



Altar Moments

Category: Shemos

The producer of Shtisel ran away from his Judaism for 18 years. But one special moment and one special place changed everything.

From Yeshivah Student to Film Producer

“Kugel” is a new TV series about the religious community—a follow-up to “Shtisel.” Recently, when the show was announced, *The New York Times* ran a profile on its creator, Yoni Indursky, who also created “Shtisel.”

The creator of *Shtisel* didn't grow up planning to write TV shows. He was raised in a religious, non-Chassidic family in Jerusalem, and he went off to learn in Ponevezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak at fifteen. At first, he dreamed of becoming a great Torah scholar, picturing his face in religious magazines and his name known everywhere. But then reality hit. Instead of feeling inspired, he felt lost, like just another yeshiva bochur in a huge crowd, with no way to express himself. The place that was supposed to be his home started feeling more like a prison.

Looking for an escape, he and his roommate started sneaking off to public libraries outside Bnei Brak. There, they discovered books they were never supposed to read, and suddenly, a whole new world opened up. One thing led to another, and eventually, Yoni realized that yeshiva life wasn't for him. So one day, he picked up a public phone and called *Hillel Association*, a group that helps people leaving the Haredi community.

The association invited him for an interview to ensure he fully grasped the significance of the step he was taking. Once they were convinced that he was mature enough and that the decision was truly his, they provided him with new clothes and a temporary place to stay.

A volunteer from Hillel helped Yoni write a letter to his parents, telling them that he was leaving Judaism and starting a new life. A few days later, Hillel arranged for him to move into an apartment in Tel Aviv shared by others who had left the Haredi community.

As he stepped out of the car, he suddenly heard a familiar voice calling his name. "Yoni!" It was his mother. "Yoni, come here! You don't have to go with them—you don't belong with them!" His letter hadn't even reached them yet, but an Orthodox group that opposed Hillel had already tipped off his parents, telling them exactly where to find him.

His mother ran up to him. "Come home," she pleaded. "You don't have to wear a yarmulke—there's nothing you can't do at home. We love you." Yoni was the youngest of five, and she begged, "Whatever you want, you can do it at home—just come

back with us.”

In the end, Yoni agreed—on one condition: that they truly let him live the way he wanted.

The volunteer from Hillel kept in touch with Yoni, even taking him to the movies—something he had never experienced before. The moment he stepped into that world, he was hooked. Fascinated by film, he decided to study at Sam Spiegel, Israel’s top film school. He got accepted, and by the time he graduated, his short film *Driver* won Best Film at the school and was screened at the Jerusalem Film Festival.

Even back then, he was already picturing the Haredi family that would later become *Shtisel*.

Yoni never imagined *Shtisel* would be such a huge hit, especially not outside of Israel. But then it got translated into multiple languages, and suddenly, people around the world were watching. While the show was in its height, religious Jews were stopped by strangers all over the world asking why they wore tzitzit and what was up with the long peyos. When asked how they even knew about these things, they all had the same answer—*Shtisel*.

Yoni became a celebrity. When he spoke at a Jewish event in Manhattan, 4,500 tickets sold out in just a few hours. But just as he was at the peak of his success, something shifted. His creative spark started to fade. He tried to write a new script, but nothing was clicking. And then, to make things worse, he caught COVID. The illness hit him hard, leaving him in unbearable pain that wouldn’t let him sleep. It lasted more than

six months, and doctors couldn't figure out how to help him.

From Film Producer to Chassid

The massive success of *Shtisel* should have been a dream come true, but instead, it left him feeling empty. Then, in 2021, while traveling to New York for a lecture in Manhattan, he got a devastating call from home—his beloved mother had been diagnosed with cancer.

She had one request: that he go to the Rebbe's Ohel in Queens and pray for her. He promised he would. When he got there, he called her and placed the phone next to the Ohel so she could say her prayer, and he stood there listening as she wept through the phone.

Customary, visitors to the Ohel write a note with their personal requests which they then read at the gravesite. Yoni hadn't planned on writing anything, but as he stood there, something shifted. He found himself composing a letter to the Rebbe: *"I am lost in this world. I can't live without my mother."* He tore up the letter and left it on the Rebbe's gravesite. Looking back, he said, *"That was probably the first time I felt like a simple, believing Jewish boy again."* When he later shared this moment with *The New York Times*, he became very emotional.

