



FILM.COURSE

FILMS AND TEACHING RESOURCES

OUTSIDERS

A LITTLE BIT DIFFERENT



THE OUTSIDER IN SOCIETY

By Frumah Laor
psychotherapist & educational consultant

Who is the "other" in society? Is he/she an illegal immigrant, an overweight child, a person with a physical disability, an abused teenager? In order for us to understand what is perceived as "otherness" in our communities, we need to be familiar with some sociological and psychological concepts.

Norms

Norms are accepted patterns of social conduct or accepted social responses to a given situation. Norms vary from group to group and provide the vital framework for a code of expected behavior in that group. The more closed the society, the greater the obligation of the individual to conform to its norms.

Stigma

Stigma is the negative and damaging designation of a person as different from others. A stigmatized person is perceived as evil, weak, limited, or blemished in some way and is transformed, in the eyes of society, into an inferior and unvalued human being. Different communities and countries have different norms of accepted behavior, and as a result the stigmas of those societies also vary. A social behavior that is considered normal and appropriate in one group can be stigmatized in another.

Stereotype

A stereotype is a widely held and oversimplified image of the identifying characteristics of a segment of the population. A stereotype is usually based on ethnic, communal, religious or racial perceptions. As in the case of a stigma, a stereotype is used by the individual as a way of sharpening and clarifying his understanding of the social phenomena that surround him. A stereotypical perception is by definition a narrow and limited one, as it lacks depth and complexity and is based on generalizations that pay no attention to nuance in a particular group or person. Stereotypical thinking is a superficial attempt to categorize human beings into easily recognizable and identifiable sub-groups.

The Shadow

In Carl Gustav Jung's psychoanalytic school of thought, known as Analytical Psychology, the concept of the shadow refers to every facet of an individual's life that she consciously experiences as disagreeable or negative, and very different from herself. Because of a discrepancy between the disturbing or alien qualities of the shadow as the individual experiences them and the values and convictions with which she consciously identifies, the ego tends to repress shadow experiences, consigning them to the unconscious. Deep within the unconscious, inaccessible and unrecognized as essentially one's own, shadow feelings nevertheless continue to exert their effect and influence on the conscious mind. It is the role of awareness to lift parts of the shadow out of the unconscious and into consciousness, releasing the negative energies they emit, integrating them in some revised way, and redirecting them towards personal development. But this is exceedingly difficult to do. Our tendency to project our shadow (that is, some kind of denied and repressed emotional pain) onto other individuals or groups explains, according to Jung, why we blame, criticize and bear grudges against others, act violently against groups whose views or behavior we cannot accept, or experience boredom in the presence of ideas or persons whose true capacity to excite us we cannot tolerate. This process can operate in the reverse as well. We often project positive feelings from our own unconscious onto others, which enables us to adore and to love them — yet, occasionally, we then experience our own selves as somehow depleted, or even envy or hate the object of our love for what we think they possess that we do not. Ultimately, because we cannot change others until we change ourselves, change in many of our relationships is only possible when we can acknowledge that many of those elements that we dislike in others are actually projections of the "shadow" dimension of our own unconscious. As long as these elements lie buried within us we cannot reveal them, understand them or work to heal them.

The purpose of this film kit is to bring up for open discussion some of the complex psychological and emotional challenges that people face in their day-to-day lives. Observation and exploration of the life challenges of the individuals in these films allows us to gain insight into the prejudices and stereotypes of the different societies in which we live. It is suggested that the films be analyzed from the standpoint of the universal issues that they address, such as inter-generational conflict, the difficulties and coping tools of the "other" in the community, and so

on. Because these painful or controversial issues are presented in the unfamiliar context of Israeli cultural phenomena, they are less threatening and less immediate to the audience than films very specific to their own social background. We recommend that the audience not explore the film's connection with their own social and cultural background until it has discussed most of the universal issues in the film. This enables those watching the films to see the problems in the wider context and internalize them.

