

David C. Jacobson

The Ma'ale School: Catalyst for the Entrance of Religious Zionists into the World of Media Production

I^N 1989, THE MA'ALE SCHOOL of Television, Film, and the Arts was founded in Jerusalem with the primary purpose of providing religiously observant Jews with the opportunity to receive the appropriate training that would prepare them to become engaged in the world of Israeli film and television production in a manner that is informed by the spirit of religious Zionism.¹ Until now the school has received little scholarly attention, and it still maintains a relatively low profile in Israeli society as a whole. Ma'ale, however, merits careful consideration for three main reasons: (1) The establishment of Ma'ale has constituted an important new stage in the development of the relationship of religious Zionists to modernity in general and to the secular majority culture in Israel in particular. (2) The school represents the first sustained attempt to arrive at a synthesis between traditional Jewish values and the relatively new visually-oriented field of media production, thereby raising important questions about the relationship between Judaism and the visual arts in general and film and television production in particular. (3) The films produced at Ma'ale as graduate projects attempt to explore issues of Jewish religiosity in ways that had been largely absent from the history of Israeli film and television production until the founding of the school, thereby suggesting the potential for the emergence of religiously-oriented trends in the world of Israeli media in the future.

MA'ALE AS A NEW DIRECTION FOR RELIGIOUS ZIONISM

In a recent study of Israeli religiosity, Yair Sheleg notes that in the early years of the State, religious Zionists found much to admire in the idealism and sense of national purpose that pervaded the general secular culture, which

was then still largely dominated by Labor Zionist discourse. Convinced that it was possible to synthesize a nationalist Israeli identity with the observance of Jewish tradition, religious Zionists “aspired . . . to be included, and often even to assimilate, into this idealistic atmosphere.”² The prevailing religious Zionist consensus at the time was, as Menachem Klein puts it, “to bear the burden of building the nation and the state alongside secular Zionism. . . .”³ Daniel Tropper of the Gesher Foundation—an organization that is dedicated to bridging the gap between religious and secular Jews in Israel—writes of “a symbiotic relationship . . . between secular and religious Zionism,” which was reflected, on the political level, in the frequent participation by the National Religious Party (NRP) in government coalitions dominated by the Labor Party.⁴ The NRP’s participation in these coalitions was based on its support of the government’s domestic and foreign policies in exchange for the government’s ongoing affirmation of the religious arrangement established in the early years of the State. This arrangement included legislation mandating some degree of religious observance in the public sphere. Emblematic of this largely accommodationist approach to the majority secular society was the founding in 1955 of the religious Zionist-oriented Bar-Ilan University. Bar-Ilan was designed to provide religious Zionist Israelis with an opportunity to continue their education in traditional Jewish sources and remain steadfast in their religious observance while receiving the kind of academic and professional education that would allow them to contribute to Israeli society as a whole.⁵

Since the Six-Day War in 1967, religious Zionism has undergone a radical transformation in self-perception. Less willing to accommodate themselves to the majority secular culture, religious Zionists have been more inclined to affirm the unique features of their identity, which they have come to see as possessing an intrinsic superiority to that of secular Israelis. Two factors may be cited as leading to this transformation. One factor, suggested by Yair Sheleg, was that as secular Israeli culture came increasingly under the influence of late twentieth-century moral laxity beginning in the 1960s, religious Zionists began to develop a completely different attitude toward the majority culture. “They no longer felt inferior in relationship to [secular culture],” writes Sheleg, “and actually felt feelings of pride and frequently even superiority. . . . The desire of the religious Zionists to be included in Israeli society became a desire to seize in it a leading position and to guide it according to new and improved values.”⁶ The other factor was the tremendous impact of the Six-Day War in 1967 on religious Zionists, who became convinced that the war was a sign of a coming messianic redemption, and that they, as the keepers of tradition, had a central role to play in that redemptive era.

This shift in self-image fueled the development of a network of nationalist-oriented *yeshivot* [talmudic academies] which began to emerge in the 1960s, and the founding in 1974, with the significant involvement of religious Zionists, of the Gush Emunim movement, which has been the driving force behind Jewish settlement in the territories occupied by Israel in the Six-Day War. In addition, as pro-settlement politics came to play a central role in the ideology of the NRP, the party abandoned its tacit acceptance of official Israeli foreign policy and became an active advocate of a hawkish approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In reaction to what they saw as the overly compromised religiosity of religious Zionism, those who fostered the growth of the nationalist *yeshivot* asserted the intrinsic value of traditional religiosity by re-appropriating many of the values of the pre-modern *yeshivah*, to which non- and anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox *yeshivot* had remained loyal. Nevertheless, as much as these nationalist *yeshivot* embraced pre-modern religious values, they still affirmed the value of Israeli nationalism, which religious Zionism had always supported. Along with the assertion of religious values, the nationalist *yeshivot* have seen themselves as harbingers of a religiously-oriented Zionism, which they have hoped to inculcate into the population as a whole. This view has been characterized by Eliezer Don-Yehiya as a commitment “to convince the general (secular) public to affirm religious values and recognize the sacred meaning of the Land of Israel.”⁷ Gush Emunim, in turn, provided religious Zionists with the opportunity to seize the idealistic high ground of Labor Zionism that religious Zionists had so admired in the past by transforming them into latter-day *halutsim* [pioneers] at a time when many secular Israelis had ceased to be enamored of the value of settling the Land of Israel. Religious Zionists were also motivated by the desire to offer a more viable spiritual alternative to what they saw as the Western-oriented cultural decadence that had come to pervade Israeli society.⁸

Comparable to the NRP's redefinition as a major player in the hawkish political block, the growth of the nationalist *yeshivah* movement, and the emergence of Gush Emunim, another, lesser-known trend has developed recently. This is the growing involvement of religious Zionists in artistic and literary creation in Western genres of art, music, and literature, which had always been dominated by secular Israelis.⁹ The messianic nationalism of the other trends is not shared by all participants in this trend toward involvement in the creative arts, but what it does share with the other trends is the attempt by religious Zionists to assume a position of centrality and influence once held primarily by secular Israelis. Religious Zionists have moved more to the center stage of artistic production in Israel with both a sense of disillusionment with Western art and literature and a more

self-confident feeling that they have much of value to say to Israeli culture. According to Sheleg, “the most dramatic and marked change” in the relationship of religious Zionists to art has been their entrance into an area from which they had previously been largely distant: the world of modern media production.¹⁰ The founding of Ma’ale has been the most important factor in facilitating this new direction for religious Zionists.

The NRP, the nationalist *yeshivot*, and Gush Emunim have had the effect of not only thrusting religious Zionists into a more central role in Israeli culture and politics, but also of reinvigorating the spirit of religious Zionism. In a similar fashion, Ma’ale was founded both to facilitate the influence of religious Zionism on Israeli culture as a whole and to enrich the cultural dimensions of religious Zionism. Thus, just as the nationalist *yeshivot* challenged the accommodationist approach of Bar-Ilan University and the redefined NRP and Gush Emunim challenged the tendency of religious Zionism to play a relatively passive role in Israeli politics, so Ma’ale challenged the tendency of religious Zionism to distance itself from active artistic creativity in general and the world of modern media production in particular.

The religious activism of the nationalist *yeshivot* and the political activism of Gush Emunim, which became so central to the NRP platform, share a common intellectual source with the cultural activism of Ma’ale: the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (popularly known as Rav Kook, 1865–1935). Eliezer Don-Yehiya defines Rav Kook’s approach to modernity as “*expansionism*, since it aspires to expand religious influence to every aspect of individual and social life, thereby providing religious meaning even to the process of modernization itself.”¹¹ Rav Kook’s broad approach discerned the religious significance of not only Zionism as a political movement, but also, as Gideon Aran has noted, of “philosophy, science, [and] art.”¹² Thus, the nationalist *yeshivot* and Gush Emunim on the one hand and Ma’ale on the other can be seen as based on selective derivations of the Kook philosophy, which took a broadly inclusive approach to contemporary politics, thought, and art.

