



A Conversation with Shuli and Michal Rand

BY DOV PARIS

For halachic reasons, Shuli insisted that his real-life wife, Michal Bat-Sheva, who had never acted before, star opposite him in Ushpizin. Shuli won the Israeli Film Academy's 2004 Best Actor Award, the Israeli equivalent of the Oscar. Photos courtesy of New Line Home Entertainment

Shuli and Michal Bat-Sheva Rand don't look like your typical movie stars. Sure, they recently starred in a groundbreaking Israeli film that has won acclaim far beyond the Jewish community. But this middle-aged couple is anything but your typical image of celebrity, and that's because this former actor and his wife are Breslov Chassidim. *Ushpizin*, a box-office hit in Israel and one of the highest grossing foreign films in America last year, was a rare collaboration between secular and Orthodox Israelis. Screenwriter/actor Shuli Rand won the Israeli Film Academy's 2004 Best Actor Award, the Israeli equivalent of the Oscar, for his role in *Ushpizin*. Dov Paris sat down with the Rands to discuss the movie, their return to Judaism and their plans for the future.

In what follows, unless otherwise indicated, the answers are credited to the Rands, rather than to Shuli or Michal separately, since they were both present at the interview and answered the questions together. Ed.

JA: Do you view your stage and movie career primarily as an opportunity for personal development, or as a means to impact our largely secular society and bring people back to the fold?

Shuli: Answering this question is not easy. Personal development came second at most; certainly for Michal, who had never been involved in acting before and joined the cast because of halachic

Rabbi Dr. Paris was born in Israel, educated in Israeli yeshivot and attended Brown University where he earned a PhD in economics. He has taught both Chassidic thought and economics in the United States and in Israel. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and four children. The interview was conducted in Hebrew and translated by Dr. Paris.

reasons. [Shuli would not play opposite a woman other than his wife.]

We did not want to appear as if we are out to proselytize. Nor do we think that we are suited for that role, or that the movie would have had such a positive impact [had our agenda been to "convert" the audience]. Because of my demanding work, I do not learn as much Torah as other members of our Breslov community and do not consider myself qualified to preach. We had a more modest aim: to expose people, via the medium of movies, to the treasures and beauty of Judaism, to Rabbi Nachman's ideas and to the Breslov world. We hoped to dispel misconceptions that are rooted in the media's

superficial understanding of the Orthodox world. We did not aim [at reaching] only the non-observant, but rather we hoped to foster unity, to enhance mutual understanding between religious and non-religious.

JA: Could you name a particular misconception you wished to dispel?

The Rands: Well, take, for example, the supposed oppression of women in traditional Jewish communities. Two earlier Israeli movies spread the false notion that *Chareidi* women are little more than baby-making machines, and are cast aside if they cannot have children. In *Ushpizin*, Malli has difficulty becoming pregnant. Yet Moshe, her husband,

treats her with the utmost love and care, insisting that he wants to have children but only with her. Moshe buys the “diamond,” the most expensive *etrog* in town, for the exorbitant price of 1,000 *shekalim*—about a quarter of his and Malli’s miraculous windfall—because it might mystically trigger another miracle and help Malli become pregnant. Some critics noted that the movie portrays the modesty and love found in *Chareidi* marriages, as Moshe and Malli show such affection for each other without ever touching on screen.

JA: Do you feel you have been successful in dispelling these misconceptions?

The Rands:

Beyond our wildest dreams. We certainly did not expect the film to elicit such a warm response among viewers. A certain Israeli-owned web site announced it would be showing *Ushpizin* for free for a short period of time. The site drew some 20,000 visitors, several times its usual number. It also generated 1,353 responses to a questionnaire about the movie. A comprehensive analysis of the data is yet to come, but some of the results are astounding. For example, 670 respondents expressed an interest in learning more about Judaism, 540 were surprised by how women are treated in the Breslov community, and 275 reported that the movie caused them to begin to observe Shabbat.

JA: How important are Rabbi Nachman and Breslov *Chassidut* in your *Yiddishkeit*?

