Creating a Significant Community

Religious Engagements in the Film Ha-Mashgihim *(God's Neighbors)*

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ABSTRACT: Focusing on the 2012 Israeli film *Ha-Mashgihim* (God's Neighbors), this article explores the construction of a Jewish and religious Mizrahi identity and analyzes the various ways in which the film presents a world of meaning that contests the secular liberal grammar. The analysis sheds light on the cultural motivation for introducing Judaism and Judaic identity into the cinematic narrative and demonstrates it through two themes: the formation of a peripheral religious Mizrahi territory and the journey toward redemption and meaning.

KEYWORDS: Breslov, cinema, liberal secularism, meaning, Mizrahi identity, periphery, redemption, religion

The confluence between religion and cinema has over the past 15 years provided an impressive bounty of research and essays. This includes a variety of viewpoints and disciplines, including theology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and sociology.[1] Many touch on the philosophical, aesthetic, and cultural relationships interwoven between religion and cinema, as well as moral issues and their linkage to the central themes in theological discourse: grace, sanctity, salvation and redemption, the transcendental, and the divine. In spite of the tremendous significance of religion in the life of the State of Israel, its citizens, and its communities, the study of Judaism in Israeli films is in its nascent theoretical and methodological development stage.[2] This article seeks to contribute toward expanding the research on the subject and to enrich the academic discourse on religion and Israeli cinema.

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With this goal in mind, the article discusses the representation of religion in the award-winning and highly praised Israeli film *Ha-Mashgihim* (hereafter *God's Neighbors*), a 2012 Israeli-French co-production directed by Meni Yaesh. My central thesis is that *God's Neighbors* deviates from the precise liberal boundaries of representation of religion in Israeli film and challenges the tension that exists in cinema between liberal secular and religious values. The film presents a cultural alternative to the secular-liberal platform and reveals a religious and spiritual option for the film's Mizrahi heroes from Israel's periphery. This option is portrayed as a charismatic and emotional resource for human existence, a world of meaning that has an autonomous status and is independent of the liberal universe and its representation.[3]

The secular Zionist project was never separate from the religious and cultural heritage of Judaism and its preeminent narratives. Secular Zionism was based on an anti-religious tradition (Avineri 1998) and on the negation and rejection of Jewish exilic existence (Raz-Krakotzkin 1993). However, this project was also a movement informed by deep religious, even messianic characteristics, and it appropriated religious symbols and elements for its nationalist ideology (Shenhav 2003).[4]

This ambivalence also found expression in Israeli cinema. Some prominent Zionist films of the 1930s, for example, *This Is the Land* (Agadati 1935) and *Avodah* (Lerski 1935), contain multiple mythic religious elements in their expression of the Zionist ethos (Perchak 1998: 329). Furthermore, as shown by Anat Zanger (2003, 2011), biblical mythology, such as the binding of Isaac, is present in both contemporary and early cinematic narratives. However, in 1948, when the State of Israel was established, the tension between the concepts of religious utopia and secular Zionism was enhanced. This conflict is expressed in a few films in which religion, as a central element of the narrative, organizes and delimits the plot and is represented in a critical and negative way when it appears.[5]

Roni Perchak's (1998) study on the role of the religious experience and emotion in Israeli cinema illustrates this contrast. Perchak asserts that the religious experience exists in Israeli cinema only on the fringes and that ignoring abstract, emotional, and non-institutional expressions of religion (such as the 'divine', the sacred, and the mystical) is a prominent phenomenon. Furthermore, issues involving the individual's fascination with Jewish religion, including the emotions and yearnings stimulated by religion and the transcendental, did not preoccupy Israeli cinema, except in very unusual cases (ibid.).

The period from the mid-1990s to the beginning of the twenty-first century marks a turning point in the representation of religion in cinema due to the expansion of the 'politics of identity' in cultural and academic

discourse (see, e.g., Alush-Levron 2008; Loshitzky 2001; Munk 2012: 146–160, 162–178). The increased awareness among religious groups of their public status in culture is not disconnected, obviously, from the growing empowerment of religion in Israeli society during the past two decades and the cultural struggle over the Israeli identity. It is also associated with the heightened power of the Shas party during the mid-1980s. The party's political centrality led to the growing socio-political status of religious and traditional Mizrahi Jews in the public culture and sharpened the cultural rift between Israeli secularity and traditional-religious groups. Simultaneously, the increased power of religious Zionism is clearly seen in and beyond the settlements of the West Bank—in the army, in the political system, and, during the last decade, in the media as well.[6]

Thus, during these years, Judaism has in fact taken its place, albeit gradually, in multicultural discourse and politics, and religious artists are part of the self-representation project in the cinema and in popular culture (Wright 2009: 101). Nevertheless, we need to avoid generalizations when referring to the new religiosity in culture. We must examine its representations in light of the dynamics of the forces at play and the intercultural interactions that give birth to mixed performances, such as hegemonic and counter-hegemonic expressions, simultaneously.

