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## Exploring Orthodox Jewish Masculinities with Eyes Wide Open

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## Exploring Orthodox Jewish Masculinities with Eyes Wide Open

### Abstract

*Eyes Wide Open* (*Einayim Petukhoth*), Haim Tabakman's 2009 feature debut, explores the masculinity of strictly Orthodox Jewish men, carefully noting the various practices that shape it – work, religion, clothes, family, social context and community, sexual desire –, but also the fissures that emerge in their performances. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender practices and R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, this paper argues that the film explores the practices through which Haredi masculinity is performatively established, but it also shows that this hegemonic masculinity is never perfectly embodied by any man. It is precisely its protagonists' "failures" to perfectly perform masculinity – most centrally with regard to bodily discipline and sensations, and their religious meaning – that open up a space in which a shift in Haredi masculinity might become possible that poses a challenge not only to religious, but also to secular hegemonic masculinity.

### Keywords

Eyes Wide Open; Haim Tabakman; masculinity; Haredi Judaism; gaze; symbolic space; relationality

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### Author Notes

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## Introduction

A man cutting up a chicken; a man praying; a man undressing, layers of clothing, black and white; a man singing, arms around other men, smiling; a man lying down in bed next to his wife; a man tucking his son in at night; a man walking the streets; a man kissing another man. *Eyes Wide Open* (*Einayim Petukhoth*), Haim Tabakman's 2009 feature debut, explores the masculinity of strictly Orthodox Jewish men, carefully noting the various practices that shape it – work, religion, clothes, family, social context and community, sexual desire –, but also the fissures that emerge in their performances. The film is set in Mea Shearim, a quarter in Jerusalem where strictly Orthodox Jews live in a closed community with little outside contact. The discovery of the protagonist, Aaron, a butcher and married man, father to several children, to be attracted to another man, the young stranger Ezri, represents a moment of crisis both for the protagonist, and for his community. But even more, Aaron's and Ezri's desire for each other becomes an occasion when the ruptures in normative ways of doing masculinity surface, first of all because the protagonists' sexual relationship disrupts normative heterosexuality in Orthodox Judaism, but also in many other respects, and for other characters in the film, as my film analysis will show.

Maybe inspired by the allusion to Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), which also deals with the subversive potential of sexual desires, most reviews of the film have focused on the challenge that its protagonists' same-sex

desire represents in the context of strictly Orthodox Judaism.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will deal with the issue of same-sex desire in Haredi Judaism only in the broader context of the film's treatment of Haredi masculinity. I argue that the film explores the practices through which Haredi masculinity is performatively established, but it also shows that this hegemonic masculinity is never perfectly embodied by any man. It is precisely its protagonists' "failures" to perfectly perform masculinity – most centrally with regard to bodily discipline and sensations and their religious meaning – that open up a space in which a shift in Haredi masculinity might become possible. Of this, however, the film offers no more than a sketch, a vision that remains ambiguous until the end.

For my argument, I draw on the concept of hegemonic masculinity and multiple masculinities developed by R.W. Connell<sup>2</sup> and reformulated by R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt,<sup>3</sup> and on Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender.<sup>4</sup> After briefly introducing the models of masculinity present in contemporary Israel, the religious Haredi masculinity which the film explores, and the secular model that is prevalent in Israeli society at large, I will then turn to the film and discuss its treatment of masculinity, for which it employs two specifically filmic strategies: the symbolic use of the setting, and the motif of the gaze, both of which contribute to rendering more ambiguous the idea of hegemonic masculinity and the practices that uphold it, and open up possibilities for change. In my conclusion, I will discuss the film's critique of both secular and

religious hegemonic masculinities, its vision of a shift in their practices that might give them a new meaning, and its contributions to the broader discussion of masculinity/ies.

### **Gender as performance, hegemonic masculinity and multiple masculinities**

Over the last few decades, critical men's studies have underlined that masculinity is not something one is born with, but rather something one attempts to achieve in a life-long project. Judith Butler has shown that gender should be understood as a performance whose meaning is established through the repetition of gendering acts and gestures: "Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality."<sup>5</sup> The compulsory repetition of gendering acts, whose repertoire is limited by history and socio-cultural context, leads then, over time, to the naturalization of gender and the gendered body so that what seems to be the cause of gender identity (a gendered body) is really the effect of gendering practices.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, as Judith Halberstam points out, masculinity is not limited to men, but women's performances of masculinity also contribute in important ways to the construction of its meaning.<sup>7</sup> While on the one hand, the repeated performance of

gendering practices leads to the naturalization of gender, on the other it offers the possibility for change through unconsciously “failed” repetitions, consciously altered or parodied repetitions, and the temporality underlying the performativity of gender.<sup>8</sup>

Masculinity is, however, not a “neutral” practice, but constitutive of hierarchizing and oppressive relationships of power based most fundamentally on binaries of gender and sexuality.<sup>9</sup> R.W. Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity<sup>10</sup> tries to capture the ways in which masculinity is involved in the maintenance of patriarchal power through history. Hegemonic masculinity is understood to be “the pattern of practices (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue.”<sup>11</sup> Although only few men perfectly perform hegemonic masculinity in actual life, it is perceived as normative – not least through media constructions of men that embody hegemonic masculinity<sup>12</sup> –, and men (as well as women) either comply with it and the gender order it supports in order to reap its benefits,<sup>13</sup> or are subordinated. Conformity to hegemonic masculinity is socially enforced in institutions like schools, sports, the military, law, and through the marginalization and discrimination of deviant masculinities, such as homosexual, lower-class or female masculinities. The concept of hegemonic masculinity includes the idea of multiple masculinities, in several senses: with regard to the synchronic diversity of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities in a given society; diachronically,

through the historical change of what functions as hegemonic masculinity in reaction to social developments and to the mutual influence of hegemonic and other masculinities on each other;<sup>14</sup> and in the internal diversity of apparently homogenous models.<sup>15</sup>

