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Religious Mediation, Sensational Forms, and Counter-Counterpublics: Films By and For Orthodox Jewish Women Only

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Article abstract

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Religious Mediation, Sensational Forms, and Counter-Counterpublics: Films By and For Orthodox Jewish Women Only

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Abstract

This paper examines the genre of films being produced by Orthodox Jewish women and intended to be viewed only by other women [i.e., Orthodox Jewish women] as a key form of "sensational" religious materiality and a counter-counterpublic sphere of religious action. Religious materiality is all that makes religious sentiment, knowledge, and practice knowable; it is the "stuff" of religious life and belief. These films present "sensational forms" of religious materiality, or, in other words, experiences that "induce religious modes of sensing, feeling, and making sense that effect the very 'beyond' that is posited and form the people addressed as believers" to audiences (Meyer 2015). Focusing on religious films as a key form of and forum for sensational religious materiality moves away from not only a Protestant-style bias focused on the role of interior belief and disregard for "entertainment" media, but also a simple "religion and [+] media" instrumentalist approach. Further, films produced by and for Orthodox Jewish women, while broadly part of the religious counterpublic media of Orthodox Jewry, are further located in a gendered location; the films are thus productively described as located in a counter [read: religious]- counterpublic [read: gendered] sphere of Orthodoxy.

Keywords: Jewish women, Hasidism, film, religious mediation, sensational materiality

Introduction

Although the genre of professional films created by and intended for Orthodox Jewish women only (referred to herein as "by and for" films) in the United States is now nearly two decades old, theoretical analyses of the films remain few and far between, and have yet to fully explore the films' relevance for understanding women's religious lives. This paper highlights the potential for understanding these films as key forums of Orthodox Jewish women's religious mediation, in contrast to seeing the films as merely entertainment for observant women. Religious materiality consists of all that makes religious sentiment, knowledge, and practice knowable; it is the "stuff" of religious life and belief. Further, films produced by and for Orthodox Jewish women, while broadly part of the religious counterpublic media of Orthodox Jewry, are further located in a gendered location; the films are thus productively described as located in a counter [read: religious]- counterpublic [read: gendered] sphere of Orthodoxy. In keeping with a range of

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religious practices of Jewish Orthodoxy, the films are characterized by their sensational presentations (see Meyer 2015), presentations which are emotionally- and spiritually-laden, intended to elicit impassioned responses among the Orthodox women who view them.

By and for films are intended to strengthen and affirm Orthodox Jewish women's religious lives within Orthodoxy, largely without question. To achieve this goal, the films must contain only appropriate material and themes and abide by the rules of modesty, including not showing unrelated men and women together on screen. By and for films are also produced within the limits of Orthodox Jewish law: Unrelated men and women do not work together in proximity on set, filming is not undertaken on Jewish holidays, and so on. It is important to distinguish the by and for genre from films that may be produced by Orthodox Jewish women who wish to challenge and/or critique Orthodox Jewish life, religion and practice, or discuss issues such as sexuality. Further, films intended to be viewed by mixed gender audiences are also not part of the genre. Films such as "Disobedience" (2017), "Felix and Meira" (2014) and Netflix dramas including "Unorthodox," and "Shtisel" are therefore not part of the by and for genre.

Three feature-length films prototypical of the genre include, "A Light for Greytowers" (2007), "The Heart that Sings" (2011), and "Operation: Candlelight" (2014), each of which was directed and produced by Robyn Saexe Garbose. The films are briefly summarized here as referents for understanding this realm of religious mediation via film.

Robin Saexe Garbose

Robin Saexe Garbose is a Los Angeles-based American Jew who grew up within the Conservative Jewish movement and turned to an Orthodox, Hasidic-influenced Jewish lifestyle as an adult due to the significant influence of Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994). Hasidic Jews comprise a sub-group of Orthodox Judaism. While there is considerable variation amongst the sub-groups of Orthodoxy, Orthodox Jews generally believe in the divine origins of Jewish laws and observe rabbinic laws to the greatest extent of their ability. In the United States, Orthodox Jews constitute about 10 percent of the total American Jewish population (5.3 million adults) (Pew 2021). Jews who identify with Reform, Conservative, or other movements view the observance of rabbinic law as optional and/or in need of significant adaptation to the modern world.

