

Presentation title as announced in Program Book: “*Haredi Films from the Israeli Popular Collection at Arizona State University*” by Rachel Leket-Mor

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Description

The current demand for appropriate entertaining titles in the Haredi community in Israel is reflected, among other things, in the growing movie industry led by Haredi producers and directors. This interesting sub-genre of popular Israeli cinema, consisting of male-only actors, is intended for the whole family. Therefore, not only these movies are approved as “G-rated” by rabbis, they are also sold in a CD-Rom format, since in many Haredi households computers are welcome as a work tool, while DVD players are not allowed for religious reasons. Main themes of this genre include, quite surprisingly, quite a lot of military stories (some of them describing adventures of Israeli Mossad agents), comedies, contemporary dramas with Haredi happy endings, Hassidic tales, historical documentaries, as well as “women movies” with moving stories and heartbreaking endings. The presentation will feature segments of some movies and discuss their significance in academic collections as authentic portrayal of Haredi culture in Israel.

Haredi Movies on CD-Roms: Current Trends in Israeli Cinema

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Haredi Movies on CD-Roms are sub-category of the Israeli Popular Literature Collection at Arizona State University. Like the other materials in this collection, these films are products of a sub-culture which is not part of the Israeli canon or “official” culture. They are not featured in movie theaters, they are not reviewed in professional outlets or even in dailies, and they are not collected in libraries. These films are not sold in just any bookstore or media store in Israel, but in Haredi stores or stands only. However, these films not only feature interesting social and cultural aspects of the Haredi sector, but they also reveal the problematic relationships between this and other sectors, mainly the secular one, in the Israeli society.

The link inserted in Slide 1 leads to a short segment from a documentary film made by Shelomo Hazan for the Israeli Channel 10, *Hared le-Sirto – FILM FANATIC (2006)*, about the producer Yehuda Grovais; a translation to the Hebrew monolog is available in Slide 2.

Slide 2

The speaker is Yehuda Grovais, who truly epitomizes the Haredi film industry. He started his career in the 1990s as a film director, producer *and* actor together with his brother (now he is operating by himself), and since then he released dozens of movies – over 50 of them. The 50-minute documentary *Hared le-Sirto*, made by director Shelomo Hazan, was screened at the 2007 San Francisco Jewish Film Festival.

The challenges Grovais is talking about are posed by the film establishment in Israel – which is mostly secular. This establishment is made of film makers' clique as well as different foundations whose support he seek out. The foundations usually would support what they regard as “quality” films. Their lectors are looking for personal style that exposes the inner world of the director through a not-told-before story; they are looking for directors' attempts to break through genre conventions.

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These links include information on some Israeli film foundations. The first is of the Israel Film Fund, who is “committed to further develop the conditions for a sustainable, creative and vibrant Israeli Film Industry.” In the Industry Guide offered by the Israel Film Fund there is no trace to Grovais or his colleagues.

Gesher Foundation is the one Grovais attempted to apply for support: “Gesher (Hebrew for bridge) is an educational organization committed to strengthening the fabric of Israeli society through the appreciation of our shared Jewish heritage and common destiny.” Their Multicultural Film Fund page claims that “the Fund acts in response to the breach between the Israeli multiculturalism and the way it is represented in film and on TV.” Grovais did not get funded through Gesher, but the documentary made *about* him was supported by this fund.

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On the other hand, Grovais is challenged by his own community. Grovais comes from the Gur Hassidic community, which is part of the greater Haredi community in Israel. This community is made of Litvaks, Hassidim, and Sephardi groups (including Mizrahi Shas) – all together they constitute a community of about 800,000 out of the 5.4 million Jews in Israel. This is quite a diverse group, of which the Edah Haredit is the strictest one.

Although the Edah accounts for only 1.25% of the Haredi community in large (and doesn't even get to be 1% of the Israeli population), it's certainly the most vocal; its Bet Din Tsedek (Badats) kashrut and halachic rulings are the most valued among the Haredim.

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The prestige attached to Badats rulings makes them authoritative in the Haredi community. Badats announcements – as other rabbinic and commercial ads – are communicated through pashkevils (print

announcements affixed to bill-boards and buildings), as the Edah doesn't have newspapers or websites. Badats rulings are meant to purposely preserve the everlasting truth of "Anything new is prohibited by the Torah" (Rabbi Moshe Sofer), however they are in conflict with modernization and Israelization tendencies in the larger Haredi community.