In Connell and Messerschmidt's recent reformulation of the concept of hegemonic masculinity two points are particularly relevant for my reading of *Eyes Wide Open*: first, they propose a framework that takes into account the different geographical levels at which hegemonic masculinity can be analyzed, namely the local, the regional and the global, arguing that this "allows us to recognize the importance of place without falling into a monadic world of totally independent cultures or discourses. It also casts some light on the problem of multiple hegemonic masculinities [...]"<sup>16</sup> Thus, "local plurality is compatible with singularity of hegemonic masculinity at the regional or society-wide level."<sup>17</sup> The distinction between local and regional levels is helpful for understanding the relationship between the secular and religious models of masculinity prevalent in Israel, as we will see in the next section, and for the possibility of change at both levels. Secondly, the authors underline the importance of the embodiment of masculinity, and the active role of bodies in the construction of identity. Bodies are not only objects of social control, but "the body is a participant in generating social practice"<sup>18</sup> and, I would add, meaning. Recent studies of the masculine Haredi body by Gideon Aran, Nurit Stadler and Eyal Ben-Ari<sup>19</sup> and Yohai Hakak<sup>20</sup>

suggest that the body represents a useful analytical category for the study of Haredi masculinity, on which I will also draw in my reading of *Eyes Wide Open*. As we will see, the fissures that the film shows to emerge in masculinizing practices are closely related, if not the result of, the agency of bodies, their *Eigensinn* (here to be translated as both “stubbornness” and “with a will of their own”).<sup>21</sup>

### **Israeli masculinities, religious and secular**

Explicitly and implicitly, *Eyes Wide Open* relates to different models of masculinity present in its production and reception context: secular Israeli masculinity, which following Connell and Messerschmidt might be defined as regional hegemonic masculinity, and religious Haredi masculinity, which is marginal on the regional level, but hegemonic on the local level, the closed Haredi community. The film focuses on the religious ideal of masculinity promoted by Aaron’s Haredi community, which could be described as the attempt to maintain and even reinforce the traditionalist Orthodox masculinity developed in 18th and 19th century Jewish Diaspora, which again might be understood as the attempt to maintain Talmudic ideals under modern conditions.<sup>22</sup> According to Michael Satlow’s reading of Talmudic constructions of masculinity,<sup>23</sup> men are primarily characterized by their capacity for self-control, which helps both to overcome the evil urge (*yetzer harah*), and to engage in the study of Torah, which is also

perceived as an antidote to the evil urge. Masculinity is thus seen as a permanent struggle and always at risk of being lost, either by succumbing to bodily, mundane desires, or by losing one's Torah knowledge. As Daniel Boyarin shows, the ideal Orthodox man is a scholar of Torah and family father, distinguished by an attitude of intellectuality, sensitivity and gentleness, captured in the Yiddish word "edelkayt."<sup>24</sup> Ideal Orthodox masculinity is thus based on religious principles derived from Torah and Talmud, and masculinizing practices are essentially religious practices, such as prayer, study, and the fulfillment of other religious obligations. In the Diaspora, this ideal of full-time Torah and Talmud study was embodied by only a few, while others practiced the ideal in less perfect forms, for example by pursuing other kinds of work, delegating religious study to experts. Haredi communities in Israel, however, have attempted to realize this ideal for all men, who are full-time Talmud students in yeshivas and *kollels*, i.e. Torah academies for young and married men, which are not only places of study and prayer, but can be described as "the backbone of Haredi life": all Haredi men and their families are attached to a yeshiva, and "there is almost no Haredi existence outside these institutions."<sup>25</sup>

Bodily discipline continues to be a central concern in the performance of masculinity in Haredi Judaism: it is maintained through the observance of food laws and other purity laws related to bodily practices, the regulation of sexuality, and typical dress (black suit and hat, white shirt), but also through the particular

bodily discipline required by hours and hours of intense Talmud study without interruption by physical activity.<sup>26</sup> Under these circumstances, and reinforced by the ascetic and homosocial environment created through the yeshiva system (young unmarried men live in dormitory-style conditions in the yeshiva, and married men spend a considerable amount of time in the company of other men at the *kollel*), sexual desire represents a particular problem for Haredi masculinity, and as in the Talmudic texts studied by Satlow, the control of the evil urge, and in particular the control of illicit sexual desires (for other men, or for women not one's wife), is a central preoccupation for the successful performance of Haredi masculinity.<sup>27</sup>

Strict gender segregation is one of the means to reinforce Haredi masculinity and its hegemonic function in the patriarchal gender order. Women are excluded from all practices that confer community authority: Torah and Talmud study as well as communal prayer are practiced only by men, whereas household chores, the education of girls and young boys, and in some cases also the management of small businesses are women's obligations. The strict enforcement of heterosexuality, in particular through the interpretation of heterosexual marriage and procreation as a religious obligation and the condemnation of same-sex activities as an "abomination" in the eyes of God (Leviticus 18:22), up to the point that the possibility of same-sex desire is not even acknowledged as a reality in the community (as can be seen in the film

where neither the reason why Ezri was expelled from his yeshiva nor what happens between Aaron and Ezri are ever named), can be interpreted as necessary in order to control any same-sex desire that might emerge in the homosocial environments resulting from these gender-segregated structures and represent a threat to social power relations.

