will in reality. Yet what for one is a “discovery,” for another means a “reading.” And indeed, the foregrounding of subjectivity, coincided with an articulation of God’s image in more immanent and less “wondrous” terms, constructs a message of nomian Neo-Hasidic religiosity that is adaptable to modern sensibilities. If for a believer like Avi, Faith proves God’s workings in the world, for the non-believer, such belief may be dismissible as an interpretation that bestows a metaphysical agency onto a natural

phenomenon whose existence can still be accounted for within the categories of our rational thinking.

As opposed to *Ushpizin* and *God's Neighbors*, *Magic Men* seems less invested in asserting the presence of God, which aligns it with the antinomian part of the Neo-Hasidic spectrum. In actuality, the film's evocations of the not-readily-unexplainable often appear most strenuously in non-religious contexts, which in turn are used to resist attempts at straightforward theological contextualization. The first scene of this nature takes place early in the film. Avraham is at a local Thessaloniki bar, when a television show about searching for missing relatives appears on a nearby screen. While watching, the anchorwoman suddenly addresses Avraham and announces that his old friend has been looking for him for a while now. Avraham responds, and the two have a conversation, until the bartender interrupts, and the scene returns to "normalcy." Here, the television show's title—"The Light in the Darkness"—clearly evokes the language of mystical revelation, yet the scene seems to indicate that the unexplainable here is not so much supernatural as the product of individual hallucination. This dismissal is followed up by the foregrounding of magic as a competing discourse to that of revelation, with the latter defining the abnormal event as verifying divine existence, and the former defining it as a "trick." This "trick" aspect is highlighted in a montage scene which shows Avraham and Maria performing various "feats of magic": for example, when he stands to the side of a parked bus, and brings his hands together as the automatic doors close; or when they perform swiping motions, seemingly forcing the movement of a nearby revolving door. Such feats are clearly marked as tricks—Avraham and Maria's actions do not cause the mechanized effects to occur, and even as objective occurrences, these effects are hardly out of the ordinary. Accordingly, through them, the existence of something transcendent to modern categories of coherence is discredited. As the plot progresses, however, the film alters its attitude towards this possibility—a change registered in the way that magic is depicted. The next central scene featuring magic has Avraham and Yehuda putting on a street show for passersby in order to earn some spending money. Their magical feats are different than those Avraham performed with Maria. These are no longer obvious tricks, their mechanism displayed in full view. Rather, they are acts whose results seem out of the ordinary—especially as they are shot in slow motion—but whose cause is not entirely laid bare. In making magic more mysterious, it stops being a barrier and starts becoming a possible bridge for Avraham and Yehuda to come together—a possibility indicated in the choice to have them both wear clown make-up so as to

mitigate their visible differences. Yet, the placement of these feats in the context of a street show still lends them an air of trickery, and as a result prevents the occasion from becoming a truly sound base for rapport.

It is only at the end of the film that magic ceases to be explicable in terms of rational thinking. In the penultimate sequence, Avraham and Yehuda are in a parked car, and engage in an intimate conversation for the first time in years. At the conversation's conclusion, Avraham asks Yehuda to pick a card from his deck. Yehuda picks the queen of hearts, and places it back in the deck. Avraham then looks through the deck but does not extract the right card. Yehuda asks him where he placed the queen of hearts—is it under his pillow, as it was when they were younger? Avraham simply responds that the magic “didn't work,” revealing it as a bad trick. Yet after he dies, in the last moments of the film, the card reappears in the most unlikely of places—in Maria's cigarette box, which she opens while on a date with a client, and between the pages of Yehuda's prayer book, as he reads the Kaddish over his father's grave. The sheer implausibility of these “magical” occurrences makes them more than a trick and turns them into something that is truly mysterious, equal to instances of mystical revelation. Considering the exact character of the card—the queen of hearts—and the fact that it also appears with Maria, a female figure who helps Avraham and Yehuda rediscover their love for each other, the film seems to indicate that such mystery can only be accessed through an emotional openness, a capacity for love; it is this common denominator that acts as the condition for both Yehuda and Avraham to transcend categorical thinking. Yet the mysterious vision that was enabled through this emotional openness is not presented as merely a subjective phenomenon but as an “objective fact” belonging to the “outside world,” independent of character mediation and interpretation.

To the extent that one wants to understand this vision in mystical terms, it qualifies as an example of “equalization” (*Hashvaah*), which Chabad uses to describe the ecstatic act of pursuing “the equality of the divinity [through] the equalization of opposites and the finding of a median between entities contrary to each other in their external manifestation.”<sup>135</sup> While *Ushpizin* and *God's Neighbors* privilege an understanding of this ineffable as mystical revelation, this film does not explicitly ascribe a divine source to the appearance of the cards, neither in verbal reference nor in associating it with mystical symbols or with the miraculous abilities of a Tsaddik. If this is indeed a “wondrous act,” then it is moderate and worldly in nature, making it possible, in

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<sup>135</sup> Elior, *Paradoxical Ascent*, 69.



antinomian Neo-Hasidic fashion, “to deemphasize the significance of the ‘truth value’ of religious claims on a theoretical level.”<sup>136</sup> Yet while this gesture seems representative of the film’s adaptation to modern-secular sensibilities, it is not indicative of an overall attempt to privilege an understanding of the ineffable through these sensibilities either; indeed, it seems that unlike the other two films, *Magic Men* also does not offer its secular audiences the possibility of giving credence to a revelatory event as something “belonging to the outside world” through its reduction to rational categories of explanation (trick, coincidence, etc.). Thus the card, representing the modern-secular rational, is not positioned as a wholly compelling explanation for this revelation; rather, like the theological perspective, it emerges as a particular *reading* of an event that overwhelms and extends beyond its particular terms of coherence. In this sense, by bringing together the card and the Siddur, *Magic Men* equalizes them into a *coincidentia oppositorum* so as to manifest an underlining unity that binds them both and that both may never exhaust. It neither addresses this unity as necessarily divine nor affords the opportunity to treat (or dismiss) it rationally, but preserves its mystery as the ground upon which religious and secular individuals may potentially come together.

Thus envisaged, the three films in question all follow in the tradition of Hasidic and especially Neo-Hasidic tales, which embody religiosity in the sense of making the concept of revelation palatable for modern audiences through the lessening of its “fantastic” valences.<sup>137</sup> As such, if one were to accuse them of “credulity,” such a designation would only be applicable in

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<sup>136</sup> Ross, *Beloved-Despised Tradition*, 333.

<sup>137</sup> The significance of this choice is thrown into sharp relief when compared to the representational strategies of a group of Judaic-themed Israeli films, made by secular filmmakers during the 1990s, which represented a supernatural order through fantastic imagery. These include Daniel Wachsmann’s *The Appointed* (1990), which is abound in spontaneous combustions that charge the plot’s major relationship—between an influential Rabbi-mystic and a Lilith-like vagabond—with uncanny valences; Hagai Levy’s *Snow in August* (1993), a tale of one secular Israeli’s adventures in search of his lost Haredi love, which lead him to encounter various outlandish dreams and inexplicable occurrences; and Yossi Zomer’s *Forbidden Love* (1997), a modern rendition of S. Ansky’s *Der Dybbuk* set to Israel’s ultra-Orthodox community, which includes many surreal moments, including a CGI-enhanced vision of the Garden of Eden. Critics such as Ronie Parciack and Shmulik Duvdevani have read these representations as God-affirming. Such a claim, however, could also be argued against on the grounds that representing divine revelation in terms deemed “fantastic” by modern sensibilities would necessarily lead secular audience to actively refute, rather than tacitly accept, the existence of some transcendent order. Following this line of reasoning, it may also be claimed that the choice of fantastic representation in these films was meant to support the secular antagonism that drives their social vision of Judaic life, rather than oppose it. Such a reading is aligned with the zeitgeist in which all three texts were produced, and which preceded the so-called “Jewish Renaissance” of Israeli society and its attendant ambivalences. See: Parciack, “Religious Experience,” 105-113; Shmulik Duvdevani, “Magical Realism in Israeli Cinema,” in *With Both Feet on the Clouds: Fantasy and Israeli Literature*, ed. Danielle Gurevitch, Elana Gomel, and Rani Graff (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 141-162.

the self-conscious sense of “second naiveté,” which Mendes-Flohr, following Jewish-German philosopher Ernst Simon (1899-1988), defines as:

an approach that allows the children of Enlightenment to affirm religious belief while still respecting the doubts, hesitations, and skepticism that come with secular experience. What destroys belief is not the denial or rejection of the insights and sensibilities of modern, secular culture; if anything, these insights and sensibilities, and the knowledge-images they support, are given respect, transformed and incorporated into a new cognitive stance, which opens up to the transcendent truths that carry within them tradition’s “old answers.” Without giving up on the critical wakefulness of the secular order, “second naiveté” allows Man to experience God’s presence, to open up to tradition’s transcendental claims, and to bow down in humility and prayer.<sup>138</sup>

To the extent that “second naiveté” retains a desire to work within a theosophic understanding even while *incredulously* attempting to adjust to the modern mindset, it can never fully detach itself from modern definitions of credulity. Such is clearly the case with the nomian Neo-Hasidic films *Ushpizin* and *God’s Neighbors*, which support, to a greater or lesser degree, the ontological validity of “God’s presence.” These texts should therefore be considered “religious,” even as they leave room for modern-secular audiences to accept their revelation through rational terms. Like these two films, the antinomian *Magic Men* foregrounds an overarching unifying presence that undergirds multiplicity, yet unlike them, it does not explain this unity away. Traditional-religious and modern-secular perspectives are presented as readings of this multiplicity, as *discrete interpretations* that are unified by their shared referent (a position that becomes apparent in the conjunction of the film’s English [*Magic Men*] and Hebrew [*Son of God*] titles). Devoid of the ability to couch this unity in *Faith*—i.e., in a system of categorical explanation—the film thus points more squarely to the act of unraveling categories, of exhibiting *faith*, and a mysterious sense of unity that supposedly ensues. This position seeks to offer a response to “the quest for the ‘deeper,’ internal and hidden dimension of reality, of being in its entirety [...] [that has characterized] the ‘secular’ or at the very least modern mindset.”<sup>139</sup> The question remains, however, to what degree such a remedy, removed not only from theological claims but also from those of instrumental reason, can find a footing within the modern mindset, without simply being dismissed as credulous.