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Movie watching is certainly one of the most banned leisure activities – and any time not spent on Torah study is absolutely "wasted" time as far as the Edah is concerned. However, this ban is repeated again and again on pashkevils, which means that movies are a great source of temptation in the Haredi community. It also means that not everybody obeys the ban.

I still remember how in the 1980s Haredi friends of my parents' friends bought their first TV set to hide it away in their bedroom closet. They had to be guided through movie and TV shows watching – they literally had to be educated how to conceptualize visual conventions.

Mainstream movies pose a great danger to the Haredi community as they present unwanted visual images and deliver non-Jewish and non-Haredi life style values. However, it's difficult to completely stay away from facets of Modern life in Israel when Haredi and secular cultures literally get in touch daily in the streets, hospitals, government agencies, etc, not to mention the Teshuva movement in general, and famous past cultural icons as Uri Zohar or Pupik Arnon who became born-again Jews.

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Grovais tried to bypass the ban by offering his fellow Haredi community members movies that are adapted to their values. The link included in Slide 7 shows another segment from the documentary done about him – on Youtube.

So what are the modifications for the Haredi community? First, the movies are not distributed to movie theatres or TV stations; and even not on DVDs – but on CD-Roms.

Slide 8

Why CD-Roms? Because Haredi households in Israel wouldn't have DVD players or TV sets – at least not in the living room – but would have computers for study or work purposes. Many Haredi women in Israel are the only or main breadwinner at home, be it in the education system or high-tech industry; some work at home, some in all-female all-Haredi high-tech companies (like Citybook), and some in the "outer" world, in the general Israeli market. Some even have their own international businesses. Naturally, the more one is exposed to another culture, the more he or she is influenced by it. The Haredim are indeed influenced by the Israeli culture, not necessarily the secular one.

The Israelization process through which the Haredi society is going includes learning English (either in school or through private teachers), acquiring professional degrees and occupations as well as academic

careers, finding academic books about the Shoah as well as guide books for martial life in bookstores, reporting domestic violence, being involved with rescue efforts after terrorist attacks (ZAKA), going out for hikes and visiting cultural institutions such as Yad va-Shem – and using technology. All these are consumed as markers of Israeli culture, but not as secularization agents.

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However, electronic gadgets and computers need to be modified for the Haredi life style. Cell phones, for example, are sold pre-installed with filters for unsafe numbers and websites, and most of the home computers are not connected to the Internet. For those that are connected, there are Haredi or “dati” (Religious-Zionist sector) Internet services. They are either filtered or designated for the Haredi community. Some products are distributed on USB flash drivers or CD-Roms, like the Haredi movies.

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Movies on CD-Roms, then, may be watched in a supervised environment – on a PC at home – and that is why they are less likely to be rejected by Haredi rabbis, or in other words, to be pre-approved by them. Grovais is not the only active producer in this industry; other producers/distributors include Gal Disk, Ulpane Dinur, Pri Ets ha-Daatl, Greentec Media (the most aggressive distributor), Nitsotsot shel Kedusha, ha-Ahim Cohen-va-Hetsj, and Nisim Varta.

Depending on the producer, the movies can be played using different software: some are using Windows Player, while others come with their own software. Some are also distributed on DVDs – which means they are watched by wider audiences. Again, depending on the producer, these movies include a verity of warnings against copying and unauthorized distributing, based on the Halacha. As we’ve seen earlier, that doesn’t really help as some of the movies are available for download through file sharing sites.

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Expect for the format, the other modifications required for Haredi movies are obviously associated with their content. The following are unwritten rules in this industry:

1. Storylines must **not** feature any “adult” content, as the movies are “educational” and appropriate for all

the family. Most of them would have been approved as PG, were they to be submitted to the Motion Picture Association of America, although some contain more violence than others – not graphic though; occasional fights but no blood.

2. No bad language – I will expand on the language later.

3. No female actors – not even little girls. All movies feature males only. The exception for this rule is the recent Haredi woman directors who produce women movies only; men are prohibited from watching

them. This sub-genre feature heartbreaking storylines, with bad ending. A separate presentation should be dedicated to this sub-genre only.

With these restrictions, you could think that this industry cannot produce too many titles. Well., wrong.

