

A CONVERSATION WITH SANDI DUBOWSKI

Amy Herzog



Amichai Lau-Lavie. Courtesy © Simcha Leib Productions.

“Not everything that we’ve inherited is worthy of being passed on,” Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie observes in Sandi DuBowski’s documentary *Sabbath Queen*, which premiered at the 2024 Tribeca Film Festival. “We’ve got to create new alternatives that look the twenty-first century

in the eye, but don’t lose contact with the other twenty centuries.” This dialogue between present, past, and future animates DuBowski’s film, which follows Lau-Lavie’s journey as a radical queer spiritual leader over the course of twenty-one years.

Lau-Lavie’s family legacy spans at least thirty-seven consecutive generations of rabbis, dating back to the eleventh century. His uncle Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau served as Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1993 to 2003; his father, Naphtali Lau-Lavie, served as Israel’s consul general in New York. In his early twenties, Amichai Lau-Lavie was outed, without consent, by the press. Unmoored, he left his native

Israel for New York in 1997 and embraced the queer community he found there. The secular spiritual and political experimentation of the Radical Faeries movement, in particular, provided a space of awakening where Lau-Lavie could experiment with multiple facets of his identity, “to be very queer, very spiritual, to navigate and fuse both.” It was through the Faeries that he met Pie (Scott Harrison), a Catholic man on a parallel spiritual quest whom Lau-Lavie describes as the love of his life. Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross, Lau-Lavie’s drag alter ego, emerges from this transformational place, a “widow of six Hasidic rabbis” who materializes during Purim to share her spiritual wisdom, her shellacked bouffant, and her well-accessorized fablousness. “Redemption,” Hadassah asserts, “will only come through transgression.”

Hadassah’s performances were the initial catalyst for DuBowski’s film, and while, in many ways, she is the embodiment of the Sabbath Queen, she also sparks a more serious quest. Lau-Lavie eventually steps into his own role as spiritual leader, cofounding Lab/Shul, an “everybody-friendly, artist-driven, God-optional, experimental community for sacred Jewish gatherings.”¹ He later pursues rabbinical studies at the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), where, after years of work, he is officially ordained. Soon after, he defies the JTS’s prohibition against interfaith marriages (he officiates at a queer Buddhist/Jewish wedding), causing rifts within the Conservative Jewish world and in his own progressive Lab/Shul congregation.

DuBowski pays close attention to Lau-Lavie’s academic practice, which Lau-Lavie describes as viruslike, operating within the system. Diving deep into early Jewish teachings, Lau-Lavie unearths suppressed histories that he adapts to the demands of the present. He discovers that during the era of the Roman Empire, when Jewish communities began mixing with their non-Jewish neighbors, a term was coined to describe individuals who formed deep connections to the Jewish community, but did not convert: *ger toshav*, resident outsiders. The film follows Lau-Lavie as he creates a contemporary portmanteau for the similarly inside/outside non-Jewish partners in interfaith marriages: not a Jew, not fully a goy—rather, a Joy.

Hadassah, too, engages with the historically hybrid concept of *Shekhinah* (literally translated as “dwelling”) through a ritual immersion in the Dead Sea, a scene that provides a thematic anchor for the film in both live-action and animated forms. *Shekhinah*, in Kabbalistic mysticism, represents a divine female presence, one that has been revived by contemporary Jewish feminists to challenge dominant patriarchal theologies.² Hadassah’s ritual search

for *Shekhinah* is simultaneously high camp and utterly earnest, just one facet of Lau-Lavie’s larger quest to reclaim Judaism for queer and feminist communal ends.

This is challenging subject matter to visualize, to say the least. Using Lau-Lavie as an avatar, DuBowski weaves together interviews, performances, and events shot over the course of the production with archival footage and animation (created by illustrator Yaron Shin, aka Jewboy). In the discussion following a screening at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2024, Lau-Lavie stated, “[I]f there’s anything that people take from the film, I hope it’s the power of ‘and.’ What does it mean to stand *with* and *with*—with my people, and with all people. There is a messy middle. Let’s meet there.” This willingness to reside in the “messy middle” is paralleled by DuBowski as a filmmaker. Like his subject, DuBowski also risks vulnerability and allows for contradictory narrative threads in the film, doubling back and also staying present, no matter how excruciating this might prove. They share a loose and generous demeanor, playful and nonlinear modes of storytelling. All of it is undergirded by a rigorous political and historical commitment.

