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15

Negotiating Judaism in Contemporary Israeli Cinema

The Spiritual Style
of *My Father, My Lord*

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In reviewing the developing relationship between center and periphery within Israeli society of the past several decades, one cannot help but notice—and indeed be amazed by—a radical change in the stature of Jewish religion and religious devotion. During the nation's early stages of evolution, Zionist discourse established the secular-socialist Sabra identity as the norm, at the price of a relative marginalization of Jewish religious sentiment. As a result of the subsequent collapse of secular Zionism as a dominant ideology, however, religion gradually obtained a position of greater influence within Israel's sociocultural landscape. Looking back, it is possible to isolate the milestones of this transformation: the forming of the settlement movement in the 1970s, the emergence of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party as a political powerhouse during the 1980s, the explosion of spiritual celebrations and pilgrimages to holy sites, the rise to prominence of religious “miracle workers,” and the growth in religious repentance (*khazara bishuv*) since the 1990s. These manifestations have been singled out as formative phenomena and have accordingly been studied with great care in both academic and nonacademic literature.¹ Yet by no means do they encompass the turn toward religion in Israel, whose repercussions we are still far from fully grasping.

One of the most intriguing and least investigated symptoms of this state of religiosity has been the recent proliferation of representations of Jewish religious life in mainstream media.² In films such as Joseph Cedar's *Time of Favor* (Hahesder, 2000) and Campfire (Medurat Hashev, 2004), Anat Zurtia's *Purity* (Tehora, 2002) and *Sentenced to Marriage* (Mekudeshet, 2004), Giddi

Dar and Shuli Rand's *Ushpizin* (2004), Raphaeli Nadjar's *Stones* (Avramim, 2004) and *Tehitin* (2007), Shmuel Hasfar's *Schwartz Dynasty* (*Shoshélet Shvartz*, 2005), Avi Neshet's *The Secrets* (*Hasodot*, 2007), Avraham Kushnir's *Bruriah* (2008), and Haim Tabakman's *Eyes Wide Open* (*Einayim Pkukhot*, 2009) as well as in television series like Udi Leon, Nissim Levy, and Jackie Levy's *Me'orav Yerushalmi* (2003–2009), Zafir Kochanovsky, Ron Ninio, and Ronit Weiss-Berkowitz's *A Touch Away* (*Merchak Negr'ah*, 2007), and Hava Divon and Eliezer Shapiro's *Strugim* (2008–2010), we find a rigorous attempt to negotiate present-day tensions between Israeli religious and secular identities and to explore their effects on larger issues of faith. Thus conceived, these texts offer a unique perspective on some of the preeminent questions troubling Israel's Jewish citizenry, believers and nonbelievers alike, at the dawn of a new millennium.

Of the current crop of religiously themed films and television shows, probably the most critically acclaimed work is David Volach's *My Father, My Lord* (*Khufshat Kayitz*, 2007).³ Volach's film shares with several of the aforementioned media texts a preoccupation with a crisis of faith—a matter of growing concern for those religious circles that have increasingly come under the sway of secular culture in an attempt to become more involved in Israel's sociopolitical reality. Nevertheless, two important elements make *My Father, My Lord* an exceptional case. The first is the identity of the filmmaker: unlike the creators of these other texts—who are, by and large, recognized unequivocally as either observant or nonobservant—Volach grew up as an ultra-Orthodox Haredi Jew and then turned his back on religion. This liminal position provides him with privileged insight into the experience of a crisis of faith. This may also account for the second differentiating element: the choice to have *My Father, My Lord* present its themes through a “spiritual” cinematic style, thereby allowing it to function not only as a social document on religious identity within Israeli society but also, more importantly, as a theological essay on the value of religious belief. The film's spiritual style and its theological implications are at the heart of this essay.

