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JEWISH ASSOL'S WEDDING PLAN, OR *ESHET HAIAL* BREAKS THE WALLS: AN EXCELLENT WOMAN IN RAMA BURSHTTEIN'S *LAAVOR AT HA-KIR*

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to American Israeli *haredi* director Rama Burshtein's second film *Laavor et ha-Kir* (לעבור את הקיר, 'to break through the wall', Ivrit; in the US: *The Wedding Plan*, 2016).

The first part of the article (dealing with the conscious part of the author's mind) is an attempt to reveal and explain the most important biblical and rabbinic sources that the film is based upon. Burshtein's protagonist, Michal, is an Orthodox Jewish *yerushalmi* spinster in her thirties that desperately wants to get married. She is an active, brave and resourceful lady of faith that represents the best Jewish values. Michal is obviously the *chossid* חיל אשת (woman of valour, *Prov.* 31:10), but, for some strange reason, God does not send her a husband. The excellent wife goes far to get bread (*Prov.* 31:14), and, likewise, Michal goes as far as her religion allows her (a matchmaker, a healer, Ukraine) to get a great husband, even if it requires a miracle.

"A great miracle was here" in the 2d century B.C.E. for the Macabean rebels and Michal expects a (relatively) small one to happen for her at the same place at the same time 22 centuries later. What she needs to do is to make sure that she has done her part of the job and that she is 100 per cent ready.

The second part of the article follows G. K. Chesterton's advice to the critics not to spend much time dealing with the conscious part of the author's mind ("which the author himself can express") but to deal with the subconscious part of the author's mind and say about the

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author “the very things that would have made him jump out of his boots.” So, as *Ashkenazim* came out not only from Egypt, but also from Poland / Ukraine (S. Freud, P. Wexler, M. Dorfman), the critics suggest that in 2016 the Burshteins (*cf. burshtyn* and *bursztyn*, amber, in Ukrainian and Polish) staged the modern Jewish version of *Scarlet Sails*, the Christian *feieria* composed by the ethnic Pole Aleksandr Grinevski a hundred years earlier. *Michal is today's dati Israeli Assol'*. Even if Rama Burshtein is not familiar with A. S. Grin, the argument still stands: the Spirit blows where she wants to make sure that between the true artists of any time there is an unconscious community (T. S. Eliot).

Keywords: *Assol', Rama Burshtein, Chanukah (feast of Dedication), miracle, ultra-Orthodoxy, woman of valour (Prov. 31:10).*

For Frieda-Rachel bat Yaakov.

Thanks to her, I have come to understand a simple truth, namely: you must make so-called miracles come true yourself.

*A. S. Grin. Scarlet Sails (1922) [*1].*

INTRODUCTION. In the 1999 Cannes Film Festival the superbly educated Israeli director Amos Gitai presented his film *Kadosh*. The film addressed the issue of the unfortunate status of women in the ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) society that was hinted at at the very beginning: the film started with a *haredi* talmudist's Morning Prayer in which he thanked God for not creating him a woman [*2].

Gitai's film was not always accurate in depicting the ultra-Orthodox way of life and was a big challenge to the *haredim* [*3].



Laavor et ha-Kir. The Israeli poster

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They could not accept an architect from Crazy Cal speaking to the civilized world on their behalf and had to respond using the same medium. Their response was Gidi Dar and Shuli Rand's famous *Ushpizin* (2004) and two films directed by a woman (sic!): Rama Burshtein's *To Fill the Void* (2012) and *To Break through the Wall* (2016, in English: *The Wedding Plan*). All three films mentioned above are set in an Israeli ultra-Orthodox Jewish community and present the Jewish *haredi* woman in a most favourable light. Mali (*Ushpizin*), Shira (*To Fill the Void*) and Michal (*To Break through the Wall*) are all difficult not to respect, no matter where the spectator stands religiously.

