

Movie Review: "The Secrets"™ - A telling story, and worth the effort

by Creators Syn. Movie Reviewers

Watching "The Secrets" is work. It's a multilayered film, in Hebrew with English subtitles, about complex religious concepts. It's also a story about human relationships, love, courage and redemption. And that's why you work to stay with it.

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Set in Israel, the film opens in Naomi's home, at the funeral for her mother. Naomi (Ania Bukstein, in a stellar performance) is stoic, while her sister, Rachel (Alma Zack), sobs. The message and the feminist subtext are quickly clear that this young woman is different from the others in her ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. She studies the Talmud with her father, Rabbi Hess (Seffy Rivlin), and longs to be a rabbi herself, a goal out of reach in her faith.

She doesn't want to go through with the arranged marriage to Michael (Guri Alfi), one of her father's students. Rabbi Hess, sensing Naomi's grief, relents and allows her to take some time away to go and study at Knowledge and Truth Seminary, where young women deepen their understanding of their religion and, as becomes clear, look for husbands.

Naomi is fixed only on the former and makes an impression on the woman who is headmistress (Tiki Dayan). She excels, thanks to the lifelong tutoring by her father, something not unnoticed by her roommates " husband-seeking Sheine (Talli Oren) and newly religious Sigi (Dana Ivay) and, particularly, Michelle (Michal Shtamler), who's been sent to the seminary from her home in France where there's been some trouble, which is left unsaid.

Naomi is appalled by Michelle's brusque, even rude behavior toward everyone as she acts out her unhappiness at being in this place. But the headmistress pairs them up to take food to a woman who has come to Safed seeking absolution from the religious community after being released from prison for the murder of her lover. The headmistress believes Naomi is the most mature of the students and can handle the situation. Michelle goes along since the woman, Anouk (the memorable Fanny Ardant), speaks only French.

An unlikely alliance forms as the two young women get to know the older woman and respond to her plea for help. Anouk is dying and begs Naomi to use the religious "secrets" and do what the rabbis won't: help her cleanse her soul.

At Michelle's urging, Naomi accepts the challenge and studies even more diligently, coming up with a redemptive ritual that they both know is dangerous for her to perform, should anyone in the community find out. They are deeply committed to easing Anouk's emotional pain, despite the societal price, and they become deeply committed to one another in the process.

Enter Yanki (Adir Miller), a graduate of yeshiva who would rather be a musician than a rabbi. He takes a fancy to Michelle and is of some help to her and Naomi, unbeknown to him, as they conduct the series of Tikkuns (holy rituals) for Anouk. Sigi and Sheine ultimately catch on to what's happening and want to participate, a decision Naomi and Michelle eventually will rue.

Despite the fact that so much of what is happening on-screen will seem foreign to outsiders, Israeli director Avi Nesher and screenwriter Hadar Galron skillfully inform viewers about the Jewish faith, while also telling a powerful story about the connections between human beings and the yearning that exists in every soul.

"The Secrets." Rated: R. Running time: 2 hours. 3 stars.

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