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Established in 18th century Eastern Europe, Hasidic Judaism emphasizes "joyous communication with God through song, meditation, harmony with nature, and attachment to the charismatic 'rebbe' and his dynastic tradition" (Fishman 2007: 73). Rebbe Schneerson, one of the few Hasidic Jews who escaped the Holocaust, arrived in 1941 in Brooklyn, New York, and, in 1951, succeeded his father-in-law, becoming the leader, Rebbe (Reb), for Lubavitch Jews. Reb Schneerson's main goal was to spread the observance of Jewish law to all Jews via a massive series of unprecedented outreach efforts. Schneerson strongly encouraged the embrace of "radio, television, video, and the Internet, always doing so on Lubavitch's own terms, and thereby further distinguishing itself from other Hasidic communities" to spread its message of Jewish observance and traditional teachings (Shandler 2009: 239).

Prior to adopting a religiously observant lifestyle, Garbose was a very successful television and theatre producer. It is her desire to be both observant and to continue her work in film that has brought her to making movies by and for *frum,* or, religious, Jewish women. She established her Los Angeles film school, Kol Neshama, in order to "produce a cadre of new, observant talent that will 'turn Hollywood into Holy-wood'" (Wagner 2009: n.p.). Garbose is deeply aware of the potential impact of these films for actors and audiences; she argues,

> Artistic expression is an incredible educational tool. When a girl plays the part of a Jewish heroine, she has an intimate connection with that figure, it becomes a part of her. The creative experience enters directly into the soul of the actress and into the audience. "When my movie appeared [in October] at the Ashkelon Jewish Eye Film Festival, there was a very secular crowd. It was a wonderful surprise to see how much the film touched them. When the film ended, there was not a dry eye in the house. Women stayed to speak to me. A lecture won't reach so deep. But art does. (Wagner 2009: n.p.)

Garbose's films, "A Light for Greytowers" (2007), "A Heart that Sings" (2011), and "Operation Candlelight" (2014), were made in accordance with Orthodox Jewish law: During production unrelated men and women were not on set together, no production took place on Shabbat or other Jewish festivals, modest dress and behavior were maintained at all times, and the content of the films communicated gender-specific didactic lessons for girls and women. The films thus allow the women and girls who view them to experience them as appropriately religious, replete with religious acts; for these viewers, viewing these films is akin to studying religious texts, observing and imitating their real-life mothers as models of gendered religiosity. The films are significantly enhanced by not only the storyline but also the use of song and carefully

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choreographed, appropriate dance; these practices reflect the centrality of song and dance in Hasidic life for religious experience more broadly.

Creating and attending these films are lived religious acts that allow viewers to see, identify with, cheer on, fear for, and adore the girls in the films who are enacting Jewishness -- and criticize and feel distant from those characters who do not. Garbose's films show to both the actors and the viewers the clear and extra-ordinarily beneficial outcomes of appropriate Jewish femininity and feminism – how young girls can empower themselves via religious observance to lead more authentic and better lives; and, how, by doing so, they are the praise-worthy Jewish heroes for our times.

Garbose's three films discussed here as representative of the by and for film genre are distinct from films produced by Orthodox Jewish women who focus on subjects who may be "voice-less in their community" and/or focus on topics that may be considered taboo for open discussion, particularly including sexuality (Seigelshifer and Hartman 2020: 125). Many of these women filmmakers may be considered "devoted resisters" within their religious communities, devoted to the religious life but working to create change, especially for women (Seigelshifer and Hartman 2020: 129). The by and for genre, however, does not aim or wish to address topics considered taboo or controversial or spur religious and/or social change. Rather, the films discussed here are intended to strengthen, not challenge, the status quo of women's religious lives. The films have been shown at Jewish film festivals, described in Jewish newspapers, and are available online for purchase.

