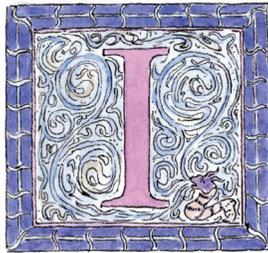


# Why Israeli TV Is So Good



IN THE BEGINNING, there was Yifat.

Sure, there had been religious characters before her on Israeli TV and in the movies, but never like this: She was the star, the center of attention, the one whose love life you were more invested in than your own and whose hair style you secretly tried to emulate in front of the mirror. And if that wasn't enough, her show, *Srugim*, wasn't just *about* religious Jews, it was made *by* religious Jews, aired in prime time on a major network, and won a bunch of awards and the highest ratings imaginable.

For three years, secular Israelis who could barely tell their Rambam from their Rambo fantasized about the mikveh and the shtiebel and all the other mystical, magical places that drew the show's gang of young and attractive and religious and very single Jerusalemites. It was like Israel's version of *Friends*, if Rachel and Monica had met in Ulpana and spent every Shabbat singing zemirot. And just like that, religious Jews, more or less invisible in Israeli pop culture for six decades, were everywhere.

If you watched every Israeli production made before *Srugim* debuted in 2008, you would be able to count all the religious characters you'd seen on two hands. If you discounted the ones who were mere comic reliefs or silly foils, one hand would suffice. The screens, small and large, were for the rugged and the tanned, the bold and the beautiful, the secular Sabras who worked the land and fought the wars and roamed the streets of Tel Aviv looking for love. And then came Yifat, and after her, the deluge: There were the Haredi women of Rama Burshtein's *Fill the Void* in 2012, a big hit at the Venice International Film Festival as well as on Israeli TV; *Shtisel*, father and son, lonely and yearning for connection in their eponymous TV series, still a crowd-pleaser nearly a decade after its 2013 debut; *Shababnikim*, streamed here as *The New Black*, a raucous comedy about four misfits at an elite yeshiva; *Autonomies*, a dystopian drama imagining Israel split into two states, one secular and the other religious. The list goes on, a flowering of frum fun.

It hardly takes a Talmudic scholar to figure out why Israeli entertainment these days is so obsessed with the faithful. For one thing, show business, like any other business, is about numbers, and the numbers are resolutely on the side of the believers—while the average Israeli woman has three kids, her religious counterpart welcomes twice as many children into the world. This means that within the next three decades or so, one in four Israelis is likely to be Haredi, a group increasingly swapping its reticence for full-on engagement with the culture at large. More immediately, though, ever since Uri Zohar—Israel's most radiant comic, director, and movie star—abandoned the bohemian life for one of studying and teaching Torah in 1977, scores of Israeli actors, directors, writers, musicians, and entertainers have traveled some way down a similar path, growing more pious and producing works that reflect their spiritual journeys.

These lovely and introspective works—throw Shuli Rand's *Ushpizin*, a film about a Breslov Hasid forced to reckon with shady friends from his unsavory past, onto the pile, too—would've

likely reached few outside of Israel had it not been for streaming, a technology that meant shows enjoyed in Bnei Brak could now be cherished in Boise as well.

*Shtisel* was the watershed. Making its debut on Netflix in 2018, the show—it seems silly, at this point, to summarize such a smash hit, but in case you’ve spent your evenings with quainter pastimes, such as knitting or novels, the show is about a young Hasidic man who wants to be an artist and fall in love and gain the respect of his hardened father—soon developed a cult following. The *New York Times* parsed its meaning, the *Atlantic* dispatched its bien-pensants to unpack its popularity, and its stars packed Manhattan’s Skirball Center whenever they flew in for a tour.

Hollywood being the Great Regurgitator that it is, foreign rights were soon acquired and an upcoming American version of *Shtisel* announced with much fanfare. And it was then that keen observers were treated to a delightful peek at the pathologies that plague American Jewish life.



How would Tinseltown, rarely accused of an excess of profundity, grapple with a show about men and women whose values and practices are distinctly, to borrow a phrase from academia, Other? One early, promising hint was the news that the American adaptation’s director would be none other than Kenneth Lonergan, the Jewish playwright whose forgotten masterpiece, *Margaret*, remains one of the most haunting and profound meditations on religion, morality, family, loss, and love ever committed to celluloid. Not much imagination was needed to picture the Academy Award-winning writer and director of *Manchester by the Sea* training his eye on young Hasidim and producing a work every bit as delicate and as true to Orthodox life as the original.

