

## Biracial Jew portrays ostracism as a child in NJ in Berlin film festival debut

In 'Broken Bird,' novice filmmaker Rachel Harrison Gordon returns to her family synagogue to capture liminal time as a rare black Jewish bat mitzvah

By IGAL AVIDAN 6 March 2020



A still from 'Broken Bird,' the first film made by Rachel Harrison Gordon. (Courtesy)

BERLIN — Birdie is a biracial girl raised by her white Jewish mother. In “Broken Bird,” she is seen sitting on the floor playing a tape recorder in her room to prepare for her upcoming bat mitzvah. The Torah portion Birdie chants in Rachel Harrison Gordon’s novice short film deals with keeping commitments – a fraught issue triggered by a distant relationship with her black father.

“Broken Bird,” which had its world premiere on February 23 at the recently finished Berlin International Film Festival, is a personal film about a lonely biracial girl. In a time of rising anti-Semitism and racism in Germany, the film’s embrace of racial differences carries an important political message.

The film is largely based on Harrison Gordon’s life growing up in South Orange, New Jersey. Her parents got divorced when she was four and she lived with her mother.

“I have all these memories of going to the supermarket and people staring at us, not knowing we were together,” she recently told The Times of Israel. Her mother and maternal grandparents belonged to the Conservative Oheb Shalom congregation. “Both in high school and in the Temple there were not many people who looked like me.”

Only two of the hundreds of community members were black, a couple from Africa. Sometimes, she said, people would ask her at the synagogue if she was adopted.

Harrison Gordon said she didn’t really feel connected to her religion while growing up. “I didn’t see myself in the book that we were reading. It was something that I had to do, also studying for my bat mitzvah when all my friends were running around on the weekend,” she said.

Harrison Gordon's path to filmmaker is likewise outside of the mainstream. She studied Mechanical Engineering and took part in a dual degree program at New York University, which combined business courses in management, marketing, but also filmmaking, directing, editing, and writing.

"I finally got the chance to write a script and this story came out the fastest," she said.

Harrison Gordon's attention to detail is felt with the Hebrew tune "*Eretz Zavat Chalav*" (Land of Milk and Honey), which is jazzily performed by Nina Simone.

"I always loved Nina Simon and by chance I came across this song of hers," Harrison Gordon recalls. "I thought the juxtaposition of this song with this African-American genius was fitting. The theme of the song represents Birdie's journey of building a whole from disco music and religious prayer."

The central scene takes place in Birdie's synagogue, which Harrison Gordon shot at her childhood temple and with "her" real cantor. She said it helped her to come to terms with the difficult times she had spent there as a girl.

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"In the synagogue I felt that they were doing their best, they were inclusive, but they always felt the need to remind me of how I looked," she says. "They debated about the slavery of black people and the Holocaust and we had to argue what was worse. It was really hard for anyone to be satisfied with my answer that they were both terrible. I was forced to pick a side and it was impossible. It still is impossible."

Shooting this scene inspired the actor playing Birdie, Indigo Hubbard-Salk, who is also Jewish and black — and even wears the same dress that Harrison Gordon wore for her bat mitzvah.

“She mentioned that the role and conversations with participants on set, including my mother and cantor, inspired her decision to have her own bat mitzvah,” says Harrison Gordon.



A still from 'Broken Bird,' the first film made by Rachel Harrison Gordon. (Courtesy)

In one scene, Birdie is she dancing at the Temple barefoot. For Harrison Gordon that's a fantasy, but also a statement. Harrison Gordon said the community was eager for the film to be shot there. “Our cantor was there to support and was a liaison between me and the administration of the Temple. She did not mind, she saw the film and she loves it,” she says.

The film is playing at the New Jersey Jewish Film Festival in April and members of the congregation will have an opportunity to see it. But for all the community's current embrace, says Harrison Gordon, working on the pivotal synagogue scene was difficult.

“It was hard for me to walk back in this Temple because I never felt that I was fully received. I felt that I was never Jewish enough, that my Hebrew was never good enough. Through the scene I wanted to take back control and to declare: This black woman is here and she deserves to be here,” she says.

“Broken Bird” didn’t win any prizes at the Berlinale, but it has brought Harrison Gordon’s “broken” family together again.

“My mom had a lot of questions about my experience because we had never talked so explicitly about it, why I felt on the outside,” she says.

These talks brought her closer to her mom. Her dad also visited on set and was very moved by the film.

“I think he was relieved we could have gone through such a history and come up with a strong relationship in the end,” she says.

While preparing her film, Harrison Gordon talked to her parents about their experiences with each other. She discovered that it wasn’t always easy for them to explain to their families why they were together.

“Now both families talk to each other just because I connect them,” she says.

As a result, she decided to take her father’s last name, Harrison.

She married Alon Gur who is also the film’s producer; she now has relatives in Israel, whom they visit every year in the northern city of Haifa and Lower Galilee settlement of Mikhmanim.

“I’ve been to Israel twice, but I could live there. His aunt and uncle own a Japanese teahouse in Mikhmanim and it’s one of the most beautiful places I’ve been to,” says Harrison Gordon.

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