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Watching the movies in our collection, I came up with this division as far as genres go:

- Children's movies: some of these feature female teachers, but then men are clearly prohibited from watching them. All children though are males. The movies are filmed indoors. Sets are not elaborate and are very didactic. Children are always on their best behavior....
- Hasidic Tales: Some of these movies are actually filmed in Eastern Europe with local co-producers. They feature period sets that include clothing and accessories, although modern gadgets such as digital watches can be seen on actors. The stories follow values such as acceptance of the divine judgment and following the Tsadik's word.
- Some titles in the genre of Historical Drama have documentary pretensions; there are titles about Bet ha-Mikdash or Soviet Jewry. Unfortunately, I didn't watch any of them, so I don't know how factual they are.
- Comedy: This genre includes many titles. In all the movies I watched, the elements of physical, and mainly facial humor is very strong, with Post-production manipulations such as blinking or moving the picture in order to stress the funny aspects. There is almost no verbal humor in these titles, but a lot of fallings, bumping, and misunderstanding. You can see by this title – *Mivtsa Mitgalgel mi-Tsehok: A Funny and Exciting Operation for Tikkun Middot.*

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David ha-Hakyan (David the mimic comedian) also performs regularly in the community during birthday parties or other celebrations. He is featured in many Haredi comedy movies. He's not the only one; it seems that there is a community of Haredi film actors; one can see them again and again in different movies. Some of them are Haredi actors (Grovais and Nissim Varta play in films they direct), some are secular and some are out of work old actors or *hozrim bi-teshuve* like Yehuda Barkan.

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Barken was one of the active individuals in the comedy movie scene in Israel during the 1960s and 1970s, dubbed "burekas" movies after the Italian spaghetti movies. "Burekas" movies featured the "authentic" Israeli mixture of different edot (origins), introducing characters with marked accents of Moroccan, Persian or Polish Israelis who represented the upper class (Ashkenasim) vs. the lower-class Mizrahi Israelis. Some of the Burekas features became cult movies, and actually legitimized the Mizrahi struggle for recognition in the Israeli culture, including the phenomenon of Shas.

In many ways, Haredi comedies resemble “burekas” movies; stereotyped characters, emphasized accents and language which is far than standard. The linguistic register used in Haredi movies is an almost impossible mixture of current Israeli slang and Haredi vocabulary, which is probably authentic representation of the Haredi Hebrew register. What a great resource for linguists and sociologists.

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But if you thought that Haredi movies are only based on existing Israeli models, think again. *The Deceased Scream* is the first and only Israeli horror movie, based on an idea from the 1999 American movie *The Sixth Sense* – the details are different, as I read (we don’t have this title at ASU Libraries). The movie also features original music by Shaul Hayun.

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However, the most interesting genres are Drama, and moreover Action movies. They feature complex storylines with flashbacks and surprising turns, they are filmed on location – all over Israel and even in Europe (Turkey, Budapest, and Prague) – and they touch on Haredi-Hiloni conflicts in the Israeli society. I find these movies fascinating, as they bring together Israelis from other than the Haredi sector, so they enable non-Haredi viewers a glimpse into this world. However, the goyim are always bad and corrupt and anti-Semitic, Arabs are all the same, secular Jews are just wrong. Some of the titles are based on current tensions between the Haredi and Hiloni communities; *Neshek Shahor (black Weapon)* is a good example for mixed identities and some exchange of Hiloni and Haredi lifestyles.

The Bet features a secular 17 years old who bets with his friends that he can dress up as a Haredi and live in a Yeshiva for a whole week without revealing his identity. *No Uniform Soldiers* features a Yeshiva buher who is recruited to the IDF and struggles his way out to prove that those who serve in the Yeshiva are true soldiers, only they don’t wear uniforms.

King David’s Sword brings together three different parties interested in this archeological item. The sword is recovered with the help of Mosad agent in disguise, and the final dramatic scene in Bet Govrin Caves is unforgettable. Another mini-series, *Black Weapon*, features a dramatic chase in the streets of Istanbul – a true suspense story with many surprising turns. Here too there’s a Mosad agent and extensive use of guns.

These patriotic themes together with the fascination with IDF, weapons and Mosad agents reveal the Haredi attraction to the military life in Israel, but this is how far the movies go with sensitive issues that part the Israeli society. The State of Israel is absent from the movies that take place here and now – and it seems that embracing patriotic and militaristic markers of Israeli identity instead of official agencies implies to political choices made by the Haredi community.

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Although the Haredi movie scene is a young, unprofessional industry, I look forward to see it developed. A movie that looks into the business of Haredi movie making is available by Grovais, which means that

there is a demand not only for a retrospective approach to this sub-culture, but also for future developments. Since experts are predicting that information literacy in the 21 century is going to be based on visual rather than textual representations, it is encouraging to see that the Haredi community in Israel takes advantage of available technologies.

Slide 18: References

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