

Chapter 6

ELICITING "KOSHER EMOTIONS" IN ULTRA-ORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN'S FILM

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ABSTRACT

Since 1999, Israeli ultra-Orthodox Jewish feature films have been produced by ultra-Orthodox Jewish filmmakers for ultra-Orthodox Jewish viewers. Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women's films are restricted to female viewers and portray women only. These films are mostly melodramas and are screened at banquet halls in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods on Jewish holidays. This study examines two main questions: a) How do ultra-Orthodox Jews filmmakers deal with religious restrictions and constraints in combining the cinematic medium with religious stories and ideas, including commercial and entertainment aspects? b) What is the nature of the audience's reception of these films? In order to answer these questions, ethnographic research was conducted in the course of 2010-2013 regarding ultra-Orthodox Jewish film production and distribution sites. Interviews were conducted with film producers, revealing the mechanisms employed by them to produce "kosher" women's films. Women who were frequent consumers of these films were also interviewed in order to determine and interpret audience responses. Semiotic analysis was performed on posters advertising the films in the course of 2011-2013.

Findings disclose the apparatus by which producers focus on viewers' emotional experiences using religion as an exciting commercial product. An attempt is made to design an active cinematic viewing experience for participants (although it collides with the rules of modesty and self-control that ultra-Orthodox women are required to uphold). In order to achieve emotional arousal, the producers employ various cinematic strategies during the distribution and production processes: assisted by kitschy images, they use enigmatic visual and verbal rhetoric in film posters, inviting viewers to participate in an emotional experience. In the production process, "film excess" is used both thematically and aesthetically. Those who respond in what may be perceived as an exaggerated emotional manner are mainly younger viewers, who are encouraged in this behavior by older ones. These screenings may be regarded as a unique female ritual with a carnival atmosphere that provides a space for unleashing emotions, thus strengthening viewers' religious beliefs.

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INTRODUCTION

During the mid-to late 1990s, with the rise of the influence of religious parties within Israel's political coalition system, there was a significant increase in antagonism between secular and ultra religious Jews. A number of serious feature films were produced portraying the ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious community (Kronish, Amy and Costel, 2003), while focusing on these Jews' lifestyle (Balint, 2007). However, much less attention has been paid to feature films that are produced, distributed and consumed by the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) religious community itself. Basically, these movies deal with religious issues, representing the stories, values, beliefs, and norms of Haredi society in Israel. They are made in accordance with Jewish law (Halacha) and are generally produced by Haredi men and women. These movies are consumed by ultra-Orthodox audiences representing different sectors of society and a wide age range.

In accordance with Halachic restrictions and constraints, two types of films are currently being produced: women's films, which will be the focus of this chapter, and men's films. Each of them has different characteristics in terms of content, audience and production and distribution methods. Both types of films are meant for the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community and conform to basic definitions of community media (Howley, 2005; 2010).

The common denominator of these films lies in their being commercial films dealing with topics involving religious belief and representing the ideas, values and norms of Haredi society. These ideas and values are transmitted with the use of entertaining and emotional elements. This chapter examines the manner in which women's films' producers combine the cinematic medium with religious stories and ideas, while including commercial, entertaining and emotional aspects. In addition, viewers' interpretations and reception of the outcome of this integration – community commercial films - are also analyzed.

Women producers have been producing ultra-Orthodox women's' films since 1999, and in 2007 male producers also joined this industry. Women produce films that are consumed by women only and display only female portrayals. The religious authorities have determined that producers must refrain from including any male presence. When men are required by the plot, they must appear in separate short scenes that are devoid of women; furthermore, males are cast in secondary and marginal roles only. The length of women's movies is two to two and a half hours, and they are screened three times a year: at the Sukkot and Passover holidays, two major Jewish holidays that last a week and include in-between days, neither sacred nor profane, when screenings are allowed [Hol Hamo'ed], and during the Yeshivas' and ultra-Orthodox Jewish schools' summer vacation. They are also occasionally projected for girls' school students after school hours. All in all, ultra-Orthodox schools have always maintained a separation between boys and girls. Much of the girls' and women's education in these schools focuses on preparing them for their responsibilities as mothers and housewives, perpetuating their secondary status in ultra-Orthodox society (Halperin-Kaddari, 2004).

The films are screened at banqueting halls in ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods that have been converted into cinemas. The actors in the movies are both ultra-Orthodox Jewish and secular actors, and the producers often recruit professional secular filmmakers. The film production process requires the approval and censorship of a rabbinical authority who

consults with principals of women's schools and seminaries, requesting their confirmation. Most of the women's films are melodramas, but due to Halachic constraints they do not deal with romance or relationships between couples. The producers are careful to embed a clear and direct religious message in every film. These religious aspects are often central to the plot and constitute the chief motivations of the protagonists. As befits the characteristic of melodrama and due to the Halachic limitations, alongside the religious messages, the main motivation of the producers is to portray and evoke a variety of emotions. These become the films' most outstanding characteristic and the one that defines them. Producer Ariel Cohen explains:

"Women's films deal mainly with emotion, emotion and more emotion. Most of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish scripts for women are a kind of 'sitcom' in disguise. The scripts depict personal tragedy, comedy and slightly dramatic relationships, which operate on feelings. The issues deal with adoption, malignant diseases, sisters separated at birth, lost children, Anti-Semitic persecution, family conflicts and especially 'dark' secrets that are borne by the characters. Thus, in most cases, the plot is full of twists and an emotional climate; it provides escapism and an emotional outlet in all of its forms. Tears, laughter, stress, anxiety, fear, moving music plus some crying are all mixed into the plot of women's films" (Cohen, 7/23/2010)¹.

