

# The Women's Balcony

## ישמח חתני

A Film by Emil Ben-Shimon and Shlomit Nehama



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**Los Angeles Times Critic's Pick of the Week!**

**"A charming, warm-hearted comedy."**

Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times

**"An entertaining, feel-good comedy.**

**You don't have to be Jewish to love "The Women's Balcony."**

Frank Scheck, The Hollywood Reporter

**"Viewers will leave the theater in a joyous mood."**

Alissa Simon, Variety

**"The most joyful, good hearted and charming film of the year!"**

Yair Raveh, Cinemascope



## Synopsis

**A comedy/drama about community, old traditions and values and the power of women to keep all of these together in the face of modern extremism.**

An accident during a bar mitzvah celebration leads to a gender rift in a devout Orthodox community in Jerusalem, in this rousing, good-hearted tale about women speaking truth to patriarchal power.

When the women's balcony in an Orthodox synagogue collapses, leaving the rabbi's wife in a coma and the rabbi in shock, the congregation falls into crisis.

Charismatic young Rabbi David appears to be a savior after the accident, but slowly starts pushing his fundamentalist ways and tries to take control. This tests the women's friendships and creates an almost Lysistrata-type rift between the community's women and men.



## Technical Details

Country of Origin: Israel

Language: Hebrew (with English subtitles)

Running Time: 96 minutes

Aspect Ratio: 2.35:1 Scope

## **Cast**

<b>Orna Banai</b>	Tikvah
<b>Itzik Cohen</b>	Aharon
<b>Einat Sarouf</b>	Margalit
<b>Igal Naor</b>	Zion
<b>Evelin Hagoel</b>	Ettie
<b>Aviv Alush</b>	Rabbi David
<b>Yafit Asulin</b>	Yaffa
<b>Sharona Elimelech</b>	Ora
<b>Herzl Tobe</b>	Nissan
<b>Haim Zanati</b>	Rahamim

## **Crew**

Director	<b>Emil Ben-Shimon</b>
Screenwriter	<b>Shlomit Nehama</b>
Producers	<b>Osnat Handelsman-Keren</b> <b>Talia Kleinhendler</b>
Director of Photography	<b>Ziv Berkovich</b>
Editor	<b>Einat Glaser Zarhin</b>
Music	<b>Ahuva Ozeri</b> <b>Shaul Besser</b>

## Cast

### **Orna Banai - Tikva ("Hope" In English)**

One of Israel's most loved and successful comedians with a career spanning more than 25 years, Orna played numerous satirical characters on TV and theatre portraying free-spirited characters. This is her first big role in cinema, as an Orthodox woman, for which she was also nominated for an Ophir prize.



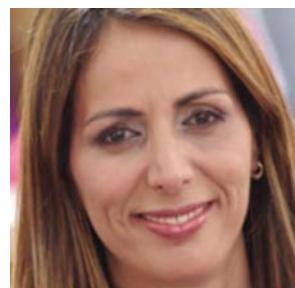
### **Itzik Cohen – Aharon**

Started his career more than 25 years ago as a drag queen in the very popular group "Daughters Of Pesia" and since then has become an established actor and entertainer in films like "A Matter Of Size", "Sima The Witch" and in theatre on stage.



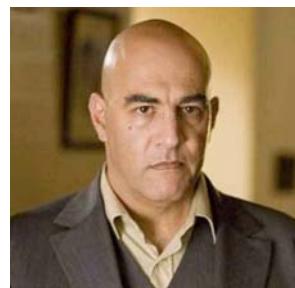
### **Einat Sarouf – Margalit**

A highly successful and loved Israeli singer and entertainer, Einat specializes in bringing her unique Israeli flavor and high energy to audiences around the world. Margalit in "The Women's Balcony" is her first film role.



