

Feature

A documentary about chasidim that cuts through the stereotypes

Chasidic Kingdoms



Filming the Rebbe of Belz in the city of Belz, Ukraine

A conversation with Israeli filmmaker **Uri Rosenwaks**

By Rabbi Yitzchok Frankfurter

Uri Rosenwaks, who was born in Yerushalayim, grew up in Be'er Sheva and currently resides with his wife and three children in Ramat Gan, recently produced a unique film about the chasidic world, with a special focus on the Belzer community in Yerushalayim. *Malchuyot Shel Matah*, or *Kingdoms* as it is entitled in English, adopts a neutral perspective and is always sympathetic and respectful of its subject, and has gotten rave reviews in both the secular and chasidic communities. Having allowed his interviewees to voice their opinions and points of view without interference or attempt at objectification, many of the voices in the film articulate an unwavering trust in the miraculous. However, the biggest miracle is probably the film itself, which received the tacit approval of the Belzer Rebbe.

Most films about *chasidim* produced by Israeli filmmakers are critical and condescending towards chasidic beliefs, and are outright disdainful of its way of life. Secular viewers, who have no way of knowing how accurate or representative the portrayal is, are usually shown behavior that appears outlandish, pagan-like and primitive. That the Belzer Rebbe wasn't apprehensive that Uri would produce another film that is grounded in ridiculousness and that talks over the heads of the *chasidim* to whom he was given access is simply astonishing.

Perhaps more astonishing is that Uri, a secularist and self-defined rationalist, doesn't view his film as a tool that would cause a secular viewer to embrace *Yiddishkeit*. Nonetheless, he may have unwittingly produced just such a *kiruv* tool, something the Belzer Rebbe may have keenly foreseen. But regardless of whether it serves as a *kiruv* tool or a means to quench one's curiosity about the chasidic way of life, *Malchuyot Shel Matah* will undoubtedly be an informational source about Judaism for many people. As such, Uri Rosenwaks' documentary has already left an indelible mark on Jewish research and studies for years to come.

When we met in Yerushalayim during my recent visit there, we sat under a large window that was facing the majestic *shul* of Kiryas Belz.

Malchuyot Shel Mata almost seems as if the chasidim produced this film themselves. It certainly doesn't come across as something made by an outsider who is looking in.

That's true. Someone told me, "This is truly chasidic filmmaking, because you subdued your ego." At the last screening in Michlelet Yerushalayim there was a woman in the audience who is an academic researcher into chasidism. Afterwards she came over to me and said, "You did a *maaseh chasidi*, because you were *metzamtzeim* [constricted] yourself."

Yedidya Meir told me that it was the first time he saw chasidic Jews on television who didn't seem to feel threatened. They weren't sitting there expecting to be attacked. They spoke freely and were sometimes asked difficult questions. You said that it almost felt as if they shot it themselves, but they couldn't have done

it because they couldn't have asked many of those questions. It's a different perspective.

I interviewed the filmmaker Eyal Datz, who made a brilliant documentary on chasidut Sanz. He's also secular, but he did something different from what you did. His was also a very positive film, but it was still from the perspective of an outsider. You kept yourself and your ego almost entirely out of it.

One reason is that I didn't want to be just another outsider portraying *chareidim* in a way that had already been done many times before. I left all my stereotypes and presumptions at the door and just let the people speak for themselves. That was the way I approached it. I really wanted to hear them; I was curious about what they had to say. Everyone knows what secular people and academics say about them. I didn't want to be just another person adding to that.

In allowing them to speak, you became them in a certain sense.

That's what's so new about it. It's not just another television program about *chasidim*. During the first year of this project, when no one in the chasidic community was willing to talk to me, it was because of all kinds of programs that were being aired that really attacked and blackened them.

The fact that you were able to get Belz to cooperate like that is nothing short of a miracle.

I agree. But the one who facilitated this cooperation was the Ruv [sic] himself.

Did you ever speak with him?

I shook the Ruv's hand a few times. I saw him in Canada, in the city of Belz and here in Yerushalayim, but I never had a conversation with him.

But he knew who you were?