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<sup>138</sup> Mendes-Flohr, *Progress and its Discontents*, 40-41.

<sup>139</sup> Ross, *Beloved-Despised Tradition*, 501-502.

## 5.4 CINEMA, CREDULITY, AND FAITH

Though not the sole manifestation, unio mystica, as noted in this study's introduction, has often been considered the most emblematic of mystical states. For many mystics in Judaism as in other religious traditions, this "sense of being united with all physical reality, which as a whole was united with God by being within God,"<sup>140</sup> has served as the pinnacle of their concentrated devotional efforts. It requires the mystic to unravel his cognitive categories of coherence, eliminating "sustained reasoning or discursive reflection [from] the experiential moment."<sup>141</sup> As a consequence of this unraveling, an "enlightened vision" of an overarching unity comes into view. Such envisioning, in turn, facilitates "an emotional change and a cognitive change, through which the subject sees in a new and different light the ingredients of reality and their value."<sup>142</sup> Prompted by transformative awareness, the mystic then undergoes an experience of being intimately connected with the aforementioned divine vision.<sup>143</sup>

Unitive states, however, are arguably not limited to the sphere of mysticism alone.<sup>144</sup> Evidence to this effect may be found, for example, in Abraham Maslow's formative psychological studies on "peak experience." In his scholarship, Maslow looked into a variety of contexts—such as "great moments of love and sex" or "bursts of creativeness and the creative furore"—for certain experiences which "mostly had nothing to do with religion—at least in the ordinary

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<sup>140</sup> Dan Merkur, *Mystical Moments and Unitive Thinking* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 7.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>142</sup> Koren, *Mystery of the Earth*, 160.

<sup>143</sup> See also: Adam Afterman, "From Philo to Plotinus: The Emergence of Mystical Union," *Journal of Religion* 93, no. 2 (April 2013): 184-185.

<sup>144</sup> See, for example: Merkur, *Mystical Moments*, 27-34.

supernaturalistic sense”<sup>145</sup>—but which nevertheless *behaved* similarly to mystical experiences. These “peak experiences,” it became apparent, coalesced with the mystical states of old around a particular set of core characteristics, of which a central feature had been the experience’s “unitive nature [that] affirms self, the world, man, and nature”<sup>146</sup>—a condition of subjecthood wherein the subjects’ “self consciousness was lost. All separateness and distance from the world disappeared as they felt one with the world, fused with it, really belonging in it and to it, instead of being outside looking in.”<sup>147</sup> This shared core, for Maslow, proves that all mystical experiences could be understood as peak experiences, but not the other way around; as such, in his words, it functions as “a meeting ground not only, let us say, for Christians and Jews and Mohammedans but also for priests and atheists, for communists and anti-communists, for conservatives and liberals, for artists and scientists, for men and for women, and for different constitutional types, that is to say, for athletes and for poets, for thinkers and for doers.”<sup>148</sup> While Maslow’s approach to “peak experiences” was broad (as he sought to show that they “come from *many, many* sources”),<sup>149</sup> Linda Brookover Bourque highlighted the importance of his perspective to the more particular sphere of aesthetic engagements. Exchanging the term “peak” with “transcendental,” Brookover Bourque focused on a state of being whose key feature is “an expansion of consciousness, or the entrance into the new level of consciousness [...] a state in which the individual temporarily loses his identification as an isolated individual power and merges with an external self or power which to all practical intents encompasses what he [sic] defines as the totality of the universe.”<sup>150</sup> Interviewing subjects in relation to both religious-mystical and secular-aesthetic engagements, she attempted to see whether these two categories share in this experiential base. Her results showed that “while some differences exist in description between aesthetic and religious experiences, the overlap is so great that it leads us to conclude that the two experiences are *not* qualitatively different in the feeling states which exist. Rather the differences which do exist in description of the feeling at the time of the experience, the frequency of the experiences, the significance of the

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<sup>145</sup> Maslow, “Lessons,” 10.

<sup>146</sup> S. Daniel Breslauer, “Abraham Maslow’s Category of Peak-Experience and the Theological Critique of Religion,” *Review of Religious Research* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1976): 55.

<sup>147</sup> Maslow, “Lessons,” 9.

<sup>148</sup> Maslow, *Religions*, 28.

<sup>149</sup> Maslow, “Lessons,” 11 (italics in the original).

<sup>150</sup> Linda Brookover Bourque, “Social Correlates of Transcendental Experiences,” *Sociological Analysis* 30, no. 3 (Autumn 1969): 154.

experience to the individual, and particularly the triggering situation are a product of differences in social position of the respondent and in his social utilization of the experience rather than a qualitative distinction between two feeling states.”<sup>151</sup> On these grounds, she then further asserts that “religion is more similar to art than it is to politics.”<sup>152</sup>

Predating Maslow and Brookover Bourque, Bazinian theory arguably resonates with their conclusions in its attempt to conceptualize unitive states within the context of cinematic spectatorship. As discussed above, Bazin famously argued in his “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema” essay that analytic montage distorts reality by imposing upon it a certain order—“the *unity* of meaning of the dramatic event.”<sup>153</sup> A deep focus-long take realist style, in contrast, was not seen as distorting reality, since it “bring[s] together real time, in which things exist, along with the duration of the action, for which classical editing had insidiously substituted mental and abstract time.”<sup>154</sup> Accordingly, by “permit[ting] anything to be said without chopping the world up into little fragments,” this form seemed to Bazin more capable of “*reveal[ing]* the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the *unity* natural to them.”<sup>155</sup> In this formulation, it becomes evident that unity is paramount to Bazin’s understanding of the proper image of reality that should be revealed on screen. This is a unity that is largely transcendent to our categorical modes of ordering—that foregrounds “ambiguity,” in the sense that when one unravels these modes, the interconnectedness that is exposed between reality’s constituents appears incoherent by any traditional standards of coherence. To witness with uncertainty such revelation of ambiguous unity, for Bazin, is not merely an event of psychological implications; rather it speaks to a “metaphysical” modality of the cinematic experience, and is the appropriate “spiritual key”<sup>156</sup> through which we should interpret a realist film. Importantly, while aesthetics occupy a vital role in facilitating this revelation, its foundation seems to reside in “the irrational power of the photograph to bear away our *faith*.”<sup>157</sup> Indeed, as articulated in his “Ontology of the Photographic Image” essay, Bazin imagines our engagement with photography (and cinema) as always already grounded in faith, in the suspension of instrumental reason, which is why he equates it to

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 157-158.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>153</sup> Bazin, “Evolution,” 36 (my italics).

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 38 (my italics).

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>157</sup> Bazin, “Ontology,” 14 (my italics).

interactions with religious relics and ritualistic artifacts. It is from this position of faith that spectators are willing to address the photographic image as transparency rather than representation—as “laying bare the realities” rather than masking them. Once cinema taps into this faith, it is able, through proper aesthetic means, to strip “its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it” and show “the natural image of a world that we neither know nor can see.” Concurrently, it also further dissolves “the logical distinction between what is imaginary and what is real,”<sup>158</sup> allowing the spectator to experience the screen as if they were both part of a unified microcosm, irrationally interconnected.