### **Igal Naor - Zion**

An established Israeli actor for many years, Igal appeared in "Saint Clara" in 1996 and since has appeared in the American films "Munich", "Green Zone" and "Rendition". Naor portrayed Saddam Hussein in the four-episode "House of Saddam" television docudrama from BBC and HBO (2008), and appeared in Season 5, Episode 4 of "Homeland".



### **Evelin Hagoel - Etti**

Born in Morocco, Evelin is one of Israel's most sought after dramatic actresses. In movies she appeared in "Gett: The Trial Of Viviane Amsalem" with the late Ronit Elkabetz, "A Matter Of Size", "Young Victor Perez", "My Lovely Sister", "What a Wonderful Place".



## **Aviv Alush - Rabbi David**

Aviv is a young actor, musician and TV anchor. He started his career in 2004 as a supporting actor in the movie "State Evidence" and in 2005 was cast in a leading role in "The Dreamers". In 2006 he became the lead anchor for Israeli Nickelodeon and as a result became a teen heartthrob. In 2010-2011 he was cast in the hit Israeli TV series "Asfour".



## **Yafit Asulin – Yaffa**

Yafit is a young actress and comedienne. She started acting in Cameri Theatre when she was 16. After her army service she studied at the Kibbutzim seminar and since then played in numerous theatre shows and stand up comedies. Her breakthrough appearance was in the successful TV series "Zagouri Empire".



## **Statement from Screenwriter Shlomit Nehama**

When I was 12 years old, we moved from central Tel Aviv to the Bukharin neighborhood in Jerusalem. The encounter with the neighborhood and its people won over my heart. It was a place full of life, smells and tastes, like an urban village living its life peacefully. Years later when I returned to the neighborhood I was surprised to see the many changes and the religious extremism that had all but taken over. Speaking to relatives who still lived there, it was hard not to feel their yearning for the vibrant community of days past, a community that was disappearing to the point that they felt like a minority in their own neighborhood.

In the film “The Women’s Balcony,” I wanted to tell the story of the moderate people, who are forced to deal with growing religious extremism.

“The Women’s Balcony” depicts the crumbling of this community when an extremist rabbi takes advantage of a crisis in the community and infiltrates it. This infiltration puts the people of the community to the test. But the film also offers comfort that religion can be different, and can still provide a rational community with compassion and love.

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*Shlomit Nehama grew up in Jerusalem, in a religious family. She worked for many years on Israeli TV, mainly in children's programs and animation series. "The Women's Balcony" is her first feature film, inspired by the story of her family and their neighborhood. Shlomit is 47 years old, mother of two children.*

## **Statement from Director Emil Ben-Shimon**

This is a film about brave, strong women. Women who are fighting for their place in Jerusalem - a city sacred to all religions, and for their place in their community and homes. These women, full of passion for life, are confronted by a rabbi full of blind faith. This encounter raises questions about religion, the true path of faith, can every believer choose his or her own path? And what is the price of extremism. I invite you to immerse yourself in this community full of laughter and emotion, and into a story that tries to give hope even to those who have fallen out of grace.

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*Emil Ben-Shimon is a writer/director known for his Israeli TV shows “Wild Horses” (2015), “Katmando” (2011) and his acclaimed TV Movie “Mimon” (2005) which won the Israeli Film & Television Academy Award for Best TV Movie in 2005.*



## The Music

Ahuva Ozeri (Born March 30th, 1948 – Died December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016 in Tel Aviv) was an Israeli singer-songwriter and player of the bulbul-tarang (or Indian banjo). Raised from a Yemenite Jewish family, Ozeri has been referred to as "the founding mother of Mizrahi music" by the Israeli daily Ha'aretz and "the great priestess of oriental music" by the BBC.

In 2005, cancer forced the removal of her vocal chords.



Beginning with her 2013 album, Me'alay D'mama (Silence Above Me) she continued to write the words and lyrics for her songs and play on the album but was forced to largely leave the singing to others, including some of the most prominent names in Israeli music today. Using a specially shaped metal plate pressed to her throat, she still managed to sing on two tracks.