Uri Rosenwaks speaking with Rabbi Frankfurter in Yerushalayim

I believe so. His *gabbaim* know me very well because I sat with them a lot. Even after the Ruv opened the doors for me, getting each individual to trust me and be willing to participate took a couple of meetings.

I know the Belzer Rebbe, and it's not surprising that he understood that a positive film like this can turn secular Jews on to Yiddishkeit, which to him is invaluable. But the fact that he trusted that you wouldn't produce something negative is amazing. To my mind it's a *neis*, or *ruach hakodesh*, and I mean that in the literal sense.

That's what the Belzer *chasidim* said. I

could have certainly done something different, but he trusted me, and he trusted a Belzer *chasid* named Yitzchok Alchemeister, who worked with me.

But you didn't sign any contract that you would make a positive film.

The only contract I signed was with the broadcasting corporation to make sure they wouldn't interfere with my artistic license. Other people in the chasidic world said it was very risky, but it was a brilliant PR move, and he did it just like that. I went to a lot of different chasidic groups, but I couldn't get my foot in the door. They were all suspicious and thought I was going to trick them. "I'm going to film ev-

erything myself," I reassured them. "But who's going to be the editor?" they wanted to know. I told them that I would be the editor as well, but it didn't help. They were convinced that either I or someone in the broadcasting company was out to get them.

It was very well filmed and edited. Did you do all of that on your own?

No. I worked with very good people, but I was in complete control, and there were a few scenes I did shoot myself. I was essentially the producer. At the end of the day, I was in charge of everything.

Who introduced you to Belz?

After about a year of trying to get access to the chasidic community, one of my two *chareidi* researchers—a *Litvak* named David Deckelbaum—met Yitzchak Alchemeister, who was one of the first *chozrim biteshuvah* of Belz. He had been very involved in *kiruv* in the past, and he understood that a project like this could be very instrumental. So he went to the Ruv, and the Ruv said, "I don't have any personal interest in this. I don't need to be promoted. But if this can create some sort of dialogue between the people here"—this was during a time when there was a big outcry over whether supermarkets should be open on Shabbat in Ashdod—"then I'm all for it." He opened the door for us after that one meeting and without even meeting me personally.

It's a mark of great boldness on the Belzer Rebbe's part.

He's always been that way. A lot of people are saying that only he could have done it. He allowed his *tishen* to be filmed 20 years before everyone else, except for Chabad. He also promoted producing music on discs.

And bringing social workers into the yeshivos.

Yes, and everything else he does for children in the field of education. He's an amazing person, and so is his life story. Af-

Someone told me, "This is truly chasidic filmmaking, because you subdued your ego."

ter he opened the door, it became easier to approach other chasidic groups.

Were you given free access in Belz?

Yes. I could go wherever I wanted, but I had to show the film to them before it was released, and the agreement was that they could ask for anything to be deleted if they felt it was improper. After I showed them the first part they said, "It's very nice, but where's the catch?" "What do you mean?" I asked. "When are you going to stick it to us?" I said, "I'm not going to stick it to you. You'll see everything."

The documentary is in three parts. Which one got the best reception?

The second part elicited the strongest emotional reaction from secular people in Israel, especially because of the ending with the *chasid* who lost his son. I have two thoughts about that part. One is that it starts off with people who believe that everything is miraculous and then it becomes complicated, and in the end you find out that it isn't about miracles, it's about solidarity. As a secular person, when I look at all these people who don't have children even though they have a *brachah* from the Rebbe, it means that it isn't about miracles, it's about the mindset. From my perspective, the scene in which the Pittsburgher Rebbe visits the house of the person with the *mezuzah* is one of the best in the whole series, because it shows how it's all about solidarity. The third part is also excellent because it's the least obvious.

In the third part, which deals with family life and with earning a living, you also filmed women and concentrated on their role in the community.

It was a little controversial, but the most moving thing for me was to watch the women seeing themselves. We held two large screenings, one in Ashdod and one in Yerushalayim in Belz for women. There were about 1,000 women at each screening.

When I first made the documentary I didn't think that the Belzer *chasidim* themselves would ever see it, because the attitude was, "Well, if it's for the secular community, then no problem." A lot of people were surprised about how much excitement there was in Belz itself. There are almost no Belzer *chasidim* who haven't seen it yet.