In Bazin’s view, the irrational power of faith carried immense positive significance, not only in delineating the proper perspective through which we need to address the ontology of the photographic image, but also the correct means through which we need to engage the lived world. Such investment in faith, according to Cardullo, subsequently “comprise[d] the biggest stumbling block”<sup>159</sup> for film scholars who revisited Bazin’s work, especially after cinema studies became a bona fide academic discipline with commitments to a “scientific” outlook.<sup>160</sup> Nowhere has this resistance been more felt than in Christian Metz’s later work on the psychology of film spectatorship. In his influential study *The Imaginary Signifier* (1982), Metz designates Bazin as the principal proponent of an “idealist theory of the cinema”—a school of thought that exhibits “acute and immediately sensitive intelligence” on a descriptive level, but nevertheless gives “the diffuse impression of a permanent ill-foundedness” on the level of analysis. Particularly troubling for Metz is Bazin’s tendency to formulate “conceptions of the cinema as a mystical revelation, as ‘truth or ‘reality’ unfolding by right, as the apparition of what is [*l’étant*], as epiphany.” In Metz’s eyes, such “cosmophanic conceptions (which are not always expressed in an extreme form) register rather well the ‘feeling’ of the *deluded ego* of the spectator.”<sup>161</sup> In the process of distinguishing his work from that of the “idealist” school, Metz makes use of two important terms. The first is “belief,” which comes to replace Bazin’s reliance on “faith” as a category that is more

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>159</sup> Cardullo, *André Bazin*, 4.

<sup>160</sup> Andrew, *Major Film Theories*, 242; Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj, “Headnotes to Christian Metz: Loving the Cinema; Identification, Mirror; Disavowal, Fetishism,” in *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), 17.

<sup>161</sup> Metz, *Imaginary Signifier*, 52 (italics in the original).

“psychological,” and thus lends itself more easily to incorporation within a theory that highlights spectatorial delusion. This subsequently leads to the second term which undergirds Metz’s “structures of belief”: that of *credulity*. According to him, inside every spectator there is a “credulous person” who is “seated *beneath* the incredulous one, or in his heart, [and] continues to believe.”<sup>162</sup> The spectator’s incredulousness, which fails to trust the “truths” put forward by the image (and first and foremost, the “truth” of “presence”), triggers the desire to disavow this insight and maintain “a certain degree of belief in the reality of an imaginary world.”<sup>163</sup> This “credulity,” in turn, is “sustain[ed] in all incredulousness”<sup>164</sup> through its displacement onto the supposed naiveté of past cinema audiences.

Metz’s critique of Bazin’s “idealism” resulted in the devaluation of the latter’s theories in the decades after his death. In recent years, however, attempts have been made to recover Bazin in “non-idealist” terms: to argue that he actually discussed the photographic image psychologically and not ontologically, as producing an illusory effect rather than revealing some essence.<sup>165</sup> While this analysis has considerable validity, the typical elusiveness of Bazin’s argumentation also opens up other ways through which to recover his writing, and with it—to imagine a different model of cinematic experience than the one overdetermined by the psychological coordinates of spectatorial “credulity.” This model would take Bazin at his word that cinematic engagement can induce unitive states along the experiential lines of *unio mystica*—the combination of a revelatory vision, which exposes an ambiguous unity within supposed multiplicity, and a sense of radical Ekstasis, which connects the subject to this vision. At the same time, rather than treat these states as illusory, the proposed paradigm would stipulate that they are indicative of a certain phenomenological-ontological truth<sup>166</sup>—the existence of an essential order of unity within the phenomenal world that escapes our rational attempts to define it. Even more so than in Bazinian theory, such a model need not argue that unitive states—and especially those extreme varieties, where normative categories of coherence are almost entirely unraveled—take place in all our cinematic engagements; indeed,

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 72 (italics in the original).

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>165</sup> See, for example: Philip Rosen, “Belief in Bazin,” in *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife*, ed. Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 107-118.

<sup>166</sup> In the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, M. C. Dillon defines phenomenological ontology as one where ontological primacy is given to phenomena (i.e., “reality is conceived in terms of phenomenality”). Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 90.

as proposed in the conclusion of the previous chapter, our common encounters with the screen tend to be firmly bound by such categories and the analytic separations and amalgamations they inhere. Nor does this model presuppose that “fantasy” and/or “creative inspiration”<sup>167</sup> are not a part of unitive cinematic experiences; rather, following Bazin, it recognizes the existence of such elements, but also concedes that they can be grounded in, and be representative of, basic truths of reality.<sup>168</sup> To even consider such a model of film experience, however, it becomes necessary to conceptualize it further, using sources external to Bazin’s scholarship as means of support for claims about an underlying phenomenological-ontological order of unity, as well as its relationship to (mystical or non-mystical) unitive states and revelatory aesthetics. Drawing on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the religious existentialism of Martin Buber, which serve as the theoretical foundation for the previous chapter’s concluding discussion, the following will be a modest attempt to do just that—an attempt motivated, not by a desire to “authenticate” this model and its premises, but by the intention of offering them as a way to open up the terms by which we conventionally define spectatorship.

In an attempt to explicate a phenomenological-ontological order of unity, as it arrives through our interaction with perceptible form, Buber provides a telling description that is worth quoting at length:

I consider a tree.

I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.

I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith, suck of the root, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air and the obscure growth itself.

I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life.

I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of law—of the laws in accordance with which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or of those in accordance with which the component substances mingle and separate.

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<sup>167</sup> Merkur, *Mystical Moments*, 30-31.

<sup>168</sup> See for example, Bazin’s argument about the sequences involving an animate balloon in *The Red Balloon* (Albert Lamorisse, 1956): “Lamorisse’s red balloon actually does go through the movements in front of the camera that we see on the screen. Of course there is a trick in it, but it is not one that belongs to cinema as such. *Illusion is created here, as in conjuring, out of reality itself.* It is something concrete, and does not derive from the potential extension created by montage. What does it matter, you will say, provided the result is the same—if, for example, we are made to accept on the screen the existence of a balloon that can follow its master like a dog? It matters to the extent, that with montage the magic balloon would exist only on the screen, whereas that of Lamorisse *sends us back to reality.*” André Bazin, “The Virtues and Limitations of Montage,” in *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 1: 45 (my italics).



I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number, in pure numerical relation.

In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution.

I can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.

To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.

Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colors and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars, are all present in a single whole.

The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it—only in a different way.<sup>169</sup>

Drawing on his previously-discussed terms, Buber aims to show in this passage that any object, even one as simple as a tree, is always a manifold—a Thou—and that our engagement with this object reduces its multidimensional nature into a particular perspective—an It. When the multitude of different perspectives (or Its) are placed together, certain inconsistencies arise, and a particular ambiguity ensues. For Buber, however, this ambiguity is not inherent to the object itself but a product of our objectifying engagement and the reified terms of coherence that emerge from it. Accordingly, we need to bypass our regular modes of approaching It, via an attitude of openness and humility, in order to yield a different vision of the object, a Thou which replaces inconsistency with totality and ambiguity with mystery. Such a vision, in Buber's mind, does not entail a credulous disavowal of the various definitions of the object, but rather an acknowledgement that in defining it, we necessarily implement analytic separations that fragment its unity. By moving away from such separations, the object thus emerges as "indivisibly united"—as a mysterious totality where each aspect stands in relation to each other. This unified vision, though relying on a transformation of consciousness to manifest itself, is essential rather than experiential in the sense of not being wholly contingent on a "play of my imagination."

Crucially, when appearing as "a single whole," the tree is also revealed as something that "is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it;" in this sense, this revelatory vision seemingly invites the subject to follow through experientially on an already existing

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<sup>169</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 7-8.

phenomenological-ontological interconnectedness between them. Such, of course, is the emblematic expression of the Buberian idea of dialogue; yet while a dialogue with It maintains the distinction of Cartesian dualism, a dialogue with Thou goes a long way to dissolve such separations. In this state of dialogue—“an experience that takes place in another plane than that dominated by reason”<sup>170</sup>—there is a “soft unity”<sup>171</sup> that does not fully abolish all differences between I and Thou, in the sense of fusion, so much as interweave the two together in the form of an “embrace.”<sup>172</sup> Through this embrace, then, “the true ‘I,’ that reason why a human being is called a ‘human being,’ really extends beyond itself [...] towards the actual site of Thou. The ‘I’ of the I-Thou is therefore comprised of I and Thou; it is an ecstatic being whose point of origin is around its body and its end point extends beyond itself without losing its former grip around its body and without the subject losing its sense of individual self.”<sup>173</sup> Following the traditions of Hasidism, this embrace is contextualized through the term “love.” Yet for Buber, love is less important as an emotion than as a basic state of relation; loving emotions proper may facilitate an awareness of this relation, but they are only at best its “companions.” Dialogical relations between I and Thou, in their purest form, are thus “a clinging of love, but one lacking in the personal feeling of love. In this state, love exists only as being and not as emotion.”<sup>174</sup>

It should be stressed again, however, that Buber does not collapse the mysterious totality that is the I-Thou into the relationship between I and eternal Thou, the apprehensible God.<sup>175</sup> In this, the framing of his tree example is also significant. Per his view of a concrete metaphysics, we encounter only the Thou as a particular element of a specific meeting: that is, the totality that is perceived is always somehow bound to the coordinates of engagement, the circumscribed position of a perceiving consciousness as it relates to an element within the lived world. While this vision exhibits a unity that, in essence, is divine, it does not encapsulate the eternal Thou. Rather, this eternal Thou acts as “the Centre”<sup>176</sup> where “the extended lines of relations meet,”<sup>177</sup> not only of a meeting between a particular I and a particular Thou, but of all the meetings that are occurring and