The same can be said about Rama Burshtein (born in 1967 in New York). She and her husband Yaron Burshtein are both *baalei teshuva*. By the year 2017 they had already moved to *Mea Shearim*, Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox neighbourhood, and had become part and parcel of the *haredi* world. They have four children; two of them refuse to watch their mother's films as they consider the film industry *treif* [*4].

This paper will discuss the case of Michal, the protagonist of Rama Burshtein's second film *Laavor et ha-Kir* that, like the director herself, 'returned' to *haredi* Judaism and got married late.



Rama and Yaron Burshtein at the Venice Film Festival, 2012

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS.

THE TITLE

The title of the film (unfortunately, changed in English translation) is an allusion to Michal's own words that she said to her friend Martha who was tailoring her wedding dress:

“My wedding plan is like a hit in karate. If I concentrate 100 per cent, I will break the wall. If I only concentrate 99 per cent, I will break my arm.”

Of course, a student of Religion cannot help but compare Michal's wedding plan not only with a karate hit but also with the Jewish concept of *kavvanah ha-lev*, the direction of the heart that implies both concentration and sincerity in prayer.

Another source that comes to mind is an oft-quoted Chasidic parable. Arthur Green summarizes it this way:

The king has stored away his precious possessions in a treasure room, locked with a complex set of keys. The keys were given only to his most special servants. <...> In our generation the keys have been lost altogether. All we can do to get to the treasure (and the King wants us, His beloved children, to have it!) is to smash the lock [*5].

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THE PLOT (WITH LITTLE COMMENTS)

Michal is a very plain *haredi* woman in her thirties that has never been married and, most probably, still a virgin. She lives in Jerusalem with two *shutafot* [*6] and only dates *haredi* men. She spent altogether 490 hours dating 123 men in 10 years but nothing worked out. Being desperate, she went to see the *dati* healer Chuldah and described the purpose of her visit this way:

“I am tired of being a laughing-stock. I want to be normal. I want to be respected because I have a husband. I want somebody to sing ‘*Eshet Chaial*’ to me ”[*7].

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Michal visiting Chuldah. Note the blouse covering Chuldah's elbows.

Chuldah applied fish gall counterclockwise on Michal's face to neutralize the evil eye and told Michal that soon she would get married [*8]. She also recommended that Michal should get married at her son Shimi's wedding hall: Shimi is sure to give her good discount because she is his mother's client. And really, very soon a 36 years old *haredi* man named Gidi proposed to Michal, but suddenly broke his engagement despite Michal had already arranged a wedding dress and a move to her own flat. Anybody would give up, but not Michal: she is *eshet chaial* [*9]. She had a wedding dress, she had a flat, she had Shimi's wedding hall in Jerusalem (booked for 15 thousand shekel) and a perfect date for the wedding, the eighth day of Chanukah [*10]. All she needed was to find a *chatan* in 22 days.

“A great miracle was here” 22 hundred years ago for the Macabean rebels and Michal was absolutely sure that God would send her a perfect husband by the end of Chanukah. She even quoted M. *Sanhedrin* 4:5: Everyone is in duty

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bound to say “For my sake was the universe created.” Interestingly, Michal seems to use this phrase out of its original legal context. It is a possibility that she knows this phrase in Rabbi Simcha Bunem’s (1765-1827) interpretation:

Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that they can reach into the one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: “I am but dust and ashes” [*11]. But, when feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and, there, find the words: ‘For my sake was the world created’ [*12].

If this is the case, Michal is not arrogant; she is ‘lowly and depressed’.

Michal’s mother was very much concerned about her daughter’s intention and invited a rabbi (skillfully played by Yaron Burshtein) to speak to her. The rabbi was also very much taken aback by Michal’s arrogance / faith and he told her bluntly: what you are doing is called “to rely on the miracle.”

