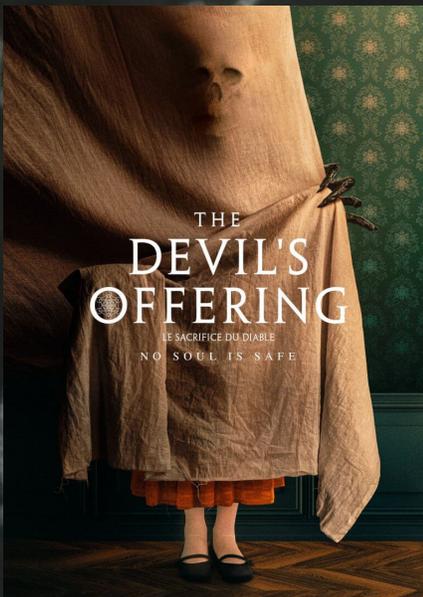


The Canadian Jewish News

HANK HOFFMAN
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bodies in Toronto to
creating a horror movie
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Hank Hoffman explains how he brought Hasidic horror to Hollywood with ‘The Devil’s Offering’

/ Ellin Bessner

Hank Hoffman was 18 when he took a job as overnight shomer in the morgue at Benjamin’s Park Memorial Chapel, which involved reciting psalms over the body of a deceased person before their funeral.

Sitting with a dead person might not appeal to most young men, but it was a gig that didn’t intimidate the son of an Orthodox rabbi, Baruch Hoffman, who was the ritual director—and a secondary cantor for a time—at Toronto’s Adath Israel Congregation. Funerals were a big part of his father’s career.

It was an experience that Hank embraced to the point of selecting psalms that he hoped would please the souls of the departed.

“I felt emotionally moved by the spirits that were in the room. I felt an incredible sense of life and only life,” Hoffman told *The CJN Daily* in an interview from Beverly Hills, Calif.

“And that all sounds like maybe a little hippy-dippy or a little naive, but when you develop sensitivities, you can feel things. And that’s what happened for me.”

Hoffman’s formative experiences with Judaism, death and the afterlife helped inform his screenplay for *The Devil’s Offering*, which was released in Canada to multiple digital platforms to rent or buy on Jan. 17. It was also distributed to 40 countries—and a theatrical run is planned for Israel in March.

The story involves an ancient female evil spirit known as Abyzou who steals children and causes miscarriages. (*Abyzou* was also the film’s working title.) After a misguided widower from a Hasidic community in New York conjures the monster, it begins terrorizing and killing people. And the only remedy is to do a reverse exorcism and lock the demon into a new host.

Hoffman isn’t a big horror fan, and he was initially reluctant to take on the project even though the offer came from his best friend Jonathan Yunger. Yunger is the co-president of Millennium Media, a Hollywood studio that also recently produced Sylvester Stallone’s sequels to *Rambo* and *The Expendables*.

But gradually, the screenwriter warmed up to the idea of being able to use his script to portray a side of Jewish life he felt deserved more positive storytelling, beyond what the television series *Shtisel* has been able to convey.

“The general perception of Hasidim is that they’re just a bunch of chauvinistic, backwards scoundrels,” explains Hoffman. “I wanted to do a film that could showcase my love for these people without whitewashing them.

“I wanted to depict them honestly, I wanted to show their wit and their charm and their chutzpah and their sensitivities.”

As for the 36-year-old Hoffman’s own Jewish upbringing in Toronto—where his family moved from Israel when he was two years old—he was raised modern Orthodox, and attended Netivot HaTo-

rah for elementary school, followed by middle school at Bnei Akiva.

After that, his hope was to attend a local yeshiva—but says he wasn’t accepted “because I apparently was too rebellious.”

Instead, he spent Grade 9 boarding at a yeshiva in Memphis, Tenn., where the headmaster permitted him to indulge in his budding passion for watching movies.

While he was born in Mevo Modi’im, the moshav founded by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, Hoffman felt little connection to the religious side of Judaism at the time. So he came home to Toronto to finish his education at TanenbaumCHAT.

That perspective shifted after graduating high school, when he flew to Israel for an extended stay, and became fascinated with Jewish mysticism.

He began an intense study of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz’s theories about the Kabbalah and dabbled in the Breslov Jewish spiritual tradition along with Chabad rituals. While admitting it might sound irrational, he felt the presence of God while wandering around Jerusalem.

“Because part of my journey into the mystical side of Judaism involved wanting to do certain mitzvahs that were very unique,” he said. “I wanted to know what that felt like. I wanted to see if there was a Godliness that I could contact.”

That’s where taking the job as a teenage *shomer* came in.

But a passion for movies eclipsed the idea of a career in funeral homes. Hoffman earned a master’s degree from the American Film Institute in Los Angeles. And even though he wasn’t big on horror, his first production credit came on a 2018 film called *The Clinic*, about a woman who awakes from a coma in a sinister hospital that won’t let her go.

The Devil’s Offering, his first full foray into screenwriting along with production, is about a family at the mercy of an ancient demon trying to destroy them from the inside. The scary scenes include a Hasidic girl who levitates.

