

'EVEN JEWS HAVE A MILLION MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT HASIDIM'

New documentary opens a hermetically closed world

Filmed over four years at a small French-Canadian Chabad seminary, 'Shekinah' gives an unprecedented look at Hasidic women

By [RENEE GHERT-ZAND](#) | 29 October 2013, 3:30 pm



A BMC Seminary student at the Rebbe's grave. (photo credit: Courtesy of DLI Productions)

In photographic and film images, we almost always see Hasidic Jews in urban settings. We see them on the crowded streets of Brooklyn, or walking in the narrow alleyways of their crowded neighborhoods in Jerusalem. However, a new documentary feature film about Hasidic women and girls surprises by being set in bucolic [Ste. Agathe, Quebec](#), a resort town north of Montreal.

Although "[Shekinah: The Intimate Life of Hasidic Women](#)" is about women in Hasidic Judaism, it also about the role played by a specific group of teenage girls at a Chabad seminary in this French Canadian town. Not all of Ste. Agathe's residents are thrilled by the girls' presence, as can be attested to by a history of [anti-Semitic incidents](#) in the picturesque locale. The film chronicles attempts by the Hasidim to counter these acts of hatred with outreach to the local population.

The filmmakers couldn't be happier about the timing of its premiere this week in Montreal, as well as at the Crown Heights Film Festival in Brooklyn. Although they did not set out to make a political statement with the documentary, they are glad it is out in theaters at a time when there is strong support among the Quebec electorate for a proposed "[Charter of Values](#)," which would ban the wearing and display of religious symbols in the public sphere.

"What we are trying to do with this film is open a door to a world that is closed," says Montreal-based director Abbey Neidik. "There is a lot of hostility against the Hasidim in Quebec, and this film lets people see how Hasidim see the

world.”

“There’s room for all ways. We need to not only tolerate diversity, but also embrace it,” says producer Irene Angelico, who is Neidik’s wife. “Even Jews have a million misconceptions about Hasidim,” she adds.

Filmed over four years, “Shekinah,” gives audiences a significant glimpse into the Hasidic way of life in general.

In particular, it sheds light on how Hasidic women (at least, from Chabad) understand their sexuality and roles in their marriage, family and community.



Rebbetzin Chana Carlebach teaching at BMC Seminary (photo credit: Courtesy of DLI Productions)

The filmmakers were able to open up this world to a movie-going audience only because Rebbetzin Chana Carlebach, director of [Bais Moshe Chaim Teacher’s Seminary](#), was willing to give Neidik unprecedented access to the school and its students. Carlebach founded the seminary, which grants a community college diploma at the end of its two-year program, in 2000 in memory of her son (the eighth of her 13 children), who died at the age of 3 months. The school enrolls up to 30 students, who come mainly from France, but also from Montreal, the US, Australia, Belgium and Israel.

When asked why she allowed film crew members, including men, to follow the young women in their classes, in their dormitories, around town, and also on trips to Montreal and New York, Carlebach answered that it was because it was what the Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson would have wanted.

“The Rebbe always emphasized that our goal is outreach. Torah has a message for everyone — Jews and non-Jews. We all need each other to make the world a better place,” she offers.

Carlebach considers the film a service to the world. “Everyone is looking for meaning, and there is no better place to look for it than in Torah. This is part of being *or lagoyim* [a light unto the nations].”

Executive producer [Monika \(Mushka\) Lightstone](#), who originally conceived of the idea for “Shekinah,” is very grateful for Carlebach’s cooperation. The *ba’alat teshuvah* (newly religious) filmmaker and photographer had been turned away by other seminary directors. “I asked several schools before BMC and never got permission,” she says.

Lightstone, a former Montrealer living in Los Angeles, felt compelled to make the film after reading a 2008 newspaper clipping about former BMC student Hana Sellem holding her [wedding](#) in a public park in Ste. Agathe and inviting the entire town to celebrate with her and the Jewish community. (The wedding took place following several local anti-Semitic incidents, but Carlebach insists that the invitation to the town’s residents went out prior.)



Director Abbey Neidik on the set. (photo credit: Courtesy of DLI Productions)

The gesture by Sellem, who was named one of [Elle Quebec’s 2008 “Women of the Year,”](#) sparked in Lightstone the idea to tell a cinematic story about “the power of [Hasidic Jewish] femininity and the divine *shekhinah* [the feminine manifestation of God].”

“These girls are full of life. They are outspoken and intelligent. They are not repressed,” she asserts.

Neidik came on board after he went up to Ste. Agathe to film a play at BMC in which Lightstone's daughter appeared. When he went backstage to meet the girls, he was surprised.

"I asked them whether they felt like throwbacks in this feminist age, and I was really surprised when they answered that they didn't see themselves that way at all," he recalls.

The director had found the spiritual film he had always wanted to make, and he'd have the chance to dispel stereotypes — including some he himself had held — about Hasidic women. He knew the biggest challenge he faced, aside from securing funding, was how to making a film about the intimate life of women when his subjects were teenage girls who had never even touched a boy.



Twenty-year-old BMC student Chaya Mushka Stern says she looks forward to marrying soon and having many children. (photo credit: Courtesy of DLI Productions)

"Shekinah" doesn't completely surmount this challenge, but it pulls the viewer in nonetheless. Anyone looking for a single narrative through-line in this film will be disappointed. The film is bursting with real-life characters, none who end up being fully developed protagonists. We are left wanting to know more about Carlebach and some of the other charismatic women and girls, like dorm counselor Hannah from France and British student Chaya Mushka.

The director recognizes this lack of traditional narrative structure and makes no apologies for it.

"Not all documentaries are narrative," he says. "Documentaries are like jazz — they can take so many different forms." He let "Shekinah" unfold and take form as he filmed in fits and starts. His goal was to just show to people what Hasidic women feel, how they look at life and their roles in it. "That they really believe this, that they are not just repeating things by rote."

For Neidik personally, the biggest revelation was the way in which Hasidic Jews connect their intimate lives with holiness, and how the separation of the sexes is meant to create a dynamic sex life.

Critically, the film brings in Bracha Feldman as a counterpoint to all the pro-Hasidic statements made throughout the film. At the time of the filming, Feldman, a social worker who grew up Hasidic, was 25 years old and felt she was not ready for marriage. She's seen meeting with [Rabbi Yisroel Bernath](#) ("Montreal's Hip Rabbi"), who wants to make a match for her, and also with her newly married friend as she speaks about her recently embarked upon sex life.



Movie poster for 'Shekinah,' which premiered this week in Montreal and Brooklyn. (photo credit: Courtesy of DLI Productions)

"I come off looking like more than a rebel than I am," Feldman says several years later. But she is still unmarried and, although she has an affinity for Chabad, she more closely identifies with the Jewish Renewal movement at this point.

Despite her personal feelings about Chabad, Feldman finds the film "beautiful and authentic." She commends the director, saying, "He really tapped into the spirituality of the feminine in Judaism."

Even viewers who don't buy some of the statements in the film, like for instance, that "Hasidism is essentially a feminist movement," will appreciate the filmmakers' intention for audiences to come away with an understanding of what makes Hasidim tick.

"For them, everything is a reflection of God," Neidik says.