After the screening in Ashdod, a lot of women came over to me and said that they wanted their husbands and sons to see the documentary. They asked if I could take out the third part with the women so they could see it, but I said no.

Did you get any complaints?

In one part of the documentary a *chasid* says that Aleksander is a very small *chasidut* today because of the Holocaust. Some Aleksander *chasidim* called me afterwards because they were insulted. You can understand them to a certain extent, but the whole thing is very complicated. My own great-grandfather was an Aleksander *chasid*, and my father is named after him. It's also about the lesson of the Holocaust.

Did you expect the film to be so well received in the secular community?

Actually, I had a lot of fears about that, because I knew that people would be upset that it wasn't critical. I knew they'd want to know why I didn't ask them about serving in the military and other points of contention. But the response was amazing. It went viral, and people just saw them as human beings. To me, that's the biggest achievement. For a lot of secular people

it came as a surprise that all of a sudden they weren't this black, monolithic group. Of course, I was criticized as well.

What was the biggest criticism you received from the secular community?

The usual thing: how dare I portray them so nicely when they're ugly and parasites, etc. I also got criticism from historians who thought that I whitewashed the fact that many Rebbes fled Europe while their *chasidim* were left behind to burn. I touched upon that in the very first story about Rav Aharon of Belz, which was the only thing the people in Belz were concerned about, because they weren't sure how I was going to present it. I wasn't familiar with the story before, but you would need to have a separate series just on that. I also read the writings of Rebbetzin Farbstein about what they did to save others, and how by saving themselves they tried to preserve the culture and traditions, which makes sense in a certain way. So I knew how to answer the historians.

I never knew how much *chasidim* avoid discussing the Holocaust. Rav Aharon of Belz spoke about the *hester panim* and the *hester b'toch hester* before he passed away, but I didn't want to get into that because it's not something you can portray in five minutes. I'd heard a lot of explanations in my life about why the Holocaust happened, but then I heard that the Rebbe of Belz said that anyone who tries to explain it is a *ra-sha*. What astounded me the most when I shot the film was the acceptance of the Holocaust by the people who went through it.

The Belzer Rebbe allowed his tishen to be filmed 20 years before everyone else, except for Chabad.



L-R: Yitzchak Alchemeister, David Deckelbaum and Uri Rosenwaks

Were there other surprises?

I think my biggest surprise was that while chasidic society is quite insular, after the documentary was released, everyone was interested in knowing how it was being received by the secular community. It was really important to them to know how they were being seen. All of a sudden they were not so inward-looking. The *chareidim* in Israel are transitioning from being a minority to a major faction within society, so they are becoming far more influential. The fact that they wanted to know what people were saying really amazed me.

You've attended screenings in both the secular community and with the chasidim in Yerushalayim and Ashdod. Which one did you feel was the most powerful?

Nothing could compare with the screenings for the Belzer women. I was afraid that no one would show up, but hundreds of women came to the one in Ashdod, and you could really feel the electricity in the audience. I think they were thrilled by the way they were portrayed, as if they were finally seeing themselves being depicted as likeable rather than being used or humiliated. That was a shock for them. One of the Belzer rabbis wanted to know why the broadcasting corporation would be interested in such a portrayal.

Did you feel that electricity in Yerushalayim as well?

Even more so. As you probably saw, I filmed the Rebbetzin lighting *Shabbat* candles, and she came to the screening in Yerushalayim. I was really nervous before the screening, because in Ashdod they didn't know what to expect. But the women in Yerushalayim were there because they'd already spoken to their friends and family in Ashdod. Having expectations is a recipe for disappointment, but it ended up being amazing.

So your biggest surprise didn't come during the filming, it came from the way the documentary was received.

Yes. Before it came out I told people that it could either end up flying under the radar or being torn apart. I was very surprised by the way it went viral, even among *chasidim*. We were under the impression that the *chareidim* wouldn't see it. The thing is that the public broadcaster puts everything on YouTube so I had to block it abroad, because I want to take it to other countries and hold screenings. When you're in the middle of the process you can't really assess how things are going. One amazing screening was before a mixed audience of about 400 chasidic and secular people in Tel Aviv. Several *chareidim* spoke on stage and I did too. A couple of people complained to the Belzer Ruv about how he could allow such a thing, but he completely ignored it.

