

JEWISH JOURNAL

15-21 Sivan 5784, June 21-27, 2024

Open Your Community



HEROIC HASID

In their new film, "Guns & Moses,"
Salvador and Nina Litvak portray an Orthodox Jew like no other.

by Kylie Ora Lobell

Noa Argamani's Secret Annex
by Matthew Schultz

Nothing Feels Normal
by Rabbi/Cantor Eva Robbins

A man with a beard, wearing a black suit, white shirt, and black fedora, is striking a dynamic, low-to-the-ground pose on a sandy surface. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. In the background, there is a large array of solar panels mounted on metal structures, stretching into the distance under a clear blue sky.

'GUNS AND MOSES': THE HEROIC HASID

In their latest film, Salvador and Nina Litvak created a brave and stereotype-defying Orthodox Jewish hero: A gunslinging Chabad rabbi.

“

“Here’s a movie about a mensch who is warm and approachable, but who has to step way out of his comfort zone to defend his community ... It’s an action-thriller, and Rabbi Mo becomes an unlikely gunslinger.”

– Salvador Litvak

» by **Kylie Ora Lobell**

COVER

A rugged, unshaven cowboy with a dusty hat. A suave British gentleman in a perfectly fitted suit. A Chabad rabbi driving a minivan with a "Thank You Hashem" bumper sticker?

In the new movie "Guns & Moses," by filmmakers and husband and wife team Salvador and Nina Litvak, the main character isn't the usual hero archetype. Instead, this brave rabbi wears a black hat and tzitzit, serves up dvar Torahs and wraps tefillin on Jewish men whenever he gets a chance. It's a first for Hollywood, which historically has shown Jewish men as being nebbishy, neurotic and weak and, at times, demonized Jewish people in TV and film.

"As Jews, we resent these stereotypes," Nina said. "In real life, we don't resemble that. It's overdone. It's not really what being Jewish is all about."

The Litvaks are both baal teshuvos – Jews who were not previously religious but became observant in adulthood – who have always used their filmmaking skills to depict authentic Judaism on screen. From their hilarious 2005 film, "When Do We Eat?," which is about a Pesach seder gone terribly awry, to their popular online group Accidental Talmudist, where they create content on Jewish topics and boast more than 1 million followers, Salvador and Nina don't shy away from their Jewish roots. They fully embrace them.

Now, with "Guns & Moses," which premiered at the Los Angeles Jewish Film Festival, the two are breaking new barriers and depicting the film's protagonist, Rabbi Mo Zaltzman, played by Mark Feuerstein, as a hero unlike any other that's been seen on screen.

"Here's a movie about a mensch who is warm and approachable, but who has to step way out of his comfort zone to defend his community," Salvador said. "It's an action-thriller, and Rabbi Mo becomes an unlikely gunslinger."

The Litvaks came up with the idea for "Guns & Moses" in the wake of the Chabad of Poway shooting in 2019, where a shooter entered the Chabad building on April 27, killed Lori Gilbert Kaye and injured Rabbi Mendel Goldstein and two other congregants.

"We sadly knew that attacks on Jews would always be relevant," Salvador said. "We never imagined that there would be an Oct. 7, which happened during postproduction on our movie. The world in which we conceived and shot the movie is a different world in which it will be distributed."

It could be argued that it's more important now for a courageous and strong Jew to be shown on screen, in a time when antisemites are trying to take down Jews in Israel and all around the world. Salvador and Nina, who have been to Magen Am USA gun safety and training sessions, have seen an uptick in Jewish men and women – as well as Chabad rabbis – who are participating.

"These are kickass warriors," Salvador said. "We've seen that from the entire population in Israel by necessity. Maybe we thought we were immune to that kind of danger in America, but we were mistaken."

"Guns & Moses" follows Rabbi Mo, a Chabad rabbi who runs a community center in the High Desert and serves a diverse group of Jews, ranging from young children to Holocaust survivor Sol Fassbinder (Christopher Lloyd). In the opening scene, Rabbi Mo and his wife Rebbetzin Hindy (Alona Tal) are hosting a party honoring Alan Rosner (Dermot Mulroney), a local philanthropist who owns clean energy farms. Right after Alan makes a generous pledge to help Chabad build a new center, shots ring out – and a Jewish person at the party is murdered in plain sight. Chaos ensues, as everyone thinks they are the next target. After the police and local news show up, a tearful Rabbi Mo gets



Neal McDonough, Sal Litvak, Dermot Mulroney, Nina Litvak and Mark Feuerstein

on camera and urges people to do a good deed in memory of the deceased.