In one sequence, shot during the 2014 war in Gaza, a hand-held camera follows Lau-Lavie into a crowd of pro-Israel demonstrators. He carries a sign with a humane and fairly benign message: “Stand with Israel. Mourn with Gaza. Cease the Fire. Seize Our Peace.” As the crowd presses in, the camera is jostled alongside Lau-Lavie while the demonstrators accost him and hurl insults, triggered, as they make explicit, by the text “Mourn with Gaza.” (“You’re in the wrong place, know your place.” “The only peace they will give you is a piece of your body.”) At one point, a woman hisses at Lau-Lavie, calling him a “bastard.” He turns to face her, stating, “My father was a Holocaust survivor.” “You should have died with them,” she replies.

Sixteen-year-old Naphtali Lau-Lavie protected his five-year-old brother, Yisrael, until they were liberated from the Buchenwald concentration camp. He had been tasked by their father, who perished alongside his congregation in a gas chamber, to protect the Lau rabbinical dynasty. This story emerges in *Sabbath Queen* via a series of interviews with Naphtali and Yisrael (some current, some archival), along with photographs and video shot during a family pilgrimage to Poland. It becomes clear that the survival of the rabbinical line is intertwined, for many in the family, with the survival of Judaism in an increasingly secular world. It is an enormous burden to bear, and it is manifest in the strained relations between Amichai and his brother, Rabbi Binyamin Tzvi (Benny) Lau, a prominent Orthodox author and community leader in Jerusalem.

Excerpts from an interview with Benny provide perhaps the most poignant through line in the film. He shares his deep reservations about Amichai's experimentations with Judaic tradition, particularly interfaith marriage. "I think he is playing a game with Judaism," Benny states. "We grew up under the influence of a clear message from my father. . . . Stay loyal to the path. . . . Because sometimes you take a step that makes you think you're a hero, but you actually cause harm." In the end, however, Benny reveals his openness to change, with a shift in his own religious practice that arrives unexpectedly.

The sweep of this documentary is incredibly ambitious, with political and emotional rifts that feel insurmountable, particularly when framed by the mass atrocities unleashed on civilians in Gaza after October 7, 2023, and the international political fallout. Polarization and intergenerational stalemates have deepened fault lines within the Jewish community. As DuBowski's film makes clear, this identity crisis, while deeply urgent, is not new. This point is emphasized through a cyclical, nonlinear structure, where the rifts of the present are juxtaposed with those of the past.

This nonsequential temporal construction includes frequent tangents into ancient theology and Lau-Lavie's personal history; not all of these detours are fully resolved in the film. For example, there is a sequence on Lau-Lavie's relationship with Pie, and the trauma of his death in 2018 of AIDS-related illnesses. Pie is never mentioned in the film again. There are other moments when it feels as if DuBowski incorporates tangents to challenge the decisions of his subject. In one scene, Shira Kline, cofounder of Lab/Shul, expresses frustration when Lau-Lavie doubles down on his Conservative rabbinical training. She might be speaking for many in the audience when she confronts Lau-Lavie with exasperation: "What is the value of Halakah [Jewish law], and why are you so obsessed with it?"

Several reviewers have balked at *Sabbath Queen's* densely layered structure. (*Variety* called the film "provocative if cluttered.")³ I find it more productive to read the film in the context of DuBowski's work as an activist and organizer. DuBowski began his media career as a research associate at Planned Parenthood, creating videos to counter the Christian right's antiabortion movement. He is a cofounder of the Creative Resistance Collective, a group of independent media makers who create videos for progressive political candidates, and he has shot media for various activist groups, including Gays Against Guns. His acclaimed 2001 documentary *Trembling Before G-d* chronicled the stories of queer members of the Orthodox Jewish community. DuBowski produced Parvez Sharma's *A Jihad for Love*

(2007), on the experiences of gay and lesbian Muslims. The distribution strategies for each of these projects prioritized education and community impact.