How did you choose the people you interviewed? Or did Belz tell you whom to speak to?

No, they didn't. There were certain types of people I was looking for. Yitzchak and David, my two researchers, knew what I was looking for and went out to find them. We met a lot of people. Some were good, and some were good but didn't agree to participate in the end. It was a process. It wasn't as if we could just set a date and go shoot. Each person was given a list of questions he would be asked. They would then ask the Ruv if they should answer all of them, and the Ruv said yes.

Did the Belzer Rebbe tell them what to answer?

No, but he read the questions. There was no censorship. He isn't afraid.

Did you ask any questions to which they replied that they didn't want to go there?

I don't remember anything like that, but there were a couple of times when they felt that the answers shouldn't be broadcast. But 99% of the things they told me were kept in the film.

Your interview of the elderly Belzer chasid Mr. Fried was fantastic. He's an amazing person, and you captured him very well.

Interestingly, he didn't want to see the film. His children wanted to make a big

deal out of it and invite all his grandchildren for a screening, but he said that if he was going to see it he would only do it at home. So we went to his house on Chanukah with a small projector and showed it on the wall. There was only a handful of people there. He sat in the front and was completely absorbed in it. When it finished he started to cry, and then he sang the Modzhitzer “Ani Maamin.” He was really touched.

How long did you spend shooting the film?

A year, but it took some time to get it off the ground. A year after I signed the contract with the Israeli Broadcasting Corporation (Kan 11) I still didn't have anything, but in the end I delivered much more than I promised.

I see that they had no problem sending you to Montreal or anywhere else.

They gave me a budget and told me to do whatever I felt was necessary.

Why did you think it was important to go to Montreal?

Two months after we started filming I found out that the Ruv was going there, and I realized that it could be my breakthrough. I knew that if people saw me in Montreal and then again in Belz they would be more comfortable with me and also see how serious I was. I was surprised to see that the Belzer community in Montreal lives in a very mixed neighborhood. When the Ruv came, the police blocked all the streets, and the non-Jewish neighbors came out of their houses to watch his arrival. They also blocked all the main roads for a *hachnasat sefer Torah* and no one said anything. But on Shabbat all the roads were open and people drove freely.

You also went to Auschwitz and filmed a visit there by a group of chasidim. Was it an emotional experience for you?



A still from the documentary. At left is Mr. Fried playing the violin at the Belzer Rebbe's tish.

I was especially cold. (Laughs.) When I'm behind the camera I'm completely focused on shooting the scene correctly.

You were behind the cameras?

Yes. Sometimes we had two cameras and other times the cinematographer was shooting. The parts that weren't shot that well were my contribution. But there were some places where I couldn't go in with a cinematographer. For example, when I went in to see the *kvitlach* by the Pittsburgher Rebbe in Ashdod, I had to go in on my own. It was very funny, because afterwards he asked me who I was and what I was doing there.

Did you go with a full-size camera?

No, just a small one.

What about when you filmed the Belzer Rebbetzin?

That was also with a small camera. I knew that it wouldn't be as disturbing.

Were you dressed as a chasid?

No. I just put on a cap. I never pretend. I have a very strict ethos of never letting people think that I'm something I'm not. I also never came for Shabbat because I didn't want people to start thinking that I was going to be *chozeir biteshuvah*. I'm me. I'm a director, and I keep to that. It's morally not fair to put on a disguise, and I don't think you'll find anyone who will say that I wasn't fair.

This wasn't your first film.

No. I've been working for 30 years. I've made many documentaries, including one on Yeshayahu Leibowitz and another on Maimonides.

Was this film unique?

Very, because it was like a parallel galaxy for me. I've done a lot of things that were new and different to me, but this was the epitome of that. I'd grown up in a very rational culture and in the home of scientists, so this was completely different.

It was mystical.

Yes, and it's a different life, with all its pluses and minuses.

