

## Individualism in ‘Menashe’ Challenges the Tribe

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on August 15, 2017 - 11:05am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – We all belong to something, be it a family, workplace, congregation or (expansively) a tribe. But within all that belonging is a sometimes nagging feeling of being an outsider. There is not a human being in existence that hasn't felt that way, and a new film expresses that feeling in “Menashe.”

The title is a character, a Hasidic Orthodox Jewish man whose wife had died, and due to tribal/religious tradition has lost the right to care for his son. He is the outsider in a very strict religious order, with a dogma that affects virtually every element of his difficult life. In another world, that type of individual would simply walk away, but within this closed society Menashe fights to exist and express, often taking matters destructively into his own hands. The film is unique, funny, sad and wise, plus gives audience outsiders a glimpse into a tribal world that is often viewed as weird and impenetrable, but is actually made of up of another tribe that we all recognize... human beings.

The introduction of Menashe (Menashe Lustig, whose life was loosely based on the main character) exposes a broken man in the most concentrated Hasidic district in America... Borough Park, Brooklyn. He has been widowed for a year and by Hasidic tradition can no longer care for his son (Ruben Niborski), who he adores. He works a lousy job as a clerk in a grocery, and doesn't want to start the process for remarriage, which is arranged by matchmakers.



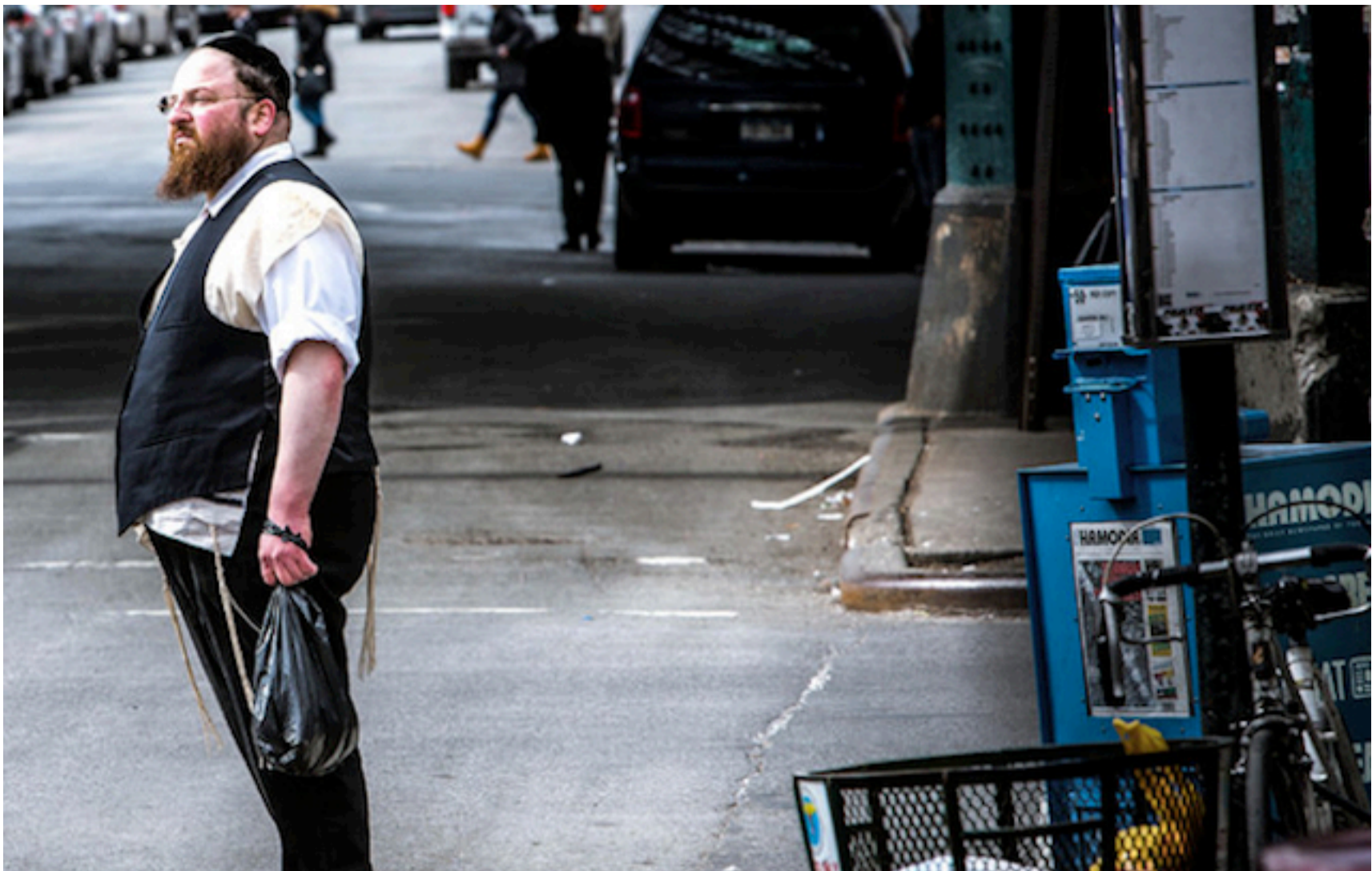
The Title Character (Menashe Lustig) and his Son (Rueben Niborski) in ‘Menashe’

