Film Review: Haredim-Religion.com

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Haredim-Religion.com. **Israel, 2010. Doc, 50 min. Video. Directors: Ron Ofer, and Dr. Yohai Hakak. Producers: Itay Ken-Tor, Belfilms.**

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This outstanding high quality and mind expanding documentary provides a unique window into the Israeli Haredi community. Yigal Revach runs an advertising agency in Bnei Brak and is encircled by Haredi (Ultra Orthodox Jewish) men and women. While in his youth, Yigal aspired to become a rabbi, in the film he tries to initiate an Internet service that if approved by the Rabbis, will be introduced to the Haredi community. However, it is forbidden to even mention the words 'Internet' or 'Email.' Juxtaposed to Yigal is the more conservative entrenched position in relation to technological change by Rabbi Micha Rothschild who posts anti-internet leaflets in Haredi neighbourhoods and warns web providers to stay away from the Haredi community. He is aware of the fragility of the world view of young Haredi men and the temptations offered by the world outside but compromises in acknowledging the development of safe computers employing large filters to screen Haredi viewers from the dangerous immodest material counter to haredi values of the internet. For Yigal, the Internet is a lively realm that fosters curiosity and exploration in a society that restricts freedom of expression. For Micha, the internet is a Trojan horse that might ruin Haredi Society from within unless safeguards are not put in place to protect the values of the close knit fabric of the Haredi communities.

The film raises many questions such as: Why is the Haredi world alarmed by the internet? How has the campaign of some Haredi against exposure to the Internet been waged? Why do Haredi believe they need protection from the Internet? What is the significance of the Haredi language and metaphors by describing use of the internet like making a hole in a boat, unkosher food, and opening a Pandora's box? Why do Haredi Liken aspects of the Internet to unkosher material but some express desire to eat a vegetarian Glatt kosher dish that tastes like a pork chop, but has the stamp (*hechsher*) of rabbinic approval? Can the Haredi live in two worlds of their isolated ghettos and use the internet just for earning a living*?* How did it come about that the Rabbinical Council gave a kosher stamp of validation for Haredi to use the internet solely for means of

earning a livelihood while at the same time cautioning the use of filters to skim out immodesty, violence, and foreign ideas counter-ethical to pious living? What danger do human beings face in addictive behaviors to technology? Does technology promote a dangerous I-It relationship rather than the religious sensibility of the I-Thou that recognizes the divine spark in each human being? Does an Israeli Haredi cartoon that depicts a Haredi boy named Yosel who uses the internet and turns into a punk, then a dragon, and then a delinquent totally detached from the religious Haredi world represent real concerns or unjustified exaggerated fear? How to make sense of the apparent paradox that while many Haredi pledge allegiance to their Rabbi's bans on internet use, many use in secret? The film estimates over 50% Haredim secretly explore the internet in secret or at public libraries. In historical context was rabbinic censorship of Newspapers in the 19th century analogous to the phenomena of Haredi alarm against the use of computers to access the internet? Is curiosity that draws some to explore the internet a good thing or bad thing for religious communities? Is allowing children access to internet based on trust, a good thing or bad thing? Can Haredi Jews who live in a medieval frame of reference integrate at all into the modern world as according to Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch's notion of *Torah Im derekh Eretz*[i] and the formulation of Torah and science? The film raises the question whether the "Jewish internet problem" has much at stake as other historical problems in Jewish history, such as what was referred to by "*Die Judische Frage*" in Western Europe. Is there an *endlosung* (solving) of this Jewish internet problem?[ii]

The film juxtaposes two individuals with very different views, perspectives, and attitudes to internet use. On the one hand there is Yigal who was brought up Haredi by his Father from Switzerland and mother, but has moved on to the post-modern business world dependent on new technologies like the internet and social media and blogs as a successful advertiser. Yigal is contrasted by Micah Rothschild who was raised Haredi and still lives according to strict Haredi values and views regarding himself as the gatekeeper to protect fellow Haredi from the dangers, risks, and negative effects of the internet and new technology in general.