Aesthetically, the influence of feminist and queer experimental media feels more pertinent to DuBowski's filmmaking than that of traditional documentary. I'm thinking of message-driven activism like DIVA (Damned Interfering Video Activists) TV's videos for ACT UP. Both the films and the videos are playful, earnest, and less concerned with creating polished artworks than with reaching their audience. There is an intimacy to DuBowski's work, allowing characters and relationships to build before the camera, that resonates with a long history of queer video diaries and performance art. One of his early videos, *Tomboychik* (1993), features vignettes of himself, then twenty-two, and his grandmother Malverna, eighty-eight, sharing stories and playing dress-up. The low-budget, improvisational format creates a closeness made more poignant by the knowledge that Malverna died before the video was finished.

One key objective in DuBowski's films and videos is the extended conversations that they enable. In the case of *Trembling Before G-d*, DuBowski undertook a multiyear tour, personally bringing the film to hundreds of venues around the world (at both large festivals and small schools, colleges, synagogues, and community groups). He used screenings to help launch larger-scale education initiatives, including training facilitators through the Trembling Before G-d Orthodox Education Project and organizing the first Orthodox Mental Health Conference on Homosexuality. *Sabbath Queen* is clearly designed with a similar mission. DuBowski and I spoke on August 7, 2024, at his home in Brooklyn, New York.

AMY HERZOG: How did you envision *Sabbath Queen* when you first began the project, and how did it transform over the course of twenty years?

SANDI DUBOWSKI: I really didn't know what it was. I didn't understand the shape, the scope, the timeline. I was intrigued by Rebbetzin Hadassah, the drag character, and I had met Amichai in the late nineties in Jerusalem. I went to try to find people for *Trembling Before G-d*, and everyone kept saying, "You have to meet the Chief Rabbi's nephew, he's gay." So, we met, and I asked him to be in the movie, and he refused because he's too much of a diva; he wanted his own movie. But we became friends. *Sabbath Queen* began five years into our friendship, when we had already built that base of trust.

I had become more invested in Orthodox ritual because of my experience with *Trembling*, and I wasn't as interested

in Amichai's version of Judaism at that moment. But by 2004, I had done almost 850 live events with *Trembling*, all over the world, and I needed a sabbatical. I think that break, reworking my mind and my body and my spirituality, opened me up to explore Judaism in a different way, to begin a journey with Amichai. At the beginning, we were just filming a lot of performances. But it got more serious a few years later.

HERZOG: When did the project change course?

DuBowski: After I filmed the High Holidays in 2008: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur. I recognized that I was willing to be on this ultramarathon: not knowing, and really sitting in the not knowing. Just letting a life unfold before the camera and not being product driven, listening deeply and carefully to Amichai's layered and complicated story.

Because he has so many disparate worlds that do not see each other. His Orthodox world does not see his Radical Faerie world. His Jewish Theological Seminary world does not see his Lab/Shul radical reimagining of a ritual world. His kids, him being a queer bio dad, didn't always see a lot of the Radical Faerie. To try to knit these into a coherent narrative was very challenging.

HERZOG: During the screening, I kept thinking, "How did you possibly edit this?" What was that process like?

DuBowski: The first phase was figuring out, with [film editor] Philip Shane, how to watch eighteen hundred hours of original footage and eleven hundred hours of archival footage. Then we transitioned to a team of writer-editors, led by Francisco Bello and Jeremy Stulberg, who are just brilliant. Kyle Crichton, who transitioned from assistant editor to editor, provided a through line because he knew the material. There were aspects of the story that felt clear throughout. But the actual editing took six years, trying to figure out, especially in act three, how to land the plane, what would be at stake. I thought that the film would end when Amichai became a rabbi. That's a natural end: he gets ordained, the big ceremony, you know, that's the end of the movie. And then I realized, in a mythic journey, that [i.e., achievement] is the beginning. What does a hero do with a title? And when Amichai said, "I'm going to do interfaith marriage," it felt like a consequential choice that could be a microcosm for so many of the issues in the film. What is the relationship between Jew and non-Jew in our world? As Amichai's brother told me, I filmed Amichai facing the consequences, the price he paid for his choices.