A Light for Greytowers ["A Light"] (2007)

"A Light for Greytowers," described on its DVD cover as a "thrilling musical adventure," is a screen adaptation of 1992 young adult novel by Eva Vogiel and Ruth Steinberg. The book was published by well-known Orthodox Jewish publisher, Feldheim Inc., self-described as a publisher of "Torah Literature of Quality" (Feldheim, n.d.). "A Light" was shot at Rohr Jewish Student Center and Chabad House at the University of Southern California. "A Light" has been described as an "Orthodox Little Orphan Annie," including a "plucky heroine, a scratchy-voiced headmistress, and a series of catchy dance numbers that are less about dancing than about picturesque orphans scrubbing and sweeping to the command of a whistle" (Ament 2008). By

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2011 the film had been screened to more than fifty thousand women in Canada, US and Israel, including the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival, the Jewish Eye World Festival in Ashkelon and the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv Cinematiques, and sold more than 5,000 DVDs (Trapper-Spielman 2011: n.p.).

The story is set at the turn of the century; Miriam Aronowitch and her mother are fleeing Russian pogroms for England. When Miriam's mother becomes ill, her mother's employer sends Miriam off to an orphanage, telling Miriam that her mother had in fact died. The orphanage, run by the evil Miss Grimshaw who does not allow religious observance, is home to many orphaned girls. Miriam soon finds out that all the girls are, in fact, Jewish and she persuades them to stand up to Miss Grimshaw in order to observe Jewish law. Miraculously, Miriam's mother recovers from her illness and manages to find Miriam at the orphanage just as Miriam's father also finally tracks Miriam down. The family is reunited, Miss Grimshaw loses her position, and the Aronowitch's become the adoptive parents for all the girls at the orphanage.

Throughout the film there are numerous, not particularly subtle messages about the obligations and rewards of observing Jewish law. Garbose summarized the message of "A Light" as, "When you go beyond yourself to do the mitzva, God answers you in the most amazing ways." (Wagner 2009: n.p.). The importance of keeping Shabbat and its redemptive power is literally enacted for viewers to see; as a girl, it is incumbent on her to light the Shabbat candles. Miriam's only possession of value is a pair of her mother's Shabbat candlesticks which, after being recovered from Miss Grimshaw, bring good fortune to Miriam. All the girls learn that food truly tastes better when eating is prefaced by saying the proper blessing, thanks to Miriam's insistence and instruction. Even when the girls are hungry, they learn that unkosher meat is best consumed by a dog, which leads to the opportunity for a kosher feast. Disobedience is required and ultimately rewarded when carried out for the sake of God and keeping Jewish laws. And non-Jews, even the kind ones, should not raise Jewish girls.

Heart That Sings ["Heart"] (2011)

"Heart's" storyline is based on Dr. George Kranzler's (his pennames for his fictional writings were Gershon Kranzler and Jacob Isaacs, b.1916 – d.2000) six-page short story titled "Miriam's Lullaby" (see Rothenberg 2021 for a full analysis). The story is set in 1950 at a Jewish girls'

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summer camp. Miriam, an orphaned Holocaust survivor, accepts a position as the music and drama counselor for the summer. Miriam does not fit in with the campers and other counselors; she is too serious and frighteningly marked by her concentration camp tattoo. Singing her father's tune to a lullaby one night to an inconsolable young camper, Miriam and the camper realize they are, in fact, sisters, each having presumed the other to have been killed. The other campers are awestruck by witnessing the miraculous family reunion. Miriam is then able to easily persuade and direct the summer camp's musical finale production – a beautiful musical focussed on good deeds and miracles – rather than the silly, meaningless musical production previously preferred by the other campers. "Heart" was shown at numerous sites throughout the United States as well as at the Jerusalem Festival, marking the first time a film made by women and intended for a women-only audience was shown; men were asked not to attend but were not prevented from doing so.

The religious messages in "Heart" are numerous, ranging from the importance of Jewish girls always focussing on enhancing their Jewishness and not being distracted by silliness (such as their originally preferred drama performance), to the authentic Jewishness of a Holocaust survivor. The summer camp setting is likely to be a familiar one for many American Jews, making it possible for a range of Jewish viewers to identify with the film's setting, if not its era.

