

*A provocative trigger film
for groups exploring:*

Judaism and Feminism

Jewish Continuity

Community and Individualism

Assimilation and Tradition in Modern Life

Religious Pluralism/ Tolerance

Women's Spirituality

A NOTE FROM THE FILMMAKER

This film tells a personal story that began when I attended the wedding of a woman friend who chose as an adult to live an Orthodox Jewish life. In my quest to understand why she—an educated, strong, young woman—was drawn to a life I had always thought was extremely limiting, many of my assumptions were challenged.

This film was never intended as a comprehensive exploration of all the options for women in Judaism or for spiritual connection in the Jewish world. Rather, I hoped its provocative nature would generate discussion about key issues I see facing both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities in the U.S. – the value and cost of cultural identity, the price of placing individual freedom over community responsibility, the role of tradition in the modern world, the possibility of respectful pluralism – to name a few. I hope this guide will serve as a jumping-off point for framing discussion about these vital issues after screenings of the film. No doubt as teachers and facilitators you will find the film raises other issues as well.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Marcia James". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large loop at the end of the last name.

ABOUT THE FILM

The Return of Sarah's Daughters is a one-hour, personal documentary about contemporary women drawn to Jewish Orthodoxy. Rus, a no-nonsense social worker, gives us a guided tour of the Hasidic life she finds so fulfilling. Spiritually-oriented Myriam spent time in this community, but when she realizes she can't reconcile her lesbianism with the conformity demanded, she chooses a different path. Ultimately, she decides to become a rabbi in the Reconstructionist tradition. These two women's stories challenge the filmmaker to give more than a feminist tour of the closed world of Hasidic women. She must confront her own lack of ethnic identity. What does tradition have to offer? At what price? Ultimately, her journey illuminates the modern conflicts between assimilation and tradition, community and individualism.