Such hopes were soon shattered by reality’s brute force. The show, *Deadline* soon announced, would be written by Lauren Gussis, the

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creator of the very dark-humored Netflix hit *Insatiable*, and would focus on “the privileged daughter of a Hollywood power couple” who falls in love with a religious Jew.

*Shtisel* fans raised an eyebrow—save for one character being religious, the new show seemed to have nothing in common with the heartfelt and candid original—but not for long. The show was swiftly suspended, then canceled.

Why? Hollywood is as inscrutably mute about its failures as it is insufferably vocal about its success, but what happened next gives us a pretty good clue. While the American *Shtisel* languished in production purgatory, a powerful one-two punch of shows focused on Hasidic life appeared, to great critical acclaim and much fanfare.

First came *Unorthodox*, which, despite sharing a name with a very good Jewish podcast, showed nothing but a cold contempt for Jewish life in all its forms. The show’s premise is simple: Esty, a 19-year-old girl from the Satmar Hasidic sect, is abused within an inch of her life by her gelatinous husband and his exacting mother. Eager to regain her independence and recover her soul, she flees to Germany in search of the good, free life.

A few critics, Hasidic or otherwise, argued that the show got pretty much everything about the community wrong, but that didn’t matter much to the intelligentsia. The show, sprach the *New*

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*Yorker*, was “wrought with anthropological specificity”—a description that made it sound as if the characters in question lived among the remote Sentinelese tribe of the Indian Ocean islands rather than a short train ride from midtown—while NPR hailed it as “an upbeat tale of a woman who escapes into a glorious new future.” Few critics bothered with basic critical thinking, such as asking whether it was actually possible that Hasidic life really was bereft of everything that didn’t resemble an especially vigorous Marines hazing ritual. Facts be damned: A show that portrayed faith and religious life as benighted and oppressive and destined to crumble before the liberating and libidinous force of individual promiscuity—Esty’s awakening, of course, is purchased at the price of intercourse with a smoldering Herr—was not so much entertainment as it was a principle of secular American faith.

But if Hasidic representation on mainstream American TV started off as melodrama, it soon became farce, when the reality show *My Unorthodox Life* debuted in 2021. The show’s star, Julia Haart, boasted a story every bit as sweeping as Esty’s: Growing up oppressed and suppressed and depressed in Monsey, New York, Haart works up the courage to leave the Hasidic community, becomes a lingerie designer and modeling maven, and lives a large life of joy and sex and earthly delights with her Italian husband.

Once again, real, live religious Jews cried foul, pointing out that

some of Haart’s autobiographical claims didn’t add up to recorded and observable history and that the show repeated the same vicious trope, portraying all Hasidic life in a dark and twisted monolithic fashion. And yet, once again, the show generated considerable attention. Publicity shots for the upcoming second season show Haart staring resolutely into the middle distance, wrapped in a revealing slip of a black dress that would hardly suffice to make a smallish tallis.

Again, there’s very little here by way of intricacy or complexity. The show is about as subtle as college sophomores, hoarsely shouting their convictions: Religion bad, men stupid, orgasms good, money best.

How to explain this discrepancy between American and Israeli Jews? Why do the latter churn out intricate works that observe and reflect on religious people and life while the former forge steely rejections of the very same? It’s a complicated question, obviously, but a brief history of the past few decades in the emotional evolution of both communities is instructive.



On this side of the Atlantic, Jews have spent much of the past century learning to be Americans. Our shuls, our Federations, our novels, our schools, our customs, our movies, our domestic lives—all are variations on one powerful theme, namely that great things happen when Jewish and American are fused into one syncopated beat. We are raised to believe that the two can never be in contradiction, at least not for real, at least not for long. America, we’re told, is a country founded on Judeo-Christian ideas, whatever that strange locution means. We read George Washington’s letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, and our hearts swell with reassurance that the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, will forever continue to merit and enjoy the goodwill of the other inhabitants. We’re troubled by

the rise of antisemitism, but not enough to believe that America could ever become another Egypt or Spain or Germany or worse. Our individual paths may differ slightly, but our destination is the same: We're traveling to the heart of the American mainstream, or as close to it as we can get. Harvard can take us there. So can Hollywood, and Goldman Sachs, and Silicon Valley, and while we may feel proudly and uniquely and incontestably Jewish, the coins we truly value were forged in all-American smithies.