Merkaz Harav Kook, a *yeshivah* founded by Rav Kook, emerged under the leadership of his son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891–1982), as the spiritual hub of the nationalist *yeshivah* movement, as well as of the religious Zionist supporters and leaders of Gush Emunim. Zvi Yehuda Kook had a major impact in particular on the development of the ideology of religious Gush Emunim followers by providing interpretations of his father’s teachings that supported the contemporary political positions adopted by the religious Zionist settlers. As Aran has argued, in applying his father’s

teachings to post-1967 Israel, Kook the son developed the political dimension of his father's concerns, while ignoring other aspects of modernity that his father took seriously: "[It became impossible in Zvi Yehuda Kook's approach] to find positive value in the contents of secular culture such as literature and art. At that point the messianic interest gravitate[d] toward politics and [became] firmly focused on various aspects of the state."¹³

In contrast to the opposition of Zvi Yehuda Kook and his followers to the notion that the arts have a religious significance, Ma'ale constitutes an attempt to resurrect from the teachings of Rav Kook the role of contemporary intellectual and aesthetic dimensions in the life of religious Zionists. While the Ma'ale faculty includes secular film instructors, its underlying ideology has been developed by the religious Zionist members of the faculty, who see Rav Kook as their spiritual forefather just as much as the nationalist *yeshivot* and the religious Zionist members of Gush Emunim do. One faculty member, Amnon Shapiro, has called attention to the fact that Rav Kook's support for the establishment of the Bezalel Art School in Jerusalem in 1906 was based on the notion that the Torah considers human aesthetic creation to be legitimate. He also has cited a statement by Rav Kook which unequivocally endorses the legitimacy of art: "Literature, drawing, and sculpture have the potential of expressing all of the spiritual concepts that are planted deep in the human soul. And whenever even one line hidden deep in the soul is not expressed, art has the obligation to express it."¹⁴ Faculty member and one-time director Udi Lion has stated that he believes Ma'ale students should engage in the creative freedom of filmmaking as a means to uncover spiritual truths. In support of this position Lion has cited a passage in which Rav Kook writes:

Everyone should create in truth and wholeness what his soul shows him, actualizing his spiritual fruits without any expression of deceit, and from sparks such as these torches of light will come together and light the whole world. From such small inner truths will emerge the great truth.¹⁵

THE FOUNDING OF MA'ALE AND ITS TUMULTUOUS FIRST DECADE

In a conversation with me in 1998, Lion, who at that time was the director of Ma'ale, told me that the school was originally founded to challenge the general consensus in Israel among both religious Zionist and secular Jews that filmmaking and the Jewish religious tradition are not compatible.

Before the founding of the school Israeli films were written and directed primarily by secular Jews who, Lion noted, were not particularly interested in incorporating in their films religious or even specifically Jewish themes. The relative lack of religiosity in general and Jewish religiosity in particular which Lion cited is confirmed by a study of religious themes in Israeli cinema by Roni Perchik. In this study Perchik raises the question of why if “religious consciousness is an inseparable part of human consciousness”¹⁶ has religiosity played such a marginal role in Israeli films: between the years 1960 and 1995, approximately twenty out of over four hundred and twenty Israeli fictional films dealt with religious themes.¹⁷ Perchik blames this paucity of religious themes in Israeli films on the religious-secular divide that has been so central to Israeli politics and culture. In part due to the virtual monopoly on religiosity by Jewish Orthodoxy in Israel, secular Israelis have found it difficult to develop alternative forms of Jewish religiosity, and they have therefore experienced a great deal of alienation from Judaism. Therefore, when Israeli films have presented Jewish religiosity, they have tended to reflect “an identification of the Jewish religion with the ultra-Orthodox population and with Orthodox doctrine, [thereby reflecting an assumption that] non-Orthodoxy is cut off from Judaism and from religion in general.”¹⁸

In addition, argues Perchik, because of “the absolute lack of a Jewish artistic tradition that portrays the transcendental,”¹⁹ it has been difficult for secular filmmakers to incorporate Jewish visual imagery when dealing with religiosity. Curiously, observes Perchik, those Israeli filmmakers who have attempted a serious representation of religiosity have turned to Christian symbols and imagery. Christianity has thus functioned as a less politically charged form of religiosity than Jewish Orthodoxy, which is associated with religious coercion and exclusivity. Furthermore, it is natural for Israeli filmmakers to turn to Christian images, for they are well-embedded in the Western cinematic tradition on which these filmmakers have based their work.

The establishment of Ma’ale, according to Lion, was an essential step toward involving religiously observant Jewish Israelis in the media. Until Ma’ale was established, there was no film school in Israel that could easily accommodate a religiously observant Jewish lifestyle. Observant Jewish Israelis, for example, are unable to engage in much of the student collaborative work that typically takes place at secular Israeli film schools on the Sabbath. In addition, because religiously observant Jews in Israel have tended to view filmmaking as a questionable activity pursued by secular Israelis, they would be hesitant to enroll in a school with a majority of secular students.

A film school with an explicitly religious orientation sends a message to observant Jews that there need not be a conflict between a religious orientation and filmmaking. Those who founded the school were convinced that it would not only facilitate the entrance of religiously observant Jews into the world of film and television production, but would also help to move Israeli media creativity more in the direction of exploring Jewish themes in general and the world of religiously observant Jews in particular.

Ma'ale was established with the support and blessing of the NRP and of religious Zionist rabbis. As Sheleg notes, Ma'ale “was established in the heart of the religious Zionist establishment. Two of the leading members of the National Religious Party, Shaul Yahalom and Uri Elitzur, were the ones who initiated it as part of the organization ‘Ma'ale,’ whose purpose was to be a cultural center . . . for religious Zionism.”²⁰ However, the members of the religious Zionist establishment who originally supported the founding of the school soon became disappointed with the fact that films produced at Ma'ale did not always serve “as a tool for the delivery of religious messages or the presentation of that which is good and beautiful in the religious Zionist society.”²¹

The school eventually severed its official association with its founding organization, Ma'ale, although it continues to bear the same name and it is still located in the same building in Jerusalem as that organization and the literary journal it sponsors, *Dimui* (which has had its own battles with the religious Zionist establishment). This break from the Ma'ale organization would appear to have been the inevitable outcome of the school's openness to admitting students who did not identify as religious Zionists and its commitment to serve less as a vehicle for the propagation of religious Zionist ideology and more as a facilitator of the constructively critical exploration of religious issues and as a bridge between the religious and secular in Israel. In my 1998 conversation with Udi Lion, he made a point of saying to me that not everyone in the school is religiously observant and that student films produced at the school are not only on strictly religious themes, but also deal with issues of Jewish culture in general. He, himself, Lion informed me, does not personally identify with the religious Zionist political and cultural establishment, which is why he fulfills the custom of religiously observant Jewish men to cover their heads by wearing a cap rather than the knitted skullcap that religious Zionist men typically wear. One certainly finds in the language the school uses to present itself to the public an attempt to deny any possible association with the religious positions and nationalist ideology of religious Zionist institutions that divide religious Zionists from the secular majority culture, even as it affirms the

primarily religious mission of the school. One public statement (1997) presented the school as having been established “for the purpose of training creators of works of film and television who draw their values from the Jewish heritage, but who are also open-minded, intellectually curious, and skilled in creative expression.”²² A later statement (2001) described Ma’ale’s commitment to the development of “new artistic tools and methods for the joining together of communication, creativity, and Western culture with Torah, *halakhah* [Jewish religious law], and Jewish thought.”²³ In a recent website, Ma’ale defined itself as a religious school seeking to provide a link between religiosity and secularism in Israeli culture:

Ma’ale is a unique training institution in the Jewish world, establishing a completely new relationship between the religious public and the visual media. It was founded in 1989 with the goal of training film and television professionals deeply rooted in the Jewish faith. By promoting Jewish religious film production, the school has taken on the task on the one hand of establishing visual media in the religious community; on the other hand it attempts to break down clichés in the perception of religious Jews by secular Israelis by bringing into the visual media—and thus into general consciousness—areas of religious life not often discussed in public. The school understands itself as an institution building bridges on the one hand between religious Jews and their heritage, [and] on the other hand between the religious and the secular worlds.²⁴

Since I suspected that the school would be concerned about the potential for student creativity undermining the structures of traditional Judaism, I asked Lion in my 1998 conversation with him if there was an official policy to submit the students’ work to religious censorship. He answered that there is no formal censorship policy, although students are aware that they are expected not to make films that are not according to the spirit of the school administration. It would appear from his answer that at the time Ma’ale had a rather vague approach to the issue of artistic freedom that presumably was designed to foster its goal of synthesizing the secular and the religious worlds. To date, Lion informed me, no student film had been censored, but he did think it was possible that some day a student filmmaker would cross a line that would evoke attempts at censorship by the school administration.