Recently, increasing numbers of young students have dropped out of yeshiva, and thus also of the basic social structure the yeshiva system provides, because not all young men are equally suited for the strict physical and intellectual regime of yeshiva studies.<sup>28</sup> Without an alternative role in Haredi social structures, some of them form informal gangs that provoke disturbances, engage in criminal activities or, seeking a meaningful position in their community, function as a kind of purity police controlling the behavior of other members of the community.<sup>29</sup> The physical violence these men perpetrate both against members of their own community and against outsiders can be seen as a “failure” to perform Haredi masculinity properly, and the attempt to establish an alternative. Their presence thus challenges the Haredi community to redefine the meaning of hegemonic masculinity and the practices through which it might be achieved.

Although Israeli secular masculinities are not made explicit in the film, they represent the regional hegemonic model in relation to which Haredi masculinity is marginal.<sup>30</sup> Israeli hegemonic masculinity is shaped by the Zionist

ideal of the “muscle Jew,” which has played an important role for the collective identity of the Israeli nation.<sup>31</sup> This model developed in the 19th-century Zionist movement as a counter-ideal to the meek, “effeminate” yeshiva student of the Diaspora. The new muscular Jew, self-confident and strong, would now be able to turn the hostile land of Palestine into a new homeland for Jews. Although changes in contemporary Israeli masculinities are noticeable in reaction to feminism, capitalism and consumerism,<sup>32</sup> Zionist muscular masculinity continues to be enforced through obligatory military service with its emphasis on physicality, aggression, and violence, and the impact of the Israeli-Palestine conflict on Israeli society. Paradoxically, it is also further stabilized through its embodiment by marginal masculinities, such as female<sup>33</sup> or gay masculinity.<sup>34</sup>

It is interesting to note that in spite of all the differences between secular and religious hegemonic masculinity, they are connected by the common emphasis on the “heroic” element in masculinity,<sup>35</sup> although each understands it differently: in secular hegemonic masculinity, heroism is defined by physical strength, violence, assertiveness and self-abnegating courage. For Haredi men, heroism is redefined as spiritual struggle and religious strength, with the “battle” against one’s bodily, sexual urges in particular often described in military terms.<sup>36</sup> In contrast to the heroic negation of bodily limits and needs, the alternative performance of Haredi masculinity that *Eyes Wide Open* points to, has as its core the affirmation of body, bodily pleasures and needs as gifts of God’s creation. This

represents a challenge to secular and religious masculinities alike, but maybe also an opportunity for mutual interactions between these masculinities.

### **Doing masculinity in *Eyes Wide Open***

In its exploration of Haredi masculinity, the film relies less on dialogue than on visual strategies, leaving gaps that the viewers are called to fill in. Alternating close-ups and totals, the film is empathically close to its protagonists, but never intrudes on them, acknowledging the intimacy of its story without being voyeuristic. Its representation of Haredi Judaism is complex and avoids both its romanticization as a recreation of the Jewish shtetl of the past, and its “othering” in relation to secular Israeli society. Instead, it shows the community as plural, both rigidly intolerant (the group of young, self-appointed guardians of morality), ascetic (Aaron) and generous and wise (the rabbi). This plurality of attitudes is further emphasized in theological discussions about pleasure and sin. Interestingly – and maybe unexpectedly for viewers who associate Haredi Judaism with fundamentalist rigor and intolerance – the rabbi defends a generous, life-affirming position in which bodily and spiritual pleasure in the things created by God is given a positive religious meaning, because God created the world precisely for the good of humans. The rabbi states: “God doesn’t want men to inflict pain upon themselves.” Even if a man does sin, it is not a reason for despair; a sinner is not condemned for eternity, but has always the chance to atone for past sins by

overcoming new challenges. At this point, the camera panning around the table to capture the faces of the men comes to rest on Ezri and Aaron, uniting them in a single frame, as if this was meant precisely for them. This does not mean that one should not take seriously the matters of sin, and indeed the rabbi reproves Aaron as well as Israel, a man involved in an illicit affair with Sarah, who is promised to another man, for what they do, but he lives the belief that there is always God's greater forgiveness to trust in. In contrast, Aaron defends a heroic model of spirituality by emphasizing that God's service is not done in enjoying what God created, but rather in the struggle to overcome hardships, even to love them, because they are an occasion to show spiritual strength and obedience to God. Thus when Ezri wants to kiss him the first time, Aaron acknowledges Ezri's beauty and worth and his own desire for him, but sees their desire as a challenge to their self-control, and a chance to purify their souls by overcoming it, an exercise in self-restraint and bodily control. Only slowly does Aaron overcome his ascetic tendencies and learn to accept his bodily sensations and the pleasure another man evokes in him as gifts of God's creation, as he explains to his rabbi in a moving declaration of his love for Ezri: "I was dead. Now I'm alive."

The film's careful documentation of the details of daily life and ritual in this particular community with its repeated images of certain practices, such as ritual ablutions or communal prayer, might produce a sense of exoticism for secular or non-Jewish audiences that have little or no knowledge of the meaning

of these rituals,<sup>37</sup> but more than that, it gives a sense of both the security these rituals and rules provide in clearly structuring one's life,<sup>38</sup> and their potentially oppressive power. Importantly, the film's attention to these religious practices shows how through their repeated performance, through donning a tallit and the tefillin, the pronunciation of prayers and the typical bodily movement during prayer and study, an individual's masculinity and masculine body are constructed and given meaning. But in spite of its close, discreet observation of Haredi life, it is quite clear that the film is not a documentary: its montage combines the realism and calm fluidity of tracks or pans with sudden cuts that leave gaps and thus admit to the fact that the film's representation of Aaron and his community is itself a construction. This underlines that what viewers see as Haredi masculinity is established in a twofold performative practice: by Haredi men on the level of filmic narrative, and by non-Haredi actors on the level of the film's production.

