



Malki Rotner, an ultra-Orthodox Israeli woman who stars in a documentary TV series on her Belz sect. Credit: Ilan Assayag

This ultra-Orthodox Israeli Woman, Who Stars in a Documentary on Her Sect, Wants Women to Learn the Torah

Malki Rotner, a self-described Haredi feminist, has a unique vision for women in her society. But reacting to a TV series on the Belz Hasidic sect, she says her activism has clear boundaries

By [Shany Littman](#) | Dec 17, 2019

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One Saturday a few weeks ago, after the end of Shabbat, an audience of almost a thousand women gathered in the synagogue of the Belz Hasidic sect in Jerusalem for a long, intensive evening. The organizers had been worried that the event would not be well attended. A similar event held two weeks earlier in the Belz community in Ashdod had drawn a packed house, but those in the know say that Jerusalem women are somewhat – how to put it? – guarded. The hand motion accompanying the tilting of the nose heavenward said it all. Condescending or not, the women of the Jerusalem branch of the Belz community leaped at the chance to watch on a big screen, in public, an episode from a new documentary series about the sect, “Kingdoms.” There wasn’t an empty seat in the hall.

This may sound like no big deal, but it was an exceptional event of historic dimensions. The television series is about the Belz Hasidic dynasty, and the only participants are Hasidim who talk about the community. However, its creator, veteran filmmaker Uri Rosenwaks, is secular, and the series is being broadcast on state television, the Kan 11 channel. From the sect’s perspective, those two facts alone are sufficient to keep Haredim – **ultra-Orthodox Jews** – from viewing it, certainly not declaratively, still less in public.

But because the filmmaker received the blessing of the Belzer Admor, leader of the sect, and because senior figures from the community took part in it and attested that never before has such an attentive stage been given to their story, a public screening was organized. It was for women, though not only for reasons of

separating the sexes. The fact is that men are more strictly enjoined than women not to watch films.

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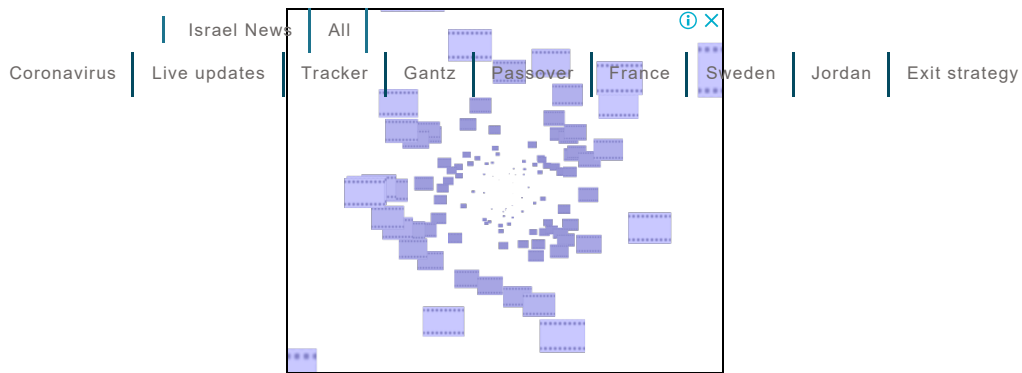
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There are three episodes in the series, and in each of them Rosenwaks takes an extremely delicate approach, some would say exaggeratedly so, toward the subjects of the film. The episode screened at the [Jerusalem](#) event was the first – it was chosen because it is considered less critical – and it was wrapped in three educational talks. Toward the last of the talks, the community's female superstar, the Admor's wife, the Belzer Rabbanit, entered the hall. Her presence was the final seal on the sect's grand legitimization of Rosenwaks' series, and he, in response, was effusive about how moved he was.