Audiences may notice that an element common to all of the films is the lack of sensitivity that individuals and communities display towards the predicament of the "other." We recommend exploration of this topic in order to discuss with the audience some of the skills that we all need to acquire to ease the burden of the outsider. Screening the films in a communal setting for mixed-age audiences also provides an excellent opportunity to discuss inter-generational conflict in which parents and children are free to express themselves respectfully and without constraint.

We hope that, at the very least, the films will encourage people to be more open, loving and respectful in difficult social settings which demand the highest levels of our engagement and empathy.

A LITTLE BIT DIFFERENT



Scriptwriter & Director: Racheli Scheinfeld Gadot | Drama | 25 minutes | 2003

Film synopsis

Hava, better known by her nickname Havaleh, is an ultra-Orthodox young woman who has broken off her engagement eighteen months before the film begins. Now a new match is being arranged for her, and Havaleh looks forward to meeting the young man, Moshe. But nobody tells her that Moshe has a disability, and when she first meets him she rejects him in a humiliating and hurtful manner. Hava must deal with her feelings of guilt and overcome her prejudices and the young man must be open and forgiving, in order for the two of them to meet again as equals.

Topics for discussion raised by this film

- **Being "set up"** on a date: Expectations and disappointments; what do we look for in a person we have never met before?
- **The "shidduch" or match** in ultra-Orthodox society; its pros and cons.
- **Physical appearance and fitness vs. the character of a human being.**

- **Psychological status in disability:** Self image, self-empowerment, communication with others, responses to stereotypical perceptions in the community.
- **Family relationships** in the ultra-Orthodox community.



CINEMATIC TOOLS FOR ANALYSIS

1. THE CHARACTERS

Havaleh, a young woman who is not typical of her ultra-Orthodox community, is strong-willed and independent-minded and does not conform to some of the expectations of those around her. A high-school gym teacher, she enjoys physical exercise, likes to wear her hair loose and is generally aware of her body and appearance in a way that many consider to be immodest. Worse, six months ago Havaleh called off her engagement when she discovered that her husband-to-be had no intention of allowing her to keep working as a gym teacher after the marriage. The fact that she terminated the engagement is seen as a lack of sincerity in her approach to marriage and as a selfish refusal to put her family's standing in the community above her own desires.

The broken engagement has made Havaleh less desirable on the marriage market and she has been relegated to second-class status in terms of her chances for a good match. First-class young men are no longer available to her; the only ones she will be allowed to meet will have a physical or emotional disability of some kind, or will come from a family less well connected than her own.

Supporting characters

Moshe, a Talmudic scholar of exceptional ability, was injured some years ago in an accident and walks with crutches. Moshe is particular about physical fitness and aside from his disability is healthy and strong. Unusually for a devoted yeshiva student, Moshe's intellectual curiosity extends to fields of knowledge outside the yeshiva world, as evidenced by the physics book he brings along with him on one of his dates with Havaleh. Since the study of all subjects not directly related to the Torah is considered a waste of time in the ultra-Orthodox community,

the book is an indication of Moshe's independence and his determination to pursue what interests him without needing the approval of others.

Havaleh's parents are deeply caring, but Havaleh's stubbornness and independence, along with the history of her broken engagement, give them cause to fear for her future. They are aware of how she differs from her peers but because being different is perceived as a negative trait in the ultra-Orthodox community, they try to dissuade her from taking courses of action which will make her stand out. This streak of individuality in her affects not only Havaleh's chances for a good marriage but also those of her sisters, who are tainted by association. Her parents are complicit in her relegation to second-class status since they defer to the matchmaker's opinions and do not tell her that the young man she is to meet has a disability.

The film shows Havaleh's struggle to maintain some small degree of independence while under the strict supervision of her parents and community, not just in dialogue and plot but in small gestures such as her undoing her braid and shaking her hair loose after her mother has carefully braided it.