That line was indeed crossed during the following academic year, 1998–1999, causing a tremendous uproar which threatened the very integrity of the Ma’ale project. Accounts by journalists Yair Sheleg and Larry Derfner

vividly capture the degree to which this event served as a catalyst for the school to face the inherent contradictions between the Western aesthetic ideal of free expression and the *halakhic* value of sexual modesty. In one of the Ma'ale courses, a female student screened a two-and-half minute film exercise which included “three drawings by the film’s scriptwriter: El Shadai (which shows a set of phylacteries on a woman’s breasts), The Priestly Blessing, and The Woman Who Drank from the Havdalah Wine. . . .” In between these drawings, a completely naked woman was filmed, either standing opposite a mirror, ironing or working in the kitchen.”²⁵

It is clear that it was the nudity in the film that was the main factor in the controversy that came to surround its screening in a class; and it is most likely that if images of nudity had not appeared in the film, it would not have evoked the negative reaction that it did. Nevertheless, from the interpretation later offered by Avital Livne, the student who prepared the film exercise, it would appear that her motivation was less to challenge traditional norms of sexual modesty and more to make a feminist statement that in itself could be seen as seriously challenging traditional Jewish values:

I am very concerned about my position as a religious woman in the Jewish world. I am not part of the Priestly Blessing; I do not don phylacteries and am not part of the Havdalah ceremony. The educational trend in Judaism has been to say that a woman has a more direct connection with the Almighty, which is why she does not have to be a direct participant in the ceremonies. This approach seems to me to express a deep fear of women which led in turn to the desire to keep them at home, in the kitchen. There is a tendency among Jewish women today to be partners in religious activities, and I definitely identify with this approach.”²⁶

She also stated that she included nudity in the film “in order to emphasize the image of the woman in this context as a sex object.”²⁷

When some students protested the screening of the film to the school administration, Livne was suspended from the school. After secular members of the faculty threatened to resign over Livne’s suspension, the administration reinstated Livne, but in the end she did not return to the school.²⁸ Yitzhak Recanati, who was then the director, held a school-wide seminar in which he tried to reach an understanding with the faculty and students about how to “redefine the balance between artistic creativity and the *halakhab*.”²⁹ As one student participant put it, the seminar failed because “the students objected to all the theoretical talk about ‘film and Judaism’ and told the rabbis [who participated in the seminar]: Let’s talk when you

have made some movies.”³⁰ Recanati eventually reached an agreement with the school’s student council on the establishment of a school covenant that stated that “all films must be made ‘according to the spirit of *halakhah*.’”³¹ In the aftermath of these events, Shai Piron, the school rabbi, resigned, as did Rabbi Aryeh Stern, a member of the school administration, as well as the film director Ram Levi, a secular teacher in the school.

During the following academic year, 1999–2000, no new students were admitted to the school and in 2000–2001 only women were admitted, “in order to reinforce its ‘legitimate’ status in the eyes of the religious public.”³² Due to a lack of private and public funding, the school almost shut down in May 2001, but in the end it opened the following fall for the academic year 2001–2002, and when I interviewed Neta Ariel, the current director of the school, toward the end of that academic year, she expressed the feeling that the school had survived its religious and economic crises of recent years and was stronger than ever as an institution.

Nevertheless, the administration of the school realizes that in order to maintain its sometimes shaky standing in the Orthodox Jewish world, it must be careful that its graduate films, which are often screened publicly, are never as religiously controversial as Avital Livne’s film exercise. The school rabbi, Mordecai Vardi, told me during a conversation in 2002 that oversight in this area is provided by a committee that makes a final judgment on both the professional quality and *halakhic* correctness of all graduate films. Any films that cannot meet the standards set by the committee may not be identified as a film of a Ma’ale graduate upon their release to the public.³³

IS IT LEGITIMATE FOR RELIGIOUS JEWS TO ENGAGE IN MEDIA PRODUCTION?

The nationalist *yeshivot* and Gush Emunim have had little trouble capturing the loyalty of religious Zionists. Those who study in one of the nationalist *yeshivot* are generally held in the highest esteem by religious Zionists, and it is only a small minority of religious Zionists (whose most forceful expression has been the tiny Meimad political faction) who have raised serious questions about the compatibility of a pro-settlement position with Jewish tradition. Ma’ale has had a much greater challenge in its attempt to be seen as a legitimate institution within the framework of religious Zionism. The fact that a majority of the students are women³⁴ is an important indication of this lack of acceptance. The leadership of such Religious Zionist

institutions as NRP and Gush Emunim is primarily male, and only men study and teach in the nationalist *yeshivot*. It is clear that media production is still seen by most religious Zionists as “women’s work” that is of less importance than the male-dominated activities that support the spiritual and political missions of religious Zionism. The nationalist *yeshivot* have successfully claimed the long-standing tradition of *yeshivah* study as the basis for their identity, while they, along with Gush Emunim, have claimed the Jewish messianic tradition as the basis for their support of the settlers. It has been harder for Ma’ale to point to a traditional Jewish precedent for their departure in the direction of modern media production.

In essays published under the auspices of the school, religious Zionist members of the Ma’ale faculty have attempted to come to terms with the potential difficulties in creating a synthesis between the medium of filmmaking and Jewish tradition.³⁵ One of the hardest issues to resolve, as can be seen by the crisis surrounding the controversial class exercise by Avital Livne, is the role of the erotic in films and the way that traditional Jewish safeguards regarding relations between the sexes could be violated in the process of acting. Faculty member Ilan Nov³⁶ has observed that good acting and directing involve an intimate connection among actors and between the actors and the director. The great director Ingmar Bergman, Nov has noted, maintained lifetime friendships with the main actresses of his films. How, he has asked, would such a relationship fit with traditional Jewish norms of relations between men and women? Should only married couples act opposite each other or direct each other? But if they did, wouldn’t they be improperly revealing to the public aspects of their relationship that, for the sake of modesty, should remain hidden?

Ma’ale’s founding director Yitzhak Recanati³⁷ has called attention to many potential conflicts between Jewish tradition, on one hand, and film and television, on the other: the essentially visual nature of the mass media vs. the essentially oral and aural nature of Jewish texts; the universalistic ethos of the mass media vs. the particularistic trends in Jewish identity; the tendency of the mass media to focus on the latest cultural trends vs. the commitment of Judaism to age-old teachings; and the violence and sexuality of the mass media vs. Jewish moral norms. Recanati has also noted that problems can arise for Jews committed to teaching the Jewish tradition by means of film when they have to confront the general consensus in our time that those who use art to foster national, religious, or ethical values are mere propagandists who cannot be taken seriously as artists.

Amnon Shapiro³⁸ has raised the issue of creative freedom in a religious setting. He cites the example of the description of the design of the

Tabernacle when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. On one hand, the Torah speaks of the choice of the chief designer of the Tabernacle, Bezalel, as an inspired artisan (Exodus 31); on the other, it is clear that according to the Torah there is a divinely ordained plan for this Tabernacle that does not appear to come from any personal inspiration on the part of Bezalel. This represents for Shapiro the paradox of religious artistic creativity. Even while the Torah encourages people to engage in creative acts, there is always the danger that human creativity will undermine the divine spiritual order.

