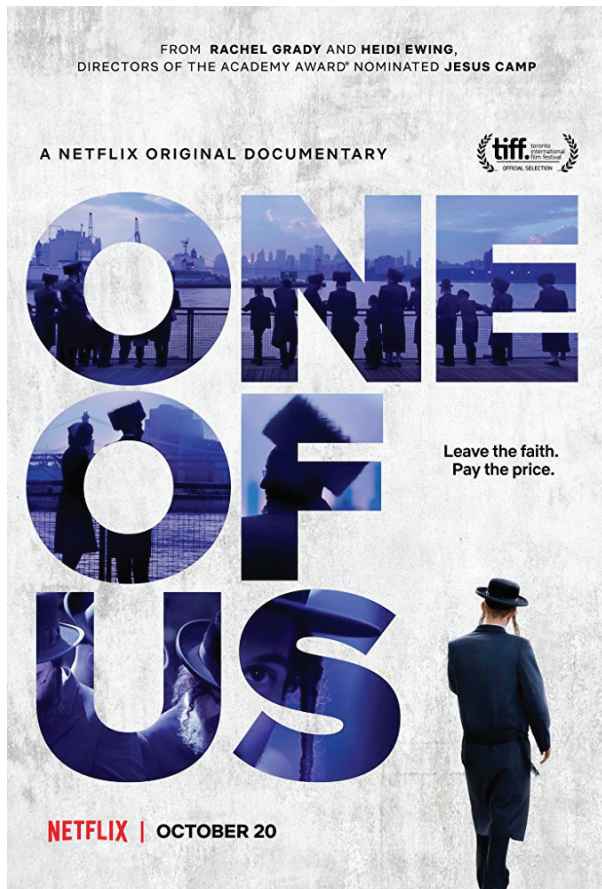


INFLUENCE | FILM CLUB

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One of Us Discussion Guide

Director: Heidi Ewing & Rachel Grady

Year: 2017

Time: 95 min

You might know this directorial team from:

Norman Lear: Just Another Version of You (2016)

Detropia (2012)

12th & Delaware (2010)

Jesus Camp (2006)

The Boys of Baraka (2005)

FILM SUMMARY

Much like trying to escape the clutches of an extreme religious cult, it turns out leaving Brooklyn's Hasidic Jewish society without some sort of psychiatric (and in some cases physical) damage is rather difficult. As a cloistered community constructed in the wake of the Holocaust with the sole purpose of self-preservation, the Hasidic populace live under strict religious law and patriarchal control, with its own private school system and emergency services. With *ONE OF US*, co-directors Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady had to develop a covert system for shooting in order to infiltrate this reticent community as they documented a trio of Jews whose curiosity led them away from the laws of their faith and into the secular world.

Ari, the youngest at 18, discovers the wonders of the internet. He soon realizes just how much of the world has been kept from him, having been raised in religious schools without access to outside information in any form. Luzer, having left years prior, lives in a mobile home in Los Angeles with dreams of breaking into Hollywood and nightmares of religious upbringing. Both men are frank about their sheltered, stifling, abusive experiences growing up. And yet they continue to mourn their loss of purpose—something that all men of faith possess—while their curiosity about the greater world leaves them permanently searching.

Constructed as a sort of multi-threaded escape thriller, *ONE OF US* heartbreakingly centers on the wellbeing of ETTY, a youthful mother of seven who was forcibly married in her teens to a man whose suffocating control would become increasingly abusive. After soul crushing contemplation, ETTY decides to seek outside help in order to separate from her husband and the Hasidic community, but the enterprise of escape is much more precarious than just walking away. One part espionage exposé, another part therapeutic religious rehab, *ONE OF US* pulls the curtain back on a world of patriarchal religious extremism to shocking, deeply emotional affect.

FILM THEMES

The neighborhood enforced societal rules of the Hasidic community are patriarchally written to keep its community members from exploring the secular world, from discovering all that they are unable to experience under religious law, and most importantly, from leaving the Hasidic community as a whole.

HASIDIC LIFE VS. SECULAR LIFE

All three of the characters within *ONE OF US* have or are in the midst of leaving the Hasidic community, and the way of life they have always known, in order to explore what else life can offer. The differences are staggering. Ari talks about how at the age of 18, he's just now faced with learning the basics of how to navigate the secular world—speaking English, doing basic math, Googling things, etc.—and he's not alone. Outside of the Hasidic community, exiled from their support systems, they each face major challenges when trying to establish themselves in the greater world.