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<sup>170</sup> Koren, *Mystery of the Earth*, 157.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>175</sup> In the words of Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Buber does not say that one has an experience of God per se, but rather that one experiences, or, more precisely, apprehends, God as the eternal Thou.” Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions*, 261.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>177</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 75.

may occur between all particular Is and particular Thous. At the same time as interpenetrating these meetings, it also “encompasses” and “includes” them in an embrace, “without dismissing their humanity.”<sup>178</sup> The eternal Thou’s existence, then, subtends all human existence as a unified system, and in this respect is not fully included in each person’s particular perspective; yet for Buber, His presence is felt in each meeting, which is also the only context where we may speak of—or rather to—Him.<sup>179</sup>

In light of the previous chapter’s concluding section, it may come as no surprise that Buber’s description of a vision of mysterious totality parallels similar descriptions in the classic phenomenological literature—and in particular, the literature of Merleau-Ponty—that has informed film studies scholarship. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, as M. C. Dillon has cogently argued, sought “to liberate phenomena from their traditional restriction to the sphere of immanence, to restore their transcendence, and thereby to lift the curse of mere presence from appearance and return to human opinion the measure of truth it has earned.”<sup>180</sup> It performs this task, however, without re-erecting the rigid Cartesian dualism of immanence and transcendence, and its attendant conceptual problematic: that, “if the world is completely transcendent, it is completely opaque and cannot be known,” but “if the elements of cognition are entirely immanent and transparent, the degree of opacity and givenness needed to give meaning to externality and transcendence is lost, and truth is sacrificed in a quest for certainty that defeats itself.”<sup>181</sup> To avoid this deadlock while still maintaining a claim to ontological truth, Merleau-Ponty searched for a middle ground “where immanence and transcendence intersect: that is, in the phenomena manifesting themselves in the perceptual field.”<sup>182</sup> Looking at (a phenomenological) ontology through this middle ground, he stipulated that our ontological knowledge is always partial, and that an opacity always remains, but did not see these as justification for equating partiality with falsity.

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<sup>178</sup> Koren, *Mystery of the Earth*, 158. To the extent that such a description of the eternal Thou seems paradoxical, it is indicative of a general trend within Buber’s writing to present accounts “which challenge reason by seeming contradictory.” According to Koren, “Buber was aware of the paradoxical nature of some of his descriptions, and associated it to the particular nature of the religious situation, ‘which is lived through all of its contradictions, and just gets lived and relived,’ [...] as opposed to philosophical contradiction, where two claims only seemingly oppose each other, but in actuality they coexist” (156).

<sup>179</sup> In his words: “Man cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human.” Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man* (1958; repr., New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 42.

<sup>180</sup> Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, ix.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

If “phenomena are real,” and if “phenomena is here understood to be what manifests itself or presents itself in perception,”<sup>183</sup> then for Merleau-Ponty the operation of perception must be given primacy as the key to unlocking the secrets of the lived world. Within phenomenology, perception is generally conceived as meaningful by definition, as an expression of an intentional project that seeks to organize the perceptual field. Following a primordial logic, itself grounded in a certain “pre-established harmony”<sup>184</sup> between the look and the world, this organization functions as the extraction of figure from ground. This extraction, in Merleau-Ponty’s eyes, represents an “intentional and existential *choosing* of the visible and the invisible. That is, what is taken up as seen by the act of seeing is taken from what will remain unseen.”<sup>185</sup> As such, seeing functions “as an activity of existential and semiotic choice in which the visible is inscribed in that *syntagmatic combination* called the ‘visual field’ as a process of *selection* from the invisible, those *paradigmatic possibilities* offered by the world as ‘horizon.’”<sup>186</sup> Significantly, by choosing a visible figure, perception does not exclude the invisible. Rather, the invisible may be sensed as a layer of latency within the visible, as an indication of the surrounding ground or depth out of which the figure has been carved. This relationship is evocatively explained by Merleau-Ponty in the fourth chapter of his posthumously-published *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964):

We must first understand that this red under my eyes is not, as is always said, a *quale*, a pellicle of being without thickness, a message at the same time indecipherable and evident [...]. It requires a focusing, however brief; it emerges from a less precise, more general redness, in which my gaze was caught, into which it sank, before—as we put it so aptly—*fixing* it. And, now that I have fixed it, if my eyes penetrate into it, into its fixed structure, or if they start to wander round about again, the *quale* resumes its atmospheric existence. Its precise form is bound up with a certain woolly, metallic, or porous configuration or texture, and the *quale* itself counts for very little compared with these participations. [...] The red dress a fortiori holds with all its fibers onto the fabric of the visible, and thereby onto a fabric of invisible being. A punctuation in the field of red things, which includes the tiles of roof tops, the flags of gatekeepers and of the Revolution, certain terrains near Aix or in Madagascar, it is also a punctuation in the field of red garments, which includes, along with the dresses of women, robes of professors, bishops, and advocate generals, and also in the field of adornments and that of uniforms. [...] If we took all these participations into account, we would recognize that a naked color, and in general a visible, is not a chunk of absolutely hard, indivisible being, offered all naked to a vision which could be only total

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 93-94.

<sup>184</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964; repr., Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 133.

<sup>185</sup> Sobchack, *Address*, 86 (italics in the original).

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 87 (italics in the original).

or null, but is rather [...] something that comes to touch lightly and makes diverse regions of the colored or visible world resound at the distances, a certain differentiation, an ephemeral modulation of this world—less a color or a thing, therefore, than a difference between things and colors, a momentary crystallization of colored being or of visibility. Between the alleged colors and visibles, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things.<sup>187</sup>

If a visible exists as a selection, as an apprehended choice, it nevertheless opens up our experience to the fabric of possibilities, the latent layer of invisibility, “the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals.”<sup>188</sup> The red that I bring out through perception interacts with other reds about it, and other possible reds beyond it, and this interaction bears its mark on the visible red even as the latter is extracted from the “web-matrix, the whole cloth, the *flesh*, of the world.”<sup>189</sup> By bringing together these invisible possibilities not chosen with those that are, we may be able to experience a vision of “a natural or non-arbitrary *unity*”<sup>190</sup>—one which exceeds our normative categories of coherence, and which consequently appears in “*ambiguous* richness and determinability.”<sup>191</sup> It is this inherent ambiguity that the ego continuously represses in its search for a coherent explanation. Thus in Dillon’s words, Merleau-Ponty regards

that which is to be analyzed, explained, understood, etc. [as] always the phenomena of the world we perceive in everyday experience. In the process of analysis/explanation, since it proceeds by means of language, an idealization takes place: the confused, ambiguous, overdetermined richness of perceptual experience is focused, clarified, determined, categorized. Specifically, the phenomenal object, which is perceived by us as in itself, is brought under the categories of consciousness and thing, immanence and transcendence, subject and object. [...] The problem is [that] by the processes of abstraction, polarization, determination, and reification [we] give rise to these second-order constructs and mistake them for first-order “underlying realities.” The ontological categories are literally misconceived and they generate the epistemological problems. Once the precept or phenomenon has been torn asunder, bifurcated into polarized and mutually exclusive categories, attempts to reconstruct it will necessarily fail.<sup>192</sup>

The burden of this ongoing process of separating and polarizing—this “sedimentation”—is overwhelming, as it “permeates our language, our thought, and the things themselves.”

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<sup>187</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible*, 131-133 (italics in the original).

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>189</sup> Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 155 (my italics).

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 67 (my italics).

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 68 (my italics).

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

Accordingly, for Merleau-Ponty, “there is no *epoché* capable of freeing us in one act of reflection from millennia of sediment; it is, rather, the work of a lifetime to perform the *akesis* required to dig out from under the conceptual weight of the dualist tradition.”<sup>193</sup> Such work that allows the revelation of the “flesh of things” would arguably be founded on a radical and sustained departure from our “natural” attitudes—on a series of “active and searching” gazes, which in Vivian Sobchack’s words, rest “not on the familiar forms or figures that vision has time and time again constituted, but rather on the latent visibility from which such figures emerge and against which they stand in relation to its latency.”<sup>194</sup>

Accessing such a revelatory vision also allows the perceiver to recognize that the “the phenomenal world is, at the most primordial level, a communal world.”<sup>195</sup> This world, Merleau-Ponty argues, “is (a) not a world I experience as my own: it is a world in which there is an indistinction of perspectives, a world from which the mine-alien or self-other distinction is absent. Furthermore, (b) this world of *syncretic sociability* is an infantile world which corresponds to a quality of experience that is lost with the development of the reflective awareness of perspectival differences between myself and other.”<sup>196</sup> For adults who manage to behold this world of “syncretic sociability,” the separation between subject and object is unraveled to a degree that they discover themselves bound by this vision—experientially intertwining through “the identity of the seer and the visible,” where “he *is of it*” and vice versa, as discernible parts belonging to the same flesh.<sup>197</sup> It is in this bond—this “chiasm”—that a certain unity beyond clear categorical separations becomes particularly palpable, for if “the hidden face of the cube radiates forth somewhere as well as does the face I have under my eyes, and coexists with it, and if I who see the cube also belong to the visible, I am visible from elsewhere, and if I and the cube are together caught up in one same ‘element’ (should we say of the seer, or of the visible?), this cohesion, this visibility by principle, prevails over every momentary discordance.”<sup>198</sup> Significantly, like Buber’s notion of the embrace, Merleau-Ponty also defines experiential intertwining in corporeal terms, such as that of one hand touching another (the double sensation of touching and being touched). This image allows him to

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>194</sup> Sobchack, *Address*, 90.