Leah, Havaleh's younger sister, conforms to the community's norms of behavior. She buys thick, modest stockings for Havaleh and likes to try on clothes from Havaleh's now-useless wedding trousseau. She dreams of getting married herself some day soon and tries on the wig that Havaleh ordered for the aborted marriage and then put away. Leah has no understanding for, or empathy with Havaleh's anger over the proposed match with the disabled Moshe. To her it is clear that Havaleh is now a "second-class" match and should not have higher expectations.

The matchmaker is the absent but present character in the film, spoken of by the characters with respect and trepidation. She is the arbiter of who will be set up on a date with whom. The matchmaker also supervises the continuation of the process *after* the first date; she receives feedback from both sides about the meeting's success or failure and decides, together with both sets of parents, how matters will proceed. The matchmaker is a figure of power who must be consulted, placated, impressed or persuaded, as she is privy to valuable information about the background and character of the young people in the community, who cannot meet or date outside of her auspices. However, the

matchmaker herself is not a free agent, since her professional reputation rests upon her careful navigation of the dating and marriage minefield by bringing about a satisfactory outcome. Meticulous codes of behavior are observed throughout the various stages of the process, with the matchmaker acting as go-between for both families. For the purposes of our film, the matchmaker symbolizes the ultra-Orthodox community's "voice" or societal expectations.

2. THE DRAMATIC CONFLICT

The film's dramatic conflict is a double one, both external and internal. The external conflict is Havaleh's rebellion against the community's code and against her parents, who are its representatives. The internal conflict is Havaleh's struggle to carve out her identity as she embraces adulthood without sacrificing her inclusion in the community.

3. FILM STRUCTURE

Exposition: It is the evening of Havaleh's first meeting with Moshe, the young man who has been suggested as a potential husband for her. By tradition, this meeting takes place in her home. Leah, Havaleh's younger sister, has bought especially thick stockings for the occasion to ensure that Havaleh will dress modestly and suitably. Havaleh's annoyance at this control over the minutiae of her life is first felt here in the innocent exchange between the sisters.

Havaleh's parents discuss the upcoming meeting out of their daughter's hearing and with some trepidation. The father asks the mother, "Maybe we should have waited?" The mother firmly replies, "It's already eighteen months since she called it off." Her reply reveals much about what happened before the film begins: a trauma has occurred and those affected need time to recover. (The euphemistic word *bitul* — "cancellation" — that the parents use to describe the broken engagement has many negative connotations. In its infinitive form, *levatel*, it can also mean to postpone, revoke, erase, delete, eliminate, delegitimize, terminate, or put an end to.)

We begin to grasp that the broken engagement has been a traumatic, damaging, saddening and frightening experience for Havaleh and for the family



as a whole. They speak of it as they would speak of a terrible accident or tragedy.

The continuation of the parents' conversation gives the viewer a sense that a "second-class" match is being arranged and that the match produces anxiety. "Why didn't they suggest that other guy, the gifted Talmud student?" the father asks, and the mother answers bitterly, "A widower with two children! A wonderful suggestion!"

The exposition in these first two scenes gives us all the information we need to set the stage for drama: an attractive, slightly rebellious ultra-Orthodox girl prepares for a meeting with a young man and decides to wear her hair loose, while whispered conversations between her parents in another room reveal that a past trauma — in this case, a broken engagement — has relegated her to second-class status on the marriage market.

Crisis: Havaleh meets Moshe, the young man, for the first time. The shock of his highly visible but fairly mild physical disability makes Havaleh harsh, cold and rejecting towards him in her speech and body language. They sit across the table from one another as if they were in opposite corners of a boxing ring before the start of a fight. Havaleh makes no effort to hide her distaste and distress at the matchmaker's choice, not because she is callous but because Moshe's disability provokes a storm of emotions inside her that she has difficulty subduing. She is also dismayed that her parents did not tell her about the disability in advance.

Appalled and angry at Havaleh's behavior, Moshe leaves, wishing her better luck next time.

