



February 11, 2019

Shtisel and "the Other"

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

I got sick around New Years and didn't have a choice but to spend a few days at home to recover. With a little more time available to take it easy, I started watching an original Israeli series called "Shtisel."

"Shtisel" has, for a while, been available on YouTube. However, only recently has it been readily available on Netflix. Silvia and Rabbi Uri had been nudging me to watch it, and I finally gave in. Suffice it to say, it was a good decision. Not only does it portray an entertaining story, but in addition, it allows me to practice my Hebrew and my Yiddish.

"Shtisel" is a show about an Ultra-Orthodox family living in Jerusalem. Indeed, the Shtisel family has all the ingredients of an Ultra-Orthodox family: many children, even more grandchildren, limited or no access to the internet or TV, and access to the outside world through strict Orthodox lenses. The husbands teach or study at the Yeshiva, very few women work outside of the house, the children go to the Cheder, and they live on a very limited income.

The storyline of the show is comprised of complex family interactions, similar to the ones you find in a non-orthodox, or even a non-Jewish, family. In other words, if you take out the Ultra-Orthodox ingredient, the show is no different than any other soap opera. In it you can find romance, deception, and intrigue.

Interestingly enough, as I began watching "Shtisel," Jewish friends and relatives from Argentina, the U.S., and Israel, started commenting on it: "You must see Shtisel; it is great." While I agree with their opinion, I was intrigued by it. Why all of a sudden, are non-religious friends and relatives, fascinated by a show like "Shtisel"? It cannot be because of the drama in it, since, as explained above, the non-Jewish aspects of the show can be found in any other soap opera. It must be, I'd like to suggest, that it is precisely the Ultra-Orthodox identity of the characters that fascinates us. Probably, for the first time, Jews and non-Jews alike, are massively exposed through one of the most popular forms of media, to a world about which

they know practically nothing. Moreover, I spoke with Orthodox people, who are very familiar with the world depicted in "Shtisel", who watch the show, and asserted that it is a precise representation of that world.

I'd like to suggest, that it is the confrontation with the "Other" that fascinates us, opens our imagination, and expands our horizons. Watching "Shtisel", one identifies with the different characters who are at the same time so different, and so similar to all of us. "Shtisel" is a great medium to inspire us to bring the "Other" closer to us.

We have many "Others" around us: immigrants, Muslims, Christians, and those who support a different political viewpoint than ours. We will never live in a world where everyone is the same as everyone else. The least we can do in this very diverse world that we live in is to try and look at the "Other" as someone who goes through the same things we do. Our distinct faces testify to the fact that we were both created in the Image of God.

In the words of the French Jewish Philosopher Emanuel Levinas, "The Other faces me and puts me in question and obliges me" (Totality and Infinity 207). "The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy" (Totality and Infinity 215), and, "In the face the Other expresses his eminence, the dimension of height and divinity from which he descends" (Totality and Infinity 262).

The "Others" have spouses, children, and parents. They struggle with sickness, with unemployment, and with unrequited love. Quoting Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare: "Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer... If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"

Delving into the fantasies of these shows can in turn bring us closer to the real "Others" out there. Realizing that the "Others" are less different from us than what we think, is, I believe, a positive step in the right direction to a better world.