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## **Film Review: The Rabbi's Daughter and the Midwife**

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**Ofer, Ron, and Yohai Hakak. *The Rabbi's Daughter and the Midwife*. Israel: Belfilms, [2009]. 50 min.**

**Reviewed by David B. Levy, Touro College, New York, NY, USA**

The film raises many important questions concerning Haredi women in Israel: women's Orthodox education, women's professional careers, women's balancing career with family, the sociology and economics of Haredi cultural life, young Haredi women's hopes and realistic expectations in Israel, the profession of midwifery in Israel, and how two Haredi women living for an altruistic noble purpose have made an extraordinary difference in helping fellow Jews, and the vulnerable in Israeli society

Adina Bar-Shalom is the eldest daughter of the former Shas leader Rabbi Ovadia Yossef. Although she would have preferred studying psychology, due to socio-economic factors she spent many years as a tailor, managing a bridal salon. Later, as her children matured, she established an academic college for Haredi Jews. In part, the aim was to provide young religious men and women the chance to expand their education, helping them find work to support their families.

Rachel Chalkowski, nicknamed Bambi, is a midwife (and head nurse) who has helped to deliver over thirty thousand babies. Both Adina and Rachel sympathize with the hardships many ultra orthodox women experience i.e birthing and rearing many children, in addition to financially supporting their large families while their husbands study in Kollel or Yeshiva. Bambi established a foundation that economically helps support these large families. Bambi and Adina each attempt to better the lives of ultra orthodox Jews, who often live in great poverty. Together they seek to lessen the hardships of Haredi women in Israel. Both Bambi and Adina Bar-Shalom pose hard questions that explore the possibilities of a more fair society where men and women share a more equitable, just, and humane existence while fighting against discrimination and

misogyny. "The Rabbi's daughter and the Midwife" is one of three documentaries in the trilogy "Haredim."

The film shows a number of scenes with Rav Ovadia Yosef. One scene follows the Talmud leader and scholar visiting Adina's college and giving a *drasha* (sermon) where he notes that the "qualities of humility, mercy, and charity" (b.Yevamot 79a) can be carried over by the women into their professional careers. Most scenes of Rav Ovadia involve him giving blessings, including blessings to the college administrators and Rebbetzin Adina herself. Adina describes how Haredi culture always involves seeking the blessing and advice of rabbinic sages before making any decision or carrying out any endeavor. She explains that the Haredi are often skeptical if not downright hostile to the academic approaches in Universities, and the secular lifestyle in general.

The most moving scene for this viewer was of Rav Ovadia Yosef's personal library. After The Rav gives his daughter yet another blessing to succeed in her endeavor, Adina takes the camera crew into Rav Ovadia's extensive personal library and tries to convey how her father's first love is "books" and learning.

Rebbetzin Adina notes that her father would give up all the pleasures of the world for a small single book, as his greatest pleasure in life was learning. She pulls an old tattered volume saved from Eastern Europe off the shelves, and notes the care by which many centuries of owners actually glued fragile pages together, as the viewer imagines the tears shed on this tome. She respectfully however wonders what a world might be like, if Haredi women were allowed to study these texts in ancient Aramaic and on topics of Jewish law and mysticism. Instead, women of her generation had to learn a trade to support their families. Rebbetzin Adina confesses that her mother actually asked her for forgiveness because she was forced to pursue a trade at the age of 14. Adina says her mother's apology is a testament of her mother's greatness of soul and spirit. Rebbetzin Adina also beams with pride and accomplishment when the film crew films the nursery in her college, as most of the students are mothers of small children. Rebbetzin Adina sums it up, "look how lovely this is" while babies still unable to walk recline on gym mats and play with toys— while their mothers are able to pursue education. The students in the college are

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also given classes on how to conduct professional career life in a way of modesty (*tzinut*). Rebbetzin Adina describes what it was like to be the oldest daughter. She notes that she was delegated authority and responsibility as a second surrogate mother. Rebbetzin Adina's last scene with her father Rav Ovadia involves asking if Haredi students can become psychiatrists because part of that training involves exposing one's inmost secrets. Rav Ovadia confirms that the therapist is also a woman but urges his daughter to use her "wisdom."

Bambi is also filmed in her capacity as midwife, a profession viewed by the Midrash as a partnership with God, going back to Puah and Shiphrah in the book of Exodus. Introspective glimpses are shown of Bambi who herself does not have children, but when asked if she regrets this she remarks that women possess a lot of maternal love and she has transferred that love to her sister's 12 children and the thousands of babies she delivered. Bambi also is filmed in a car with her husband who appears stoical when asked about how he and his wife are often like ships passing in the night given that he works during the days, but his wife often works night shifts and holidays at the hospital Sharei Tzedek. He is clearly in love with his wife as noted further when he drives her to the airport and lovingly wishes her a safe journey to America where Bambi goes regularly to raise monies for her foundation that provides food and financial support for the underprivileged in the slums of Bnai Brak, Meah Shearim, and Beitar.

In a speech at one of the NYC fundraisers, Bambi cites a biblical verse, saying "Zion will be redeemed by charity." (Isaiah 1:27) She notes that poverty often plays into domestic problems. People who feel badly about their lot often lash out at those closest to them. They feel invalidated; so, this sometimes translates into anger that spills over into physical and verbal abuse. As a second generation Shoah survivor, Bambi points out that while she did not starve like her parents did in the concentration camps (her father was murdered in Auschwitz) she did experience hunger. She adds that the Jewish organizations that provided financial relief to Shoah survivors after the Holocaust, "showed her that you could help people that you do not know."

Briefly, the film is about the altruistic vision of two extraordinary Haredi women seeking to make a positive change in the lives of disadvantaged Haredi women in Israel.