Representing the Holy: *My Father, My Lord*

Although not widely theorized within the cinema studies field, the notion of a filmic spiritual style has succeeded in capturing the attention of numerous critics and scholars who have sought to explore—under diverse headings such as “devotional,” “religious,” or “sacramental” cinema—the medium's potential in representing the Holy. My understanding of the spiritual style is informed by a foundational text within this body of work: critic-cum-

filmmaker Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film* (1972).⁴ Schrader argues that filmmakers of different cultures use a general representative form in expressing the Transcendent. This “transcendental” style, which is an evolution of precinematic visual renderings of the Holy, may be found in its purest form in the works of filmmakers Robert Bresson and Yasujiro Ozu. As Schrader explains, both Ozu and Bresson perceive reality as, to an extent, masking divine presence; their films therefore interrogate everyday reality so as to position it as a tangible threshold onto the ineffable. In doing so, these filmmakers radically depart from classic cinematic traditions: instead of exploiting the medium's expressive means to create a plentiful image of the world, Ozu and Bresson choose to strip reality to its bare bones. It is a “stylization of elimination,” where, in Schrader's words, “given a selection of inflections, the choice is monotone; a choice of sounds, the choice is silence; a choice of actions, the choice is stillness.”⁵

Appropriately, the spectators' reaction to this unusual cinematic representation of reality differs from their response to the “reality effect” of a traditionally styled film. As Schrader notes in relation to Bresson's works: “[The representation of the] everyday blocks the emotional and intellectual exits, preparing the viewer for the moment when he 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.”⁶ Schrader terms this form of reaction “schizoid”—that is, it is an experience of imaged reality as simultaneously gesturing toward the concrete objects of our world and toward an entity or meaning which is not wholly reducible to these objects.

In commenting on *My Father, My Lord*, several critics have noted the similarity of its style to that of Bresson.⁸ This similarity seems most evident in the approach to the function of narrative. As in Bresson's works, the basic tale which Volach's film depicts is very lean in nature: Jewish Orthodox parents prepare to go with their only son Menakhem on a trip to the Dead Sea; at the end of this trip, the child drowns, thereby prompting the parents to experience a crisis of faith. In adapting this unostentatious tale to the screen, Volach resisted the temptation to enhance its dramatic potentialities by adding action-oriented story lines. 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? 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 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 for the story itself.⁹

Consequently, Volach, like Bresson, supports an aesthetic of elimination—or, in his words, a “skimming on plot to flesh out the story.”¹⁰ In *My Father, My Lord* we are not invited to skip over the fabric of reality in a hurried race toward a cathartic ending; rather—through leisurely shots, blatantly minimalist in action—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.

Faced with this image of reality stylized through elimination, we are then conditioned to perceive it as pointing to something else—as being referential. But to what does it refer? Principally, but not exclusively, to a set of interconnected theological debates which form the basis of Jewish religious law (Halakhah). Throughout his film, Volach inserts scenes which overtly connote Halakhic discourses, thereby setting up the conceptual framework for the appreciation of the symbolism of the narrative at large; this appreciation, in turn, unveils the narrative's goal of delegitimizing these discourses.

One prominent discourse which the film engages 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 Halakhah wisdom: how only human beings have souls, and how only human beings who spend their waking hours worshipping the Lord have superior souls. This axiom is undermined through other moments in the film. For example, in one scene Menakhem 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 mistress's side, contrasted with the paramedic's heartless reaction, makes us question why the former would be regarded as soulless by the Halakhah simply due to its animality while the latter would be regarded as soulful only by virtue of being human.

In another sequence Menakhem is shown trading picture cards with a child who is apparently mentally disabled. In the Halakhah individuals with mental disabilities are considered lesser souls because 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.¹¹ In the film Menakhem not only breaks this Halakhic law regarding trading but also treats his friend not as a lesser soul but as an equal partner. Menakhem's behavior toward his friend is then contrasted with the behavior of the father toward Menakhem in the following scene. The father discovers that the card Menakhem obtained from his friend carries the image of a bare-chested African tribesman and thus may be considered an object of idolatry.¹² In handling this situation, the father, a superior soul in Halakhic terms, does not treat his son, a lesser soul, with the same respect and compassion that Menakhem extended to his friend; rather, he firmly orders Menakhem to rip up the card, reducing him to tears. The father's superiority is further undermined when his callous behavior is compared with the mother's affable demeanor. In the Halakhah women are considered to be inferior to men.¹³ Yet in the film it is the mother who emerges as the favorable—and thus superior—character, counterbalancing the father's reserve toward Menakhem with acts of compassion and tender nurturing.

