



Fill the void

Director: Rama Burshtein

Country: Israel

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A review by Jonathan Romney for *Sight and Sound*:

Spoiler alert: this review reveals a plot twist

In his 2011 novel *The Marriage Plot*, Jeffrey Eugenides mused on the state of fiction in an era when marital intrigue has long fallen into disrepute as a narrative motor. Mainstream cinema still tries to make what it can of the drive towards marriage, but outside generic romcom it's hard to imagine what kind of fictions might be built unproblematically on such a framework today. *Fill the Void* is an unexpected answer to that question. It's set within an orthodox Jewish community in Tel Aviv – Haredi rather than Hasidic, the latter being a subset of the former. And it's written and directed by a member of that community – although the fact that Rama Burshtein did not grow up within it but became Orthodox in her twenties gives her a hybrid insider-outsider status.

Her film follows the vagaries of a young woman's wedding plans – plans made for her by her parents with a community marital broker. If *Fill the Void* resembles anything in familiar fiction, it's the novels of Jane Austen – an inspiration that Burshtein has cited in interviews. Indeed, the Orthodox codes of separation between the sexes, and the roles of mothers and aunts in facilitating meetings, closely echo the codes of decorum at Austen's balls and teatime visits.

The topic of arranged marriage is increasingly contentious today, whatever the religious or ethnic context, so it comes as something of a shock that this urbane, intelligent film offers a defence of the practice. Burshtein depicts Haredi wedding tradition as cementing social order and offering a genuine possibility of happiness. It's missing the point to complain that *Fill the Void* is conservative; the terms of its argument are so far outside familiar western social norms that the film registers as altogether radical in its gentle, elegantly expressed otherness. To establish this hermetic social world, largely restricted to interiors, Burshtein and DP Asaf Sudri create a distinctive and seductive visual style that emphasises intimacy: shallow focus, low angles, highly composed groupings.

The key theme is the formalised engineering of marriage: at the start, 18-year-old Shira visits a supermarket to get a first glimpse from afar of a possible husband. Matrimony is organised by a marriage broker who eventually – in a *deus ex machina* twist that resolves everyone's problems – himself marries Frieda, the one young woman in the community whose enduring single status has been the narrative's chief element of blockage.



This blockage can only be removed by pairing Frieda with the elderly Shtreicher, hardly the dashing swain of every young girl's dreams – but then romantic love and sexual attraction are not paramount in this community's worldview. The very fact of marriage is presented as a source of joy. Just as Frieda is visibly delighted to get together with Shtreicher, so at the start Shira glows at the prospect of union with the solemn youth who's been chosen for her.

Such alliances and their management are represented with a certain ironic wit. The film's

wonderfully eccentric opening close-up has Shira and her mother Rivka holding a nervous vigil in the supermarket, before Rivka makes a call to locate the elusive youth (“He’s in the dairy section”). When he is spotted, gauche and bespectacled, Rivka announces, “He looks just like his father” – leaving it to us to decide whether this is a good thing or not.

But there’s a twist to Burshtein’s take on marriage. For despite this ostensibly being a film about marrying the correct person in social terms, it turns out also to be a romantic drama in a more familiar sense. In Shira’s case, it’s about marrying the right person, the one who will make the ideal fit – which may mean romantic/erotic love after all. It’s never suggested that Haredi women are obliged to accept the decisions of parents or rabbis: women are under pressure to make their choices at the right time, but the decision of whom to marry is theirs. Besides, Burshtein’s deck is a little stacked: not only is widower Yochay the best-looking man around, he’s also established as a tender soul with a seductive streak. There’s clearly an emotional, even erotic bond simmering between him and Shira. The fact that he was earlier seen declaring passionate devotion to Shira’s older sister is simply one of those challenging elements that Burshtein requires non-Haredi viewers to deal with. Burshtein doesn’t make it easy for us: she wants us to be struck by the otherness of this community’s norms.

Fill the Void certainly has a singular status among screen representations of Jewish life, which most commonly – whether secular or religious, made by Jews or gentiles – emphasise the ‘vibrancy’ of Jewish family life (in other words, lots of shouting). Burshtein gives us possibly the quietest Jews ever filmed, who live thoughtfully and often speak sotto voce. Parents and spouses alike are gently solicitous: when a distraught Rivka tells her husband that she’s losing her mind, he calmly replies, “Lose your mind, I’m here.”

Burshtein is interested in the conflicts of the situation – the film’s one heated confrontation comes when Rivka and Aunt Hanna disagree about Frieda – but generally, empathy and mutual support are key. Patriarchs have a special role in minimising discord. At a Purim meal, Shira’s father hands out subsidies to a succession of men with griefs that require finance; in a comic interlude, a senior rabbi interrupts a meeting to explain the workings of an oven to an elderly woman.

We’re far from the Coens’ *A Serious Man* (2009), with its comic image of the ancient rabbi as earthly embodiment of a forbidding God. Theologically, the film is about Shira’s personal relation with a nurturing deity. A rabbi quotes the text “Blessed be he who says one word of truth to the Almighty” – the suggestion is that Shira is blessed because she is courageous enough to address the truth about her world and her desires. Seeking to reconcile social requirements with her needs and desires, she is a person of integrity, an exemplary Austenian heroine – a Serious Woman. Burshtein may appear to present a society in which women are fated to lose their liberty to a patriarchal order, but she makes it clear that her female characters consciously and freely assume their situation. As opposed to the bleak view of sexual subjugation in *Kadosh*, Amos Gitai’s 1999 film about Hasidic marriage, *Fill the Void* sees Burshtein fortrightly and wittily asserting that this is how her community lives.

The film is finely acted, especially by Irit Sheleg as Rivka, a watchful social and familial politician. The command of emotional quietness is subtly achieved throughout, the introverted Shira (Hadas Yaron) tending to express herself through melancholy accordion-playing rather than words. Not that the film is unquestioning. The loose thread is disabled Aunt Hanna, who wears the traditional headdress of married women despite remaining single: a rabbi advised her that it would stop people asking questions. So one of the drama’s strongest characters is a semi-excluded figure who guarantees herself a social place by living a lie of sorts.

Then there’s the coda, with the newly married Shira and Yochay coming home together for the first time; the film leaves us with Shira looking decidedly anxious, as if to remind us that the traditional Austenian ‘marriage plot’ can only ever be a prelude to the real and complex drama of conjugal life.

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