A CLOISTERED COMMUNITY

After having survived the ravages of the Holocaust, the Hasidic community in Brooklyn, NY was set up with the intention that the Jewish people would not have to rely on any outsiders for anything. They've not only written their own Jewish laws that discourage people from exploring outside their own community, but have created their own private schools as not to educate their children on the world outside. They've created a system of religiously run ambulances, and even hired their own police force for the community. If in need, they turn to their Hasidic neighbors for help, and generally no further than that.

PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

Etty, a mother of seven who was married off as a teen to a man who would become abusive and controlling, is a prime example of the cost of patriarchal systems like that of the Hasidic community. Forced to live under a set of religious laws that barely acknowledge women as autonomous people, she was raised with little more expectation than being a wife and mother to as many children as she could bear. She heartbreakingly shows her children's school books, in which every female figure is blacked out in magic marker, offering this visual proof of attempts to extinguish any form of representation for girls and women in Hasidic life.

NO ESCAPE

Even with organizations like [Footsteps](#), which provides a range of support services for former ultra-Orthodox Jews looking to explore the world beyond their insular communities, people have a very hard time leaving the Hasidic community. Not only do they find themselves out of touch and overwhelmed by the technologically savvy, ultra capitalist secular world, they are leaving behind their only support network. They possess relatively no applicable job skills that would allow them to create a new life for themselves. As Luzer states in the film, most Jews either end up in jail or rehab, or return to the fold of Hasidic life.

“We have always been drawn to stories that put the nature/nurture debate into stark relief. Are some of us just born with an unshakable need to question the status quo, despite the consequences?”

Heidi Ewing & Rachel Grady

“I looked in the mirror and saw something that's not what I wanted to be, so I chose a different path.”

Ari Hershkowitz

FILM FACTS:

- ONE OF US had its world premiere at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival and went on to screen at a pair of world renowned international festivals: DOC NYC and the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam. The film became available world wide via Netflix on October 20, 2017.
- The directors happened upon the story of Footsteps, which assists the ultra-Orthodox to transition away from their community to a new life in the secular world, and immediately approached them about possibly making a film about what they do. After six months of talks, they were allowed to attend some events without cameras in order to scout for subjects. This experience led them to their three main subjects: Etty, Ari, and Luzer.
- Footsteps offers a variety of services to its members, including peer and emotional support programs, educational guidance and academic scholarships, career coaching, and even legal services for those grappling with divorce and child custody. The organization has served over 1,300 people since its founding in 2003. Demand for Footsteps' services continues to grow exponentially.
- Throughout ONE OF US, we witness Ari Hershkowitz struggling with addiction—overdosing on cocaine and in the aftermath, attending rehab in Florida on his father's dime. As of December 29, 2017, Ari [shared](#) that he was 283 days sober thus far.
- On September 29, 2017, the Drew Associates announced that Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady were the winners of the 2017 Robert and Anne Drew Award for Documentary Excellence, which recognizes a mid-career filmmaker distinguished for observational cinema. The award was presented at the Visionaries Tribute Award Luncheon at the DOC NYC Festival on November 9, 2017.
- When asked by IndieWire about their Robert and Anne Drew Award, Ewing and Grady responded, "We're career filmmakers. There's a lot of filmmakers in documentary that are not career filmmakers, because they're hard to make and maybe it takes ten years to make a film. We're in it for the long game, and we're interested in a body of work. We're trying to build a body of work that matters."

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Donate** to the [Etty Ausch Educational Trust](#). Following the events depicted in the film, Etty has set a personal goal to attend a four-year college and eventually become an attorney that defends those in need.
2. **Support** [Footsteps](#), the only organization in North America that assists people who wish to leave or explore leaving ultra-Orthodoxy.
3. **Know** the [signs](#) of child abuse and don't be afraid to ask for help from services like [Childhelp](#), a national organization dedicated to the prevention of child abuse. Kids like Ari need your support.
4. **Reach** out to those suffering from depression or suicidal thoughts. If you are in the U.S., share the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) if you feel someone is in need. To find crisis centers and hotlines outside of the U.S. visit the [International Association for Suicide Prevention \(IASP\)](#) online.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.