Operation: Candlelight ["Operation"] (2014)

Funded primarily by a Kickstarter campaign, "Operation" was shot at the secluded campus of Mesivta of Greater Los Angeles, an Orthodox Jewish residential high school, in Calabasas, reconstructed as the story's "Torah Academy for Girls." A group of "misfit Jewish school girls," rejected from performing in the school's annual Chanukah musical production, learn of a secret evil plot planned by local Muslim terrorists. The cover of the DVD proclaims that "Every girl deserves a chance to shine," a clear message to the potential audience that the girls will be their best, Jewish selves. Indeed, the girls, through their determination to find out what's going on, not only prevent the evil plot from being carried out but also help a local family recall their forgotten Jewishness and find authentic happiness.

As a "real" action film, "Operation" uses familiar mainstream movie stereotypes (Muslim terrorists, clueless undercover cops, resourceful hostages) and action scenes, including a shoot-out and nighttime chases. Also shown to the audience, however, are classroom scenes of the girls in

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science class, a nod in the direction of the importance and value of modern secular education alongside religious classes, at least for girls. The religious messages are clear here, too, primary among them being that Shabbat observance and modesty for girls and women can overcome evil of all sorts.

Hasidic Storytelling

Understanding the by and for films as forms of sensational religious mediation requires contextualizing them first and foremost within the historical and cultural genealogy of the religious practices of Jewish Hasidic storytelling, in addition to locating them within the American capitalist entertainment economy availed upon by Orthodox Jews (e.g., Roda 2024). Garbose's films are moral tales of "correct," meaning here Orthodox, Jewish religiosity enacted in the face of secularity and danger and resulting in miraculous outcomes. As such, these films bear a strong family resemblance to Jewish Hasidic tales. A key characteristic of Hasidic Judaism is its focus on the *tzaddik*, a righteous, saintly person, and hagiographic stories about such individuals. Historically, stories praising the deeds of saints were related orally by the Hasidic leader and his adherents to their followers. The first book of such stories was published in 1814 (Mandel-Edrei 2022: 368). Rabbi Schneerson is widely considered a *tzaddik*, although some of his followers consider him to have been a prophet, while still others believe he is the messiah (Dein 2016: 118-119). Today, *tzaddik*-styled stories about Rabbi Schneerson describe his miraculous deeds and have gained enormous popularity (Dein 2016: 119).

Hasidic stories do not only focus on the *tzaddik* and his saintliness and miracles. A second form of Hasidic storytelling is "a parable or the form of an apparently trivial account of mundane affairs but containing supernal profundities" (Dein 2016: 5). This branch of stories may take place in any context (not necessarily a Jewish setting), have a familiar plot for listeners/readers, and are "infused with an idea, message, or meaning by the Hasidic narrator" (Kauffman 2014: 104). Storytelling in Hasidic life focuses on "specific persons and their circumstances, human situations, and emotions, as opposed to law, norm, and abstract determination" (Kauffman 2014: 125).

Hasidism has long recognized storytelling as a form of "sacred activity" in which "the teller will tell with the tongue of faith, the listeners will hear with ears of faith, and the circle of holiness will be closed" (Buxbaum 1994: n.p.; cf. Buber 1991, Mayse 2024). Hasidic rebbes have

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praised storytelling as a "mitzvah", or, divine commandment, and a form of spiritual practice (Buxbaum 1994; n.p.). Hasidic Judaism sees storytelling as a "holy activity equal to Torah study or prayer" (Kauffman 2014: 102; Dein 2016). Not only storytelling but also listening is a religious act, a "ritualistic deed" (Dan 1983, Dein 2016, Kaufmann 2014). Telling and listening to these stories are thus not only an "aesthetic luxury but also. . . a useful tool of worship – a hybrid of aesthetic pleasure and work" (Mandel-Edrei 2022: 369).

By and for films are a modern, feminine variation of classic Hasidic tales for a multimedia generation. No longer limited to print or in-person gatherings, these films bring their stories to vivid expression, authored/adapted, directed, and enacted by Jewish women. As such, these films are not so much a break with traditional Hasidic tales, tellers, and listeners, but a newly constituted form of them, reflecting the changing circumstances and resources of American Jews broadly and Orthodox Jewish women specifically. Deeply influenced by Hasidic life, thought, and religious practice, Garbose melds her training in film production with her commitment to a religiously observant Jewish lifestyle to produce a reconstructed form of Hasidic tale on screen, by and for women.

