

Sara K. Eisen

ONE RAINY FRIDAY MORNING this past winter, in an open loft-like space at the Ramat Aviv studios of Keshet TV, some 20 writers, producers and directors toast the debut success of the new drama series "Imale," during a break in the morning's "Jewish learning" session. Everyone in the group, whose members work on a number of different shows, is in jeans, trendily designed glasses and good spirits.

On the large square table are two bottles of wine, one a pricey import, the other a vintage but kosher domestic label, which is meant primarily for Dov Singer, the rabbi who is present. Singer is teaching Talmud to this group of largely secular media people as part of a larger program meant to immerse Israeli culture-makers in their own "genetically" bestowed mythology. Since last October, the group has been meeting every other week for sessions of frontal instruction followed by traditional paired *hevruta* learning.

Today's topic is the deaths of Rabbis Akiva and Eliezer, two 2nd-century teachers whose stories are replete with fascinating insights into both their characters and those of their disciples. The death of the beloved Akiva, at the hands of the Romans, in Tractate Brakhot 61b, suggests a man who remained optimistic and loyal to his faith even in his last, tortured moments. Eliezer, on the other hand, was excommunicated by his colleagues in reprisal for his stubborn refusal to compromise on matters of principle, as recounted in Sanhedrin 68a. When his students do visit him as he's dying, he rebukes them for not having come earlier, and shares with them a terrible prophecy about how they will die.

The subtle Talmudic plays on words, alongside the oral tradition's distinctive bombastic imagery, are not lost on this class; after all, these are people who write and direct for a living. In fact, Tamar Merom, who together with director Ram Nehari writes "Imale" ("Mommy"), responds to the offerings of congratulations by telling how her recent exposure to this new-old literary form, via the workshop series, helped shape the way she conceived the program's pilot, in which Efrat (played by comedian and actress Orna Banai), a single woman grappling with an unplanned

pregnancy, is trying to decide if she wants to go to the trouble of testing to ascertain the identity of the baby's father (her recent romantic life allows for two possibilities). In the end, she doesn't.

"The secret [of paternity] is the woman's power," explains Merom to her peers — something, she reminds them, that they explored not long ago when they covered the

Israel's leading commercial broadcaster gets into the business of Talmudic education, in the hope of enriching screenwriters' and other TV professionals' understanding of Jewish thinking

The Jewish Bookshelf Goes Prime Time

Talmudic tractate of Sotah. It was from this classic Talmudic story, of the ordeal intended to test the fidelity of the woman whose husband suspects her of adultery, that Merom drew her inspiration for her show's plot twist, in which the proof of paternity is in the woman's hands alone, and she has the prerogative to reveal it or not. "The workshop surfaced in my work," she told the room, a muse that, she later explained in a phone interview, only creeps up on her very randomly, and never "on demand."

Still, seminar co-instructor Ruth Calderon, a well-known secular educator and writer on midrash and Talmud, is clearly thrilled by Merom's revelation. "This is joy,"

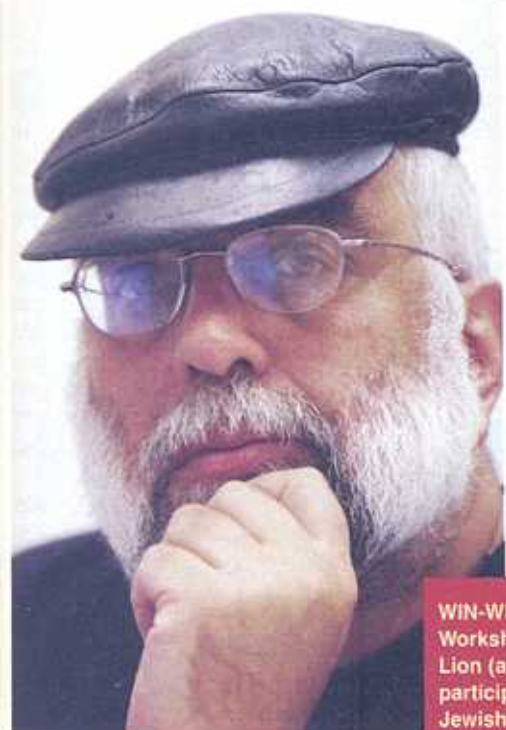
she says, "when you have these materials in your hands, and you see what you can do [with them]... This is one of my favorite groups: They get it — they are people who connect with texts."

There has been, for at least a decade, a rising wave of interest among secular Israelis in exploring the Jewish "bookshelf," in an effort to deepen their erudition. But these individu-



als — who include some of Israel's most promising and prolific screenwriters and directors — have been assembled as *artists*, and they are approaching Torah "not in order to come to *Yiddishkeit*," as Calderon puts it, "but rather as material to work with."