THE MEDIA AND ISRAEL'S HAREDI SOCIETY

The combination of the cinematic medium with religious stories and ideas in women's films, including commercial and entertaining aspects, seems to contrast strongly with the characteristics of Israeli Haredi society² as it formally presents itself. Haredi society views itself as concerned with the exact fulfillment of Halachic laws, placing them as much as possible on an equal level of importance. It tends to adopt the strictist options provided by Halachic literature (Friedman, 1991: 17). Haredi society is divided into three major streams: Lithuanian, Hassidic and Sephardic. All three of them share some major patterns of behavior and ideological and theological stands: first and foremost, a commitment to study the Torah; a commitment to Eastern European or Eastern Jewish tradition, as it is formulated in their consciousness; a commitment to Orthodox Jewish law in its strictest form; a confrontational stand against the Zionist movement and the State of Israel; life patterns with a tendency towards isolation and separation from society in general, which is manifested by distinctive clothing; residential patterns in Haredic and Non-Haredic districts, as well as a unique educational system separate from that of the general Israeli public. This population is also generally suspicious of modernity due to the fear that it might pose an existential threat and exert a negative influence on Haredi communities (Friedman and Lahav, 1985; Caplan and Stadler, 2009: 11; Caplan, 2003: 228-224; Spiegel, 2011). This latter position is the basis of Haredi society's attitude towards the media.

There are two fundamental approaches to mass media in Haredi society, a conservative approach and an instrumental approach. The media represent modernity and negate Haredi

¹ From an article posted by Ariel Cohen on the site "Articles" under the name "Woman in the frame" [http://www.articles.co.il/article/75414/Woman% 20 in the frame](http://www.articles.co.il/article/75414/Woman%20in%20the%20frame) (retrieved on 05/20/2013).

² Ultra-Orthodox Jewish society is a minority group in Israel. It constitutes about 8% of the Jews in Israel aged 20 and over. (See Dror-Cohen, 2010.)

society's desire to preserve tradition and maintain separation from a secular environment. Thus their extreme position completely negates the employment of mass media. Alongside this approach, there is an instrumental attitude towards mass media, considering them excellent tools for spreading religious messages (Caplan, 2003: 260; Liran-Alper and Tzarfati, 2010: 130). According to the latter approach, Caplan (2007) notes that "folk religion"³ is distributed to the ultra-Orthodox Jewish public by various and diverse means, including sermons, lectures and lessons many of which are reproduced by means of audiotapes, radio stations, CDs, movies, folk literature, newsletters, children's literature and women's theater (ibid., 33-32).

In addition to these two approaches, a third approach is reflected in women's film productions, a consumer-centered approach by which religious ideas and values associated with emotional experiences are constructed as consumer products. As will be shown later in this chapter, the dissemination of religious messages is not necessarily the main and sole objective of the producers; they also seek to market an exciting and entertaining experience constructed in a religious manner. During the 1990's, with the expansion of the ultra-Orthodox Jews sector and its growing political presence, ultra-Orthodox Jews began participating in the mainstream consumption process (Carmeli and Applbaum, 2004). However, their consumption patterns differed from those of the secular population, partially due to the community's willingness to adopt and enforce religious censorship according to rabbinical commandments (Hersroni, 2011). In any event, the growth of consumer culture in Haredi society has clearly led Israel to a homogeneous global consumer culture (Azaryahu, 2009).

THE JUXTAPOSITION OF MARKETING, RELIGION, THE MEDIA AND EMOTIONAL RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The use of religion as a consumer product is depicted by McDannell (1998) as a historical tradition in which Christian products are sold in various ways – as highbrow productions such as Chagall paintings and as lowbrow artifacts such as t-shirts and fridge magnets. The consumption of products containing religious motifs that reflect and represent the faith of the purchasers may be perceived as ambivalent. On the one hand, they may be seen as contradicting the definition of religion as being ascetic, non-materialistic, spiritual (Schofield-Clark, 2007: 4-5). On the other hand, the consumption of religious products may be seen as a glorification of faith, a public declaration of the self (ibid.). The popular consumption of religious goods is defined as a "vernacular" religion or as the "religion of the streets" (ibid.). It is a part of non-formalized daily religious practice combining religion with commerce in a "spiritual market" (Roof, 2001; Cimino & Lattin, 1998).

In addition to Christian material consumption, Schofield-Clark (2007) shows how the combination of commercialization and religion is also reflected in Muslim pop and rap music in the United States. A band of three African-American Muslims called "Native Deen" chose to create American rap music, encouraging Muslim identification with their lyrics and glorifying the values of Islamic religion. Their music is produced using traditional

³ A folk religion is the experience of religious in everyday life, the interpretation of religion by its believers and the practice of their daily lives. It is contrary to the official religion of the spiritual leaders. (See Caplan, 2007: 33.)

instruments, while avoiding the use of modern musical technology. They perform in places such as Islamic conferences and weddings, but refrain from venues such as bars and clubs that encourage activities contrary to Islamic beliefs (ibid., 19-21). One member of the band has indicated that people attending their events claim they now have their own entertainment scene that is not necessarily in Arabic (ibid., 20).

Schofield-Clark indicates that this phenomenon of popular entertainment that conforms to religious values and beliefs is still new and limited, but it presents a challenge to the conventional notion that Islam forbids any kind of popular music (ibid., 21). It is part of a phenomenon she calls "religious lifestyle branding":

"It is a process that occurs as commercial industries provide materials meant to appeal to those seeking articles designed to express religious distinctiveness and as individuals locate, purchase, and claim those commercial items as their own" (ibid., 23).

Regarding women's films, a similar phenomenon of modern religious and popular entertainment will be explored from the perspective of the films' producers. In their work they sell emotional experiences wrapped in religious messages through the cinematic medium. Linking religion, emotional experiences and the media is represented by Meyer (2011, 2012) as a bond in which the media reinforce and intensify religious experience. This approach is contrary to the claim that the media negate or violate religion.

Meyer claims that in some situations media technologies are related to the transcendental. She notes that the media serve to mediate between Man and God and as such provide a religious experience. For example, Meyer mentions a video of a Nigerian Pentecostal pastor raising a man from the dead. This tape demonstrates the belief in the power of God and confirms it (2012: 162-163). In other Ghanaian videos Meyer found that the media provided visual proof of a divine presence in some religious rituals (2011: 25). Thus, according to Meyer, besides transmitting religious messages, the media can unite people in a shared communal experience, serving as a link between Man and God (ibid., 27-28). This link is formed with the help of aesthetics in their broadest sense: organizing the totality of the world's sensory experiences and information (2012: 165).

This type of communal religious experience is also reflected in women's films. In the following sections, the mechanism which creates such an experience will be analyzed and the ways in which film producers sell emotional experiences to ultra-Orthodox Jewish women viewers and the nature of these women's consumption of them question will be explored.

