A Touch Away from Cultural Others: Negotiating Israeli Jewish Identity on Television

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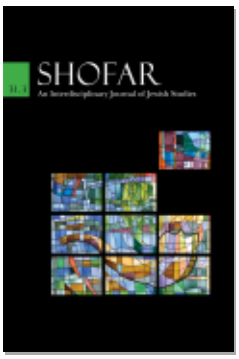

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Abstract

The Israeli television drama series, *A Touch Away*, *Jerusalem Mix*, and *Srugim* are symbolic sites for the negotiation of Jewish identity in Israel, a multicultural immigrant society. They open a window to the sociocultural religious communities within Israel, hence creating more visibility of these versions of Israeliness on the small screen, and deconstructing stereotypes thereof, allowing for more complex images of "religious Israeli Jews." The dramatic elaboration of intercultural encounters and conflicts in these TV dramas are contextualized by the Tzav Piyus project of reconciliation, which was initiated as a consequence of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination and the painful sociocultural fissures associated with it, as well as the larger enterprise of the AVI CHAI foundation—the promotion both in Israel and in North America of an awareness and discourse about Jewish identity as a complex and diversified experience. How do resources of the medium—serial drama and audiovisual expressions of television—serve to construct identity as an open-ended process yet a social product bound by communal constraints? This analysis seeks to illuminate how television dramas bring Israeli and American viewers alike to a touch away from marginalized cultural universes within Israel, as well as from the contradictions underlying the yearning to create a unified collective Israeli and Jewish identity in a democratic state.

Israeli Culture as a Site of Identity Negotiations: The Case of Religious Israeli Jews on Screen[1]

When the last chapter of the drama series *A Touch Away* was aired on the Israeli commercial second channel in the winter of 2007, it achieved a record rating of 35.9 percent.[2] The Israeli Film and Television Academy liked the series no less than its Israeli viewers. It awarded the series and its makers five awards at its 2007 ceremony, and crowned it the best television drama series for the year. Henry David received the award as the best actor in a drama series, authors Ronit Weiss Berkowitz, Amit Lior, and Shuki Ben-Naim received the award for best screenplay, composer Shmulik Neuefeld received the award for best musical score, and, last but not least, Ron Ninio

received the award as best director.[3] HBO, the American producer of worldwide consumed quality television, acknowledged this Israeli series's quality and purchased it for production in the U.S.

What is it that makes this Israeli television drama series so meaningful to its Israeli viewers, and what was the secret of its record-breaking success in both commercial and critical terms? What can we learn from *A Touch Away* about Israeli and Jewish identity, as seen, narrativized, and negotiated on the small Israeli screen? Ronit Weiss Berkowitz, the author of the screenplay, explains its reach and meaningful communication with viewers:[4] it is a complex story, she argues, with plenty of soul in it, not a shred of cynicism, and it takes place in "fresh," noncliché locations previously unseen on the Israeli television screen.

Indeed, *A Touch Away* opens a window to a unique sociocultural environment in Israel. It takes place in an Orthodox religious Jewish neighborhood, Bnei Brak, where the culture of Orthodox Jews has been relatively out of sight for secular Israelis until recently. On both film and television screens, this world of orthodox religious Jewry has been a mysterious territory not yet charted. Religious Orthodox Jewry has traditionally banned the visual media from its everyday life in the domestic sphere as well as the communal public sphere. Secular Israeli society has treated the Orthodox Jewish community in Israel as a homogenous minority, rather than a complex and diverse social sector which is characterized by a rich repertory of life styles, ideologies, and sociocultural practices.[5]

Representations of the unique communities of religious Jews in Israeli popular culture have typically been those of a stereotyped minority, of others—marginal, alien, not integrated into the mainstream of Israeli society. Such representations tend to be generalizing and flat, ambivalent, and stereotyping.[6] Yet, such stereotypical images of Orthodox religious Jews in Israeli visual media, which could be theorized as expressions of postcolonial mechanisms of exclusion directed at an oppressed marginal group in a colonial or postcolonial cultural setting, exemplify sociocultural mechanisms unique to Israeli society and its culture, infused with mythic contradictions: a multicultural democracy, which is based on Zionist ideologies and Jewish identifications.

The creation of modern Hebrew-Israeli culture was characterized by an ambivalent approach to the Jewish cultural past, on one hand, selecting and embracing those aspects of the past which suited the image of the locally rooted national renaissance, in the form of a Zionist return to the biblical

homeland and cradle of the nation, and on the other hand, a rejection of elements of exilic Jewish cultures, as incompatible with the new collective identity. The evolving national identity involved a return to the biblical text and the Hebrew language, which have both preserved the linkage to the land of Zion over centuries of exilic existence, suspended in yearning for the lost homeland of the forefathers.