The film uses two particularly filmic elements, namely the symbolic relevance of settings and the motif of the gaze, in order to explore hegemonic Haredi masculinity and the fissures that emerge in its performative practice, most centrally in Aaron's and Ezri's desire for each other, which disrupts the heteronormativity on which Haredi masculinity is based, but also in the eruptions of violence, both verbal and physical, among the young guardians of morality, and in other acts by practically all male characters in the film.

*Spaces in which to be a man*

It is striking even at a first viewing of the film, how restricted it is to a certain, limited set of locations. While this might well be due to budgetary restraints in its production, it also has the effect of charging these spaces with symbolic meaning: Aaron's shop, his home, his *kollel*, the streets of Mea Shearim and a well outside of town, are in a way the corner points between which his life takes its regular course, with the trip to the well being not only an exception to this routine, but also a rare excursion beyond the city quarter to which his life is limited. From the perspective of this paper, it is important that these spaces, the norms that govern them and the people that populate them, are also associated with particular practices that establish hegemonic masculine identity, or challenge it.

Maybe the most important of these settings is Aaron's shop, with which the film opens. The clean, orderly shop is the scene of Aaron's professional competence, which the camera again and again emphasizes in images of gleaming steel shelves and dishes, and of Aaron performing his craft as a butcher. Although as a business man, Aaron does not fully conform to the Haredi ideal of a life dedicated to the study of Torah and Talmud, he attempts to come as close as possible to the ideal by continuing his studies in his shop whenever he has a spare moment.<sup>39</sup> Both study and business are serious matters for Aaron, duties which he does well, but apparently without finding much pleasure in them. Therefore Ezri's presence in the shop and the *joie de vivre* he expresses, represent quite a contrast:

his playful parody of a chicken in front of a truck-load full of chickens is frowned upon by Aaron, who later also reproaches the young man that a good butcher doesn't smile, when Ezri smiles at a job well done.

The shop also represents a kind of interface between public and private: as a kosher butcher, Aaron fulfills a religious obligation and performs an important role for his community, who depend on him for their nourishment; people enter the shop to buy their meat, and here, social conflicts also flare up, such as in the confrontations with the guardians of morality, when a stone is thrown through the window, or when the community is called to boycott Aaron's shop in the attempt to force him into conformity with the rules. But his shop is also the setting of private troubles and struggles. It used to belong to Aaron's father, whose presence still lingers after his death: when Aaron reopens the shop, he drapes the notice of his father's death over his chair, where his coat and hat are still hanging, and later he walks up to the small room full of books and old furniture where his father used to rest, and reminiscently looks at an old photo of his father, with the camera remaining close, but not intruding, and the sound of first the rain outside and then soft, slow music adding to the impression of mourning and remembrance. His father's death confronts Aaron with the need to define himself anew, being no longer "the son of..." but rather himself the "head" of his family. When Ezri enters the shop, yet another facet of his identity – unknown to him at first – is evoked in this space: his desire for another man. In a

striking contrast between the sterility of the shop and the passion of the men, they have sex in the walk-in refrigerator for the first time, their carnal desire being satisfied in close proximity to big lumps of meat. Later on, they repeatedly make love in the small room upstairs, a safe, private space where they can live their love hidden from communal control.

His family home provides an interesting contrast to Aaron's shop and the other spaces where he moves because it is the space of a woman, his wife Rivka, something that is even more remarkable because otherwise women are marginal in the film. Like all spaces in this quarter, Aaron's home is small and narrow, populated by numerous children, but well-kept, comfortable, and friendly. According to Orthodox gender segregation, the house is a woman's domain, and this is quite noticeable in the film: Rivka is shown doing household chores, caring for her children and feeding her family. Subtly, she uses the privilege and – limited – power she has (provision of food and the privilege to have sex) to establish and secure her position as Aaron's wife when she senses a threat to her family life: in several occasions, she demands to have sex with Aaron, a right that the Talmud accords to a wife after the end of her menstruation and whenever she shows her interest, and once she invites Ezri for dinner and presents herself emphatically as wife and mother as if to make it obvious to him that he has no right to her husband. Rivka's "hyper-performance" of femininity seems to be a strategy to force her husband to comply to his role as husband and father by

performing the complementary practices due to him. Aaron does not challenge the gendered division of labor: his interactions with his children are loving, but limited to an occasional pat on the head, and he makes no effort to help with chores; instead, when he comes home, he sits down to study another page of Talmud. Repeated scenes of love-making between Rivka and Aaron also characterize his home as a space where gender is practiced according to norms, in contrast to his shop, where illicit desires are realized: sex with his wife is an important element of Aaron's embodiment of Haredi masculinity, although it lacks all the passion of sex with Ezri.

In his *kollel*, a space of communal prayer and study, Aaron fulfills the various religious and social obligations that establish strictly Orthodox Jewish masculinity: he wears tallit and tefillin, he joins communal prayer, he is consulted by the rabbi concerning community affairs, he apparently competently engages in Torah study and theological discussions, he celebrates with his community. In this all-male environment, he has close relationships with other men, embracing them, leaning close to them when discussing important matters. However, as the film shows again in a contrasting scene, it is extremely important in which context such intimacy between men occurs: when Aaron and the others put their arms around each other and sing to celebrate the wisdom of Torah in the study room, this is acceptable, and the smiles he exchanges with Ezri do not raise any attention. In contrast, when Aaron puts his arm around Ezri showing him how to

grind meat in his shop, the rabbi who enters in this moment apparently finds this inappropriate – as does Aaron, who first hesitates to touch Ezri, and then jumps as with a guilty conscience and cuts himself when the rabbi calls to get his attention. Touching and touching is not the same – the meanings that practices performatively establish change depending on the contexts in which they occur, and this polysemy of practices can become a further occasion for instability in gender orders.