METHODOLOGY

In order to integrate the cinematic medium into Haredi society, film producers must first and foremost adapt this medium and its content to religious restrictions and constraints. This objective raises three questions: a) How do film producers circumscribe religious constraints and limitations when producing "kosher films"?

b) How do ultra-Orthodox Jews women's films' producers understand their role and task?

c) How do the producers perceive their audience? In addition, this chapter will also examine audience responses by focusing on two questions: a) How do female viewers react to ultra-

Orthodox Jews women's films? b) How do female viewers perceive and interpret these films and their screening?

Methods and Research Field – In order to answer the research questions, an ethnographic study (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999) was conducted in the course of 2010-2013. Field work included observing and participating in the process of ultra-Orthodox Jewish film production and distribution and attending public events related to these films. Observing production was done from the perspective of a backstage photographer and production assistant on eight women's films. At the same time, conversations were held with individuals involved in the field. Some of the producers were accompanied through all the stages of the production process. Ten screenings of women's films were observed from the perspective of an assistant projectionist and usher in the screening halls.

Interviews (Kvale, 1996) were also conducted with nine women's film producers and directors and with ten frequent female viewers between the ages of 23-70. All interviewees were members of various sectors within the Israeli Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. The interviews were semi-structured, following a general plan that assured that the same topics were covered in all interviews, yet allowing variations in emphasis and content as required by the natural progression and flow of the discussion. In addition, semiotic analysis (Barthes, 1997) was applied to six women's film posters. The posters appeared on bulletin boards in the Haredi town of Bnei-Brak during the years 2011-2013. Semiotic analysis deconstructs the signs present in texts and examines their denotative, connotative and ideological meaning (ibid.).

RESULTS

Emotions for Sale

The main goal of the producers is to generate great excitement in the audiences viewing the ultra-Orthodox Jewish melodramas. Producers consider melodrama the proper genre for telling a religious story that promotes moral values in an emotionally appealing way. This relates to the Halachic constraints that producers must work under, as well as their desire to sell as many tickets as possible. The producers aim at entertaining viewers by means of displaying religious themes. They are constrained from dealing with issues such as social criticism and themes considered taboo by Haredi society. They are especially forbidden to deal with the usual subjects of the melodramatic genre - emotions arising between couples, such as love and passion. Instead, women's film producers have very limited options to work with regarding themes and emotional contexts. Thus the emotions that are permitted must be amplified. As Shlomit, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish director, points out:

"You cannot produce real drama. You must not show theft and murder and romance and serious conflict because it is not educational. Then what will you do? You present a conflict with the Gentile world or deal with issues like illness or adopting children. Then you remain with soap operas. 'Clean' soap operas, about these issues [...] you can't excite the viewers otherwise [...] so here are all the soap operas and everything is beautiful. It is for covering the lack of opportunities to create a real movie. If ninety per cent of the

dramas of life can't be expressed on the screen, you are left with a niche so narrow that you magnify it greatly [...] you must excite the audience in different ways" (August, 2012).

The director and producer Judah Grovais (a Gur Hassid⁴) explains that he aims at providing the audience with a “roller-coaster experience,” stating: “*Part of the experience is to scream like in an amusement park, to be released*” (May 2013). In his opinion, arousing this experience in viewers should be done by an excessive use of cinematic elements that elicit a range of emotions throughout the developing melodrama. According to his perception, the more a movie causes viewers to break out of their daily routine and disengage themselves from social restraints, the better it will succeed at the box office.

In order to achieve this objective, while writing and producing his melodramatic women’s film *On the Banks of the Danube*, he insisted on the integration of thrilling and entertaining scenes, all of which were incorporated in a moving melodramatic story. As will be shown below, this type of combination is one of the mechanisms used by producers to get viewers involved in the viewing experience.

Grovais confirmed that the production was a success during the film’s premiere at a banquet hall in the town of Bnei-Brak (April, 2012). Grovais was thrilled to see the red warning lamp located on the hall’s ceiling light up when younger viewers let out loud screams during the first exciting scene of the film. Such an outburst recurred four times in the course of the film. This red lamp, which is attached to a decibel-measuring device, is designed to flash a warning when the noise in the hall exceeds the decibels permitted by law. It provided Grovais with confirmation that he had achieved his goal: moving some of the viewers to react in an unrestrained and extreme way by screaming during the designated scenes according to the cinematic codes he had implemented. For him, these responses were a measure of the film's commercial success.

Comparing this incident with other screenings, the violation of production norms can teach us about the imaginary reciprocity between viewers and producers. Throughout the movie premiere of another melodramatic women’s film, the combined project of three producers, there was some laughter at the right places and some loud shouting at the characters on the screen. However, despite the noisy responses, Tamar⁵, one of the three producers, was not satisfied. She mentioned her disappointment and fear that the film would be a commercial failure. She claimed that the absence of several loud shouts, screams and laughter indicated a problem with the film. She had apparently failed to provide the viewers with the variety of emotions that they were expecting. This problem might lead to a dwindling number of viewers at subsequent screenings (October 2012). Tamar had anticipated that she would observe groups of female viewers outside the screening hall continuing a discussion of the experience they had undergone, but this did not happen. She claimed that at the end of her previous film, viewers had stood around outside the hall:

“Talking about what they had experienced. They felt as if they had been on a roller-coaster ride and had to make sense of the experience, but that did not happen this time” (October 2012).

⁴ For more information about various ultra-Orthodox Hasidic communities see Wasserman (2011).

⁵ All first names are pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of the participants.

In the days following the premiere, what Tamar had feared became a reality. Less and less viewers attended subsequent screenings and the movie was pronounced a commercial failure by the producers. According to Tamar, the failure was not due to denying the viewers what had become standard fare in such films, namely a range of emotional experiences (as will be discussed below). Comical and frightening scenes had been shot during the film's production, which were meant to be incorporated into its basic melodramatic plot. However, in the end these scenes remained on the cutting room floor due to the director's desire to render the film suitable for both the secular Israeli public and the Haredi community. He had decided to omit what seemed to him to be narrative exaggeration (cinematic excess), which would not be considered acceptable in mainstream cinema. Thus, he relinquished the strategy that lies at the heart of the production process of ultra-Orthodox Jewish women's film, as will be discussed in the next section.