It is striking that despite their full recognition of the potential incompatibility of what faculty member Yehuda Brandes calls *Torah vetiqshoret*³⁹ [Torah and the communications media], religious Zionist faculty members have repeatedly asserted that what they are engaged in is really not a new phenomenon in Jewish history. Brandes has pointed out, for example, that at the moment in Exodus when God first called on Moses to assume the role of prophet, Moses had to deal with media issues. He never questioned the truth of the prophetic vision God commanded him to deliver, only whether he had the effective means to convey it. He was unsure of how effective he would be as a speaker, given the fact that he possessed a “heavy mouth and a heavy tongue” (Exodus 4: 10), and he was not confident that his audience, the Israelites, would respond appropriately. According to Brandes, in the end Moses did discover a medium to successfully transmit his message, for after all, the revelation on Mount Sinai with its thunder and lightning was a most effective sound and light show. In addition, Brandes has asserted, the Ma’ale school is continuing a long tradition of creating a synthesis between Jewish tradition and other cultures, including the rabbis in their relationship to Hellenism and medieval Jewish writers in their relationship to Arabic poetry or to Greek philosophy. As Udi Lion put it to me, film should be seen by religiously observant Jews as a medium which is potentially just as legitimate as any older, fully accepted medium of traditional Jewish culture, such as a page of Talmud.

Brandes has declared that, if religiously observant Jews want the general public to turn to tradition as a source of truth, they need to master the current media just as the ancient prophets mastered whatever media were available to them in their day. Just because the media are used today to present ideas unacceptable to tradition, he argues, does not mean that religious Jews should not master media methods. “He who believes that the Torah is a divine message that, from the moment it appeared on earth, has needed to use every possible medium in order to inculcate it in the hearts

of humanity,” Brandes has stated, “cannot afford to miss any opportunity to try to expand its boundaries.”⁴⁰

Udi Lion has suggested a similarity between film and rabbinic exegesis by developing a category of film analysis which he calls *midrash qolnoa* [film midrash]. This refers to the attempt to discern the intertextual patterns in film and to develop intertextual interpretations of films, as well, with a particular focus on the relationship of film to traditional Jewish texts. Lion has cited the Ma'ale graduate film *Bat Yiftah* [Daughter of Jephthah] (1996), directed by Eynat Kapah, as a prime example of a film made in the spirit of *midrash qolnoa*. It establishes a creative link between the biblical story of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter (Judges 11), the struggle of Ethiopian Jews to immigrate to Israel, and the personal experiences of the filmmaker, who is of Yemenite Jewish origin. As Lion pointed out to me, the film is not a Hollywood-style reenactment of a biblical story, in the spirit of Cecil B. DeMille. Instead, there is in the film a creative interaction between the contemporary situation and the biblical story of Jephthah the judge who sacrificed his daughter to fulfill a vow. The film portrays Ethiopian Jews walking through the desert of the Sudan on their way to be taken to Israel. When they are threatened by Arab robbers, the oldest daughter of the family concludes that she must allow the robbers to take her captive in order to save the rest of the family. We see here a feminist reinterpretation of the Jephthah story when the daughter takes the initiative to sacrifice herself, in contrast to the Jephthah story in which it is the father who sacrifices the daughter. In the poignant final scene of the film the daughter puts on the dress she had been sewing to be her wedding dress when she would marry in Israel and turns herself over to the robbers in exchange for her father whom they had kept hostage, a scene which evokes the biblical image of Jephthah's daughter and her female companions devoting two months in the hills lamenting the fact that she will die a virgin at the hands of her father.

In a session of his course on *midrash qolnoa* that I visited, Lion and the students viewed the short film *La Jetée* (1962), directed by Chris Marker, in which time travel experiments are conducted after the earth has experienced a nuclear holocaust. After they viewed the film, Lion and the students discussed intertextual connections that they could make between the film and Jewish texts such as the rabbinic legend about how Honi the Circle-maker undergoes an experience that resembles time travel when he awakes after many years of sleep. Obviously if the approach of *midrash qolnoa* is to work, the students need to be well-versed in Jewish texts, and indeed

students do study the Jewish tradition in required courses in the school's *beit midrash* [study house].

MA'ALE GRADUATE FILMS: HARBINGERS OF A NEW ISRAELI CINEMA?

The final project of each Ma'ale graduate is to be involved in the production of a film. These graduate films have included both documentaries and fictional films. The fictional films have presented the greatest challenges to the Ma'ale goal of synthesizing religious commitment and artistic creativity, and thus it is to those films that we now turn our attention. We will consider fictional films spanning the first decade of graduate films, from 1993 (the year of the first graduating class) through 2001. It is beyond the scope of this article to consider all the films of this period; however, important insights can be gained by considering films that address three thematic issues that reflect important concerns of the Ma'ale film students who produced them. These particular concerns were chosen because they have been central to at least two (and in some cases more) films by Ma'ale graduates. As we consider each of these thematic issues, we will compare the ways that two different filmmakers approached the issue. The first concern is of a more general moral nature that reflects the strong ethical dimension of the Jewish tradition: the issue of human sensitivity to physical and mental differences among human beings. The other two concerns reflect issues that are of more particular interest to young religious Zionists of the last decade of the twentieth century: (1) the tensions between Jewish legal restrictions on relations between men and women and the modern value of a less restrictive approach to such relations; and (2) a concern which has become more prominent in the more recent films—relations between men and women who cross the cultural divide between religious and secular life styles.

These films explore a variety of challenges to the ideals taught by Jewish tradition, and frequently they do so by making intertextual connections between the world of the film and classical Jewish sources. For the most part, these films attempt to resolve challenges to the Jewish tradition in such a way as to affirm traditional Jewish values; but, in so doing, they do not necessarily put to rest all aspects of the challenges they raise. Space does not allow for a detailed analysis of all aspects of each of these films, including the many visual effects that can have such a powerful impact on the viewer. The focus of the analysis will be on the way the story line of each

film expresses the filmmaker's attempts to struggle with thematic concerns in this medium so new to traditional Jewish religious creativity.

Sensitivity to Physical and Mental Differences: *Tom* and *Tefillah zakkah*

The last decades of the twentieth century have been a time of heightened sensibilities toward people with physical and mental disabilities in the West and in Western-oriented countries such as Israel. The value of equal rights and respect for the disabled challenges Israeli cultural values to which Ma'ale students have undoubtedly been exposed. While Jewish tradition puts a premium on the acceptance of all human beings as being created in the image of God, the Torah demands bodily perfection in the priest presiding over a sacrifice, and later Jewish tradition restricts the legal and ritual role of those with certain mental defects. In addition, the Zionist glorification of physical strength, particularly in the context of the military conflict with the Arab world, has put a premium on the perfection of physical prowess. The Ma'ale graduate films *Tom* [Innocence] and *Tefillah zakkah* [A Pure Prayer] explore the clash between the ideal of full acceptance of the disabled and those cultural forces in Israeli society that challenge this ideal.

The setting of *Tom* (1993, 9 minutes), directed by Riki Berkovitz, is an outdoor café somewhere in Israel on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The characters—all apparently secular in orientation—are the owner of the café, a slightly retarded young man who serves as a waiter, and some customers: a young man in a wheelchair (possibly a wounded army veteran) and a married couple with a son who appears to be about eight to ten years old.

At the beginning of the film, the wheelchair-bound young man takes out his anger about his fate on the retarded waiter. Soon, however, the boy begins to draw them together. The boy is fascinated by a doll that the waiter gave him that, because it has a rounded bottom, stays erect and never falls down. When he realizes that his parents are too busy arguing to speak with him, the boy goes over to the physically disabled man and asks him how come the doll can stand without legs, to which the man replies in an annoyed tone, "I don't know." The boy then asks him why he is so angry and whether it is hard for him to sit all day in a wheelchair. The man replies, in an obvious reference to the waiter, "It's better than being retarded [using the pejorative term *dafuq*]." The boy's response to this comment is to ask the waiter, "If you try very hard, will you be able to understand?" The waiter answers that yes, if he tries very hard he will be able to understand. Following this the boy asks the physically disabled man, "If you try very

hard, will you be able to get up and walk?" Somehow the innocence of the boy and the absurdity of his question strike the physically disabled man as so funny that for the first time in the film he begins to laugh, setting off laughter in the waiter as well. The waiter then asks the owner to play some music on the café's cassette player, and accompanied by the music, the physically disabled man and the boy begin to go off together toward the beach. As they do so, the physically disabled man motions to the waiter to join them.

