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Menashe

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Menashe

Abstract

This is a film review of *Menashe* (2017), directed by Joshua Weinstein.

Keywords

Haredi, Orthodox Judaism, Yiddish

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & 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* (NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Routledge, 2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (2015). He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



Menashe (2017), dir. Joshua Weinstein

There are not many movies that represent Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jewish communities from within, mainly because such groups resist being filmed by outsiders. As a result, most movies about Haredi Jews are made by outsiders or those who have left the fold, and so they represent them as an oppressive and backward society. This movie is an exception; it tells a simple story of a man and his son, and all the characters are flawed but basically good people—just like the rest of us.

Director Joshua Weinstein gained access to the Haredi community through his star, Menashe Lustig, who is a Haredi comedian. Although most of the Haredi would not work with the filmmakers, they found a group of about thirty who were happy to act in the film. As a result, it uses no professional actors at all. Most of the film is in Yiddish, and it tells a story adapted from Lustig's own life.

Menashe is a widower with a ten year old son who does not live with him, as the Rabbi has declared that the boy should live with Menashe's brother-in-law until Menashe remarries. The brother-in-law is remarried since the death of Menashe's sister, and they have other children. They

are well off financially, unlike Menashe who works at a grocery store. But Menashe is not eager to marry again, as he did not really enjoy married life; he wants to raise his son by himself, although the Rabbi declares that Menashe needs to have a wife to help care for the boy before he can have custody.

One might think that this would then be a story of how oppressive Haredi communities are in not allowing a man to raise his own child. But as the story develops, we discover Menashe is in fact not very responsible, either with his job or his family. As his boss says, he is a *schlimazel*, and Lustig as a comedian plays that role well. He has difficulty taking care of his son and getting to work on time, he can't always pay his rent, and he constantly makes excuses for his own shortcomings and irresponsibility. He needs to become a *mensch* and grow up, but he has difficulty doing so. At the same time, he loves his son, and his son wants to live with him, too.

That the Rabbi is a kind and wise man is shown when Menashe insists on holding the *yahrzeit* memorial for his wife at his own apartment rather than the brother-in-law's. The kugel burns and the setting is not lavish, but the Rabbi praises him and the kugel. He wants to encourage Menashe, but he continues to insist that Menashe remarry to regain custody of his son, to all appearances out of genuine concern for the boy as well as the father.

This is a very genuine and real story that depicts how a sectarian community can function in ways that serve the interests of its members and not only as a means of oppression. Like *Arranged* (2007) and *Fill the Void* (2007), it shows that the traditions of the Ultra-Orthodox create a set of rules which may sometimes frustrate the members of the community but that also give them structure and meaning. There are few non-Haredi characters in the story, the only exception being Menashe's two Hispanic co-workers. When he tells them his story (in English), one quotes Jesus' dictum that if you forgive, you will be forgiven. In other words, whatever Menashe decides

about his marriage, his son will understand, as they love each other. Lustig spoke at the Q&A about how this is a story of hope, which he has found in his own life and religious community. Although the context for this story is a separatist community, the themes of love, duty, and forgiveness that it showcases are universal.