The dynamic processes that occur between the liberal hegemony and traditional-religious groups seeking to attain a more dominant status illustrate how critical and actual is the contribution made by Raymond Williams toward understanding the profound and reciprocal bonds between culture and social processes. Williams (1977) identified three types of cultural forms: dominant, residual, and emergent. These contrasting cultural forms reflect conflict, difference, and contradiction, the significance of which, according to Williams, was that "no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order … ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention" (ibid.: 125). Accordingly, in the new wave of religious films we can see a variety of cultural artifacts that reflect the ongoing struggle over control between the dominant form and the emerging traditional-religious form.

Some important new films that present religion as a dominant motif—*Ha-Ushpizin* (Dar 2004), *Fill the Void* (Burstein 2012), *God's Neighbors* (Yaesh 2012), *A Place in Heaven* (Madmoni 2013), *Encirclements* (Gilat 2015), and, to a certain extent, *Avanim* (Nadjari 2004) and *Tehilim* (Nadjari 2007)—reflect a cinematic narrative that draws away from the liberal secular ethos to present meaningful traditional or religious practices for their main heroes/heroines. It is not accidental that five of these films (*A Place in Heaven*, *Tehilim*, *Avanim*, *God's Neighbors*, *Encirclements*) were produced by

Mizrahi Jewish filmmakers who chose to emphasize Judaism and their traditions as significant components of their works.

In this respect, these films from the early 1990s up to the present might herald a new phase in Mizrahi Jewish cinematic artwork. Along with those elements shared by these films, *Ha-Ushpizin*[7] and *God's Neighbors* are unique in representing a coherent alternative to Israeli liberal secularism. The blending in *God's Neighbors* between the transcendental and the religious themes results in the more consolidated significance of a non-liberal religious cosmology that stands at the film's core.[8] *God's Neighbors* is also conspicuous for its accented Mizrahi essence—as reflected in the identity of its main characters, in the peripheral Mizrahi Jewish location where the story takes place, and in Mizrahi cultural symbols that compose the *mise en scène*—as well as for being a part of the Mizrahi Jewish self-representation project in contemporary Israeli cinema.

Similar to other Mizrahi films, such as *The House on Chelouche Street* (Mizrahi 1973) *Sh'Chur* (Hasafri 1994), *Desperado Square* (Toraty 2001), and *The Ballad of the Weeping Spring* (Toraty 2012), *God's Neighbors* nullifies the hegemonic Ashkenazic secular identity. However, it accomplishes this not only in its physical and thematic meaning, but also in a political and discursive sense, casting the secular identity as a depressive or discriminatory force. While doing so, the film avoids the discourse of Mizrahi mimicry and its construction around an ambivalence that produces the fragmented and split Mizrahi identity (Bhabha 1994: 88–92). Retrospection concerning Mizrahi oppression and its mark on Mizrahi subjection is replaced by an introspective and spiritual awareness[9] that enables a radical and peripheral Mizrahi self-representation that plays no part in any cultural negotiations with the Ashkenazic hegemony.

The film's plot takes place in Bat Yam, a city just south of Tel Aviv, bordering the Arab-Jewish neighborhoods of Jaffa. Known for its areas of cultural friction, Bat Yam is affected by issues pertaining to ethnicity, nationalism, immigration, and socio-economic status (Yacobi 2006: 80). Violence between Mizrahi Jews and Russians and between Mizrahi Jews and Arabs reflects this inter-cultural conflict.

Avi Bahar (Roy Assaf), Kobi Shmaia (Gal Fridman), and Yaniv Lugassi (Itzik Golan), the main characters in *God's Neighbors*, are a group of young Mizrahi Jewish men who have found religion under the sponsorship of Aaron, a rabbi (portrayed by the actor Gili Shushan, who himself became religious) from the neighborhood Breslov *yeshiva*. Since taking 'the yoke of religion' upon themselves, the young men have become self-appointed overseers of religious order in the neighborhood. As one of the characters states concerning their task: "There is a Greater Force [i.e., God], and there is a ground force [i.e., human beings]." Using knives and batons,

they roam the streets, attacking young Russians listening to noisy music on a Friday night after Shabbat has begun. They show hostility toward Arabs from Jaffa, who provoke them as they drive through Bat Yam, and imagine a plan of attack in which they will "burn [the Arab neighborhoods of] Jaffa." As part of their self-appointed 'supervisory' position, they taunt local women who they think are dressed provocatively and assault store owners who have not closed their shops prior to the beginning of Shabbat.

Avi, the neighborhood leader and the film's main protagonist, is strongly tied to the place where he grew up. He works in the vegetable shop of his father (portrayed by Haim Hova), follows his daily routine, and appears to be happy with his life. At the same time, it is clear that something weighs on his mind. The silence surrounding him hints at the emptiness of his life. In one of his emotional confessions, we learn about his ongoing grief over his mother's recent death, which has inspired his search for meaning and his turn to religion. One day, Avi meets Miri (Rotem Zissman-Cohen), a young Mizrahi woman, in his father's shop. Together with his friends, he tries to control her behavior in the neighborhood. Avi soon falls in love with Miri and comes to understand that the violence associated with his group's self-appointed religious oversight is incompatible with his new beliefs. He then goes through a process of introspection and renewed spiritual awakening.