<sup>195</sup> Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 115.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 119 (my italics).

<sup>197</sup> Sobchack, *Address*, 134-135.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 140.

similarly subvert an idea of fusion between subject and object, while still maintaining their interconnectedness as corporeal ingredients of the same flesh—“a continuity between my body and the things surrounding me in the world I inhabit, [predicated on the assumption that] I can touch worldly things precisely because I am myself a worldly thing.”<sup>199</sup> It also points to the affective dimension of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological ontology, specifically on the question of love. Thus, for him, if individuation brings about a clear-cut separation between subject and object, then it is also the origin of alienation; yet the existence of a primordial experience of our phenomenal reality as one founded on communality, of touching and being touched, ensures the continued presence of “an archaic desire, oneiric longing for unity/completion.”<sup>200</sup> It is in this longing, and the ground that prompts it, where love becomes possible.

The aforementioned unitive state, in which the unraveling of categories of coherence leads the subject to sense an interconnectedness with an ambiguously unified vision, should not be taken as exposing the flesh of the world in its entirety. The source of experience is a corporeal being that perceives *from somewhere, and towards a particular horizon*. And even if the experience of the thing is informed through intersubjective relations, there is always a limit that denies omniscience. Thus the world is forever something that transcends us, even as we are able to achieve intimacy with its totality; or put differently, through envisioning the multitude of reds that exist within a particular red, we experience the reverberations of an “inexhaustible depth”<sup>201</sup> that is a world which our perception cannot encompass. In this respect, as the “horizon of all horizons,” the lived world “provides an abiding context of framework which establishes a locus in space, time, and meaning whose unity grounds the unity of the diverse adumbrations of the phenomenal theme appearing within it.”<sup>202</sup> As such, it becomes “Merleau-Ponty’s name for what others have called God or *Geist* or Being;”<sup>203</sup> it is also there where parallels to Buber’s conceptualization of the eternal Thou are most clearly manifest.

As previously established, the alleged order of unity of the phenomenal world which both these philosophical stances address is not divulged by intellection but by other means. Of these, art and aesthetics take on a privileged role in allowing us to sense this order through unitive states.

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<sup>199</sup> Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 159.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>201</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible*, 143.

<sup>202</sup> Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 80.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 79 (italics in the original).

Buber's advocacy of art, for one, seems at face value to undermine his criticism of a dynamic of objectification, of a dominant I-It relation. Indeed, every act of forming—artistic creation included—places a dangerous limitation on “streaming reality,” threatening to turn it into an ossified figure that denies its basic multifarious yet unified nature. Yet such risks are tolerated by Buber, primarily because he acknowledges that the Thou-as-word is, in itself, essentially a form, a framing within the manifold of being. And as an essential form, the Thou is necessary as a tool of revelation of that which cannot be fully abstracted, allowing human subjects to relate to the eternal Thou through a finite, albeit ambiguous presence. This capacity of the Thou is diminished, however, as it inevitably turns into an It, its contours hardening into a concept. It is this stage of form evolution to which Buber sternly opposes, rather than all modes of forming; and in this respect, as Zachary Braiterman has pointed out, his thought could be considered anti-form only in a “most limited sense.”<sup>204</sup>

The different stages of form evolution are rendered acutely visible for Buber in artistic creation, and in particular that of visual art, mainly because it does not emerge from intellectual processes so much as from one's bodily and affective relationship with the world. In *I and Thou*, he gives a telling explanation of exactly how such a creation unfolds. An artwork that matters, he argues, is not “invented” but “discovered” through a particular relation to the world, a meeting of Thou as an essential presence. Taking on the role of the artist, Buber describes this meeting as one in which

I can neither experience nor describe the form which meets me, but only body it forth. And yet I behold it, splendid in the radiance of what confronts me, clearer than all the clearness of the world which is experienced, I do not behold it as a thing among the “inner” things nor as an image of my “fancy,” but as that which exists in the present. If test is made of its objectivity the form is certainly not “there.” Yet what is actually so much present as it is? And the relation in which I stand to it is real, for it affects me, as I affect it.

For Buber, the meeting of the Thou is what drives the aesthetic experience (as creation and reception). When the artist enters into an I-Thou relationship with the lived world, an ambiguously unified form is disclosed. Because form (a Thou) is contained in the coordinates of the particular meeting, this disclosure necessarily entails a sacrifice: namely, “the obliteration” of “the endless possibility that is offered up on the altar of the form,” the exclusion of all other possible meetings

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<sup>204</sup> Zachary Braiterman, “Martin Buber and the Art of Ritual,” in *New Perspectives on Martin Buber*, ed. Michael Zank (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 123.



beyond the “exclusiveness” of this meeting, which nevertheless are themselves included in the manifold of being. Yet while this “sacrifice” still maintains the integrity of the I-Thou relation, the act of transporting form into an artform might not. Thus, in “lead[ing] the form across—into the world of *It*”<sup>205</sup>—the artist may cause it to be hardened into a “structure”<sup>206</sup> and distance the artwork from the original relation. But since the traces of that relation are never fully banished, and structure always “longs”<sup>207</sup> for its return, the artwork “from time to time [...] can face the receptive beholder in its whole embodied form.”<sup>208</sup> At this new moment of encounter, as the spectator enters into an “embrace” with the artwork, the elements of the “ordered world” begin to “thaw, catch fire, and become presence. They radiate and burn IT up. IT turns into [THOU], object to presence, matter into spirit.”<sup>209</sup>

Thus explained, the disclosure of a revelatory vision seems to rely solely on the desire of the spectator to respond to an invitation from the artwork’s underlining form, and is independent of aesthetic considerations. Indeed, aesthetics seem to be of minor concern to Buber’s project in *I and Thou*. Yet if one takes his oeuvre as a whole, it is possible to see an abiding interest in aesthetics, and especially those of painting, that extends as far back as the philosopher’s early school days.<sup>210</sup> Taken in this context, Buber’s approach to art privileged certain aesthetic strategies as ones which, like the word “Thou,” were more proximate to the essential forms and their attendant relations—which, in the words of Margaret Olin, have “discarded the representation of sensory data in favor of a relationship to them.”<sup>211</sup> Such, for example, was the case of his study of Jewish artist Lesser Ury, first published in 1901, over twenty years before Buber’s magnum opus, *I and Thou*. Here Buber particularly commends Ury’s “coloristic poeticization.”<sup>212</sup> In Buber’s mind, Ury does not want to produce an image of reality as the sum of disparate objects, but rather wishes to assert the “the reciprocity of things,” believing that once you “connect a being to all

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<sup>205</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 10 (italics in the original).

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>209</sup> Braiterman, “Martin Buber,” 120.

<sup>210</sup> Margaret Olin, *The Nation without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 101-126.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>212</sup> Martin Buber, “Lesser Ury,” in *The First Buber: Youthful Zionist Writings of Martin Buber*, ed. Gilya G. Schmidt (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 72.

beings, [...] you tease out its most essential.”<sup>213</sup> In pursuing this goal, Ury consequently attempts “to dissolve the uniqueness and emotional states of the represented being in color nuances.”<sup>214</sup> Such dissolution is inherent to color as color, since only it “can tell about air and sun, fog and shadows: it puts the thing in context; it awakens the underlying harmony.” Accordingly, it seems that the unifying effect of color is mostly existent within the visual presentation of a natural landscape. Thus, in Ury’s landscapes, “color is the indisputable sole ruler. Here he can truly communicate the soul of the landscape, which reveals itself in the reciprocal effect of the elements, in the reciprocal shades, musings, clarifications, and deepening. The soul of a tree is the continual transformation of a tree. A moment in which a thousand lifefloods are mixed.”<sup>215</sup> It is at these particular renderings that Ury turns into an “ecstatic”—“color becomes God for him, an everpresent God, whom he sees in visions. [...] He does not limit the area of color; he wants to present everything as color. His work is an abstraction of everything that does not have color value.”<sup>216</sup> Consequently, the artist also invites his audience members to surrender to the unified vision of color and become ecstasies themselves.

Yet while Buber’s trust in the capacity of visual art to induce Ekstasis—not only for the artist, but also for the spectator—will continue throughout his life, the aesthetic devices that should be used in prompting this state become more diversified as his writing unfolds. Thus, as opposed to his early interest in color’s ability to dissolve a landscape into a general atmosphere of connectedness—of *Stimmung*, to use a term that was then in vogue—during his later years he turned to other aesthetic approaches, for example that of the isolated black-and-white portraits of natural objects created by another well-known Jewish painter (and architect), Leopold Krakauer. As Olin explains, Buber appreciated Krakauer’s anthropomorphic renderings of still life “because they conveyed the sense of the confrontation with nature as the encounter with a being rather than the representation of an object.” Finely etched and thoroughly detailed, a Krakauer portrait of a thistle, for example, may have spoken of solitude rather than provided an image of togetherness. Yet in capturing this inherent solitude, according to Buber, what is discovered is a bond that

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 66. Interestingly, to the extent that Buber regards Ury as ecstatic, he also defines him as “truly a Jewish artist.” This definition, for the young Buber, was founded on the (essentialist) claim that “a yearning struggle of boundlessness and the feeling of the boundless world unity [...] were at all times the basic powers of the Jewish people. Ibid., 83.

connects the object to a subject's existential solitude, one that allows for an intimate dialogue with the world to come alive—"an intense personal encounter in close up"<sup>217</sup> with reality for both artist and viewer.

