

The Spiritual and the Secular

"I never would have guessed that later in our lives it would be religion that would define our relationship.... As time goes on, it becomes difficult to remember the brother I was once so close to. It's a testament to our past connection that we have a relationship at all."

— Documentary filmmaker Dan Akiba, whose *My Brother's Wedding* chronicles his brother's embrace of Hasidic life in Israel

For many people, no relationship is more intimate to their lives than the one they have with their God. Connections to lovers, parents, even children—for many of the deeply spiritual, all relationships become secondary. To them, this rank of priorities is acutely logical and profoundly sacred. To the people who love them and don't share their beliefs, seeing their roles usurped by religion is nothing short of inexplicable.

This kind of bafflement and tension is even more acute when the religious fervor is a newfound passion. For all the richness that this topic would seem to present, all the potentials for showing the way families draw in and recoil back when one of their tribe gets the fever, the number of feature films that focus on the issue is slender. Compared to the number of movies about love choices that antagonize families or career pursuits that fracture the family peace, there are slim pickings about this other convulsive love.

Documentary filmmakers, however, are picking up the slack. *Hiding and Seeking: Faith and Tolerance after the Holocaust*, which played the Boston Jewish Film Festival in 2004, tells the story of filmmaker Menachem Daum, who was raised in Brooklyn after his family emigrated to the States and whose sons have chosen a life in Jerusalem as full-time Yeshiva students. The film explores the ambivalence he feels about their insular lives. "My children and grandchildren are growing up in a time where every religion is in danger of being hijacked by extremists," says Daum.

Watching a loved one transform into someone new is also the theme of the extraordinary *My Brother's Wedding*. Dan Akiba was 28 years old when he made this 36-minute film. Growing up in a secular home in Brookline, Massachusetts, Dan and his younger brother, Jonah, were always very close. When Jonah was in his early 20s, he dropped out of college and spent a year with the community service group City Year in Boston. He then began traveling: India, Egypt, Jordan, and finally Israel.

"I told him I hoped he'd have a wonderful time in Israel," Dan said, to the agreement of his mother, Barbara. "But he should just promise me one thing: that he would not come back Orthodox. It was a joke—I mean, I meant it, but it was a joke. Because in my wildest dreams, I couldn't imagine him becoming Orthodox."

When Jonah called his mother from Israel and told her that he had "found the truth" and that "the Torah was the word of God," she dissolved into tears, she said. "What I felt was that I've lost my son."

Unflinchingly, the film exposes the toll Jonah's steady conversion to an Orthodox and then Hasidic faith takes on his family's relationship with him. His father, David, a photographer and college professor, said he has "so much trouble with some of the underlying philosophy of the



Still from *My Brother's Wedding* by Dan Akiba. 30 min., 2003.

orthodoxy." Dan said that "in finding God, my brother has left us behind, and that's something I will never understand."

At Jonah's wedding in Jerusalem, both Dan and David took refuge, as Dan put it, behind their respective cameras. As Jonah became increasingly ecstatic during the festivities, dancing with the Hasidic men who have become his chosen family, "it hit at this moment," Dan said in a voiceover, "that my brother and I had become strangers."

My Brother's Wedding played at the 2003 Boston Jewish Film Festival and was part of an installation, *Through the Lens: A Separate Journey*, at the Leventhal-Sidman JCC in Newton Centre this past spring. The exhibited collection of nearly sixty photographs by David Akiba was culled from over 2,500

images and chronicles the lives of his sons both before and after Jonah's conversion. The installation moves to the 92 Street Y in Manhattan in September.

Some of the quotations posted on the walls alongside the photos were drawn

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from Dan's film, while others were stand-alone commentary. David is quoted at one point as saying, "The love and concern that I sensed between Jonah and members of the Breslover Hasid community living in Safed led me toward a more sympathetic appreciation of his life."

The Akibas's exhibition—the father's photos, the son/brother's film—presented a profoundly private, melancholic but not maudlin, and deeply loving portrait of connection, disconnection, and acceptance.

In a 1992 book, *Stomping Grounds: A Pilgrim's Progress Through Eight American Subcultures*, author W. Hampton Sides writes that "modern America is a country of subcultures, a place where people's identities are shaped to a peculiar extent by the private enthusiasms which they may pursue with kindred spirits within an identifiable microcosm." We live in a culture where it is standard to rewrite our identities by trying on, shedding, and then trying on again associations with subcultures from Girl Scouts to sports teams, poker circles to AA meetings, political splinter groups to religious faith.

That we manage to hold on to our families at all along our journeys is a minor miracle. ■



Photograph by David Akiba.

92nd Street Y – www.92ndsty.org

National Center for Jewish Film – www.brandeis.edu/jewishfilm

Boston Jewish Film Festival – www.bjff.org

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