*Photo credit: A24*

He is constantly fighting battles with Eizik (Yoel Weiss Haus), his wife’s brother-in-law, who is his son’s current caregiver, and he is fighting the traditions that plagued the Orthodox sect of Judaism that he practices. With the first anniversary of his wife’s death looming, he insists on providing the memorial dinner, providing a spark he hasn’t had in awhile.

The real-life Menashe is portraying a classic “schlimazel,” an unlucky or inept type of person, although he insisted in an interview he wasn’t that person. In my viewpoint of the character, I didn’t see him as unlucky/inept, but as an insider fighting his natural inclination to be an outsider. In the karma of that battle, there are the day-to-day responsibilities that always tilt a situation, and since Menashe intuitively did not care about them, of course they would go askew. This seems strange to talk about karma in association with Hasidic Jews, but co-writer/director Joshua Z Weinstein gave the story that much depth.

The world of the Hasidic Orthodox sect is so strange to outsiders, probably even to modern Jewish people, that it seems to come from another planet or time. Weinstein’s passion in the film – which is spoken entirely in Yiddish – is to give all the portrayals basic human characteristics beyond the strict rules, which as the old saying goes are made to be broken. Greed and unholy power play a role in this humanity, and Menashe is a constant victim to those relatable sins. For example, it is incongruous to see an Hasidic using a mobile phone, and Weinstein seems to revel in that.



A Man Faces His World in ‘Menashe’  
Photo credit: A24

The memorial dinners becomes the main confrontation between Menashe and his world. There is a pathos to that scenario, as the widower insists on preparing everything, including food (although he’s never cooked a thing in his life), and setting up the dinner in his shabby apartment. As the rest of his clan gathers, the disgust in their faces are a palpable expression of their capitulation to modernity – at least in food and comfort – and it takes the Rabbi (Meyer Schwartz, in an authority role he absolutely owns) to remind them of their mission as Jews in the community, and that Menashe is still one of them. The scene was masterfully rendered in the story, and again is simply human.

Many of us come from other tribes, and in going back through our ancestry may have been in tribes that powerfully exploited other tribes. No one individual or group has an ownership on what is true. We only have our beliefs and our nature to guide us in a often cruel world. We are all Menashe, and he is us.

*“Menashe” continued its nationwide release in Chicago on August 11th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Menashe Lustig, Meyer Schwartz, Yoel Weisshaus and Ruben Niborski. Written by Joshua Z Weinstein, Alex Lipschultz and Musa Syeed. Directed by Joshua Z Weinstein. Rated “PG”*



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