



ISRAEL MATTERS!

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Not Strictly Kosher T.V.

I travel to Israel twice a year, each time for a few weeks. I see Israel through several perspectives; that of a Jewish American, a former resident, and as a sociologist. As a sociologist I am interested in the daily lives of people; how they relate to each other on a face to face basis, what they eat, how they work and how they play. Being in Israel now I chose to write about what they watch on T.V. and how some of the locally produced T.V. series reflect what is going on in Israeli society.

From the Bible we learn that ancient Israel was made up of 12 tribes. The days of the individual tribes are long since gone, but in another sense, Israel is still a nation of tribes based upon cultures of origin and religious orientations that share common Jewish roots.

There are two broad groups of secular and religious Israelis. On the secular spectrum there are those who identify as totally non-observant all the way through many shades of traditionalist practices short of what we might consider 'religious'. For example, it has become common when dining in a restaurant lacking kosher certification and serving sea food and pork, to be asked by the waiter if it would be a problem that the mashed potatoes have butter in them, and you are having it together with a meat dish! By the way there is a renewed interest among Israelis in restaurants that may be open on Shabbat but that serve only kosher meat and do not have shell fish or pork on their menu.

There are also 'tribes' among the religious Israelis. I would need to write a dissertation to examine all these tribes, but just to name a few:

The Haredim (ultra-orthodox) who isolate themselves from secular society as much as possible.

Other Haredim who participate in Israeli society to a certain extent, most notably in coalition politics and what might be called the religious coercion of the non-religious.

The 'Yeshiva Orthodox' who wear black hats but are integrated into the wider Israeli society and whose young people are conversant with both the religious and secular worlds. Among these are young men with 'payot' (side curls) beards, and visible tzitzit hanging out over army issued uniforms and machine guns.

The 'modern orthodox', many who are university educated professionals, high ranking officers in the military and who can be identified by their knitted 'kipot'.

The 'progressive' religious Israelis i.e. Reform and Conservative who unfortunately are somewhat scorned by the religious and secular alike as being 'non-authentic Jews'.

The secular and religious sectors of Israeli society have been in a cultural and political struggle with one another since the founding of the State in 1948. Living in the same house however has led to compromises and great

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efforts to get along with one another. In recent years I have detected a new interest and perhaps even fascination among secular Israelis with the religious Israelis. This fascination can be seen in the many T.V. series themed on the religious. Many of the religious will never view these shows, they don't watch T.V., but the seculars do seem to enjoy them. Now let's sit back and watch five of these Israeli T.V. series.

Srugim- the name means 'knitted', and this refers to the knitted kippot worn by the modern orthodox males. This show is a kind of an Israeli 'Friends'. A group of single 30 somethings interact with one another in semi-comedic yet poignant ways. Dating, sexual issues, the marriage market and establishing careers and personal identities all come into play here. The difference of course is that these young people are religious; should they shake hands, (negiah) on the first date? Definitely not Sex and the City.

Shababnikim- the title comes from the Arabic 'Shabab' meaning young guys, dudes, or homeys. 'Nikim' is the Yiddish or Hebrew suffix which means group of. So, imagine the fun-loving college students of Animal House but instead these are four young fun-loving Yeshiva students living in Yeshiva dorms and who get involved in numerous antics while all the time never failing to daven Shacharit, mincha and maariv every day. Oy, these are really nice 'bad boys. Mild compared to Animal House, but hilarious none the less.

Shtisel- This is a dramatic portrayal of a multi-generational Haredi family in Jerusalem. The main character is Shtisel in his late 20s or early 30s who lives with his widowed father. Shtisel may dress in a black caftan and have payot down to his chin but otherwise has the appearance of a Greek or Nordic mythical hero. A tale of love, loss, and relationships. Shtisel gets involved in relationships across the religious/secular divide. We observe how universal themes affect us all, including the very observant.

Kippot Barzel or the Iron Yarmulkes. This series follows the experiences of an ultra-orthodox unit in the Israeli Army. Some ultra-orthodox are now being drafted and some are volunteering for service. Special ultra/orthodox units have been formed in which religious laws are made easier to observe and in which men generally do not encounter female soldiers. Unfortunately, problems do arise especially when the ultra-orthodox families and communities of these soldiers show their hostility towards those who do serve.

Autonomim' (the autonomous) this series which is in a darker vein than the others is set in a present-day alternate reality in which Israel has been divided into a secular state with its capitol in Tel Aviv and a religious state with its capitol in Jerusalem. High walls and border entry points divide these areas. The flag of the religious area is not the star of David but rather a black banner resembling the flag of ISIS. Ultra-orthodox police in black caftan uniforms and wielding billy clubs maintain order. A council of rabbis rather than parliament members run the government. All secular influences are kept out of this religious autonomous area. The main protagonist is a young ultra-orthodox family man who drives a hearse for the 'Hevra Kadisha' or burial society, which allows him to travel to both sides of the border. It's hard to feed a family on a hearse driver's salary so he moonlights as a smuggler between both areas. Forbidden books and foods are smuggled into the ultra-orthodox area. In one episode a kilogram of ham was delivered to an ultra-orthodox man in the territory. When the smuggler delivers the 'treif' food with shock and disbelief the recipient explains 'Well, if you are already going to sin, you might as well sin big.'

Let me conclude by speculating as to why these series are so popular in Israel. Just as the secular world may be strange, exotic and forbidden to the religious; the religious world may be strange, exotic and forbidden to the secular. Both sides may be looking to each other in order to enrich and complete their lives.

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