



# FILM.COURSE

FILMS AND TEACHING RESOURCES

SHABBAT & HOLIDAYS  
**A SHABBAT MOTHER**



The short films in this collection are the graduate creations of our students. The films embody the passions, concerns and spiritual dilemmas of the young people who have written and directed them. The educational materials are a compilation of the classes, lectures and seminars that have been given with the films to Jewish audiences of every age and background over the past decade. This particular set is designed to bring you original and vibrant resources for the Jewish High Holiday period with its themes of soul-searching, repentance, forgiveness and renewal.

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# A SHABBAT MOTHER



Scriptwriter & Director: Inbar Namdar | Drama | 30 minutes | 2004

## Film Synopsis

Three young women from an Orthodox background return to their childhood home to spend the Sabbath (Shabbat), with their widowed mother. The youngest, Cheli, who is deeply committed to Jewish tradition, is married to a yeshiva student, Dudi. Cheli has been trying for over a year to get pregnant, but without success. Ella, the middle daughter, also married, is due to give birth any day but unsure of her ability to be a parent. Yael, the oldest, has chosen a secular lifestyle and works as a radio broadcaster. The girls' widowed mother struggles with her loneliness and with her daughters' life choices, many of which confuse or aggravate her. Over Shabbat, the gaps and differences between the sisters and their mother cause conflict, while other issues bring them closer together and underline their commitment to one another. Some family tensions are worked through and clarified, while others are not resolvable and must be accepted and integrated into the family over time. The film ends with the birth of a new baby and the promise and renewal that this augurs for the women and their partners.

## Topics for discussion raised by this film

- Complexities of **the mother/daughter relationship**. Areas of conflict.
- **Choosing a lifestyle** or life-view that differs from that of one's parents.
- **Religious identity** and expression.
- The different ways in which siblings in one family relate to their parents.
- **Family relationships**: Parent/child, sibling/sibling, parent/child's partner.
- How extreme closeness and alienation can exist in one family and can fluctuate over time.
- **Shabbat** and the meaning of that day for the family, including the concept of "sanctified time."
- **Relationships between young couples**: conflict, accommodation, unarticulated fears and tensions, stress from outside factors.
- **Parental disapproval** of choice of girlfriend/boyfriend/partner.
- **Bereavement**, widowhood, loss of a parent and destabilization of the family dynamic.
- **Realistic/unrealistic expectations** of family unity and empathy.
- **Acceptance of difference**, inter-generational and inter-sibling.
- **Motherhood**: how it changes with the age of the children, expectations and disappointments, adjustments, a new birth in the family.
- **The desire to be parents as a Jewish value**: Do we want to be parents? If so, why? What is being a parent and what kind of parent do we want to be?



## CINEMATIC TOOLS FOR ANALYSIS

### 1. THE CHARACTERS

It is the job of the scriptwriter and director to ensure that each of the characters has a particular type of behavior and speech that is easily identified by the viewer. However, while different characters may conform to easily recognizable dress modes and speech patterns, the director will aim for some non-stereotypical representations of the character in order to achieve greater complexity, break down pre-conceived notions about particular groups of people, sharpen the drama, show change and development in the character, and surprise and entertain the audience.

Here is a breakdown of the character representation in the film:

	Appearance	Behavior	Non-stereotypical elements
<b>Mother</b> (Miriam)	Middle-aged, no hair-covering, accented Hebrew (Eastern European?). Note the furnishings of the house, which are themselves reflections of the mother's personality, culture and age.	Talkative, intrusive, bossy, not very sensitive, not much of a listener, impatient, caring, motherly, possesses a wry sense of humor, generous.	At the end of the film, she is much more accepting of her younger daughter.
<b>Youngest Daughter</b> (Cheli)	Dressed in modest clothing associated with very religious women. Youthful verging on childish facial expressions, naïveté in language.	Sensitive, gentle, distressed, trusting, introverted, romantic, committed to her marriage, spiritual, strong and defiant about her particular Jewish identity.	Accepting of her sisters and their different lifestyles, willing to confront her mother on issues of independence and non-interference.