As you said before, it's about solidarity or the merging of two souls, of the Rebbe and the chasid.

I'll accept that description. There's a depth to their outlook that is Kabbalistic and mystical.

Is your background completely secular?

Yes, but my father's relatives were *chasidim* two generations back. My grand-

mother was from a Gerrer family and my grandfather was from an Aleksander family, but they stopped being religious in Poland. My mother is from a completely secular *Yekke* family. That's probably one of the things I'm trying to explore in this trilogy of Leibowitz, Maimonides and now Belz. I had thought of Leibowitz as a political figure my parents adored, but when I started to do research I discovered that there were other sides to him, such as the philosophical and the religious. I actually learned about Maimonides through Leibowitz, who saw himself as a modern-day Rambam.

One of the main things I learned was that the Jewish religion and culture are very rich and interesting, but it's presented to secular people in the most boring way possible. The first problem is that it's taught by religious teachers, which is a mistake, and it's relayed in a very dry way. It's the most boring subject in the Israeli educational system. After 12 years in school I still didn't know anything about Judaism, and what I did learn was uninteresting and brought to us from a religious rather than a scholarly perspective. It's only recently that I've found it intriguing and full of drama.

Judaism is what has always preserved the Jewish people, as there was no country or common language.

Daniel Boyarin of Berkeley wrote an interesting article about how until the establishment of the State of Israel, the book was our homeland.

What you are saying about the secular community not receiving a proper education about Judaism is very interesting to me.

Right, because it isn't done with a humanistic approach. There's so much scholarship, but it hasn't trickled down to the schools. But when you read the *Moreh Nevuchim* you see things that are unbelievable.

The religious community has always been afraid of the secular

world encroaching upon it, but now the religious community is being mashpia on the secular one. And your documentary is one of the biggest influences, because you've humanized people who were only previously seen through the lens of stereotype. Would you agree with that statement?

Not entirely. In the documentary on Maimonides I interviewed a *Litvak* named Danziger. Afterwards, he told me that he was very worried about me. When I asked him why, he said, “Because you're taking Judaism and turning it into culture. I don't like that.” That's one point. Another is that I don't think any secular viewers are going to say, “It's great to be a *chasid!* I'm going to be *chozeir biteshuvah.*” I don't think they see it that way. You don't have to accept anything; just come and listen and understand.

It seems to me that you have a spiritual side, or maybe it's just curiosity, but you clearly find something fascinating about these subjects.

I spent at least two years on each one. Part of it is that I envision someone walking into his house after a long day and sitting down on the couch and saying to himself, “I saw so much garbage today; I want an hour of therapy for my mind. Is there something intelligent I can watch on this device?” That's where I come in. In some ways, when making a series like this, you have to dumb down the subject matter a little, because even though you know that these are very deep concepts, the viewer will only encounter them once. That's why it's an art. So on the one hand you have to make it intelligent, but easily understandable on the other. But you really have to know your stuff for afterwards, when you're giving talks and people are asking you questions.

You mean that there's still a lot more beneath the surface.

I'm not referring to the information; I'm talking about the experience. The work of

the director is the alchemy of what floats up from the contact with the information. The information itself isn't relevant. It's about the viewing experience that will make the person interested enough to want to know more. In this case, the idea is for people to say, “I might not agree with a single thing they said, but they're nice, and I can accept them.” One of the people I interviewed was very upset after I finished the interview. He said, “You're so condescending and you're filming us like we're some kind of exotic creatures. Why are you doing this?” I replied, “I'm curious about other human beings.”

There's been a tremendous evolution in Israeli filmmaking about the Orthodox community. It used to be shallow, negative and racist. Israelis can get away with things that Americans can't because of political correctness that's taken to an extreme, although Trump is trying to fight that.

I would say that Trump is the reaction to political correctness because it was taken to the extreme.

In my opinion, there are two factors behind the recent change. Thanks to the growth of *chareidi* society, there are now many ambassadors who can act as bridges, like the people who made *Shtisel*. Second, a lot of thanks is due to the AviChai Fund, which supported this project. They've invested a lot of money in the filmmaking industry. Another thing is that Israel is one of the filmmaking capitals of the world. There is no major festival that doesn't screen Israeli films.