In contrast to the other women of the sect, who cover their heads with wigs over a short haircut, the whole under a hat, to indicate that they are married, the rabbanit does not wear a wig, but a high turban to cover her head. The women rose, thrilled to see her, and flocked around to kiss her hand. One woman urged me to approach her and receive a blessing. "Say 'shavua tov'" – a good week – she said, and pushed me gently toward the guest's seat, in the first row. As I was the only woman in the hall without a wig, the rabbanit undoubtedly noticed that I was a bit out of place, but she was still generous and kissed my hand. If there was a blessing, it was uttered inwardly.

The episode that was screened deals with the history of all the Hasidic sects, but focuses primarily on Belz. It recounts how the previous admor was smuggled from Europe to Palestine during World War II, how the Hasidic sects became almost completely extinct, and depicts their wondrous revival in the Holy Land. From 50 Hasidim who barely survived the Holocaust, the Belz sect today numbers tens of thousands. The viewers were thrilled at the episode and afterward wanted to know if similar events would be organized to view the other sections. Rosenwaks is convinced that those in charge are apprehensive that the other two episodes are not fitting material for [the community's](#) women, so it's unlikely they will allow this.



A scene from 'Kingdoms.' Malki Rotner: 'A religious way of life is limiting. You find solutions.' Credit: Shahar Yerushalmi

Genesis of Haredi feminism

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The third episode, broadcast earlier this month, is devoted to the role of women in the complex life of an ultra-Orthodox Hasidic community (a sub-group within the Haredi world) in 21st century Israel. It deals with the everyday and with earning a living, and also points to several points of friction with the secular world that surrounds the Hasidic bubble. One of the outspoken women in the episode is Malki Rotner, 34, an Ashdod resident . She is from a leading family of the Belz dynasty and grew up on Sheinkin Street in Tel Aviv, back then an ultra-trendy place. Holder of a senior position in a center for Haredi employment, she has three children, and terms herself a Haredi feminist.

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Haredi feminist says, tracing its origins to a group of women who urged people not to vote for parties in which women were unrepresented. Subsequently, the feminist agenda raised issues that were previously not talked about, such as physical and sexual violence against [Haredi women](#), and a demand that Haredi MKs aid single mothers .

“There’s a gap between the attitude toward women in the Jewish tradition, which was suited to certain periods, and which in many cases was even considered ‘progressive,’ and reality,” Rotner says. “These days Haredi women are everywhere. It’s a gap that will have to be reduced in the coming years.”

What does it mean to be a Hasidic woman? How is it different from being a Lithuanian Jew – that is, not Hasidic?

Rotner: “The differences are diminishing. They mainly concern how to behave in your community and the people you pray with in the synagogue. It remains a cultural thing. The Hasidic approach is ‘from love and not from dread.’ Part of what Hasidism was about, was to take people who could barely read and write and hardly knew halakha, and say to them, ‘You have a significant part.’ And that is also what the sect is doing for women, in many senses. The critique of the sect related to its forgoing of intellectual depth, but it has a different depth, a depth that is kabalistic and mystical.”



How complicated is it to be a Haredi feminist?

“It’s a conservative society that we want to be part of. With every other identity that you add to the Haredi, you lose something of the Harediness, because it’s by definition a one-dimensional identity. So Haredi feminism is not a war, it’s a struggle to broaden the concept of what Haredi is.”

To begin with, in Rotner’s opinion, women need to be connected to the Jewish bookshelf and to halakha ([Jewish religious law](#)). “What’s most important for me is to teach Torah to women – they have no access to the beit midrash [study hall]. That is the essence. As long as Haredi women are not part of that, the hierarchy will not change. We are not trying to work for a revolution, but for evolution.”

That’s a loaded word, “evolution.”

“True, but we are converting it to Judaism. I think that everything that happened to Judaism is evolution, and that is why it is a living religion. That was expressed when the sect first began, to introduce the women into halakhic life, but things froze a little, because there is no strong push for change from below, from the public. The disparity between the place we are standing in and the way many men and women in my community see things, is incredible. For example, for a Haredi woman to be a judge on the bench – but according to halakha she is disqualified from giving testimony. That is a paradox that needs to be clarified.”