Religious Materiality and Sensational Forms

Recognizing Hasidic storytelling and Hasidic-inspired filmmaking as key forms of traditional religious action clearly points to the importance of these films as types of religious materiality, not merely entertainment or distraction for religious people. Films produced by and for Jewish women are enactments of religious faith in practice that intend to engage and spiritually enhance their audiences (cf. Aharoni 2014), or, in other words, meeting the very definition of religious materiality.

Focusing on by and for films and religious films more generally as a key type of and forum for religious materiality moves us away from not only a Protestant-style bias focused on the role of interior belief and disregard for "entertainment" media, but also a simple "religion and [+] media" instrumentalist approach. An instrumentalist approach:

> *seek[s] to trace the various ways religious adherents, leaders and movement activists either 'succeed' or 'fail' to transmit religious messages* through the strategic control of the material communicational resources required for self-confirmation ('preaching to the converted'), or to perform the work of outreach, proselytism and related forms of social mobilization (Stolow 2005: 124).

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Understanding film *as* religious materiality engages film as religious expression and action, contrary to analyses of film that understand film "*as part of a nonreligious culture with which religion engages*" (emphasis added, Lyden 2003: 12).

Indeed, by and for films may be analyzed as a religion unto themselves, as Lyden (2003: 3) argues, drawing on and extending Clifford Geertz's famous definition of religion:

> (1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz 1966, 2008: 59).

Religious films typically contain the key building blocks of any religion, including myths, or, "a story that expresses the worldview and values of a community"; ritualized experiences meaningful for the viewer, and the portrayal of repertoire of moral values (Lyden 2003: 4). Building further on Geertz's assertion that symbols provide models "of" and "for" "reality" (Geertz 2008: 60), religious films may "offer a vision of the way the world should be (in the view of the film) as well as statements about the way it really is" (Lyden 2003: 4).

In addition to containing the key elements of religion, including myth, ritual, and moral values, by and for films are also "sensational forms," or, experiences that **"***induce religious modes of sensing, feeling, and making sense* that effect the very 'beyond' that is posited and form the people addressed as believers" (this author's emphasis, Meyer 2015, Introduction). Sensational religious films work to "to render tangible and accessible a professed transcendent and situate it in the world" (Meyer 2020). Producers of ultra-Orthodox Jewish women's films in Israel, for example, aim to "generate great excitement" (Aharoni 2014: 6) in the audiences viewing the films through the use of "narrative and aesthetic exaggeration," the melodramatic genre emphasizing "morality and emotional empowerment," comic relief, and music (Aharoni 2014: 6-10). The goal of the films' producers is to produce "morally saturated women's films;" the medium of film is "not just a tool for spreading religious messages. . . but also serves as an emotional mediator reinforcing the believer's faith" (Aharoni 2014: 18). While the films are in fact both "entertaining and religious" (Aharoni 2014: 19), these two ends are not separate, but singular: entertaining religion.

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A Counter-Counterpublic Religious Sphere

Films by and for Orthodox Jewish women are taking their place within the spheres of Orthodoxy, Jewish life more broadly, and the settings in which the films are viewed. Roda (2024: 25) outlines four types of spaces that she identified through her fieldwork on a range of women Orthodox artists, including: “private space” available strictly to women; “modest public space” that is accessible to both men and women but aims to disallow men; “counter-public space, an online space where women contradict official discourse about their appearance and comportment in an effort to replace the official public Orthodox one;” and “public space,” a location that reaches out to all audiences, Jewish and non-Jewish men and women alike. By and for films, including Garbose’s and those with similar characteristics and goals, are most closely aligned with Roda’s delineation of a “modest public space” (men can buy Garbose’s films and watch them, and may attend public screenings of the films, but are strongly discouraged from doing so). Building on Roda’s conceptual and physical locale of the modest public space, this modest public space is a counter- counterpublic one, intended to counter both inappropriate non-Jewish and liberal Jewish spaces as well as spaces that include men.