Theoretical Framework: Between Universality and Particularity

In his book *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad (2003) applies mythical dimensions to the 'secular' formulation that shaped secularism as a liberal doctrine. According to Asad, the key reason for criticizing modernism is not that the secular modernist ideal is a distorted description, but rather that it has become hegemonic as a political goal. What, Asad asks, are the sociological conditions that preserve modernism? Secularism stands at the heart of modernism, which is defined by Asad as a 'project'—or, rather, a series of interlinked projects—that certain people in power seek to achieve. The mythical dimensions that shaped secularism are anchored in the tradition of enlightenment and justify the universalist rationale that lies at its foundation. But as Asad analyzes, following Margaret Canovan's metaphor of "a garden in a jungle," this doctrine applies a "translucent" violence in the cultivation of enlightenment that is the "violence of universalizing reason itself" (ibid.: 59). For, in the name of this universal secular reasoning, the liberal individual repeatedly and violently attacks "the darkness of the outside world that threatens to overwhelm that space" (ibid.).

Nissim Mizrachi (this issue) shows how this metaphor might shed light on the liberal logic of human rights activists when coming into contact with social groups in Israel that do not support their liberal values. Mizrachi observes that while activists strongly advocate for their message, they avoid any reflective process when faced with reality. Thus, for example, the secular-liberal discourse in academia and civil society holds that the nationalistic and traditional political tendencies expressed by Mizrahi Jews in Israel are an "anomaly"—an "offshoot, never a wellspring" (Mizrachi, this issue).

Mizrachi emphasizes that individuals operate in their world by means of their own cultural logic that is "neither fortuitous nor random," but serves as a resource that is used dynamically. He clarifies that these cultural logics are not disconnected from the entirety of their social linkages but rather are embedded into "distinctive social networks" from which a moral identity and experience emerge, as well as one's sense of belongingness and self-worth (Mizrachi, this issue; see also Mizrachi 2014).

I suggest that *God's Neighbors* presents just such a space in which individuals are embedded into their own peripheral social and religious networks, remote from those enlightened regions of hegemonic liberal secularism and its myths. The film embraces the main character's religious experiment and validates it as genuine, that is, as stemming from a conscious state of repentance (*tikkun*). As we will see, religion—and not the liberal nation-state—is what helps Avi fulfill his human capabilities and reject violence.

This last assertion requires an additional discussion that is essential to the alternative suggested in the film. In "Liberalism in Israel: The 'Good Person', the 'Bad Citizen', and a Liberalism of Personal and Social Flourishing," Menachem Mautner (2013) shows how Israeli liberalism, as a liberalism of negative rights, embodies within it the 'desire for normalcy'—the desire to live a life that promotes one's personal well-being and that of one's relatives within the framework of uninterrupted daily living.

However, as Mautner explains, Mizrahi Jews (as well as other non-hegemonic groups) in Israel do not enjoy normalcy in an equal manner. This is due to the social egoism of the 'former liberal hegemons' (FLH), who exhibit an unwillingness to devote enough societal resources to create a more unified and equal society. This social egoism found its expression against Mizrahi Jewry during the 1950s, the decade of Mizrahi *aliyah* and absorption, when they were 'exiled' to the country's periphery, and again during the 1990s, when neo-liberalism became the ruling socio-economic and political ideology among liberals comprising the FLH. Consequently, support from lower-class Mizrahi Jews for the liberal project has been relatively low and has weakened the status of liberalism in Israeli political culture.

Mautner (2013: 49–50, 66, 78) shows how this distorted reality operates to the benefit of another desire that exists alongside that for normalcy—the desire for meaning. The 'meaning system', as emphasized by Mautner, addresses the fundamental questions about our human existence. In the lives of certain religious believers and social revolutionaries, it is liable to overtake any desire for normalcy. Religion, like nationalism, represents a source for what Mautner (2016) calls 'big meaning', and the groups estranged from Israeli liberalism because of the harm it has inflicted upon them will tend to adopt religion as a central source for creating meaning in their lives. Clearly, Yaesh's film portrays Breslov Judaism and its values as a primary source for establishing meaning in the young men's lives. However, from a liberal viewpoint, *God's Neighbors* is a disturbing film. It is saturated with acts of violence, its characters seek to exercise order in their neighborhood through the imposition of religious injunctions, and in their environs they behave in a crude manner that easily leads to the destruction of property and to physical and emotional harm. One can expect that the reasonable secular-liberal viewer, as depicted in the descriptions of Asad and Mizrachi, will regard the film's violence as posing severe injury to the liberal sense of order, equality, and morality and will perceive it as a threat. It is also reasonable that the liberal commentator will view the violence as directly linked to the country's system of law and institutions or will consider the country's social format as a warning against the threat posed to human rights.