The next shot is of the sea itself, as if its water and vastness can provide a purifying transition from the interpersonal tension of the first part of the film to the reconciliation of the film's conclusion. We then see a long shot of the two men and the boy from behind, bonded together as they contemplate the sea. This is followed by individual shots of each of the three characters: the two disabled men look serenely at the sea and the boy plays in the sand. It is clear from these shots that the physically disabled young man's self-loathing and his mistreatment of the retarded waiter have been healed by the innocence of the child, who is free of the adult prejudices that have been the source of the young man's feelings and actions. After the boy rejoins his parents, the final shot of the film is of the toy that made the transformation possible, slightly leaning on its round bottom on the sand of the sea shore.

A significant counterpoint to the growing bond that the boy establishes between the two disabled characters is an argument between the boy's parents that we hear in the background of the film about whether or not they should try to have a second child. Clearly they, like the physically disabled man at the beginning of the film, lack the naïvely exuberant attitude of their son that celebrates life as a process to be accepted in any form. The title of the film, *Tom*, derives from the Hebrew root *taf-mem-mem*, which can connote innocence as well as wholeness, thereby suggesting that the innocent perspective of the child gives him access to the truth that the mentally and physically disabled may be as whole or sometimes even more so than those who are supposedly not disabled.

Tefillah zakkah (2000, 26 minutes), directed by Sarah Dor Beck, is the story of the Schwartzman family, which consists of a middle-aged husband and wife and their thirty-year-old son who live a religiously observant life in a settlement that had originally been founded as a religious moshav [*moshav dati*]. Schwartzman, as the husband is called throughout the film, earns his living as an auto mechanic, but much of his energy goes into maintaining the synagogue in the moshav, whose viability is threatened by the decline in the number of religiously observant residents there. The central problem

around which the plot of the film develops is the question of whether Schwartzman's son Menahem, who is mentally retarded, can be counted as one of the ten men in the *minyan* [prayer quorum] during Yom Kippur prayers in the synagogue. This is a most urgent matter for the synagogue, since it appears that only nine men will be available for the Yom Kippur prayers. According to Jewish law, a person who is too mentally defective to understand what he is doing in the synagogue cannot be a legitimate member of a *minyan*. If the congregation were to allow Menahem to be counted, their *minyan* would be in violation of Jewish tradition.

This problem is woven together with developments in the attitude of Schwartzman toward Menahem. Since his birth, Schwartzman has seen Menahem as a useless person who brings nothing but aggravation to the life of the family. In the course of the film, however—driven initially by the need to count Menahem in the *minyan*—Schwartzman begins to pay more attention to his son and to appreciate him in ways that he had never done before. Schwartzman's first attempt to connect with his son is when, in the hope that Menahem would be able to be the tenth man in the Yom Kippur *minyan*, he tries, but fails, to teach him when to respond "Amen" to the Kaddish prayer. Despite this initial inauspicious interaction between father and son, Schwartzman gradually begins to see that his son is not as helpless as he had always seemed to be: in one scene Menahem helps him as he fixes a car and in another scene Schwartzman sees, apparently for the first time, Menahem unloading a food supply truck at the local supermarket where he works.

Over time Schwartzman becomes increasingly committed to the notion that the solution to the *minyan* problem is to count Menahem, despite the latter's inability to learn how to pray and the persistent opposition of fellow synagogue members to breaking Jewish law by counting Menahem in the *minyan*. In the final scene of the film, at first the camera focuses on Schwartzman and Menahem sitting together wearing prayer shawls in apparent anticipation of the Yom Kippur evening prayers. For a moment we are under the illusion that somehow the prayer service will go on with a *minyan*. It soon becomes clear, however, that the other eight men in the community have gone elsewhere for Yom Kippur, and the only ones attending the service are the father and son.

After waiting a short while, Schwartzman and Menahem go up to the raised platform of the cantor in the middle of the synagogue and, facing the ark, Schwartzman recites the traditional formula that precedes the chanting of Kol Nidre: "With the consent of the Omnipresent and with the consent of the congregation, in the celestial council and in the earthly

council, we declare it lawful to pray with sinners,” to which Menahem responds, “Amen,” although it is not ritually appropriate to do so at that point. As Schwartzman proceeds to repeat this formula two more times, as is customary, his voice is accompanied by an increasingly haunting echo that reinforces the viewers’ realization that the prayer room is empty except for Schwartzman and Menahem. Having broken through the barriers of his prejudice against his son’s mental retardation and the barriers of the *halakhic* and communal prejudices against Menahem, Schwartzman is truly worthy to be the representative of the community [*shaliah tsibbur*] on this holiest night of the Jewish year. His prayer, with its suggestion that all Jews should be accepted by the community—if sinners, then certainly the mentally challenged—and his son’s “Amen”—even if it is technically out of place—constitute the “pure prayer” to which the title of the film refers. The fact that there is no *minyan* in the synagogue to affirm the humane insights that Schwartzman has discovered, however, casts a critical shadow on the moral qualities of the religious community to which Schwartzman belongs.

Men and Women: *Ishah bema’agal* and *Eshet kohen*

In recent years, a virtual revolution in the interpretation of traditional Jewish legal approaches to gender relations has begun in some religious Zionist circles. More and more women have begun to engage in the serious study of rabbinic sources, once the almost exclusive domain of men, and some prayer groups have adopted a more (but not fully) egalitarian approach to the participation of women in the synagogue service. Women have begun to play a more direct role within the traditional framework of *halakhah*, occupying positions as legal advisors to women on ritual matters [*yo’atsoṭ halakhah*] and legal counsels for women in rabbinic courts [*to’anot*]. In addition, under the influence of general trends in Western culture, some young married couples have adopted a more balanced approach to the participation of husband and wife in outside work and in household and child rearing responsibilities.⁴¹ Despite these new developments in gender relations, religious Zionist men and women still consider themselves to be obligated to conduct their relations in accordance with *halakhah*, a commitment that can give rise to considerable tension between human needs and *halakhic* ideals. The films *Ishah bema’agal* [Woman in a Circle] and *Eshet kohen* [A Priest’s Wife] tackle two areas of Jewish law, which, in seeking to control relations between men and women, put women in a position of frustrated powerlessness.

In *Ishah bema'agal* (1993, 15 minutes), directed by Ayelet Samuel, we see a newly married religious Zionist couple, Ilan and Shira, who are experiencing some tension in their relationship. The tension between them comes to a head when the woman gets her period. According to traditional Jewish law, the couple is not permitted to engage in sexual relations during the time the wife is menstruating and for an additional week thereafter. The film explores the question of how far one is to take this prohibition. Various practices have been developed to prevent the husband and wife from being tempted to engage in sexual relations during the prohibited time, such as sleeping in separate beds and not touching each other in any way. The husband and wife in the film differ as to how strictly to observe such preventative practices. Shira considers it acceptable for Ilan to have some physical contact with her, such as massaging her leg when it hurts and hugging her when she becomes upset about a stain from something she spilled on her dress. Ilan, however, insists on refraining from touching her in any way. At the height of the tension between them over this issue, they are seen standing at the bathroom sink as Shira tries to wash out the stain in her dress. The viewer sees both of their faces in the bathroom mirror, with tension-filled expressions, while they are unable to look directly at each other with any kind of understanding. The couple eventually resolves the tension between them when the wife makes peace with her husband's stricter interpretation of the law.

Unlike *Ishah bema'agal*, in which the filmmaker explores marriage in the religious Zionist cultural context familiar to Ma'ale students, *Eshet kohen* (2000, 24 minutes), directed by Nava Heifetz, takes place in a world less familiar to religious Zionists: an ultra-Orthodox [*haredi*] community in which Yiddish is the everyday language of speech. The situation that creates tension between traditional Jewish law and human desire is much more extreme in nature than that which is of central concern in the earlier film. Instead of the issue of physical contact between husband and wife during the wife's period, explored in *Ishah bema'agal*, this film deals with the response of the husband and of the community's rabbinical authorities to the wife's rape in her home by an ultra-Orthodox Jewish stranger

Because the husband, Motl, is a *kohen*, according to traditional Jewish law he can no longer stay married to his wife Rivke following her rape. Initially, the local rabbinical court asserts that the law must be followed, and as long as that decision stands, Motl is forbidden to be alone under the same roof with his wife. Torn between his commitment to Jewish law and his love for his wife, Motl continues to seek advice from rabbis and other

Jewish men to see if there is any way he can avoid being forced to divorce Rivke. Rivke, however, is not all that impressed by Motl's efforts: to her the most important issue is that Motl is not communicating with her and thus appears to be abandoning her. Her frustration is intensified when during the one occasion when Motl does visit her and they engage in a loving embrace, Motl breaks away from her, declaring: "I can't, I can't!"