The Rands: Very important. Being a Breslover is not just an intellectual expe-

rience but also a way of life; Breslov *Chassidut* is highly creative in numerous ways, and it offers a unique perspective on life. It provides overall life direction as well as guidance in daily matters. Naturally, we want to convey to others what worked so well for us—the movie is one way of doing so.

JA: What attracted you to Orthodoxy, and specifically to Breslov? Which one came first?

Shuli: It is hard to say what attracted us

intellectual pursuit, that it means commitment, actually observing the *mitzvot*. As we became more observant we also saw that my acting career was not consistent with a genuine Torah life. I quit the theater to study Torah full time.

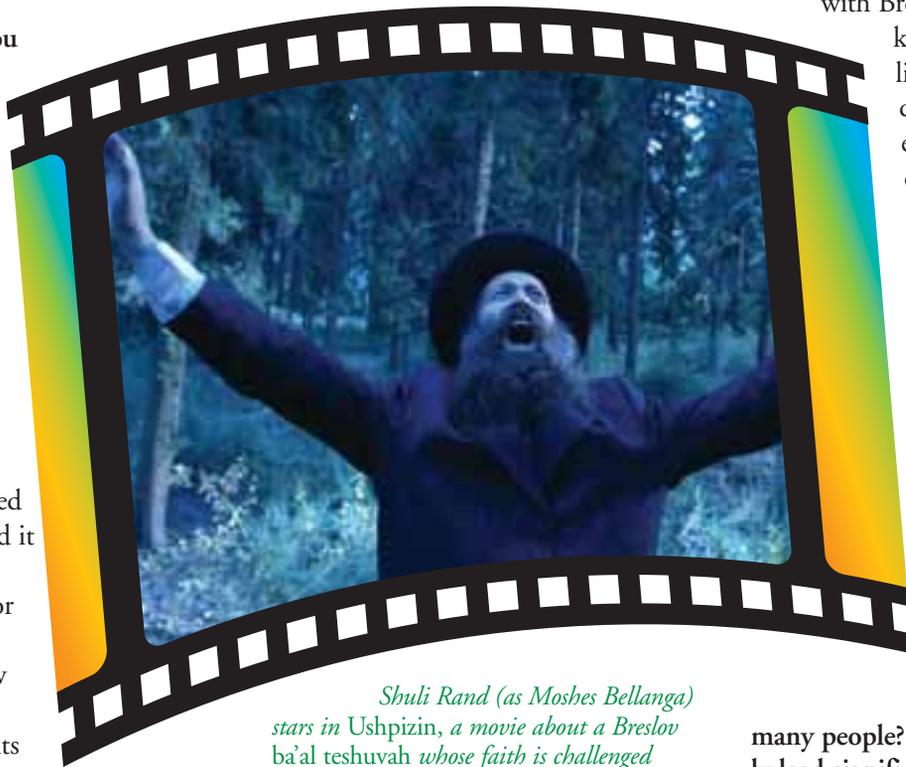
I only became Breslov after I returned to observant life. Breslov is quite fashionable in Israel even among the non-observant—in fact, a recent Khan Theater show based on Rabbi Nachman’s “The Seven Beggars” was a tremendous success—and like many Israelis, we had already been acquainted with Breslov before we began

keeping the *mitzvot*. Now, like others in the process of doing *teshuvah*, we experience ups and downs in our search for answers. We have found that Rabbi Nachman’s writings are more attuned to our needs than others, that he offers in-depth advice regarding the very problems that bother us; he infuses our Jewishness with meaning.

JA: How do you explain the interest in Breslov, and why Breslov attracts so

many people? Does this interest actually lead significant numbers to embrace Orthodoxy?

