



The Rebbe giving shalom aleichem to Uri Rosenwaks

Uri Rosenwaks, who produced the highly acclaimed documentary series Kingdoms, which presents an intimate look at the chasidic world through the eyes of its members, discusses his impressions of the **Pittsburgher Rebbe**

Through the Lens of a Filmmaker

By Rabbi Yitzchok Frankfurter

Some of the victims of COVID have been rabbis, including the Pittsburgher Rebbe, whom you got to know in the course of making your documentary.

Yes. I also met him again at a *bris* right before the COVID outbreak. This *bris* was for the son of a Pittsburgher *chasid* named Yanky Weber, who had previously lost a young son, as depicted in the documentary. There's a scene in which the Rebbe comes to his house after the *levayah* to put up a mezuzah, and you can see how comforting he was to his *chasidim*.

At the time of the *bris* of the newborn Weber, the Rebbe had just returned from the United States, and he spoke about the virus and how people should be careful. I think it's very tragic that the Rebbe, who isolated himself in his house and *davened* with a *minyan* from his balcony because he was at high risk due to various illnesses, ended up passing away from it anyway. He was relatively young, only 64. At the *bris* the Rebbe told me that although he hadn't seen the series, he had gotten excellent feedback from people. He said, "I see that I was right to

cooperate with you, and I thank you very much." He was a great man.

I remember you telling me when we met in Jerusalem that most of the people who saw the film found the part about the Pittsburgher *chasid* who lost his child to be the most poignant.

Yes. Throughout the series, a lot of chasidic men and women talk about their beliefs and the way they see the world, but then suddenly this man Yanky is faced with a test. He doesn't lose his faith, but there is something very touching about the way he reacts. When the Pittsburgher Rebbe comes to visit him for the *kviat mezuzah*, I think it helps people understand the *chasid*-Rebbe relationship.

How would you define it?

That's a very hard question—especially now when we see the different approaches being taken by the various chasidic groups in Israel to COVID. But you see how this simple *chasid* doesn't question the Rebbe in any way and takes comfort from him. The Rebbe wanted him to know that he was there

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The Pittsburgher Rebbe at the bris of Yanky Weber's son who was born right before the COVID outbreak

for him no matter what and that he understood his pain.

Did you have any direct interactions with the Rebbe?

Yes. There's a scene in the film in which Yanky came to him with a *kvittel*. The Rebbe called me over and said, "I see you here all the time. Who are you?" I told him that I was there to make a documentary. "Oh, I knew about that," he replied, "but I didn't know that you would be coming today. If I'd known, I would have dressed up and straightened my *peiyos*." He was so nice about the whole thing. Then he asked if I ate kosher, and I answered, "I also eat kosher food." He started to laugh, and then we had a great conversation. That was his greatness.

Pittsburgh is really a small community, but all of Ashdod knew him, and you could see at his funeral that all kinds of people came

to pay their respects. He really embodied what a Rebbe is supposed to be like, giving individual attention to everyone who came to him. He was descended from a long chain of great Rebbes in the Carpathian Mountains, starting with Rav Meir of Premishlan and then Rav Mordechai of Nadvorna. These days, there are about 100 different Rebbes from that *chasidus*, including Nadvorna, Kretchnif, Pittsburgh and Cleveland. There's a very big difference between a community of 200 families like Pittsburgh and one like Belz, which has about 7,000 families. The connection between the Pittsburgher *chasidim* and their Rebbe was extremely close, and they are devastated by their loss. Some of them called me looking for comfort, because they wanted to talk to someone who appreciated him. He was really a striking person, very warm and accepting, just like a father to his *chasidim*.

Another *chasid*, who was something of a spokesperson for the Rebbe, sent me something he wrote: "For 30 years I followed the Rebbe everywhere. One time the Rebbe flew to America. I really missed him, so the next day I followed him to America. When I arrived at the place where he was staying, he said, 'Shaul, I missed you! I'm so happy that you are here.'" I don't think that this type of relationship is possible in a bigger *chasidus*. The Pittsburgher Rebbe lived in a small apartment in Ashdod. While a third of the population of Ashdod is now *chareidi*, his father was the first *Admor* in the city and was highly respected by everyone.

I find it amazing that the *chasidim* are confiding in you and speaking about their pain. That's very interesting.

I believe that there are several reasons for this. I wrote a Facebook post about the



Yanky Weber at the kever of his son who tragically passed away

tension between the chasidic community and the general public because of COVID. Unfortunately, the rift in the relationship has reached a level that I am afraid might be irreparable in some cases.

Another thing that was very tragic was that the funeral was a complete disaster in terms of COVID. You can blame the police or maybe the *chasidim* themselves, but with 3,000 participants the police couldn't control the crowd and didn't do their job. What bothers me is that what the general public now knows about the Pittsburgher Rebbe is that his funeral was unlawful. I feel really bad about that. Someone was asked to go on the radio and talk about the Rebbe, but all they wanted to know about was the funeral. It feels like his memory was sullied by what happened, which is particularly unfair because the Rebbe always adhered to the Health Ministry's guidelines, as did his *chasidim*.