The streets of Mea Shearim underline another aspect in the construction of Haredi masculinity: the importance of community for an individual's identity, and the enforcement of community values through social control. Images of the streets evoke a certain stifling atmosphere because of their drabness and narrowness, although one should be careful to distinguish one's impressions as a viewer who does not live there<sup>40</sup> from how the protagonists are shown to feel about their environment: Aaron's confident moves around his quarter, his engagement with others on the streets, occasional scenes of him looking at the street life with Ezri suggest that this is indeed home to him, and not necessarily a prison, as an outsider might think. The space of these streets symbolizes that in this group, existence is quite literally "being-in-relationship," in which individualism is not encouraged: the film shows in short, but significant scenes how neighbors are so close that privacy is difficult to uphold, how private matters are discussed in the synagogue or even on broadsheets pasted to the walls, how

every movement is observed by others, how people on the street greet or shun somebody, expressing their approval or criticism, how the uniformity of traditional clothing discourages individualism.<sup>41</sup> The importance of appropriate behavior in public places and its enforcement are also shown in scenes when Ephraim, Ezri's former lover, refuses to talk to him on the street and eventually pushes him forcefully away – an action which seems to give permission to other young men to push and beat Ezri until, falling, he breaks open a water-pipe and the men disappear. Yet paradoxically, the form in which conformity to norms is enforced through violence, represents itself a contradiction to the ideal of non-aggressive, gentle masculinity.

Interestingly, the film includes relatively few scenes that show the protagonists moving from one of these places to another, and many more that show Aaron, Ezri or others being *in* a given place: often the director uses a rather harsh cut to change the setting, more rarely opting for a “transition scene” that shows them on the street, for example. This formal choice conveys a sense of immutability and the impression that (gender) roles and identities are set and clearly defined with little space for development.

The well Aaron visits first with Ezri to take a ritual bath before the sabbath begins, and then a second time, at the end of the film, alone, is very different from the other significant settings of the film. It is the only non-urban setting, with all others, both private and public spaces, situated in the urban

environment of Jerusalem. The open space that surrounds the well evokes a sense of freedom, in particular when contrasted with the narrow streets of Aaron's quarter. In the middle of trees and rocks, with birdsong mixed with soft, pastoral music on the soundtrack, the city with its houses, streets, traffic noise seems far away, and so are the people that inhabit it, and the restrictions that community life brings with it. The two men react differently to this setting: the way in which Ezri quickly undresses and immerses himself in the green-blue water of the well expresses spontaneity and pleasure in bodily sensations. Aaron, on his part, takes a moment to follow him, taking off his underwear only when he is already in the water, bound by traditional rules of modesty. But then, submerged in the cool water, playing around with Ezri, Aaron seems to be liberated from the discipline which otherwise governs all his gestures and to truly enjoy this freedom in his body's sensations, gifts of God's creation, as his rabbi taught.

In the film's final scene, Aaron returns to the well early in the morning, after Ezri left, alone. This time, he takes off all his clothes at once and enters the water with more confidence. He is shown staying under water until the surface is calm again, then the screen blacks out for the closing titles. This is an ambiguous scene which allows for several interpretations: it could suggest a form of ritual cleansing from sin, suicide (which is strictly forbidden in Orthodox Judaism), or a new beginning, a new way of being in which bodily sensations such as the cold water on one's skin are no longer denied but affirmed and even given a religious

meaning. The well represents a space in which Aaron is free from social rules, free from the bodily discipline enforced by them. Although he discovers these pleasures first through Ezri, this does not mean that Aaron experiences this freedom only when being with Ezri, nor that it is defined exclusively by his desire for another man. In the final scene, Aaron is, for just a moment, no longer husband, father, Haredi Jew, lover of another man, butcher, etc. He simply *is*, without the need to define *what* he is or *how*, in terms of gender, sexual preference, religious affiliation, profession. The loneliness of this space reflects Aaron's momentary, liberating solitude, but it is also clear that this cannot last, that this space and situation are exceptional, because human beings do not and cannot exist without relationships.

### *Gazes that make a man*

Not least through its title, *Eyes Wide Open*, the film emphasizes the theme of the gaze: through its visual strategies, it underlines the importance of practices of looking for the construction and performance of masculine identity, but it also self-consciously problematizes the look of the camera at its actors, and of the viewers at the film.

Gendered identity is a matter of recognition and how a person relates to this recognition: by being recognized as a man or a woman by others, a person is incorporated into a gender order to which the individual is expected to conform by

performing the appropriate gendering practices. Michel Foucault<sup>42</sup> analyzes the gaze as a means to discipline individuals and to establish social power in his study of the panopticon, where the prison architecture ensures that prisoners internalize the gaze of the guards up to the point of submitting to their rules even when they are no longer watched. Similarly, controlling gazes in everyday life enforce the appropriate performance of gender, and thus stabilize the gender order.

In *Eyes Wide Open*, however, gazes have two different functions: controlling, but also affirming. There are first of all the exchanges of looks between Ezri and Aaron, emphasized right from their first meeting, when a close-up of Ezri looking at Aaron for several seconds is followed by a shot from behind Aaron's back that captures both men surreptitiously eyeing each other. Their first longer conversation is then filmed in an interesting shot of Ezri looking at Aaron, with Aaron's reflection visible in the window next to Ezri so that their interaction and looking at each other is brought together in a single image rather than the usual shot-counter-shot construction. The fact that the window frame separates the two, although the framing of the shot unites them, subtly hints at their being both united in their mutual desire, expressed in their gazes, and separated by external structures.

