



ABOUT THE MOVIE

Set in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood, this movie has entertainment value purely as the heartwarming tale of a holiday miracle during the Jewish holiday of *Sukkot*. However, this film also carries great significance as the first of its kind: a movie made by members of the ultra-Orthodox community in collaboration with secular filmmakers and aimed for general audiences. All religious characters were played by religious actors in this movie made on a set where Jewish law was followed, even by the secular camera crew from Tel Aviv.

USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

CINEMA Collaboration between ultra-Orthodox Jews and secular Jews to make a movie

HISTORY History and importance of the Jewish holiday of *Sukkot*

CULTURE The ultra-Orthodox community in Israel

BEFORE THE MOVIE

VOCABULARY

Sukkot A joyful Jewish holiday in the fall

Sukkah Temporary dwelling religious Jews use during *Sukkot* to commemorate the Exodus

Eetrog Citron, one of the Four Spices used during the holiday *Sukkot*, considered a blessing for having male children

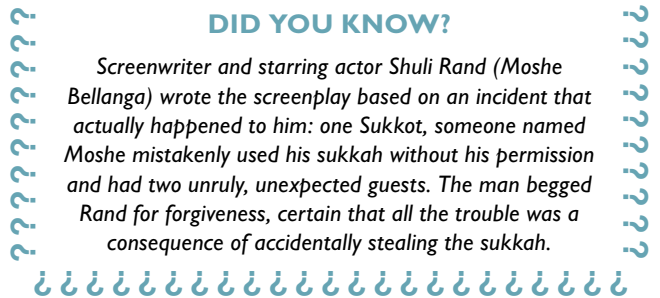
Ushpizin Holy guests

Gemach Organization that distributes charity to the needy in the Orthodox community

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DID YOU KNOW?

Screenwriter and starring actor Shuli Rand (Moshe Bellanga) wrote the screenplay based on an incident that actually happened to him: one *Sukkot*, someone named Moshe mistakenly used his *sukkah* without his permission and had two unruly, unexpected guests. The man begged Rand for forgiveness, certain that all the trouble was a consequence of accidentally stealing the *sukkah*.



PLOT SUMMARY

Moshe and Malli Bellanga, Breslov Chasidim, have been married for five years but remain childless. They are too poor to buy the necessary provisions to celebrate the holiday of *Sukkot* until they suddenly receive an anonymous gift of \$1000. As they rejoice in this holiday miracle, little do they know that Eliyahu Scorpio and his friend Yossef have escaped from prison and have come looking for Moshe, their former associate. It is not until after the two criminals set up camp in the Bellangas' *sukkah* and abuse their hospitality that the Bellangas come to view the treatment of their guests as a test of worthiness.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This movie takes place during the Jewish holiday of *Sukkot*, a seven-day festival with historical and agricultural significance. Historically, *Sukkot* commemorates the forty years of wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt, during which Jews lived in temporary shelters, or *sukkot*. Therefore, celebrating this holiday involves building *sukkot*, eating all meals in them and even sleeping in them. Agriculturally, *Sukkot* is the harvest festival. Part of the holiday's religious service uses what are known as the Four Spices: date-palm branches (*lulav*), myrtle (*hadass*), willow (*aravot*) and citron (*etrog*). The Four Spices are waved in all directions in a prayer for rain to make the crops grow in the coming year.

According to mystical Judaism, the souls of the Jewish forefathers known as the Seven Shepherds of Israel (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and King David) come to visit the *sukkah*. They are known as *Ushpizin*, an Aramaic word meaning "guests." Some recite a mystical invitation to the *Ushpizin* upon entering the *sukkah* for the first time and when eating meals during *Sukkot*. At this time of giving thanks for a successful harvest and in striving to be worthy of these eminent visitors, it is traditional to invite the needy and other guests to holiday meals, underscoring the importance of hospitality in Judaism.

It is said that each of the *Ushpizin* personifies a different aspect of human perfection, so that together they form a model for the perfect man. *Sukkot* falls immediately before the day when the fate of the Jewish People is sealed for the coming year, at a time when Jews are thinking about their path in life. The visiting *Ushpizin* provide examples of positive qualities which can be emulated in the year to come.

Abraham loving, kindness • **Isaac** restraint and personal strength • **Jacob** beauty and truth
Moses eternity • **Aaron** empathy • **Joseph** holiness • **David** kingship

According to another way of understanding the *Ushpizin*, each of them was forced to go into exile and endured due to the protection of G-d, just as Jews today during *Sukkot* leave the security of their permanent houses to dwell in the *sukkah* under G-d's protection.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Screenwriter and starring actor Shuli Rand (Moshe Bellanga) abandoned his acting career once he made the decision to follow an Orthodox Jewish lifestyle—or so he thought. It was an idea from Gidi Dar, the director of two movies in which Shuli acted previously, which brought him back to the big screen. Dar, a secular Jew, offered to make a movie that would be appropriate for an Orthodox Jewish actor, both in content and in keeping with Jewish law in the manner of its production.