Tractate *Taanit* describes several cases when a Torah scholar (Choni ha-Meagel, Rav Huna, Nachum Ish Gam Zu and others) endangered himself or his colleague relying on the miracle. The story of Nachum is of special interest: Nachum Ish Gam Zu was a cripple who lay in bed in a dilapidated house. His disciples sought to remove his bed and then to remove the furniture, but Nachum told them, ‘My children! First remove the furniture, and then remove my bed, because you may be assured that as long as I am in the house, the house will not collapse.’ So they removed the furniture and then removed his bed and the house then collapsed (TB *Taanit* 21a). The Talmud is not appreciative of this kind of behaviour. TB *Taanit* 20b reads:

A person should never stand in a dangerous place and say ‘A miracle will be performed for me because the miracle may not be performed for him. And even if <...> a miracle will be performed for him, it will be deducted from his merits.

Michal's response to her rabbi's warning is remarkable: "I do not require a miracle from God. I require from myself to believe in His plan."

Like Ish Gam Zu, she believes that everything works for the better for her: Gidi broke his engagement only because God had planned a better match for Michal.

So, she continues dating *haredi* men and even flies to Ukrainian Uman' for a day to pray for a miracle at Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav's (1772-1810) sacred tomb [*13].

Nevertheless, the right man does not come out and Michal begins to fast to put even more pressure on God [*14].



Rama Burshtein. Photo.

The day before the day she visits the *mikveh* as the *dati kalah* is supposed to. When the time comes to go to the wedding hall, she still does not have a groom.

Nevertheless, Michal puts on her wedding dress and goes to the wedding hall anyway. There she finds Shimi who proposes to her.

He tells Michal that he fell in love with her at first sight when he saw her at his mother's 'office' reading *Tehilim* while she was waiting to be received.

He only thought that a woman like this did not need his mother's service. Michal agrees to marry Shimi.

The film ends with a Shabbat dinner scene depicting Michal with her head covered exactly the way Rama Burshtein covers her head and Shimi singing "*Eshet Chaial*" to her.

ΠΑΙΔΑΓΩΓΟΣ ' P. S.: A GRIN

A wife, beloved by her husband, enticing,
sweet with love,
With charming lips and pleasant speech.
Everything that came out of her lips was like
the creation of Truth.

An excellent woman, praised in her city,
She extends a helping hand to everyone,
Says good things and tells what they
like to hear,

Does what people like,
Her mouth did not engender any evil.
Everyone loves her,
Renpetnefret.

[A Praise to a Loving Wife][*15]



A. S. Grin. A Ukrainian stamp, 2005.

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Exactly one hundred years prior to the release of *Laavor et ha-Kir*, Aleksandr Grin (1880-1932) began working on his most famous novella, *Alye Parusa* [Scarlet Sails]. The novella (or, rather, *feieria*, as Grin called it) became a classic and was made into a 1961 film by the famous Soviet director Aleksandr Ptushko. Two more versions followed: Boris Stepantsev's *Assol'* (1982) and Aleksandr Stekolenko's *Pravdivaia Istoriia ob Alykh Parusakh* [The True Story about the Scarlet Sails] (2010).

To cut the long story short, the *feieria* tells the story of Assol', a lonely young girl who lives at the seashore village Caperna in a very hostile surrounding. The villagers find her crazy as Assol' firmly believes (and tells everybody) that her groom (whom she never saw) will take her out of this horrible place coming on a ship under the scarlet sails. Once the young, handsome and kind Captain Arthur Gray was sailing by Caperna and suddenly felt like going fishing there. He went ashore and saw Assol' sleeping in the woods (not unlike a Faun in Arnold Böcklin's painting), fell in love with her at first sight and slipped his treasured old ring onto the pinky of her right hand [*16].

Later he heard the villagers telling Assol's story, so all he needed to do then was to buy plenty of scarlet silk and to have the scarlet sails for his ship. Grey's crew believed that the shrewd captain wanted to smuggle the most expensive silk abroad as "anybody can have whatever kind of sails he wants to," but to everybody's surprise he sailed to Caperna to take Assol' out of it [*17].