The phase in which the people of Israel were rooted in their own territory, dominating and cultivating it, was the core of the emerging national identity. The Israeli-born "sabra" was to be indigenous to the territory, and rather than being a spiritual man of letters, he aspired to be, like his biblical ancestors, a farmer and a shepherd, intimately tied to the land and cultivating it. The enterprise was about an indigenous Hebrew culture emerging from desert and sea, where the immigrants to the old-new country visually emerged in most Hebrew-Zionist films from the 1930s to the1960s, reconnecting to the ancient Hebrew textual resources and rituals while skipping, so to speak, the more immediate "exilic" folk Jewish traditions.

Cultural origins and resources which the influx of immigrant cultural producers brought with them from Europe and Africa, the Middle East, and the European East is now acknowledged as an infinitely rich resource for the constantly evolving culture. Yet, from its very inception Hebrew culture in the Land of Israel is characterized as an ongoing struggle, or even battle, over its "genuine" and "authentic" nature. Is it to be western or eastern, secular or religious, "purely" homogenously Israeli, or rather articulating its wealth of resources from the diversity of diaspora, which were and still are, steadily in-gathering into the promised and sheltered land?

The struggle over diverse ethnic heritages and their articulation in the indigenously forming "authentic" and "organic" Israeli Hebrew culture has found its way to the particularly ethnically oriented Israeli humor as well as comic stereotypes and nostalgic types representing religious Jewish orthodoxy, whereas officially the culture adopted a "Hebrewist" approach,[7] suppressed exilic Jewish heritage and folklore,[8] and strove to invent itself anew. This aspiration imposed tremendous pressures on the Israeli sociocultural context of an immigrant, multicultural society, striving to integrate into the Middle Eastern space yet considered an alien intruder.

The sealing of social boundaries to the cultural heritage from the "old countries" was coupled by social mechanisms of exclusion of newcomers, denial and suppression of Jewish and ethnic culture from the Diaspora, and cultural mechanisms of creating socio-ethnic types in oral Israeli culture as

well as popular cinema and television. Hence, ethnic groups which joined the boiling Israeli melting pot, and the individuals within them, were subject to ritual exclusionary cultural mechanisms, often materialized in jokes and additional popular texts, which ridiculed and objectified "foreign" ethnic signifiers and accents.

Officially, then, the Israeli melting pot was producing a cohesive and homogenized Hebrew-Israeli culture,[9] but the collective popular subconscious expressed the suppressed cultural heritages and identifications in popular texts, which turned the interethnic exchanges and negotiations into their core narrative and content. These cultural negotiations of Jewish and exilic ethnic heritage found their way into popular Israeli entertainment, that like American vaudeville, created genres, typologies, and cultural archetypes, which in a carnivalesque manner exaggerated ethnic signifiers, interethnic clashes, and reversals of ethnic-class social hierarchies. These popular texts constructed an escapist yet subversive utopian universe of cultural exchange and narrative integrative resolutions.

Israeli cinema articulated these folkloric ethnic and Jewish heritage negotiations in particularly popular films, nicknamed "*Bourekas* Films" after a Middle Eastern pastry. The central place of food, the family and the domestic sphere in these romantic comedies and maternal melodramas was a direct challenge to the official national Hebrewist, masculinist, ascetic, and collectivist discourse, and clearly borrowed from the suppressed folklore of Yiddish and Middle Eastern cinema and culture.[10] No wonder these very popular films in Israel, which to this day are a local cult, were so fiercely rejected by highbrow cultural critics and the cinematic institutions;[11] no wonder these films were so popular with the Israeli audience.

Popular Bourekas films of the 1960s and 1970s captured what the official self-reflexively emerging Israeli culture suppressed and rejected: the vital folklore traditions of the Jewish communities out of which the Israelis originated. They laid bare the intercultural heated encounters and struggles in Israeli culture, and resolved them in a carnivalesque and integrative manner, conventionally through interethnic, interclass weddings.

The traditional Orthodox Jew appears in popular Israeli films from the 1960s, such as *Two Kuni Lemels* (Israel Becker, 1966, Hebrew title: *Shnei Kuni Lemel*) and *Tevye and His Seven Daughters* (Menahem Golan, 1968, based on Sholom Aleichem's novel, Israel West- Germany coproduction, Shmuel Rodensky as Tevye, Hebrew title: *Tuviya vesheva bnotav*) in an ambivalent light, as a kind, funny "*shlemazl*" or "geek," in other words, as the complete

opposite of the masculine Israeli "*Khevreman*," who can always get things to fall into place his way, who is fearless and has no dread nor respect of authority, order, or law.