Dar signed a contract guaranteeing that the production would comply with Jewish law in that no one would shoot for or work on the film on Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest, and that the set would be kept completely kosher, in accordance with Jewish dietary laws. In addition, Rand's actual wife plays Malli in this movie, because Rand would not act opposite a woman who was not his wife. Though not an actress and initially hesitant, ultimately she agreed to play the part. "In real life," the couple has six children, who were a constant presence on the movie set.

In addition to Rand and his wife, every other actor playing a religious role in the movie was actually religious. Many, like Rand, were former actors who became religious and left the profession. The *etrog* appraiser was played by Michael Weigel, a former actor on a successful Israeli television series; Ben Baruch was played by Avraham Abutbul, formerly in films by action movie mogul Menachem Golan and the brother of Alon Abutbul, an Israeli movie star; and the rabbi was played by Daniel Dayan, a former kung-fu master who acted in Hollywood martial arts movies. For extras for the street scenes, religious non-actors were recruited.

Before going into production, Rand sought the advice and secured the support of his rabbi, Shalom Arush, a leader of the Breslover community. Rabbi Arush was supplied with a cell phone, dubbed "The Red Phone," in case a conflict arose between what Rand believed was Jewish law and what Dar deemed necessary to make the film. The phone was never used.

When the film was released, Dar agreed not to exhibit the film on Shabbat (in Israel only), an arrangement which carried great financial risk. Commercial Israeli movie houses had never before received such a request. Nevertheless, they complied with it, and ultimately the movie was successful.

Shuli Rand won the 2004 Best Actor award from the Israeli Film Academy.



I remember walking around neighborhoods populated only with ultra-Orthodox, feeling for the first time that this is a world completely apart, living by different rules, a fairy tale world. Entering that world was like Alice In Wonderland down the rabbit hole. It didn't look quite real to me.

Every time I visited him, Shuli was becoming a bit more religious. Sitting at home with my wife, I suddenly heard shouts from the street. I recognized Shuli's voice calling my name, and when I opened the door for him and Michal I was shocked to see a fully-costumed Hasidic couple, with the beard and all the rest. It was very strange to see a close friend looking so different. It was almost unreal.

I was very reluctant about the meeting with Rabbi Arush. But when I came into the room I found this man with a smile that could melt a person in two seconds. I was straight with the rabbi, and I think he appreciated my honesty. We talked about the polarity that exists between secular and religious Jews in Israel and his feeling was that a human Hassidic film could help diminish this animosity. Rabbi Arush gave us his blessing and promised to help. It was nothing official but his encouragement opened many doors.

It's complicated to make a film. But then to ask the director to use his art, his tools, not only to try to make a good film but one that adheres to the laws of the Jewish nation! It was a complicated arrangement, but also magical, also beautiful. If we were going to go this deep into this world, and in a way receive its welcome and be guests in this world, we could not break its rules and end up doing things that would appear disrespectful.

Marriage is a complex experience. In many respects, Shuli and Michal bring real life to the film—all the special qualities of a true married couple that cannot be scripted or rehearsed. We managed to convey a feeling of love and romance and intimacy without showing the man and woman touch even once. When you think about what most movies do to create that kind of excitement!

Rabbi Arush said that talent is a gift from G-d, it is part of the world, and it can be used to form bonds between religious and non-religious Jews. Even during the making of the movie, it was an amazing thing to see such a bond grow between the crew and the actors. In some ways, that experience was an even greater achievement than the artistic success of the film.

It would have been easier to get secular actors and dress them up like ultra-Orthodox—like they always do in movies—but it would never be the same. We went through casting agents that told us about actors that had turned to religion, and I quickly found out that they all miss acting very much. Once they understood what kind of film we were doing they jumped at the opportunity to participate.

People from different religious trends, even the most devout, appeared as extras in the film as a 'mitzvah' (good deed). The Tel Aviv crew admitted they had never before seen extras so disciplined and happy to work. The shooting was very difficult but also very special. More and more we were all drawn into this world, entering the language of these people. I got used to talking to the actors in their terminology, explaining that they should use their belief in G-d when acting. In many instances, it helped them overcome their fear of camera. Some of the extras called me, 'Our Rabbi.'