Aleksandr Grin. Photo, 1908

At the times when everybody admired the novella and Ptushko's film based on it Yuriy Boianovich dared to call *Alye Parusa* a very harmful story.

His argument was like this: it does not matter what A. S. Grin had intended, *de facto* he had paved the road to hell as the target group for *Alye Parusa* turned out to be Soviet teenage girls.

They will naturally identify themselves with Assol' and later (following Eric Berne) will become passive imitating her. All the Assol'- type girl needs to do is to wait for her prince Charming [*18].

But what if he does not show up?

CONCLUSIONS. We only hope that the ultra-Orthodox female 30 + audience of *Laavor et ha-Kir*, unlike Soviet teenagers, is able to think critically and does not imitate Michal. To echo her rabbi, "What will happen to their faith if they do not get married during the Chanukah"?

Rama Burshtein wrote and staged a Jewish fairy-tale and it should be treated as such.

NOTES

[*1] (Grin 1978: 79).

[*2] The term "haredim" is borrowed from *Is.* 66:5: "Listen to the word of YHWH, you who tremble [haredim] at his word" (NJB). Heilman estimates, that slightly over half of the approximately 550,000 Jews who fall into this category live in Israel (Heilman [1992]: 12).

[*3] On *Kadosh* see: Dushi 2011.

[*4] Non-*kosher*, *i. e.* not fit for religious reasons (Yiddish). (Lyukimson 2017).

[*5] (Green 2000: 132).

[*6] Female flatmates (Ivrit).

[*7] A passage from the *Book of Proverbs*, chapter 31 that is traditionally sung by a Jewish *dati* husband to his wife at Shabbat dinner. Chuldah is the prophetess, mentioned in *2 Ki.* 22:14-20. In Norse mythology Hulda ("hiding", "secrecy" in Old Norse) is a sorceress.

[*8] The technique known at least from the times of *The Book of Tobit* (c. 200 B.C.E): "The angel said, "Catch the fish; <...> Cut it open, take out gall, heart and liver <...> for gall, heart and liver have curative properties" (*Tb.* 6:4-5, NJB).

[*9] A woman of valour (*Pr.* 31:10, Hebrew).

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[*10] 15,000 NIS is about 4,500 American dollars. Chanukah originates in *1 M.* 4:59: “Judas [Yehudah, called ha-Makabi], with his brothers and the whole assembly of Israel, made it a law that the days of the dedication of the altar should be celebrated yearly at the proper season, for eight days beginning on the twenty-fifth of the month Kislev, with rejoicing and gladness (NJB).

[*11] *Gen.* 18:27.

[*12] Quoted in: (Limmer 2018).

[*13] Half-jokingly, Rama Burshtein admitted that R. Nachman made a miracle for her and her crew, too. When they arrived to Uman’ to film Michal at R. Nachman’s tomb their new German camera got broken. It turned out impossible to repair it in the Ukraine, and Burshtein’s *hiloni* (!) actors told her that it had happened because R. Nachman did not want them to film at his tomb. The whole group had to return to Israel and Burshtein was desperate: she knew she did not have enough funds to take her team to Uman’ again. However, when they arrived to the Ben Gurion airport, she got a message saying that the company *Yes* had sent her money that she never expected to receive. ‘See, said Burshtein to her actors, you were wrong when you said that Rabbi Nachman did not want us to film at his tomb. He just wanted us to visit him twice’ (Lyukimson 2017).

[*14] *cf. M. Taanit* 2:4.

[*15] *A Praise...* 1984.

[*16] (Grin 1978: 51-52).

[*17] (Grin 1978: 74).