The Production of Cinematic Excess

As may be understood from the debut of Tamar's film, viewers do not always participate actively in every screening. This only occurs as the outcome of interaction between the production and the audience, expressing a relationship based on barter (Kotler, 1997). Each side has a defined role in the exchange, and each must play his part. The producers comprehend that viewers expect to be emotionally aroused, and they achieve this by employing a variety of unique and innovative mechanisms. These are meant to produce a range of emotional responses in the viewers, so producers are constantly searching for new ways to thrill and excite spectators according to two main aspects: the narrative aspect; the aesthetic and visual aspect. In order to succeed, these aspects must evoke extreme reactions from viewers, exceeding the accepted modest behavior demanded of them in their everyday lives (and in a manner that would also be deemed unacceptable in mainstream film productions⁶). These aspects have one major thing in common - the use of "cinematic excess" as the main mechanism used to market emotions.

"Cinematic excess' may be defined as narrative and aesthetic exaggeration that defines the relationship existing between the films' topics and characteristics in accordance with the rules of the genre (Williams, 1991).⁷ The elements producing exaggeration have no narrative or structural justification beyond their power to stimulate the audience emotionally and experientially (ibid., 6-3). In addition to exaggeration, Thompson (1977) defines "excessive" as adding elements that are not part of the basic story that sometimes even go against it due to

⁶ In general, one might argue that the purpose of film production is to provide viewers with emotional experiences. Film researchers indicate that the basic characteristics of Films make it possible to produce emotional experiences that are anchored in the visual nature of cinema - the illusion of movement; the manipulative editing; the dynamic of the camera and its angles; the controlling of story elements and the frequency of the images shown; and the music and soundtrack (Gaut, 2010, 244-281; Tsivian, 2008). However, the ways producers use these mechanisms in terms of quantity, frequency and juxtaposition create a distinction among film genres.

⁷ Linda Williams (1991) demonstrates the use of excess in cinematic melodramas and horror movies. Regarding melodrama, excess relates to a radicalization of the relationship between genders. In horror movies the excess is used combining sexuality and violence in an unacceptable narrative (ibid., 6-3).

their being artistically unjustifiable and undermining the unity and completeness of the basic narrative" (ibid., 54, 60).

Excessiveness serves as a key component in the major genre of Haredi women's films - the melodrama. Melodrama begins and ends in representing innocence in conflict between good and evil (Williams, 1998). Melodramas focus on morally virtuous heroines falling victim to evil circumstances or immoral antagonists. The dramatic storyline presents a journey of discovery towards true moral identity while combining pathos with action. Pathos is a key element in melodrama, and action is its resonance. In this context, researchers of the genre argue that the stories frequently draw on reality, but its main characteristic - emotional excessiveness - is manipulative and deviant from real life (Williams: 65-80; Brooks, 1976: 627-628). The objective of excess is to emphasize the film's moral lesson by overstated emotional rhetoric manifested in exaggerated theatrics (Brooks, 628-633). Excessiveness in melodrama consists of four dimensions: emotions evoked by a building up of expectations leading to a positive outcome in hazardous circumstances; aesthetic phrasing; a powerful use of music and songs; the scale of the spectacle (Williams, 2012: 524-525).

Using the melodramatic genre allows women's film producers to emphasize two major elements: morality and emotional empowerment. Melodrama reinforces the religious and educational dimension required of women's films. The moral dimension provides the producers with a rabbinical seal of approval that allows them to produce and screen their films. Moral values also permit the audience to relate to the viewing event as a confirmation of their faith, not mere entertainment. Mor (37), a Breslev Hasidic⁸ viewer, responded thus to my question regarding what she expected from women's films:

"Interesting plot, music, cinematic experience and a kind of message. There is no such thing as a film without a message [...] this is entertainment and a release and it is also the receiving of a [religious] message and intensification [of faith]" (January, 2013).

However, moral messages are at times interpreted by younger viewers as excessive and not conducive to the exciting viewing experience they expect when purchasing a ticket. Tirza (14), Gur Hasidic, noted that the scenes where there were lengthy discussions of religious issues were not suitable for girls of her age (October, 2012).

Apart from moralistic messages, melodrama affords emotional empowerment on both the narrative and the aesthetic level (Williams, 2012: 524-525). Regarding narrative, women's film producers produce excessiveness by combining thrilling and entertaining scenes with a melodramatic story. This involves adding elements that do not contribute to the plot. For example, in his melodramatic film:

"On the Banks of the Danube, Grovais integrated thrilling elements. He refers to this integration as his main way of activating viewers, noting how in those scenes, "the girls would die of fear. There would be a disaster; they would become hoarse [from screaming]" (August, 2011).

Grovais preferred to elicit viewers' emotions by integrating “chase” sequences. For instance, in one scene the Catholic nun heroine is pursued by the Mother Superior through

⁸ See note iv

streets, alleyways and the convent's cellars immediately after the heroine discovers that in her childhood the Mother Superior had kidnapped her from her Jewish mother.

Apart from scenes involving suspense, in some melodramatic women's films the producers incorporate comic scenes, or a comical figure is integrated into the plot, usually accompanying the heroine and providing comic relief. Producers of ultra-Orthodox Jewish melodrama consider these figures to be aberrant and hackneyed, while acknowledging their importance for the genre. This need to combine many different and conflicting emotions is emphasized by Odaya (15), a Lithuanian viewer⁹:

"I love when there is such tension and everything is combined together, and then there will be a comical element such as the funny maid in Iveret [Blind woman]. You have tears in your eyes, then suddenly you laugh" (April, 2011).

Producers' attempts to evoke a variety of emotions are sometimes harshly criticized by consumers. Following viewers' negative comments regarding one of her films, Ya'ara, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish director and producer, realized in retrospect that they were chiefly interested in consuming positive and exciting experiences. One of her films presents a heroic story of four ultra-Orthodox Jewish women who help rescue their Jewish friends from death in a work camp during the Holocaust. Unlike other women's films dealing with the Holocaust, in this film Yaara chose to display the cruelty and violence of the Nazi guards in the camp. She explains that this production decision was rooted in the constant need to renew and challenge the limited emotions permissible in women's films (April, 2012). Ya'ara noted that after the premiere several viewers approached her angrily, claiming that they were unwilling to witness brutality on Passover eve. They had come to enjoy themselves and the film had spoiled the holiday atmosphere. Consequently, the next day she omitted two of the excessively violent scenes (ibid.).