HERZOG: The impact at Lab/Shul [during a debate there about whether Lau-Lavie could continue to perform interfaith weddings against the rules of the Jewish Theological Seminary] was especially palpable—the tension between Amichai's new Conservative dictates and the members who were invested in the inclusive space they'd built.

DuBowski: There's that great scene at the Lab/Shul board meeting where Amichai snapped at me and I told him, "I think you've changed."

HERZOG: That was one of the few places when your personal relationship to Amichai comes to the foreground. I'm really interested in your own position within the film. Amichai is such a big presence, but you maintain this very quiet undercurrent, just below the surface.

DuBowski: We created an entire reel of all the interactive moments between us. My editors said, "We want to try something, we think the film needs you as a narrator." And I was not thrilled about that. *Please, no, this is not "My Rabbi and Me."* But they really pushed, and I said, "If it's going to serve the film, I'll do it." We started to record voice-over, building my voice as a narrator, building me as a character, drawing on footage of my own interfaith queer wedding that Amichai officiated at. We brought in my father, because Amichai buried my dad. Finally, we had a test screening with a group of directors and editors, and they said, "Sandi, we love you. Get out of the movie." And we ripped nine months of work completely out and threw it to the floor. I think it was an important path because we left no stone unturned in the editing, and it enabled us to build a nonnarrated and nonlinear film. Then Amichai's brother, Benny, emerged as the spine, which we didn't expect. And that's a very biblical story: two brothers who are politically and ideologically in opposition, but also leaning toward each other in deep love and respect.

HERZOG: It was so moving to witness Benny's evolution. In the first half of the film, it felt like a classic case of Conservative family rejection. And as the film unfolds, Benny's answers become more nuanced, really grappling with this painful conversation. And the moment when his position, and his own practice, start to shift, it's revelatory. I left feeling like the film was really about Benny, that maybe the audience for the project is really Benny and the Orthodox community.

DuBowski: It's interesting because we're having such a wide reaction, and the film is being embraced by folks who are very pro-Palestine on the left. And then someone just told me she brought her Trump-voting Jewish mom

to see the film at Tribeca. And she said, “My mom cried through the film. And then we had this really surprising conversation afterward.” So, it’s reaching from the very left to the center right and everything in between. And I’m trying to understand why. I think it’s because it’s the story of an individual. People can identify with someone who’s being challenged and who is challenging. Maybe it’s not as threatening, [unlike] if it were an issue film that cast a chorus of voices. Somehow, because it’s someone that people are deeply connected to as they watch, to Amichai and to his brother, maybe that allows them to see themselves.

HERZOG: The intergenerational investment of the project is powerful.

DuBOWSKI: That’s what’s interesting too, with people bringing their thirteen-year-olds, their eighteen-year-olds to the screenings. Twenty-year-olds keep coming up to me and saying, “I have to bring this to my college campus.” I look at them, and I realize, Oh, my gosh, you are younger than the film. The film’s twenty-one years old. You’re twenty.

HERZOG: The notion of inheritance seems central to the project, in terms of what we’re given, and figuring out how to initiate painful change. During the postscreening discussion at Tribeca, Amichai talked about the project being nonbinary, which really struck me. The word *nonbinary* doesn’t come up in the film, but there’s so much about hybridity, the middle, and the additive: this and this and this and this. I’m wondering if you would describe the project as nonbinary.

DuBOWSKI: Nonbinary has now become the whole frame through which I’m seeing the work. Sometimes when you’re in a project, you don’t always realize what’s percolating to the surface until you’re presenting it and realize how it has crystallized. But, yes, on every front, in terms of Jews and not Jews, it’s nonbinary. People can be both. You can have someone be part of a Jewish world who’s in love with a Jew, and they don’t have to be a Jew. They don’t even have to convert. They can just be like *ger toshav*, this new category of community and connection. We just had dinner with two people who came to the film, and they said, “We have never seen a film about our lives.” He’s Muslim, she’s Jewish, and they’ve never met another Muslim-Jewish couple. They’ve never seen themselves on-screen, never seen themselves referred to in a positive way. For them, the film was revelatory. Today, 72 percent of American Jews who are not Orthodox are with non-Jews in love relationships. That’s a staggering statistic. And it reflects so many of us.