<b>Oldest Daughter</b> (Yael)	Witty and wistful voice on radio, arrives on a motorbike, makeup, fun, curly hair, modern secular clothes, irreverent, sarcastic and tolerant tone with her mother.	The most adult and mature of the three, relaxed, takes life in her stride, strong, independent, calm, misses her father, wise, caring and considerate toward her sisters, romantically involved.	Still attached to some Jewish traditional symbols: her father's tefillin, her willingness to celebrate an Orthodox Shabbat with the family.
<b>Middle Daughter</b> (Ella)	Modern-Orthodox appearance with minimal hair-covering, colorful dress and makeup. Facial expressions: sarcastic, puzzled, disconnected, sad, angry.	Impatient towards husband and Shabbat rituals, confused, resentful, pregnant, exhausted, selfish, not very warm or affectionate.	Unexpectedly empathetic to her sister in conversation, unexpectedly honest in her appraisal of herself as potential parent, tender and joyful on birth of baby.
<b>Cheli's Husband</b> (Dudi)	Very Orthodox dress code, shy and non-confrontational tone and facial expression, committed to Jewish study and Jewish rituals.	Immature, shows lack of sensitivity and worldliness in certain situations but on the whole attempts empathy, shows off Jewish knowledge.	Tries hard to respect his mother-in-law despite her harshness, brings candy to his wife in the labor room, makes peace with his mother-in-law.
<b>Ella's Husband</b> (Kobi)	Modern-Orthodox appearance with small and colorful <i>kippah</i> , modern dress, easygoing manner and tone of voice, physically attractive, buoyant and lively body language.	Takes everything in his stride including his wife's complaints, pleasantly engaged with Jewish tradition but not overly inspired by it, lighthearted, unsympathetic, boyish.	This character remains more or less within his stereotype, except for his panic when his wife goes into labor.

### Identification of the main character

Who is the main character in the film? Who moves the narrative forward and has unfulfilled desires and obstacles to overcome? Who changes and grows the most and causes others to change and grow? In a film with many characters it is important for us to be able to identify the main character around whom much of the drama unfolds.

The main character is usually the one with whom we identify the most and whose emotions and challenges feel tangible and engaging to us. The main character usually expresses in some way the mindset, message and worldview of the director, or is the vessel used by the director to tell the story she wants to tell. The main character will also get more camera time than other characters, and often has more dialogue and more opportunities to express herself, verbally or otherwise.

Though other characters arouse our empathy and affection and undergo some change, the main character in the film is Cheli. Her challenges are multilayered, and her lack of ability to conceive is a universal form of distress which puts her in a unique position of empathy with the audience. Her name, a shortened version of Rachel, hints at the biblical Rachel, who suffered from infertility for many years.

### Relationships between the characters

The mother, Miriam, shows an obvious preference for the Modern-Orthodox, pregnant daughter, who appears to fulfill most of her expectations. Miriam is often short-spoken with her other two daughters, displaying a lack of sensitivity to their needs. She disapproves deeply of Yael's secular lifestyle and Cheli's low socio-economic status, and takes every opportunity to communicate her disapproval. Of the two young marriages, one appears to be based on gentleness, seriousness and shared life values, the other on acceptance, humor and a light-hearted response to problems. Both are models for relationships and both have their advantages and disadvantages in a crisis. The relationship between the sisters is shown as strong and caring despite the differences in their chosen lifestyles, which indicates that a stable and loving family dynamic was in place when the women were children.



### How the scriptwriter has created the characters

The scriptwriter has used the dialogue in the film to show a specific point of view about each of the characters. There is underlying criticism of Miriam's insensitivity towards her daughters, particularly Cheli, whose homemade *hallot* Miriam rejects and whom she mocks for her modest career aspirations. Ella, the Modern-Orthodox sister, and her husband Kobi are not often shown in a sympathetic light. They appear to be shallow and cynical in much of the dialogue. Dudi, Cheli's husband, is portrayed as a gentle man, but the script stops just short of making him an empathetic personality, since his passivity, childishness and lack of tact make him seem immature and less interesting than Cheli. The scriptwriter's obvious affection for Yael, the secular daughter, is highlighted in her tolerance, maturity and kindness towards her sisters. From the start of the film, Yael is presented to us as a sensitive, warm and "whole" personality, particularly in the scene where she finds her father's *tefillin* bag in the closet and is reminded of how much she misses him.