Alongside the narrative excess of the films, the need for magnifying emotions and experiences using cinematic excess is also present at the aesthetic level. Aesthetic excess is both auditory and visual.

Music and soundtracks play an important role in movies. Shlomit notes that a successful women's film combines two key elements:

"It must be a soap opera and as sharp and as sweet and as lovely as it can possibly be. And secondly, you take pieces of music from the best films in the world [...] soundtracks from good movies and mix them and add your own [...] for example, you see a girl escaping in a hall. There is blasting music, thrilling music, it is something crazy..., it is climatic music and the crowd screams, but they see nothing. No one is chasing her and nothing can be seen on the screen. The music creates the emotional effect. Music tells you what to feel right now and what to do with it. That is how you buy the audience. The plot is nothing. Take away the music and it is just nothing. Music interprets it and it works" (August, 2012)

Shlomit claimed that the music in her films generates emotional exaggeration that would not be acceptable at the same level in mainstream cinema. Because of this, in her last film she refused to use this effect, showing ultra-Orthodox Jewish viewers *What Cinema Is* (ibid.). Shlomit also avoids narrative excess. The result, as she sees it:

⁹ For more information about Lithuanian-Ashkenazi communities, see Stadler (2009).

"[It was the] first time I did a film as a film. Dina [Perlstein – a female filmmaker] says that it is like the Gentiles' [movies]. The barrier has been broken" (ibid.).

The lack of excessive scenes and exaggerated pathos in her film was perceived by some ultra-Orthodox Jews viewers as an unacceptable novelty.

Some female filmmakers are interested in adding reactions such as curiosity, admiration and amazement to the emotional corpus marketed by their films. For this purpose, they provide a visually rich experience using new techniques like three-dimensional screenings, unusual shooting angles and casting one actor in several roles simultaneously. Nava, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish filmmaker, chose to enhance the viewing experience by using an innovative shooting technique: in the climactic scene of her film – a cult leader's pursuit of two young sisters attempting to escape from him was filmed using a helicopter. According to Nava, incorporating a helicopter into the shooting of the film was an important innovation that had not yet been attempted in the genre. Its main purpose was to provide viewers with a novel emotional experience. She claimed:

"I present things that viewers are not accustomed to seeing. This film includes tension, kidnapping, a helicopter flying overhead and a stuntman climbing down ropes in the scene when the girls run away" (January, 2013).

Together with technological innovations, producers of women's films prefer shooting in exotic locations such as Thailand and India, cellars of ancient castles, the streets of European cities or popular tourist sites like the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Statue of Liberty in the U.S. Producers create additional interest by filming dramatically excessive scenes in settings that pique the curiosity of viewers who understand, as Grovais noted, that for the price of a ticket they can “visit” sites that are economically and practically inaccessible to them (September, 2012). Shlomit depicts these elaborate scenes as part of an aesthetic experience:

"There is a demand for beautiful visuals. Sometimes shots from abroad are integrated into films for no other reason. They insist on the use of landscapes from overseas in order to provide beauty" (August, 2012).

Aesthetics and the emotions are both used as major sales strategies, being also employed as a marketing technique, as evidenced by women's films' posters.

Building Up Expectations of an Emotional Cinematic Experience – Marketing Women's Films

The process of marketing a variety of emotions begins with women's film posters, which are displayed on public bulletin boards in ultra-Orthodox Jewish towns and neighborhoods, while also appearing in ultra-Orthodox Jewish newspapers about two weeks prior to the screenings.

Movie posters are defined by Jonathan Gray as "paratexts" (Gray, 2010). Paratexts are materials surrounding the main text - in this case the film. They do not function only to advertise movies, but also to convey the film's meaning (ibid., 6). They convey the

significance of the main text, providing it with context and interpretations. Thus they prepare the audience in advance for what kind of messages they can expect to receive (ibid.: 25, 52). Hollywood movie posters highlight the film's genre, the participating actors (stars) and the names of the directors, the producers and the studio. Film posters also introduce the viewer to the world of the narrative by means of a short written text accompanying the visual content (ibid., 55, 72).

Regarding most ultra-Orthodox Jewish women's films, the producers are responsible for the posters, their content and their graphics. These posters are lacking in several key elements that are present in paratexts of Hollywood movies, including genre, participants and plot. Instead, the main emphasis is on the emotional viewing experience, which is the main product being sold by the producers.

When designing the posters, the producers appeal directly to the viewer in three ways: by intensifying the drama; inviting and encouraging an active viewing experience; and evoking a reflexive position. On the movie poster for *The show must go on* (M. Barzel, 2011), the producers appeal directly to viewers using rhetoric that intensifies the drama by encouraging an active viewing experience. The header reads:

"New! Never before seen!", and underneath the movie's title it says: "Thrilling drama, exciting and exhilarating. Full of thrills and laughter, and with a strong Jewish message filled with faith!!! Do not miss out! This is your last chance!"

A similar invitation is expressed in film posters for additional screenings of *Suddenly* (R. Elias, 2012) and *Tears of Sand* (R. Elias, 2010):

"You will be excited. You will again be surprised!" and "Come again and experience even more thrills!"

Other film posters provide subtle hints regarding the film's characteristics, but again the producers prepare the viewers for an enhanced and unique experience. The film poster advertising *On the Banks of the Danube* (Y. Grovais, 2012) promises "A startling discovery, confusion and loss, breathtaking drama. Never has there been a production like it." On the poster for *Sheets in the Wind* (R. Ya'akobowitz, 2010), besides the emotional aspect, religious values are also mentioned:

"Tumultuous and breathtaking drama filmed in Poland and Israel, with a powerful moral, illuminating a Jewish spark that is everlasting. A few hours' worth of experience that will haunt you for days after viewing ...".

In addition to the emotional experience being sold, the poster for the comedy *Caution! Neighbors!* (Y. Grovais, 2013) also invites viewers to take the action even further and reflect on their own lives:

"The best comedy of the year has arrived!!! Come enjoy an evening of laughter and good spirits! Go on an unforgettable journey with Yentle Ben Lulu and her friends. Come and see yourself reflected in the mirror of life".