The Rands: The interest is indeed amazing, for two reasons. Firstly, since Rabbi Nachman’s death [in 1810], Breslov has not had a living *rebbe*, yet it attracts more *ba’alei teshuvah*—from all walks of life—than the Lithuanian *yeshivot* and most other Chassidic groups put together. Breslov *Chassidut* is so attractive, perhaps because it makes room for everybody, even beginners. True, Breslov, like *Chassidut* generally, is based on the paradoxical maxim that man can become something only by considering himself nothing—relative to God—thereby attaching himself to Him. At the same time, Breslovers treat



Shuli Rand (as Moshe Bellanga) stars in Ushpizin, a movie about a Breslov ba'al teshuvah whose faith is challenged when people from his past arrive unannounced at his sukkah.

to Orthodoxy because we returned gradually. It did not happen overnight; we did not “see the light” and return in a flash. Unlike Michal, I grew up in a religious home and had a religious education. At a certain point, I lost my faith, as happens with many youth, but we made our way back to the fold together.

I was still working in the theater full time when we began learning Jewish texts. At some point, we felt that something was lacking; we realized that Judaism is about life itself, not just an

everyone with respect: One may belittle himself, but not others. Breslov is very inclusive and believes that everybody—scholar or not—can have a deep relationship with Hashem and can join in *avodat Hashem*.

Secondly, it is amazing that Rabbi Nachman himself was surrounded by highly pious and learned disciples, sort of an elite society, yet his writings are very well attuned to beginners and to *ba'alei teshuvah* today. He actually stressed that he was writing for future generations, and he deals with the very issues that bother modern people. Rabbi Nachman's writings, which are at the same time both logical and poetical, reveal how multi-dimensional he was.

Some try to *sell* Judaism as an escape, a utopia; observe the *mitzvot*, they claim, and it will make your life better and solve all your problems. Breslov does not compromise the truth in order to attract people; it does not promise that becoming observant its way will in itself solve your problems. Rather it invites one to continuously confront himself, never to seek nirvana and to endlessly struggle for self-improvement. Breslov attracts people because it is challenging, demanding and, most importantly, relevant today. We hope this message came through.

JA: The movie takes place in a small Breslov community, and it is imbued with the Breslov spirit and teachings. Actually, many of the seminal themes of the movie seem to have been culled from *Likutei Maharan*, part A, chapters 59-60, for example, where there is a discussion about spiritual practices to help one get pregnant. Did you really write the script this way, from book to screenplay?

The Rands: Not at all. The material for the movie grew out of our day-to-day experience, which in a Breslov commu-

nity follows Rabbi Nachman's teachings. Rabbi Nachman was not merely a deep and abstract thinker as many believe; he was also a leader of a community, teaching that the way of a Torah life is in the details. Thus, when dealing with printing the *Likutei Maharan*—which he regarded as heralding the Era of Mashiach—he inquired about even the most mundane details, such as the minute expenses.

Rabbi Nachman struggled extensively with the issue of materialism and developed a dualistic approach to it. He despised and sharply criticized material-

money are capable of genuinely overcoming the desire for money.

Hence he encouraged his disciples—even his very son-in-law—to become financially independent by engaging in business, exhorting them to do so honestly and only for a few hours a day, as learning Torah should be their primary occupation. This is an example of the Breslov holistic approach, relevant to everybody, at all times.

JA: What has been the response of the *Chareidi* community to the movie?

The Rands: Officially, the movie was shown only to non-*Chareidi* audiences, since that was the condition under which our rabbi permitted us to make this movie. Hence, we could hardly observe [*Chareidi*] reactions. However, many *Chareidim* watched the movie on DVD on their home computers. The responses were extremely favorable. People reported that the movie caused them to pray better, and

generally to try harder in heeding the *mitzvot*.

JA: Can you explain the scene where everything is going wrong and Moshe prays to God in the woods? Is that typically Breslov? How and why?

The Rands: Yes, it is typically Breslov. When very young, Rabbi Nachman, like his great grandfather the Baal Shem Tov, used to seclude himself in the woods to pray, learn and meditate. He taught that everyone should do so regularly, especially during critical moments. Often, especially in tough situations, a person who is part of the picture needs to get out of it to see things more clearly. Ultimately, whatever we experience is due to God; the figures we encounter in life are actually His emissaries, but many times we act like the dog who



Director Giddi Dar and Shuli on the set of the dramedy Ushpizin. The movie was a rare collaboration between secular and Orthodox Israelis.

istic desires per se as disruptive to *avodat Hashem*, separating man from God. At the same time, he stressed that money is a necessary means, not only for sustenance, but also for observing the *mitzvot* and for Torah learning, and even for attaining the highest levels of holiness.