### The silent characters

The absent father is the missing character who nevertheless has a role to play in the story. How many of the tensions and uncertainties in the family have developed since his death? The film hints that he has not been gone very long; his shirts and his *tefillin* are still in the closet, the daughters discuss where he sat at the table, and Yael and Cheli play childish games that remind them of him. In the last sentence of the film, Miriam wistfully remarks that the baby resembles him. Loved ones who have died are always "present," and the memory of their faces, voices and actions are carried down to the next generation.

In some respects, "Shabbat" is also a character in the film. The twenty-four hour period of Shabbat in an Orthodox household calls for the suspension of everyday activities in order to create an atmosphere that is restful and quiet. In our story, Shabbat has allowed for the close physical proximity of the characters, bringing certain resentments and hurts to a head while defusing others. At some points, Shabbat divides the family members in their perception of how it should be celebrated and respected. At others it provides them with moments of mutual support and a reinforcement of their ultimate loyalty to one another. In this film, Shabbat is a kind of laboratory in which the family bonds are tested.

## 2. THE DRAMATIC CONFLICT

### The core of the conflict

The focus of the conflict is the relationship between Cheli, the youngest daughter, and her mother, Miriam. On the surface, the conflict is about money. Cheli needs money to pay for expensive fertility treatments as her husband has taken a minimum-wage job while he studies in yeshiva. Cheli would like to ask her mother for financial help but has been frequently humiliated by her mother's disapproval of her spiritual aspirations and of the couple's economic situation. On a deeper level, Cheli is grieved by the lack of warmth and affection her mother shows her; she craves love, encouragement and unconditional acceptance. Her mother's harsh and derisive comments throughout the film underscore Cheli's sense of isolation and abandonment, magnified by the recent loss of her father and her inability to become pregnant.

### The motif of "The Burden of Secrecy"

Cheli's inner sense of crisis is heightened by what she perceives as the necessity to keep her infertility a secret. For reasons that are not clear to us, Cheli has not told her family about her infertility, perhaps because she believes their lack of empathy will make her situation harder to bear. This "burden of secrecy," which sharpens the drama and Cheli's feeling of sadness, demands of her an almost superhuman effort to pretend that everything is fine when in fact she feels fragile and vulnerable. By the end of the film, Cheli has unintentionally shared her secret with Yael, who overhears a whispered conversation between Cheli and Dudi. Later in the evening, Cheli unburdens herself to Ella, who fears the impending birth of her baby and the responsibilities of parenthood. Miriam, the mother, is then presumably informed of Cheli's situation by her sisters. Miriam offers financial support to Cheli and Dudi at the end of the film. Cheli's learning curve here is about the psychological relief and trust involved in sharing pain with family members, even if the problem cannot be resolved in the short term.

## 3. FILM STRUCTURE

**Exposition:** One at a time, the daughters arrive at their mother's house before the start of Shabbat on Friday afternoon. The reception that each of them receives from their mother indicates the quality of the relationship in each case.





**Crisis:** A whispered conversation between Cheli and her husband, followed by a heartfelt prayer over the Shabbat candles, reveal that Cheli has not been able to become pregnant and does not feel she can ask her mother for help with fertility treatment. This is made worse by the fact that Ella, her sister, is due to give birth within the next few days and appears to be cynical and unappreciative of her impending new status as a mother.

**Turning Point:** The Shabbat lights go out early, plunging Cheli and her husband into darkness on Friday night and indicating Miriam's disdain for their needs and requests. This small but significant humiliation brings Cheli's feelings to a boiling point.

**Denouement:** The next day, Miriam's usual harsh responses become unbearable to Cheli, who in a burst of anger finally articulates her frustration and hurt. This conversation, which has the potential for forgiveness and healing, is interrupted by the labor pains of the middle sister, Ella. Although Cheli has been thwarted in her desire to be understood and accepted by her mother, she has at least had the chance to express her feelings.

**Resolution:** The birth of a new baby into the family causes such an outburst of spontaneous joy and excitement that all the characters are able to put their immediate concerns aside for the moment. This helps to give them some perspective and calm. Miriam has been informed of Cheli's predicament by the other two sisters, and her offer of financial help is not just about getting the right doctor, but is unarticulated permission for Cheli's husband to continue his yeshiva studies. The tiny new baby resembles Miriam's husband, who is missed by everyone. The cyclical nature of life and death, and the idea that continuity is achieved not just by bringing new children into the world but by forgiveness and communication in the family, is the closing message of the film.