The liberal interpretation of the film may of course include a variety of identifications. For example, violence may be perceived as a by-product of the abandonment of the periphery, of discrimination, and of the practices of social and cultural exclusion imposed upon Mizrahi Jews in Israel. In light of this, *God's Neighbors* can be read as a manifesto voicing the protest of the peripheral Mizrahi population against the failures of liberalism.

In his forthcoming article "Meaning, Religion and the State: On the Future of Liberal Human Rights," Mautner (2016) describes the protagonist of *God's Neighbors*, whom he depicts as a 'working-class person' who embodies a disconnect between deprived groups and the liberal project in Israel. In their lifestyles, the working-class heroes in the film fulfill, in Mautner's view, the results of the clash between Jewish religiosity, the 'big meaning', and the liberal values thwarted in the public space: "The movie clearly conveys the message that for these ordinary people religion is a highly important system of big meaning … But the movie also conveys the message that ordinary religious believers will not shy away from violently enforcing religious commandments in the liberal public sphere, which is otherwise committed to liberty and diversity of conduct and appearance (as well as to equality). Religious big meaning, then, has the capacity to undermine liberal human rights" (ibid.).

On a meta-textual level, the violence in *God's Neighbors* can in fact be interpreted as dramatic testimony to the troubles of Israeli liberalism. However, a closer reading of the cinematic text shows that the film is not interested in interpreting for us the sources of the violence or in researching its social motives. *God's Neighbors* does not even involve the state or its institutions or its central agents in the cinematic story. In fact, what is most blatant is the film's disregard for the state and its representatives.

The camera takes the audience on a tour of a working-class Bat Yam neighborhood. We are introduced to old housing blocks and their simple lobbies, the father's vegetable shop that serves as the family's source of income, the humble neighborhood synagogue, the pizza shop, and the main character's small apartment. In and among these locations, the audience is exposed to the tensions between the various groups of Mizrahi, Russian, and Arab men. We can identify the human and spatial representations of familiar-looking neighborhood housing and the architectural simplicity of the Israeli periphery. However, the director makes do with this presentation and avoids the social, ethnic, and/or class criticisms that are usually found in political films.[10]

Moreover, the characters in *God's Neighbors* are not represented as unfortunates or oppressed individuals, and they do not protest against inequities perpetrated by the state. The film in no way hints that the main characters desire to increase their economic security, resources, and material pleasures. It is quite clear that they are happy and make do with what they have.[11] In other words, they integrate a rich and coherent system of meaning, primarily religious, together with the normalcy of daily life, thus creating a significant community. For these reasons, which are incorporated into the script, *God's Neighbors* does not allow us to discuss violence as the act of a victim that expresses defiance toward the country's liberalism. The absence of such a discourse from this film does not, of course, contradict the 'troubles of liberalism' nor the wall that stands between it and Mizrahi Jews. However, it seems that the director is interested in going beyond the boundaries and representation of this conflict and, as such, portrays the acts of violence on another level of images to which we should direct our attention.

Therefore, in my discussion, I will skip over the film's presentations of violence and its dissemination, the moral harm inflicted upon its victims, and the question of any political justifications. Instead, I will discuss the portrayal of the Mizrahi-Breslov shared territory and the development of the journey toward redemption that our protagonist undergoes. This proposed analysis shows how the film avoids both the politics of secular redemption (Asad 2003: 61–62) and the liberal politics of the desire for normalcy (Mautner 2013).

Religious Mizrahi Hasidism in the Israeli Periphery

"For the true believer, faith is evidence" is a teaching of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. Embossed in white lettering on a black background, it provides the opening scene of *God's Neighbors*. Afterward, the viewer is shown a Kiddush cup being filled with wine. The camera focuses on the raised goblet, stops in an extreme close-up on the upper portion of the character's face, and then comes face to face with a pair of penetrating eyes. As the Kiddush prayer over the wine ends, we are presented with the film's opening titles and then return to the main character as he prepares to distribute and say the blessing over the Shabbat challah. The viewer then sees him and his father enjoying their Shabbat evening meal. The next scene finds the main character seated and reading Psalm 136 ("His mercy endureth forever"), making an effort to understand its meaning.

