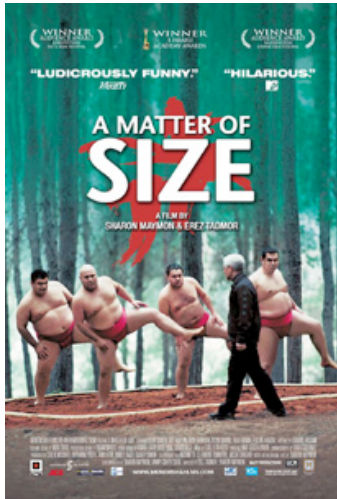


# Kosher Sumo

Film

By Jordana Horn

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'A Matter of Size' ("Sipur Gadol") happens to be one of the Israeli entries in this year's Tribeca Film Festival — but it addresses personal conflict rather than the more stereotypical geopolitical conflict. Directed by Sharon Maymon and Erez Tadmor, the movie tells the story of an overweight Israeli chef who mutinies from the rigors of his diet support group to pursue a field where one can be overweight with impunity: He forms Israel's first sumo wrestling team.

The film is a comedy, not a documentary, and there can be no denying that it owes debts of gratitude to other cinematic scenarios where "growth through conflict" is sprinkled with humor. The obvious model for "Outsider Receives Asian Tutelage To Overcome His Own Insecurities" is "The Karate Kid," but Kitano, the group's appointed sumo sage and sushi restaurant owner, is no Mr. Miyagi; he's a Makuya Japanese Zionist, of all things (go ahead and Google it; I did). Another familiar trope the film uses is "Beauty Comes in All Shapes," which "A Matter of Size" shares with the two British films about getting naked — "The Full Monty" and "Calendar Girls." And finally, of course, there is the inevitable motif recurrence: the getting in shape montage (mercifully short) and the men

sauntering along the highway and *shuk* (marketplace) in itsy-bitsy sumo outfits scene. Okay, arguably the latter is not yet a true cinematic formula, but the Sumo Saunter is a recurring gag in the film.

But, while the film uses sumo on one level, the clichés work because the movie's real subject has nothing to do with the Japanese sport. What puts "A Matter of Size" in a weight class (forgive me) of its own is its examination of conceptions of physicality within the context of Israeli society — a society based on occasionally brutal candor, the near-desperate desire not to be a "frier," or "sucker," and the hardy character of the "sabara." The plight of the protagonist, Herzl Musiker (played by an expressive and boyish Itzik Cohen), and his four friends, Sammy, Gidi, Aharon and Zehava, is all the more touching as a result. As a child, Herzl is referred to as "Har Herzl" (an allusion to the Israeli mountain), but I'd venture his name was chosen to make clear the parallel between the character and Theodore Herzl, who famously said, "If you will it, it is no dream." The original Herzl may not have meant sumo, but never mind.

Fat people, the film contends, are people that Israeli society deems it completely okay to hate. True in America, which, ironically, is one of the fattest countries around, it seems doubly true in Israel — an active, appearance-conscious society with that lethal combination of great beaches and mandatory military service. "How come there's no sumo in Israel?" one guy inquires as the four buddies sit around Gidi's shawarma joint. "Because there are no fat people in Israel," Aharon flatly answers, taking another tremendous bite of his shawarma.

Of course, there are the expected scenes of fat-person-rejection-sadness: Gidi's struggles with online dating, for example, or Aharon's constant fears of his wife's infidelity. But where the Farrelly brothers' film "Shallow Hal" deliberately, and cruelly, plays on its viewers' prejudices and preconceptions, "A Matter of Size" puts the viewer on Herzl's side from the very beginning. Herzl is deliberately introduced in the opening scene as a sweet, young, overweight boy waiting to be weighed at school. By the tenth minute when we see the adult Herzl, along with four friends, semi-nonchalantly try to squeeze into the compact for the diet group carpool, they are our buddies. Sure, we like Herzl more than the other boys — who wouldn't feel for the guy who's kicked out of the diet group for gaining rather than losing weight? — but we like them all, even with their imperfections.

