

## Article

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### The Eruv is broken.....The Trauma Narrative in 'Unorthodox.'



The eruv is broken, and they can't go out, the first scene in the Netflix series 'Unorthodox,' which caught the attention of millions worldwide in March 2020. The eruv is a symbolic wire constructed to create a safe space so that orthodox Jews can carry certain items they otherwise would be forbidden to carry outside the Sabbath home. Typically made up of fish wire and hung from utility poles or other structures, these broken wires set up the perfect opening scene being symbolic and metaphoric to the rest of the narrative.

Based on the novel 'Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots' by Deborah Feldman published in 2012, a memoir of her life as she escaped her orthodox Satmar Hasidic Jewish

upbringing and family in Williamsburg, New York and moved to Germany. The Netflix drama is partly based on this novel, with a few changes in a four-part series. A show about Jews shot in Germany is in itself noteworthy, a show that talks about a nineteen-year-old Jewish woman Esty or Esther Shapiro, played by Shira Haas, who goes back to the source of the most traumatic place for her race in modern history to find and rediscover herself.

Researchers at the Mount Sinai Hospital, New York, analyzed a gene associated with stress hormones and known to be affected by trauma in 32 Jewish people who experienced the Holocaust and their children. They compared the results to Jewish families who were living outside

Europe during World War Two and found methylation changes in the Holocaust survivors and their children that were not present in the control group. After ruling out the possibility that the stress indicators in the children's genes could be caused by their own childhood trauma, the researchers concluded that they had inherited their parents' epigenetics changes. 'The gene changes in the children could only be attributed to Holocaust exposure in the parents,' said Professor Rachel Yehuda, who co-authored the study.<sup>1</sup>

Trauma can be seen in all the characters of the series; Esty's Grandmother is a holocaust survivor from Hungary and keeps mourning the loss of her family members in the horrid war. This trauma is also passed down in overt forms and used to justify their orthodox beliefs and way of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Satmar Jewish community in Williamsburg finds its identity in the trauma suffered through generations and finding ways to undo the trauma. Trauma plays an essential role in this series's narrative structure as the audience sees the various manifestations played out in different forms in different people. The Rabbi uses trauma experienced in the past, whether through the Exodus in Egypt or the Holocaust in the second world war. To direct and control the people who follow his teachings and even add to it by traumatizing his followers through extreme interpretations of the Torah and Talmud like Esty's mother, Leah Mandelbaum, whose child is forcefully taken away and is forced to flee under the Rabbi's direction.

In an interview, Deborah Feldman talks about the Satmar Hasidic Orthodox community as she says, "It is founded by the people struggling with the immense

trauma we can imagine. For the first two generations, this trauma was the driving force behind the ideological structures of the community". This community is different from the other orthodox communities as developed who they were after the war and not so much before.

Gender is entwined within the trauma narrative; we see the males get away with many falterings and are forgiven. Moishe is promised deliverance and forgiveness if he brings back Esty from Germany by the Rabbi as she is carrying a baby that belongs to her husband, family, and the Jews of the community and not her. When Moishe sees Esty enjoying a club with Robert, he feels like he has seen something extraordinarily wrong and ends up jumping naked into the water in shock. When a woman breaks barriers, it is considered more immoral than if a man does, even if he has faltered much more. Esty's mother, who was forced to run away to Germany because of the trauma and trouble the community caused her, is outcasted and blamed for Esty's disappearance. The community does not realize that its subjugations and extreme rules cause people to suffocate and seek release.

Suffocation as a theme is brought out explicitly in the series where the family members and community are too involved in each other's lives that blurs the line between concern and gossip-mongering. The women are taught their only job is to procreate, and only then will they have a say in the marriage and a stand in the family. In Season 1, part 2, when Esty asks how sex works, the Kallah teacher tells her, "*It's basic physics, The man is the giver, and the woman is the receiver.*" This dialogue brings out the gender dynamic

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.bionews.org.uk/page\\_95172](https://www.bionews.org.uk/page_95172)

running through the community being taught generation after generation without much thought about women and men's psychological implications. Every young bride is schooled about the basic tenets of traditional Jewish Marriage etiquette by a Kallah teacher who guides and helps the bride make her a worthy bride of Isreal.

