

Cultural Daily

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Filling the Creative Void on Israel's Orthodox Community

Sophia Stein · Thursday, June 6th, 2013

Fill the Void is an unsentimental love story. It is set within a Jewish, Orthodox community in Tel Aviv, Israel, where marriages today are still often arranged with the assistance of a matchmaker. When her older sister unexpectedly dies during childbirth, Shira's match is indefinitely postponed. Eventually, her mother proposes that Shira consider marrying her widowed brother-in-law, and Shira is forced to choose between the wishes of her heart and her obligations to family.

Director Rama Burshtein was born into a secular family in New York. She grew up outside of Tel Aviv, moved back to New York as a teenager, and then returned to Israel to attend the Sam Spiegel Film and Television School in Jerusalem. "My father is a sailor, and we have been doing that trek from Israel to New York, for many years" she explains. At the age of twenty-seven, Rama chose to join the Orthodox Jewish community and to dedicate herself to promoting film as a tool of self-expression in that community. Burshtein was inspired to write *Fill the Void*, by a true encounter with a newly-engaged young woman at the wedding of a friend's daughter. "Did you see that pretty young thing," her friend chimed in. "She got engaged a month ago to the husband of her late sister."

Fill the Void, Burshtein's first feature film, was selected as Israel's official entry for the Academy Awards in 2012. Actress Hada Yaron, won the Best Actress Award at the 2012 Venice Film Festival for her portrayal as Shira. Yaron was drawn to the project because "it was not just another Orthodox film about someone who is confused about his identity in the religious community," but rather a story of love and passion within that community.

Fill the Void was a bona fide box-office hit in Israel, and opens in theatres throughout the United States this week. During the San Francisco International Film Festival, Sophia Stein spoke with Rama Burshtein about her unique motivations and experiences in the making of *Fill the Void*.



Sophia Stein: You give us a glimpse into a world that is rarely seen by outsiders, from an insider's perspective. What are some of the truths about the world of Orthodox Jews that you are attempting to reveal?

Rama Burshtein: I'm just trying to say that we Orthodox Jews are human. Unfortunately, a lot of people do not think we are. By human, I mean: loving, caring, passionate, sexy, alive, searching, hurting. From the reactions I have gotten to the film, I see just how far people go in thinking about us not being human. I was sitting with a German reporter, and without blinking, he told me: "I know Orthodox people only by watching them in the airport. I have no contact with them, and I must tell you, they do not look attractive in any way — with those beards, and they don't even smell that good. I would never even want to know them! They don't look beautiful to me." "You

did something so amazing,” he continued, “because you made me come out of the film thinking not only that those Orthodox Jews are not ‘people from outer space’ — they are beautiful! They are attractive, and they are human.”

Sophia Stein: Rama, you were born and raised in a Jewish secular family, but just after finishing film school, you became deeply religious?

RB: There are seekers in the world ... If you are a seeker, you seek for answers. I have always been like that. I have always looked for a meaning. I never thought that Judaism had the answers. I thought Buddhism sounded a lot more spiritual. But when I met Judaism the way I did, it was true love! I made that commitment very quickly. Two people are responsible for me being religious. One is a six year old boy. I went to a Shabbos meal with a friend. There was a couch with plastic slipcovers on it, and the six year old boy was talking and singing and jumping up and down on the couch like Billy Elliott, the whole time. And I said, I want a kid like this. He had a big influence on my life, this little guy. At the end of the film, his wedding is the one that I shot. When I left that meal, my friend gave me a thin, little book, *The Journey* by Rabbi Erez Moshe Doron. I woke up in the morning and started reading it. I experienced a feeling that “I’m home.” As my mother used to say, “That’s all she wrote.” It was done. I made the transition in a week. By the next Saturday, I was already keeping [Kosher].



S2: The screenplay was inspired by a true story?

RB: The story of *Fill the Void* is based on seventeen cases that I researched. I was curious to see how people make that kind of transition in a family. All of them were saying how natural it is. My logline for the film: “From an impossible love, that love becomes the only possibility.”

S2: You obtained your Rabbi’s blessing to make this film. What did that entail?

RB: My Rabbi was into the film from the beginning – in many, many, many conversations. Even though he never saw a film in his life, he knew exactly how to support me and encourage me. There were many times I wanted to quit because it was too complicated, and he was pushing me to go further. I would never do this film without a blessing. Not because it is me being a little girl, looking for permission from my father. More in terms of understanding my intentions for making the film: Is it me trying to say something? Or is it just me wanting to be famous and appreciated, and wanting to conquer the world? If you are honest with yourself, then you need someone who will tell you when you are crossing the line, into fame for fame’s sake, or to keep going in a particular direction, that you’re really saying what you wanted to say. I couldn’t do it myself. I needed my Rabbi and my husband to help me to not lose myself in that process.

S2: You said that making *Fill the Void* meant “sacrificing the right order of things that you truly believe in.” How so?

RB: I was educated to express myself, to be in the center, to draw attention, to use my beauty, to conquer the world, and to leave a stamp on the world. For me, learning femininity entails being able to hold back the need to be in the center. In my own experience, every time you run to that center, something in you doesn’t feel good, and you want to die afterwards. — And then another part of you is addicted to being in the center. For me, life is a journey of you knowing yourself. It is not about being a big film director. Directing film is a part of being myself. But knowing myself as a woman — not knowing myself as a man or something my parents educated me to be — defining gender in such a way, starts a dialogue, which for me is the biggest dialogue of my life.

S2: I read that you were influenced by Jane Austen?