Merleau-Ponty's interest in aesthetics is most clearly present in his last published essay "Eye and Mind" (1961), which he wrote during the preparation of his most explicit account of phenomenological ontology—*The Visible and the Invisible*. Continuing his life-long struggle against the dominance of conceptual thought, Merleau-Ponty reasserts in this context that the "profane vision" of scientific mentality denies a primordial "'there is' [...], the soil of the sensible and humanly modified world such as it is in our lives for our bodies."<sup>218</sup> In contrast, he argues, "art, especially painting, draws upon this fabric brute meaning which operationalism would prefer to ignore."<sup>219</sup> In a description that mirrors Buber's, Merleau-Ponty depicts the act of painting as one in which the painter "practices a magical theory of vision. He [sic] is obliged to admit that objects before him pass into him or else that [...] the mind goes out through the eyes to wander among objects." This is not the objectifying gaze of the scientist that reduces an entity like a mountain into a discrete empirical thing. Rather, the relationship between subject and object is one of exploratory reciprocity, where "it is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter; it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze."<sup>220</sup> The invitation "extended" by the mountain is one which asks the painter "to unveil the means, visible and not otherwise, by which it makes itself mountain before our eyes [and which] exist only at the threshold of profane vision"<sup>221</sup>—or in more forceful terms, to "break the 'skin of things' to show how the things become things, how the world becomes world."<sup>222</sup> In doing so, the painter exposes the mysterious principle of total and ambiguous interconnectedness, as indicated in this oft-quoted passage:

When through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them... I cannot say that the water itself—the aqueous power, the syrupy and shimmering element—is *in* space; all this is not somewhere else either, but it is not in the pool. It inhabits it, is materialized there, yet is not contained there; and if I lift my eyes toward the screen of cypresses where the

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<sup>217</sup> Olin, *Nation*, 124.

<sup>218</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 122.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

web of reflections plays, I must recognize that the water visits it as well, or at least sends out to it its active, living essence.<sup>223</sup>

Thus envisaged, the goal of painting is to unravel conceptual barriers, bringing to the fore those invisible connections that line the visibility of our normative perception. By performing this revelation, in turn, the artwork is also capable of bestowing upon the subject a sense of being in intimate communion with the representation.<sup>224</sup> Though such unitive experiences are grounded in certain phenomenological-ontological realities, for Merleau-Ponty their realization is nevertheless contingent on a proper use of aesthetics. For example, in his analysis of both the content and attendant painting reproductions of the essay's original publication, Galen Johnson points to the lingering influence Paul Cézanne had on Merleau-Ponty's thinking, which in this context focuses on the artist's late watercolors of Mont Sainte-Victoire. According to Johnson, what attracted Merleau-Ponty to these pictorial renditions was

the many shifting planes superimposed on top of each other or blended into one another together with their differing levels of depth [that] are more prominently visible than in Cézanne's oils. The orchestration of color harmonies from the transparencies of each color modulates toward more delicate and less resounding chords, such as we find in the modulation of blue, green, and pink in the painting selected by Merleau-Ponty. Moreover, the blank spaces of white paper are not filled in, but are more and less brilliant highlights, unifying visible with invisible. [...] Without losing the objectivity of his oil paintings, both these features of Cézanne's watercolors draw our attention to the surface composition of the painter's late work and its sublimity and spirituality rather than the features of mass, monumentality, and solidity.<sup>225</sup>

Where Merleau-Ponty's interrogation of Cézanne's painting—which resonates with Buber's reading of Ury's paintings and his own description of red in the passage quoted above—reveals a unity that is disclosed through the indivisibility of color, other artists are included in “Eye and

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>224</sup> As such, Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic model has striking similarities with the one presented in Mikel Dufrenne's earlier phenomenological study on aesthetics (1953). In this voluminous study, Dufrenne argues that every aesthetic object expresses a world, which is “like the soul of the represented world” (190), and exposes through it the represented world's organizing sense of unity, “a truth which compels the spectator to yield to its revelation” (225). In yielding, the spectator enters into “an act of communion to which I bring the entirety of my being” and acquire “an intimacy with what the object expresses” (406). Such depth of intimacy renders visible the common bond of “being in the world” (177) that connects the human subject to aesthetic object—an affective a-priori, that “mysterious splendor of being that precedes men [sic] and objects” (225) and determines their relationship. See: Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (1953; repr., Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

<sup>225</sup> Galen A. Johnson, “Ontology and Painting: Eye and Mind,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 40.

Mind” for employing dissimilar aesthetic strategies towards similar ends. For Merleau-Ponty, Paul Klee employs lines “as a distinct element of composition in creating a hieroglyphic or sign system against a subdued background of color;” Henri Matisse’s “linear arabesques,” on the other hand, “move toward simplification, in which the power of a single organic line discloses the essence of a scene.” In both cases, the phenomenologist finds an explicit attack against “the mechanical, prosaic line of Renaissance perspective painting and drawing as a form of domination that imposes a fixed univocal perspective of godlike survey.” This linear attitude is replaced with a “flexuous line” that “sets in motion a certain disequilibrium within the space of a surface,” and consequently invites us into the “chiasm between the visible and invisible.”<sup>226</sup>

In bringing the philosophies of Merleau-Ponty and Buber together, what therefore becomes apparent is their shared phenomenological-ontological claims of an order of unity to our lived world that often proves inaccessible due to the sedimentation of categorical thinking, and of art’s ability to reveal that unity through unitive experiences. Bazin’s film theory, it has been argued, makes similar claims. Where these thinkers diverge, however, is in the object of their aesthetic interrogation; yet this divergence is not insurmountable when attempting to synthesize the three views. Such synthesis would move away from Bazin’s exclusive emphasis on film as a revelatory medium, and join Merleau-Ponty’s and Buber’s proposition that other artforms may have the capacity for revelation. It would also recognize the possibility that Bazin was correct in his assertion that film may have greater success at prompting unitive states because, in the words of phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne, it “impress[es] itself much more forcefully upon our vision” than other visual arts,<sup>227</sup> presenting image as reality and consequently inviting us to assume the irrational stance of faith. Beyond questions of medium specificity, the juxtaposition of these theories also highlights a critical necessity to foreground the significant role of style in effecting unitive experiences, and to look at aesthetics broadly rather than narrowly in relation to said objective. This latter point is of particular relevance when considering Bazin’s emphasis on “realism” over “abstraction” in reference to photographic media’s revelatory role. Such a proposition seems unduly limited in light of the artistic examples provided by Buber and Merleau-Ponty, which rely on both “realist” *and* “abstract” styles in the context of aesthetic unitive experiences, as well as of subsequent film studies theories that undervalue realism as means of

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>227</sup> Dufrenne, *Phenomenology*, 28.

triggering such “spiritual” epiphanies.<sup>228</sup> In addition, even if one accepts Bazin’s position that “realism” is the style most appropriate to capitalize on cinema’s ability for disclosure, it is worth noting that the term itself yields different aesthetic approaches within the writer’s own work, ranging from the more ascetic (as in the oeuvre of Robert Bresson) to the more fantastic (as in Albert Lamorisse’s *The Red Balloon* [1956]).<sup>229</sup> Moving away from an essentialist prescriptive position, then, we would do well to recognize the existence of a range of potentially “revelatory styles,” and to point to historical and cultural contingency as a main factor in the realization of this potential, considering that “revelations” are always already dependent on the participation of a perceiver with a particular “localized” frame of reference. This understanding underlies the attempt of Judaic-themed Israeli cinema to induce experiences of revelation by drawing on the tradition of Jewish mystical thought and expression with which its Israeli audiences are (increasingly) familiar. It is in this framework that a spectrum of aesthetic resources—extending from straightforward presentations of the wondrous to enigmatic images of the everyday—becomes readily available for adaptation through cinematic means, amplifying the medium’s inherent capacity to draw out a “faithful” spectatorial response.

The example of Judaic-themed Israeli cinema finally brings us back to the issue of mysticism and its relevance to a model of filmic unitive states. Indeed, though sharing similar assertions, out of the three thinkers discussed above, only Buber seems to speak the language of mysticism;<sup>230</sup> Merleau-Ponty does not, and even “the mystic” Bazin prefers to abstain from

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<sup>228</sup> Avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage offered such a theory in his attempt to assert the importance of an abstract style in achieving a fuller and truer revelation of the world than that which is supposedly provided by “the ‘absolute realism’ of the motion picture image” (125). Taking on a stance reminiscent of Buber’s and Merleau-Ponty’s, Brakhage imagines his age as one “which artificially seeks to project itself materialistically into abstract space and to fulfill itself mechanically because it has blinded itself to almost all external reality within eyesight and to the organic awareness of even the physical movement properties of its own perceptibility” (121). In order to counter such tendencies, the true artist, according to him, should operate differently: he or she must imagine and actualize “an eye unrulled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception.” As a result of this artistic activity, what would be revealed is “a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. [...] a world before the ‘beginning was the word’” (120). Brakhage, “From *Metaphors on Vision*,” in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1978).