While everyone assumes that what happened was a hate crime, and a white supremacist who hung around the Chabad is thrown into jail, Rabbi Mo refuses to accept that this young man is guilty. He sets out on a journey to get to the bottom of the crime and find the real killer – before they strike again.

The only problem? Rabbi Mo has absolutely no detective experience. He doesn't know self-defense or own a gun, either.

At the urging of Hindy and the security guard at the Chabad, Brenda (Gabrielle Ruiz), Rabbi Mo purchases firearms and begins his training at the local range.

"This is based on the firearms training I received as a member of Magen Am," Salvador said. "Rabbi Yossi Eilfort of Magen Am trained me. The cliché in movies is that when a civilian learns to wield a gun, there's a 30-second montage of him shooting cans off a fence, and suddenly he's an expert gunman. We made sure that the firearm use was accurate. The way Rabbi Mo holds his gun and what he was learning had to be authentic. Mark Feuerstein went with Rabbi Eilfort to their training."

Throughout the movie, Rabbi Mo, with help from Brenda, Hindy and their children, follows the clues and gets closer and closer to discovering the identity of the real killer – all while driving around in a minivan, the typical car of choice for an Orthodox Jewish family.

The most captivating scene in "Guns & Moses" takes place in the Mojave Solar Project's clean energy field, a location filled with reflective solar mirrors. In it, Rabbi Mo is evading an attacker with a hidden identity. "I was very intrigued by that location, and thought it'd be an incredible place for a predator and prey scene," Salvador, who also directed "Guns & Moses," said.

The entire film, which was shot over 20 days, has a Western vibe, or as Salvador calls it, "neo-Western ... There are Western tropes and conventions throughout the movie starting with the place, with its scenery," he said. "That location is where so many Westerns have been made in the history of Hollywood. But now, saloons and covered wagons



"As Jews, we resent these stereotypes. In real life, we don't resemble that. It's overdone. It's not really what being Jewish is all about." – Nina Litvak

and horses have been replaced by strip malls and power lines and minivans. They are iconic to the West in 2024."

Though the movie contains intense sequences of action and violence, there is no nudity or profanity. "It's not always easy, because as a director, I often get a great performance from an actor that includes profanity, and I have to ask them to do it again," Salvador said. "The movie is kosher."

The Litvaks, who co-wrote "When Do We Eat?" and their 2013 film "Saving Lincoln," always write together. For this screenwriting team, it means that Salvador lays down the first draft, Nina does the rewrite and then they go back and forth until it's perfected. "When we are actually writing the dialogue in a script, we can't be in the same room together," Nina said.

"We don't write scripts – we grow them," Salvador said. "I hand them to Nina, and she is merciless. It has to work on every level: Character, dialogue, motivation and the story arc. We are very hard on ourselves, and we bring different strengths to the table."



A scene from "Guns & Moses"

Once the two decided they wanted to make a thriller, they watched one thriller a day, a tradition they've kept up for years. "We studied the genre and watched new and old thrillers," Salvador said. "One thing that's so interesting to me as a director is that this Chabad rabbi, an action hero armed with a gun, is one of the only characters in modern times that would unironically wear a fedora and a long black coat, just like a Western hero."

The black hat and coat are typical garb for Chabadniks, a Hasidic sect that follows the teachings of Chabad-Lubavitch and the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Rabbi Mo is a Chabad emissary, like one of the many thousands of emissaries around the world, who goes to a community with Jews in it and holds services, hosts Jewish events and is there for any Jew in need.

Though Salvador and Nina are not Chabadniks themselves, they go to a local synagogue run by Chabad Rabbi Yekusiel Kalmanson and his wife, Rebbetzin Hindy.



We never imagined that there would be an Oct. 7, which happened during postproduction on our movie. The world in which we conceived and shot the movie is a different world in which it will be distributed."

- Salvador Litvak

While the real-life Hindy met with Alona Tal, who plays Rebbetzin Hindy in the movie, to make sure she depicted her role correctly, the rabbi served as a consultant on the script and an executive producer to ensure that the religious references were accurate.