RB: Someone wrote that “*Fill the Void* is Jane Austen, in a Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) community.” I didn’t think about Austen until then. Austen has a way of telling a story with a lot of conflicts in the same room; *Fill the Void* is filled with those situations. Austen lived in a society with many

restraints and even within those restrictions, she brought out the love. So there are a lot of similarities.

S2: Were there any conscious influences for you, from other filmmakers or films?

RB: The Dardenne Brothers are definitely masters in letting things happen, which I adore. For me, Tarantino is the biggest filmmaker giving audiences the magic of cinema today. He sells you the hope and the justice, and everything. But while making the film, I didn't think about influences — because, frankly, I was not so sure that this movie would actually happen! I was just into making it.



S2: You have commented that you feel the ultra-Orthodox community has no voice in the cultural dialogue. What do you mean by that?

RB: They are mute. Being Orthodox, the way you are educated, you don't have any spare time. If you don't have spare time, you don't go to film school or practice any art form. Religious life is not about spare time. So Orthodox people generally don't grow up creating in the art world. Films you do see about the Orthodox community, are made by people from the outside trying to interpret this 3,000 year-old ancient culture. I saw a film about the Orthodox world (I will not mention the title here), that made me weep. I said to myself, listen, it's OK if someone does a film like that, I'm open — but it can't be the only thing out there. It has to be in comparison to something else. People have actually approached me and asked, "Do you really do it through a sheet?" Seriously, because this is what they see. Then you explain, "You know, it's written in our laws, you're not allowed to do it through a sheet." This is how far apart in our understanding we are, the religious and secular communities. So I felt it was time, just to have a little voice, to say something different. Now maybe people will notice and say: "*Fill the Void* and *that* film are so different!"

S2: As an artist and a Jewish woman, I have often thought that were I to become more religious, because of the way that religion structures your life, that there would be no time left for creating. Is that a conflict for you?

RB: Let's talk about what it means to be creative. I got married. Do you know how creative it is to get married and keep it going for 17 years, the way I do? I have four kids. Do you know how creative this is? Being Orthodox is not about — not being creative. The question is do you need to be acknowledged? Nobody knows how creative it is to raise my kids. It is a big conflict because I want the whole world to say, "Rama, you're the best mother! The best wife!" The need to be acknowledged is the thing that we Orthodox, check-out on. If you want to tell me, "But if I become more Orthodox, then I won't be able to be acknowledged by the world," then we will start talking philosophically. Why would you want that? Why is it so important for you that the world will know how talented you are?

S2: Did you feel competition between your need to make the film and your obligations to family?

RB: Of course, there's competition. And a secular mom doesn't have that? There's competition between everything and everything; it's not about being religious. It's about, first of all, what do you want, Rama? Are you doing this because you want the whole world to know how talented you are? When we were at Venice, the whole day before, up until the screening, there were photo shoots, which were crazy — "Rama!" "Rama!" "Left, left!" "Right, right!" [Snap!] [Snap!] — and the press conference was really strong. The film ended, and there was a standing ovation. Then we had three-quarters of an hour (before we got into little boats going to the only Kosher restaurant in the Jewish ghetto in Venice), I was in the hotel room with my husband and I just started crying. I told him: "Listen! No more rabbits underneath my hat!" "If you won't love me now, I cannot do anything else to make you love me more." "... Like what else should I do, should I win an Oscar for you to love me?" In that moment, all I cared about was — am I the center of my husband's

world? He cried too, because of the truth of it. Sometimes the need to be in the center is because you don't feel loved. You imagine that if only the whole world will love you, you will find peace. And then the whole world does love you, and you feel ... weird ... you feel lonely ... and then again, you're addicted to that feeling. It's really confusing?! But if you are very truthful, and you have that spouse with you — that is all you care about. When you've got that, you can go out and do films and be in the center, but you have your priorities. You know what's important.

S2: Did you employ the services of a matchmaker for an arranged marriage within the tradition? How did you find your *bashert* (soul mate)?

RB: My *bashert*. [She smiles a knowing smile.] Of course, I was not always religious, so my parents did not marry me off. They were not into looking for my spouse. I was sitting in a Friday dinner when I met my husband. (I was already religious.) It was a long, long table, and he was sitting all the way at the other end. I didn't see him, but I heard him telling a story. He had gone to see this big Rabbi and he asked him, "O.k., I got out of Egypt, but now where do I go?" "You don't need 40 years to get to Israel," the Rabbi responded. And I said, "Wow, ooh, that's strong." I looked and went – "Who – is – this – GORGEOUS!-looking – guy?!" (It was such a shock; he was soooooo!! gorgeous; I really fell in love with him.) I am very proud, unfortunately, and I was waiting for someone to offer to introduce us, which took some time. Finally, we met. Of course, seventeen years, three boys and a girl have passed between us now.

S2: What is next for you, as a filmmaker?

RB: I am very cautious in answering that question, because nothing is really written yet. The strongest drug in the world is success; you get addicted to it the minute you experience it. You don't even have to feel it twice to become addicted and want more. I think it is a trap! So I let myself believe that this is the only project that I will ever do! ... *and then I start to write ...*

Where you can see 'Fill the Void'? Find out [here](#).

Photos, from top: Rama Burshtein and Hadas Yaron at the 56th San Francisco International Film Festival, Photographed by Pat Mazzer, courtesy of the San Francisco Film Society; Left to Right: Irit Sheleg as Rivka, Hadas Yaron as Shira, Hila Feldman as Freida and Razia Israeli as Aunt Hanna, Photo by Karin Bar, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics; Left to right: Yiftach Klein as Yochay and Hadas Yaron as Shira, Photo by Karin Bar, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

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