These films expressed nostalgia for the shtetl's Eastern European familial and communal folklore and offered values and themes which were denied and suppressed in the national Israeli mainstream. The family in those films, rather than the national collective in mainstream Israeli cinema of the time, was the most important social institution and frame of reference. The Jewish community and people exerted social and ideological control over individuals through the sociocultural mechanisms of marriage and the family, which served to sustain collective Jewish identity, keeping members of the community within its social boundaries through the control of proper marriage and expressing the ultimate moment of unison between the people and its religion or Jewish history in the ritual of the Jewish wedding.

Thus, the Orthodox religious Jew in these films as a stereotypical other ensured the stable identity of the "new," "masculine" Israeli Jew. The stereotypical representations of Kuni Lemel or Tevye as Jewish men included not only their clothing, beards and "*payes*," or hairdo, but also a body language and disposition which constructed them as softer and less assertive, with less "khutzpah" and boldness, a feminized and even subjugated disposition of the "exilic" Jew, as opposed to the virile sabra.

These stereotypes of the religious Jew in popular Israeli films of the 1960s and 1970s[12] ideologically associated him with the exilic period in Jewish history rather than with the Israeli phase. Culturally and expressively othered, religious Orthodox Jews in the popular cinematic discourse were hence symbolically excluded from the Israeli collective. Rather than being depicted as variants of Israeliness, these stereotypical representations of the religious Israeli Jew articulate the cultural strict boundaries othering nonsecular Israeli Jews in an ambivalent attraction to them as nostalgic objects, as well as rejected suppressed yet haunting original versions of the national ego, which had been relinquished in favor of new ones.

Boaz Davidson's cult film *Hagiga basnooker* (aka *Snooker*, Israel, 1975) is another well-known instance of the economy of the popular and the dominance of stereotyping ethnic humor in representations of Orthodox religious Israeli Jews before the 1980s. In those films the hyperbolic excess of their depiction and the carnivalesque contexts thereof render them too grotesque to identify with; rather, they become functional social types in

texts which efficiently negotiate and resolve clashes within Israeli society in the utopian sphere of popular entertainment.[13]

Only in recent decades have the cultures and lifestyles of religious Israeli Jews emerged in Israeli cinema and television as a legitimate and mainstream content,[14] depicted in a realistic mode, verging on the documentary, within two significant trends of representation in Israel on both cinema and television of the early twenty-first century: the hunger for reality, which finds its expression in a plethora of reality programming, and the discourse of authenticity, as a norm of representation and an ideal in Israeli identity politics.[15]

The New Discourse of Authenticity on Israeli Television

The visibility and dramatization of the Orthodox Jewish sector in society and its culture is a fairly recent phenomenon in Israel. Both on film and television, in films like *Ushpizin* (Giddi Dar, 2004), *My Father My Lord* (David Volach, 2007), *Eyes Wide Open* (Haim Tabakman, 2009), *Campfire* (Joseph Cedar, 2004), and *Fill the Void* (Rama Burshtein, 2012) or TV drama series such as *Another Life* (Hebrew: *Khaim Akherim,* Yossi Madmoni, Tzafrir Kohanovski, Erez Kav-El, Arik Rotshtein, 2010), *Srugim* (Lazie Shapira, Hava Divon, 2008-2011), and *Meorav Yerushalmi Jerusalem Mix* (Udi Leon, Jacky Levi, Nissim Levi, Yaacov Golwasser, Shai Kannot, 2004-2006, 2009), religious Israeli Jews in diverse sociocultural versions frequent Israeli screens as these dramas' protagonists, their lives and dilemmas objects of great curiosity, identification, and para-social engagement for Israeli viewers in the recent decade.

Furthermore, such television dramas and features, as well as documentary films, offer a more authentic image of these communities. These visual and narrative cultural texts both offer a more nuanced image of religious Israeli Jews and multiple versions of their social and material culture in a mundane context on the one hand, and on the other construct these images from an insider's perspective. Joseph Cedar, director of *Campfire*, grew up within the national-religious settler community. David Vollach, director of *My Father, My Lord,* comes from the Orthodox Haredi world the film depicts. On television, Eliezer (Lazie) Shapira and Hava Divon, who created the TV drama series *Srugim* about young national-religious "*kippot srugot*" singles in Jerusalem, come from the very community whose mundane life romantic aspirations and identity negotiations they depict for TV.

This creation of television drama and film which re-create for the screen portions of religious Jewish-Israeli cultures from within, in an au-

thentic way, is part of a larger significant development in the culture which can be characterized as the "discourse of authenticity." Within this trend, *Ushpizin*, *My Father My Lord, The Secrets* (directed by Avi Nesher, 2007, whose screenwriter is Hadar Galron, a woman who came out of the Orthodox Religious community), or *Srugim* and *Another Life,* are created by authors from within the social environments they recreate or represent on the screen, small or big.