More importantly for Hoffman, though, it gave him the opportunity to incorporate Jewish themes that he personally finds important.

“This is a film that pretends to be a commercial film, but it’s not. There’s like 30 midrashim all carefully woven in,” he says in reference to the inclusion of scriptural commentary.

A singing of *Eshet Chayil* (*Woman of Valour*), as traditionally heard at Shabbat tables, further provides an opportunity to explain its origins to an audience unfamiliar with the ritual. It comes from a chapter in the Book of Proverbs, and is sung by men in honour of their wives.

The ritual incantation to summon the evil spirit was as real as it gets, with a couple of words changed for safety’s sake. It’s the screenwriter’s way of saying “Don’t try this at home.”

On the other hand, Hoffman explains that he wasn’t making a statement against intermarriage when the pregnant non-Jewish wife of the prodigal son becomes the monster’s ultimate target. Rather, she serves as a character who could see things from an outsider’s perspective.

Hoffman’s mother and father returned to Israel upon retirement, but he hasn’t sent them a digital copy of *The Devil’s Offering*—because he’s still hoping they can see it for the first time in a movie theatre.

“Hopefully I can scare my parents. And hopefully they can be entertained.” ■

Ellin Bessner is chief correspondent of *The CJN Daily*.

Bill Weissmann, unofficial ambassador for Winnipeg's Jewish community, to receive Lt-Gov.'s award for promoting interfaith understanding

/ John Longhurst

In the late 1990s, Louis Berkal, then rabbi at Congregation Shaarey Zedek in Winnipeg, had a favour to ask Bill Weissmann.

Rabbi Berkal, who died in 2009, was supposed to speak to a local high school class touring the synagogue. Would Weissmann fill in for him and tell them about Judaism?

Weissmann had misgivings. But he said yes. And all these years later, the 73-year-old is still saying yes to telling people about Jewish faith and culture.

"People seem to appreciate it, and I enjoy answering their questions," said Weissmann, who retired in 2022 after working as a teacher, sports administrator, entrepreneur, manager and college instructor. "I think I get more out of it than I give."

On Feb. 7, Weissmann will be honoured for his service on behalf of Winnipeg's Jewish community when he receives the Lieutenant Governor's Award for the Advancement of Interreligious Understanding.

At the ceremony, which will be presided over by Lt.-Gov. Anita Neville, the first member of the Jewish community to hold that position, Weissmann will be recognized for being a bridge builder and goodwill ambassador on behalf of the Jewish community in Winnipeg.

As the office of the lieutenant-governor said in announcing the award: "With his quiet and gentle manner, Weissmann explained Judaism to religious studies classes at Manitoba colleges and universities. His professional expertise, passion for his own faith tradition and community, and personal warmth and openness became the embodiment of Judaism to the rich and varied spiritual and religious traditions of Winnipeg and Manitoba."

For Weissmann, who also served as a shammes at Shaarey Zedek, receiving the award is humbling.

"I'm very honoured to get it," he said of the award, given annually since 2011 to a Manitoban "who best embodies understanding between all religious groups."

"I didn't do it for the recognition," he said, adding promoting interfaith understanding is just "something we have to do if we are to flourish as a community."

Weissmann has been part of the Jewish community in Winnipeg since 1962, when he arrived from Romania with his

parents, both of whom were Holocaust survivors.

"The Holocaust was ever present in our house," he said, even if it was "rarely spoken about."

All he knows about his parents' experiences is simply that they survived. Many of their siblings and other family members did not.

He remembers his mother was "angry at God her entire life" because of it, and rarely attended synagogue due to her anger and pain.

But Weissmann's father took him to services, which left a strong impression on the young boy.

"He didn't impose religion on me, but he passed on to me a sense of quiet inclusiveness," he said.

For Weissmann, who is married with one son, that sense of inclusiveness continues today, explaining the spectrum of what it means to be Jewish to all faiths.

"My goal is to be a bridge builder between different groups," he said.

Winnipeg is a good model for how different faith groups can get along, he believes.

"I think we really care about each other here," he said. "The interfaith community is very entwined and strong."

He especially appreciates the support that is shown when an antisemitic act takes place in Canada or other countries. "Winnipeg is a good home for Jews," he said.

Along with his interfaith activities, Weissmann is well-known in the community for blowing the shofar on holidays.

For former Shaarey Zedek Rabbi Matthew Leibl, Weissmann is "friendly, warm, inviting, and inclusive. He made people feel welcome and comfortable, which is no small feat in a religious setting like a synagogue where people often feel unfamiliar, unsure, and out of their element."

He is a "phenomenal ambassador for Judaism and Jewish traditions," Rabbi Leibl added.

For many young people "he was the first Jewish person, or at least the first memorable Jewish person, they'd ever met. His ability to make Judaism interesting, relevant, and give young audiences something meaningful to take away is a very special skill, and exactly why he deserves this award after doing that day in and day out."