The nonbinariness in terms of gender is so clear in the film, in terms of Hadassah as a drag character. And nonbinariness around Israel/Palestine, not just falling into polarized camps, but holding some kind of way forward around peacemaking, supporting both Palestinian and Israeli-left peacemakers. It’s been interesting to see every dimension of the film really sing with that frame of nonbinary.

HERZOG: You gathered an incredible amount of archival footage to follow these different narrative threads. What was that process like? Were you working primarily with private collections?

DuBOWSKI: I had to work through the community. I had to pull in archival footage for the Holocaust sections and all the worlds that the story moves through that we can’t necessarily see on camera. I did years and years of work with multiple archives and researchers. It was enormous, trying to find footage scattered everywhere, trying to connect with the people that Amichai married back when and seeing if they had archives of their weddings.

Even the Faeries, the Radical Faeries. These days, it is frowned upon and even forbidden to film in a Faerie gathering for public presentation. But these were archival pieces. I found footage that was already out in public from Ellen Spiro [from her film *Greetings from Out Here* (1993)]. I had to do all this research into Faerie footage from the 1990s that’s not easily archived.

HERZOG: I wanted to ask about Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross. When I saw the title *Sabbath Queen*, I assumed she would be the focus of the film, and there’s no doubt that she’s a force. But her role as a spiritual vehicle seems more complicated. I wondered what the figure of the Sabbath Queen meant to you, and how she developed.

DuBOWSKI: Well, it’s funny, because the film used to be called *Rabbi*, and my editors kept pushing me: “Sandi, no one wants to see a film called *Rabbi*.” I was resistant at first, but the Sabbath Queen is the essence. As a filmmaker, I’m constantly trying to figure out how to render spirituality in cinema. With *Trembling Before G-d*, I invited a community of Hasidic Orthodox queer people to perform their lives behind a giant screen. The shadow play was one device to illuminate the hidden, to create an alternative visual language not just based on vérité and interview. Creating the animated Hadassah with Yaron Shin was another way of trying to render spirituality on-screen. Because when you film a theater piece, it can fall flat on-screen, [become] just documentation. So how do we really bring Lab/Shul’s Friday-night Sabbath Queen ritual into the movie? That, for



Still from *Sabbath Queen*. Courtesy © Simcha Leib Productions.

me, is core to why I made this film and why I connect so deeply with Amichai and Lab/Shul: because that God-optimal, everybody-friendly, artist-driven gathering moves my soul. I kept arguing with the editors when they would say, “I don’t see how this advances the narrative.” And I would say, “Let’s not focus on plot, let’s try to figure out how we can knit this drag character and this spirituality into the film.” I think we tried every which way, and what we landed on was weaving animation into the ritual, through Amichai’s mystical interior experience. So there was a feeling of bringing forth the Sabbath Queen to greet us on Shabbat through the animation. She is the “palace of time,” diving down into the Dead Sea to rescue the female divine, the *Shekhinah*, who has been imprisoned by the rabbis. It’s her journey to fight patriarchy. But it’s also a ritual that Amichai and Shira Kline and the Lab/Shul folks perform: a nonpatriarchal Friday-night ritual where they eliminate not just the patriarchal names for God, but eliminate even God, making it a presence that isn’t traditional at all. Once we landed on that, it felt like some of the most innovative filmic work we did.

HERZOG: I loved that [Israeli feminist activist and educator] Alice Shalvi participated in Hadassah’s live ritual at the Dead Sea. What was Shalvi’s relationship to the project?

DuBOWSKI: She and Amichai were very close. She died a week before October 7, 2023. You could see her spirit in that interaction. She did so much to push the boundaries of Orthodox feminism. It’s amazing that she was so game to play—play the foil, play the elder. There’s something about watching it now that she’s died. There’s a lot of dead people in the film. You create a twenty-one-year work, people die. Pie’s dead. Alice Shalvi’s dead. There’s a conversation here

between the living and the ghosts. People are alive and dead in the film, and that holds this sense of a conversation with here and beyond. A conversation with our ancestors and our futures. Sometimes a film feels like a living memorial.