The Pittsburgher community is also very down-to-earth. The first time I visited, I didn't sense any antagonism and felt completely at home. The community has something that you don't necessarily find in other places. The transition to the new Rebbe, the Rebbe's oldest son, has been very smooth, but you can see that they still miss their old Rebbe.

When we last spoke, we discussed the idea that an artist becomes part of his

art. It seems to me that on a certain level, you've become part of the communities you filmed.

Yes. This is something that happens with most of my films. I don't see myself as a journalist who is looking for a scoop. The people in my films are still my friends 20 years later.

How long ago did you complete this one?

We aired it in November, so it's still quite fresh, but the bulk of the filming was completed a year and a half ago. The shooting began on Chol Hamoed Sukkot two years ago.

The Rebbe made a deep impression on you. As you pointed out, it's a very small community, yet you felt it important enough to focus your camera on.

I put the Pittsburgher Rebbe in the second installment, which was about *Admorim*. It was interesting to tell two stories: that of a Rebbe with many thousands of *chasidim* who comes to Montreal and is greeted by large crowds, namely the Belzer Rebbe, and that of a Rebbe who lives in Ashdod with his little congregation. The differences were striking. The Pittsburgher Rebbe was a warm and happy grandfatherly type who was also very musical. Every Israeli kindergartner knows

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the song *Yismechu Hashamayim*, but I never knew that it was composed by the Rebbe's father. I was welcomed very warmly by Belz as well, but it's very different when you're going to a *tish* with 5,000 people. The Pittsburgher *tish* was much more intimate, which was very good for the series. And as happens with documentaries, when you hang around for a long time you end up with unexpected things, like the story of the tragic passing of the Weber baby. When I first met the father it was in the *sukkah*, and he was telling me the miracle of how the baby had been saved, but four days later I received the news that he had passed away. Everything evolved in front of the camera.

And you were amazed by his *emunah peshutah*, right?

Yes. Filming this series was a great experience. I had to get out of myself and live in a world that was in some ways completely fantastic to me.

Everyone likes these people. Their communities are really warm and intimate. In many ways, that's the path of *Nadvorna*, because they have so many *Admorim* who each have their own small community. That's the way it was historically as well, with each one having his own village or area.

Do you think that COVID is taking a toll on some of the communities you filmed?

Yes. Many of them are in crisis, because it's an almost impossible situation. There's a lack of communication with the chasidic community because they don't have Internet, so it's not getting a lot of information. There's also a lot of finger-pointing with everyone blaming everyone else. Some *chasidim* find themselves in a tough spot because they want to keep the rules, but then they see their Rebbe behaving in a different manner. They're torn because they don't know whether to listen to the doctors or rely on



At a *tish* of the Pittsburgher Rebbe

emunat chachamim. This is a very big crisis for some people. Others are perfectly fine doing whatever their Rebbe says, no matter what. What's your average person supposed to do? Some of the *chasidim* I called before Rosh Hashanah didn't take my calls because they didn't want to face me. The majority are really in limbo, and it's really sad because these are nice, ordinary people.

I don't think most people can appreciate what COVID is doing to the world. We are tearing ourselves apart looking for scapegoats. The level of hatred is abnormal.

It's very simple. In most of the countries that have populist leaders, the virus is hitting very hard. In places where the leaders are more modest and listen to the experts and scientists, the situation is better. You can see this in Israel, the US, Brazil and India. These are places where the experts weren't given a chance to navigate the crisis. But I do believe that ideological poverty has its price.

Given the way most *chareidim* in Israel live, it is almost unavoidable to be hit by the virus. If you have 300 kids in a block of 20 apartments, what else can you expect when the infection spreads quickly? I really think that the younger generation is waking up and realizing that certain changes have to be made. But I don't know what will come of it.

The Pittsburgher Rebbe passed away from COVID, but social distancing wasn't practiced at his funeral. That's also part of the tragedy.

As I said, it's very tragic. How many people in Israel knew who the Rebbe was before his funeral? Despite his best precautions he was infected anyway.

Is COVID a subject you wish to explore with your camera?

Perhaps, but it would have to be after the dust settles. If I come at COVID it will be with a different perspective—that is, once we have a real perspective. I don't think the time is right just yet. Once we have a broader picture and can really see the outcome it will be more interesting. The world has certainly changed.

You've been under lockdown for the past few weeks.

Yes, since before Rosh Hashanah, but we're allowed to go shopping within 1,000 meters of our homes. The real problem is that the economy is shut down. It's very concerning. I believe that the lockdown is political in some ways, because a month and a half ago Professor Gamzu, the head of the coronavirus project, had a "traffic light" plan to shut down the "red" cities, which were mainly in the *chareidi* and Arab sectors, because otherwise the whole country would end up in trouble. The *chareidi* politicians didn't let that happen, but now the entire country is shut down and the economy is suffering. It also looks like we're going to end up with the very same plan that was originally proposed, except that now no one can complain because the numbers speak for themselves.

It's really depressing. Who knows what the winter will bring? A lot of people are finding it very hard to survive. Many of my friends don't have jobs and a lot of businesses and restaurants have been closed. And even when we come out of it, who knows how much money will be available for investments and the like? It's very concerning.

Do you have another project lined up?

I have a couple of ideas, but nothing has been signed on yet. ●