Another former Shaarey Zedek rabbi, Alan Green, noted that Weissmann has been the "welcoming, smiling face of Judaism for Winnipeg school children representing the whole ethnic diversity that is today's Canadian reality."

Weissmann "punctured stereotypes and dissolved prejudices by providing young people and their teachers direct experience of the basics of Jewish spiritual life," he went on to say.

But perhaps his most important achievement Rabbi Green said, "was to exemplify, in his person, the way a modern Jew should be in our world: strongly identified with who we are, while affirming the diverse identities of everyone around us."

Weissmann, he said, exemplified this approach, showing how "each strand of our human diversity should contribute to a rich tapestry of appreciation for the whole of humankind." ■

John Longhurst is the religion reporter at the *Winnipeg Free Press*.

Bernard Baskin, 102, was at the helm of Hamilton's Temple Anshe Shalom for 40 years—and a print fixture of The Canadian Jewish News

/ Lila Sarick

Rabbi Bernard Baskin, who served as spiritual leader at Temple Anshe Shalom in Hamilton, Ont. for 40 years, and was a long-time columnist for *The Canadian Jewish News*, died Jan. 18. He was 102.

Rabbi Baskin and his wife Marjorie arrived in Hamilton in 1949, intending to stay only a few years, he said in an interview with *The CJN* in 2010, on the occasion of his 90th birthday.

But he ended up serving as rabbi to the oldest Reform synagogue in Canada from 1949 to 1989—and then was rabbi emeritus until 2017.

A lover of literature, he wrote numerous book reviews *The Canadian Jewish News* and other newspapers for over half a century. His reviews and remarks were published in two collections, *The Essential Bernard Baskin* (2008) and *The Essential Bernard Baskin Volume 2* (2018).

The columns in *The CJN* were a well-read feature, which drew on a wide range of sources and the rabbi's own wisdom and gentle humour.

His annual book talks in Hamilton were enormously popular and he continued to deliver them when he was well into his 90s. When he moved into a Toronto retirement home in 2017, he continued the tradition of giving lectures. His last talk was just three weeks before he died, on the celebration of Hanukkah, according to his obituary.

Rabbi Baskin's theology was not concerned with the consuming questions of the nature of God or why was the universe created, his son David noted in his eulogy.

"His Judaism, his theology was not concerned with 'Why.' It was focused on 'How.' How can we live a meaningful life; how can we make the world a better place, how can we serve our fellow human beings?" David said at the funeral held at Temple Anshe Shalom.

"The thing that made Rabbi Baskin Hamilton's rabbi was that he conveyed that message to the wider community with energy and urgency over a period of 60 years or more. Dad estimated that he gave at least 500 speeches outside the walls of

this sanctuary. He was equally comfortable in churches and cathedrals, banquet halls and meeting rooms."

His affection for the temple and its congregants never dimmed, his daughter Susan Baskin said at the funeral.

"During COVID, out of concern that congregants and the wider community be included in both worship and programming, Dad made a generous donation so that equipment could be purchased to enable live streaming," she said.

"He created and maintained relationships and was an important figure in so many people's lives."

During his six decades in the rabbinate, Rabbi Baskin witnessed major changes in Reform Judaism, and Judaism in general. Women are now regularly ordained as rabbis and cantors in the non-Orthodox movements and there has been a return to greater use of Hebrew in Reform services.

"I think that's all favourable," he told *The CJN*. "For Judaism to exist and continue you need things like ritual to add colour and meaning to Jewish life."

His son David reflected on the societal changes that arose during Rabbi Baskin's career.

"The civil rights movement, the rise of feminism, the fight for acceptance of what we now describe as the LGBTQ community—all these came to the forefront during his time in the pulpit. Dad did not duck these issues; he embraced them. The various awards he received in his life from organizations concerned with these matters is a testimony to the fact that he lived his beliefs."

Rabbi Baskin received a B'nai Brith Humanitarian Award for his interfaith work and was a Negev Dinner honoree. He also served as chair of the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews and sat on the boards of McMaster University, the Art Gallery of Hamilton and the Hamilton Public Library.

Bernard Baskin was born in 1920 to Rabbi Samuel and May (Guss) Baskin in New Jersey. He was raised in an Orthodox home in Brooklyn, N.Y.

He was ordained at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York in 1947 and served briefly in congregations in Denver and Baton Rouge, La., before arriving in Hamilton.

His father never disagreed with him about his decision to become a Reform rabbi, he told *The CJN*. "I'm sure he would have liked if I had become more Conservative, but... I think he was pleased that I chose the rabbinate to serve in the Jewish community."

Members of the temple recalled his long tenure, erudite sermons and kindness in comments on the funeral home's website.

"He was not only a wonderful rabbi, but a brilliant speaker, a scholar, and a true mensch," wrote one congregant, "I am forever grateful that 10 years ago, at the age of 92, he agreed to officiate at my father's funeral. He was just that kind of person."

Bernard Baskin was predeceased by his wife, Marjorie. He is survived by three children; Dr. Judith Baskin, David and Susan; seven grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. ■

Lila Sarick is news editor of The CJN.

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