

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ULTRAORTHODOX FILMS INDUSTRY

Since 1999, Israeli ultra-Orthodox Jewish feature films have been produced mostly by ultra-Orthodox Jewish filmmakers for ultra-Orthodox Jewish viewers. Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women's films are restricted to female viewers only and portray women only.

A number of serious feature films were produced portraying the ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious community (Kronish, Amy and Costel, 2003), while focusing on these Jews' lifestyle (Balint, 2007). However, much less attention has been paid to feature films that are produced, distributed and consumed by the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) religious community itself.

The films are made in accordance with Jewish law (Halacha) and are generally produced by Haredi men and women. These movies are consumed by ultra-Orthodox audiences representing different sectors of society and a wide age range.

The religious authorities have determined that producers must refrain from including any male presence. When men are required by the plot, they must appear in separate short scenes that are devoid of women; furthermore, males are cast in secondary and marginal roles only.

They are screened three times a year: at the Sukkot and Passover holidays, two major Jewish holidays that last a week and include in-between days, neither sacred nor profane, when screenings are allowed [Hol Hamo'ed], and during the Yeshivas' and ultra-Orthodox Jewish schools' summer vacation. These screenings may be regarded as a unique female ritual with a carnival atmosphere that provides a space for unleashing emotions, thus strengthening viewers' religious beliefs.

The film production process requires the approval and censorship of a rabbinical authority who Eliciting "Kosher Emotions" in Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women's Film consults with principals of women's schools and seminaries, requesting their confirmation.

Producer **Ariel Cohen** explains: "Women's films deal mainly with emotion, emotion and more emotion. Most of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish scripts for women are a kind of 'melodrama' in disguise. The scripts depict personal tragedy, comedy and slightly dramatic relationships, which operate on feelings. The issues deal with adoption, malignant diseases, and sisters separated at birth, lost children, Anti-Semitic persecution, family conflicts and especially 'dark' secrets that are borne by the characters. Thus, in most cases, the plot is full of twists and an emotional climate; it provides escapism and an emotional outlet in all of its forms. Tears, laughter, stress, anxiety, fear, moving music plus some crying are all mixed into the plot of women's films"

Ariel Cohen is one of the leading film creators and the only male producer director in the ultraorthodox community (although he is not an ultraorthodox Jew). He has written and directed 11 feature films for the ultraorthodox community. His latest films also received funds from the Israeli film fund and participates in worldwide film festival around the globe (Haifa film festival, New Delhi film festival, etc.)