## FILM LANGUAGE

### 1. The Narrative

In what setting does the narrative of the story unfold? Except for the very last scene of the film, the story takes place in *a single location*, Miriam's home. Since

this is the home where the three young women grew up, they are thrown into early patterns of parent/child interaction when they are there. Their memories from their childhood home also sharpen their sense of loss over their father's death. All interactions that take place under this roof do so in the shadow of his absence.

The story also takes place over a comparatively short period of time i.e., the twenty-four hours between sunset on Friday and nightfall on Saturday. Because of these two factors the characters are effectively *locked down in time and place*, creating a "pressure-cooker" effect. This "pressure-cooker" feeling is common to many Orthodox families who spend Shabbat and the holidays together. Phones, iPods, computers and other electronic diversions are switched off and neutralized, travel is limited, and there is a focus on human interaction. The stresses, emotions, and priorities of the week are re-calibrated during this time. Family tensions may become either more relaxed or more exacerbated over this period.

The three sisters and their lifestyles represent a common scenario in the Israeli Orthodox family today. Some young people who have been raised Orthodox decide to opt for a secular lifestyle, others closely emulate the traditions of the childhood home, while still others choose a stricter and more exacting way of life than that modeled by their parents. But in the broader context, the three sisters represent Israeli society, in which millions of Jews struggle to give shape and expression to their Jewish identity in a variety of ways. While this results in a healthy diversity, it also causes resentment and conflict between the different communities. The film's message, that no *one* lifestyle is the "correct" one and that family and continuity are the underlying values that strengthen us, is carried within the narrative framework of this family story.

The narrative of the film also addresses the wider, universal issue of parental acceptance. Almost all parents wish for their children to imbibe their values and carry on their way of life. Many parents find a child's rejection of the family "ethos" painful or unacceptable. Yet young people make choices every day about education, politics, religious affiliation and geographical location that contradict or differ from the choices their parents made. How can the yawning gap between parental expectations and children's right to free choice be negotiated? What is the role of the Jewish family and community in bridging this gap?



The absence of the father hints at the fact that the twentieth-century model of the Jewish family is changing and that many twenty-first-century families have one parent only. Is this one parent expected to fulfill the roles of two people? How can the burden of the single-parent role be expressed to children to make them more sensitive to the unique stresses of that parent's life? How much should the community be involved in mitigating this stress?

The birth at the end of the film shows how family attitudes and behaviors that have hardened and appear to be non-negotiable can sometimes undergo a paradigm shift when new and unexpected circumstances arise.

Birth, real or symbolic – whether in the form of a second marriage, a relocation or much-needed therapy – is an important element of renewal and survival in Jewish family life.

## 2. Genre, visual language and imagery

Family dramas are a well-known and well-explored genre, partly because every director and every viewer has come of age within his or her own family drama. A family drama may be very specific in its cultural context as in the case of this film, but universal issues of conflict and communication between the generations are of interest to all.

Visual symbols of the Jewish life are employed freely in the film: a father's *tefillin*, Shabbat candles, Shabbat meals, prayers and songs, a page of the Talmud. Secular and Orthodox codes of dress are modeled by the characters. Adventurous and outgoing Yael wears red lipstick, while girlish Cheli wears a white headscarf. Various sorts of lighting design are used to convey the enveloping warmth of tradition, the meditative experience of prayer in an attic, the soporific heat of a summer day in an Israeli garden.

The musical score alternates between the sentimental and the comical, culminating in the scene in which Ella's labor pains begin. From this point on, the heavy disharmony within the family begins to disintegrate in order to make way for something entirely different.



## POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

### Trigger questions for after the screening

Note: We have included questions addressing a wide range of ages and backgrounds. You are invited to choose which questions will be most appropriate for your educational setting.

1. Who is the main character in the film? Why?
2. With which character do *you* most identify?
3. Why does Cheli's mother, Miriam, belittle Cheli's profession as a pre-school teacher and Dudi's poorly-paid cleaning jobs? Can we understand what might lie behind her unsympathetic comments to Cheli?
4. How do we define a "traditional lifestyle" for a Jewish family? Are there parameters? What are the different ways in which a Jewish family could be said to be "traditional"? What are the other ways in which we define, label and categorize a family's Jewish affiliation? When is this categorization helpful in the communal setting, and when is it not helpful?