Tzafrir Kokhanovsky, the creator of *A Touch Away,* debuted on the Israeli television screen with the 2002 reality series *Hadimona'im.* The series documented the life of several men and women from Dimona, a southern development town from the Israeli *Negev*, peripheral and under- or misrepresented in Israeli media and visual arts until then.[16] The spokesman of the Dimona municipality, Amos Sarig, hurried to issue a press release about the series, and posed an ultimatum to Kokhanovski to add a disclaimer at the opening sequence of the documentary series, stating that the real persons, protagonists of the series, do not represent or reflect the town of Dimona, nor any sector of its residents. Rather, he insisted, they represent specific individuals and their lives only. The Dimonians, then, a title pretending to generalize and typify the Dimona people, with the additional documentary nature of the series, ventured to offer Israeli viewers authentic, documentary views of the Israeli periphery in its mundane domestic sphere. *Hadimona'im* was an important event on Israeli television of the time, since it did allocate to the town of Dimona and its people television primetime and visibility. In *A Touch Away,* Kokhanovski moved on from that periphery to another underrepresented section of Israeli life in the Haredi orthodox religious community of Bnei Brak.

The discourse of authenticity is very relevant to representations of the immigrants from Russia which *A Touch Away* depicts. "Russians" in the drama are played by actual immigrants from the former Soviet Union, speaking their native Russian language rather than stereotypically accented Hebrew. The cast playing the Mintz family are all actual immigrants from the former Soviet Union to Israel, who have personally experienced the traumas of immigration and "absorption" into Israeli society: Jenya Dodina (Marina Mintz), Slava Bibergal (Sasha Mintz), Henry David (Zorik Mintz), and Lucy Dubinchik (Natalia Mintz). Just like Arik Kaplun, author of the 1998 film *Yana's Friends*, and his wife Evelyn, who played the role of Yana, the new immigrant from Russia whose story represents the story of the 1991 immigration boom from Russia into Israel during the Gulf War, they bring

their own biography into the fictional world, rendering it more authentic, identifiable, and intimately closer to both their own and the viewers' world.

Although the medium of television and oral media culture prefer shorthand stereotypes, narrative and generic formulae, the discourse of authenticity challenges this tendency of the medium, and offers a more nuanced portrait of the sociocultural reality it mediates. The real challenge for Israeli television is to represent a pluralistic, multicultural society and culture, which no longer believes in its homogeneity and the unifying power of the melting pot, in all its diversity and complexity, in spite of the simplifying and stereotyping constraints of the medium and the commercial marketplace which television actually is.

The discourse of reality which characterizes television programming of the current decade emerged in response to the postmodern media environment of the 1990s, which was saturated with quoted and recycled images and simulations of reality.[17] This backlash of reality television[18] addresses viewers' hunger for real-life dramas and real-life protagonists. One of the most successful Israeli television shows of the recent decade, *Fisfoosim* (literally, "missed shots"), is a disciple of a popular Israeli film genre of the 1980s, which,like *Candid Camera* and *America's Funniest Home Videos*, combines pranks and the voyeuristic pleasure of viewing both celebrities and ordinary Israelis coping with degrading, unexpected situations, under the supervision and control of the collective eye.

Like American reality programming, Israeli reality shows are mostly serial, and like soaps, they provide a serial, open drama that cultivates para-social relations of viewers with real people put in unfamiliar extreme contexts such as the ones in *Survivor, Big Brother,* or *The Biggest Loser.* Like the fictional Ed in the film *Ed TV* (dir. Ron Howard, 1999), the actual real-life protagonists of MTV's *Real World* and *Laguna Beach* are objects of the constant voyeurism of their TV viewers, who become permanent participants in other peoples' private, everyday lives. While voyeurism is certainly part of the pleasure associated with such viewing, the para-social relations vis-à-vis such real people and the identification with their world are accompanied by the "pedagogical" experience that such continuous observation yields. We, the viewers, learn about the lives of other real people in the real world they inhabit; we learn about their feelings and relationships and hopes. The drama that real, authentic reality yields, as if it were not edited and manipulated (which it certainly is), is more fascinating than any fabricated soap or fiction, of which some of us had grown suspicious.

This hunger for the televised real life of others, which reflects television's original vocation as a medium to document real life as an extension of the viewers' eye,[19] extends to dramatic television as well. Television drama series offer Israelis realistically rendered sociocultural milieus, which afford them a gaze into hitherto hidden sites of Israeli life. Furthermore, these new landscapes of lifestyles and sections of society replace stereotypical and stigmatizing portraits of these cultures, which are narrativized and gazed at from the inside, by authentic members of these communities. Such internally experienced and unbiased vantage points facilitate complex and more authentic representations of the internal diversity and complexity of these social milieus.[20]

Representations of the Jewish religious sectors in Israeli society have become one of the prominent themes, visions, and dramas on Israeli television.[21] 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,[22] but, most importantly, is created by authors as an authentic discourse that comes from within the community and the subculture.

