



RELIGION IN ISRAELI SOCIETY

The struggle to define the role of religion in Israeli society caused great controversy long before Israel as a state even existed. Two opposing conceptions of Zionism existed at the turn of the 20th century. Eastern European intellectuals espoused Cultural Zionism, envisioning a modern, secular Jewish state based on ethnic, nationalistic and cultural Judaism. In contrast, Religious Zionism visualized a Jewish state in Israel in a religious context, with Jewish Torah law at its center.

The question of whether Israel should be “a state of Jews” or a “Jewish state” continues to cause a rift in Israel today. As of 2007, one fifth of the Israeli Jewish public defines itself as secular (*chilonim*) and one third as religious (*datim*), while half considers itself to be “traditional” (*masorti*), maintaining some connection with religious observance but not strictly following religious law (according to the Israel Democracy Institute¹⁰). Rising tensions largely stem from the fundamental belief of religious Israelis that the laws of a Jewish state must be guided by religious Jewish principles. Since Israel’s establishment, the Chief Rabbinate has held jurisdiction over all Jews concerning such issues as Jewish marriages and burials, defining “who is a Jew” for matters of immigration and conversion, and observance of the Sabbath and *kashrut* (dietary laws).

However, secular and traditional Israelis do not wish to be bound by Jewish religious law, especially since they already feel connected to Judaism through living in Israel, being surrounded by other Jews and speaking Hebrew. Friction is also apparent when ultra-Orthodox (*haredim*) receive exemptions from military service and some *datim* refuse to carry out military orders (especially concerning settlements) for religious reasons.

Across the secular-religious divide, each side sees the other as one-dimensional and seeks to define itself as the other’s opposite. The religious see the secular as empty, lacking in values and hedonistic; the secular view the religious as backward and hypocritical, with an agenda of conquering society for their own purposes. Naturally, these stereotypes are culturally reinforced in the realm of film.

This unit examines *Time of Favor*, which deals with the line between devotion and fanaticism in a West Bank yeshiva, and *Ushpizin*, the first movie to be made by members of the ultra-Orthodox community in collaboration with secular filmmakers and aimed for general audiences.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- 1 What is the goal of these movies? What message do they send to Israeli society and internationally concerning Judaism and how it is practiced in modern Israel?
- 2 How do these movies portray the relationship between secular people and religious people in Israel today?
- 3 Could these movies take place anywhere except Israel? Are movies dealing with religious themes in Israel important or even relevant to people who do not live in Israel and aren’t Jewish? Why or why not?
- 4 How (and to what extent) do these two films overcome the following challenges facing films that deal with religious themes? a) Making them interesting/relevant to audiences not knowledgeable concerning these religious issues b) Presenting what are oftentimes controversial, nuanced and sensitive issues in a clear and unbiased way c) Representing the religious community accurately and knowledgeably