Even sex matters that are supposed to be between the husband and wife do not stay inside closed doors. Esty's and Yanky's problems in bed are openly communicated and discussed by their family. It does not help that he thinks his mom can find the solution to their sexual issues and tells her to talk to Esty instead of doing it himself. They do not realize that airing their problems only causes more hurt, anxiety, and pressure on Esty, enhancing their marriage problems.

That she could not make him feel like a king in bed like any dutiful wife is supposed to lead her to be deemed selfish and even blamed for decreasing his self-esteem only because they could not conceive right after marriage. Even after voicing her concern to Yanky that she feels his whole family is in bed with them, which increases her anxiety and causes problems like vaginismus, he does not understand and is still angry with her. In that scene, her outburst is symbolic of hers and every other orthodox Jewish woman unable to voice the hurt and suffocation she feels with her body treated like a baby-making machine owned by the whole community.

When Esty points out that the husband must pleasure the woman in the act of sex as told in the Talmud, he feels attacked and screams at her saying women are not supposed to be reading the scriptures. This scene gives a glimpse of the power structure developed between the men and the women, where it is preferred that

women stay ignorant of them and rely on the interpretations given by men to not raise questions even in sex matters. Abortion is shunned by the community, which does not even think that pregnancy termination is an option to consider. The main aim is to repopulate to resurrect the 6 million Jews lost in the Holocaust.

The other side of the same trauma is Berlin and how it has responded to the trauma. The people of Berlin and those who have come to live and study uniquely embrace the intense trauma. As Yael Ruben, the Jew from Israel whose ancestors have gone through the same trauma as Esty's says, "*We are too busy defending our present to be sentimental about the past*" (Season 1: Episode 1). She chooses to express through music and enjoy the freedom of speech, expression, and life, which her ancestors didn't have. In comparison, Hasidic Jews like Esty's family do not embrace the present and have become more restrictive and shunning the evolving world around them. They believe that they were betrayed when they trusted their neighbors and friends of other races and backgrounds. This belief taught and propagated to the community, as seen in the scene where Esty's grandfather explains the Four Questions' answers.

The representation of the orthodox Jewish community in the media is scarce and close to none. The community members hardly ever see themselves represented in movies or shows. As Deborah Feldman said during the making of the show, "We never saw ourselves reflected in the stories told in popular culture. So we didn't really know how to tell our own stories." This show brought to the attention of the world The Hasidic Jewish community, beliefs, and way of life and was also the first Netflix show to be

primarily in Yiddish. The OTT platform, like Netflix, helps by encouraging and bringing out subaltern narratives like these with proper representation, which brings satisfaction to the community like Deborah Feldman, an integral part of the show and the whole shooting process. The production designer Silke Fischer did an excellent job of recreating and representing Williamsburg, the Jewish household down to the most delicate details of the bedroom and kitchen. The costumes by Justine Seymour for Shira Haas and the rest of the cast were crafted with incredible detail. From the 'Payot' (sidelocks/sideburns) and 'Shtreimel' (a hat made up of 6 minks' fur) for the men and the 'Tichel,' headscarf worn by married Jewish women and even the nightdresses worn by them. The show won awards for the best Production and Costume design in the German Television Awards. The production set and design evolve with the narrative and growth of Esty.

Her past flashbacks in Williamsburg recur where the spaces are mostly enclosed and restrictive, reflecting her closely-knit community's mindset and beliefs. The areas and buildings are in stark contrast in Berlin; the spaces are more open and free-flowing like the Music Academy and even her mother's apartment. As her mind opens up and grows, she learns that breaking her community's rules does not necessarily mean she will die or suffer as taught; the open landscape of Berlin and its people come alive to her. The inspiration for the music academy inspiration was from the Barenboim-Said Akademie, where Jews and Muslims play classical music together. The people she meets in the music academy are a vibrant mix who make up what Berlin is about, accepting everyone sans restrictions, wearing their trauma on their

sleeves, but not forgetting to live in the present truth. There is a contrast in the lighting, too, as her time in Berlin has more natural light sources, and white lighting in Williamsburg's lighting is mostly tinted and limited.