Deepening of narrative and turning point(s): Later, in a discussion with her mother, Havaleh realizes that Moshe must have been terribly hurt by her coldness. While her response might have been understandable because of her shock, it was also unkind. Her compassion for Moshe as a person and her guilt at having caused him pain overcome her anger, and she asks for a chance to meet him again so that she can apologize.

The two meet for the second time in a hotel lobby one evening and, keen to escape the stares of other people, they take a walk outside to a nearby playground. Here, Havaleh gets a glimpse of Moshe as a person and is charmed by his sensitivity, humor and intelligence. It turns out that he shares her interest

in physical fitness and shows a keen appreciation of her work as a gym teacher.

This step-by-step shedding of fear and doubt on both sides can be traced almost word for word in the dialogue of the nighttime scene in the park, as Moshe's humorous and warm responses to Havaleh's honesty and his praise for her choices and for her integrity strengthen and validate her. His validation allows her to open up to him and accept him as he is.

In this conversation it is Havaleh who appears to bear the scars of trauma. She has not yet come to terms with her mistakes and triumphs and their formative effect on her. But Moshe seems to have made peace with so much from the past that could have caused him bitterness or anger. His disability and his positive attitude toward life empower Havaleh to accept herself and make peace with her past decisions.

The conversation continues far into the night. Havaleh returns home at 4:00 am, infuriating her parents. Her father tells her that yet again she has put her selfish concern for her own desires above what the community considers to be appropriate. He forbids her to meet Moshe outside the family home again.

Denouement & resolution: Obedient to her parents' wishes to guard her modesty and reputation, Havaleh meets Moshe once again, this time across the dining-room table, with her father as chaperone. Understanding that they must pass a test of sorts, she and Moshe use the formal language expected of them, telling Havaleh's father in a roundabout manner that while they are totally committed to the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle, they think that young people should sometimes be given a little privacy and independence. Taking the hint, the father pats Moshe on the back and goes into the kitchen, where his wife waits anxiously to hear how things are going. At this point Havaleh moves from her chair opposite Moshe and comes to sit next to him in the chair her father has just vacated, signaling to him and to her parents that she feels at ease with Moshe.

Final scene: Havaleh's father tells her mother that "everything is going to be fine." By this he means not only that Havaleh and Moshe appear to have "clicked" and will probably become engaged, but that they have been allowed their individuality without any transgression of the community's behavioral codes.

FILM LANGUAGE

1. The narrative

This is a classic narrative for a film script. The protagonist comes into conflict with her parents (who in this case represent the wider community) when she seeks to express her individuality, achieve a goal and do what she believes is right. In our story, a double dynamic is set up where Havaleh's growing commitment to her own need to be "a little bit different" eventually enables her to be open to a relationship with a disabled man. The opposite is also true: the more she gets to know and accept Moshe for himself, the more empowered she becomes with the courage of her convictions.

Havaleh's growth process as protagonist is not about how she called off her engagement eighteen months before. She is clearly a young woman of integrity and inner strength. Rather, it is her realization that at the very moment the community treats her as second-rate, she finds herself delivering exactly that treatment to another person. Caught off-guard because she had not been told about Moshe's disability, she is as dismissive of him as the community is of her. Only later, in her discussion with her mother, does she realize the paradox — that she judged someone superficially and was unkind toward him. Havaleh's resolve to meet Moshe and apologize, even though she is not the least bit interested in him romantically, is the beginning of her emotional journey in the film.

While the film's narrative is critical of some aspects of the ultra-Orthodox community and calls some of its practices into question, it does not oversimplify or demonize the tradition of matchmaking. All four of the main characters are sympathetic and endearing as they struggle to come to terms with new situations that require adjustment and growth. The director has chosen to bring up questions for debate respectfully, from within the community, without attempting to portray its traditions as outdated. The characters have no desire to tear down the system. They wish only to make their voices heard from within it.