[Haredi feminism](#) also operates in many channels that are not related to religion but to the society’s conservative structure, Rotner explains. “There is a struggle against the patriarchal structure, in which most things are transparent and fixed and by now appear natural – for example, the division of roles at home, or the fact that in the Haredi press women’s names are not mentioned. In the past few years women have entered the press more, and once you enter it’s easy, because women see more women and share with more women.”



Still, her activity also has clear boundaries; Rotner steers clear of anything that relates to halakha itself. “I operate in a space where there is a great deal to do and change before touching the actual halakha,” she says.

In the end, it's the cement wall that's the most significant thing but also the hardest to change.

“We look at our [national-]religious feminist sisters, who are already really flirting with Orthodoxy, and it's not clear where that is going. Some already see them as Reform. A situation has been created where a woman who is not satisfied with the Judaism she has in Orthodox terms, becomes Reform. That's not where Haredi feminism is. I think that women need to remain in a conservative place, but to know as much as possible and understand that these are things that belong to them, too, and they need to be part of the halakhic discussions.”

Women are not yet learning Gemara.

“That's true, but I believe that will also change. If women are studying law, one day the gap will grow narrower. It will be impossible to say, ‘I am learning only external wisdom, and not what is related to my culture.’”

Does the Haredi feminist agenda involve birth control?

“No, but in my opinion there is a slowdown in births in the Haredi society, for pragmatic reasons.”

Don't you think that's something that has to be part of the change?

“It happens individually. I suppose that in the end, yes. Contraceptives were one of the things that advanced the feminist revolution. It entered Haredi society as well. On the other hand, my most feminist girlfriends are having more children. In Haredi society everything is ready for children, so they want to take advantage of that.”

What did you think about Rabbi Firer's fundraising event, which was canceled because of the rabbi's insistence that no female singers take part?

“I separate the figure of Rabbi Firer from the story – he is a terrific person. I think that it will be necessary to allow female singers to appear, in order not to harm them professionally. If people start to show consideration for a rabbi at every event, there's no end to it. To decide that at an event aimed at a secular audience there will be no women because a Haredi man is not allowed to hear women sing? Deal with it. On the other hand, if he were to get up and leave when a female singer goes onstage, that too would be unpleasant and provocative. We have to think about what to do with this – these are things that will be clarified.”

Is that an approach that can be changed in the Haredi society?



The Belz sect. Credit: Michal Fattal

“It depends where the need comes from. Obviously, if the need comes from secular people who preach liberalism, no change will be possible. But Rabbi Ovadia [Yosef, founder of the Shas party] listened to women singing. He heard [Egyptian diva] Umm Kulthum. I don’t know if it can change, but pressure will only cause greater entrenchment around this halakhic issue.”

I don’t understand how a feminist woman can support a way of life in which she is perceived as inferior.

“It is not perceived as a way of life that defines you as inferior, but as a way of life that defines a role for you. In the end, on a day-to-day basis, the difficulty or the essence are divided between the man and the woman. It’s terribly difficult to go to prayers three times a day. If my husband starts work at 8 A.M., he leaves the house at 6 every day in order to pray. I, as a woman, don’t have to do that, because I am supposed to look after the children. The big story safeguards you amid that. You are not an individual in this, and that is very different from a postmodernist secular approach. In our society the spaces are separate all the time – women are with women and men are with men – so the hierarchy is eroded. There are many positive aspects to it. For example, you don’t dance in front of men at a social event, and that does away with the whole objectification issue.”

Another struggle that Rotner doesn’t intend to conduct is against the prohibition on women driving. It’s not a halakhic thing, but a social norm related to modesty. “It would have community-wide repercussions,” Rotner says, explaining what would happen if she took the wheel. “If you are in the community, that’s how you have to behave. It’s hard, obviously, but it doesn’t occupy me all day. I wouldn’t commit suicide over it. A religious way of life is limiting. You find solutions.”