HERZOG: In terms of your practice, would you say that you search in each project for new techniques to get at that connection between the cinematic and the spiritual, rather than having a particular formal style that you’re committed to? How do you think about your craft?

DuBOWSKI: For *Sabbath Queen*, I started thinking of it visually, like the Guggenheim. There’s something about the spiral and there’s something about going up and down that ramp, which is not just nonbinary but nonlinear. We’re coming back, we’re revisiting. We have a cold open in the film, with the wedding, but we come back later and learn more. Amichai’s father condemns his becoming a rabbi, but at the end of the film, we extend that interview, and learn he respected Amichai’s choice. There’s a memory theater that’s happening; it’s sort of the way that Judaism works. Like, we have the same holidays every year. [But] a year later we’re different. How did we change? How do we reflect on our lives when there’s a new year, a new Day of Atonement? There’s something about the spiral form that mirrors the way that Judaism and time work. That time is manifested in the film. At every moment, Amichai is living in the past, the present, and the future. He’s so connected to the ancient, he’s so contemporary, and he’s so visionary in terms of imagining a future, a possibility. So we’re going to move from the 1940s to the 1990s, and then we’re going to leap to 2021.

HERZOG: And 2014 especially. Looking at that footage of the attacks on Gaza and the protests, it could be outside, right now.

DuBOWSKI: Yeah, yeah. We even held that “2014” title longer. We really wanted to imprint into the audience that this is not now. This is 2014. We’re living in cycles. But with the Guggenheim structure, you also have galleries. You’re going down the ramp, but then you’re going off into a little gallery, and you’re experiencing a story or a moment. So I think of Amichai’s relationship with Pie, his lover. That never comes back in the film. That is a piece, that is a gallery. And we come back into the ramp and the spiral. It was a very complex editing narrative structure. I bow to Francisco and Jeremy for creating such a dense rope, a tension throughout the whole movie. Some people are already saying, “I need

to see it a second time because there's so much, and I need to really chew and sit with these questions."

HERZOG: Amichai's family plays a pivotal role throughout the film. I was surprised that they participated so much given their conflicts. What was your relationship to his family during the production?

DuBOWSKI: There was very little opportunity to film with his family. It took years. In 2016, when Amichai's brother came to the ordination, I felt like he'd taken a huge risk. *This is an open door, let me ask him to be in the film.* That's thirteen years after I started. So I flew to Jerusalem right then and there and filmed him. And that one two-hour interview became the whole arc of the film.

HERZOG: And you had no idea that was going to happen prior to that?

DuBOWSKI: No. And I had no idea that we could take one interview and make it feel like a journey, have him be a little hostile, a little critical, and then move into loving and accepting, saying, "The closet is death." When I shot *Trembling Before G-d* I spent six years trying to find any Orthodox parent who had a queer kid who would be in the film. I couldn't find any. Six years of crisscrossing the globe from in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Now Amichai's mother is in the movie. Amichai's brother is in the movie as a prominent Orthodox rabbi. This is a huge leap forward in terms of progress.

HERZOG: There are moments of intimacy, especially at his father's burial, watching his body being put into the ground. I almost felt like, "I shouldn't be here, we shouldn't be watching this." I wondered how they felt about you being there.

DuBOWSKI: That was a really difficult inflection point because Amichai called me, crying, to tell me his dad had died. And I'm trying to comfort him, support him, and at the same time thinking, *Oh, my gosh, this is a pivotal point in the narrative, how do I approach this as a filmmaker?* Because at every moment, I was a friend of Amichai. I was a director and he was a protagonist, and I was also a congregant, and he's my rabbi. So I'm constantly negotiating these overlapping relationships between us.

And he says, "Don't come. This is too stressful with my family. Do not come."