Rabbi Nachman claimed that overcoming one's desire for money, despising money, is a prerequisite for attaining the highest spiritual levels (*Likutei Maharan*, part A, chap. 60). It may seem paradoxical, but he argued that only people who actually possess

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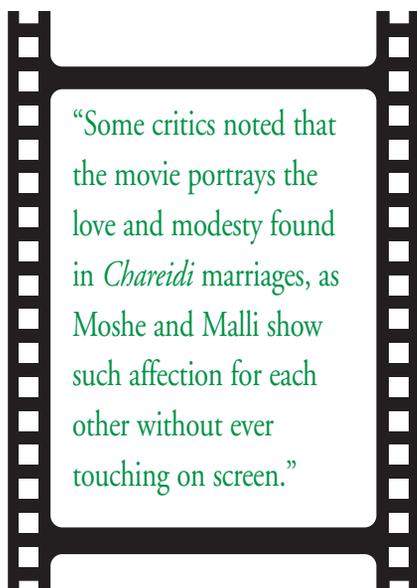
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tries to bite the stick with which his master hits him.

This scene is actually the climax of the plot, Moshe's lowest point. Receiving the unexpected money seemed to him to be a sign from Heaven for a fresh start. He believed that he had performed all the *mitzvot* of Sukkot perfectly, and at a great sacrifice, but now everything seems to have fallen apart. He discovers that his sukkah was actually a stolen one, and hence not kosher, and that his guests have gone wild causing Malli to leave him. Worst of all perhaps, his perfect and precious *etrog*, the "diamond," which was supposed to bring the blessing of fertility, is gone. Moshe, completely baffled, grows more and more furious and is about to lose his temper, reverting to his earlier violent self. At his lowest point, Moshe finally realizes that it is all from God, that the problem lies within himself, and he manages to control himself. This marks a turning point for him. He is now ripe to go to the woods for seclusion, to "discuss" matters with the

Master—rather than deal with the "stick," his guests. This is a universal message, Rabbi Nachman-style.

It was amazing to watch non-reli-



gious audiences, sensing the symbolic significance, gasp in shock while the *etrog* is cut. The *Chareidim* object to viewing movies, lest they get exposed to and influenced by tainted ideas. It

seems to me that *Ushpizin* has shown that a movie can also do the reverse—it can also expose one to sacred or holy ideas and can influence people for the good. I hope this will help change the mindset of those who think that movies are inherently evil—they are simply a medium.

JA: Why did you pick Sukkot as the time frame of the plot? Was it because Rabbi Nachman passed away on Sukkot? Or because sukkah is the only mitzvah into which man physically enters? Or is it because of another mystical/symbolic reason?

The Rands: It was a practical consideration; it provides a treasure-trove of screenplay elements with subtle effects and messages. Pesach in contrast, offers nothing comparable to a stolen Sukkah, for example, or the precious *etrog* and its "murder" at the hands of the guest.

JA: Indeed, how did these meaningful scenes occur to you?

The Rands: The damaged *etrog* is a common theme in Jewish lore and legend. Rabbi Elimelech of Lizansk, a great early Chassidic master, for example, was penniless before Sukkot, just like Moshe, and was unable to afford an *etrog* and other necessities for the festival. Hence he sold his precious pair of tefillin and used all the money to buy an expensive *etrog*. His wife got upset, especially as he didn't leave any money for food. In the course of the exchange, the *etrog* was ruined, and Rabbi Elimelech bemoaned that he was left with nothing—no tefillin, no *etrog* and no necessities for Sukkot.

On a personal note, some years ago, somebody assumed that our sukkah was *hefker* [abandoned], and took it for himself. This incident gave us the idea for the plot.

JA: Rabbi Nachman's "bad guys" were "*maskilim*," modernized Jews drifting away from Judaism, but otherwise respectable folks. Rabbi Nathan, Rabbi Nachman's editor and disciple, calls them at one point "the aristocrats of Uman." Contrary to other *tzaddikim* of his time, Rabbi Nachman believed his mission was to specifically address this elite. You choose a different strategy and have two criminals serve as the antagonists to Moshe, the hero; why not choose ordinary irreligious intellectuals, for example?