The selling of emotions is also visually represented on posters incorporating kitschy motifs. Tomas Kulka (2001) defines kitschy images as being generally beautiful, pleasing to the eye, cute or highly emotionally charged. Kulka claims that the emotional content not only promotes kitsch, but is a necessary condition for its existence. Kitsch avoids displaying disturbing and unpleasant reality, leaving nothing but what can be accepted and easily identified with, such as children, family, sunsets, love and longing (ibid., 36). Kitsch encourages emotional responses that may be immediately understood:

"A kitsch consumer knows that he is moved by the object standing before him like everyone else and with everyone else" (ibid., 37).

Identification and interpretation are important components of kitsch. According to Kulka, it employs realistic representations that are immediately recognizable by simple decoding. These representations are appropriate to accepted conventions, as well as to the cultural and social context of a given time and place (ibid., 42-39). Thus kitsch mainly employs stereotypes that present common, equivocal themes that are not rich in associations relating to the objects or subjects it describes (p. 45-42).

Women's films posters attempt to arouse viewers' emotions by showing images of children and infants. For example, the poster for the film *Tears in the Sand* (R. Elias, 2010) depicts a baby crawling on the sand outside a Bedouin tent and looking directly at the viewer, thus creating an anticipated emotional response.

Kitsch imagery also appears on the movie poster advertising *Disappeared Secrets* (R. Hershtick, 2010). In the right foreground there is a bench, and next to it a wooden mailbox with a letter protruding from it. A gravel path covered in brown leaves directs the viewer to an empty avenue at the left side of the image. The combination of falling leaves representing autumn along with the orphaned bench and the still unopened letter are stock kitschy images representing loneliness and sadness. This kind of advertising determines the spectator's anticipation of the type of emotional experience that is in store for her, without actually providing clues regarding the plot, as do movie posters in mainstream cinema (Gray, 2010).

Halachic constraints do not allow the representation of female characters on film posters.¹⁰ Acceptable images are mainly landscapes, buildings and tourist sites where the movies were filmed, arousing curiosity about these places and the anticipation of seeing them. A combination of visual kitschy images with written invitations to experience intriguing and exciting popular tourist places is demonstrated by the poster advertising *29 Champs Elysées* (Y. Silman, 2012). On the left-hand side of the poster, a child is shown sitting on a faded wooden swing and facing away from the camera towards the Eiffel Tower. A garden appears in the background under a clear sky, but the left half of the sky is painted red and black, imparting a sense of foreboding and arousing curiosity.

As demonstrated above, the producers place emphasis on generating an emotional response by means of the production and distribution process. In the following section, consumers' reactions will be explored.

¹⁰ For more information about the exclusion of women's images from advertising in the Haredi press see Zarfati and Zeevi, 2012: 100.

Film Screenings as an "Audio-Visual Carnival" for Haredi Women

In women's film screenings it is mainly younger viewers who respond to the producers' emotional codes with open expressions of feeling. These younger viewers thus become an integral part of the performance, while their responses intensify the emotional experiences of other spectators. For example, during the thrilling scenes of the film *Blind Woman (Iveret)* (A. Cohen and S. Eisenbach, 2011), three 12-year-old girls ran towards the doors of the hall where the film was being shown and two others ran down the other side of the hall. They had predicted that thrilling scenes were imminent due to the suspenseful background music. There was loud screaming on the part of younger spectators at the climax of these scenes. Entertaining scenes produced boisterous laughter and the hall was bursting with excitement and energy. Spectators called out to the screen, warning the heroine of danger and offered advice. Viewers of all ages busily discussed impending events, and were thrilled to identify places in their own home town. Such viewer reactions are generally perceived as abnormal and unacceptable in the Haredi community, as they undermine those norms of restraint and modest behavior demanded in the daily lives of ultra-Orthodox Jewish women.

Women, girls, and children in Haredi society are required to display restraint in both the public and the private sphere. Unrestrained behavior is seen in Haredi society as inappropriate and immodest. Modesty is a central value of this society (Orian, 1997: 7; Neria- Ben-Shahar, 2011: 593) and is inculcated from an early age (from kindergarten on) (Yafeh, 2007) in girl's religious education (Orian, 1997). This topic is also addressed regularly in the Haredi press (Neria-Ben-Shahar, 2011).

The emphasis on concepts of modesty and restraint requires behaving with humility and always taking other people's opinions into account (Arazi, 1983: 159). The purpose of modesty in Israeli Haredi culture is to maintain interpersonal harmony in daily life, mainly through avoidance practices and self-criticism, restraint and total control over actions and modes of speech (Orian, 1997: 7). Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women are required to wear clothing that totally covers their bodies. In Haredi kindergartens belonging to the "Bet Yaakov" educational system, girls are trained to be modest in everything involving clothing, hair styles, table manners and bodily gestures (Yafeh, 2007). Modesty is also associated with self-expression (Orian, 9). According to Yafeh, ultra-Orthodox Jewish kindergarten teachers educate Haredi girls to speak softly and slowly and to appreciate silence as an expression of self-control and restraint (Yafeh, 532). Modesty in voice and speech are also taught in schools. According to Orian, the desired manner of speech involves speaking quietly and calmly, speaking euphemistically, and speaking politely and considerately. Norms regarding speaking softly are at times accompanied by a ban against loud laughter. Spontaneous outbursts involving raising the voice are perceived as exhibiting a lack of self-control - revealing the speaker's inner feelings - (ibid., 10), so that such behavior could even damage a girl's public image and social standing.

According to Orian, these social restraints lead to reduced personal expression in interpersonal and public debates (ibid., 17). In contrast, film screenings apparently allow viewers to purchase (in addition to the chance to view a film), a few hours of escape from strict social norms by allowing the venting of emotions. During the screenings, rules of modesty are thrown to the winds, while active participation provides viewers with a means of intense self-expression. A public arena is also provided for group participation, thus creating a carnival atmosphere.

Although Haredi women's daily lives dictate modest behavior, they are permitted at certain times and places to express themselves emotionally and physically, similarly to the carnival in the Christian world.

Carnivals are social rituals carried out at specified times and locations. They are usually managed and controlled by the government and constitute a temporary relaxation of religious restrictions that allow citizens a release from the pressure of their daily lives (Armstrong, 2010: 448; Bakhtin, 1968).

Originally, the carnival was a Catholic festival which lasted from three to five days. For the duration of the carnival, the public was permitted to consume the meat that was forbidden for consumption during Lent, a forty-day period of abstinence preceding Easter.¹¹ The feasting was accompanied by street parties where participants danced, sang and masqueraded (Crichlow and Armstrong, 2010: 400-401). Medieval carnivals also expressed the idea of role reversal: for one day the fattest man in town became the ruler of the town (the local baron or king).