And I'm like, What do I do? I reached out to a cinematography team, and to a couple in Jerusalem that Amichai and I are both close to, a rabbi at a reform synagogue and a filmmaker. I asked them to be my ethical compass, my eyes and ears, because Amichai's father was an ambassador,

and this could be a state event where there would be other media. I was on the phone with them, and it turns out that, yes, this was being covered. It's not intruding on a private ceremony, but actually a public ritual. But Amichai did tell me that during the funeral he saw a camera pan over to him and [he] wondered if we were filming. We tried to establish some ethical ground. If there had been no other cameras there, we would have said, "This is not cool, we need to step back." But in the end, it wound up being a powerful scene.

Everything was a minefield in this movie. Every word, every image. It was constantly navigating trip wires, shaping the film.

HERZOG: What does Amichai's family think of the film? Have they seen it?

DuBOWSKI: Amichai just [in December 2023] did a private screening in Jerusalem with his mom and a group of Israeli and Palestinian spiritual leaders, and they had an amazing discussion. And he screened it for his brother, Benny. I got an email from Benny afterward, which I was scared to open. But he wrote me the most gorgeous note, about how I had witnessed Amichai's journey, praising the artistry of the film, saying that it did such service to his and his family's story. It was [for me], as we say in Judaism, *dayenu*, "that would be enough." That is one of the most treasured takeaways that I hold very close to my heart. It would have been really difficult if his brother didn't approve of the film. And his brother is taking such a risk. As an Orthodox rabbi, in his own world and in his own way, he is also a rebel and a bit of a renegade.

HERZOG: The repercussions of the changes he is instituting, challenging the gender dictates of leadership and participation in his own congregation—this must be huge in ways outsiders won't understand.

DuBOWSKI: I think he and Amichai are models for how to do difficult dialogue. And in these times the ability to do difficult dialogue has broken down. We can't talk to each other, we can't express difference without it being a form of attack. They're both role models for this era that we're living in.

Building difficult, intergenerational dialogue is a real goal for the project. And I think we're just at the beginning of learning what this will be. We're learning at every screening, and we're only eight screenings old. I mean, this is a newborn baby. We'll keep observing how this reaches people, what questions arise. I can feel a two-to-three-year impact campaign. The reactions are so intense and so extraordinary. I think it will be healing for a lot of people.

And that's what we need to serve. Show up where the pain is most acute and try to alleviate that pain and open spaces for conversation, for connection. Even the way that we're approaching the tour, we're infusing ritual.

HERZOG: Can you say more about that?

DuBOWSKI: When we had our world premiere at Tribeca, we timed a Sabbath Queen Friday-night ritual and feast as part of the premiere, at Judson Church. So there were people from all these worlds—the Judson Church world, the film world, the Jewish world, the queer world—who all were coming together. The same happened in San Francisco. We did a “Soul Spa” on Saturday morning as part of the festival. It’s contemplation and it’s sharing and it’s singing and eating and it’s Torah teaching. It’s always been my way: take these structures [of distribution and exhibition], whether they be festival, theatrical, or broadcast, and expand them, reimagine them. Like, let’s reimagine our films’ distribution at a time when we’re in this mode of scarcity. I did multiyear campaigns before they were even called

impact campaigns back in the early 2000s, with *Trembling Before G-d*, with *Jihad for Love*, and with all my work with the Creative Resistance Collective, trying to think about different ways we can create movements out of media. I love this phase as much as I love the filmmaking. I’m excited to be home and rest for a bit because it has been quite intense. But I can’t wait to be on the road.

Notes

1. See the Lab/Shul website at www.labshul.org/.
2. See, for example, Leore Sachs-Shmueli, “Shekhinah and the Revival of Feminine God Language,” *Modern Judaism* 39, no. 3 (2019): 347–69; and Luke Devine, “How Shekhinah Became the God(dess) of Jewish Feminism, *Feminist Theology* 23, no. 1 (2014), 71–91.
3. Dennis Harvey, “Sabbath Queen’ Review: A Provocative If Cluttered Face-Off Between Different Notions of Judaism,” *Variety*, June 9, 2024, <https://variety.com/2024/film/reviews/sabbath-queen-review-1236024143/>.