And the film makes it even easier to sympathize with them, because for the most part, the world around them is filled with real jerks. For example, anyone familiar with Israeli culture — or American Weight Watchers, for that matter — will derive great amusement from the film's depiction of an Israeli weight-loss "support group." Where the American equivalent is all about being supportive of one another — "This is your second meeting? Come on, folks, let's give her a big hand and two stickers!" — Evelin Hagoel's depiction of Geula, the cold-

blooded, chain-smoking Israeli diet facilitator, brings a new dimension to the label “tough love.” Her brutal honesty comes across as nothing less than jaw-droppingly evil. “It hurts me to see you turning yourself into a whale,” she says on Herzl’s answering machine. “Bye-bye, sweetie.”

Geula’s a gem of pure kindness compared with Herzl’s mother, Mona, with whom he lives. Mona couples her regular “You’re getting too fat; I can’t stand to look at you!” comments with the immediate follow-up of: “There’s more couscous in the fridge. Go ahead and finish it.” Mona’s unexpected, piercing meanness (its roots in the circumstances of the death of Herzl’s father notwithstanding) lends more poignancy to the film’s point: For people who are overweight, even love is a double-edged sword. Mona shows that people who are overweight shouldn’t expect to love themselves, or to be loved by anyone else.

Of course, no growth-through-conflict fable would be complete without a love story: Herzl is, in fact, loved. Zehava (Irit Kaplan) meets Herzl in the diet group and there is a spark of genuine attraction. Later, in one of the film’s most emotionally honest moments, Zehava leans seductively in the doorway of her bedroom, clad in only a white silk negligee that strains at her hips and pendulous breasts. In that moment, she could not be more beautiful: She is simply a divorced woman hoping against hope to find love, while knowing that appearances can be deceiving. “I hope you don’t make love with the lights off,” she says — and in her candor, she could not be more attractive, standards be damned. The ensuing playful war with Herzl — lights on, lights off! — is the subject of amusement rather than shame, foreplay rather than forbearance. This, the film says without words, is what the world could promise all of us, Israelis and Americans alike, if we could only let go of our inhibitions and simply be ourselves.

It’s the Israeli “I am who I am” unapologetic spirit that makes this film transcend its formula and the characters transcend their outcast status. Only in Israel, after all, would a boyfriend, upon hearing that a billboard of a girl in a bikini depressed his girlfriend, take it on himself to, shall we say, put an extra few pounds on the billboard with the help of some spray paint. If you will it, after all, it is no dream.

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## Mrs. Moskowitz and the Cats

When Yolanda Moscovitz, a retired French teacher, wakes up in a hospital geriatric ward, she is convinced it must be a mistake. But the titanium plate in her hip confines her to a wheelchair and to a lengthy convalescence. Nonetheless, Yolanda discovers a new life in the hospital. She develops a close relationship with Allegra, a solitary woman who is her roommate, and she meets Shaul, a former soccer player, who makes her feel certain emotions she thought had vanished from her life for good. Like a young woman in love, she does anything to get Shaul's attention. When the time comes for Yolanda to return home, she is forced to return to her life of loneliness. Just as she's about to renounce her possessions to win over the friendship of a caregiver, there's a knock at her door.

2009, Israeli Academy Awards, Nominated for Best Actress Award



## RUTH

(2008, 55 minutes)

During the days of the Israeli withdrawal from the settlements in the Gaza strip, when the residents of the Katif Bloc are uniting to fight for its existence, Ruth, a young teenager from the settlement, is searching for excitement. Ruth meets Erez, a photojournalist sent to cover the events of the disengagement, and realizes that she doesn't belong anywhere. In a society demanding a united front and common beliefs, Ruth fights to interpret her faith in her own way.

## 'Bruriah' has it all

Kushnir brings modern-day version of Jewish legend to the screen, with betrayal, death, God and sex.