Yes, but the films used to be very two-dimensional. It's filmmakers like you who are part of the process of change.

It's a process that I believe started with the assassination of Rabin, because afterwards there was suddenly a push from the secular community to understand what could have led to it, and people wanted to learn more about Judaism. There was a

After I showed the chasidim the first part they said, “It's very nice, but where's the catch?”

pattern of discourse that opened up, and people began to learn things about Judaism in secular spaces, in a way they could relate to.

I agree with Leibowitz's famous quote about Ben-Gurion. There's a film called *Leibowitz in Maalot* about his trip to and from a lecture there with Yisrael Eldad, who was a Lechi right-wing professor. In the film they mention Ben-Gurion, whom Leibowitz hated. Leibowitz said, "Ben-Gurion told me, 'I understand why you want religion to be a free entity in Israel, which is why I will always hold it in my hand.' That is how we got to where we are today: religious people working for a secular government instead of religion being in opposition."

This whole phenomenon of accepting Judaism as part of our culture and being less afraid of it is even more widespread when it comes to music. What's happening with Jewish sources and *piyut* in Israeli music is amazing.

Songs like "Shalom Lecha Dodi," the words of which were written by ibn Gabirol, have become very popular.

And there are so many different versions. There are also wonderful records being made by big stars, such as what Berry Sakharof did with ibn Gabirol. And *chareidi* society is changing as well, although I'm really jealous when I come here and see children playing outside rather than being glued to screens.

One thing you kept going back to in the film is freedom, *chofshiyut*. You were contrasting the secular lifestyle and the *chareidi* one. Were you satisfied with the responses you got from the interviewees?

There were a lot of things that intrigued me, but in the end I put in the things that were the most interesting. One woman, who gave a number of very smart answers, explained that it's a matter of perspective. "You think that we have to measure up to the values of the secular world, but you're mistaken." That was amazing. A lot of sec-

ular people were shocked and impressed by that. We screened that part at the premiere in Tel Aviv, and the audience was very enthusiastic. She was totally unapologetic. Whoever was apologetic ended up on the floor of the cutting room. I wanted people who were frank.

What message would you like people to get from this film?

It's fascinating that the minute you finish a film, it takes on a life of its own. Whenever we screen a film and people have things to say, I don't argue with them because I've already given my side of the story. Now it's their turn. My expectation is, as I mentioned at the screening in Tel Aviv, that we will evolve from this discourse of hate from all sides. We are a bunch of tribes that only meet when we're in conflict. Most secular Jews and *chareidim*, or secular Jews and Arabs, or *chareidim* and Palestinians only meet in confrontation. We don't live together and exist in different societies. That's the tragedy.

Your encounter with the *chareidi* world wasn't confrontational. Neither was your film.

That's my way of life. At the same time, I don't like to stay in the United States for more than two weeks at a time because of all the political correctness. I'm very liberal and all that, but I measure people by their deeds, not their rhetoric. Political correctness is solely about rhetoric. If you can say nice things about minorities and then shoot them in the street, what's the point?

What's your next project?

I'm working on a couple of things, but I usually don't talk about them before they're out.

Are you finished with Jewish topics?

I'm not sure. I think I covered quite a bit, and it's time to go on to other things. What I love about my profession is that once you're done with a project, you can move on to something completely different.

Do you work with deadlines?

Yes. No one is going to give you money and then say, "See you in five years." And you don't get all of the money upfront. You have to show results.

Maybe I'm overglorifying your accomplishments, but I really think you've done something unique. I see you as an artistic filmmaker who sees things through a different lens.

One of my most powerful childhood memories is growing up in Be'er Sheva, which was a very integrated city in those days. In 1977, when the Likud first came to power, I woke up in the morning and saw my left-wing parents devastated because it was the end of the world that Begin was going to be prime minister. They never believed that someone like that could ever be prime minister. Then I walked to school and saw people dancing in the streets. The contrast amazed me. That's when I started being interested in Israeli society and politics. Since I grew up in a city with such diverse perspectives, I've never looked at people with condescension. I always look them in the eye. ●

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