Ahuva Ozeri died in December 2016 from complications of the cancer she was fighting for 15 years.

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The film's theme song "Ismach Hatani" is sung by Sarit Hadad, the most popular Mizrahi singer in Israel. Follow the link below to watch the music video produced for the film: <https://youtu.be/ePara4T1BwY>



# THE JERUSALEM POST

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## View from ‘The Women’s Balcony’

*Israeli screenwriter Shlomit Nehama talks about her feel-good dramatic comedy set in a traditional Orthodox community in Jerusalem.*



By Hannah Brown  
December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016

‘I gave up on trying to make it universal,’ says Shlomit Nehama, the screenwriter of *The Women’s Balcony*, a movie set in the world of traditional Mizrahi families in Jerusalem. “What matters is how much you connect to the characters. If you connect emotionally, they can be from any culture.”

The first-time screenwriter wanted to tell a story set in the Bukharan Quarter of Jerusalem, about a community where life revolves around a synagogue. People know their roles and accept them. But when the women’s balcony collapses during a bar mitzva, seriously injuring several

members of the congregation and destroying the building, the dynamics change. The men are drawn to a young, charismatic ultra-Orthodox rabbi who tells them the balcony fell because the women don’t cover their hair and dress modestly enough. He convinces them that they should not include a women’s balcony in the rebuilt synagogue – that there should not be any place for women inside the synagogue anymore. The women, who have grown up obeying male authority, finally rebel.

This may sound like a polemic, but the movie is actually a gentle comedy, and portrays all the characters (even the interloping rabbi) with affection and respect. Nehama, who worked for years in television, is pleased that audiences have responded to the movie, which is a hit in Israel, where it is playing throughout the

country, and received great reviews at the Toronto International Film Festival, where it acquired a US distributor.

The movie, which was directed by Emil Ben-Shimon, stars some of Israel's best loved actors, among them Evelin Hagoel, Igal Naor, Orna Banai, Avraham Aviv Alush, Itzhik Cohen, Yafit Asulin and Assaf Ben-Shimon.

The positive reactions to the movie abroad surprised Nehama, though.

"The nuances are so specific to religious Judaism and Israeli life," she says. But in telling a story rooted in a specific place, she has touched a chord.

"I'm happy that people enjoy it, here and around the world, because I want people to see the movie," she said. "You think it will be light comedy, a *seret bourekas* [Hebrew for a silly, formulaic comedy] but little by little, you see there is more to it."

"I made something very feminist, but I didn't mean to... It is very clear to Eti [the heroine, played by Evelin Hagoel] that what is happening is not fair and we will fight it, that this rabbi is not one of us. That is the main thing, the struggle against extremism."

Nehama, who grew up in Jerusalem and Petah Tikva in communities much like the one portrayed in the film, knows and respects this world, although she no longer belongs to it in the way she once did. Becoming secular at 18, she is still close to her extended family and wishes that her children could have spent more time in this community while they were growing up.

"Every time we get together [with her extended family] I have the feeling that my kids have a community where they get unconditional love, I see how good it is for them."

Nehama sees this kind of traditional community, where the women observe the laws of kashrut and the sabbath but don't find it necessary to cover their hair or wear long sleeves, as under attack from a kind of all-or- nothing approach to religion.

"This community was unchanged for over 50 years, it kept its traditions. But now, it's very, very sad. It isn't a moral deterioration – the traditional Jews aren't lazy people who don't want to follow mitzvot. It was just a more relaxed approach to observance and identity. But now there is no room for moderation. That's the story of our generation, moderation has disappeared. In this atmosphere you must take a side."

And when people take sides, they become either more secular or ultra-Orthodox, Nehama said. In the movie, as the characters react in different ways, they don't trust each other's kashrut anymore and can't eat together, which is one of the ways that the more extremist approach starts to destroy their community.

"It's very emotional, and suddenly you can't go to someone else's house." Because of this trend towards extremism, Nehama worries that "There will be no continuation of the community I grew up in. People will be ultra-Orthodox, or they will be gone."

