

## Series Review

# SHTISEL (Yes/Netflix, IL 2013–2021) and UNORTHODOX (Netflix, DE 2020)

Recently, two series have drawn viewers' attention to strictly Orthodox Judaism: SHTISEL, a 3-season series created by Ori Elon and Yehonatan Indursky, first broadcast on Israeli TV and then picked up by Netflix (2013–2021), and the mini-series (4 episodes) UNORTHODOX (2020), created by Anna Winger and produced by Netflix. Both series deal with the negotiation of traditional religious norms with individual dreams and hopes, yet they do so in very different ways that offer much food for thought.

SHTISEL, mostly set in Jerusalem's neighborhood of Geula, follows the trials and tribulations of the strictly Orthodox (*haredi*) Shtisel family, focusing primarily on the recently widowed father, Shulem, and Akiva, one of his six children, as well as on other members of the extended family (fig. 1). Typical for a TV series, multiple narrative strands are woven together, dealing with issues of love, marriage, family, professional vocation, and dreams for self-fulfillment. Shulem, who considers a second marriage after the death of his wife, is worried that Akiva still hasn't found a wife. Another source of conflict is Akiva's decision to be an artist and give up his job as a teacher in his father's *cheder*, a traditional elementary school. The family also has to deal with death and grief: the series begins with Akiva's vision of his deceased mother and ends with a scene in which all the dead of the family are gathered around the dining table, and these and other, usually formally unmarked, dreams or visions of the dead complicate easy assumptions about the reality depicted in the series. Noticeably absent, apart from one brief story line revolving around Israeli Independence Day, are political issues, reflecting, perhaps, the withdrawal of the *haredim* from Israeli public life.

These central themes appear again and again in a cyclical fashion that expresses their existential character: these are not exceptional issues that will be resolved once and for all, but universal questions that human beings have dealt with across time and space and that will return, in a different



Fig. 1: A Shtisel family council. Film still, SHTISEL (Yes/Netflix, IL 2013–2021), S2:E5, 00:07:25.

shape, for different people. Yet the setting of the *haredi* community brings a particular inflection to their treatment that provides for dramaturgical possibilities. In Season 2, for example, Giti and her husband respond to a childless widow's offer of an award for a family who will name their child after her deceased husband so that he will have a descendant to say Kaddish (a prayer of mourning), which reflects the concern of Orthodox Jews about fulfilling the command to be fruitful and the importance of children in this life and the afterlife. The specific gender roles of the patriarchal *haredi* community are thematized several times, such as in S3:E6, when Zvi Arye's wife, Tovi, gets her driving license and buys a car against his wishes (driving and owning a car are frowned upon, especially when done by a woman), standing her ground against her husband at home while making sure that he maintains his image as head of the family to the outside.

This successful negotiation of the universal with the particular is likely the reason for the show's success among viewers from different backgrounds<sup>1</sup> in spite of its setting in a little-known community whose rules and traditions might appear strange, if not oppressive. While especially in the first two seasons, some plot lines are left unconcluded (whatever happened to that little dog Shulem takes in rather unwillingly as a favor to his grandson? And how about Shulem's two remaining children who are never

1 For some reactions, see Adler 2021.



Fig. 2: Esty walks into her future. Film still, UNORTHODOX (Netflix, DE 2020), Part 4, 49:53.

mentioned?), the show observes the Shtisels' woes and joys with understated humor and intelligence, creating empathy with its characters, who are depicted with increasing complexity across the three seasons. Shulem (an excellent Doval'e Glickman), for example, might appear as a somewhat unsympathetic character, more concerned with his own creature comforts than with the feelings and needs of others, but his love for his family and his vocation as a teacher are deeply felt, even if he does not always express them well.

In contrast, there is little joy or humor found in the community of the Satmar Hassidim in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where UNORTHODOX, inspired by Deborah Feldman's eponymous memoir,<sup>2</sup> is set. More like a long film than a 4-part series, the show focuses primarily on its protagonist, Esty (Shira Haas, who also plays, with the same intensity, Ruchami in SHTISEL), and her "escape" from her marriage and community to Berlin. Here, she befriends a group of young musicians who help her settle into this unknown world (not least marked by the city's Nazi history and neo-Nazi present), reconnects with her mother, and begins – so is suggested – a new life as a music student (fig. 2). The series interweaves Esty's present with flashbacks to her suffocating life in the Satmar community, her marriage to Yanky and their marital problems (both emotional and sexual), and the community's – es-

2 Feldman 2012.

pecially her mother-in-law's – pressure to conform. These flashbacks are essential as they provide the motivation for Esty's drastic decision to leave her community. In a further plot line, Yanky and his cousin Moishe follow Esty to Berlin to bring her back. While this somewhat melodramatic "chase" narrative creates some suspense (will they find Esty in time to prevent her scholarship audition at the conservatory? Will Moishe use the gun to force her to go back to Williamsburg?), the possibilities of these two characters are unfortunately left undeveloped. Especially Moishe, represented as a rather thuggish, unsavory character who does not shy away from threatening Esty's mother and breaking into her apartment, could have served as a kind of double of Esty, as he himself left the community but returned to it for reasons left unclear. The exploration of the different situations of Esty and Moishe, their respective motivations for leaving, returning, or staying away, would have allowed the series to treat its complex topic with greater depth.