Hence Shuki Ban Naim, one of the writers for *A Touch Away*, comes from a Haredi religious background. Jacky Levi, one of the authors for the second season of *Meorav Yerushalmi* grew up and lives in the religious Sephardic neighborhood which is the setting for the series. Eliezer Shapira and Hava Divon, creators of the television drama series *Srugim*, are members of the religious-national community in the Katamon neighborhood, known in the local parlance as "The Swamp," whose everyday life and dating practices they depict. Furthermore, they were professionally educated in the *Ma'ale* film and television school, which was founded in Jerusalem by and for the religious community, and which produces creations and creators of visible fictions and documentaries about this community, for its own spectators and for the general Israeli public. Such exchange on the Israeli screen of sights and narratives further challenges symbolic social boundaries between the secular and religious sites of Israeli life.

This trend is accompanied by internal creation of cinema within the Haredi community, which is addressed distinctly and separately to masculine and feminine Haredi audiences. Within a tradition which has historically banned the visual, this is no less than a revolution. Historically, Haredi vibrant media in Israel, which recognizes within the Jewish traditions the power of the written word, has developed a vibrant print media addressed at the Haredi audience itself. Other sectors of the religious Jewish community in Israel have had their own active press, printed press and magazines, mostly.[23] But the power of visual media seems to be penetrating the walls of Haredi neighborhoods, which become objects of cinematic and televisual representations for Israeli audiences to gaze at from the outside, as well as a creation targeted internally within the religious Jewish community itself, in its diverse variants.

The changing social discourses in Israeli culture result in dramatic changes in the representations of ethnocultural individuals and communities, their lifestyles and everyday life. Israeli culture used to reproduce a master narrative, associated with the melting-pot ideology, a conceptualization of the culture as one solid unified Hebrew-Israeli entity, emotionally and ideologically invested in the nation, the land, and their history as the only source of authority and object of identification. This is no longer the case: the culture now produces radically different stories it tells itself, diverse reflections of itself on the small and silver screen. The melting pot has become a multicultural mix of immigrant heritages and cultural variants. Hebrew language and culture are now one variant among other productive cultures in Israel, including several variants of Jewish Israeli culture which are not necessarily Hebrew. The family has replaced the nation, the homeland, and the collective whole as a site of identity negotiation and origin of identity. Familial second- and third-generation histories replace a unified collective official history which is no longer considered representative of suppressed and silenced histories of Israelis.

These revolutionary trends in identity politics and discourses are articulated in *A Touch Away* as an instance of television drama which adopts the discourse of authenticity, combined with the old popular formula of the popular Bourekas films, and a universally powerful story of an impossible love which socio-ethnic and cultural barriers hinder and bring unto a fatal, tragic end.

Bnei Brak Story, Bridges and Reconciliation: An Impossible Love as a Social Drama

A Touch Away tells a universally appealing story of an impossible love between Zorik, a young man who immigrated to Israel from Russia, who can only afford to rent a flat in the Haredi poor neighborhood in Bnei Brak, and a young Haredi woman, Rokhale Berman, his neighbor. Rokhale is just being matched to a prospect suitable groom, whereas Zorik and his "Russian" family are not acceptable in the neighborhood, let alone as a possible "shidech," a match for the Bermans.

The credit sequence opening each chapter of the eight-chapter serial drama, artfully created to articulate the audio-visual aesthetics of art cinema and quality television,[24] quotes the unforgettable imagery from Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 cinematic adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: two hands reaching for each other, unable to meet. The animosity between the Veronian clans and class differences which hinder the realization of the pure love of the innocent youth in Shakespeare's drama is translated in the Israeli television drama to an impossible encounter between Zorik, the secular young Israeli of Russian heritage, the former soldier who dreams of travelling to South America, the free man visually associated with the sky and the horizons, and Rokhale, kept away from the public space under her parents protective guardianship, kept away from touching and from knowing what a young woman in her community is not supposed to know.

Although the Orthodox Jewish milieu of Bnei Brak is shot on location in *A Touch Away,* the actors are all secular nonpracticing Israelis. The impossibility of bridging the two worlds—that of the secular Russian immigrant young man Zorik and his family on one hand, and that of the young Orthodox Jewish girl Rokhale—imports onto the television screen a social tension and cultural clash which is inextricably bound with Israeli life. Israeli society, a multicultural immigrant society, is characterized by other ideological and cultural stratifications and tensions. Varying degrees and versions of Jewish religiosity which intersect with ethnic heritage—Mizrahim and Sephardim versus Ashkenazim, left-wing "dovish" ideology versus right-wing "hawkish" ideology—infuse public and social Israeli life and media with countless tensions, clashes, and debates.