The project was initiated jointly by several individuals and organizations — Keshet, Alma (the secular "College for Hebrew Culture" that Calderon founded in Tel Aviv), the Geshar Film Fund and the Avi Chai Foundation (the latter two being organizations aimed at enriching Jewish identity and literacy, as well as bridging the gaps between secular and religious society) together with the New York Federation — but only got off



the ground after last year's reorganization of Channel 2, Israel's leading commercial TV station.

Udi Lion, director of the screenwriter workshop series, as well as the man in charge of "preferred" programming (that is, the shows that, despite their often-low ratings, help the broadcaster meet its quota of Russian- and Arabic-language, or Jewish, material, and the like) at Keshet, explains that he and others involved in the project are "trying to get people excited about Judaism by way of prime time."

Lion's goal is to create a "win-win" situation, whereby traditional Jewish material is treated with such skill that good ratings and quotas need not be at

cross-purposes. He mentions, by way of example, the popular drama series "Me'urav Yerushalmi," which recently finished its successful second season. The show, which is directed by seminar participant Jacob Goldwasser, is centered on a national-religious family's struggle with the complexities of life in Israel.

That show is,

like the workshop, a joint venture with the Geshar Film Fund, and is appealing because it is well written and acted, and tackles a wide range of issues (workplace ethics, marital strife, in-law intrigue) that affect most families. Many of its protagonists wear kippot, observe Sabbath and laws of kashrut, speak using religious idioms, and often grapple with tradition-based problems — such as children who fall out of the fold, or, alternately, turn ultra-devout — and these become interesting elements that lend depth to the characters, rather than being a series of heavy-handed attempts at "understanding the other."

The hope is that with more talented writers and directors able to draw on traditional Jewish sources for ideas, heritage-inspired matter will begin to surface naturally in their work. The roots of Jewish thought and the

cultural notions that shape Jews' essential identity as a nation are at the core of the Talmudic narrative. Calderon, Singer and Lion are eager for people who work with text to be able to present the human condition through eyes familiar with Jewish mythology.

The second half of the workshop series, then, which was to begin this spring, will be more clinic, less seminar: Participants will be asked to start work on screen treatments or ideas in some way inspired by their exposure to traditional texts. Keshet has right of first refusal on the projects that emerge, and "students" who produce material will get minimal grants of 10,000 shekels each for having participated in the 10-month-long workshop.

However, for the artists, at least, this is clearly not about the money, or even about the end product. In fact, most participants, along the lines of Merom's observation, noted that they would anticipate any rabbinic-inspired insights to surface in their work only subtly, if at all, or else have a broad creative influence, rather than one that can be pinpointed.

Yossi Madmony, writer of Keshet licensee Reshet's successful recent miniseries "Melanoma, My Dear" (which dealt with a young couple's battle with the wife's cancer) comments, "It's not like you can press a button [and produce the desired content]... It is more a process of enrichment."

Madmony says that what he especially enjoys about the seminar is being exposed to new artistic formats and fresh, thoroughly un-Western ways of thinking about life's material. The Talmud, he discovered, contains "wonderful self-contradiction, wherein text and subtext refute each other — and have the same value." In addition, he remarks, "the day-to-day and the political are joined together in these stories — the macro and the micro together. Israeli culture hasn't really joined them yet. It's amazing that the Talmud can speak on both planes."

TRENDSETTING SINGER AND novelist Kobi Oz, whose celebrated band, Tea-Packs, melds Middle-Eastern sounds with modern pop sensibilities, and which is known for its intelligent, topical lyrics, is probably the most recognizable face at the seminar.

Oz, who had very little Jewish training when he was growing up in the Southern town of Sderot, says that he's felt for a long time that Torah was missing from his life, and that he was scared by the extent to which it was a totally foreign field to him. "I've

WIN-WIN SITUATION: Workshop director Udi Lion (above) believes that participants will integrate Jewish material so skillfully into their work that high ratings will follow. Bandleader and novelist Kobi Oz (opposite) says the workshop makes him feel 'more whole, part of a continuum.' Below: Orna Banai, star of 'Imale,' whose screenwriter, Tamar Merom, says it was studying the tale of Sotah that inspired her to come up with the debut episode's plot twist



Screenwriter Roni Ninio:
'There are types of characters I hadn't seen before, like the *talmid hakham*, or people who in their essence represent mercy or sin. How this will translate, I don't know yet, but it enriches me, and my spiritual world.'

always wanted abundant Judaism that wouldn't harass me," he says with a characteristic smirk, referring to the common secular mistrust of a religious establishment often felt to be engaged in persuasion or worse. Apparently, say organizers and instructors, the 36-year-old, an autodidact in a number of fields (including botany, psychology and Japanese culture), is a natural at Jewish learning, contributing great insight and humor to the sessions.