With its "liberation" narrative, UNORTHODOX creates a binary between the religious community and the secular world. Likely shaped by Feldman's personal experiences of her community in its perspective, the series represents religious traditions and norms mostly as oppressive burdens, especially for women whose bodies and lives are the subject of religious and social control. This is visualized, for example, in a scene in the ritual bath, the mikveh, where the attendant double-checks that Esty's finger nails are really clean, when her head is shorn after her wedding, or in painful images of Esty and Yanky trying to have sex to fulfill the religious and social expectations to have children. Members of the community are portrayed quite negatively and in a one-dimensional way: when Esty leaves, the rabbi is concerned not about her welfare or reasons for leaving, but about making sure that she doesn't become an example that others might want to follow. Positive aspects of communal life – friendship, support, a sense of belonging – are hinted at only in passing, and religious practices appear as empty rituals without any kind of spiritual richness.

Through this dualism of the oppressive religious sphere and the liberating secular world, the series envisions possibilities for individual empowerment, self-fulfillment, and real relationship, especially for women, only in emancipation from patriarchal religion. This secularist narrative is very slightly modified by the fact that it is Esty's passionate rendition of a Yiddish song at her audition that convinces the committee of her talent. This suggests that while her decision to separate from her husband and her

community is irrevocable, her community's traditions and culture are still a part of who she is.

In contrast, *SHTISEL* does not create a binary between the secular and religious worlds, although their differences are recognized. Religious traditions and practices are a natural and meaningful part of the Shtisels' everyday life and closely connect the spiritual and material dimensions of life, from the blessing over food to the frequent invocation of God in conversations and to Talmud study. When conflicts arise between religious norms, communal expectations, and individual needs, the question is not whether to leave the community, but how to find a compromise within it, usually not imposed by some authority but negotiated among the individuals involved. This might certainly sometimes mean for an individual to give up some of their dreams, but just as often for the community to accommodate individual desires even if they don't quite approve: in Season 3, Giti is not excited about her son Yosa'le wanting to marry a Sephardic girl he met by mistake at a date set up by the matchmaker, but eventually she comes around because it means so much to him.

Reviewers of *SHTISEL* have noted the problems of setting a series in a community whose very appearance (sidelocks, black suits, and high hats for the men, muted colors, shapeless dresses, and hair-covering for the women), let alone their beliefs and practices, mark them as different, which might encourage a certain exoticizing voyeurism (which, incidentally, is thematized in *SHTISEL* with regard to Akiva's portraits of *haredi* Jews).<sup>3</sup> In *UNORTHODOX*, the otherness of the Satmar Hassidim is underlined and mostly marked negatively, whereas *SHTISEL* has been praised for "humanizing" strictly Orthodox Jews by emphasizing the universal that resonates across specific contexts.<sup>4</sup> Yet I am not sure if that is what the series achieves. Instead, what I appreciate about it is its careful negotiation of the universal and the particular: it certainly treats universal themes of love and death, but in a way that is rooted in the particular context of the *haredi* characters who experience these situations, and it does not suggest that "deep down" we're all the same (translate as: *haredim* are just like secular folks). As a viewer who is not part of the community, I am given the possibility of empathizing with the characters, yet without denying the remaining gap that our different experiences and contexts create. In this sense, *SHTISEL* envisions

3 Margalit 2019.

4 Berger 2019.

difference as a possibility of encounter, whereas UNORTHODOX constructs difference as separation.

For those interested in religious studies, religion and media, and Jewish studies, both series provide rich material for critical reflections on the role of religion in everyday life, gender and religion, secularization narratives of the encounter between tradition and modernity, individualism and community, and the relationship between the universal and the particular. In their detailed representation of strictly Orthodox communities, both series also offer material for studying Jewish beliefs, practices, and traditions; however, it is important to keep in mind that like all media, these representations are constructions and thus questions of “authenticity” should be handled with care.

## Bibliography

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## Filmography

- SHTISEL (Created by: Ori Elon and Yehonatan Indursky, Yes/Netflix, IL 2013–2021).
- UNORTHODOX (Created by: Deborah Feldman, Anna Winger, and Alexa Karolinski, Netflix, DE 2020).