Another Halakhah discourse that is evoked by *My Father, My Lord*'s symbolic narrative concerns divine providence, reward, and punishment. This discourse is called to mind through overt references to two noted stories within Jewish religious tradition. The first of these is the story of the binding of Isaac, which is explicitly referred to on two occasions in the film: initially when Menakhem and his friends recite the story of the binding in a classroom (*heder*) and later when the children, including Menakhem, pictorially re-create the binding scene on the blackboard in the same classroom. The second is the story of the notorious heretic Elisha Ben Avuyah and the bird's nest. This reference is made evident in a sequence where the father is seen performing the task of *shiluach haken*, 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.”¹⁴ The Talmud tells us that the notorious heretic Elisha Ben Avuyah 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 *mizvah* spelled out in Deuteronomy. The man had sent his son up the tree; after expelling the mother bird, the son fell down and died. It was this event—in which following an important religious command resulted in punishment rather than reward—that persuaded Ben Avuyah to choose a life of heresy, according to the Talmud.

Both these stories parallel the narrative of *My Father, My Lord* and illuminate its theological stance in significant ways. The binding story in which Isaac's life was spared because of Abraham's uncompromising belief inspired the Halakhic maxim that those who trust in God and follow the Halakhah will be rewarded with divine protection. This form of providence, however, is absent in the film: the father, a devout believer, is not rewarded with the life of his son as in the case of Abraham. Rather, we find here a rendition of the story of Elisha Ben Avuyah and the bird's nest, in which a father's desire to abide by the Halakhah does not save him from suffering the worst punishment a parent can receive—the loss of a child.¹⁶ In positioning these two intertexts within the film's narrative, it becomes evident that Volach wants the spectator to experience the family's tragic tale through Ben Avuyah's eyes and reach his foregone conclusion: the Halakhah is wrong and thus should be rejected.

Some would define this critique of the Halakhah as arguing against the existence of God. I would claim, however, that this is not what Volach attempts in *My Father, My Lord*. Volach's quarrel is with the interpretation of God by the Halakhah; his critique is aimed at invalidating this interpretation but not necessarily at invalidating the existence of a God that defers such an interpretation. In fact, Volach seems to go to great lengths to allow for the symbolic presence of the hidden God in his film. In making this presence known, we see the film's spiritual style, as a signifying system for the Divine, come to its fruition.

As previously described, this style conditions the spectator to perceive the imaged reality as being both object and symbol. Typically, Volach states this reality as referring to—and subsequently invalidating—certain Halakhah 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 (water accumulating at the bottom of a saucer, a loose drape dancing in an afternoon breeze), which seem so utterly irrelevant to what little drama takes place in the film that they appear decisively aberrant. Within the style of the film we are impelled to read these lyrical images symbolically. But what do they symbolize? Although we acknowledge the existence of a referent, its exact nature remains undecipherable. A similar phenomenon may be found in Ozu's works. As Schrader explains, Ozu tends to puncture the dramatic flow of his films with seemingly irrelevant shots of everyday objects or outdoor landscapes: "a shot is paradoxically a disruption and an integrant of the natural order of 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 *holy Other*."¹⁶ Through recognition of this duality, the still-life image invites us to transcend it—or rather to experience a connection with the transcendent through it.¹⁷

Thus we can better understand why it was important for Volach to connect these spiritual codas to Menakhem, typically by designating them as his point of view shots. In making this association, Menakhem, and not his father, emerges as the one with greater access to God. (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, further underscoring this message.) Here the text again sides with Ben Avuyah, who allegedly believed that children stand closer to God since they have not yet been contaminated by years of studying religious law. God is present, the film seems to argue, and may be visible to a certain degree to those untainted by the Halakhah. The question which remains largely open at the end of *My Father, My Lord* however, is whether the spectator should reach out to the God that allows for the death of Menakhem, its precious son. Perhaps it is better to grant the presence of such a God than to attempt the insurmountable task of understanding it.