Hannah Brown — 02/28/2009



Israeli films tend to be about secular Israelis. Of the few movies that have been made here about observant Jews, most were directed, not surprisingly, by religious directors. So when I got ready to meet Avraham Kushnir, the director of *Bruriah*, a movie about a modern Orthodox woman whose life and fate are intimately connected with the legendary Bruriah, I thought it would be easy to spot him: He would definitely be wearing a kippa. But he wasn't. "Sorry to disappoint you," said Kushnir, sitting at a table in a cafe in Jerusalem's German Colony neighborhood, near his home. "I'm not religious." And he did seem sorry - and even relieved - when I assured him that I wasn't disappointed, just surprised. Kushnir, who grew up in Jerusalem and attended a religious elementary school, was drawn to make *Bruriah* out of fascination with the story. Bruriah, who lived in the second century, was known as one of the most, perhaps even the most, brilliant and learned women in Jewish history. But her story is complex. Her husband, Rabbi Meir, also a scholar, taught his students that "women are lightheaded." She mocked this teaching, and then, to show her

up, he sent one of his students to seduce her. According to the legend, the student succeeded and she committed suicide. "Once I heard the Bruriah legend, it was impossible not to make a movie about," says Kushnir. The film is quite a departure for Kushnir, 63. He has had a long career as a documentary filmmaker, but *Bruriah*, which opened last Thursday, is his first feature film. He would have filmed the Bruriah legend as a documentary, he says, "If I could have interviewed Meir and Bruriah." Since that wasn't an option, he decided to dramatize their story and update it. In Kushnir's film, Hadar Galron stars in the title role, a contemporary, well-educated Orthodox woman who was the daughter of a rabbi. Her beloved father wrote a controversial book about the Bruriah legend and the modern-day Bruriah goes on a quest to find a copy of her father's book, which his religious opponents burned when she was a child. Her quest puts her into contact with a younger man, while at the same time, she faces conflict with her husband, as their oldest daughter declares that she wants to study to be a rabbi. KUSHNIR, WHO has created documentaries about the Ashkenazi and Sephardi sages of the Jewish tradition, was drawn to the topic because he saw in the Bruriah story "the summit of the conflict between man and woman... a microcosm of what is at the heart of our existence." But although the film deals with some issues that will be of interest to the religious community (such as the strictures on women studying Talmud and whether women can become religious authorities), Kushnir hopes that the film will find a wide audience. The secular director sees the stories of both Bruriah's as universal. His attitude to the material is illustrated by an anecdote he tells about collaborating with Yoni Rechter, who composed the score. He gave Rechter a note and told him to look at it after he composed the music. When Rechter finished the score and Kushnir heard the dramatic classical music he and written, Rechter looked at the note and laughed. "It said, 'Just no clarinet,'" since Kushnir had been afraid the musician would give the score a stereotypically klezmerish sound. "He [Rechter] said, 'The story is happening here in Tel Aviv,'" says Kushnir. "Or it could be in Manchester, Afghanistan, Afula or Glasgow." Kushnir collaborated on the screenplay with Yuval Cohen and his two leads, Galron and Baruch Brener, who are both Orthodox. Because of his leading actors' passionate involvement in the writing, Kushnir says, "I was able to direct with a finger," meaning with a light touch. "They did the work at home." Alon Abutbul, one of Israel's best known and busiest actors, appears briefly as a Talmud student. "When he heard I was making a movie about Bruriah, he asked me to write a part for him. He's studying Judaism and was very interested." Kushnir is especially effusive when it comes to his leading lady, the London-born actress/screenwriter/playwright and comedian, Hadar Galron. "She is the ultimate," he says. "She does not give 100 percent. She gives 120 percent." Asked about the film's ending, which many viewers will argue over, he refuses to give an easy answer, asking, instead, what I thought of it. Pressed to be more specific, he spoke about the conflict between "spirit and desire." Then he referred to a line in the film, spoken by Sasha (Israel Damidov), the young man Bruriah meets while looking for her father's book, who also studies Torah with her husband, concerning the Bruriah legend: "It has everything: betrayal, death, God... sex." Kushnir hopes audiences will be saying the same line about his movie.