These debates do not only take place in Israeli politics and parliamentary life. They are seen on the Israeli screen on a daily basis, articulated in talk shows such as *Politika*, a satire (*Eretz Nehederet*), sitcoms such as *Arab Labor* (Sayed Kashua, Ron Ninio, Shawi Kapon 2007-2008, 2012) and dra-

mas such as *Loving Annah Loving Annah* (Zion Rubin 2008-2010), or *A Touch Away*. Ron Ninio, the director of *A Touch Away* as well as of the hit sitcom *Arab Labor*, specializes in bringing these sociocultural clashes and tensions between Orthodox-religious and secular Israeli Jews, *Dossim* and *Russim* (in *A Touch Away*), or Arabs and Jews (in *Arab Labor*) into a dramatic generic televisual fictional world, be it a melodramatic drama (*A Touch Away*) or a hilarious satirical sitcom (*Arab Labor*).

Like any good melodrama, television or other, *A Touch Away* constructs the tragedy of two socially polarized worlds, representatives of which fall in love with each other, a love which cannot be actualized. The impossible, forbidden love ends in catastrophe and resignation, keeping the hierarchical and polarized social order intact, in place.

These two microcosms, of which Zorik and Rokhale are representatives, are constructed as diametrically opposed and irreconcilable visually and not only ideologically. The Orthodox religious household of Rokhale's family is a restrained, highly controlled world, portrayed in monochromatic shades of black, white, and gray, with silent, laconic talk and strict regulations for conduct. The Russian household is colorful and loud, portrayed in warm colors of red, orange, and yellow, unruly in outbursts of cries and laughter, loud and extroverted sexuality, and heightened expression of emotions. These binary oppositions re-create the stereotypical binary oppositions of Ashkenazim (restrained, in cold colors) and Mizrahim (loud, colorful, warm colors) in popular Bourekas Israeli films.

The polarization of these sociocultural microcosms serves the melodrama. Zorik and Rokhale, like Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, belong to distinct social worlds, which although a touch away physically are ideologically and culturally galaxies apart. The opening sequence signifies the tragedy of young people in love who are constrained by the social and cultural codes of their families and societies. Rokhale and Zorik can only meet in liminal spaces, such as the stairwell, corridors, an elevator, the street, or a parking lot.

The impossible love between Zorik and Rokhale signifies deeper divisions in Israeli society. *A Touch Away* is a symbolic site for the articulation of the intricacies imminent to cultural Israeli identity and the contradictions involved in striving for a unified cultural and lingual Israeli-Jewish-Hebrew collective identity. Although it was aired on the second commercial channel, in prime time, the series was funded and supported by the AVI CHAI foundation, which rather than being a commercial producer—in the busi-

ness of production for the profits—is an ideologically motivated organization with a publically manifested cultural agenda. The context for this exploration of representations on the small Israeli screen of intercultural dialogs and conflicts between Orthodox Israeli Jews in Bnei Brak (known in Israeli parlance as *Dossim*)and immigrants from the former Soviet Union (known in Israeli parlance as *Russim*) is the "*Tzav Pius*" project and its ideological endeavors. This project of reconciliation in Israeli society, initiated as a consequence of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination and the painful sociocultural fissures associated with it, is contextualized by a larger enterprise of the AVI CHAI foundation, the promotion both in Israel and in North America of an awareness and discourse about Jewish identity as a complex and diversified experience.

The Tzav Pius enterprise, a pun for the Israeli term *Tzav Gius* (which is the official form used to recruit Israeli men and women to the military duty in the IDF), is aimed at recruiting public discourse in Israel for reconciliation between hawks and doves, left and right, and settlers and "peace now" partisans. Gesher, another funder for the series—the Israeli fund for multicultural cinema—articulates this trajectory of bridging fissures and intercultural clashes within Israeli society. Gesher, literally meaning in Hebrew "bridge," funded the popular sitcom *Arab Labor* as well, the first prime time Israeli sitcom written by the Israeli Arab author Sayed Kashua, rendering the Israeli Palestinian Arab character visible on Israeli television prime time, opening its representations to alternative, more complex encoding and interpretations, from an insider's positioning.

These successful prime time Israeli series, winners of Israeli Academy Awards, attract favorable attention at Jewish Film Festivals in the United States as well. They reflect Israeli television production that self-consciously promotes a cultural agenda that prioritizes diversity, tolerance, reconciliation, and pluralism. Both of these series, although so different in mood, tone, and genre, turn intercultural dialogues within Israeli society, between Jews and Arabs, secular and religious Israeli Jews, native Israelis and new immigrants, into their subject matter and visual core. They dramatize these clashes and dialogues, which materialize as debates in the social public sphere. They visualize and narrativize the attempts to bridge and appease them.