2. Genre, visual imagery and sound

The film is structured around four meetings between Havaleh and Moshe. The first meeting, which takes place across the dining room table, has a

confrontational and hostile atmosphere and ends badly. In the second meeting, where Havaleh apologizes to Moshe, a gentle chemistry begins to form between them, intensifying as the evening progresses. The back-and-forth movement of the swings that they sit on symbolizes the swing of their own emotions, both during this meeting and between the various dates throughout the film. In this second date, the blossoming trust between them allows them to speak of their "faults," both the imaginary ones that the community projects onto them and the real ones that have led to their past mistakes. This makes them appreciate each other even more.

Contrary to the norm for this community, their third meeting is informal, unplanned and unsupervised. By walking and talking together in a public park without their parents' knowledge, they violate the standard dating procedures. Havaleh's running in the park while listening to music prior to bumping in to Moshe is not the kind of activity that is considered proper for a young woman anyway, but meeting and conversing with a man in the park crosses new boundaries for her from which she quickly withdraws, expressing her anxiety about "being seen". She invites Moshe to her home for a fourth meeting.

The final meeting, in which Havaleh and Moshe sit across from each other at the table once again, shows how their individuality and strength of personality has enabled them to connect despite the demand for conformity from their families. At the end of the scene, Havaleh, her hair loose, goes to sit next to Moshe in the chair her father previously occupied.

The camera placement in each scene and the angle of the resulting shot are, of course, deliberate. Each point of view speaks a language and conveys meaning. When Moshe first enters the apartment, only his legs and crutches are in the frame, and only afterward is his whole body revealed. This reflects exactly what Havaleh notices first about him. The opening focus on the disability to the exclusion of all else sets the scene for a meeting in which Havaleh will be unable to see beyond Moshe's disability.

Havaleh's clothing throughout the film is modest, as benefits an ultra-Orthodox woman. Her rebellion against the dress code is so subtle that ordinary viewers would hardly notice it. She wears thinner stockings instead of thicker ones, partially unbraids her hair before a meeting with Moshe, and wears running shoes instead of pumps. As she runs through the park with earphones on, she

is signaling to others that she dares to take pleasure in her physical fitness and in the movements of her body, and does so to music. She plays the same kind of music in her gym classes for the young girls she teaches at an ultra-Orthodox school.

But these acts of rebellion are tiny. No matter how loud or fast-paced her music may be, it is still Hasidic music. Her clothing adheres to the strictest codes of modesty by Western standards, and even when she undoes her braid, her hair is never completely loose. When a twelfth-grader whom she teaches becomes engaged, Havaleh behaves exactly as expected and is highly solicitous in her congratulations. Her rebellion, then, is expressed in finely-tuned gestures that are noted in her community but not necessarily detectable to the wider society.

It is notable that the director chooses to end the film not with Havaleh and Moshe but with the parents' conversation in the kitchen. The parents' approval and relief is the community's approval and relief, and ending the film with them leaves the viewer with a visual impression of the control that the community has over the lives of young people. It is the film's way of saying, "The young people here do not have the last word. They are not always in a position to decide their own destiny." If Havaleh's parents had not liked Moshe or had disapproved of him in any way, it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, for Havaleh to see him again.

Trigger questions for after the screening

- Dating and honoring one's parents: should we consider parental preferences when dating? How much weight should be given to our parents' desires when we date? What are the advantages and disadvantages of our parents being involved in our dating process? In terms of halacha, Jewish Law, honoring one's parents as each of the Ten Commandments takes precedence over other concerns in many cases. How can young people preserve some independence in dating while still honoring their parents?
- What are our own areas of vulnerability and weakness? How do we project them onto others? (For explanation for Jung's theory of the Shadow, see the introduction.)
- Why is the issue of "otherness" a particularly sensitive one in the context of dating, love and marriage?



POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Note: These questions and issues are for a wide range of ages and backgrounds. Feel free to choose that ones that are most appropriate for your educational setting.

