

SOME BACKGROUND BEFORE VIEWING

THE FILM: JOY



Joy (2005). (Hebrew title: Muchrachim Lih'yot Same'ach.) Directed by Julie Shles. Winner of five Israeli Academy Awards, including Best Actress (Sigalit Fuchs).

What would a "Yom Kippur fairy tale" look like?

Well, let's place it in Israel of the early 21st century, with hi-tech takeovers, Internet deals for European getaways, telemarketing and McDonald's "happy meals", and, of course, reality TV. Then, let's add characters who are estranged from themselves and each other, in need of the honest (and difficult) self-examination and efforts at reconciliation that Yom Kippur is meant to be about. For good measure, we'll find ourselves some scapegoats, true to the original Yom Kippur saga of Temple days. (In that saga the goat whose lot is "To the wilderness" is led off a cliff's edge in the desert, carrying the people's sins to the bottom.) Finally, let's assign one person the task of being the agent of change, so that a modicum of "teshuva" - turning or repentance - is at hand.

In Joy Julie Shles (who previously directed Pick a Card in 1998 and Sewing for Bread in 2002) weaves these elements together. It all begins with an Israeli reality TV show called "Gotta Be Happy", in which a live-action surprise party is captured on film. The show's post-Yom Kippur episode will focus on the theme of forgiveness, and the promos soothingly announce: "Are you hurting here? Did you hurt someone? Did someone hurt you - a friend, brother, father, neighbor? Yom Kippur is approaching, and our show is about forgiveness." (Only in Israel!)

If there were a family in need of Yom Kippur, it is the Levines. The parents (Yitzhak and Chaya) and son (Gil, whose name means "joy") have petty, joyless marriages, while their zaftig daughter (Simcha, whose name means "joy") has trapped herself in pointless work and an abusive affair with a married man. Everyone closets the truth -- Gil his sudden unemployment (but what a future he had!), Yitzhak his incontinence (and to think he was once such a womanizer!) -- and no one dares speak of the fact that all of Yitzhak and Chaya's friends, their "club", abandoned them 22 years earlier.

Entirely out of character, Simcha decides to "audition" for the TV show. She describes how her parents' friends rejected them (and why) so many years back, and the show's production assistant goes for it: Simcha's parents will be the "victims" in the post-Yom Kippur show, at a surprise party re-assembling all their old friends. Easier said than done. And therein lies Shles' narrative powers, in which good-hearted Simcha must first confront her own ghosts before she can make a live-TV "tikkun" (repair) between her parents and their old crowd -- and among her family itself.

Since the film's setting is Tel Aviv, and not Me'ah She'arim, it might be enlightening for some in the audience to see what happens in secular Israel in and around Yom Kippur. Besides the reality TV "Yom Kippur special", there are the empty streets (no one works on Yom Kippur) taken over by kids riding their bicycles. There is the address system at the mall apologizing for closing early on account of Yom Kippur. (We forgive the mall, don't we?) There is Nora begging her husband to take her for a quick junket to Prague, since she hates staying in Israel for Yom Kippur. The traditional "Day of Atonement" provides a fascinating study in the complex character of the Jewish State. But on this Yom Kippur, or a little after, something magical happens. That magic starts with some good old-fashioned pantomime, and continues in the surreal chlorination of a swimming pool and with a playful joy ride through a darkened mall, and culminates with a deeply inspiring bat mitzvah speech about buses and elephants.

At the end of which, we all want Simcha for prime minister (or at least High Priest).

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