TOPICS/IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

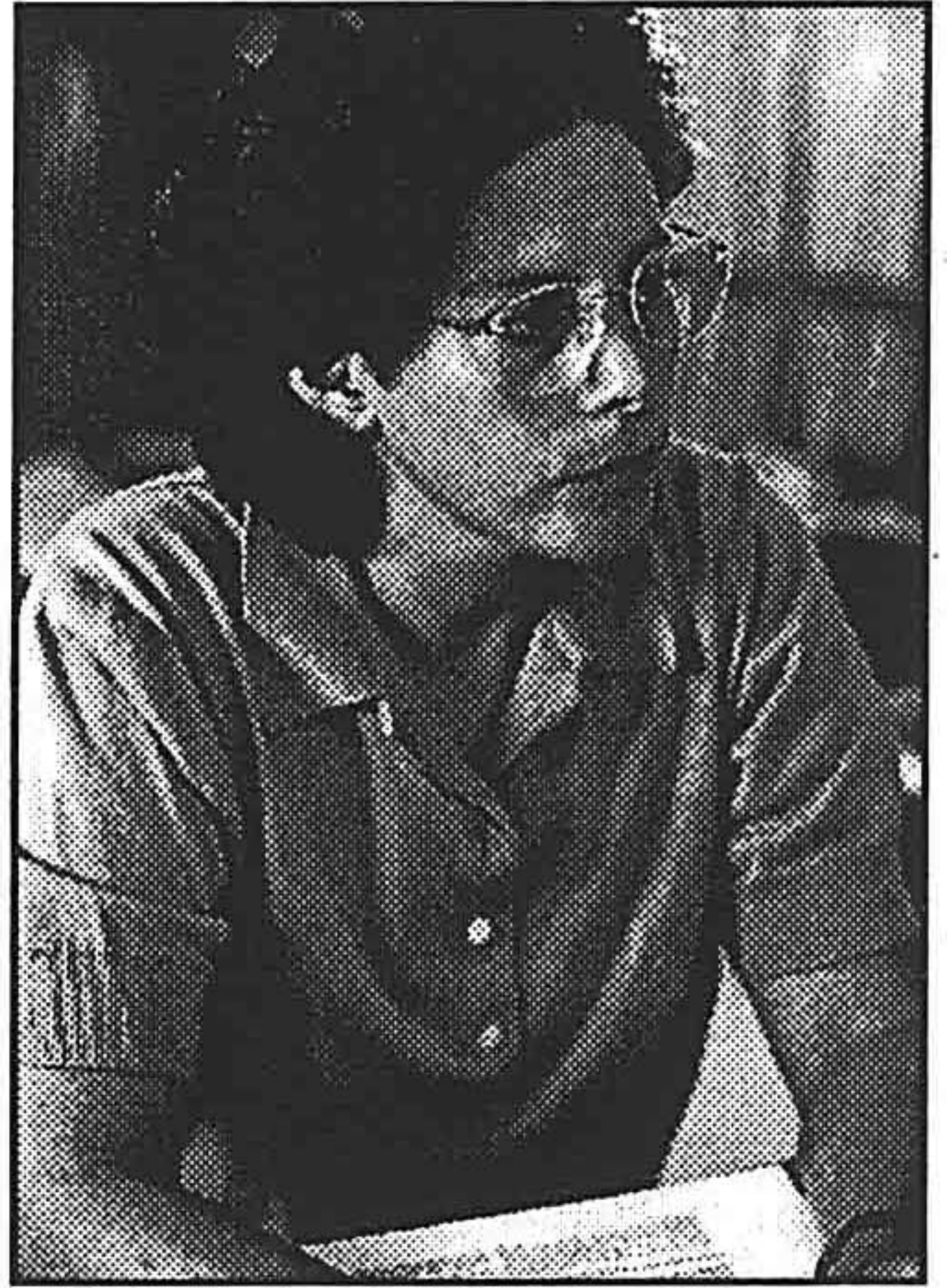
Religion/Religious Pluralism

1. Before viewing the film, brainstorm a list of stereotypes group members hold of Orthodox Jews (men and women) or Orthodox Judaism. Where did people get these ideas? Are they based on empirical evidence? Look for and point out patterns. Do most of the items refer to specific religious beliefs, or are they more about lifestyle and culture? Are the characteristics predominantly negative or positive? Why might that be? Check in with the group after watching the film. Have their views changed? Did they see anything that supported or challenged their previous ideas?
2. See what the group knows about the various streams of Judaism practiced in America today. Do they know the difference between various movements: Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, Jewish Renewal? Ask and list some things that all of them have in common. What separates them? What can you identify as a potential source of disagreement between groups?
3. Rus and Myriam are tolerant and respectful of each other although they live very different lives. How do you relate to people who have made different choices than you? What divisions do you feel between yourself and those in other religious groups? How can we repair this divide? Should we?
4. (Especially good to ask teens) What questions did you have about God, religion, or spirituality as a child that weren't answered? How have you sought answers? Have they been satisfactorily addressed?
5. Has the film challenged your ideas about the role religion plays in your life?
6. Through the film, did you learn about Jewish practices you did not know about before? Are any of them things you might like to incorporate into your own spiritual practice? Why or why not?
7. When Rus was given her new name, she described a feeling of warmth through her body that let her know that this was her name. Have you ever had an experience like this, where something just felt right spiritually?
8. If you belong to a religious or spiritual community, how does it differ from the communities Myriam and Rus belong to? How is it similar?

TOPICS/IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

Feminism/Women's Issues/Personal Identity

1. Before (and again after) viewing the film, ask whether it is possible to be both an Orthodox Jew and a feminist. Why or why not? How do you define "feminism"? Is Rus a feminist?
2. For Myriam, being a lesbian was one major reason why she "didn't fit" within the Orthodox lifestyle and community. Do you think this is the only reason she couldn't belong? Why might you fit or not fit into the Orthodox world?
3. Rus's friend in the mikvah says she hates to wear a wig, but she does it because she wants what the Orthodox lifestyle and community have to offer. Can you think of examples from your life where you have made personal sacrifices or tolerated something for a greater good or to gain acceptance? Do you think sublimating personal wishes for community goals is a good thing? Under some circumstances? What do you think you get and give up if individual choice is your highest value?



4. Why is the filmmaker searching? How do the women in this film feel their Jewish background failed them? Do you have any feelings like theirs?
5. What is the allure of Orthodox Judaism to these women? Are these things you have in your own life? If not, would you like them? Why do you think it's difficult to find them in a more mainstream lifestyle?

TOPICS/IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

Community

1. What defines a community? What ties the members of a community together? Do you feel part of a community? Do you identify with a religious community? Is this the same as, or different from, your parents community?
2. Community is clearly an essential element in living a full Orthodox Jewish life. Can you identify some positive and negative aspects of the centrality of community in Myriam and Rus's life?
3. Myriam has found a strong, vibrant Jewish community in the Reconstructionist movement. Is this sense of community different than what Rus experiences as community? If so, how?
4. Many people who are critical of the Chabad community compare it to a cult. What do you think?
5. After a very personal search, Rus and Myriam both chose Orthodox Judaism as adults. Children growing up in some Orthodox communities are not exposed to options in the mainstream. Do you feel you had a choice in your religious identity? Do you wish you had been exposed to other options? Where does individual choice factor into membership in the Orthodox community?

