

Shabbat Vayishlach 5781

Connecting to Israel through TV: My Favorite Israeli Shows Streaming Now, and What They Say About Israel Today

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Shabbat shalom!

Let's begin with a joke: What did Moses share in common with most American Jews? He always *talked* about making Aliyah but never actually did!

OK, I'm being unfair to Moses, a man who devoted himself endlessly to the People Israel. It made him sick that G-d did not let him enter the Promised Land. (Even though - brace yourselves - Moses actually *did* set foot in Israel. More on that later).

These weeks, many synagogues are following the lead of the American Zionist Movement and hosting a Zionist Shabbat to strengthen the connection between our communities and Israel. Thanks to Sandy Starkman for encouraging this. The AZM does wonderful things to bring us closer to Israel, and our own Rabbi Kurtz is a former president of the AZM.

Clearly, the best way to connect to Israel is to go there, to "*Kum Hit'halech Ba'aretz*," to walk about it with your own two feet. To feel with your own heart that you've returned home. To see with your own eyes the golden hue of Jerusalem stone as the sun sets. To hear with your own ears "Shabbat shalom!" from every direction everywhere you go on Fridays. To taste with your own mouth the heavenly combination of warm, soft, fresh pita bread, savory hummus and crunchy-on-the-outside falafel. Israel, the land of *milki* and honey.

So what are we to do these days, when we cannot safely travel there because of Coronavirus?

Today I want to speak about a relatively new way of connecting to Israel: television. Never before have we had such unprecedented access to Israeli TV shows and movies. And not just at the Beth El library - which still offers a great selection and Rachel Kamin can assist - but streaming into our homes. If you have Netflix or Amazon Prime Video, you too can watch original Israeli content in Hebrew with English subtitles. Perhaps you can with other platforms too, but these are the two I have. These shows and movies are entertaining, yes, but they are also significant and important: Significant because they

make us *feel* like we are inside Israel; and important because they tell Israel's story in a genuine, compelling, nuanced way and millions globally are tuning in.

I'd like to tell you about some of my favorite shows, which I think you may enjoy as well. More importantly, they each communicate an important story being told in Israel today. These specific shows are on Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, which anybody with a TV or computer can access with a paid subscription.

The first show is called "Shtisel," on Netflix. It's not a Hebrew word but a Yiddish name, which is why you'll hear a lot of "Shkoiyach!" throughout. The series follows a fictional Ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, family through life's ups and downs. First there is Shulem Shtisel, the family patriarch and a rabbi at the local Yeshiva. His son Akiva is 26 and feels he belongs in the artist studio more than the Beit Midrash Torah academy. Akiva is masterfully played by Michael Aloni. (An aside: A Beth El family told me they bumped into him in Israel on the street and that he is just the nicest person. It's amazing who we bump into on the street in Israel, right?) Akiva has a sister, Giti, who is fiercely independent as she navigates a difficult marriage trying to repair itself. She has a daughter, Ruhami, who feels squeezed in every direction. Ruhami is brilliantly played by Shira Haas, who this year received an Emmy nomination for her role in the Netflix limited series "Unorthodox."

Who will Akiva ask to marry him? How will Giti manage to raise her kids without a husband and a job? Will Shulem remarry later in life? Will Ruhami forgive her father, who wants a new beginning? These are some of the plotlines of Season 1. The show is astoundingly popular outside of Israel; last year the cast hosted a panel in New York City that drew 4500 attendees.

What the show does best is this: It opens a window into a community that has largely kept its doors shut. The Haredi world intentionally does not integrate with other communities. "Shtisel" takes a black-and-white photograph and adds splashes of color - literally! The show brings us inside the black-and-white-garbed community and we see it through the eyes of a talented painter, whose creative mind pushes him to reach outside.

"Shtisel" strips away the politicization of Haredi Jews and shows them as ordinary people with everyday problems. Drama about falling in love? Challenges within a marriage? Feeling squeezed by your role in the family? These issues occur in every community. This show takes an unfamiliar community and makes its characters feel familiar. There are characters we love, like Kiva, and others we can't stand, like Uncle Nuchem. And that is sort of the point. The show takes us into Haredi neighborhoods,

schools, apartments, nursing homes, and more. While not a documentary, the show was created by people who grew up in that world. This front row seat is not just entertaining - though there is plenty of that too, like in watching Kiva's burgeoning art career. It's actually instrumental to having us understand Haredi Jews, who make up a growing share of Israel's population.