In Jewish traditional culture, the celebration of Purim displays certain characteristics of a carnival (Belkin, 2002: 58-59), including movement, crowds, music and visuals (Crichlow and Armstrong, 407-408). These are manifested in a public performance centering on the idea of a temporary change of identity. In a predefined time and public place, a costumed social unit performs a ceremony involving dancing, singing and acting. This social group encourages the participation of additional social groups as equal partners in the festivities. These performances reflect the social hierarchy existing in daily life, but break it down for the duration of the carnival, so that every group feels equal to all others. They are given the freedom to speak and act in an uncharacteristic manner, undermine the social order and desecrate what is considered holy without fear of punishment (*ibid.*, 407-409).

The ideas of resistance and temporary subversion accompanying the carnival are given government approval, since this temporary illusion of democracy and pluralism is meant to allow the return and continued existence of the social order, without the danger of possible social unrest (Crichlow and Armstrong, 403-404; Schechner, 2004: 3-7).

In contrast to the machinations of the ruling classes suggested by Schechner (2004), Armstrong argues that the modern carnival serves a commercial purpose as a leisure product meant to be consumed by the public (Armstrong, 2010: 454). He emphasizes that while these are often top-down occasions serving the interests of commercial entities or even political institutions, some develop from the bottom up, for example, events organized by minority groups wishing to protest against injustice (*ibid.*, 454-455).

In the case of women's films screenings, commercial and political interests combine together to sustain and approve the phenomenon and its carnival atmosphere. However, unlike the dichotomy presented by Armstrong, in the present case the screenings also respond to the grass-roots requirements of the group, namely, the power to consume emotional experiences at will. Thus we are witnessing a combination of producers providing viewers with what they understand them to require. In this relationship between producer and viewer, the former are the ones who target specific and limited responses and control the quantity and frequency of appropriate emotional motifs. The producers' dominance is also supported by the

¹¹ The period of Lent lasts for forty days. It is a time when Catholics used to abstain from all meat and physical pleasures in solidarity with the suffering of Christ.

religious authorities, who consider these public events as a temporary release designated to preserve the social order.

Despite the cultural demands made upon ultra-Orthodox Jewish women to display modest behavior in everyday life, cultural barriers are removed during women's film screenings at prescribed times and places before an audience consisting of women only. The opportunity to behave in an excessive way - to shout, scream, cry and laugh out loud - is permitted only in the banqueting halls where the films are screened and during holidays and vacations (freedom from Torah study). These events have become audio-visual celebrations for women having definite carnival attributes.

Screenings are held during the Passover and Sukkoth holidays and in "between the times",¹² a period when religious people are allowed to celebrate, rejoice and suspend everyday activities. Rabbi Mordechai Bloy, who serves as the authoritative figure certifying the religious legitimacy (kosher approval) of the films, understands women's films as a cultural element for the temporary relaxation of the social order. He defines them as "ventilators" taking place at unique leisure times (September, 2012). The idea of a departure from daily life is also cited by female viewers to describe the unique cinematic experience they undergo, which allows them a break from routine. Besides being a chance for recreation and enjoyment, the movie-going experience is also considered by them as an opportunity to reconfirm their faith. According to Mor (37), a Breslev Chassidic viewer, women's films are:

"...a kind of ventilation, a chance to leave the house. We do not have a computer or a TV, nor do we go to [mainstream] movies, thank God. Instead, the music and the characters [in women's films] afford recreation and ventilation and you receive a [religious] message that empowers your faith [...] I don't miss a single movie. It's kind of fun. Almost every film I go to [...] is a chance to get away from everyday chores. It is like an experience that sends you somewhere else" (January 2013).

Geula (70), a Gur Chassidic women's film consumer, describes the unique screening venue. She notes that unlike the cinemas existing in secular society, the women's screening halls serve as an opportunity to meet other women:

"This is not a movie theater; it is a social gathering. There is a screen and you view [a film], and there is conversation and sharing impressions. This is not a cinema; this is a social gathering in a meeting hall, a hall of culture. Every now and then meetings are held there, parties and screenings" (July 2012).

The importance of the time and place of the movie screening, which make this commercial carnival-like event possible, could be observed at a screening event that took place at a girl's school on an ordinary school day. Tamar recounts how she screened her film at a girl's school on a day that was not a holiday or a vacation. She encountered a schoolteacher who did not allow an immodest emotional performance. The teacher supervised the event, holding up the screening of the film twice because of the girls' loud screaming during the thrilling scenes. According to Tamar, the teacher was shocked by their

¹² The period "between the times" begins one day after the Jewish calendar date the Ninth of Av and ends with the month of Elul. In the Haredi sector, this period constitutes a three-week break from schools and yeshivas. Like Passover and Sukkot, this liminal period makes it possible to go on vacation and indulge in entertainments.

unrestrained conduct, and warned them that she would stop the film if they didn't behave themselves (October, 2012).

Those young viewers play a central role in the screening halls; in fact, they are the true stars of the event, the main participants encouraging other viewers to join in the excitement. Similar to the carnival, they encourage different social groups to take part in the festivities on an equal footing. They provide the tone and the dynamic, thus intensifying the experience for the entire audience. They shout, scream, roar and laugh freely during screenings. Older viewers do not interrupt this behavior, and some of them even seem to benefit from it, as it heightens the overall carnival atmosphere. Mor, (37), A Breslav Chassidic viewer, described her experiences at the screening of the film *On the Banks of the Danube* in the town of Bat-Yam:

"There were real screams of horror from the girls, who had grown up in ultra-Orthodox Jewish homes, and it made me laugh. There was loud music throughout the film, and there was action and thrilling scenes and drama and screaming. It made me laugh..." (January 2013).

Shoshana (27), an ultra-Orthodox Jewish viewer, defined the experience of participating in these carnival-like events as an enjoyable and liberating sensory experience produced by the technical and contextual elements provided by the movie:

"I go to a film to undergo a sensory experience. I also listen, watch and feel. You see a character doing something. You become immersed in it and identify with its feelings and have an emotional experience. It is a release, it is fun and it is quality time for yourself" (July 2012).