I remember one of the first sneak previews that I attended. There were only 20 people in the theater, all of them religious, from different sects. Everybody began laughing at the right places, and then after 15 minutes, when Moshe says to his wife, 'We need a miracle,' and she replies, 'We'll see miracles,' suddenly I heard one of the viewers say, loudly and completely seriously, 'Amen.' And then more people began repeating, 'Amen, Amen, Amen.' The moment reminded me of the famous story from the beginning of cinema when the Melies Brothers projected film of a train entering a station and people ran from the theater because they thought the train would come bursting through the screen! I understood that many religious people had never seen a film before, and for them moviegoing is perhaps a more naïve and pure emotional experience.

I'd like to think I'm always dealing with faith, just in a very different way than Shuli. This is a movie about faith from within the faith. My job as a director is to make that real as a psychological journey, one that enables all kinds of audience members to identify with this man.

AFTER THE MOVIE

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1 UNIT THEME: Religion in Israeli Society

- What is the relationship between the secular world and the religious world in this movie? What parts of this relationship do you find authentic? Are there parts that seem misleading?
- How would this movie be different if it were set in an ultra-Orthodox community in the United States instead of in Israel?
- How does religion as you see it practiced in this movie differ from the religion you practice?

2 CINEMATIC THEME: Collaboration Between Ultra-Orthodox and Secular Jews in Movie Production

- What issues do you think were most challenging for the religious actors during the making of this film? What issues were challenging for the secular actors? What tensions do you think could have been in play?
- What do you think was the goal in making this movie? What messages does it convey? Do you think the goal was different for the secular and for the religious actors and producers involved?
- Do you think the film is aimed more for a secular or religious audience? Why? How do you think you could change the movie so it would be more relevant to the audience you did not pick?
- **Activity:** Refer to the quotes from Director Gidi Dar on the previous page. Pretend you are Shuli Rand. Write your own “memoirs” about the making of the movie, including your meeting with Rabbi Arush, your feeling about the religious actors in the movie and their work alongside the non-religious camera crew, and your overall hopes and fears during the movie’s production.

3 HISTORICAL THEME: History and Importance of the Jewish Holiday of Sukkot

- What did you learn about the Jewish holiday of *Sukkot* from this movie? How is the way you observe *Sukkot* different than the way it is observed by the characters in this movie? How is it similar?
- What themes make this movie especially suited to *Sukkot*? Can you think of ways in which other Jewish holidays might be suitable settings?
- What do the characters in the movie learn about each of the traits of the *Ushpizin*? (see “Historical Background”)
- How does Malli’s decision to leave home and the outcome of this decision relate to the story of the *Ushpizin* and of Jews today who leave the security of their permanent houses during *Sukkot*?

4 CULTURAL THEME: Culture: The Ultra-Orthodox Community in Israel

- Which characters in this movie could you identify with and why?
- Would you want to live in the community where this movie takes place? Why or why not?
- In what ways are the lives of the main characters different from your life? In what ways are they similar?

QUOTE ANALYSIS

“ **Moshe:** Why has the Lord commanded us to stay in the *sukkah*? Not only stay there, but everything: eat, drink, sleep, all in the *sukkah*. Why is that? G-d wanted us to feel that just as the *sukkah* is a temporary dwelling, so is this world, temporary, passing, where we're merely guests.

- What does it mean to be a “guest” in this world? How does it imply that we should treat this world and our experience in it? What do you think this means to Moshe in terms of the way he lives his life?

“ **Rabbi:** Look what our teachers wrote here, a marvelous thing: When a man passes a test, he progresses. Right? He thinks that he earned some rest. It's then that he's given an even harder test. No 'rest.' No rest in this world. Above all Moshe, don't get angry. G-d Almighty, save us from anger.

- What role does anger play in this movie? What is the significance of Eliyahu's reminisces of how Moshe used to have a hot temper? Based on his behavior in this movie, to what extent has Moshe resolved his anger management problems and how?

“ **Eliyahu:** Let's make the man happy. We messed him up for no reason.

- Why does Eliyahu emphasize that it was “for no reason”? In Eliyahu's mind, would it be justified if he had a reason for upsetting Moshe? Does the quote imply some irony when compared with a religious standpoint from which “everything happens for a reason”?

“ **Eliyahu:** Moshe, from all my heart, I want to tell you something. You changed completely. The truth: at first you pissed me off. I didn't believe you one bit, but now I see it's for real. I have respect for that.

- Do you think Eliyahu is being sincere in this remark, or is he trying to make Moshe feel better? Do you think it matters to Moshe what Eliyahu thinks? Did this entire *Sukkot* have any effect on Eliyahu and Yossef? Why or why not?