



## I left the Satmar Hasidic community. ‘Unorthodox’ is a grossly inaccurate depiction of that world.

[Frieda Vazel](#) March 31, 2020



*Unorthodox: The series is based on true events (Image: Netflix)*

Scene: It’s Shabbes when Esty, a young Samar Hasidic woman, is about to make her escape from her repressive community to Berlin, where she has decided to start a new life as a secular woman.

So opens the new Netflix miniseries ‘Unorthodox’.

She collects her valuables from her underwear drawer, pulls cash out of her styrofoam wig stand, and ties it all up in a sweater. Just as she’s about to leave the dingy Williamsburg building, the lobby is in commotion and women are milling everywhere. “Esty...you can’t leave,” a neighbor tells her, “The eruv is broken.” The eruv is a wire border encircling a public domain. If there is an eruv, Orthodox Jews are allowed to carry things on Shabbes, like Esty’s shopping bag. But on

this day, the eruv is broken, so Esty must turn back. She leaves her phone and everything but an envelope behind. She attempts her exodus again, and this time, she succeeds. The camera pans out to show her running away and leaving the grimy Brooklyn streets of Williamsburg behind.

According to the New York Times review, “the thin eruv wire that surrounds the Satmar Hasidic community where she lives might as well be an Iron Curtain.” The broken eruv is supposed to be a powerful visual of Esty’s break for freedom, of the curtain raised.

The only problem is that the scene is grossly inaccurate. Williamsburg doesn’t abide by the eruv. The Satmar consensus is that the Rebbe was against building an eruv in the city, and that carrying things on Shabbes is still prohibited, whether there is a thin wire or not. While there is a minority that honors the eruv, it has received great pushback from the community leaders. To this day, those who carry publicly are liable to be harassed with cries of “Shabbes!” by community zealots.

The opening scene of *Unorthodox*, like the rest of the show, is problematic in various ways: It imbues fancy profundity where there actually is none. It gets a lot of small details wrong. And it does not capture that which is truly profound in the Hasidic experience.

It is easy to point out how the show stumbles on costume, ritual, customs. In the opening scene alone, I was struck by the ugly weekday clothes Esty wears on Shabbes, her unwelcoming and unsightly apartment, her atrocious as-is par-for-the-course Hasidic wig (is it too hard to give the pale woman a few side-bangs). As for the women huddled in the lobby, their scarves are too low on their foreheads, their Yiddish accents are bad. These many inaccuracies might seem negligible to the outsider who doesn’t think bangs or no-bangs make any difference — I simply point to these little things because these are clear-cut.

But the small things that are wrong reflect the larger thing that is wrong: That *Unorthodox* does not accurately capture the soul of the Hasidic community. And this — this inaccuracy in spirit — is much harder to show. I grew up in the Satmar Hasidic community; I’m now (when we are not holed up with the plague) a tour guide in Williamsburg’s Hasidic community. I don’t recognize the *Unorthodox* world where people are cold, humorless, and obsessed with following the rules. Of course, bad people exist in the Hasidic community, and I am critical of many of its practices, but that doesn’t mean everyone goes about muted, serious, drawn, fulfilling the rules and mentioning the Holocaust.

I have always known Williamsburg to be a lively world of gossip, drama, peer pressure, materialism, competition, family and busybody neighbors. The people in *Unorthodox* are not that.

None of the characters feel real. They are incoherent; I can’t conjure their world and step in to it. Esty is quiet, with a kind of hardened resolve, and seems to have difficulty connecting with anyone. Yet she is Miss Popularity in her new society, when she moves to Berlin. She has the chutzpah to go to Berlin but she needs a shiksa to get her passport for her (can’t she fill out the form herself?). She says she is not like other girls, but it is hard to understand what exactly sets her apart: Is she a dreamer, is she feeling suffocated, does she feel alone? How are her social and

sexual problems so easily resolved when she leaves?

Her husband, Yanky, shows no sympathy for her vaginismus, a condition of the vaginal muscles that makes sex excruciating. He is obsessed with the need to be fruitful and multiply, as if he believes he can quote rules to make the issue of her pain disappear. From everything I know (I'm a big gossip), if a couple has sexual issues they are handled as a problem that warrants medical intervention and something akin to empathy; maybe pity. But here, Yanky lays it all on her. The sex scenes look like rape. When he finally penetrates her, she writhes in agony, and yet he pants in delight. As she lies there in agony, he almost smacks his lips with relish. He says, "Wow... that felt so... amazing." This same obtuse man is also supposedly sensitive and naïve in other moments. Many reviewers described him as a sympathetic character, but I can't feel the moments of his sensitivity, if he could be so callous to her in the most intimate moment. It's quite simple: Any man who treats his wife like that is a bad guy. But I guess the public's standards are different, for Hasidic men?

The women's relationships with each other are also nothing like the vibrant yenta world of my childhood Williamsburg. Esty's mother-in-law meddles in her marriage by showing up at her door and confronting her for not having consummated the marriage. It's implausible to me that a woman's vaginismus would be cause for her mother-in-law to show up and demand she open her womb to her son. What is the mother-in-law's motive here even? To bully Esty out of the pain? This is not believable — it just shows the limited imagination of outsiders looking in.

Real-life Hasidic *shviggers* [mothers-in-law] have devastating and less clunky ways to torture their daughters-in-law: backstabbing, manipulating, gossiping, gas-lighting...yes, I have a few ideas.

It's okay to show the dark side of Hasidism, but the portrayal still needs to be human. The characters in *Unorthodox* are othered. They are cartoonishly evil. Their kind moments seem out of character and are unconvincing. They are not like any humans I have met ever, Hasidic or otherwise.

*Shtissel* provides a good contrast to *Unorthodox*. Unlike *Unorthodox*, the human story in *Shtissel* comes to the fore, and the particulars of the culture are only the setting in which they unfold. Rituals like an eruv are not heavy-handedly emphasized. *Shtissel* makes the watcher feel drawn inside the world. It comes as no surprise then that so many people enjoy *Shtissel*, because they can connect to it. Unlike the many stereotyping film portrayals of Hasidim, where the viewer becomes a voyeur to foreign Disney-witches in odd costumes. Audiences want and can handle depictions of Orthodox Jews that are complex and realistic. Showrunners who argue that flat depictions are necessary for the unschooled outsider are just being lazy.

What good does a film like this do except to flatter secular biases against religion? It doesn't challenge the viewer. It doesn't make viewers think. It complements the viewer on being among the secular people who are the "good guys" in Berlin, not the bad Hasids in New York.

It just sinks us a bit deeper into our biases. I always get upset by this, because it reminds me too much of the way the world as it was presented to me when I was Hasidic — black and white, good and bad, only with the roles of good guy and bad guy reversed.

But in my own journey to find a world that makes sense to me I learned this: no depiction is accurate if it is dehumanizing.

*Frieda Vigel grew up in the Hasidic community of Kiryas Joel and left the sect with her son. She is now a tour guide of Hasidic Williamsburg walking tours. Her website is [friedavigel.com](http://friedavigel.com).*