This commercial film carnival has the potential for free, authentic self-expression, but this is not reflected in practice. Due to the directions and controls imposed on the producers and the religious nature of the event, it is perceived as a form of religious entertainment whose purpose is to reinforce and intensify existing ultra-Orthodox Jewish ideological norms. The range of possible viewer responses is limited to tears, sadness, joy, screaming, laughter, curiosity and admiration according to a set of predetermined cinematic codes.

Alongside the exciting scenes that trigger immodest emotional expressions, conservative messages of faith are incorporated into the films which remind viewers that this is a respectable religious event. There is, however, subversive potential in these screenings thanks to the nature of viewers' active participation, which undermines accepted codes of behavior, thus potentially encouraging reflection on social norms. However, from the reactions of the films' viewers, it seems that they are careful to note (alongside the emotional experience) the religious messages that the films convey. Geula indicates that in women's films:

"The message is important as a way to get something out of it - insights, educational messages, moral ideas, not just an experience" (July 2012). Netta highlights the existence of conservative values in women's films, which lends legitimacy to female participation in these emotional festivals. She emphasizes the difference between secular cinema and women's film thus: "This is not cinema! Cinema has a different atmosphere. [These films are] here to convey a message of how to be good" (December 2012).

DISCUSSION

This chapter analyses ultra-Orthodox Jewish women's films in Israel, focusing on the production and distribution process, as well as female viewer's interpretations and acceptance of these films. Regarding these issues, two main questions were examined: a) How do ultra-Orthodox Jews filmmakers deal with religious restrictions and constraints in combining the cinematic medium with religious stories and ideas, including commercial and entertainment aspects? b) What is the nature of the audience's reception of these films? Results indicate that the producers of ultra-Orthodox Jewish women's films focus on emotional responses. They understand their role as emotional brokers, and implement this by producing morally saturated women's films. This integration of religious themes with entertainment adds another dimension to the instrumental approach of Haredi society towards the media: the cinematic medium is not just a tool for spreading religious messages (Caplan, 2003: 260; Liran-Alper and Tzarfati, 2010: 130) but also serves as an emotional mediator reinforcing the believer's faith. Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women's films bind together religious ideas with techniques designed to heighten emotional experiences. This role of the media corresponds with Meyer's (2011, 2012) studies. According to Meyer, the media mediate between Man and God and intensify religious feelings by employing aesthetics in their broadest sense as sensory and emotional experiences.

However, regarding ultra-Orthodox Jewish films in Israel, another variable is added – commercial considerations. The producers appear to relate to the audience as seeking to consume religious stories while experiencing a maximum of emotional excitement. Thus, producers use both religious content and emotional impact to produce a marketable product. McDannell (1998) considers this phenomenon as part of a historical Christian tradition that reflects and represents consumers' beliefs. In the Jewish context, this cinematic practice may constitute part of what Caplan (2007) refers to as folk religion – the experience of religion in everyday life, which stands in opposition to the official religion promoted by spiritual leaders. Therefore, the producers provide viewers with movies that combine joy, happiness, fear, tension and horror, usually in the form of melodrama. These appear in an excessive form unlike that employed by mainstream cinema. The producers' goal is to motivate the female ultra-Orthodox Jewish audience to view the film actively and react in an unrestrained way, eliciting a wide range of emotional expressions. They believe that the more the viewers are aroused to express their feelings vocally and physically, the more success the film will have at the box office.

As a result, these film producers serve as informal religious socialization agents who generate and design cinematic social and emotional events. Like the women's films made in Hollywood in the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s (Walsh, 1984), they design films primarily suitable for female viewers regarding theme, narrative structure and visual style (*ibid.*, 23-24). By using the strategy of “cinematic excess,” they encourage an active and participatory cinematic viewing experience that has an emotional impact on viewers. The producers expect the audience to scream at the thrilling scenes, shout at the characters on screen, laugh loudly, applaud at the happy outcome and feel free to walk in and out of the hall throughout the screening.

Screenings take place at banqueting halls only three times a year – at Sukkot and Passover, two major Jewish holidays that stretch over a week and include in-between days,

neither sacred nor profane, when screenings are allowed (Hol Hamo'ed) and during the summer vacations of Yeshivas and ultra-Orthodox Jewish girls' schools. These special occasions - together with the distinctive features of the films - generate a unique ultra-Orthodox Jewish female ritual with carnival-like attributes. They afford the opportunity to release tensions, break free from everyday chores, depart from norms of modesty and strengthen belief.

These female rituals have become an integral part of Haredi popular entertainment alongside Haredi women's theatre (Rutlinger-Reiner, 2007: 23-30), which also conforms to religious values and beliefs. As shown above, Schofield-Clark (2007) calls these types of cultural events "religious lifestyle branding," Schofield-Clark claims that such events unite the consumer community, enhance religious identity and self-expression, redefine tradition within acceptable limits and integrate modernity and tradition in a new form of religious merchandise.

CONCLUSION

Ultra-Orthodox Jews women's films may be defined as both entertaining and religious. They are produced for commercial purposes by producers attempting to conform to Halachic constraints. The producers manipulate and juggle religious and entertaining aspects and focus mainly on selling emotions in melodramatic films. In order to supply this product, the film producers use "cinematic excess" regarding both content and aesthetic aspects. This usage of "cinematic excess" is regarded as unacceptable and exaggerated by mainstream cinema. The emotions that are triggered enable active, open emotional consumption.

The producers' goal is to bring female viewers to a high level of excitement that serves as a yardstick for the economic success of their film. Thus, when marketing their movies, they also invite and prepare viewers beforehand for a strong emotional experience.

The viewers on their part respond to the emotions conveyed by the films and use them to create a special women's social event, which deviates from those rules of feminine modesty and restrained behavior required by ultra-Orthodox Jews in their daily lives. The viewers express their emotional responses collectively and openly. These carnival-like events take place in banqueting halls on holidays and during vacations and symbolize extraordinary happenings. In their responses, the viewers produce a new kind of cultural experience that may be termed a "carefully supervised audio-visual carnival".

In these cinematic festivals, the producers serve as emotional brokers and cultural folk agents for Haredi society. They provide audiences with limited emotions, while not undermining core Haredi ideology. Some viewers perceive these events as a party that combines entertaining and exciting aspects with traditional religion and serves to reinforce their religious faith.

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