5. How complex are the characters? List ways in which each of them has their good points and bad points. Do any of the characters remind you of people or conflicts in your own family? Write about an ongoing point of conflict in your family that has been difficult to resolve (curfew issues, allowance, college application, sibling preference, etc.) Write down five creative solutions that you think you might be able to use to solve a difficult issue in your own family circle.
6. In the film, it is the birth of a new baby which enables everybody to "soften up" and back down from some of their hardened positions. Can you think of other, positive events in family life that would have a similar effect?
7. Have you learned anything from the way the characters interact with each other? Give an example of one positive and one negative form of interaction in the story that you have learned from.
8. Since the film is a personal artistic statement by the director, what do you think you can guess about her and her world view? Which of the three sisters do you think most represents her?
9. From the beginning of the film, Cheli's mother is impatient and inconsiderate with her until eventually Cheli loses patience and "blows a fuse." What choices were available to Cheli in her thought, speech and actions that could have helped her deal with her mother's hurtful remarks before things reached that point?
10. The desire to be parents as a Jewish value: Do we want to be parents? If so, why? What is being a parent and what kind of parent do we want to be?

## Jewish practices and philosophies raised in the film

### Practical and Halachic

*Kashrut* – checking of lettuce and other leafy vegetables for bugs.

*Shabbat* – candles, prayers, meals and special foods, songs, blessings before and after the meals, prohibitions (what is a Shabbat clock for the lights and how is it used?), circumstances in which Shabbat laws are suspended.

*Prayers* – special prayer for infertility, prayers after a birth.

### Ethical and Behavioral

Respect for parents, the ability to control anger and frustration, acceptance of the "other," how we "label" others in the Jewish world.



## MORE SOURCES & RESOURCES

### Parents and Children

#### a. Yalkut Shimoni, Bereshit, Chapter 37

Rav said: "One should never show a preference towards one particular child. Because Jacob was more generous to Joseph than to his other sons\*, the brothers became jealous. The entire descent of the Jews into Egypt resulted from this." (by giving him the coat of many colors)

#### b. "Letter to His Father" by Franz Kafka

In 1919, the author Franz Kafka wrote a letter to his father in order to confront him about his emotionally abusive behavior. He never sent the letter. *Translated into English by Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins, published in a bilingual edition by Schocken Books in 1966 and included in several Schocken collections of Kafka's works. In 2008, a new translation by Hannah and Richard Stokes was published by Oneworld Classics under the title Dearest Father.*

#### c. "Honor Your Father and Your Mother"

1. "Wisdom of the Heart," Chapter 5 on the Fifth Commandment  
From *The Ten Commandments* by David Hazony, published by Scribner.
2. The twentieth-century Jewish sage and philosopher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote extensively about the fifth commandment to honor one's parents. From his essay "To Grow in Wisdom" (1961 *White House Conference on Aging*):  
"What we owe the old is reverence, but all they ask for is consideration, attention, not to be discarded and forgotten. What they deserve is preference, yet we do not even grant them equality. One father finds it possible to sustain a dozen children, yet a dozen children find it impossible to sustain one father."





"In Jewish tradition the honor for father and mother is a commandment, the perfect fulfillment of which surpasses the power of man. There is no limit to what one ought to do in carrying out this privilege of devotion. God is invisible, but my mother is His presence."

### Israeli films on these topics

*LeilaSede* (Passover Fever), dir. Shimi Zarchin, 1995

*Knafayim Shvurot* (Broken Wings), dir. Nir Bergman, 2002

*Shiva* (Seven Days), dir. Shlomi Elkabetz, 2008

*He'arat Shulayim* (Footnote), dir. Joseph Cedar 2011

### Ma'aleh student films on these issues

See film catalog: <http://www.maale.co.il/default.asp?PagelD=73>

*A Pure Prayer* (dir. Sarah Beck)

*A-Maisseh* (dir. Yitzchak Sverdlov)

*Ido* (dir. Gili Goldschmidt)

*Luz* (dir. Yael Kaniel)

*Normal* (dir. Danny Tzur)

*Persian Lullaby* (dir. Keren Hakak)

*Sweet Sins* (dir. Renana Herman)