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The Women of Israel's Hit TV Show 'Srugim'

By Sarah Breger

“Srugim,” the hit television series tracing the love lives of modern Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem, returned this past Sunday to the Israeli cable channel YES! The series — its name is derived from the knit yarmulkes favored by the *dati le’umi* or religious nationalist boys and men in Israel — has surprised even its creators by its immense popularity among secular Israelis. In the U.S., “Srugim” has developed a cult-like following among the modern Orthodox, who can equate life in the Jerusalem neighborhood Katamon (nicknamed “the *bitzah*” or the swamp) to life in the similarly religiously and romantically fraught Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Accurate portrayals of Orthodox Jews in American films or on television are hard to come by. Good female characters are especially rare, usually appearing onscreen as either oppressed or unnaturally saintly (see “A Price Above Rubies,” “A Stranger Among Us”.) But “Srugim” (written and directed by Laizy Shapira, himself an observant Jew) comes with complex female characters who have commitment issues, religious struggles, and romantic baggage (a *lot* of romantic baggage). Modern Orthodox young, single professionals can finally see themselves on onscreen. Although created by a man, the show is especially good at portraying the female characters’ complicated relationships with their tradition.

In the first episode of the series, Reut, the high-powered accountant, is seen both dumping a suitor who is uncomfortable with her salary and reciting Friday night Kiddush to the amazement of the men at the Shabbat table. While openly feminist, Reut is constantly being drawn to what she sees as a more normative Orthodox lifestyle. When she pretends to be married to another character in order to help him keep his job, she outwardly mocks her “fake homemaker” identity but inwardly is wistful. Reut drives a motorcycle but won’t buy a new bed because she fears it would be a sign of her spinsterhood. She learns to *lein* Torah, but in the process falls for her more right-wing teacher — a *Mercaz HaRav Kook* yeshiva student whose less complicated relationship to religion has its own appeals. Reut’s fight against the traditional gender roles of Orthodox Judaism is noble, but there also seems to be a nagging thought in the back of her mind that if she only had a less competitive job and a simpler faith she would be married by now. Her angst and confusion about her identity and fear of commitment to one lifestyle lead her to run away to India at the end of the first season.

The character Hodaya goes through the most drastic change over the course of season one. After becoming romantically involved with Avri, a secular Israeli, she keeps her religious identity a secret. When he asks to take her to a movie on Friday night, she says she has other plans, and when he cooks her a meal mixing milk and meat, she pretends to be too ill to eat. One of the most moving scenes last season was Hodaya visiting the mikveh in order to have sex with Avri for the first time. We see her sitting naked and crying on the mikveh floor and it is obvious that for her — and, perhaps, for the show itself — “sex” is somehow a dividing line between being religious and being secular. Her roommate, Yifat is the most religiously conservative of the three and also the one most focused on her dating life. Madly in love with Nati, a cocky surgeon (to quote a friend, “the Chuck Bass of Jerusalem”), she spends most of the time moping and pining. Nati and Yifat briefly get together and he spends the night, but *sans* sex. Originally titled “Sex and the Holy City” there is in fact, very little sex in the show, with the big payoff to a season of romantic tension being a mere hug. Nati can’t commit and Yifat is heartbroken. but eventually “finds herself” and then finds Amir, Nati’s best friend and roommate, whom she is all set to marry at the beginning of season two.

In the first episode of the new season Yifat is about to get married to Nati’s best friend; Hodaya is grappling with her new identity as a *DatLashit* (a former religious Zionist woman), and Reut has vanished — presumably, she’s off practicing yoga in India. And while it might seem that these struggles would appeal only to other Modern Orthodox Jews, “Srugim” actually crosses the denominational divide. When I went to a screening of the first three episodes at the Washington Jewish Film Festival last month, I was surprised to see Jews from across the religious spectrum enjoying the dramedy — even if some of the idiosyncrasies might be comprehensible only to some. Yes, the travails of singlehood are universal, and the show offers just as much relationship angst as “Grey’s Anatomy” or “Sex and the City.” But the show also does a good job depicting the ways faith and tradition can be wrapped up in the dating process, and vice-versa.