The eruv breaking in the first episode symbolizes the breaking of boundaries. Esty decides to finally escape mental boundaries and move to Germany for freedom, which ironically is the source of trauma for her community. She finds true freedom of thought and living. In psychotherapy, revisiting a place of trauma is a part of Exposure therapy. Esty is doing that unconsciously as she visits Berlin and swims in the lake close to the conference hall where Nazis decided to kill the Jews in 1942. When past trauma kept aside, a lake or any place remains only that, which is how present-day Germany looks at itself. The people acknowledge the horrid past and embrace it remains impossible to keep up with the present world if one lets the past keep haunting their present. Her affair with Robert is crucial to her learning what it is to be desired and experience pleasure in the act of sex. She understands that it goes both ways contrasted to the highly uncomfortable and painful sex she has with her husband. It is mechanical and only means for procreation because sex for recreational purposes is unheard of and shunned.

The community people live the way they were raised and abiding by norms and rules without seeking pity from anyone. They know one truth and live by it, which does not make them weak, nor does it give room for the audience to be judgemental.

However, writers Anna Winger and Alexa Karolinski and the director Maria Schrader did a marvelous job on the mini-series' flow and narrative. It helped that the

on-screen Rabbi Eli Rosen was a specialist in Yiddish who helped get all the details right in terms of the cultural details, production, costumes, and coach the actors in Yiddish. This show also gives hope to the other girls and women of that community to chase their dreams. Some of the other cast too were Jews like the actor playing the Kallah teacher and even Moishe, who was a Hasidic Jew who fled from the community just like Esty did to live a secular life. It gives hope to other girls in similar situations, not only in orthodox Jewish communities but also in breaking the barriers and pursuing their dreams.

The 2017 documentary 'One of Us' released on Netflix traces the path of three orthodox Jews who have broken the rules and wish to find and rediscover themselves by following a secular path and lifestyle. It is extremely tough for a person, male or female, to walk out of the insular community. The three people on whom the documentary centers have suffered a lot through their life and even after trying to adjust and make peace with their identity and the lives they lead. One of the people is a young mother of Thirty two who has undergone tremendous abuse since she was married by her dominating and control obsessed husband. Having seven children and raising them in the best way she can, she is still tortured so much by her husband and family that she reported him to the authorities. Reporting community members to the police authorities is considered a sin among Jews and condemned heavily in the religious laws. The members have a sense of security to bypass the rules because they believe that they will be protected by the community for any falterings from the federal authorities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What is frequently asked is how these restrictive rules and ostracization occur even today in

the community when the world around them operates entirely differently. How is that a person like ETTY, with seven children and an abusive husband, does not deserve justice because she is Jewish and wishes to live a secular life. She is blamed for everything as her husband, supported by the community, hire expensive lawyers who bend the law against her favor to gain sole custody of the children.

The Jews have learned to use the law to their benefit over the years. They use a clause 'To maintain status quo' to ensure that the children are raised in the same lifestyle as before the divorce, which ETTY obviously cannot provide as she has no income source and hence cannot get custody of the children. Deemed an unfit mother as she cannot offer the same lifestyle level as they are used to, she loses the case. They use this clause to keep the children with the community as they are seen not merely as Jews but as a tool in the whole process of repopulating the six million lost.

Though the children want to be with the mother, who raised them as she was supposed to, they are separated and forced to live with relatives. Having no skills, proper education, or money to hire a lawyer, ETTY struggles to fight for her children's custody against her husband and community but unfortunately loses the case. The children's intense love for their mother and dislike for the father is blamed on her. She seeks support from an organization called 'Footsteps,' which helps Jews who want to walk out of the community and offer emotional support and guidance to restart their lives as secular Jews. Through the documentary, ETTY gets emotional support from the members of the organization. Still, there is only so much that the organization can do as it is under

constant scrutiny and disadvantage by the Orthodox community leaders. Going to Footsteps and any other place, she is stalked by the members every day; Etty's also threatened to be severely hurt or even killed. She is even knocked off her bicycle and injured one of the days and expresses her fear that she might get killed in the process of getting justice against her husband. She even questions the point of going to court proceedings when the outcome is already known. She is betrayed in court by her friend, whom she considered a sister, as she gives away to the court every small transgression Etty has committed in secret, like taking her children to a secular library and other secular spaces told her in the faith of confidentiality. This incident breaks Etty emotionally as she sees her friends and close ones go against her for the sake of the community disregarding personal bonds.