The Second Commandment and the Spiritual Style

Before bringing this discussion to a close, it seems necessary to mention an important concern that *My Father, My Lord*'s invocation of a spiritual style undoubtedly brings to the fore: the problem of visually signifying the Holy in light of the Second Commandment prohibition against the making of a graven image.¹⁸ Schrader, for one, traces a shared spiritual style connecting Zen art to Byzantine iconography to the films of Ozu and Bresson and uses this common denominator to argue that "as much as the Transcendent is universal, the style which expresses it is universal too."¹⁹ Yet this universalism, for Schrader, encompasses only those cultures that allow for visual representations of the Holy; antique cultures like Judaism that prohibit such representations are left unexplored. Does this mean that examples of this shared style may not be found within Judaism? Or does Volach, as means and emblem of his heresy, intentionally borrow an artistic form that is radically foreign to Judaic tradition?

In fact, as recent studies have shown, the idea of Jewish anticonism was ostensibly an invention of nineteenth-century anti-Semitic and Jewish assimilationist discourses, meant to disavow the role of "Jewish art . . . [as] a significant constituent of Jewish thought and identity."²⁰ It seems true that

adherence to the Second Commandment had traditionally limited Jewish artists in exploring the potentialities of an overt sacred art such as that found in Christianity. But this did not altogether prevent these artists from trying their hand at representing the Holy through art. To bypass the biblical prohibition, they utilized symbols excessively; the golden rule here, as historian Lionel Kochan phrased it, was that "if any material entity is to symbolize God, it must be of such a nature as both to disguise and reveal this relationship."²¹ In fashioning these symbols, especially those of a figurative nature, an attempt was made to signify them as being to an extent immaterial, to avoid a situation where they are mistaken as "real" and thus as proper objects of idolatry. Consequently we may recognize in Jewish religious art a tendency toward a "negative aesthetic" of elimination that nevertheless does not eradicate the verisimilitude of the imaged object. This aesthetic, I would argue, connects Jewish art with the traditions discussed by Schrader and by extension with *My Father, My Lord*.²²

To illustrate this point, a helpful analogy may be found between Volach's film and the Kabbalah's Sephirothic diagram, in light of their mutual tendency to evoke godly presence unabashedly through symbols. To the Kabbalists, the diagram was a concrete expression of God's mysteries: what seems a rather abstract structure connecting the ten *sephiroth* (the divine qualities) also acts as a representation of the human body and of a tree, thereby symbolically fusing nature with the Holy in a fashion similar to Volach's candid codas.²³ Accordingly, meditation on this diagram—much like meditation on spiritual cinematic shots—is supposed to give the viewer some measure of transcendence. Yet my point in drawing this comparison is not only to indicate a stylistic connection but also to bring into the conversation, as a final note, the Kabbalistic notion of *tikkun olam*: the mending of a shattered world, "the restoration or integration of all things to their original condition."²⁴ In the Kabbalah the diagram represents this ideal unity of divine qualities, humankind, and nature, and reflecting on it is a way of enacting a repair. *My Father, My Lord* and to an extent many other religiously themed Israeli media texts are similarly preoccupied with the idea of *tikkun* from either an approving or a disapproving standpoint. As such, they attempt to address a period when Israelis have become increasingly torn between fundamentalism and liberalism, faith and material culture, the Transcendent and the worldly; offering up contemplations on the possibility of spiritual redemption or the lack thereof.