Zorik and Rokhale are doomed to remain apart, each resigning to the customs, ideologies, norms, and values of their social and familial milieu. Yet, they do come closer. They get to know the constraints and values of

their different environments. Their fathers discover that Yiddish can actually be a lingua franca for Jews, whether they come from secular socialist Moscow or Orthodox Jewish Israel's Bnei Brak.

The gap between the Orthodox Jewish world in Israel and the secular, pluralistic, democratic values it aspires to keep as core values is challenged and bridged by the constant movement of real Israelis back and forth from secular life styles and identifications to Orthodox religiosity (*Khazara Bitshuva*), and from Orthodox Jewish lives and devotions to secular Israeliness (*Khazara Bishe'ela*). Furthermore, secular Israelis no longer consider their Judaism a property of the practicing religious Orthodox Jews. Wearing their "transparent *Kippah*," they search for meaning and values in Jewish texts and traditions, embracing Judaism as a core aspect of their Israeli identity.

Major figures and authors in cultural Israeli life, Uri Zohar, Haim Beer, Naomi Ragan, Yochi Brandeis, Hagai Levi, David Volach, Shuli Rand, Hhaim Tabakman, and others, have done the actual transition from one world to the other in their biography as well as artistic creation. They bring the transgression of the boundaries between "Jewish" and "democratic," as well as the diverse versions of Jewish religiosity and secular Israeli Jewish options, into the fore of Israeli discourse by visualizing and dramatizing the challenged boundaries and divisions onto primetime television and the Israeli academy awards winners' repertory. From this liminal positioning, between the worlds, these creators of fictional worlds offer insiders' views on both cultures and shed light on the complexities of Jewish-Israeli identity for both Israelis within and viewers outside of Israel.

Hence television dramas such as *A Touch Away* bring Israeli and American viewers alike closer to remote, foreign, marginalized, and estranged cultural universes within Israel. They offer a more authentic, rich portrait of the multicultural Israel as a complex and vibrant society, constantly debating not only its foreign and national affairs and politics, but human and social values that are inevitably struggled for within the hectic internal identity politics. This closer look at Israeli culture in action, the dramatic encounters between social others in the margins, the internal dilemmas of religious Israeli Jews as individuals and groups, offer American viewers a window into Israel closer to its real experiences, and offer Israelis a mirror into the hypertense vibrant democracy and battlefield in which they live.

Indeed, fissures, disagreements, clashes, and unbridgeable differences efficiently render the drama—better yet, the melodrama—heartbreaking, engaging, and captivating. Yet, at the same time, they articulate an au-

thentic engagement in the vibrant Israeli democracy with such social and political tensions and differences. They convey the complex, multilayered, and multicultural kaleidoscope which "Israel" actually is, which is a far cry from Israel's image on the American screen, and only a touch away from what Israelis know about their own culture.

Notes

1. I would like to thank my colleague Professor Olga Gershenson for an inspiring dialog in initial stages of this research.

2. Yael Gueoni, *Globes*, March 21, 2007. Gueoni argues that a quarter of all Israel's women aged 25-54 watched this chapter of the series, and a total of 850,000 Israeli spectators, which was an unprecedented record number of viewers for an Israeli TV drama. http://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000195237.

3. Michal Ben David, *Habama*, June 21, 2007 (Hebrew). http://www.habama.co.il/Pages/Description.aspx?ArticleId=5354&Subj=4&Area=1.

4. In an interview with Itai Stern, March 20, 2007 (Hebrew). The translation from Hebrew is mine, not verbatim. http://www.nrg.co.il/online/47/ART1/558/672.html.

5. For a discussion of sociological formations of religion, ethnicity, and class in Israel see Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Stephen Sharot, *Ethnicity, Religion and Class in Israeli Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

6. For a theoretical discussion see Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 18-36.

7. Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi, *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

8. Yaacov Shavit, "The Missing Cultural Stratum and Its Filling" (Hebrew: "Haroved Hatarbuti Hekhaser Umiluyo"), in *Folk Culture*, ed. B. Z. Kadar (Hebrew: *Hatarbut Ha'amamit*) (Jerusalem: Shazar Institute for Israel's History Research, 1985), 327-45.

9. Tamar Katriel discusses the "crystallization" metaphor epitomizing the yearning for cohesiveness and the strict social boundaries in Israeli culture in *Communal Webs: Communication and Culture in Contemporary Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

10. Ella Shohat, "From Orientalism to Bourekas," in *Israeli Cinema-East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin University of Texas Press 1989), 124-37.

11. Nurith Gertz, *Motion Fiction* (Ramat Aviv: Open University of Israel, 1993), 27-37 (Hebrew).

12. A fine example of the "non sabra," "exilic Jew" antihero in 1970s Israeli cinema, who is less stereotypical yet exemplifies the association of the nonsabra protagonist with the orthodox religious Jew is Ephraim Kishon's outstanding film *The Policeman* (Hebrew: *Hashoter Azoulai*, Israel, 1971), which won the Golden Globe Award for foreign language films in 1972 and was nominated for the Oscar in that category that same year as well.

