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Fill the Void

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Fill the Void

Abstract
This is a film review of *Fill the Void* (2012) directed by Rama Burshtein.

Keywords
Sundance, Festival, 2013, Orthodox Judaism, Arranged Marriage

Author Notes
John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals (New York: NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film (Routledge, 2009). He is currently editing (along with Eric Mazur) the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.

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Fill the Void

directed by Rama Burshtein

(Spotlight)

Shira is an 18 year old girl, in the process of seeking an arranged marriage within her ultra-orthodox Jewish community in Tel Aviv. There is talk of a match to be made with a boy her age, and she looks forward to that. All this changes when her older sister Esther dies in childbirth, leaving an infant child and a husband. Shira's mother believes that Shira should marry the widower, Yochay, in order to keep the family together and close, and she exerts all her influence to that end.

Much of the film involves the not too subtle pressures applied, as Shira's mother consults with the Rebbe who encourages Yochay to consider the match. Yochay is not interested at first, but begins to yield to the pressures himself and seeks to discern Shira's possible interest. Complicating the situation is that Shira's other older sister Frieda is still unmarried and is getting to an age at which it is difficult to make a match. Frieda would like to marry Yochay, but when Shira suggests this to Yochay, he is offended and feels rejected by her. Shira is only

trying to do her duty, however, so seeks to make amends with Yochay in being open to his proposal.

Ironically, it is the very fact that Shira is so dutiful that proves an impediment. The Rebbe refuses to endorse the match as she seems to have no feeling for Yochay; he sees her decision as forced and involuntary. Yochay also does not want such a reluctant bride who only marries out of a sense of duty. Shira feels tremendous guilt, especially towards her mother, who makes her unhappiness clear when it appears that Yochay will move to Belgium to marry a widow with children there. The possibilities alter after Frieda acquires a match, with the Rebbe's help, so Shira is free to marry Yochay. Still, she has to convince the Rebbe to endorse the match, and somehow manages this.

This film is an interesting portrait of arranged marriage in that it is clear that the women and men have choices about who they marry, but these choices are constricted by the formal and informal rules of a tight community that is based on deference to the Rebbe. He seems to genuinely have the best interests of all at heart, but this patriarchal structure does not allow the freedom of the individuals involved to discern what their own hearts want. Shira's unmarried aunt is the only one to question the structure; she lacks the use of her arms, which may have made her unmarriageable, but is also a metonymy for her powerlessness in that culture. Shira and Yochay accept their match as social forces make it impossible for them

to do otherwise, and their faces at their wedding show the triumph of reluctant duty over love and choice. In the end, we are offered a complex portrait of this culture that is not without compassion for its individual members, even while it suggests that following the rules makes it difficult for those individuals to find happiness.

— John Lyden