Men, women, and matchmakers in the Orthodox world

Every kind of Jewish society — secular, non-denominational, traditional, modern Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox — has codes of dress and behavior that provide clues to a person's beliefs and personality. But these codes, while useful, can also obscure a person's individual essence. This is the case when one person considers dating another based on visual cues that reflect their age, socio-economic status or even their politics.

In the West, status symbols tend to be physical, financial and material, signaling a person's capacity to own or purchase objects. In the ultra-Orthodox world, a young man's status symbols are his knowledge of Torah and his ongoing pursuit of that knowledge, whether in a yeshiva or with a regular study partner. A family tree comprised of many learned and righteous men and women greatly enhances his prestige. If he cannot provide such a pedigree, he will at least be expected to have developed strong relationships with erudite families and respected rabbis of the community.

The positive side of this emphasis is that it does not focus on externals such as career success, physical beauty or material wealth. Instead, it concentrates on far more important elements such as devotion to tradition; the intention to marry, have children and set up a Jewish home; lifelong striving after wisdom; holiness and good deeds and commitment to a life led for the good of the community. But because a man's religious and intellectual abilities are so prized on the marriage market, there is a tendency to treat his social and psychological makeup (his sensitivity, emotional intelligence, communication skills and ability to maintain healthy relationships) as less important, though these are the very traits required



for happiness in love and marriage. Deep feelings of connection and belonging between young people are not built on tangible, exterior credentials but on a sense of compatibility that comes from two souls recognizing and delighting in areas of shared thought, experience and response. These feelings are strengthened by mutual flexibility and openness to accept and respect the other as different and separate. It goes without saying that a relationship built only on externals will falter in time — or, to say it in traditional Jewish terms, the pitcher will dry out, crack and break because it is empty.

“Do not look at the container, but at what is inside it.” (*Pirkei Avot* 4:27)

The above is a quote from *Pirkei Avot* (The Sayings of our Fathers), a compilation of the ethical teachings of the Rabbis of the Mishnaic period.

Several stories from the Talmud address the issue of inner and outer beauty.

The daughter of Caesar said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hanania: How can wisdom be contained in such an ugly vessel? [Rabbi Yehoshua was an ugly man.] He replied: Does your father not store wine in earthenware vessels? She said: Yes; why would he not? He answered: Well, people of your high station should store their wine in vessels of silver and gold. She asked her father for some wine and poured it into vessels of silver and gold. The wine went sour. Caesar asked her: Who told you to do that? She said: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hanania. Caesar summoned Rabbi Yehoshua and asked him: Why did you tell her to do that? He answered: I was just responding to what she said to me. (In other words, Rabbi Yehoshua was saying: This is my answer to your daughter's comment that it is a shame for wisdom to be clothed in an ugly countenance. Just as the wine is better preserved in a plain earthenware jug, so my wisdom is preserved better in my homely appearance.) (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Taanit* 7a)

This midrash attempts to compare the value Judaism places upon wisdom with the value that Greek and Roman culture placed on aesthetics. In the latter, physical beauty and fitness were absolute values around which all other values revolved. In Judaism, spiritual life and a person's positive character traits are most important. (Note that the way Caesar's daughter made fun of the rabbi's appearance says something about the culture in which she was raised.) This does not mean that beauty has no place or relevance in the Jewish world. Many other midrashim in the Talmud praise beauty. But this midrash is a story about judging someone by his

physical appearance and shows us that we have a natural tendency to rely on our visual impressions when we form opinions about others. This makes us less willing to take the trouble to get to know people before making judgments about them.

This is the trap Havaleh falls into in the film. Even as she fights to have her own individuality respected, she fails to see the individuality in Moshe, at least at first. Only later does she discover that he is a complex, sensitive and open person who also struggles with his community's assumptions about him — and that he has this extra sensitivity both despite his disability and because of it.