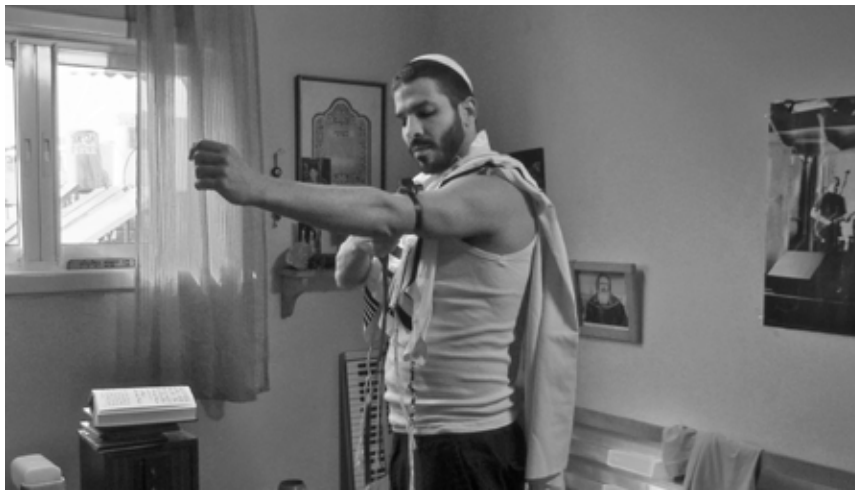
The choice to open the film with the Kiddush ritual in its entirety, spoken with full intent (*kavanah*) and emotion, gives us notice of the film's intimate focus on the religious sphere and the space of the Mizrahi home. The opening quotation offers us a preliminary indication that the cinematic text pertains to the faithful. The meaning of the Breslov concept embodied in the quotation is that for one whose faith (*emunah*) is real, faith—and not knowledge—is proof enough of the world surrounding him. The opening scene thus reflects a profound distancing from secular-liberal morality and hints at the autonomous status of a religious cosmology.

The film is rich in religious symbolism and rituals (fig. 1). Sacred and religious artifacts and objects appear repeatedly in the visuals. Religious pamphlets are in evidence, and photographs of holy men and rabbis hang on the wall. Stickers with quotes from Rabbi Nachman of Breslov and his book *Tikkun Ha'Klali* (The General Rectification), memorial candles, Shabbat and Havdalah candles, psalms, *tzitzit* (fringed undergarments) that drape the men's bodies, *mezuzot* (parchments), a close-up shot of *tefillin* cases—all these come together to create a religious and spiritual setting.[12]

The presentation of spiritual symbols, religious images, and Jewish rituals is not random or accidental; rather, it bears a significance that motivates the narrative or plays an important role within the story. Some of those symbols foreshadow the events and accompany Avi throughout his spiritual and private journey. More than once, they hide a secret, provide a hint, or announce an expected miracle. For example, the psalms that our protagonist recites with such great devotion generate miracles and function as a mystic means for endowing meaning to various upcoming events.

Scenes pertaining to religious rituals and convictions are often designated by playing with light and shadow or by a special use of lighting. In spiritual situations, there is often an enhanced exposure of the space to

FIGURE 1 The Urge for Meaning



Scene from *Ha-Mashgihim* © 2012. Used with permission of Meni Yaesh (Director) and Transfax Film Productions.

exterior light or sunlight, which is projected into the interior. This offers the viewer a sense of brightness that matches the spiritual textuality, as with, for example, a shot of the priestly blessing in the synagogue. The music also conveys a religious, semantic, and discursive meaning. It provides the film's mythic rhythm and stimulates the viewer's response.[13] The music strengthens the spiritual and religious images that, in turn, are imbued with their own subsequent enhancement. The film's theme song, "Veahavta Lereacha Kamocha" (Love Your Neighbor as You Love Yourself), bears a message that contradicts the path of violence and harm inflicted on others and represents the foundation and establishment of religion and the Breslov spirit on a moral level. In addition, the film's soundtrack, composed and designed by the Moroccan musician Isaac Shushan, is a mimetic representation of the characters' 'worlds of meaning' (Mizrachi, this issue), merging Arab-Moroccan, Mizrahi, and Hasidic music. In this way, the music creates a polyphonic and intra-peripheral musical dialogue. Thus, it serves the autonomous status of the religious cosmology, while defining it in peripheral terms as well.

The Mizrahi-Hasidic periphery in all its variety of representations draws us into the heroes' cultural world. The camera travels between a variety of known locations in Bat Yam and dwells in an intimate and natural manner on a number of visual representations that are characteristic of the area and its residents, while showing two of the film's protagonists at work (Yaniv in the pet shop and Avi at his father's vegetable shop). The

Breslov symbols, such as stickers and a photograph of Rabbi Yisroel Dov Ber Odesser (founder of the Na Nach Nachma Nachman Meuman group within Breslover Hasidism), find their place in this old and familiar Mizrahi setting. In the background, the viewer hears the music of Berry Sakharof, a Turkish Jew who, in his childhood, immigrated to Bat Yam, as well as Arab-Moroccan music, followed by popular, contemporary Mizrahi music.

In one scene, Avi and Kobi are seen playing backgammon (*shesh besh*) and arguing about which ethnic group, Turks or Moroccans, are better players. Avi is proud of his Turkish origins, while Kobi is equally proud of Moroccan-Jewish celebrities. In response, Avi reminds him of all the Moroccans who, in his opinion, "bring shame to the [ethnic] community," for example, Miki Buganim (a top gay hairstylist), and Tali Fahima and Mordechai Vanunu, both of whom acted against the Zionist state and are identified with the radical left.