In the end, Motl is saved from having to resolve the terrible dilemma of choosing between his love for Rivke and his commitment to Jewish tradition. The rabbinical court finds a way out based on the fact that the requisite number of two witnesses to the rape do not exist, and therefore it is as if the rape never occurred and so Motl and Rivke can remain married. Motel returns home and a little girl, who had witnessed Rivke's rape at the beginning of the film, now views their reunion. While we are not shown them physically embracing, in the spirit of ultra-Orthodox norms of modesty, we understand that husband and wife have now reached a physical and emotional reconciliation.

Ishah bema'agal and *Eshet kohen* share a very sympathetic view of the female protagonists, whose emotional and physical needs for intimacy are denied by a religious legal system to which their husbands feel bound. As such, both films raise serious questions about the ways that that legal system is applied in real life. Is it fully acceptable for a husband to refrain from hugging his wife during her period in a manner that is not sexually arousing? How does a rabbinical court's discovery of a loophole help a woman who was raped deal with the emotional trauma she has suffered? At the same time, however, in both films the conflict between law and life is eventually resolved without having to radically challenge traditional Jewish legal principles.

Men and Women Crossing the Religious-Secular Divide:

Purim and Hallel

The involvement of religious Zionists in the general Israeli culture has inevitably led to social relations between men and women raised in the opposing religious and secular camps and even to mixed religious-secular marriages.⁴² It is not surprising, therefore, that a number of recent Ma'ale graduate films explore such relationships in various forms. A comparison of two films can tell us much about the way this thematic concern is approached: in one film the male protagonist is religious and the female protagonist is secular and in the other film the female protagonist is religious and the male protagonist is secular.

Purim (1998, 26 minutes), directed by Gilaad Goldschmidt, is about a troubled love affair between Oded, a young man with a secular background who had chosen to become religiously observant and is at the time a *yeshivah* student, and Ruti, a secular young woman who works as a teacher. As one would expect, religion is a main source of tension between them. Their conflicts over religion are presented as a clash between the more spontaneous approach to life of the secularists and the more structured life of the religious. In one scene, while on a date out in nature, Oded is seen praying the traditional afternoon service, while on the other side of the highway Ruti engages in her own kind of meditative prayer without the ritual forms of the Jewish tradition. In another scene, Oded experiences much discomfort at a contemporary-style prayer service to which Ruti had invited him. During this service the participants sing a musical version of Psalm 23 accompanied by guitars. As a secular woman, Ruti is very comfortable with her sexuality and over time is ready to introduce a physical dimension to their relationship. Oded is much more ambivalent: he is increasingly tempted to relate to her physically, but his commitment to a modest approach to sexuality before marriage prevents him from giving in to this temptation.

The holiday of Purim, after which the film is named, corresponds thematically with the struggle between spontaneity and structure that lies at the heart of the tortured love affair of Ruti and Oded. At various points in the film, it is made clear that Purim is a holiday that combines both elements for observant Jews: it allows for exuberant, playful expression, but it also is governed by structured religious obligations. Toward the end of the film, we see Oded and his roommate Shai returning to their room drunk from the Purim night festivities at the *yeshivah*, in keeping with the practice of religiously observant Jews of getting so intoxicated on Purim that they cannot tell the difference between the hero Mordecai and the villain Haman. Purim, we see in this scene, allows for the possibility of religiously observant Jews to have an experience that to some extent liberates them, in a manner resembling that of secular Jews, from the intensity of their obligations to the framework of Jewish law. Although Oded affirms this balance between spontaneity and structure in the framework of a traditional life style, when Ruti visits him in the *yeshivah* that night, he condemns her secular worldview for putting too much emphasis on spontaneity and not enough on structure. The intoxicated Oded makes the point to Ruti that for the religiously observant Jew, the lack of control that is induced by drunkenness on Purim is more the exception than the rule, whereas for

the secular Jew lack of control is more the rule. “For you,” he tells Ruti, “every day is Purim—full of feeling and without boundaries.”⁴³

In the end, the film arrives at an idealized resolution of the tension between the freedom of secular culture and the strictures of traditional culture. Ruti, it turns out, becomes religiously observant and marries Oded’s *yeshivah* roommate Shai. The final scene portrays Oded visiting the home of Ruti and Shai on Purim night and seeing them live a life-affirming, harmonious observant life with none of the tensions that plagued his relationship with Ruti. The film would seem to suggest that, in the final analysis, one does not have to choose between the religious and secular life styles. The two characters, Shai and Ruti, having been raised at opposite ends of the religious-secular spectrum, draw on the best of both worlds and discover a way to celebrate what is liberating about secularity without abandoning the observance of Jewish law.

In *Hallel* [Praise] (2001, 22 minutes), directed by Liat Cohen, a religiously observant woman begins to draw close to the secular world. At the beginning of the film we see a young religious couple, Meir and Yael, who, after several attempts, have not been able to conceive a child. While Meir approaches the problem with a faith-based equanimity, Yael makes clear her frustrated anger at being barren. She is particularly uncomfortable with the way traditional Jewish culture views the barren woman, as if she is seriously blemished for not being able to play her biological role as a mother.

Yael begins to find an emotional outlet for her frustration with traditional Jewish culture in the Hebrew poetry of the early twentieth-century secular woman known as Rachel, whose poem about never having given birth, “*Aqarah*” [Barren], presumably provides her with a measure of comfort. She also begins to write poetry of her own. Yael’s engagement in the reading and production of poetry, however, is not highly valued by her traditionally-oriented husband Meir: in one scene when she reads him a poem she wrote he responds to it in an unenthusiastic manner.

A minor car accident that Yael has with a secular man leads to her spending time with him in the book store that he owns and at literary gatherings. This new relationship intensifies her exploration of modern Hebrew secular culture as an alternative to traditional Jewish culture. When Yael does eventually become pregnant, she cuts off her relationship with the book store owner and returns to what appears to be a more wholehearted participation in the world of tradition represented by her husband.

The final scene of the film, however, indicates that her experiences in the secular world have had a lasting effect on her and she will now be determined to seek some form of synthesis of the best of both worlds. In this

scene, Yael and Meir are holding an outdoor celebration for their newborn baby daughter. This celebration comes across as a modern supplement to the traditional Jewish rite of passage for baby girls, which consists of the naming of the baby at the time that the father is called up to the Torah in the synagogue—an event that typically does not involve the baby or the mother or the rest of the extended family. The celebration that Yael and Meir hold reflects a trend more prevalent among non-Orthodox Jews to create a celebration of the birth of a baby girl which, like the circumcision ceremony held for boys, involves all members of the extended family and their friends. In a further departure from the traditional Jewish practice of placing men in a ritual leadership role, Yael is seen as presiding over the celebration. She tells everyone that she is not such an expert in delivering Torah discourses [*divrei Torah*], and she will therefore leave that to her husband. Instead, she declares that she wishes to read a poem related to the name that she and Meir gave to their new daughter, Hallel. She reads the first and last stanzas of a prayerful poem by the secular Israeli writer Natan Zach, “Ani rotseh tamid einayim” [I Always Want Eyes]. The first stanza of the poem reads:

I always want eyes to see
 The beauty of the world and to praise this wondrous
 Beauty with no blemish and to praise
 The one who made it beautiful to praise.
 So full, so very full of beauty.

The last stanza reads:

And I will not cease praising. Yes, praising I will not cease.
 And when I fall, I will rise again—if only for a moment—so that no one says
 He fell. But rather he arose again for a moment to praise
 With his last eyes
 What he will never cease to praise.⁴⁴

The repetition of the verb “to praise” [*lehallel*] in these stanzas evokes the word *hallel*, which is both the name of the baby and the title of the film. In the context of Jewish ritual, Hallel is a specific selection of celebratory psalms said on religious holidays. Thus, the Zach poem constitutes Yael’s personal expression of praise in response to the birth of her child, which comes not from the biblical psalms included in the traditional prayer book, but rather from the words of a poet, who, although he is secular, knows how to pray.