The Rands: Firstly, today Breslov deals with all Jews, even criminals; hence they are relevant. Secondly, ordinary antagonists would have detracted from the plot's central messages, weakened the climax and branded the film preachy. Unlike ordinary guests, criminals have a tainted image, which legitimates attempts to "convert" them. As the "good guy," Moshe is also not the most respected in his community—with his tendency to miss prayer services and his limited Torah knowledge. But still he represents Judaism and Breslov. Thus, both sides are represented by marginal characters. Also, the plot imposed constraints; an ordinary guest is unlikely to appear unexpectedly and behave as

Though Rabbi Nachman of Breslov died some two hundred years ago, he continues to speak to our own generation. What is it that makes him ever fresh and ever relevant?

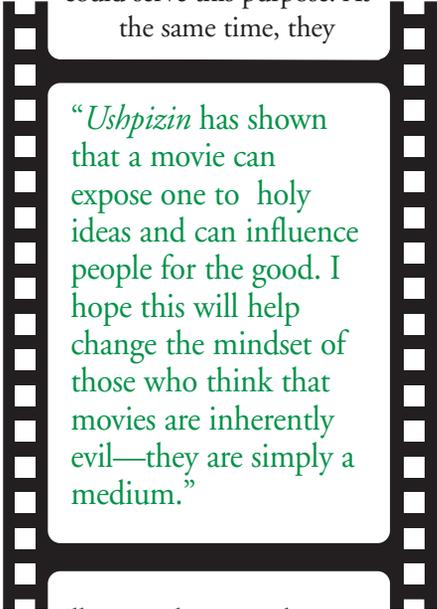
Modern man is constantly escaping from himself. Rabbi Nachman forces a Jew to confront himself, allocating time for being alone with himself and time for being alone with God (*hitbodedut*). Rabbi Nachman rejected self-effacement when it interfered with clarity of thought. He proclaimed that it was a great mitzvah to be joyous, and saw depression as the root of all illness.

Rabbi Nachman suffered from many opponents who thought he was haughty and arrogant. They mistook his emphasis on self-worth for overbearing pride.

Most of all, Rabbi Nachman spoke to the individual aloneness of each Jew. He felt their pain and helped them make their lives whole.

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rudely as the criminals did. Their Divine mission was to try the Bellangas' hospitality, test their nerves and especially bring out the bad guy in Moshe—his past anger and potential violence, so he could overcome it. Only criminals could serve this purpose. At the same time, they



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illustrate that even the lowly could be Divine instruments (unfortunately, though, this last point was lost on many viewers). When Moshe stares angrily at the two petrified criminals who just ruined his *etrog*, he is undergoing an intense inner struggle. Moshe's ordeal ends as soon as he realizes that these "bad" folks are simply Divine messengers sent to test him. He controls his anger and thereby overcomes this test. Anger, by the way, is a weakness against which Rabbi Nachman inveighs frequently.

JA: What does the hero's name, "Bellanga," imply? Is it an acronym or a symbolic/mystical *gematria*?

The Rands: It sounds like "*balagan*," Hebrew slang for trouble, alluding to Moshe's wild past.

JA: What are your plans for the future?

Shuli: We are writing a screenplay for our next feature movie, which we hope will be an American-Israeli co-production.

JA: When do you think the screenplay will be completed?

The Rands: We don't know; it goes slowly. Learning Torah and working and raising our six children leave little time for working on this project; we want to bring the screenplay to Hollywood in as perfect a state as possible, so that the folks there will not distort its Breslov content and messages. We are looking for investors who can appreciate this so things can move quickly. We believe that it will be an even greater success than *Ushpizin*.

JA: What will that movie be about? Does it have a name already?

The Rands: At this stage we can only say that it will further expound upon Breslov themes and that it will deal with the relationship between Israel and American Jewry. A name? It is too early for that. **JA**

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