The dialogue exposes three significant sources of identification for the characters: Mizrahi-peripheral, religious, and national. We are introduced to these identifications in the characters' dialogue, the textual world of the film, and the visuals shown by the camera. For example, Avi is filmed in his room while producing a track of Hasidic trance music, and on the wall behind him are displayed a photograph of a well-known Moroccan rabbi and a certificate of appreciation that he received during his military service with the Israel Border Patrol. The film's heroes are seen smoking a hookah, drinking arak (a popular Mizrahi alcoholic beverage), or playing soccer (European football) as aspects of the peripheral male's leisure culture. From time to time, the young men will find themselves discussing the main precepts of Breslov philosophy and the greatness of God, spiced with *emunah* (words of faith), or listening to sermons of the local Breslov rabbi, who is also deeply immersed in the neighborhood Mizrahi experience. The Mizrahi peripheral spirit is also emphasized through a language that involves known peripheral slang and a dash of Arab vocabulary.

By these means, Yaesh directs a complete communal performance and through it presents the world of his film's heroes and the variety of social linkages that consolidate their identity. These linkages create the meaning of concurrent Mizrahi cultural and religious identifications that compose an intermeshing representation in the peripheral space. While in close physical proximity to the liberal Tel Aviv metropolis, this space is distant from it cognitively and visually. In other words, Yaesh's religious Mizrahi Bat Yam is not established in the film as a contrast to the country's prosperous center. It—and its people—are at the center of the story.

Yet a disruption threatens the neighborhood's social order and the heroes' individual fates. The thematic and aesthetic transitions between contrasting situations strengthen the centrality of the narrative of a journey

toward redemption that enables the complete creation of meaning in the main character's life. This issue will be the focus of the next discussion.

The Pathway toward Redemption

Various religious traditions deal with the question of how spiritual rituals, doctrines, liturgy, meditations, and rites aid the individual and the community in coping with the evil, suffering, and lack of meaning present in their world and help them in their attempts to be redeemed (Deacy 2011). In the film, our protagonist's pathway toward redemption is motivated by the Hasidic philosophy of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, interwoven with Mizrahi traditionalism.[14] This philosophy leans on the three primary pillars of the religious narrative: faith, joy, and the religious spiritual experience. The more outstanding ideas, originating with the protagonist's rabbi, are presented in the film as follows: "For the true believer, faith is evidence"; "I've not given any thought to this" (*l'et machshava tefisa clal*);[15] "Do not despair"; and "You are in the place where your thoughts are; verify that your thoughts are in the place that you want to be."

In her book *Expanses: An Essay on the Theological and Political Unconscious*, Haviva Pedaya (2011: 119) writes: "If we are to characterize redemption, messianism, and revelation as the dominant forces behind the religious experience, they will then be seen as a symptom of faith." Pedaya goes on to explain that from the phenomenological standpoint, faith functions as a 'primal emotion' that is capable of being revealed on a psycho-religious level. "Faith," Pedaya writes, is "the adhesive and connecting force between the levels of our existence," and the phenomenological discussion will present it "not only as a base for a possible linkage to the transcendental, but also as a base to human power, when it creates, loves, and fights an existential threat—finding the strength to heal" (ibid.).

The audience moves with the protagonist back and forth from the violent space of danger to that of repentance, which is the transcendental sphere in the film. The constitutive physical and cognitive parts are his meetings with other Hasidic believers, his studious discussions with the rabbi, and the religious and mystical rituals.

The mystical-religious layer is represented by a liturgical motif and blessings for salvation, the Breslov type of seclusion that takes place by the sea, and the priestly blessings (*birkat hakohanim*). In fact, the protagonist's "adhesive force that connects between levels of existence," as described by Pedaya (2011: 119) with respect to faith, is formed in and between these levels. This process is supported through Yaesh's expressive and composed direction of the protagonist, emphasizing nuances in expressions

and emotional gestures. The following discussion gives more details about this process.

As mentioned above, the opening scene introduces us to Avi as he is conducting the Friday night blessing over the wine, deeply absorbed in its sanctity. The father and son conclude their meal, and then Avi is seen reading from the Book of Psalms. As he continues to read the psalm "His mercy endureth forever," and even before the outside noise invades the interior, Avi begins to rub his thumb, and his body grows tense. Avi reads the psalm with greater intent, but it is clear that his body and consciousness are separated from the sacred moment, indicating unrest.

When the exterior sound intensifies, Avi stops reading, and a strong, metallic non-diegetic sound is heard, amplified beyond its presence in reality. As it joins the diegetic sound (i.e., derived from the internal world of the film) coming from the street, a sense of accelerated urgency is created. Beneath his window, a group of Russian men are drinking heavily and loud music is coming from their cars, much to the distress and anger of the neighbors in the adjoining buildings, who are yelling at them to leave.

In the next scene, Avi is already outside, asking the men to leave the area, but they refuse. Avi then gives the signal to attack. Kobi throws a wooden baton at one of them, and the violence intensifies. After successfully driving the group away, Avi's friends are cheering and celebrating their achievement. The street's residents praise Avi. However, his expression does not show emotional identification with the victory. He looks around, as if measuring the moment, and is silent. The camera does a brief close-up on the knife in his hand, followed by its sheathing in a quick movement, and again the non-diegetic sound returns, closing the scene. This sound will be heard repeatedly throughout the film at the conclusion of dramatic, violent scenes or those of transition from the secular to spiritual rituals. It is a tonic imagery marking the transition from a materialistic state to one of the spirit, from a tension-filled exterior to the protagonist's inner soul and conscience.