In the Talmudic source, the Roman princess's question shows Rabbi Yehoshua that a) she is not at all sure that wisdom can be contained in an unattractive body and b) even if such a thing were possible, it would be a shame, pointless, or a contradiction in terms. Through the lesson of the wine, Rabbi Yehoshua teaches her that some precious or beautiful things are kept in unappealing vessels, and that such inner beauty is not immediately available to the senses and must be experienced by other means.

The “other”

As part of our psychological development, we must identify “the other” in order to identify ourselves. This also applies in the wider, societal sense; communities identify themselves as separate from other communities and societies. As stated in the introduction, when we respond to “abnormalities” or “differences” in other people, we are often responding to our own differences, which we keep deep down in our unconscious. This makes it almost impossible to know another person deeply, be in her skin and understand her completely, since we always experience her through the filter of our own psyche and experience.

“I have my self-consciousness not in myself, but in the other,” wrote the philosopher Hegel. “I am satisfied and have peace with myself only in this other and I *am* only because I have peace with myself; if I did not have it then I would be a contradiction that falls to pieces. This other, because it likewise exists outside itself, has its self-consciousness only in me; and both the other and I are only this consciousness of being-outside-ourselves and of our identity; we are only this intuition, feeling, and knowledge of our unity. This is love, and without knowing that love is both a distinguishing and the sublation of this distinction, one speaks emptily of it.” (Georg Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*)

In Jewish tradition, our sages saw every human being as having been created *Be-tzelem Elokim*, in the image of God, each containing an individual spark of God. This belief, which forms the basis of many texts in Jewish philosophy and law, demands that every person, every God-fragment, be treated with respect.

Ironically, it is fairly common for the “other” person or group to treat different groups as “other” in turn. In Israel, Moroccan immigrants, who were treated as inferior by immigrants from Western Europe, later treated Yemenite immigrants as inferior. By the time both these minorities were moving toward integration, almost a million Russians arrived from the former Soviet Union — and many Israelis began to treat the new arrivals as “other.” Later, when thousands of Ethiopian immigrants arrived, the pattern was repeated.

At first glance, this is puzzling. We would expect someone who has been treated as “other” to be more sensitive than is usual. We would expect such a person to make every effort to prevent others from being treated as he was. But this is hardly ever the case, either in society or on the individual level. Why?

When we try to understand Havaleh’s coldness towards Moshe, we should remember that this is her first date since she broke her engagement eighteen months before. During that time, she might have fooled herself into thinking she would not suffer serious consequences for having backed out of the marriage. Moshe’s appearance at her door on crutches makes him not a suitor but the bearer of bad news and the embodiment of her worst fears. Her shock and anger are directed not at Moshe himself, whom she has never met before, but at the idea of Moshe — what he represents in terms of her future prospects. The man sitting across the dining room table from her is not a person at all but a message — the community’s judgment, verdict and sentence.

Havaleh’s instinctive rejection of Moshe comes from her conviction that in the hierarchy of the community’s second-class singles, the stigma of a broken engagement is not nearly as bad as that of a physical disability. But it clearly is, as Moshe’s appearance at her door confirms. From Havaleh’s point of view, accepting Moshe means accepting her new, inferior status.

Family relations in the ultra-Orthodox community

Every society tends to reject those who step outside its boundaries. In closed communities of all kinds, children who do not comply with their families’ norms can be rejected even by their own parents. That is because a family unit in a closed society cannot afford to sacrifice its public integrity and inclusion in the community



to the whims, desires and misdemeanors of its sons and daughters. If the family were to allow such a thing, it would be designated as “other” and face rejection by other families.

That is why Havaleh’s parents cannot violate the ultra-Orthodox community’s behavioral norms. It is obvious to them that an “unusual” young man will have to be found for their daughter. This is damage control; it allows for the restoration of equilibrium and the recovery of the family’s status, which now teeters on the edge of the community’s approval.