Oz notes that the rabbis of the Talmud come in all varieties — skeptical, humorous, wise, argumentative, odd — and says he can identify these types among his contemporaries. "I feel more whole, part of a continuum," he says. "We are still the same people we always were."

On this conception of rabbinic archetype, Roni Ninio, a prominent director in film, theater and TV, comments that "there

are types of characters that I hadn't seen before, like the *talmid hakham* [great scholar], or people who in their essence represent mercy or sin. How this will translate [into my work], I don't know yet... But it enriches me, and my spiritual world." (Ninio's award-winning



RECLAIMING A HIDDEN TREASURE: Both the writer and the director of 'Catching the Sky' (whose cast is pictured here) are participants in the workshop. In the show, a husband becomes religious, to his wife's consternation.

"Catching the Sky," written by another seminar participant, Shlomo Mashiach, is about a married couple in which the husband becomes religious, to the great consternation of his wife. It completed its second triumphant season on Keshet not long ago.)

Much as one's appreciation of Shakespeare is diminished if one lacks an even rudimentary knowledge of Greek mythology, many of the artists noted that they felt bereft, as Jewish creators, of anything distinctly Jewish to draw from, even though schools in Israel have at least basic instruc-

tion in Bible. One such author, veteran scriptwriter Dita Geri, reveals that at a certain point, she felt she "couldn't write anymore" at the level she demanded of herself without knowing more about her people's source texts.

Though she remains, she says, fiercely secular, Geri, who says she became an "addict" when she began studying Talmud and other sources close to a decade ago at various other programs that cater to unaffiliated, intellectually curious people, had been advocating for this type of seminar for a long time among her peers.

"We [the Jewish People] have our own terminology," says Geri. "Our heroes are those who conquer themselves," she elaborates, referring to the Talmudic teaching that states, "Who is a hero? He who conquers his urges." "This is the antithesis of the American hero, who [often selfishly] asserts his individualism... [Artists]

should at least know what they are not using."

Which is, to Geri, no less than a hidden treasure — whose wisdom, she laments, is often the very thing so many creative Israeli young people, who have somehow been shut out of the tradition, are hunting for on their pilgrimages to India.

Or in ultra-Orthodoxy, to the dismay of many a secular Israeli who wakes up to find members of his or her family unrecognizable under a beard and a dark hat. This is the premise not only of "Catching the Sky," but also of the documentary "My Brother," being made by filmmaker Yulie Cohen (see "My Leftist," December 27,

2004), who won international acclaim for documentary films like "My Land Zion" and "My Terrorist." Cohen's new film will look at her now ultra-Orthodox brother, with whom she had had no contact for many years, until she decided she wanted to understand what made him tick. When he refused her approaches, she decided she would at least try to understand his world, even if she had to do it without his cooperation.

As in her previous work, Cohen is keen on exploring the choices her subjects make in order to better understand her own, and to

reexamine her reactions to those "others." As such, Cohen, like Geri, is enrolled in several classes and learning programs in order to broaden her world view, and come to terms with what it is her brother fell in love with when he entered the yeshiva world.

But as an intense observer of people above all, Cohen particularly enjoys the human connections she's formed in the Talmud class, most notably that with Rabbi Dov Singer, and to whom Cohen gives credit for helping her realize her way out of stereotypes. "I am coming to an inner peace via the different outlooks here," Cohen relates. "I went looking for my brother, but found myself."

After the two met at the screenwriters workshop, Singer, a resident of the Tekoa settlement in Gush Etzion and principal of the national-religious Makor Hayim High School there, brought Cohen to screen her movie "My Terrorist" at his school.

THE FILM IS ABOUT COHEN'S confrontation, and ultimate forgiveness, of the PLO gunman who shot her in London in a 1978 attack on El Al crew members, and is generally regarded in Israel, even by many centrists, as alarmingly left-wing. It was surprising, then, that the 12th grade yeshiva students at Singer's school participated in a discussion with Cohen on the film, which she says "was of the same depth [as the dialogue] when I brought the film to Harvard."

The students, effuses Cohen, were able to take the film out of its political context and speak in terms of ideals, beliefs and values — very rare at all in today's politically polarized climate, and certainly not something she expected from religious youth. Singer concurs that his central challenge in teaching the seminar is the need to dwell on substance rather than relying on the preconceptions that students with previous knowledge may have. Torah, he says, "has to be about more than slogans." This is a message that his high school students, happily, seem to have internalized.

And his more worldly audience in Tel Aviv, as well. Because although few of the seminar's participants are as optimistic as Lion as to what will emerge on the journey from Scripture to script, the artists are without exception thrilled to be expanding their still-small pools of knowledge about the sources into oceans of cultural and conceptual references — for centuries available to every yeshiva student, and now, also to them.