As Yael reads the poem the camera alternates between shots of her husband and of the secular man who had befriended her. During the reading, the secular man—obviously not an invited guest—had arrived in the back of the gathering, and when he secretly waves to her at the completion of her reading, she acknowledges him with a slight nod of the head, and he slips out. Both male influences in Yael's life—her religiously observant husband and the secular book dealer—seem to approve of this new synthesis between secular and religious cultures that she has achieved.

THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF MA'ALE AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPACT ON ISRAELI CULTURE

In many ways, Ma'ale has accomplished the goals it set for itself when it was founded in 1989. While not every Ma'ale student develops a commitment to infuse Jewish religiosity into the Israeli media,⁴⁵ the films we have examined and many other graduate films are in the spirit of faculty members Amnon Shapiro's and Udi Lion's evocation of Rav Kook's declaration that the arts are a legitimate medium for spiritual expression, and of faculty member Yehuda Brandes's declaration that, in every generation, those who seek to convey a religious message to others are obligated to adopt the best possible medium. *Tom* and *Tefillah zakkah* affirm for their viewers the core religious principle of accepting all human beings as created in the image of God. *Ishah bema'agal* and *Eshet kohen* are strong expressions of the deep empathy that their filmmakers feel for women caught in the sometimes insensitive strictures of Jewish law. *Purim* and *Hallel* present a vision of a spiritually legitimate synthesis between the secular focus on spontaneity and creativity and the religious focus on structure and ritual. None of the films attacks the legitimacy of *halakhic* Judaism, but all of them undertake a religiously informed critique of the ways that traditionally observant Jews fall short of spiritual ideals.

The films analyzed above do not always meet the highest aesthetic standards. They are, after all, produced for the most part by relatively young students in their twenties whose intellectual development and artistic talents have yet to fully mature. Furthermore, as is typical of final projects in film schools, these films are relatively short, ranging from nine to twenty-six minutes in length, thereby limiting the potential for the full development of character and plot. The films do, however, demonstrate the potential for presenting engaging characters and plots that reflect issues of Jewish religious concern in a medium in Israel that, until Ma'ale graduates started

to produce films, did not take Jewish religiosity seriously. They also present an intriguing challenge noted by founding director Yitzhak Recanati to the prevailing Western assumption that great art never seeks to foster religious or ethical values.

The 2002–2003 Ma'ale catalogue boasts approximately one hundred graduates to date, “most of whom work in film, television, radio, directing, producing, teaching, and journalistic and literary writing.” During my visit to the school in 2002, the current director, Neta Ariel, proudly told me how well-accepted the Ma'ale graduates' films have been. Ma'ale graduate films are shown in religious Zionist educational settings, they have been broadcast on occasion on Israeli television, and they have become a regular element in the programming of the religiously-oriented television station, Tekhelet, which began broadcasting in April, 2003. Thus, Ma'ale has succeeded in legitimizing media production in the eyes of at least some religious Zionists, as well as facilitating the entrance of many religiously observant Israeli Jews into the world of the communications media. It has also increased the presence of concerns related to Jewish culture, and in particular to its religious dimensions, in the world of Israeli television and film. Just as film schools in a variety of cultural contexts often produce graduates who, over time, move their chosen field of film in new directions, it is possible that the Ma'ale graduates, too, will make a lasting impact on media production in Israel in the coming years. The films produced by these graduates may serve the ideal put forth by the school's faculty to teach the Jewish tradition in a new medium; yet, at the same time, it is likely that at least some films will present penetrating views of the world of tradition with which not all rabbinical authorities will be comfortable.⁴⁶

NOTES

*This article has its origins in a paper I delivered in 1998 at a symposium on Israeli film schools held under the auspices of the Judaica Division of Widener Library at Harvard University. I would like to thank the director of the division, Charles Berlin, for inviting me to undertake my research for the symposium paper, and to thank him and his staff for making available to me the collection of Ma'ale graduate films collected at Widener and for making the collection available again in 2003, when I returned to update my research. I would also like to thank Udi Lion, former director of Ma'ale, Neta Ariel, director of Ma'ale, and Mordecai Vardi, the rabbi of Ma'ale, for generously agreeing to meet with me and provide important perspectives on the development of the school. I am grateful for helpful

comments on earlier drafts of the article by the anonymous readers that evaluated it for publication in *Israel Studies* and by my colleagues in the Judaic Studies Faculty Seminar at Brown University.

1. I use the term “religious Zionism” to refer to the social, cultural, and political trend adhered to by Israelis known as “religious Zionists,” or more commonly in Hebrew “religious nationalists” [*datiyyim le’umiyim*]. The main institutional embodiments of this trend are the National Religious Party (NRP), the Bnei Akiva youth movement, the religious kibbutzim, and the nationalist *yeshivot*. The Jewish orientation of religious Zionists is similar to that which is called “modern Orthodox” in America, in that they are committed to some form of synthesis of traditional Jewish observance and involvement in the modern world. Their support for the State of Israel and their belief in the religious significance of the founding of the State are important factors that distinguish them from traditionally observant ultra-Orthodox [*haredi*] Jews living in Israel. For a comprehensive analysis of this segment of the Israeli population, see Yair Sheleg, *Hadatiyyim bahadashim: mabat akhshavi al habevrah hadatit beyisra’el* [The New Religious Jews: Recent Developments Among Observant Jews in Israel] (Jerusalem, 2000) 25–112.

2. Sheleg, *Hadatiyyim bahadashim*, 15.

3. Menachem Klein, *Bar-Ilan: Aqademyah, dat ufolitiqah* [Bar Ilan University: Academics, Religion, and Politics] (Jerusalem, 1998) 139 [Hebrew].

4. Daniel Tropper, “The Future of Religious Zionism,” *Jerusalem Post*, 18 February 1990.

5. Klein, *Bar-Ilan*, 139.

6. Sheleg, *Hadatiyyim bahadashim*, 15.

7. Eliezer Don-Yehiya, “The Book and the Sword: The Nationalist Yeshivot and Political Radicalism in Israel,” in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds), *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements* (Chicago, 1994) 294.

8. See the remarks by religious Zionist settler Yisrael Harel reported in Amos Oz, *In the Land of Israel*, transl. Maurie Goldberg-Bartura (San Diego, 1983) 113–18. [Heb. Edition: *Po vesham be’erets yisra’el bistav 1982* (Tel-Aviv, 1983).]

9. Dov Schwartz notes that even in the pre-State period, there were religious Zionists who advocated an appropriation of the arts. See Dov Schwartz, *Faith at the Crossroads: A Theological Profile of Religious Zionism*, transl. Batya Stein (Leiden, 2002) 153–4. [Heb. Edition: *Emunah al parashat derakhim: bein rayon lema’aseh batsiyyonut hadatit* (Tel-Aviv, 1996). Indeed, in its pre-Gush Emunim days (1945, to be precise) Mosad Harav Kook published an anthology that included “poem prayers both ancient and modern,” thereby suggesting the potential religious significance of modern poetry. See A. M. Habermann (ed), *Beran yahad: yalqut shirei tefillah attiqim gam hadashim* [Singing Together: An Anthology of Poem Prayers Both Ancient and Modern] (Jerusalem, 1945). The contemporary Israeli journals *Dimui* and *Mashiv haruah* have fostered the involvement of religiously-committed Jewish Israelis in the arts, particularly in literature.