Meanwhile, just by living their lives, Haredi Jews are the great What If: What if we had made different choices? What if we opted for tradition over assimilation? What if we sought truth and beauty in our own sacred books rather than turn for meaning to partisan affiliations, political ideologies, cultural proclivities, or exercise regimens? It's a vexing question because it forces us to rethink the very foundation of our existence. This is why, Stateside, the stories so many non-Orthodox Jews tell about the men in black and the women with the covered hair are always grim: They're too restrictive. They don't educate their young. They inhibit women. They're nothing like us. To believe otherwise is to believe that modernity is not the only possibility, and that it was designed precisely to allow for every permutation save for that one.

Israelis have taken a very different route. Having spent the first five decades of their collective existence fighting for survival, they started pondering, sometime in the 1980s, once the country was safe and sound and strong, what, precisely, the meaning of it all was. Zionism was always a hodgepodge, a movement that united observant Jews and avowed Marxists, cultural warriors and political hawks, men and women of all convictions and backgrounds; now that the Jewish state was all grown up, it needed to decide just what it wanted to be. And, increasingly, the answer was obvious: It wanted to be Jewish. Hence all those artists seeking God. Hence the recently elected Israeli cabinet, the first ever in which non-observant Jews will be in the minority. Hence hit movies about the destruction of the Second Temple, hit songs about Yom Kip-

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pur, hit novels about priests and ritualistic sacrifices. Increasingly, Israelis think of Judaism not as a stubborn rejection of progress but as a rightful return to a tradition that continues to be an engine of creation, of growth and change and hope. That's how you get *Shtisel*, and *Srugim*, and so many other explorations of what it means to wrestle with faith, with community, with family, with God, with self.

Hallelujah, the Israeli model is carrying the day, not only in the most promised land but also, it now appears, here. Hollywood might see things differently, but on any given day, 34,000 American Jews—and some non-Jews—now turn to *Shtisel*'s Facebook fan page to exchange ideas and impressions and have real and intimate conversations. And when the show's stars tour America, they still attract healthy crowds, there not only to gaze at the celebrated actors but to feel, if only for a moment, as if they're a part of the soulful world of *Shtisel*, a world not of grievances and power struggles and intimations of oppression and performative liberation but of mutual care and responsibility and charity and grace.

*Unorthodox* and *My Unorthodox Life* may be trendy and liked by the cool crowd, but most Jews are looking for warmth. They don't want another affirmation of rights or a reminder of wrongs. They don't want to persist or resist or paint themselves by numbers delivered by cultural commissars. They want the sort of Yiddishkeit that

a show such as *Shtisel*—or *The New Black*, or *Srugim*, or all the other gems made in Israel—delivers. They want something that brings them closer to that old-timey religion, not something that pushes them further away. Like Yifat, all those years ago, they want more: more feeling, more knowledge, more passion, more connection. And now, courtesy of more and more Israeli shows and movies each year, they can have it all.



The remarkable growth and success of the Orthodox community in America as well as in Israel—success as measured by retention, something other Jewish communities struggle with—is likely to increase empathy for a community historically regarded with suspicion by Jews and non-Jews alike. Whether or when Hollywood will catch up is another question.

And not, mind you, a particularly new question, at that. Jews have spent decades telling themselves stories designed to explore their fundamental otherness, and to ask whether there could ever be a path that leads into something like acceptance. That’s why we have Spider-Man and the X-Men and Superman and all the other comic-book greats, dreamt up by Jews on the margins of the publishing industry. It’s why we have so many of the classic songs of the Brill Building, composed by Jews who were yearning for an uncomplicated American young adulthood yet knew that few of their neighbors looked at them and saw them as the attractive boy- or girl-next-door type. It’s why we have *Jaws* and *E.T.* and other celluloid fantasies about scary monsters and cuddly aliens and other creatures who stand athwart society, yelling “Let me in.”

Now, however, decades later, “mainstream” Jews have become Americans, just like everyone else, and it is the Orthodox who are the new Jews, telling stories in the hope of gaining a sliver of visibility and a bit of warmth, and balking when the same American media depict them as heartless creeps.

No worries, though: The arc of pop culture is long, but it bends toward empathy. The better storytellers, those who give us complexities and intricacies and humanity in all its messy glory, always win over the facile propagandists. Let a thousand Yifats bloom. \*