Now I feel like an infomercial host: time is running out! The show will remain on Netflix for only 10 more days before it's taken off. Fortunately, ten days is enough time to binge-watch these two fine seasons. And now I feel like the Netflix algorithm: if you like "Shtisel," check out "Srugim" on Amazon Prime Video, which follows a group of single Modern Orthodox Jews looking for love in Jerusalem.

Our next show is also a must-see, but I suggest not watching this one before bed. There is so much action, adrenaline, violence and passion in "Fauda" that it can be difficult to fall asleep soon after. But do make sure to watch this Netflix three-season series because it is entertaining and enlightening to the max. "Fauda" means "chaos" in Arabic. Three years ago the New York Times ranked it as one of the year's best international TV shows.

Doron Kavilio leads the Israeli undercover squad deep into Palestinian villages to pursue dangerous threats to Israel: a West Bank Hamas leader, an ISIS terrorist, and in the third season, a Hamas commander in Gaza. How does Israel gather intelligence to protect itself? What do Palestinian communities look like and sound like? This show is unique in that dialogue is both Hebrew and Arabic. What is the ongoing physical and emotional toll for the Israeli team and their targets? These are some of the recurring themes.

The series overflows with shootouts, but the show is far more than shoot 'em up. For me, I've never really seen what life is like in the West Bank. Of course this show is not a documentary, but it's usually shot on location. We venture up close to Palestinian homes, weddings, funerals, mosques, town squares, hospitals, and more. That exposure was valuable for me. We see how some Israelis can blend in as Palestinians and vice versa. We witness some of the agonizing ethical dilemmas that arise in keeping Israel safe. We see the Israeli team at times emerging traumatized from their experiences, and how they don't always do the right thing. We notice that Palestinian leadership is not monolithic but often factioned rivals.

On one foot, this series shows how complicated terrorism and counter-terrorism are. This show has received some criticism for its portrayal of Palestinians, but again, it's not a documentary. I came away with a more nuanced and deeper understanding of

Palestinian life, as well as how Israel protects itself, and I think those are important to understanding Israel today. If the violence, politics, or controversy bother you, of course you don't have to watch. But millions of people around the world do.

And if you like "Fauda," you may also enjoy "The Spy" on Netflix. Though that limited series is not Israeli-made, it chronicles an important chapter in Israeli history. Israel's quintessential spy, Eli Cohen, is vividly brought to life by a talented and serious Sacha Baron Cohen.

"Shtisel" and "Fauda" are two shows that connect viewers to Israel in authentic ways because they share compelling stories about Israeli life. Watching them makes me understand Israel better and wish I could actually be there. Israeli TV is a blessing that we have, and yet it's unfortunate that today we can only gaze from afar.

In some small way, perhaps this is how Moses felt as he stood outside Israel longing to get in. We know that G-d did not permit him to enter Israel with the nation because of his sin in striking the rock instead of speaking to it to produce water. My jaw hit the desk when I read in the Artscroll Humash - Orthodox - that *Moses actually stood inside Israel*. Parashat Masei defines Israel's borders at the time, and the verse reads: "its limits shall be south of Kadesh Barnea" (Nu. 34:4). Other verses, like Deuteronomy 1:19, identify Kadesh Barnea as the place where Moses sent out 12 spies to scout out Israel. So Moses and the Jewish people stood within Israel's borders! Moses made it to Israel! The rabbis of the Talmud share that Moses thirsted to perform the commandments that could only be done in Israel (Sotah 14a), so this brief dwelling was insufficient. Perhaps it's like having a layover in a foreign country is not really visiting if you never leave the airport.

Moses had a small taste of Eretz Yisrael, and that fueled a lifetime hunger to return. Each of us, I hope, has been to Israel to experience its power. It is my hope that when the pandemic ends, we make arrangements for another trip. And now we can fly straight from O'Hare! But until that day comes, let us every day find ways old and new to connect to Israel. I'd like you to consider watching an Israeli TV show or movie soon. In your viewing platform, type "Israel" in the search box and have your pick. Or check something out from our library. Even when our feet cannot be in Israel, our TV's can point East.

Shabbat shalom!