But although Nehama's concern about the changes in this world are clear in *The Women's Balcony*, the movie is primarily a good story, and that's the way she wanted it.

Although she had written scripts for children's television shows before, writing a feature film was uncharted territory for her, and she consulted screenplay how-to books as she worked.

"I read a lot, I saw many movies. I liked British movies about people in small towns very much, especially *Waking Ned Devine*," about a lottery winner in a small Irish village. "I loved the atmosphere of that movie," which had parallels to the one she wanted to create in hers.

What has been most gratifying for Nehama, who is in the early stages of a new script, is the feedback she has gotten from women who say the movie reflects their lives.

"I get very intimate messages from women, about how they are in their marriage and how they are out of the house and how the movie expresses what they feel. I really wasn't prepared for this."

<http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Culture/View-from-The-Womens-Balcony-474340>

## Interview with Star Orna Banai

Published at "La'Isha", written by Orit Merlin Rozenzvieg, Keren Na-thanzon vitz



### Orna Banai: "I'm waiting to pass the first wave of sadness"

Suffering and humor go hand in hand with Orna Banai who has just separated from her girlfriend of many years; Orna is thrilled to receive her first nomination to the Ophir prize as a supporting actress in "The Women's Balcony".

Last summer, on the eve of her 50th birthday, Orna Banai found out love hurts. Even when you're a successful comedian, mother of two, financially secure and you went through a few things in your life, nothing prepares you for a hurtful separation. It's only 2 months since she separated from her girl friend Avital. Banai stayed at her beautiful northern Tel Aviv apartment with her children Amir (12) and Mika (9).

Good things are happening in her career, she even looks better than usual, but behind all of this there is great sadness, which she doesn't try to hide.

"Breaking up is hell," she admits. "I'm 2 months without Avital and it hurts and it's sad. We were together 5 years, a piece of life, but things end and you have to know how to end it."

This will not be a sad article because Banai (50), one of the funniest women in Israel, chooses to wake up every day and go make people laugh. And now after so many years in the industry, after doing a TV series (*Mommy*) and numerous theatre plays, after being "Limor" with Erez Tal in "*Only in Israel*" (hugely successful satirical show), doing "*It's a Wonderful Country*" and participating at "*The Back of the Nation*", now she is doing a dramatic supporting actress role in Emil Ben-Shimon "*The Women's Balcony*".

In the movie she portrays an orthodox woman, one of a group of women having to deal with a new charismatic Rabbi (Aviv Alush) who manipulates the men in their community to extreme ideas.

"People think it is my 10th film already, but in reality I've never had the opportunity to act in a movie, for different reasons." Now she feels she managed to jump over the casting hurdle which previously had always kept her in funny roles.

*How did you prepare for a role of an Orthodox woman?*

"Ever since I got the part I started eating Zimes (cooked carrot) and volunteering as a nurse" she jokes. "Actually it wasn't hard for me to prepare. I come from a family in which tradition and religion were big part. When I was a child I spent quite a long time in synagogues on Friday-Saturday and on holidays we would go to my grandmother who lived in Mahane Yehuda market in Jerusalem, and we would go to the synagogue there. To my surprise it was one of the synagogues we shot the movie in. Closing the circle for me."

*How are you dealing with your two brothers, Meir and Eviatar, becoming Orthodox Jews?*

"It is far from my heart. Gladly for me it did not cause any disconnect in our relationship. But there is no chance this would ever happen with me."