Ethnographic analyses have identified a “counterpublic” sphere as a marginalized group’s attempt to articulate an alternative discourse parallel to a dominant public sphere, one of many publics and counterpublics that define modern publicity (Cody 2011: 39-42, Fraser 1990; cited in Fader 2017: 728). The discourses of counterpublics can be found, for example, in digital spaces, which have proved to be fertile sites for the creation and growth of religious counterpublics. For example, Fader (2017) examines Jblogosphere, an online space for ultra-Orthodox men to express their religious doubts and challenge the authority of the (male) ultra-Orthodox public sphere. The intersection of women, religion, and digital, or, subaltern (Fraser 1990), counter-publics may form a “third space,” a gendered, online space, distinct from the spaces formed by traditional, male, public authorities; such spaces are found in case studies of women involved in Sikhism, Wicca, Hinduism, and Buddhism online (Starkey 2022). While the term “subaltern counter-public” may be useful in some cases (Fraser 1990), it is not fitting in this case; these Orthodox Jewish women do not wish to challenge male authority or their understandings of Orthodox Jewish teachings.

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A religious public sphere, or, "religious publicity," is another type of counterpublic, a distinct world from the seemingly secular public one (Stolow 2005: 134). A religious counterpublic may produce -- and be produced by -- its media. Media produced by and for a religious counterpublic serves to "re-work, transform, challenge, satirize or otherwise slip out of the frame of the dominant public spheres of modern nation-states" (Stolow 2005: 134). Ethnographic research on media in religious counterpublic spheres include Hirschkind's (2006) study of those Muslims who listen to sermons on cassette tapes in public, urban spaces in Egypt and Kormina's (2023) study of a Russian Orthodox female activist whose public performances work to create a religious counterpublic in contemporary Russia.

Films produced by and for Orthodox Jewish women are broadly part of the religious counterpublic media of Orthodox Jewry. It has been common in the ultra-Orthodox world for decades to enjoy slideshows including voice over narratives; men made most of these slideshows, but some women did also produce them (Horwitz 2017). Historically, Hasidic storytelling has also taken place within its own counterpublic. By and for films, however, are explicitly made and seen in locations that are counter to mixed gender and men's spaces. The films are thus located in a counter- counterpublic, or, a gendered + religious counterpublic space.

Conclusion

Recognizing the by and for film genre as firmly within the Hasidic storytelling tradition while simultaneously pushing and reshaping its boundaries, is key to understanding both producing and watching these films as religious acts. Religious studies scholarship has been deeply influenced by a "Protestant-normative ethos" (Tamimi et. al. 2024: 2) which assumes the central importance of belief over and above matter in religion (Meyer and Houtman 2012; Pels 2023); further, "Protestant presuppositions" about the centrality of religious texts for believers' lives have too often led to a focus on canonical sacred texts over lived religious experiences (Schopen 1991). Religious studies scholars may have also inherited, as part of their Protestant-informed presumptions and assumptions about authentic "religion," a disregard for a variety of forms of entertainment media, presuming this media to be contrary to appropriate, meaningful forms of religious belief and practice.

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Over the past three decades or so, many scholars of religion have increasingly turned their focus to redress the often-neglected centrality of religious materiality (Morgan 2010; Engelke 2011; Houtman and Meyer 2012; Plate 2015; Narayan 2020; Tamimi et al 2024). After all, religious materiality "is the stuff through which 'the religious' is manifest and gets defined in the first place" (Engelke 2011: 213). Writing may well have been the "first technical carrying medium" for religion" (Weibel 2011: 32-3); today's various forms of media generally and film specifically can be a "middle ground" for communicating the unseen, or, "the presence," to viewers (Engelke 2011: 227-8). Today's scholars of religious materiality thus approach religion "*as* mediation" (Engelke 2010: 371), because the "commitment to immateriality has to be expressed through *something*" (Engelke 2011: 223).

The counter-counterpublic location of by and for films further reflects on their nature as a form of appropriately gendered, Jewish religious action. Orit Avishai (2008) argues that some Jewish Israeli Orthodox women understand their practices of gender segregation as forms of religious conduct that enhances their religiosity. Women who adopt an Orthodox identity and lifestyle, termed *ba'alot teshuvah,* in the United States choose and experience their gender segregated space as full of possibilities for the creation of a religious "community of meaning and action" (Kaufman 1994: 356). For the women who produce, enact, and view the by and for films, the possibilities are endless.

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