The drama of their looks continues to be underlined through formal means that play with the possibilities of focus, distance, and montage, for example when Aaron notices Ezri sleeping in the yeshiva. In this shot, Aaron, entering the

room, is further back and out of focus, whereas Ezri is in the foreground and in focus, clearly the object of Aaron's gaze. While often the camera looks at the men looking and thus their looking relations are clear, there are a few more obscure scenes in which the subject of the look is less obvious due to how the sequences are cut. In particular in the two sequences when Ezri meets his former lover, a sudden cut to a close-up of Aaron's face suggests both times that he had observed their meetings, although camera angle and movement did not suggest so at first: what seems to be a neutrally observing position is really a subjective gaze without the viewer noticing until the film cuts to Aaron. Similarly, when Aaron and Ezri are together at the well, an apparently neutrally observing camera captures Ezri walking over to the edge to take off his underwear and looks for a moment at him from behind. Again, a cut to Aaron suggests that this was a subjective shot of him looking at Ezri's naked body. The fact that this is obvious only afterwards, gives his gaze a certain privacy: the viewers look with him, but do not know so, they do not watch him looking. This also attenuates the inequality in the position of the naked Ezri as object of the look of the fully clothed Aaron. The intimacy of the looks exchanged between Ezri and Aaron is emphasized by close-ups of their faces individually or together in a frame, and in expressing love and desire, they are an affirmation of the other person's being in spite of potential communal criticism, something that Aaron makes explicit telling his rabbi that Ezri, too, was created by God precisely the way he is, and therefore is good.

But the film also shows how looks can imply criticism and control: the rabbi's look at Aaron putting his arm round Ezri in his shop is obviously a disapproving look, followed by an explicit warning about Ezri's negative influence. When Aaron and Ezri meet on the roof of the shop and Ezri attempts to kiss Aaron the first time, a window is shown to close at the end of the scene, hinting subtly at how gazes control behavior. In another scene, a crowd gathering in front of Aaron's shop is reflected in a passing car, the critical, even threatening power of their looks at Aaron's shop strangely deflected because they are only visible in reflection, so that their gazes seem turned at themselves. The film's treatment of the gaze is thus far from straight-forward, and it complicates the issue of the gaze and its controlling powers even more because Aaron is not only the observed, but also an observer (and thus a reinforcer of community norms),<sup>43</sup> when he once sees Sarah leaving her shop with her lover late at night, and is seen by them: through the gazes of the others, all three are reminded of their transgressions of social norms which are enforced precisely through such gazes.

The film also emphasizes the dynamics of the gaze in film production and its viewing, by making obvious the strategies of visual representation it uses, and by occasionally disrupting viewer expectations, such as when it attributes a subjective viewpoint to an apparently neutral camera perspective. The film also relies on visual metaphors in telling its story: in a sequence at the beginning of the film, when Aaron puts his shop back in order, there is a shot through the shop-

door out onto the street, with heavy rain and sunshine at the same time. Then a hat rolls into the frame, apparently blown by the wind, and lies there, in front of the shop, for a moment. The film cuts to a shot of Aaron shown from behind studying behind his counter, with the hat still lying there, in the background of the image, when it is picked up by Ezri, who then enters the shop. Apparently, the black hat – characteristic of the apparel of Haredi men – announces Ezri’s arrival; one might even say that the coincidence that it comes to rest precisely in front of Aaron’s shop, is what sets the whole story in motion. The second example is a curious image of a wasp caught in a plastic bag, with its buzzing reinforced on the soundtrack, which Aaron notices when he sits looking at Ezri getting into the well. Apparently it symbolizes – maybe in a somewhat too obvious fashion – how Aaron himself is caught in external expectations of what it means to be a man so that he is unable to follow his desire for the man he sees naked for the first time just now.

This emphasis on the visual dimension is interesting from the perspective of this paper, because it suggests that “discourses” about masculinities are not always verbal, conscious discourses with which a person could argue, but rather expectations that are communicated – maybe even more forcefully – through implicit assumptions about how to “be” a man. Yet in its twofold application of the motif of the gaze, the film does not only underline this controlling power of

the gaze, but also its potential to set another person free by affirming their worth through looking at them, recognizing them as the person they are.

## **Conclusion**

The film explores the religious and mundane practices that establish and give meaning to Haredi masculinity: religious practices, such as study, prayer or rituals, with heterosexual intercourse and procreation interpreted as religious obligation, and bodily discipline playing an important role. Through these practices, the masculine Haredi body is shaped as a disciplined, controlled body whose urges are suppressed or channeled into appropriate forms, such as sex with one's wife. The film uses clearly defined settings and the theme of the gaze to underline the internal and external discipline involved in the construction of an individual's masculinity, but at the same time, spaces and gazes also provide occasions for shifts in its performance. Haredi masculine identity is shown to be fundamentally related to community and established in relationships with other people, in contrast with the individualism of secular masculinities. The film represents this relational identity as providing support and security for the individual, but also as restrictive and limiting when an individual diverges from the normative performance of these practices: the conflict represented by Aaron's and Ezri's desire is consequently not just a matter of individual misbehavior, but represents a threat to the whole community.