But for Havaleh, her parents’ complicity in her “demotion” is a frightening thing. Though her parents have been loving and protective in all other respects, they now fail to protect her in a matter that will have profound consequences for her adult life. Her trust in them has been eroded, and she draws on her inner resources of self-reliance, compassion and intelligence to consider the situation with Moshe. The result is that both Havaleh and Moshe preserve their individuality without violating the social norms. As a couple, they are stronger than one individual attempting to test the boundaries. Their engagement will win them the community’s approval and buy them some much-needed breathing space.



MORE SOURCES & RESOURCES

Talmudic sources

Rabbi Yossi the son of Judah of Kfar ha-Bavli would say: One who learns Torah from youngsters, to whom can he be compared? To one who eats unripe grapes and drinks [unfermented] wine from the press. One who learns Torah from the old, to whom can he be compared? To one who eats ripened grapes and drinks aged wine. Said Rabbi Meir: Look not at the vessel, but at what it contains. There are new vessels that are filled with old wine, and old vessels that contain not even new wine. (Pirkei Avot 4:20)

What can the above excerpt teach us about Havaleh's relationship with her parents and her need for their advice and guidance?

The rabbis taught: A person should always be flexible like a reed and not hard like a cedar. Once, R. Elazar the son of R. Shimon was coming from his teacher's house in Migdal Gedor. He was riding on a donkey along the banks of a river, rejoicing greatly and feeling very proud of himself, for he had learned much Torah from his teacher. Then he met an exceedingly ugly man. The ugly man said: Greetings to you, Rabbi! But R. Elazar did not return the greeting. Instead, he answered: Empty one, look how ugly you are! Is everyone from your city as ugly as you are? The man replied: I do not know. But go and tell the Craftsman who made me, "What an ugly vessel you have made!"

Rabbi Elazar realized that he had sinned. He jumped down from his donkey and prostrated himself before the man, saying: It was wrong of me to speak that way. Forgive me. The ugly man replied: Not until you approach the Craftsman who made me and complain to him about how ugly I am. R. Elazar followed the man all the way back to his city asking forgiveness, but to no avail. The people came out to greet R. Elazar saying: Peace unto you, our rabbi and teacher!

The ugly man asked them: To whom are you referring when you say, "Teacher, teacher"? They said: to the man who is riding behind you. The ugly man answered: If that is a teacher, I hope that there are not many like him. Why? they asked. He related

the whole incident to them. The people replied: You should forgive him nonetheless, because he is a man of great Torah learning. He said: For your sake I will forgive him, but he must not make a habit of this. Immediately after obtaining the man's forgiveness, R. Elazar entered the house of study and taught: "A person should always be flexible like a reed and not hard like a cedar." It was for this reason that the reed was given the privilege of being used for making pens and for inscribing Torah scrolls, mezuzot and tefillin. (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Taanit 20a–b)

At first glance, this midrash appears to be dealing with the issue of judging by appearance, but that is only the surface layer of the story. The story is really about pride, about how a person's pleasure at his own achievements may sometimes make him callous toward others. Why did R. Eliezer answer the ugly man's greeting in such an angry and insulting manner? And what does that say about the value of his Torah learning?

When we react angrily to a situation, it almost always comes from our ego, from our sense of how others should be treating us. Our ego gives us a certain picture of who we are in the world, and when people criticize us, hurt our feelings or speak disrespectfully to us, they disrupt that picture and bruise our ego. A person whose self-esteem is strong and stable, but who does not have an inflated sense of his own importance, is not easily hurt or affected by people's opinions of him.

In our film, Havaleh hurts Moshe unintentionally because she is angry with the matchmaker and with her parents. But she puts her bruised ego aside and asks to meet him again so she can apologize. Moshe, who could easily have sulked over Havaleh's behavior and refused to see her, generously agrees to meet her a second time. The chemistry and warmth that develops during their second meeting is a direct result of the inner work they both did to overcome the trauma of the first meeting. Both put their egos aside to make the second meeting happen.

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Writer: Revital Stern | Translation: Katie Green | Editor: Rachel Jaskow

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