Yigal describes his Haredi childhood as living as a world that shut off the outside and inculcated Fear of God (*Yirat Hashem*). Now as an adult Yigal is the founder of a successful Israeli advertising firm. Yigal describes his positive view of curiosity by the example that one day he just left his Haredi neighbourhood of Bnei Brak and took the bus to a department store in cosmopolitan Tel Aviv. Yigal however reminisces and misses his early upbringing and thirst to set more time to return to learning Torah. Yigal goes on frequent trips to Eastern Europe yearning for a lost simplicity to visit the graves of Tzadikim in Eastern Europe, particularly the Ukraine, including Rabbi Levi Yitchak of Berditchev, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, The Besht, and the Chofetz Chaim in Radin.[iii] Yigal visits and pilgrimages to their holy resting places filmed with great sensitivity to the emotional experience this makes for Yigal who prostrates himself at the graves of these great Torah scholars and leaders, and breaks into tears, resolving to make more time for learning Torah, etc. Yigal confesses that he finds more inner peace by these pilgrimages. When in Radin Yigal so much wants to walk the streets where the Kohen Gadol [term for the high priest the Chofetz Chaim] walked. After praying at the grave of the Chofetz Chaim, Yigal soon receives a call from Eli Yishai of the Shas party to have his advertising firm run the political advertising for the Shas party's next elections, thus juxtaposing Yigal's weeping for the loss of the Chofetz Chaim, to intense joy and celebration as he says, "to provide income to support another 50 children by doing the advertising for Shas' next entire national campaign." At these holy sites in Eastern Europe and on the bus travelling between them, Yigal and his fellow pilgrimage friends sing religious songs expressing the depths of the soul. At Rav Nachman's kever he sings that he yearns to be cleansed by God of all his sins. He admits that his soul lives in two worlds, the medieval religious world of intense piety and the post-modern technological business world that is complex, fast paced, and characterized by ambiguity, and taking down the walls to the outside global community which ironically generates more alienation than the comfort of living within the small community within ghetto walls. The documentary also depicts Yigal advocating to Rabbi Lang to offer some kind of limited seal of approval to the Haredi world to benefit from the best of the internet and yet throwing the peal (*kllippa*) of the

pomegranate away, apart from the nourishing good seeds. Yigal does not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. He recognizes the internet is not all bad and dual categories of good vs. evil is to much of a crude reduction. While Yigal yearns for the simplicity of the Eastern European past, he recognizes that his mind and soul wish to know something else, to experience something else and thus he attributes his life's journeys, such as living in England for some time, to picking exotic fruits, to opening a Kosher Chinese restaurant etc. to his (Hasidic) desire to live life in joy to the fullest. Yet he expresses nostalgia for the simplicity of the life of Hasidic Rebbes like the Baal Shem Tov, whose souls were so pure, attesting to a simpler way of life then the frenetic pace of the technological information age post-modernity. The film concludes with a final scene of Yigal immersing in the cold waters of a lake near Uman, the site where Rabbi Nachman of Bratslov relocated from Bratslav to mystically pray for the elevation of the thousands of Jewish souls murdered there in mass graves. Yigal is forward thinking in addition to his authentic remembrance of an eastern European past. Yigal may sense that the destruction of this great eastern European life due to the Holocaust was in part because Jews were too insular. By shutting out the outside world, one is more vulnerable to becoming a sheep to slaughter. Jews must be conscious of new developments including technological advances not only to compete economically in the business world but to develop intellectually and stay up-to-date instead of shutting themselves from the outside world and modern scientific advances. Thus Yigal is a representative of Torah and science, taking the best from the scientific advances but not abandoning Torah as the eternal compass for spiritual development. While the Haredi call the modern enlightenment in modern Hebrew "the time of darkness" rather than recognizing etymologically that enlightenment suggests "light" Yigal is not willing to dismiss modern advances as a threat. He recognizes in part some good from the march of science and technology and trusts the future while remembering the past but always living authentically in the present.