<sup>229</sup> Bazin, “Le Journal;” Bazin, “Virtues.” For a discussion of these variations in Bazin’s writing, see: Morgan, “Rethinking Bazin.”

<sup>230</sup> In the mid-1910s, Buber publicly dissociated himself from “mysticism,” defining it as oppositional to his developing dialogical philosophy. This dissociation is challenged by Israel Koren, however, on the grounds that it is based on Buber’s terminological reduction of mysticism to the experience of complete and undifferentiated mystical union. If one moves away from this narrow definition of unio mystica, however, then it becomes evident that, in Koren’s words, “the sphere of true life to which Buber pointed is the sphere of mystical life” and that this

referencing mystical terminology. In light of film studies' traditional reliance, from Bazin onwards, on a "secularized" phenomenology,<sup>231</sup> why then should we consider Buber's brand of existential mysticism helpful for our discussion of these states within a cinematic framework? It is undeniably relevant in relation to experiences of audiences that are culturally predisposed towards mystical traditions. Yet can it not be significant for a generalized model as well? A possible reply to these questions may arrive from confronting the fundamental reason why mystical thought has been excluded from theoretical elaborations on spectatorship in the first place: namely, the belief that a model of "scientific" value cannot incorporate any claims that relate spectatorial "epiphanies" to divine origin. Such a position, from a phenomenological-ontological standpoint, could be countered by asserting that even if an explanatory model for unitive states were to base itself solely on traditional phenomenology, its claims would never yield more than "imperfect knowledge."<sup>232</sup> Thus, to the extent that one accepts an order of unity as a phenomenological-ontological truth, one must also admit that there will always be something transcendent to our finite ability to conceive of it. And if one accepts that, then the issue of whether this unity is of "divine" or "natural" origin becomes moot—or rather, a question of a "localized" frame of reference, of discourse, of belief system (or Faith). Accordingly, since origin fails to act as proper grounds for exclusion, what seems more useful in engaging filmic unitive states is an inclusive approach, one which traces experiential similarities across different "localized" frameworks that contextualize these states a posteriori and arguably shape them a priori (in the sense that we can never fully unravel our categories of coherence). With this in mind, Buberian philosophy<sup>233</sup> emerges as an important ingredient to the proposed model of cinematic spectatorship, not only because it speaks, like traditional phenomenology, of a unifying order, but because it allows us to consider this order's experiences away from the overly restrictive "secular" perspective of phenomenology, and of the film scholarship that used it as a theoretical underpinning.<sup>234</sup>

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mystical bent only grew during the dialogical period, when Buber began to address in earnest the supposed presence of God in the human relational dynamics. See: Koren, *The Mystery*, 160.

<sup>231</sup> See, for example: Andrew, *Major Film Theories*, 142-152; Sobchack, *Address*.

<sup>232</sup> Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 2.

<sup>233</sup> Here Buber's philosophy is more helpful than those of Benjamin and Levinas, previously discussed, because of its emphasis on an experience of unity and its relationship to *unio mystica*. The influence Buber had on these other two thinkers, however, does not invalidate their contribution to further developing the model at hand. On the connections and distinctions between these philosophers, see for example: Andrew Kelly, "Reciprocity and the Height of God: A Defense of Buber against Levinas," *Sophia* 34, no. 1 (1995): 65-73.

<sup>234</sup> This restrictive position is explicitly manifest, for example, in Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological study of cinema, *Carnal Thoughts*, where she confesses to being "an unrelenting atheist" for whom "the unfathomable

Looking through Buber at unitive experiences allows us to extend our theoretical reach and bring into view a wide array of descriptions of Jewish unio mystica states. For example, amongst certain Hasidic thinkers such as R. Jacob Joseph of Polonne (1710-1784) and Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz (1728-1790), an emphasis was placed on unitive states through Avoda Bagishmiut—the performance of worldly chores. According to such thinking, when chores are performed while mentally focusing on God, the subject clings to the physical as it becomes unified with—and is illuminated by—the divine (the act of *Yichud*). Such experiences, it should be noted, maintain “identity in difference,” in the sense that neither vision nor self are experienced as dissolving into an undifferentiated being.<sup>235</sup> A similar sense of moderation is found in the *Zohar*’s symbolic-visionary depiction of a state of clinging along the lines of the erotic pairing (*Zivug*) with the female part of divinity (Shekhina), which in turn prompts the latter to mate with the male part (or the King, *Hamelech*); or along the lines of kissing God’s lips in a manner that causes “the mouths to intermingle and interpenetrate during the kiss.”<sup>236</sup> In these instances, again, the mystical experience is not one of “full unification with divinity [...]. [It] does not cause the private soul to disappear but engenders the feeling of being filled with blessing, which also bestows divine bounties upon [...] the other parts of reality, which come to drink from the godly well.”<sup>237</sup> More immoderate experiences of unity are found in writings of such kabbalists as Yitzhak ben Shmuel d’min from Akko, who described unio mystica as a process where a drop of water is absorbed into the ocean. Within this image, clinging “is not the final stop of the mystical way. Beyond it lies the ‘ocean’ which lures the mystic to complete his spiritual journey through an ecstatic drowning.”<sup>238</sup> Similarly, Chabad Hasidism spoke of an extreme sense of unification, “self-sacrifice” (*Mesirut Nefesh*), where the mystic is swallowed by the mouth of God and consequently loses himself in

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mystery of our own material being is *not* meant in any transcendental or religious sense” (296). Significantly, to the extent that Sobchack uses traditional phenomenology (and especially that of Merleau-Ponty) as a way of grounding her critical exclusion, she also obliquely reveals this philosophical school’s own biases against religious experience. These biases, it should be noted, were addressed in recent decades as a result of phenomenology’s so-called “theological turn.” For more on this turn, see: Dominique Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”*: *The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

<sup>235</sup> See: Margolin, *Human Temple*, 216-287; Koren, *Mystery*, 222-234.

<sup>236</sup> Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Issues Forth from Eden: On the Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2005), 352. See also: Margolin, *Human Temple*, 232; Daniel Abrams, *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2004), 141-152.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>238</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah*, 85-86. See also: Hellner-Eshed, *A River*, 329.



boundless unity.<sup>239</sup> Along comparable terms, the *Zohar* spoke of the mystic's experience of rising towards an eye that projects a white light—"an eye that is white inside white and white that includes all white."<sup>240</sup> This white light, as Melila Hellner-Eshed explains,

is the profoundest expression of divine grace, of the unifying divine quality that precedes all language or religion. The meaning behind the desire to experience this light is connected to the wish of transcending reality's distinctions and touching the source from which all emerged, as part of an erotic impulse to draw this quality into reality. In the wish for the white light there is also a different side—the desire to be assimilated and swallowed into divinity, which includes a death wish, or perhaps a merciful death; a separation of life from the body, out of a powerful passion to trace the origin of reality, so as to become a part of it.<sup>241</sup>

It may be that unitive states that unravel categorical separations are not reflective of any phenomenological-ontological truth; that they *should* be considered naive, if not downright delusional. In light of evidence to their existence in aesthetic engagements, this perspective should not stop film studies scholars from mapping them out and locating the general characteristics of their particular Ekstasis; nor should it prevent them from looking at the rich descriptive language of mysticism for ways to speak about these experiences, not only in reference to spectators who are inundated in this language, but in relation to those who are removed from it. Where the proposition that such states expose a certain truth *does* provide us with some added value, however, is in potentially giving credence to the insight that they yield within a cinematic setting. By entertaining this possibility, it may become feasible to consider these filmic moments, generously and on their own terms, as instances of illumination, revealing a fundamental unity that encompasses the lived world. Under such narrow provisions, the cinema that "bears away our faith" to these ends comes close in its operation to that of the traditional Hasidic tale, which sought to bridge the seemingly disparate notes of our perceived reality through a "melody of faith." And in so doing, this cinema also offers us a new front through which to contemplate the meaning and limits of our own spectatorial credulity.

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<sup>239</sup> Elior, *Paradoxical Ascent*, 185-190; Idel, *Kabbalah*, 88-91.

<sup>240</sup> Hellner-Eshed, *A River*, 323.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 323-324.

