



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 14
Issue 1 April 2010

Article 22

6-17-2016

As Lilith

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Recommended Citation

Ballan, Joseph (2016) "As Lilith," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 22.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol14/iss1/22>

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As Lilith

Abstract

This is a review of *As Lilith* (2009).

A study in contrasts and confrontations, Eytan Harris' *As Lilith* (2009) investigates relationships between orthodoxy and heresy, men and women, organization and eccentricity in Israeli society. The film achieves a remarkable immediacy by giving us a sequence of events, viewed from multiple perspectives, as they are taking place, rather than reconstructing them after the fact. In the process, however, Harris leaves out some key details that might assist in the intelligibility of the narrative, including its specifically theological intelligibility, some examples of which I point out below. The film will be of interest to scholars of contemporary Judaism, as well as those interested in practices of memorializing and commemoration.

Harris tells a story that turns around an absent center: Maytar, who at age 14 has committed suicide. Maytar's death, however, is not itself the focus of this film. Nor, for that matter, is her life, along with whatever compelled her to end it (we learn that her socially challenged brother may have been physically abusing her, but this sub-narrative is left relatively unexplored). Instead, Harris fixes his attention on the dramatic aftermath of this tragedy.

Rather than giving her a traditional Jewish burial, Maytar's mother, Lilith Saraph, insists on cremating her daughter's physical remains, a practice that violates the precepts of traditional Judaism. In the Mishnah (Avodah Zarah 1.3), the burning of a corpse is said to be an idolatrous practice. In Tractate Sanhedrin

(46b) of the Talmud, the rabbis' deliberations lead them to regard burial as a positive commandment, on the basis of Deuteronomy 21.23, which reads, "his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day." Therefore, Lilith's chosen method for memorializing her daughter's life is actively, intrusively opposed by ZAKA, an international organization based in Jerusalem and best known for its humanitarian work in the wake of natural disasters, suicide bombings, and other catastrophes. In situations like these, they seek out survivors, but they are especially committed to giving proper, halakhically sanctioned burial to the remains of Jewish bodies. One of the several gaps that scholars of religion might note in this film is an absence of explanation for why cremation is unacceptable to ZAKA. We witness their extraordinarily vehement opposition to Lilith's choice to cremate her daughter without a firm sense of what drives these religious actors.

As the ZAKA members in the film remind her, Lilith, who is thought by local schoolchildren to be a witch, counts among her ancestors a famous rabbi. Harris helps us see ZAKA's opposition to Lilith's decision in light of her choice to forsake this heritage for a markedly less conventional spiritual path. Professing as she does an ambition to

"reactivate the tribe of Saraph," whose ancient practices included a "worship of God through dance," according to her, Lilith's story is not merely that of a mother claiming the right to memorialize her daughter in

whatever way she pleases. Maytar's death is the occasion for a struggle between an organization committed to an orthodoxy and a lone woman who has abandoned that orthodoxy to (re)create a new religion.

Lilith is not the highly eccentric protagonist's given name, but one that she adopted later in life. We are led to assume that she is appropriating the name of Adam's demonic first wife, described in midrashic and kabbalistic literature. As Susannah Heschel notes in her entry on "Lilith" in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2007), "in recent years, feminists have reconfigured the Lilith myth, claiming it reveals male anxiety about women who cannot be kept under patriarchal control. Lilith is admired as a woman who opposed Adam's attempts at hegemony over her, who had a firm will, and who possessed the power of secret knowledge to assert her autonomy." While we probably should not connect Lilith Saraph too closely with any academic theological project, the oblique references to Lilith mythology in this documentary, indeed in the very title of the film, endow its scenes of confrontation between the group of men representing ZAKA and the lone woman who has embarked on the strange task of singlehandedly "reactivating" a purportedly lost religion with an added, gendered layer of significance.

The darkly comic undertones of the film, and the sharply critical eye it turns on the Israeli media covering the events it records, distinguish this documentary from stock "lone man vs. the establishment" narratives. While it lacks cinematographic polish and could have benefited from more social and historical

contextualization, As Lilith succeeds in using raw materials to tell a fascinating story about the theological politics of memorializing.