13. To exemplify the meanings such films still sustain in popular Israeli consciousness here's a spectator's review of *Hagiga Basnooker*, cited from the internet movie data base, at http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0152492/:

> Considered by many to be the funniest Israeli movie ever
> 3 October 2002 | by *sefiel* (Israel)
>
> Considered by many to be the funniest Israeli movie ever made, Hagiga B'Snuker stars Israel's top comedians such as Ze'ev Revach, Yehuda Barkan and Yosef Shiloah. The story is about two twin brothers, Azriel and Gavriel (both played by Yehuda Barkan), who are in no contact with each other, since they live totally different lives. Azriel is a very religious, naive and good-hearted Jew who works in a fruit shop in Jaffa and leads a very religious life. Gavriel, on the other hand, is a hoodlum and a good-for-nothing hustler who together with his friend Hanuka (Ze'ev Revach) runs a Snooker Bar. Gavriel and Hanuka make easy money by swindling innocent people into gambling on Snooker games. One day Gavriel is forced to renew contact with his brother, because he is in trouble with the mafia, and the only way to pay them off is by selling the family estate which is co-owned by Gavriel and his brother Azriel. Accompanied by a beautiful soundtrack by Matti Caspi, this movie provides a very humoristic view of the clash of cultures in Israel between religious and secular Jews. The dialogs and scenes in this movie are so funny, that you may actually pee in your pants the first time you see it. This movie is considered a cult movie in Israel, to the extent that, living in Israel, once in a while, you may bump into a person so deeply effected by this movie, that every other sentence that comes out of his mouth is a quote from Hagiga B'Snuker.

14. For a discussion of this trend in Israeli cinema see Dan Chyutin, "Negotiating Judaism in Contemporary Israeli Cinema: The Spiritual Style of My Father My Lord," in *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion*, ed. Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

15. For a discussion of the emergence of the discourse of authenticity in Israeli cinema see Yosefa Loshbitzky, *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

16. Representations of Dimona and images of development towns in Israeli cinema are discussed in Miri Talmon, "Somewhere in Israel: Development Towns in Israeli Cinema" (Hebrew: "Ei Sham Be-Israel: Ayarot Pituach Bakolnoa Hayisraeli"), in *Ayarot Hapitua'kh*, ed. Hlamish, Tzameret, and Glitzenstein (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Tzvi, 2009).

17. See Fredric Jameson's discussion in an American cinema context in his chapter, "Nostalgia for the Present," in *Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) and in an Israeli cultural context, see Gadi Taub, *The Dispirited Rebellion* (Hebrew*: Hamered Hashafuf*) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997).

18. P. Humm, "Real TV: Camcorders, Access and Authenticity," in *The Television Studies Book*, ed. C. Geraghty and D. Lusted (New York: Arnold, 1998), 251-61.

19. This is how John Ellis characterizes television's image, sound, and fiction: as opening a window for its viewers, in the comfort of their living room armchair, to other, exotic, real worlds remote from them which become accessible yet unthreatening. See *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video,* rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 1992).

20. Olga Gershenson has written extensively of cinematic and theatrical texts and representations of the Russian community in Israel. See "Russian Israelis on Screens and Behind the Cameras," in *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion,* ed. Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

21. Some of these series are *Meorav Yerushalmi* (*Jerusalem Mix*), *Khaim Akherim* (*Another Life*), *Srugim*, urim vetumim (2011, authored by one of *A Touch Away*'s screenwriters, Shuki Ben-Naim).

22. For a discussion of sociological formations of religion, ethnicity, and class in Israel, see Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Stephen Sharot, *Ethnicity, Religion and Class in Israeli Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

23. See, for example, Orly Tsarfaty, "Alternative Identity and Memory in Ultra Orthodox Newspapers," *Journal for Semitics* 18, no. 1 (2009): 240-74; Merilin Vennig, *Haredi Cinema* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2011) (Hebrew); Ines Gabel, *The Religious-National Public and the Media: A Love-Hate Relationship,* Haim Hertzog Institute for Media, Society and Politics Research, Tel Aviv University, May 2006 (Hebrew). For a discussion of new Israeli queer religious cinema, see Gilad Padva, "Gay Martyrs, Jewish Saints and Infatuated Yeshiva Boys in the New Israeli Religious Queer Cinema," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* (January 2012), http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14725886.2011.608558.

24. For a discussion of art cinema aesthetics and the symbolic and universally mythic qualities of the quality TV credit sequence see Sarah Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good? Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgement," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I. B. Taurus, 2007), 17-19, 34.

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