Some time later, he met a Jewish woman from France who had moved to Israel and was becoming more observant. Slowly, and in her own way, she helped him reconnect with Yiddishkeit. Eventually, they married in a religious ceremony and had a daughter. Yoni returned to a life of Torah and mitzvos, but this time, he embraced it on his own terms—wearing Chassidic

clothing.

After he came back to Yiddishkeit, he learned that for eighteen years, his mother had fasted one day a week,—every single week—davening for him to return. *“Eighteen years of fasting once a week—I wouldn’t recommend it to anyone. Fasting isn’t the Chassidic way. But if anyone wants to understand the power of a Jewish mother, this is it, shining in all its glory.”* She told the New York Times that “I prayed and prayed and prayed.”

I remember that back when *Shtisel* was at its peak, someone who had watched all the episodes told me they were a bit disappointed. They felt that *Shtisel* was filled with seriousness, struggles, and sadness, but lacked the joy of Jews who love and celebrate their Torah and mitzvos. Maybe now, with Indursky becoming a Chassid, *Kugel* will be a more joyful series.

The Missing Piece

This week’s Torah portion, *Tetzaveh*, includes something unusual.

It follows directly after last week’s portion, *Terumah*, where G-d commands the Jewish people to build a sanctuary—the Mishkan—so that His presence can dwell among them. Right away, the Torah lists all the sacred objects needed for this space: the Ark, the Table, the Menorah, and the large outer altar, which was used for animal sacrifices. It then goes into detail about the actual construction of the Mishkan—the curtains, the beams, and everything else that made up its physical structure.

You'd expect the Torah to keep going in this direction, but *Tetzaveh* takes a sharp turn. Instead of continuing with the Mishkan's design, it focuses almost entirely on something else—the special garments of the priests, particularly the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest), and the process of inaugurating them into their roles. It's only at the very end of the portion that the Torah finally circles back and describes the last missing piece: the small golden altar, which was placed inside the Mishkan and used for burning incense every morning and evening.

The Rebbe points out an obvious question: Why is the golden incense altar mentioned separately in *Tetzaveh* instead of being listed with all the other Mishkan vessels in *Terumah*? Wouldn't it make sense for it to be grouped together with the Ark, the Menorah, and the outer altar?

He explains that this is actually intentional—the incense altar isn't just another vessel in the Mishkan; it represents something much deeper. In fact, it highlights the Mishkan's true purpose.

The sages teach that the two altars symbolize different aspects of a person. The outer, copper altar—where animal sacrifices were brought—represents the body. Just like a body needs food, this altar “consumed” offerings. The inner, golden altar, however, is connected to the soul. It was used only for incense, which isn't about eating or physical sustenance—it's about fragrance, something more abstract and spiritual, just like the soul.

But the relationship between the two goes even deeper. Sacrifices bring a person closer to G-d—the word *korban* comes

from the word *kiruv*, meaning to draw near. But incense (*ketores*) represents something even greater: not just closeness, but complete unity. The Zohar describes it as being bound together in an inseparable bond, *בחד קטירא אתקטרגא*.

In other words, the incense offering isn't just another part of the Mishkan—it's what truly brings its purpose to completion. The *ketores* represents the deepest bond between a Jew and G-d, not just closeness but absolute oneness. Chassidus explains that *ketores* reflects the *yechidah*, the innermost part of the soul, which is completely one with G-d's very essence. (Toras Menachem 5752 v. 2 pg. 318)

Altar Moments

In our personal lives, there are times that we “service” the outer altar, and there are times that we “service” the inner altar.

Usually, a Jew is engaged in the work of *karbanos*—bringing themselves closer to G-d. The very idea of a *karban* (sacrifice) suggests distance; something that is far needs to be drawn near. This is reflected in the outer altar, where offerings were brought. That's the story of our regular lives, of the ordinary day-to-day routine.

But then there are special moments. When a Jew visits the Rebbe's Ohel, something deeper is revealed—the truth of their *yechidah*, the deepest part of the soul that has never been distant from G-d at all. What once felt like separation is suddenly understood to be only external. Deep down, the connection was always there.

And the moment that realization takes hold, it's no longer about just getting closer—it's about recognizing that they and G-d were always one. As the Zohar puts it, "*With one knot, we are bound together.*"