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## When Do We Eat? Not till you see this.

Just when you thought it was safe to go back to the seder, someone drops a tab of Ecstasy and the traditional ritual of liberation takes on a whole funkadelic new dimension.

by Reuven Koret



Mili Avital (l) and Jack Klugman (r) supply passion and guilt respectively

That's the express intent of Salvador Litvak's cinematic haggadah, [When Do We Eat?](#), opening this week in, um, theaters near Jews. The Chilean-born, Harvard-educated Litvak, who charmingly describes himself as a *baal teshuva* [newly-repentant Jew] of the "reform hassidic" variety, has taken a comedic look at a dysfunctional Jewish family sitting down, getting down, and occasionally knocking down for their Passover festive meal.

The result has more substance than a Kosher-style version of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, although the producers and distributors explicitly hope -- pray -- that this small-budget flic with cool FX can become the same sort of crossover box office blockbuster. Litvak and his ensemble nearly-all-Jew cast -- featuring anti-acid-guzzling, irascibly irate Ira (Michael Lerner) as the surreptitiously dosed dad, Peggy (Lesley Ann Warren) as his devoted but long-suffering wife, and Artur (Jack Klugman) as the suitcase-toting holocaust-scarred scar-inducing family scion -- take the audience on a mind-bending neurotic-traumatic magical mystery tour from suburbia to Mount Sinai and back.

Along the way, they transform themselves and emerge, post-afikoman, as something other than what they started as, although it remains to be seen whether the transformations are genuine and long term or just the side-effects and byproducts of psychedelics, contact highs and constipation.

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Among the motley collection of archetypes and stereotypes and idiosyncrasies thrown together around the festive table under a big tent constructed by a too-typical eye-patched Moshe Dayan-like Israeli (Mark Ivanir) too cheap to waterproof his goat-hair tent-fabric are love-interests Ethan (Max Greenfield) and Vanessa (Mili Avital). Ethan is a failed bubble-era businessman seeking to find redemption from his father's high expectations that sonny-boy will follow him into the Christmas ornament biz by instead following after orthodox religion, only to be led astray by from his holiness by his unrequited lust for the Israeli beauty and in this incarnation first cousin-once-removed-from-her-dress, getting a rare chance to "play Jewish." In Woody Allenesque Judeo-American fashion, passion and guilt mingle freely and inextricably and the twisted tryst of the two catalyzes a more violent confrontation around the dinner table, where heaven and earth literally move to realign the family constellation.

Playing a redemptive role, somewhat surprisingly given Litvak's pro-Jewish orientation, is Grace (Cynda Williams) -- the rather transparently-named sole non-Jewish actor, cast as the sole non-Jewish role -- who as a black Christian lesbian manages to make peace among the warring Members of the Tribe by reminding them of the beauty and significance of the moment and the tradition they are together experiencing in shouts and occasional fisticuffs. Litvak, in our interview with him, said that the moment of Grace echoes the role she played off-camera, reminding the bickering and kibitzing actors and actresses stuck around a dinner-table set for endless hours, debating if this was a comedy or a melodrama, that the small-budget and ambitious movie they were making had value far greater than the typical Hollywood fare in which most of them were usually churning out.

And indeed, as I watched the film once, and then again, it dawned on me that "When Do We Eat?" was the perfect Jewish answer to the Mel Gibsons of the world, showing that imperfect Jews -- for all of their bickering and kibitzing -- are a helluva lot more real and appealing to watch than the stereotypical Aramaic-mumbling cut-outs that Mad Mel made in crafting his holier-than-thou bloodsport to rile Passion in the preachy service of believe-it-or-be-damned Dogma. May the real Jews have the last laugh all the way to the box office.

*When Do We Eat?* is indeed comedy in the over-the-top spirit of the Coen Brothers but a sneaky one which actually smuggles in some real paths and meaning into the mad mix. It also has something of a Grateful Dead concert quality, where the easy and playful tunes of the opening set lead inevitably into something darker and more profound, only to emerge into a post-psychedelic "morning dew." And ultimately it achieves what it aims to be -- a celluloid Haggadah, a retelling of the ancient story in a modern guise with each character assuming the role of the pre-ordained story and living out the story of personal and collective liberation with varying degrees of self-consciousness, self-fulfillment, and cinematic success.

*When Do We Eat?* is perhaps among the first, and the best, modern attempts to grapple with the essence of religion and spirituality in the Jewish mode. The film doesn't pull many punches, it doesn't make too many compromises or silly mistakes, and it never loses sight of its primary responsibility to entertain even as it seeks surreptitiously to illuminate and elevate the viewer, trying to slyly seducing him and her, Jews of all stripes, into participating in this phantasmagoric re-enactment of the modern-ancient ritual.

While addressing all the Great Issues of Judaism and History and Holocaust, Producer-screenwriter Litvak, his co-writer cohabitant Nina Davidovich, and their ensemble cast never lose sight of the light side of what they're doing. Framing the film is an opening in

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which a biblical verse threatening fire and brimstone to those who would forgo the paschal feast with its inevitable themes of father fighting with son dissolves into a fire which turns into the business end of a lit joint, paired with a closing in which Ben Feldman, playing the smoker of the aforesaid bogie, after having his own drug-free spiritual revelation at the end of *What a Long Strange Trip It's Been*, backslides and spends his post-seder night with a flashlight in the night seeking another dose of the psychedelic he had prematurely discarded.

If on This Night unlike All Other Nights the head of the family is transmogrified into being the Head of the Nation, a mythical mighty Moses -- complemented by his nurturing female "better half," his shining *shechina* -- capable of both smashing the cinematic equivalent of the Ten Commandment and also healing the fragmented clan with love and repentance, then why not any one of us at our own seder table?

There is something mysterious going on in the film too, something that may not immediately be apparent the first time through. Think of *When Do We Eat?* as a kind of cinematic *Afikoman*: it's out there, it's barely hidden. Eventually, if you're lucky, it may reveal itself to you as more than the modest movie matzah it may appear to be: the magic stuff is not that hard to get, it's pleasant to look for, and if you do manage to get it, there may be a bonus above and beyond the pleasure of regarding a talented table-full of ensemble actors. At the very least, after the Afikoman, you get to conclude your seder.

This may not be a great film, but it has the making of a new-jew cult-classic with an outside shot at cross-over potential with the faith-based crowd. And Thus It is Said, as It was Done. If there is one modest commandment I would make from this modest bully-pulpit to my fractious and far-flung people, my non-Jewish friends and readers alike, it would go something like this: Thou Shalt See This Movie... and then Eat.



**Reuven Koret** is publisher of Jewswweek Magazine, Israel Insider, and CEO of Koret Communications.



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