The viewers first witness Micah Rothschild putting up signs warning fellow Haredi in Meah Shearim in Jerusalem about internet use. Micah also lets the camera crews into his simple home lined only with religious books and basic amenities. There is no TV, what he calls "that box,"

suggesting all that is needed is the boxes of the Tefillin. He prides himself on his primitive kitchen, the fact that his many children share rooms, and his wife's modesty to decline being filmed. Micah is committed to purity, spirituality, and shuns the mode of thinking "always to keep up with the Jonses." Micah also takes the camera crew into the Pashkevil Archive in Meah Shearim that collects only DVDs that meet the standards of modesty according to the guide rules of Rabbinic supervision. This archive also has many items that warn against Haredi use of the internet. Micah however when faced with the fact that over 50% of Haredi secretly use the internet, decides that he wants to start his own technology initiative to provide clean kosher use of the filtered internet, making the impure pure, and converting the instruments of Satan into the tools for good by creating a "safe internet environment" with no email, access to chat rooms, no games, and no internet carte blanche use. He notes the campaign to maintain purity and cleanliness so that viewers can continue to "guard their eyes." Eyes for Micah are meant for Torah study not to wander into temptation to see things that damage the soul. Micah refers to his filtered computer as the post-factum computer. It is post-factum because Micah recognizes an a priori givenness of the God created world after which all man made gadgets are "post-factum" to the gift of divine Creation. He continues to view the computer as "dangerous." He wants to shut himself off from "what lies on the other side (*sitrei atra*)." He notes that Rabbinic culture makes "walls or fences" to protect the pious from the dangerous forces in the word. He seeks to create a "safe computer." His computer is a computer designed for "special needs." Micah only concedes to converting the forces of evil into good because he recognizes that the internet is not going away soon. It is a fact that many religious groups from the Agudat Yisrael to Sephardic Shas party use the internet to reach voters, and Kosher blogs exist to inculcate modesty to updating the haredi world about news breaking events in the ultra-religious communities, in matters such as *kashrut* and Torah lectures. Micah refers to the "internet problem" as a "trial" and notes God does not give the religious trials that they cannot overcome.

While directed by Ron Ofer and Yohai Hakak and produced by Itay Ken-Tor, the credits at the end of the 50 minute film documentary reveal that this documentary was truly a collaborative

international project of over hundreds of creative and thoughtful people who are acknowledged as making a positive contribution to the film's making.

In summary, this excellent documentary that opens a window onto the world of the Haredi by raising the important question of the place of the internet in their lives and technological change in general, will be of interest to ewish studies, sociologists, historians of Jewish life and history, philosophers of technology, media and communication studies, post-modern studies, Israeli politics, and film enthusiasts interested in what shapes a people's multiple identities, and those who study the clash and confrontations that modern and post-modern life places on traditional values, memories, and moral codes of religious communities

Highly recommended

i"*Torah im Derech Eretz* (Hebrew: ארץ דרך עם תורה – Torah with "the way of the land" is a philosophy of Orthodox Judaism articulated by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–88), which formalizes a relationship between traditionally observant Judaism and the modern world. Some refer to the resultant mode of Orthodox Judaism as Neo-Orthodoxy." Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torah_im_Derech_Eretz [accessed July 9, 2017.]

ii At the following link http://databases.jewishlibraries.org/node/17677 treats Haredi resistance to the internet and the power point includes a photo of a flyer in Boro Park noting the internet is forbidden. The following link at http://databases.jewishlibraries.org/node/17676 raises Haredi concerns in Jewish law over questions such as internet commerce on Sabbath, erasing God's name on a computer screen, and spying or hacking others' emails based on Rabbenu Gershom's 10th century prohibition on opening others' mail. The link at http://databases.jewishlibraries.org/node/49357 raises Haredi Jewish ethical laws as found in the Chofetz Chaim's Laws of *Esurei Loshon Ha-rah* (gossip), *Rechilut* (tale bearing), *ve gam motzi shem rah* (slander) relating to the ease with which gossip, tale bearing, and slander can be transmitted by email and on the internet that can embarrass and hurt the victims.

iii See Akao, Mitsuharu, "A new phase in Jewish-Ukrainian relations?: Problems and perspectives in the ethno-politics over the Hasidic pilgrimage to Uman." *East European Jewish Affairs* 37,2 (2007): 137-155. See also Akao, Mitsuharu, "Hasidic pilgrimage to Uman, past and present: the ambiguous centrality of a Jewish sacred place," *Ukraine Jews and Slavs* 11 (2003): 121-151.