## 6.0 AFTERWORD

Over the past two decades, the landscape of Judaism within Israeli society has undergone a significant transformation. Israel's secular precincts, once bearers of the national ethos of Zionism and its halfhearted repressions of Judaic life, are now manifesting a veritable "Jewish Renaissance." No longer is Judaism something that must be sublimated and displaced through the parameters of the Zionist "civil religion;" rather it has become legitimate for this constituency to pursue Jewish religion unabashedly and with fervor through a range of engagements and a variety of emphases. Concurrently, as Israeli dominant culture came to embrace Judaism, Israel's religious sector, once marginalized by this very culture, has gradually found (implicit or explicit) ways to enter into its midst. Even if not often carried to the extreme of abandoning religion, such adaptive measures are nevertheless unprecedented in Israeli history, and divulge a profound recognition by observant Israeli Jews of the dangers of treating Judaism as a static entity that must be followed through fundamentalist scripturalism. This movement towards reconciliation between Israeli secularism and Judaism, however, is accompanied by an opposing movement that is also very much present in Israeli life—one which pulls these sides away from each other, marking the gap between them as unbridgeable. Indeed, even at the moment of writing these lines, two tragic events performed by extremist Israeli Haredim—the stabbing of six marchers in the Jerusalem Gay Pride Parade, and the firebombing of a Palestinian home in Kfar Duma—seem to have rekindled this polarizing image and caused its replication through a string of public protests and debates.<sup>1</sup> It is in this conjunction of coming together and pulling apart that one is able to best sense a fundamental ambivalence around how to relate to the Judaic in the Israeli setting—a question that has not been broached so forcefully, and with such great urgency, until recent times.

Judaic-themed Israeli films, a novel phenomenon in the young history of Israeli cinema, seem geared towards answering this query, and as a result are marked by its underlying ambivalence. Whether dealing with such topics as the existence and character of God, the nature of gender and sexual relations, the dynamics of communal and personal ritual, or the tensions

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Oded Carmeli, "Garbuz was Right: Religious Extremism Will Destroy Israel" [Hebrew], *Mako*, August 4, 2015, accessed August 5, 2015 <http://www.mako.co.il/video-blogs-oded-carmeli/Article-8e7c11edd83fe41006.htm>.

between Israeli-religious and Israeli-secular social realities, these works rarely provide clear-cut answers. Rather, even when avowedly upholding a one-sided position, they seem particularly unstable as texts, drawing Judaism and secularism away from each other even as they are brought in tandem (and vice versa). The resulting uncertainty seems to act as the background, and arguably the catalyst, for an appeal to mystical experience, much as it has always been within Judaic tradition.<sup>2</sup> Inspired by similar appeals in other parts of contemporary Israeli culture, Judaic-themed Israeli cinema may be said to look toward mysticism for an avenue of liberation—a state where the basic coordinates that govern secular-religious relations and render it (at times cripplingly) ambivalent may be unraveled, and where a greater unity, one of far-reaching mystery rather than synthesis of known terms, may be achieved. This nod takes place on the level of content and form, relying on the capability of its audience (the Israeli-Jewish at least) to pick up on culturally-determined mystical cues, and on cinema’s innate “magical” capacity to induce states that defy our commonsensical understanding of the world. Such states may indeed be deemed (ontologically) false and (psychologically) credulous; in the spirit of ambivalence, the films tend to fluctuate on the validity of these propositions, even within themselves. Yet where a common bond of agreement may be found through this corpus, it is in the belief that mystical experiences can have some social usefulness within the Israeli—and perhaps even the global—context.

In his volume *The Mystical Society*, sociologist Philip Wexler addressed the growing global investment in mysticism, and attempted to tease out its “emerging social vision.” Looking at a variety of mystical practices across diverse contemporary cultural settings, Wexler argues that they coalesce around certain key features: “reorganizing the internal self, through work aimed at transcending time and space; choosing as a goal to create a more flexible ego, even if not dissolving it completely; demonstrating how a person can be simultaneously present in this and other worlds; and adjusting the self so that it would remain more open to relationships and more connected to a greater and more absolute universe, which provides meaning and vitality.”<sup>3</sup> These features speak to a different mode of subjectivity than the one commonly found within contemporary society, and which stresses stability as means of self-protection. Instead “of this protected subject, we discover

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, R. Nachman of Bratslav’s emphasis, within an ontological-mystical context, on “overwhelming uncertainty [as] a necessary first step in attaining true understanding of the world; only when one begins to search beyond appearances can one see the glimmering of the divine—indeed among the shadowy forms of one’s own world.” Wisnik-Elper, *Tradition and Fantasy*, 170.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Wexler, *The Mystical Society: An Emerging Social Vision* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing, 2007), 42.

a subject that is without boundaries and a subject that shatters its own boundaries, which evolves from the tradition of worldly mysticism that influences current everyday life.”<sup>4</sup> Under the effect of mystical states, personhood is therefore no longer seen as disconnected from its surrounding reality, human or otherwise, through conceptual barriers; nor does it appear to suffer from the experience of “mechanical ossification” and a consequent “alienation.”<sup>5</sup> Rather, by undergoing “transformation” practices, an opportunity is arguably afforded for the subject “to be reborn into the fullness of being”<sup>6</sup>—to be rejuvenated and sacralized through existing phenomenologically “in a broader and quivering life of energy and the cosmic ‘self.’”<sup>7</sup>

For Wexler, however, the mystical should not be reduced to some form of solipsistic rejuvenation, but must be seen instead, from a contemporary global perspective, as laying the foundations for a new form of social reality. The basis of this form is, again, the “evolving life pattern of a boundless and flexible self, which is no longer bound in the coordinates of time and space, and which goes on an internal journey of interconnection past the boundaries of the lone person.”<sup>8</sup> As a result of this journey, “the partition between inside and outside is worn down, and the processes of the self are gradually intertwined with social meanings and dynamics.” The dialogue of sociality that supposedly emerges in this novel context is quite antithetical to the conventional form of dialogue, “for the exchange is not about the trading of words between social subjects, but about the transmission of a meaningful experience between self and environment.”<sup>9</sup> Consequently, a system of social codification is replaced by a form of “social energy,” of tapping into a supposed fluid and integrative level of Being where “relations are no longer founded on the social currencies of belief and expectation, or even of consciousness, but on the wealth of materials related to vitality, physical breath and fluids, [...] [relations that] are not substitutions but transformations [...] of matter to energy, as we would say if using a different terminology.” To the extent that this “alchemy [...] of an expanded process of social interaction” is realized today, it does not conform to any traditional definition of a social movement: it is a movement of personal efforts that are nevertheless cognizant of their relations in the world, a “decentered and diffused”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 48.

structure that nevertheless attempts to maintain a sense of communality. According to Wexler, the fact that such social behavior is presently thriving serves as an indication that a “mystical society” is “not entirely ‘imaginary;’”<sup>11</sup> and while it is too soon to determine their greater potential, he nevertheless locates in these humble beginnings a welcomed “microcosmic model for a revolutionary social change.”<sup>12</sup>

As far reaching as it is evocative, Wexler’s understanding of contemporary mysticism is not without its blind spots. He argues, for one, that the present postmodern state of diffusion, coupled with the rise of virtual information technology, has already created an experience of boundlessness, which the current appeals to mysticism feed upon and expand; an opposing view, however, would see this perception of postmodernism as over-stated, and would stress the continued presence of principal cultural terms (for example secularity and religion) within today’s “virtual” environment, albeit in a less firmly dialectical and more ambivalent way than before. Furthermore, Wexler’s attempt to trace such mystical experiences to New Age spirituality, and through them to imagine this social phenomenon as embodying the revolutionary potential of his “microcosmic model,” seems overextended. In contrast, one could also argue that the lingering presence of cultural terms of coherence even in the most extreme of New Age mystical experiences has opened the way for their subsequent cooption into the preexisting modes of social relations. Thus envisaged, the less conservative expressions of the New Age still seem too constricted by conventional discursive categories so as to provide the revolutionary alternative of which Wexler speaks (the dictum “spiritual but not religious,” for example, shows how much spirituality continues to rely on religion for its self-definition); while its more conservative variations, on the other hand, follow the traditions of historical mysticism and explicitly use mystical experience to reaffirm orthodox social and belief systems.<sup>13</sup>

Judaic-themed Israeli cinema appears to recognize these difficulties, and hence often features mystical experiences, at the very best, as neither easily instigated nor effortlessly sustained, and at the very worst, as doomed from the start in their struggle against the very building blocks that structure our social consciousness and wall it in. Yet while these films may not be as optimistic as Wexler’s account, they nevertheless share his lingering commitment to a certain kind

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example: Zinnbauer et al., “Religion and Spirituality,” 561; Persico, “Neo-Hasidic Revival,” 296-299; Garb, “*The Chosen will Become Herds*,” 71-98.

of “social vision.” Their continuous courting of mysticism seems to hold tentative hope of both cinema’s ability to induce mystical experiences in the being of its spectators and of these experiences’ ability to institute greater social change. Thus, though mired in the ambivalence of Israel’s religious-secular landscape, Judaic-themed cinema’s gaze nevertheless extends towards a radical horizon, “which has a certain Archimedean value, if not utopian”<sup>14</sup>—a beyond of mystical social existence founded on the continuous subversion of discursive systems, including those theologies that undergird mysticism itself. It heralds not a departure from the world, but from its limiting conceptual terms, so as to locate a unity within it, illuminated by a flash of a once hidden light.

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<sup>14</sup> Wexler, *Mystical Society*, 153.

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