

Festival Love Rabbi makes marriage work in *Kosher Love*, a documentary about Jewish matchmaking

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As Valentine's Day approaches, there are two movies in town this weekend that tackle love and relationships – but from entirely different perspectives.

The one in wide release is [Fifty Shades Darker, the follow-up to Fifty Shades of Grey](#) – based on the kinky bestseller.

The one in more limited release is devoid of whips, chains and masks. *Kosher Love*, as its title should suggest, takes a more traditional, even Biblical approach to the subject. The documentary marks its world première Sunday at 7 p.m. at Concordia University's Oscar Peterson Concert Hall. The film then makes its TV debut Thursday at 9 p.m. on CBC's Firsthand series.



"If people want to know if they need a partner in their lives, they should see what it's like to eat at a table with one chair, then clear half their closet space and sleep on only one side of the bed," says Yisroel Bernath, better known as the Love Rabbi. He has paired up more than 50 couples and is the main focus of a Montreal-produced documentary titled Kosher Love. Bill Stone / Bunbury Films

"Fifty Shades of Neurosis could have also worked as our title," cracks *Kosher Love*'s Montreal director, Evan Beloff.

The director is not far wrong. The documentary offers a fascinating yet whimsical view of the search for love in a community where match.com doesn't quite cut it.

The focus of *Kosher Love* is the man some call "the Love Rabbi," Yisroel Bernath, spiritual director of N.D.G.'s Chabad House and chaplain at Concordia's Loyola campus.

Rabbi Bernath, a native of Chicago who moved here over a decade back, is quite the engaging character. He breaks down the Jewish

community into three groups: the not-so-religious majority "who eat bagels and watch *Seinfeld*," the more serious Orthodox; and the Hasidics "who have a retro fashion sense from the 1700s."

Bernath didn't actually choose the role of matchmaker, but he was pressed into service when approached by so many members in the community – from, according to Beloff, "those Reformers who love crispy bacon to the Orthodox who read psalms by candlelight."

Montreal producer Frederic Bohbot, the executive producer of the 2014 Academy Award-winning short documentary *The Lady in Number 6*, is somewhat familiar with this world. He was also the producer of the acclaimed Eric Scott doc *Leaving the Fold*, which, ironically, dealt with disaffected young Hasids who bolted from the community to find love and freedom on the outside.

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Opines the Love Rabbi in a telephone interview: "We don't want to commit an hour from now, let alone 20 years from now." And let alone in a lifetime.

Though Bernath has successfully matched more than 50 couples, he is not overly optimistic about the future. In fact, he feels that for many young people their perfect partners would be ... themselves.

Such would appear to be the case with one young man Bernath counsels. YoNatan, as the single, ultra-religious rapper is known, seems pretty much in love with himself.

YoNatan's parents are disconsolate. They want grandchildren. They want him to shave his beard – clearly a hindrance, they think, in his finding a mate. His mother laments that YoNatan only wants a woman with a nice "tuchus" (butt) who looks like Kim Kardashian.

Bernath asks YoNatan to make a list of attributes he's looking for in the perfect mate. Bernath is slightly aghast after viewing the list and declares that YoNatan just wants a "stylist," not a mate. Needless to say, Bernath is unable to accommodate the rapper.

"Many people get their perceptions of romance and ideas, having been conditioned by the two-hour Hollywood love-affair film," Bernath says.



***Kosher Love's* director Evan Beloff, left, with Michael Gamliel, his wife, Miriam Leah Gamliel, and their daughter, Shoshana. Bunbury Films**

Beloff recalls. "One of his older daughters, who was single, was complaining about the lack of suitable men in the city. Her lament could have come from anybody, regardless of religion. There was something universal about it. And that, quite simply, was the genesis of the project."

Finding the Love Rabbi also came about rather accidentally. The guys were initially just looking for a research source, not a principal character for their doc.

Bohbot had been Facebook friends with Bernath, although they had never actually met.

"I didn't know he was the Love Rabbi," Bohbot says. "I was contacting him to see if he could find me singles and married couples from the Orthodox community who would speak to us."

"We were having a hard time finding subjects," Beloff says. "People were dropping out, because for people in that community marriage was so important and the feeling was that being in a film could be very damaging. But in the end, we decided to make him a support

Bernath fares better with an Orthodox couple, Miriam Leah and Michael Gamliel. Though Miriam Leah, a New Yorker, held strong beliefs in finding true love, she accepted a marriage proposal from Michael, a Montrealer, after just their fourth date. Three years later, the couple is still together and content and with child – even though Miriam Leah still clings to her idealistic romantic beliefs.

"If people want to know if they need a partner in their lives, they should see what it's like to eat at a table with one chair, then clear half their closet space and sleep on only one side of the bed," Bernath says. "Stop pretending you're a whole person if you are alone. Being whole is being in a unit."

So Bernath maintains that marriage is the "greatest thing going – better even than sliced bread." Fighting words, indeed.

Beloff and Bohbot came upon the idea for the documentary quite by accident.

"I was at a Sabbath dinner of a modern Orthodox friend who had

character, because he was so entertaining and had such interesting things to say in our initial interview. People who saw that interview wanted to see more of him.

“So he went from researcher to research facilitator to support character to central character. And so we dug deeper into his work and world.”

Alas, Bernath was unable to match either the single Beloff or Bohbot with mates.

“He did try with me, but I’m single-ish, so it didn’t work out – and not because I was only interesting in finding a stylist,” Beloff, 45, says. “He was quite disappointed that the dates he set me up on didn’t turn out well.”

“Single-ish – there’s the problem,” Bohbot, 41, counters. “Frankly, though, his method of matchmaking could be construed as questionable. Sort of like: You’re Jewish and she’s Jewish – so you should go out together.

“That works for some, who get married after just a few dates,” Beloff says. “It’s almost like a business transaction, which is kind of jarring. But it gives perspective to secular people like myself who are endlessly non-committal.”

Bohbot points out that the secular frequently have different priorities. “We go to school to develop our careers” and, as Bernath notes, it’s harder to integrate marriage and careers.

“I had a very serious relationship last year but our careers took us in different directions and it became untenable,” Bohbot adds. “So a decision was made more on our career paths than our family desires.”

Bohbot and Beloff are on to different projects now.

Bohbot is working on a documentary with Albert Nerenberg – about positive self-change – and has the fictional dramatic feature Boost – about being an anglo immigrant in Montreal – coming out in April.

Beloff is developing several documentary ideas, ranging from female surgeons to the history of cantorial music in Montreal. “Let’s just say I’m in Fifty Shades of Development now.”

AT A GLANCE: *Kosher Love*, in English with French subtitles, makes its world première Sunday at 7 p.m. at Concordia’s Oscar Peterson Concert Hall, 7041 Sherbrooke St. W. Tickets are \$18 at the door; \$14 at kosher.love. The film then makes its TV debut Thursday at 9 p.m. on CBC’s *Firsthand*.

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