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Rotner said yes quite quickly when Rosenwaks asked her to take part in the series. The result, she says, was not disappointing. She has little good to say about earlier series dealing with the Haredi world. “No one before came from a neutral place and allowed voices like mine and from my community to be given expression in the secular media. Until now the feeling was that you could talk over the head of the Haredim, because they won’t see it anyway, and if they do, they won’t understand the so-very-complex messages. By chance I entered the hall for the premiere of Amnon Levy’s series about Haredi women, and there wasn’t one Haredi woman there. In the small hall I felt the people clucking, it stung my skin. The secular viewer has no way of knowing how normative or representative what is shown is. Things aren’t served up within a context, and it’s impossible to understand the underlying ideology. He shows behavior that looks dumb, pagan and primitive, and everyone is shocked.”

Weren’t you apprehensive that Rosenwaks would do the same?

“We were apprehensive, and there was great caution. Because there is criticism, and there’s a desire to hear it and to correct the place you are coming from, out of love. But that can’t be allowed to steal the focus of the series. The criticism is heard from outside all the time.”

The question is whether it’s the same thing – external and internal criticism. The series is very interesting and respectful, but it’s not critical.

“There’s the thing about washing the dirty laundry in public. I’m in favor of criticism, but the question is in what forum. If you’re among people who want to hear about Haredi society, then there’s place to voice criticism. But to voice all the criticism the first time you get an opportunity to express yourself, is to miss the opportunity.”

By the same token, why screen for adult women a series in which they see their world? Why not be exposed to the general culture?

“That’s part of the ideology, not to be exposed to things so that we won’t need to cope with them. It’s part of the system of educational blocking. We know that children can’t make an intelligent decision until a certain age, so we won’t present them with the opportunities. And even at a later age there is no exposure to external culture. Culture per se has no value if it is not connected to actual Torah, if it doesn’t produce Torat Hashem [God’s Torah]. This is a completely different approach from liberal education, which says, ‘I will lay everything before you, and I hope you will understand, as I do, what is good and what is not.’”

Rotner has experienced the difficulties of transitioning from educational blocking to the materials of the general world, secular and contemporary, since she became a sociology and history student at the Open University. “I am coping with critical material, and in academe you don’t have many Haredi answers,” she says. “I went to university in order to get tools and start to understand the

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phenomena in my society. My identity is clear and I am confident of it, but it's definitely jolting and an emotional storm. Suddenly religion is stripped away and lowered to the level of texts and sociological phenomena; there is no viewpoint that comes from the Haredi world.

“There are subjects about which the lecturers will be cautious, such as the question of whether anti-Semitism was justified or not. But they are not cautious when it comes to religious sensibilities. It's permitted to talk about what is holy to the religious public, the halakha, and it's also all right to be mocking, though when it comes to what's holy for many Israelis, such as Memorial Day, it's forbidden.”

The series shows that this way of thought and way of life necessitate constant optimism. You must not be downcast or pessimistic, because faith obliges you to say that everything is for the best.

“That's right. It's not that you are forbidden to feel hurt, but you do a great deal so that there is happiness. You are oriented toward optimism.”

What about those who don't succeed?

“I am one of those who don't succeed. I am very cynical. But my worship of God is very happy. I know that others are happy with me, I know that I am coming from a beloved place, not from a place that is out to get me. My thinking about the world is that what I do is all in all, good, even if I did something that is not good. My intentions are understood.”

There is a lot of talk about miracles in the documentary series. Have you experienced miracles?

“I am not a devotee of miracles, but of the way of nature. The question is, what is defined as a miracle. I do not need miracles in my worship of God, I don't need proof that it works. I believe without that. I am happy about events that do not end in a disaster, but I don't say ‘Wow.’ What amazes me far more is that the Torah survived for so many years.”



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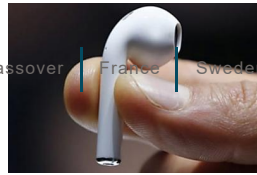
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