Jewish Continuity

1. Can the the group arrive at one definition of Jewish continuity? Is continuity about preserving a religious tradition, or more about culture and community? Is simple survival the measure of the success of Jewish continuity? What role does assimilation play?
2. Is there a threat to Jewish continuity today? What is it?
3. To what extent can non-Orthodox traditions provide for Jewish continuity (as previously defined by the group)?
4. In the film, Darcy's (Rus') father says that "It's individuals like Darcy who will preserve Judaism for the future." Do you agree with this statement? How do you think Myriam might respond?

RESOURCES FOR LEARNING MORE

Books

- Abraham, Pearl. *The Romance Reader*, Riverhead Books, 1996. *A young Hasidic girl struggles to leave her community.*
- Bauer, Agi L. *Black Becomes a Rainbow: The Mother of a Baal Teshuvah Tells Her Story*. (Feldheim Publishers, New York), 1991. *A secular mother grapples with her daughter's choice to become Orthodox.*
- Biale, Rachel. *Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources*. (Shoken Books: New York), 1984. *A resource for what the texts actually say about women.*
- Davidman, Lynn. *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*. (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA), 1991. *A sociologist looks at the phenomenon of women returning to traditional Judaism.*
- Frankiel, Tamar. *The Voice of Sarah: Feminine Spirituality and Traditional Judaism*. (Harper Collins: San Francisco), 1990. *A feminist Orthodox scholar's take on spirituality in traditional Judaism.*
- Greenberg, Blu. *On Women and Judaism: A View From Tradition*. (The Jewish Publishing Society of America: New York), 1981. *A well-respected Orthodox feminist looks at women's roles in Torah-observant Judaism.*
- Heschel, Susannah (editor). *On Being A Jewish Feminist: A Reader*. (Schocken Books: New York), 1983. *The classic compendium of writings on the topic.*
- Kaufman, Debra Renee. *Rachel's Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women*. (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, NJ), 1991. *A sociological study of women drawn to Orthodoxy.*
- Kaye, Evelyn. *The Hole in the Sheet: A Modern Woman Looks at Orthodox and Hasidic Judaism*. (Lyle Stuart, Inc.: Secaucus, NJ), 1987. *A first-person account of a woman leaving a Hasidic community.*
- Pogrebin, Letty Cottin. *Deborah, Golda, & Me: Being Female & Jewish in America*. (Anchor Books: New York), 1991. *A thoughtful feminist's musings on being a Jewish woman.*
- Roiphe, Anne. *Lovingkindness*. (Warner Books: New York), 1987. *A novel about a feminist-mother whose daughter becomes Orthodox.*
- Rudavsky, David. *Modern Jewish Religious Movements*. (Behrman Hiuse: New York), 1979. *A basic primer.*

RESOURCES FOR LEARNING MORE

Films

Gefilte Fish

1984 15 min.

Three generations of women share their methods for making gefilte fish, and in the process, their opinions of tradition and its role in contemporary society.

Available through First Run/Icarus Films, Ergo Media, and Facets Multimedia.

Half the Kingdom

1989 60 min.

Profiles six women from Israel, Canada, and the U.S. struggling for equality in a Jewish context.

Available through Direct Cinema.

In Her Own Time

1985 60 min.

Anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff's classic depicting her experience in the Orthodox community in Los Angeles after discovering she is dying of lung cancer.

Available through Direct Cinema.

Oskar and Jack

1989 60 min.

Identical twins separated as children, Oskar was raised as a Catholic in the spirit of Nazi Germany joining the Hitler Youth. Jack stayed in the Caribbean with his father who raised him as a Jew. They are reunited as middle-aged men.

Available through the Jewish Film Foundation.

There are many films described, complete with information on how to obtain them, in the *Independent Jewish Film: A Resource Guide*, published by the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival. To obtain copies call (510) 548-0556 or check their website, <http://www.sfjff.org>.

Look for more information about
The Return of Sarah's Daughters
and other related films on the web at:

www.sfjff.org/sfjff17/programs
shamash.org/jb/bk970530/etfilm.htm
www.pbs.org/a-life-apart/return-of-sd.html
www.nfjc.org/film/sarasdaughters.htm

**To Order additional copies of the video tape or study guide,
call or write PatchWorks Film Library
22-D Hollywood Avenue • Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ 07423
Tel: 800.343.5540 • Fax: 201.652.1973**

Video Sales

University/Institution: \$250
Public Library/High School/Community Group: \$99
Individuals: \$50

Rental

Video: \$80
16mm film: \$150 (Call for paid performance fees)

Shipping & Handling

\$15 (U.S.) \$25 (Canada)
Previews pay shipping & handling only.
Allow 3 weeks for delivery.

Contact the filmmaker about speaking engagements
Call or e-mail: 415.626.9902 • patchworks@igc.apc.org