10. Sheleg, *Hadatiyyim bahadashim*, 61.
11. Eliezer Don-Yehiya, “*The Book and the Sword*,” 267. Italics in the original.
12. Gideon Aran, “The Father, the Son, and the Holy Land: The Spiritual Authorities of Jewish-Zionist Fundamentalism in Israel,” in R. Scott Appleby (ed), *Spokesmen for the Despised: Fundamentalist Leaders of the Middle East* (Chicago, 1997) 301.
13. *Ibid.*, 307. See also the discussions of the religious Zionist settler movement in Ehud Sprinzak, “The Politics, Institutions, and Culture of Gush Emunim” in Laurence J. Silberstein (ed), *Jewish Fundamentalism in Comparative Perspective: Religion, Ideology, and the Crisis of Modernity* (New York, 1993) 117–47; and Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, transl. Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman (Chicago, 1996) 79–144 [Heb. Edition: *Haqets hameguleh umedinat hayehudim: meshibiyut, tsiyyonut veradiqalizm dati beyisra’el*] (Tel-Aviv, 1993)].
14. Amnon Shapiro, “Hamedyom hatiqshorti al reqa haqonfliqt bein modernah ladat” [The Communications Media in the Context of the Conflict between Modernity and Religion] in Yitzhak Recanati (ed), *Mevaseret: asuppat ma’amarim al yahadut veqolnoa* [Film Herald: A Collection of Articles on Judaism and Cinema] (Jerusalem, 1996) 63–4. My English translation of the title of this collection is an attempt to capture the play on words contained in it. The Hebrew word *mevaseret* with the letter *sin* representing the “s” sound means “herald;” the Hebrew word *seret* with the letter *samekh* representing the “s” sound means “film.” The title spells the word *mevaseret* with a *samekh*, thereby suggesting both meanings: “herald” and “film.”
15. The information provided by Udi Lion is based on conversations I had with him by telephone and in person when he was the director of Ma’ale in 1998.
16. Roni Perchik, “Me’ever lagader: haregesh hadati baqolnoa hayisre’eli” [Beyond the Fence: Religious Feeling in Israeli Cinema] in Nurith Gertz, Orly Lubin, and Judd Ne’eman (eds), *Mabatim fiqtiviyyim: al qolna yisre’eli* [Fictive Looks: On Israeli Cinema] (Tel-Aviv, 1998) 328.
17. *Idem.*
18. *Ibid.*, 330.
19. *Ibid.*, 332.
20. Sheleg, *Hadatiyyim bahadashim*, 61.
21. *Idem.*
22. The 1997–1998 Ma’ale catalogue.
23. *Mevaseret: iyyunim betelevizyah, qolnoa veyahadut*, 1 (2000) 79. This is a journal edited by Yitzhak Recanati, which Ma’ale has begun to publish under the same title as Recanati’s collection of essays published in 1996 (see note 14).
24. <http://www.reel-il.de/il_html/schule_ma_ale.shtml> .
25. Yair Sheleg, “Split Screen,” *Ha’aretz* (English Internet Edition), 19 February 1999. See also the discussion of this incident in Sheleg, *Hadatiyyim bahadashim*, 63.

26. Sheleg, "Split Screen."

27. Sheleg, *Hadatiyyim bahadashim*, 63.

28. Larry Derfner, "Lights! Camera! Shabbes!" *Jerusalem Post*, 3 December 1999.

29. Sheleg, "Split Screen."

30. *Idem*.

31. Derfner, "Lights! Camera! Shabbes!" Derfner quotes Recanati's account of the first time this principle was applied with the effect of changing the content of a Ma'ale film: "The screenplay included two unmarried couples kissing, hugging, and touching, which is clearly not according to the spirit of *halakhah*, but the student agreed to take these parts out. The other objection we had was to the fact that the two unmarried couples lived together, but the screenwriter insisted on keeping this in, so we told him that while we regretted his position, we would agree to it."

32. Sheleg, "Bitten by the Film Bug," *Ha'aretz* (English Internet Edition), 21 May 2001.

33. It is interesting to compare this incident with the account by an American professor of film of his experiment in which he limited the permissible subject matter of his students' films by establishing the following rules: "1. No Guns. 2. No Suicides. 3. No Drug Deals or Overdoses. 4. No Prostitution. 5. In other words: NO CLICHÉS! . . . Remember: 'Limitation is the artist's best friend.'" This professor's censorship was not motivated by religious strictures; instead, his main motivation was to force the students to produce films that went beyond the overwrought subject matter of their contemporaries as well as of contemporary film in general. Similarly, the religiously-motivated censorship of Ma'ale can be seen as liberating its students and Israeli film in general from a repetition of the secular thematics of contemporary film. David Franklin, "The Professor as Censor: Creative Limitation and Film Production Pedagogy," *Journal of Film and Video*, 53.1, 2001, 25.

As I was preparing the final version of this article, an article appeared in the *New York Times* describing a controversy at the New York University film school regarding a decision by the school administration to forbid a student from filming two actors engaging in actual, not simulated, sexual relations in front of a camera set up in a classroom as part of a four-minute film on the relationship of "unbridled human lust and banal everyday behavior." In conjunction with the prohibition of the filming of the sexual relations, the article reports, "university officials said they would issue a written policy requiring student films and videos to follow the ratings guidelines of the Motion Picture Association of America, with nothing racier than R-rated fare allowed . . . [which] may include 'nudity within sensual scenes.'" *New York Times*, 4 December 2003. The tension between community norms and artistic creativity at New York University is not all that different from the same tension at Ma'ale, except, of course, that the latter limits sexual content more strictly than the former.

34. A recent web site states: "Women are over-proportionally represented in the student body." <http://www.reel-il.de/il_html/schule_ma_ale.shtml>.

35. The essays to which I refer may be found in Recanati (ed), *Mevaseret* (1996).

36. Ilan Nov, "Mevuqash: qolnoa yehudi," [Wanted: A Jewish Cinema] in Recanati (ed), *Mevaseret* (1996) 16–21.

37. Yitzhak Recanati, "Binyan mul binyan: befithah shel shenat limmudim beveit hasefer 'Ma'ale'" [Building Opposite Building: At the Beginning of a New School Year at the Ma'ale School] Recanati, ed., *Mevaseret* (1996) 69–78.

38. Shapiro, "Hamedyom hatiqshorti," 53–65.

39. Yehuda Brandes, "Torah vetiqshoret" [Torah and Communications Media] Recanati (ed), *Mevaseret* (1996) 7–15.

40. *Ibid.*, 14.

41. See Sheleg, *Hadatiyyim habadashim*, 63–7; Tamar El-Or, *Next Year I Will Know More: Literacy and Identity among Young Orthodox Women in Israel*, transl. Haim Watzman (Detroit, 2002) [Heb. Edition: *Befesah haba: nashim ve'oryanut batsiyyonut hadatit* (Tel-Aviv, 1998)].

42. Sheleg, *Hadatiyyim habadashim*, 54–5.

43. Gideon Aran has discussed the way that Purim functions for what he calls "fundamentalist" Jews (i.e., followers of Gush Emunim and the ultra-Orthodox) as an opportunity for self-parody within a group, as well as for trying out the ways of an opposing outside group (e.g., a Gush Emunim follower wearing a Peace Now T-shirt on Purim), but also attacking an opposing outside group, as when settlers have gone on rampages against Palestinians on Purim. He notes the way that Purim in these circles straddles the fence between serious religious commitment and the human need to let go in a playful manner: "While the true believers exalt the festival, they also convert the joy into gravity. Hence Purim foolery is subject to strict supervision. Limits are set on costume and repertoire. With some ultra-Orthodox, for example, it is forbidden for a man to masquerade as a woman. Some *yeshivot* have censored certain subjects for parody." See Gideon Aran, "What's So Funny About Fundamentalism?" in Marty and Appleby (eds), *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, 325–6.

44. Natan Zach, *Kol hehalav vehadevash* [All the Milk and Honey] (Tel-Aviv, 1986) 20. The translation is mine.

45. Larry Derfner reported in an article in 1999 speaking to Ma'ale students, who were more concerned with raising the level of the media from "the cheapness, the commercialism, the shallowness, the sensationalism" which characterizes contemporary film and television programming, than with teaching religious truths. One student was quoted as saying, "I don't want to make religious programs, I want to make sane programs, I want to introduce a measure of sanity into the media, and maybe it'll spread." Derfner, "Lights, Camera, Shabbes."

46. A case in point is the documentary *Tehorah* [Purity], (2002), directed by Ma'ale graduate Anat Zuria. The film has reportedly received negative reactions

by some Orthodox Jewish viewers because it raises critical issues surrounding the traditional Jewish laws of family purity. See Brandon Judell, "The Joys of Mikvah: A Ritual Gains Popularity Among Non-Orthodox Women" in *Aufbau*, 30 October 2003 <www.aufbauonline.org>. I thank my colleague Michah Gottlieb for calling my attention to the film and for his report to me of the controversy he witnessed in a discussion in an Orthodox synagogue in New York following the screening of the film.