*Are you ready for the change in your age to 50?*

"Age bothers me. I have an issue with it. I certainly feel age in terms of being tired, feeling my life experience, and also I'm vegetarian and fighting for animal rights so in the current world I feel like a dying breed, but it's ok with me. I invite people to come to my special island, exotic island filled with tofu:)"

# VARIETY

## Film Review: 'The Women's Balcony'

Alissa Simon - Film Critic

October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016



*Viewers will leave the theater in a joyous mood.*

A close-knit congregation fractures along gender lines after a catastrophe at their synagogue, in Emil Ben Shimon's nicely observed dramedy "The Women's Balcony." Offering solid, middle-brow entertainment that borrows from Aristophanes' "Lysistrata," the film shows the relationships and tensions between different groups within Orthodox Judaism in Jerusalem, and provides a cautionary (and universally understandable) tale about religious fundamentalism. Released in Israel on September 29, it has already notched an impressive 125,000 admissions, and is on track to double that number before the hardtop run ends. Menemsha Films is circulating this Jewish-interest crowd-pleaser to U.S. fests in advance of a theatrical opening.

Beginning with a bar mitzvah and culminating with a wedding, the film focuses on a community of lively and relaxed Sephardic Jews who enjoy coming together as a community and revere their elderly spiritual leader, Rabbi Menashe (Abraham Celektar). But during the bar mitzvah of the grandson of congregational stalwarts Zion (Igal Naor) and Ettie (the magnificent Evelin Hagoel), the balcony where the women sit suddenly collapses, and the

rabbi's wife is severely injured. The rabbi is already in poor health and can't cope with the disaster.

Lacking a place of worship as well as the services of an ordained religious leader, the men of the congregation are thrilled when the charismatic, ultra-orthodox seminarian Rabbi David (Aviv Alush) steps in. With Rabbi Menashe out of commission, Rabbi David is soon supervising the repairs to their synagogue. But when the building reopens, the women are dumbfounded to find that their bright, open balcony no longer exists, and that they are expected to attend services in a claustrophobic anteroom. Moreover, Rabbi David, who believes that all women should observe extreme modesty rules, further alienates them by implying that their sins might have provoked the accident.

While the men are captivated by Rabbi David's sermons, the angry women set about raising money to renovate their balcony. An amusing scene in which Ettie and her friend Margalit (Einat Sarouf) negotiate with a contractor should be a teaching primer for all those who hate haggling with workmen. But when Rabbi David unilaterally decides that the money the women collected should be used to pay for new Torah scrolls rather than their construction project, it generates a rift between the sexes. As the women walk out on their menfolk and hold a public protest outside Rabbi David's seminary, it sparks a showdown between the rigid, sometimes joyless religiosity of the ultra-orthodox and those who find pleasure in traditional ritual without being overly strict in their observance.

In a country where middle-aged women rarely appear as movie protagonists, screenwriter Shlomit Nechama (the director's ex-wife) deserves kudos for her likeable, responsive, can-do heroines. And she smartly incorporates challenging and subversive elements into a film that is outwardly simple and charming. Using broad strokes, she establishes an environment where the main characters' religious observation creates a sense of belonging that is closely tied to the warmth of home and family. She contrasts their heartfelt practices with the inflexible dictates of Rabbi David and his followers.

Director Ben Shimon further exploits the differences between the two groups on a visual level, contrasting the colorful dress of the women with the almost frightening black garb of the ultra-orthodox men. The tension generated by the infiltration of the ultra-orthodox into the relaxed market neighborhood of Zion is further emphasized by the appearance of pashkavils (posters serving as one of the ultra-orthodox's few forms of mass communication) plastered on the narrow stone alleyways, and by a scowling Hasid seemingly keeping tabs on what the neighbors are doing and saying.

Hagoel's proud and practical Ettie leads a fine ensemble cast comprised of a number of female comedians, including Orna Banay as Ettie's outspoken pal Tikva, and on-the-rise young comic and performer Yafit Asulin as Ettie's unmarried niece, Yaffa, who falls for Rabbi David's assistant (Assaf Ben Shimon).

The colorful tech package is sized to look fine on screens small and large. An upbeat Mizrahi music score by Ahuva Ozeri insures that viewers will leave the theater in a joyous mood.

<http://variety.com/2016/film/festivals/the-womens-balcony-review-1201898418/>