And yet practically all men in the film are shown to depart in different ways from the gendering practices of Haredi hegemonic masculinity (prayer, study, gentleness, non-aggressiveness, heterosexual married intercourse, strictly gendered division of labor). In the case of Aaron, this is most importantly the failure to perform exclusive heterosexual intercourse with his wife, but also those moments when he experiences pleasure in bodily sensations that otherwise he tries to suppress: when he holds his hand into the wind on the way to the well, when he immerses himself in the cold water, or later when he has sex with Ezri. Aaron's struggles to appropriately perform Haredi masculinity are certainly central to the film, but by no means is he the only man who fails in reaching the ideal: in particular when contrasted with Aaron's serious, controlled demeanor, Ezri's playfulness in imitating a chicken or when splashing around in the well, his passionate love-making, his artistic ambitions and his affirmation of his desire for other men also represent moments of subversion of hegemonic Haredi masculinity. And also the young guardians of morality do not succeed in the performance of hegemonic masculinity: the rabbi explicitly reproaches them for having failed at the study of Torah, and warns them not to challenge his authority. Their acts of violence, both verbal and physical, against Aaron and Ezri can be seen as the attempt to achieve the ideal of Haredi masculinity by suppressing those who do not conform to it, but paradoxically they do this through adopting inappropriate behaviors themselves. Israel, too, the man who has an affair with the

wrong woman, fails in performing masculinizing practices in the appropriate way, which in his case would mean to suppress sexual or romantic urges until his community organizes a marriage for him. The rabbi, religious and social authority at the same time in this community, represents an ambiguous case of Haredi masculinity, too, because there is an incongruence between what he teaches and what he does: as theological authority, the rabbi defends the pleasure in earthly things as God's gifts in creation, which contradicts the Haredi ideal of the suppression of bodily desires in order to be free to concentrate on the spiritual, and he teaches God's forgiveness of human failure in contrast to the prevalent emphasis on struggle and discipline. Yet in his role as social authority, the rabbi continues to uphold traditional norms, reproaching both Aaron and Israel for their transgression of norms in the enjoyment of their bodies' desires.

Thus all men, even minor characters like Israel, are shown to fail in their performance of hegemonic Haredi masculinity, which, although not embodied in any concrete member of the community, nevertheless remains the ideal. However, the ruptures in their performances, related as they are in particular to the body, bodily desires, failures and their (theological) interpretation, provide an opening for a shift in the performance of Haredi masculinity, which the film seems to endorse: a masculinity that affirms the body as active and meaningful. Through the suggested interpretation of bodily sensations and pleasures as important for religious experience, this alternative Haredi masculinity continues to be based on

religious foundations, but differently interpreted. With this, the film reflects the multiplicity of voices and opinions gathered in Torah and Talmud, and the space for development they offer, in contrast to the unequivocalty of socio-religious rules established by strictly Orthodox Judaism.

With its focus on the body as the moment when ruptures in the performance of masculinity might occur, the film also offers a contribution to Israeli discourses of masculinity more in general: secular and religious hegemonic masculinity converge, in spite of their many differences, on the heroic control of the body, with the secular body being disciplined in order to function for military purposes, and the religious body being disciplined to overcome earthly desires and concentrate on the spiritual. The film's focus on the agency of the body and the affirmation of its needs and desires criticizes both versions of heroic masculinities, although only one of them, the religious one, is explicitly referred to in the film. This also contributes to more recent currents in the study of masculinity that have come to realize the analytical importance of the body, and in particular its agency in social, in particular gendering, practices.

The film adds two more aspects to the general discussion of the construction of gender, and masculinity in particular: one is its emphasis on the polysemy of gendering practices as a moment of instability in gender orders, from which change might result. It points to the importance of spaces as providing the context that enables the interpretation of these polysemous practices, as

establishing normative masculinity, or potentially subverting them, and thus to the analytical function of space for the study of masculinities. The other aspect relates to the gaze, which is usually theorized as controlling, policing normative behavior, and functioning as a means of power. While the film certainly points to this function of the gaze, it also underlines a second function of the gaze, namely its potential to affirm another person as what s/he is and thus to transmit a sense of freedom to “do” gender differently.

With its ambiguous final scene, the film refuses to develop a more concrete vision of what the ambivalent potential of gazes, spaces, and bodies might imply for both religious and secular hegemonic masculinities, for the community and its individual members; but it points to their potential to motivate transformations in Haredi and other hegemonic masculinities, and the gender orders they uphold.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example A.O. Scott, “Passion and Identity Crisis in a Pious Community,” *The New York Times*, 4 Feb 2010, accessed August 2, 2013, [http://movies.nytimes.com/2010/02/05/movies/05eyes.html?\\_r=0](http://movies.nytimes.com/2010/02/05/movies/05eyes.html?_r=0); Rene Rodriguez, “Eyes Wide Open: The Struggle between Human Desire and God’s Will,” accessed August 2, 2013, <http://www.miami.com/039eyes-wide-open039-unrated-article>; Lauren Krotosky, “Gay Love Story Tackles Ultra-Orthodox Taboo,” accessed May 8, 2013, [http://www.totallyjewish.com/entertainment/features\\_and\\_reviews/?content\\_id=13924](http://www.totallyjewish.com/entertainment/features_and_reviews/?content_id=13924).

<sup>2</sup> R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 173 (emphasis in the original).

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- <sup>6</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 178.
- <sup>7</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
- <sup>8</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 179.
- <sup>9</sup> For the discussion of the broader epistemological implications of binaries of gender and sexuality, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
- <sup>10</sup> Connell, *Gender and Power*.
- <sup>11</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," 832.
- <sup>12</sup> Kenneth MacKinnon, *Representing Men: Maleness and Masculinity in the Media* (London: Arnold, 2003), 9.
- <sup>13</sup> For a study of women in masculine roles and male soldiers in blue-collar jobs in the army see Orna Sasson-Levy, "Constructing Identities at the Margins: Masculinities and Citizenship in the Israeli Army," *Sociological Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2002).
- <sup>14</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," 847.
- <sup>15</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," 835. See also their bibliography for studies on multiple masculinities in different social and national contexts.
- <sup>16</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," 850.
- <sup>17</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," 850.
- <sup>18</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," 851.
- <sup>19</sup> Gideon Aran, Nurit Stadler and Eyal Ben-Ari, "Fundamentalism and the Masculine Body: The Case of Jewish Ultra-Orthodox Men in Israel," *Religion* 38 (2008).
- <sup>20</sup> Yohai Hakak, "Haredi Male Bodies in the Public Sphere: Negotiating with the Religious Text and Secular Israeli Men," *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality* 3, no. 2 (2009); Yohai Hakak, *Young Men in Israeli Haredi Yeshiva Education: The Scholars' Enclave in Unrest* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), ch. 3.
- <sup>21</sup> Julia Reuter, *Geschlecht und Körper: Studien zur Materialität und Inszenierung gesellschaftlicher Wirklichkeit* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2011).
- <sup>22</sup> For a brief summary of the historical and religious development of Haredi Judaism see Aran, Stadler and Ben-Ari, "Fundamentalism and the Masculine Body," 31-35; Samuel C. Heilman and Fred Skolnik, "Haredim," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, second edition, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), vol. 8, 348-352.

