
Reviewed by David A. Salomon, The Sage Colleges, Troy, New York

Purity (Tehora), a 2002 film by Israeli filmmaker Anat Zuria, is a disturbing and insightful examination of the ancient laws (particularly Family Purity or Taharat Hamischpacha) regarding women’s sexuality. At the heart of the film is the niddah, the seven day period following menstruation during which women must separate themselves from their husbands. During this time, according to Lev.18:19) the women are considered unclean. The woman remains unclean until she immerses herself in the ritual bath or mikvah. Three women are profiled in this documentary, and each of the three approaches the ritual with a different attitude and perspective. One----left marriage in protest; another faithfully teaches the ritual to her daughter, about to be married herself; the third, Zuria herself, struggles with the physical and emotional stress the ritual causes, both for herself and for her marriage.

Shot cinema verite, with a haunting soundtrack, the film sheds light on an ages-old tradition, a tradition being dealt with in very real ways by very real women in the 21st century. One of the film’s shortcomings is the English subtitles, many containing misspelling or even funny mistaken transliterations. The question which arises by the film’s end: should contemporary Jewish women still be required to keep this tradition in order to remain faithful Jews? Zuria does not provide us with an answer to this question, though it seems clear that her answer would be ‘no.’ Some have gone so far as to call the film a ‘smear’ on an ancient tradition.

The ritual is not only physically draining; it is emotionally painful, requiring a great degree of solitude, physical restraint, and religious fervor. These are three things not embraced in the contemporary world of chat rooms, never ending interaction, and an overwhelming secular world. What are these women to do? In fact, Zuria’s more recent film, 2004’s Sentenced to Marriage, explores another Jewish tradition in a secular world: divorce.

Purity has been recognized by a wide variety of awards committees: from the Jerusalem International Film Festival to the Jihlava Documentary Film Festival in the Czech Republic. Zuria has explored a taboo subject and has done it with what some might think a heavy hand. Her own story, the most difficult to follow in the film, has compelled some reviewers to brand the film as ‘misunderstanding’ the ritual. The trouble is not a misunderstanding of the ritual but a misunderstanding of its role in modern Judaism, a faith that continues to reinterpret (and reinvent) itself with each new reading of the Talmud.

The film is certainly an interesting exploration of the topic and a film that will spur heated discussion, not only within the faith but by outsiders, many of whom will see the ritual as
Purity

primitive and inconsistent with the modern world. But what religion that is centuries old does not include traditions that now, in the 21st century, seem out of date?