NOTES

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1. See, for example, Oz Almog, *The Sabra: A Profile*; Yair Sheleg, *The New Religious Jews: Recent Developments among Observant Jews in Israel*; Baruch Kimmeling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Mishnah*; Yossi Yonah and Yehuda Goodman, eds., *Maelstrom of Identities: A Critical Look at Religion and Secularity in Israel*; Avi Sagi, *The Jewish-Israeli Voyage: Culture and Identity*.
2. The few examples of studies focusing on the representation of Jewish religious identity in Israeli cinema include Ronie Parachak, "Beyond the Fence: Religious Sentiment in Israeli Cinema"; Yael Munk, "Le retour du cinéma israélien vers le judaïsme"; Nurith Gertz and Yael Munk, "Israeli Cinema: Hebrew Identity/Jewish Identity"; Yuval Rivlin, *The Mouse That Roared: Jewish Identity in American and Israeli Cinema*.
3. *My Father, My Lord* was awarded the 2007 Best Narrative Feature Award at the Tribeca Film Festival and the Special Jury Award for Best Director at the Taormina Film Fest.
4. I use the term "spiritual" in part to indicate that my appropriation of Schrader's model of "transcendental style" is selective.
5. Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Branson, Dreyer*, 39.
6. *Ibid.*, 70.
7. *Ibid.*, 42.
8. See, for example, Meir Schnitzer, "Artistic Miracle."
9. Pablo Ulla, *The New Israeli Cinema: Conversations with Filmmakers*, 62–63 (my translation).
10. *Ibid.*, 63 (my translation).
11. Zvi C. Marx, *Disability in Jewish Law*, 107–114.
12. The reference to idolatry here may be seen as the filmmaker's self-reflexive comment on his own "sin"; that is, by creating a film within a spiritual style, he stood the risk of defying the Second Commandment prohibition against the making of a graven image (see the final section of the essay for more on this).
13. To cite one well-known example of this ruler: "In pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16).
14. Deut. 22:6–7.
15. There is, of course, a double loss in the story of Elisha Ben Avuyah and the bird's nest: not only does the father lose his boy, but the female bird loses its offspring. This latter loss, like the former, is mapped in *My Father, My Lord* onto the figure of Menakhem. In the film the father takes Menakhem to the men's section of the beach because the child has grown too old to go to the women's section with his mother; subsequently, while the father is deep in prayer, the child wanders off to find his tragic end. Seen in relation to the Ben Avuyah story, the female bird's loss is analogous to the mother's, who is expelled, like the bird, from a position of protecting her child. As a result, the father's complicity in the loss is enhanced, because the death

- came about not only due to his transferring parental responsibility to the Halakhic God but also due to his expulsion of the mother from the role of primary caregiver.
16. Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 49 (emphasis added).
 17. It may be argued that on this occasion the spiritual style invites us to read the film as we would a Gothic stained-glass window: since light was traditionally equated with godly presence, the appropriate devotional response to such a window was "to look not at it but through it." See Roger Homan, *The Art of the Sublime: Principles of Christian Art and Architecture*, 65.
 18. See also Parachak's extended discussion on this issue in "Beyond the Fence."
 19. Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film*, 10.
 20. Melissa Raphael, *Judaism and the Visual Image: A Jewish Theology of Art*, 2. See also Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual*.
 21. Lionel Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image: A Jewish View*, 62.
 22. Volach's words gain particular significance here: "[T]he whole religious world is a world of symbols. Think of God, isn't it a symbol for a father figure? We have a world here . . . whose power is in symbolism. . . . 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? It doesn't strike me as the right thing to do" (quoted in Ulin, *The New Israeli Cinema*, 68; my translation).
 23. See Leslie Atzmon, "A Visual Analysis of Anthropomorphism in the Kabbalah: Dissecting the Hebrew Alphabet and Sefirotic Diagram," 103–109.
 24. Gershon Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, 242.

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16

Seeking the Local, Engaging the Global

Women and Religious Oppression in a Minor Film

NAVA DUSHI

Penetrating the intimacy of a world fixed in a religious time zone, otherwise hermetically sealed from its contemporary surroundings, the film *Kadosh* (Sacred; Amos Gitai, 1999) portrays the life of abstinence at the core of one of Jerusalem's religiously constituted enclaves. Much like the subject of his film, Gitai's gaze is committed to the exercise of restraint, reducing the cinematic form to the poverty of its language, to its desert, and as such rendering it barren and unfit for reproduction.¹ In this double play *Kadosh* never splits from that which is unique to its locality and at the same time sustains its freedom from the pervasive reign of any universal signifier, therein foregrounding the film's "minor" standing. But what do I mean by minor standing and what does it have to do with the production of meaning which is so critical for the interpretation of any film, regardless of its immediate context?

The interface between local cinematic texts and their foreign viewers is one of great intricacy. Members of juried committees in international film festivals, potential distributors,² and general audiences worldwide perceive such films from some distance, outside of their local context. Still, in recent years a growing body of Israeli films has gained increasing international awareness. What qualities may be attributed to the ability of such texts to lend themselves to the derivation of meaning?