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- <sup>23</sup> Michael L. Satlow, "'Try to be a Man': The Rabbinic Construction of Masculinity," *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Björn Krondorfer (London: SCM Press, 2009), 261-276.
- <sup>24</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1.
- <sup>25</sup> Aran, Stadler and Ben-Ari, "Fundamentalism and the Masculine Body," 33.
- <sup>26</sup> Aran, Stadler and Ben-Ari, "Fundamentalism and the Masculine Body," 37.
- <sup>27</sup> Aran, Stadler and Ben-Ari, "Fundamentalism and the Masculine Body," 38.
- <sup>28</sup> Hakak, *Young Men in Israeli Haredi Yeshiva Education*, 16; Aran, Stadler and Ben-Ari, "Fundamentalism and the Masculine Body," 37.
- <sup>29</sup> Aran, Stadler and Ben-Ari, "Fundamentalism and the Masculine Body," 37-42.
- <sup>30</sup> See Hakak, "Haredi Male Bodies," for a discussion of the influence of secular masculinities on Haredi masculinity.
- <sup>31</sup> Raz Yosef, *Beyond Flesh: Queer Masculinities and Nationalities in Israeli Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 2.
- <sup>32</sup> Hakak, "Haredi Male Bodies," 106. See for a discussion of the transformation of ideals of masculinity in Israeli films: Yaron Peleg, "Ecce Homo: The Transfiguration of Israeli Manhood in Israeli Films," *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion*, eds. Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); for a study on how advertising reflects changes (or not) in Israeli models of masculinity: Dafna Lemish and Irit Lahav, "Much Ado about Nothing?: Masculinities in Israeli Advertising," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 2 (2004).
- <sup>33</sup> For the strategies employed by women in masculine roles in the army see Sasson-Levy, "Constructing Identities at the Margins."
- <sup>34</sup> Boaz Hagin and Raz Yosef, "Festival Exoticism: The Israeli Queer Film in a Global Context," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 1 (2011), 167-168. Yaron Peleg also notes the enduring power of the model of the muscle Jew and its use in gay literature, "which has adopted this model in reverse and seeks to normalize Israeli gay men through masculine associations that often involve military service." Yaron Peleg, "Heroic Conduct: Homoeroticism and the Creation of Modern, Jewish Masculinities," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 13, no. 1 (2006), 32.
- <sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the concept of heroic masculinity in the context of disability studies, see Susan L. Hutchinson and Douglas Kleiber, "Heroic Masculinity Following Spinal Cord Injury: Implications for Therapeutic Recreation Practice and Research," *Therapeutic Recreation Journal* 34, no. 1 (2000), 43-45.
- <sup>36</sup> Hakak, "Haredi Male Bodies," 105-106.

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- <sup>37</sup> Boaz Hagin and Raz Yosef convincingly argue that self-exoticization in the representation of Israeli society plays an important role in promoting Israeli films and their success as “world cinema” in the festival circuit, a phenomenon of which successful queer films are a part. Hagin and Yosef, “Festival Exoticism”, 164-166.
- <sup>38</sup> Schnoor shows in his study of Jewish gay men that the strict rules of traditional Judaism are perceived to provide safety and support by many men struggling with the conflict between their sexuality and their religion. Randal F. Schnoor, “Being Gay and Jewish: Negotiating Intersecting Identities,” *Sociology of Religion* 67, no. 1 (2006), 49-50.
- <sup>39</sup> The issue of full-time Torah study vs. gainful work is discussed controversially in the Talmud, and given that increasingly, young men drop out of yeshiva, the Haredi communities have begun to open up to the idea of vocational training for some of their members. See Nurit Stadler, “Ethnography of Exclusion: Initiating a Dialogue with Fundamentalist Men,” *NASHIM: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues* 14 (2007), 194-197.
- <sup>40</sup> Paul Julian Smith, for example, describes these spaces exclusively in negative terms, as claustrophobic, restraining, and confining, but does not seem to note the positive values that such narrow spaces can also have through the familiarity, sense of protection and mutual support they can convey. Paul Julian Smith, “Men in Trouble: *Lebanon* (Samuel Maoz), *Eyes Wide Open* (Haim Tabakman),” *Film Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2010).
- <sup>41</sup> On this latter point, which is perceived as positive by Haredi men confronted with secular individualism expressed in clothing, see Hakak, “Haredi Male Bodies,” 109-110.
- <sup>42</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
- <sup>43</sup> It should be mentioned that although Aaron contributes to the upholding of community norms through his own gaze, and also when he visits Israel in his home and demands from him not to continue his relationship with Sarah, he does so not as a member of the group of self-appointed guardians of morality, who act without the rabbi’s authorization and use violence, but together with the rabbi and without resorting to violent behavior.

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