

## Menashe - A Film Review

By Estelle Krumholz, LCSW



Not surprisingly, the Angelika Theater in Manhattan was packed for "Menashe," a unique Yiddish-speaking, slice-of-life film starring an authentic Hasidic cast. Movie-going is frowned upon amongst this ultra-religious Jewish sect and only 60 persons out of a community of many thousands showed up in Brooklyn for the open casting call. However, life being what it is, the few novice actors were able to live out their dreams in cinema, such as the real life Hasidic cab driver who plays the role of the rabbi.

Living a Talmudic life, one that follows Judaic law regardless of one's station in life, is part of belonging to the community. Menashe, a grocery clerk (in the film and in real life), makes time to study with the other men as part of his everyday routine. In fact, at the Q and A session following the screening, the secular, non-Yiddish speaking director jokingly recalled his fear that the film might never be finished due to the frequent and heated debates among the actors and crew over the subtitles of translation from Yiddish to English; a director's nightmare, but a commonplace occurrence amongst Hasidim. Yiddish vocabulary often has several words and meanings for a single item (hmm . . . could Freud have been a closet Hasid)?

Ostensibly, the movie is about the predicament of Menashe, a recent middle-aged widower, and his wish to be the custodial parent of his young only son, Rieven. According to religious law as practiced in the community, a child must be raised in a home with both mother and father. This not being possible while Menashe remained single, young Rieven (in real life the son of two Israeli Yiddish scholars) is sent to live with his maternal aunt and uncle. No love is lost between Menashe and his brother-in-law, who is wealthy by community standards and has a stronger sense of following rules than of nourishing his inner life. Menashe, on the other hand, is a rotund, affable but bumbling man - a "schlemiel" - who wears his heart on his sleeve. He is beside himself in his desire to keep custody of his son, the only thing of value that remains.

The rabbi allows Rieven to live with Menashe for one week. The film centers on father and son within the context of this highly regulated community, with the impending separation looming in the background.

Men, in their distinct black garb, white shirts and large hats are everywhere on the screen. One had to look carefully however, to avoid missing the few scenes in which women were visible. Notwithstanding, it seemed to me that the atmosphere was continuously infused with what was not there --- the need and longing for a woman/mother.

Menashe clearly adores his son, and is kind and loving to him in a somewhat goofy way. The boy, however, only reluctantly gives himself up to the joyfulness of this relationship, as the rules of the community weigh heavily on the side of the impending separation until such time as his father would re-marry and provide a proper two-parent home.

One interesting brief foray into the secular world occurs during a work break at the back of the grocery store. Amidst the unopened cartons, Menashe, relaxing, opens up to two Hispanic helpers about his early-arranged marriage, which had been fraught with arguments and the stress of infertility. The men are moved by "Gordito's" (as they refer to him) story and invite him to go out with them on Friday night. Laughing, the three men immediately realize the folly of this warm gesture and the reality of their respective cultural boundaries that stop at the unopened contents in the store.

While the few women in the film are seen only briefly, their relative absence, however, shouts their powerful position. Clearly, the family cannot exist without the mother, and other makeshift arrangements must be made for the nurturing of children.

Pressure weighs heavily on Menashe to remarry as quickly as possible, so he succumbs to the aid of the matchmaker. However, Menashe is just not ready to remarry and finds himself on an awkward and embarrassing date. The woman is incensed that Menashe has wasted her precious time! Marriage seemingly is the business of creating and maintaining family; Romeo and Juliet must live in another borough.

As the story continues, the empathic rabbi gives a nod to Menashe's wish to host his dead wife's "yahrzeit" memorial service in his little apartment. Preparation of the meal, including the ever-present kugel, traditionally is a task left to the woman of the home. Yet Menashe attempts to make it, having borrowed a recipe from his obliging but disdainful "balaboosta" neighbor, who incredulously asks, "What, now you think you can cook, too?!" Is this perhaps Menashe's unconscious attempt to inject the feminine into his home, and thereby increase the possibility of being allowed custody of his son?

Menashe, however, neglects the kugel that burns in the oven and the apartment fills with smoke. Amidst sneers from the other men, the rabbi slowly eats his kugel without any trace of a grimace, putting an end to the reproach of the others. The similarity between an elderly, bearded rabbi and the good-enough mother who compliments her child's first attempt at cooking, no matter how distasteful, was touching and familiar in its motherliness.

Although women are largely absent on the screen, the importance of the mother lurks understatedly throughout. Menashe tries to capture this mothering persona. The audience roots for him in spite of his inadequacies because he is loving and nurturing in his own awkward way. We want him to receive a pardon. Even the rabbi, upholder of the unbending law, is sympathetic to Menashe.

The internal struggles portrayed in this film are not ones of existential choice and free will, but rather those of living within the boundary of what is considered to be God-given law. We see Menashe's struggle to live within these bounds clash with his shame and torment of having to let another man take his place as father.

At the end we see Menashe immersing himself in a bath. Emerging clean and looking dapper, he strides down the neighborhood street, perhaps ready for a new wife and new life with his son.

This is an interesting and sensitive film that neither glorifies nor excoriates Hasidic life. Rather, it allows outsiders to view what is behind the curtain of a very private community, a community surrounded by a secular world that barely touches it and its vibrant life.