Calling 911 or any services is against the religious law, or reporting other Jews is considered sinning. This possibly stems from the Holocaust trauma, where they were reported to the Nazis. The laws that apply in NY state don't apply to the ultra-orthodox community, and justice is not meted out the same way people like Etty question the system. Announcements are made in the community victimizing the father and villainizing the mother even though everyone knows who is truly at fault.

Support is given to those following the Rabbi but not to the woman who has been suffering for years with an abusive man and wants to get out to live a free life. Every day is a traumatic journey for her as she is stalked or threatened by her community people under the direction of the Rabbi-The Rabbi, who is supposed to safeguard the community, does just the

opposite when a situation like this occurs. He takes on a dictator's role to keep the community intact/together/maintain the status quo. As the Germans under Hitler did everything they can to protect their race's purity, the Jews, too, were the victim at that period now subconsciously do the same under their Rabbi's directions through their ultra-orthodox rules and norms. The members believe that this kind of ostracization can maintain the community's structure and integrity. If the community loosens its reigns on the members and lets them do as they wish, the purity is lost. The irony of what the Germans did to them and what they are doing to themselves and their community is entirely lost on them.

Problems like drug addiction are present even in ultra-orthodox communities. They are stigmatized and ostracized even more for breaking religious laws that are entirely unacceptable and delinquent. Ari's trauma brings him to a dark place leading him to overdose on cocaine and get hospitalized. This addiction can be seen as an extreme consequence of the suffering endured through his life with no proper outlet for venting out the emotional struggles. The same reason for having no outlet for emotional struggles, inability to find answers to the many questions, and having identity struggles on his mind leads Luzer Twersky to attempt suicide.

The internet remains a mystery to most of them for most of their life as it looked at a temptation to be avoided even as adults. With technological advancements on the rise regularly, the community chooses to shun it rather than make sure that it is not misused. After they get a taste of what it is like with access to the internet and understand that it is helpful and not just a devil's pawn to misguide kids and lead

them to deviate from the religious path, people like Ari in the documentary and Esty on 'Unorthodox' do not wish to go back to living in ignorance. Even a simple event of hanging out with friends and having a burger is a luxury unknown to them due to the conservative upbringing.

As a Rabbi tries to answer the questions raised by Ari on if G-d exists and is as powerful as in the texts, then why couldn't he stop the rape and abuse that happens in the community not only to him but to others as well and why has not God done anything about it? The Rabbi is unable to answer any of these questions substantially, and the only answer is having faith and prayer that "Aruch mi morem"- a spirit from upstairs would embrace him and make him come back to the path of Judaism. We also see that along with the sense of freedom that comes with walking out on the insular community lies the fear of living and adjusting to a secular world and lifestyle as expressed by Ari. Moishe scares Esty telling her that she will eventually kill herself because she does not have the support of the well-knit community and cannot survive by herself.

This documentary directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady gives the series a preview lens into the reality of Hasidic Jews' life, to which the show further added a semi-fictional narrative structure. The documentary and the series bring to the palette ringing themes and issues that are relatable to audiences world over in its essence. They get to light the experience of

walking out on the community in different manifestations. Walking out of an insular community has more to it than pure joy. The emotional and mental baggage does not disappear suddenly. It takes time to overcome, unlearn the changes and fears that arise as you walk into an entirely different life world view.

Though focussing on one specific community, they problematize and brings to light the universal images of trauma, suffocation, power structures, and gender, to name a few. It brings to limelight the Orthodox Jews' silent narrative and adds it to the mainstream giving it the deserved space.

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