Subsequently, Avi is partner to additional acts of violence, and in some cases copes with the 'temptation' his friends place before him to join in acts of revenge against "desecrators of the sanctity." The closing of the chasm between the holy and the secular follows a seclusion scene that is a defining moment in the establishment of Avi's religious and mystical subjectivity. This scene is an aesthetic and thematic highlight in the process that our protagonist undergoes. It precedes the final confrontation with the Arabs and plants seeds of faith leading up to Avi's expected test in the Jaffa confrontation.

Avi's seclusion includes three elements that are characteristic of the Breslov practice: (1) thanksgiving; (2) confession and a request for forgiveness;

and (3) a plea for assistance. Avi's emotional outpouring, which takes place by the sea in the early morning hours, is shot without lighting. The sky is dim, and the quiet sound of the waves is heard in the background. Behind him, the lights of the homes on the coast are blinking softly. Avi is seen squatting, observing the sea, and later the camera moves in for a medium close-up as he begins his conversation with God. His voice is heard without any musical accompaniment.

Avi delivers a Shakespearean soliloquy ("Am I for real?") and begs God to give him a sign concerning Miri and his own repentance. He thanks Him for the good living he has earned and for the Torah He has given him. Expressing his love for Him ("You are the only one I listen to," "You know everything"), he begins to cry, concluding with the blessing "God is King." After his confession, Avi is seen with his back to us. The camera draws closer while he removes his shirt and approaches the water. The silence is replaced with slow music that accompanies him as his body becomes immersed in the water.

This seclusion evokes the expression of the sublime and draws us closer to "the ineffable and invisible" (Schrader 1972: 3)—to the same profound inner spiritual dimension that Avi experiences in his unmediated meeting with God. In addition, it brings our protagonist to a renewed encounter with faith and strengthens that faith as being itself the proof of the things surrounding his world. With this insight and his renewed spiritual awakening, Avi continues his journey. From there, a number of predicted miracles occur in the film, and his next meeting with Miri brings the first. Miri reveals to him that in the past she used to read from the Book of Psalms, hinting at her traditional-religious upbringing. Avi suggests that she open his book to any random place to prove that it is "showing her the state of her situation." She does this and sees the words that predict their upcoming union.

The next miracle takes place opposite an Arab in a scene of political and moral importance. David, Avi's and Kobi's friend, urges Avi to take revenge for Kobi's injury during a fight with Arabs from Jaffa. Avi stares at David in silence as his friend exposes a large cache of weapons in his car and then reluctantly joins him. While driving to Jaffa, Avi becomes even more silent. He pulls out his Book of Psalms and reads to himself, bending back and forth at an ecstatic pace. On reaching the site of the fight, a Molotov cocktail is thrown toward the Arabs by David's group. After seeing that a pistol is aimed in his direction, Avi joins the fight. He throws a baton toward the gun and knocks it down. Picking up the pistol, he aims it at his Arab attacker, who is lying on the road with a pleading look on his face. Avi pauses for a few seconds before firing the pistol, but he has moved the barrel to the side, away from his intended target. For a fleeting

second, the Arab's glance falls on Avi, creating a short moment of mutual human recognition.

The next scene returns to the realm of sanctity, this time in the synagogue, where the final moment of redemption is revealed. A flash of a supreme light wraps the frame and fills the space with an invisible thing—the sublime. The camera travels among the congregants, each of whom is holding onto their prayer shawl (*talit*), and Avi is shown with a photograph of the priestly blessings in the background. Wrapped from head to toe in his *talit*, Avi bursts into uncontrollable sobs. His body bends in convulsions, and he grabs onto his father's waist. His father holds him strongly and caresses him in the first moment of intimacy shown between the two.

The film's last scene gives us a glimpse into the new and harmonious world that Avi has achieved. His beloved Miri and his father both stand at his side. At home and with his new family, Avi serenely and confidently conducts Havdalah marking the end of the Shabbat. By bringing together love and spousal relations with religious and Breslov practices, this image (fig. 2) portrays Avi's final redemption and provides a worldview in the framework of a cinematic narrative that creates credibility. The Havdalah rite and this harmonic familial scene signal Avi's release from the entanglement he felt during the Kiddush ritual that opened the film. At the end of the Havdalah, the film's concluding song, played on voiceover, expresses love for humankind and self-recognition: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself, and know one's inner soul."

FIGURE 2 Love for Humankind and Self-Recognition: A Religious Formation of Redemption

Scene from *Ha-Mashgihim* © 2012. Used with permission of Meni Yaesh (Director) and Transfax Film Productions.