[*18] “One morning a crimson sail will gleam in the sun on the far horizon. The shimmering pile of crimson sails on a white ship will head straight towards you, cutting through the waves. This wonderful ship will sail in silently; there will be no shouting or salvoes; a great crowd will gather on the beach. Everyone will be amazed and astounded; and you’ll be there, too. The ship will sail majestically up to the very shore to the strains of beautiful music; a swift boat decked out in rugs, flowers and gold will be lowered from the ship. “Why have you come? Whom are you searching for?” the people on the beach will say. Then you’ll see a brave and handsome prince; he’ll be standing there and stretching forth his hands towards you. “Hello, Assol!” he’ll say. “Far, far away from here I saw you in a dream and have come to take you away to my kingdom forever. You will live with me there in a deep rose valley. You shall have everything your heart desires; we shall be so happy together your soul will never know the meaning of tears and sadness.” He’ll take you into his boat, bring you to the ship, and you’ll sail away forever to a glorious land where the sun comes up and where the stars will descend from the sky to greet you upon your arrival” (Grin 1978: 29-30).

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ПЛАН ВЕСІЛЛЯ, АБО ЮДЕЙСЬКА АССОЛЬ ПРОБИВАЄ СТІНУ: ЧЕСНОТНА ЖІНКА У ФІЛЬМІ РАМИ БУРШТЕЙН «ЛААВОР ЕТ ХА-КІР»

Борис ЗІСЕЛЬМАН, Ігор УСТЮЖИН

АНОТАЦІЯ

Статтю присвячено другому фільму ультра-ортодоксальної американо-ізраїльської режисерки Рами Бурштейн – «Лаавор ет ха-Кір» (רַקִּיר לַאֲבוֹר, «пробити стіну», іврит; в американському прокаті – «Весільний план», 2016).

Перша частина статті (що апелює до свідомості авторки) розкриває та коментує основні біблійні та рабинські джерела, на яких базується сюжет. Протагоніст «Лаавор ет ха-Кір» Міхаль – активна, смілива та винахідлива незаміжня єрусалимлянка, яка втілює найкращі єврейські якості.

Єдина проблема – їй вже за тридцять, а Бог чомусь не посилає їй чоловіка, хоча вона є справжньою хасидською לֵיב לַשָּׂמַיִם (ешет хайял) – жінкою-воїном, «чесотною жінкою» (Пр. 31:10). Чесотна жінка «їде далеко, щоб здобути хліб свій» (Пр. 31:14), і Міхаль використовує всі можливі не заборонені своєю релігійною практикою методи (навіть їде до України) для того, щоб на свято Хануки в Єрусалимі здійснилося ще одне чудо.

«Велике чудо було тут» у другому сторіччі до н. е. для Єхуди ха-Макабі (Юди Макавея) та його братів, і героїня очікує, що ще одно (зовсім невелике, стосовно першого) здійсниться для неї та її нареченого за двадцять два сторіччя від першого – на тому ж місці, в той самий час. Вона лише має бути для цього стовідсотково готовою.

У другій частині статті критики дослухалися честертонівської поради не гаяти багато часу, пояснюючи свідому частину авторської психіки (яку сам автор має пояснити), а, замість цього, спробувати висвітлити авторську підсвідомість і показати речі, від яких автор має вистрибнути зі штанів.

Отже, оскільки ашкеназійці пішли (чи, може, навіть, походять) не тільки з Єгипту, а й з Польщі / України також (З. Фройд, П. Векслер, М. Дорфман), запропоновано наступну гіпотезу: 2016 року Р. та Я. Бурштейни (пор.: «бурштин» та «bursztyn», українською та польською) втілили на екрані свою версію добре відомої слов'янам християнської феєрії етнічного поляка А. Гриневського.

Міхаль – то є сучасна ізраїльсько-юдейська Ассоль. Критики наполягатимуть на цьому, навіть якщо буде доведено, що режисерка ніколи не читала «Яскраво-червоних

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парусів» (1916-21). Дух віє, де воліє, для того, щоб між усіма художниками всіх часів забезпечити несвідомий зв'язок (Т. С. Еліот).

Ключові слова: Ассоль, Рама Бурштейн, «чесотна жінка» (Пр. 31:10), Ханука («свято Відновлення»), ультра-ортодоксія, чудо.

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