Film Review: "The Return of Sarah's Daughters"** by filmmaker Marcia Jarmel

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In "The Return of Sarah's Daughters", film maker Marcia Jarmel takes us on a feminist tour into the world of Orthodox Judaism where what we glimpse is at once part reflection, part history and part cultural memoir. Jarmel, writer, producer and director of the award winning film (1), inserts herself as our narrative guide along the life path of two women - Rus and Myriam - all three in search of their own identities as Jews, and as women grappling with the contradictions of feminism and Orthodoxy in the 1990's.

Across from Lowen's Bakery in the Orthodox shtetl that is Crown Heights, countless Jewish men, women and children go about their daily ablutions and chores. What sets them apart from other Brooklynites, other Jews, is not only that prescribed garb of Orthodoxy - black suits for men that conceal the swaying fringe of the talis or the trademark tiki or sheitel that covers women's hair - but their beliefs as Lubavitch Hasidic Jews that each deed or mitzvah prepares the world for the Messiah. In the midst of this bustling and thriving community (we are told that the fastest growing Jewish communities in the U.S. are Orthodox), Rus Shatkin Burdman circulates from community meetings and her job as a social worker to the private demands of keeping a kosher home and following the six hundred and thirteen rules she must follow every day of her life.

Rus, who chose her Jewish name in an epiphany of religious certitude, became Orthodox after growing up "Darcy" in a non-observant Jewish home. More than a decade into her conversion, her father generously remarks: "In every generation there needs to be someone like Darcy...to preserve the traditions for future generations." In fact, Rus insists, were it not for Orthodox women keeping kosher and keeping the Shabbat rituals, "Judaism falls apart". We see Rus as a strong woman of crystal determination who is guided by her own clarity of purpose. In the ten years prior to her arranged marriage in the Lubavitch community, Rus traveled and taught throughout the world in a tireless effort to fulfill one of the dictums of Habad - to embrace wayward Jews into Orthodoxy. Despite the otherwise reticent stance against proselytizing in Judaism, we hear post-Holocaust Orthodox rabbis insist that we must re-populate the world with Jewish people. And what better way than through the mitzvah of marriage and a well-ordered life according to strict Jewish law?

In her disarming sureness, Rus almost convinces us that Orthodoxy is good for women. We see women bound together with the same focus, sense of community and camaraderie of sisterhood to capture even the most faded feminist imagination. Thankfully, Jarmel's feminist sensibilities retrieve us from the romantic lure of ancient rituals, such as those that separate women from men in worship and in public discourse. In a critical moment, we even hear Rus lament that it is painful to
hear men forget the melodies of the Torah while women and children sit in isolated pews on the other side of the Temple.

On the other side of the country, Myriam sits in a San Francisco cafe and recalls how the subordination of women in Orthodoxy was a "lesser pain than the greater pleasure of hearing the Torah for hours." Myriam, a demure, yet eloquent woman in her thirties, reflects on her "swim in the Torah" as a path of self-realization and identity formation. In the joys of Jewish community, Myriam found the celebration of herself. The process of "coming out" as a Jew parallels and underscores her identity as a lesbian. The crisis comes when the rabbi insists on the heterosexist doctrine of marriage - a moment of conflict Myriam ultimately resolves by leaving Orthodoxy. Myriam looks back, at moments in sadness, on the "power, romance, beauty [and]...depth behind the ritual" of which she can no longer be a part. But, did she ever pray that God would make her straight? "Never, not one day." In continuing to live her life "Jewishly" through her rabbinical studies in the Jewish reconstructionist movement, Myriam sustains the "potent tools" of ritual that "keep us in our growth as human beings."

In "The Return of Sarah's Daughters," Marcia Jarmel reveals her quest that rests just below her feminist critique of Orthodoxy. Each of these women's lives teaches us foremost about the viability of cultural continuity in the (post)feminist world of Jewish women. Taken together, the roots of Orthodoxy connect to the renewal movements as diverse ways of "re-creating the Jewish world" like the tree of life itself reminds us. As a generational return, Jarmal shows us the strengths in rekindling cultural traditions.

Notes

The film recently won the Judas Magnes Museum's Jewish Video Competition.