Epilogue

God's Neighbors offers cinematic testimony to the growing strength of religion and tradition in Israeli society. This is evidenced by large-scale religious 'rebirths', the growth and multiplication of alternative centers for the study of religion, the mainstreaming of Kabbalah studies among large segments of the population, the Breslovization of peripheral groups, the development of Jewish traditions, and the renewed integration of those traditions into Israeli culture. However, what is the real place of these developments in the public sphere, as forces that shape "elements of the public" (Asad 2003: 184) and that represent an interpretive "background" against the "foreground" (ibid.: 185) of political principles? Is it possible for secular liberals to accept the penetration of religious concepts at sites of confrontation and conflict in Israeli civil society and politics, not only to enrich the public discussion, but also, for example, to influence given concrete processes experienced in moral polemics? According to Asad, these questions touch upon the democratic essence of the public sphere, which is intended not solely for free discourse but also, as he clarifies, for concrete influence regarding alternative discourses. The film *God's Neighbors* provides a forum for considering and discussing these questions and challenges.

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NOTES

1. For an overview of the literature on religion and cinema, see Deacy (2001, 2009, 2011, 2012), Johnston (2000), Lyden (2009), Mitchell and Plate (2007), Stone (2000), Telford (2000, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d), and Wright (2006, 2009).
2. Most of the research studies and papers concerning religion and cinema in Israel focus on contemporary film. Roni Perchak's (1998) work is the only meaningful study that considers Israeli religion and cinema in previous decades until the end of the 1990s. Other, more recent publications in this field include Dan Chyutin (2011, 2014), Yael Munk (2006), and Yael Munk and Nurith Gertz (2007). For a collection of articles on religion and Israeli film and television, see a 2015 issue dedicated to the phenomenon in the international journal *Jewish Film & New Media* (volume 3, number 1).

3. Yaron Peleg (2013: 65) claims that *God's Neighbors* "marks a significant cultural moment in the legitimation of Jewish religiosity in Israel and records an important milestone in the country's metamorphosis in recent years from a secular, liberal society to a more fundamentalist religious one" (see also ibid.: 64–86).
4. Concerning the theological origins of Zionism, see Katz (1979), Kimmerling (1998, 1999), and Raz-Krakotzkin (1999). See also Shenhav (2007) on the mixing of 'religious' and 'secular' practices and the separation between 'religion' and 'nationalism' as two distinct zones in the construction of Zionist nationalism. Concerning the renewed discussion pertaining to religiosity and secularism in Israel and the undermining of the dichotomy between the two, see Buzaglo (2008) and Yadgar (2010) for analyses of 'traditional' Jews in Israel.
5. For example, of the 410 fiction films produced between the years 1960 and 1995, only 20 contained some religious theme (Schnitzer 1994).
6. Regarding the crisis of 'republicanism' (*mamlachtiyut*) in Israel and the growth of religion in Israeli society, see Mautner (2011). See also Kimmerling (2001), Mautner (2008), Mautner et al. (1998), and Sagi (2003).
7. See Wright (2009: 103) and her analysis on the presentation of Judaism in the film *Ha-Ushpizin* and its subversion of the Zionist meta-narrative.
8. In his seminal study *Transcendental Style in Film*, Paul Schrader (1972) offers a comprehensive assessment of the stylistic means by which films in various cultures express the sublime. Although the transcendental style of *God's Neighbors* does not meet most of the characteristics of the Schrader model, I find that the film positions the sublime through both its narrative and its spiritual aesthetic.
9. A separate issue worthy of discussion touches on the status of Breslov Hasidism in relation to the status of the Mizrahi Jewish religious tradition. In this film, the Mizrahi identity is not subsumed in Breslov Hasidism; rather, it serves as a fundamental component in the human and religious subjectivity of the main character. However, the film does not take part in the cultural reformation of the historic Mizrahi religious legacy that has been expropriated from Mizrahi Jews by the Ashkenazi hegemony. With respect to the characteristics of Mizrahi Jewish traditionalism, see Buzaglo (2008). Regarding the roots of the connection of peripheral Mizrahim to Breslov Hasidism and the tensions and contradictions that are involved, see Baumgarten (2012) and Pedaya (2011: 91–94).
10. In political films, critical social commentary may come as an expressed and open manifest, or it may appear in more complex formats as in, for example, *Vasermil* (Salmona 2007), *Ajami* (Copti and Shani 2009), and *Menatek Ha-maim* (The Cutoff Man) (Hubel 2012).
11. Concerning poverty as a mystic value and its centrality in the formulation of Hasidism, see Pedaya (1995; 2010; 2011: 204).
12. The *mezuzot* is a parchment inscribed with Hebrew verses from the Torah that is attached to door frames in the homes of Jewish people. The *tefillin* are small leather cases holding biblical passages that are worn above the head and on the arm of Jews during morning prayers

13. Royal Brown argues that in films music can encourage the viewer to accept the scene on a mythic level and evoke associations that foster emotional identifications (Stam 2000: 220–221).
14. The scope of this article does not allow me to delve into the representation of the film's female character and her part in the protagonist's redemption, as well as feminist issues. These are worthy of a separate and profound discussion.
15. A fundamental principle in the philosophy of faith asserts that it is impossible to perceive and understand God through the use of human cognitive thought.

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