"We had a very early test screening for a handful of friends, and the rabbi pointed out that the menorah in the Zaltzman's home was a round-shaped candelabra," Nina said. "He told us that Chabad uses a very straight kind of menorah, according to the Rambam. So, we went into post-production and changed it."

While shooting the film, Mark Feuerstein, a secular Jew who is convincing as the star Chossid, went to synagogue with the Litvaks for Shemini Atzeret. "He loved it," Salvador said. "He has been to our Shabbos table a few times. All the Jewish actors in our film were excited to be a part of it."

Both Salvador and Nina can relate to secular Jews, since they were once not so religious themselves. Salvador was born in Chile and came to the United States with his family when he was 5 years old. He celebrated the Jewish holidays, went to Hebrew school and had a bar mitzvah, but after that, he didn't do much. Still, it was apparent that his family loved Judaism.

"My father said to me many times, 'Sal, you don't understand what the establishment of modern-day Israel did for the Jewish people around the world'" he said. "He told me, 'Prior to having a country that could fight for itself, Jews had to walk down the street with their heads down and live in constant fear. After 1948, we realized we could fight for ourselves. We became a new kind of Jewish people.'"

Nina's family, on the other hand, was completely assimilated. While she believed in Hashem, growing up, she never lit a Hanukkah candle or went to synagogue. "It was tragic," she said. "When I was seven years old, I went to the Brooklyn Children's Museum with my mom and sisters, and we ate at the kosher dairy restaurant there. I was fascinated that there was an entire restaurant just for dairy. I wanted to say to the waitress and the people in the restaurant, 'I'm Jewish, too!' That stuck with me. My whole life, I was curious about it."

After they got married, Salvador and Nina grew more religious together, first going to a Reform synagogue, then a Conservative one, sending their children to Jewish schools and finally becoming fully observant. "I realized I liked the traditional Jewish practice and way of life," Nina said.



Despite the rise in antisemitism happening around the globe, the two proudly visible Jews have had positive experiences with non-Jews, including the actors in "Guns & Moses."

Despite the rise in antisemitism happening around the globe, the two proudly visible Jews have had positive experiences with non-Jews, including the actors in "Guns & Moses." "They reacted just the way we expect our non-Jewish audience to react: with tremendous respect and intrigue," Salvador said. "Secular Jews in America can be so uncomfortable with religious Jews, but non-Jews are fascinated."

This is something the Litvaks had already discovered through their work on *Accidental Talmudist*, which puts out videos like "Who Is the Jewish Messiah and When Is He Coming?" and "The Deaf Princess Who Saved Jews During the Holocaust." (They also co-edit *The Journal's* weekly "Table for Five" feature.) "We were not surprised by the reaction from the non-Jewish people," Salvador said. "They are very respectful and interested in Jews who take their Judaism seriously." As Nina put it simply, "Non-Jews like their Jews Jewy."

The Litvaks discovered this is not something that the rest of Hollywood believes. A secular Jewish man who works in Hollywood told Salvador and Nina he loved "Guns & Moses," but he asked them, "Who would want to watch this? The Jewish audience is so small. And the Christians in America hate the Jews."



"We don't write scripts – we grow them. I hand them to Nina, and she is merciless. It has to work on every level: character, dialogue, motivation and the story arc. We are very hard on ourselves, and we bring different strengths to the table." – Salvador Litvak

Nina was taken aback. "I thought, that's not true," she said. "I wanted to ask him, 'Have you ever met a Christian?'" "Hollywood is so out of touch with America," Salvador added. While Salvador and Nina acknowledge that there are groups of white supremacists in America – and a few genuine ones who even show up in their film – the problem isn't one-sided. "The horseshoe theory is true," Nina said. "The far right and the far left hate the Jews. The only thing that can unite them is their hatred of us." Salvador believes it comes from ignorance. "Many of these people who have been radicalized and taught through rhetoric to hate the Jews have never known a Jew," he said.

With "Guns & Moses," which is currently showing at Jewish film festivals and will hopefully be in theaters later this year, Salvador and Nina are striving to make a change and introduce a more accurate and uplifting representation of the Jewish people to audiences everywhere. "We hope this is a massive hit seen by a huge swath of America and the world," Salvador said. "We want them to see that these old and tired stereotypes of Jews and Judaism are gone. Those bad guys in the news who happen to be Jews don't represent us." Nina said another goal they have is to "attract secular Jews to be more open about going to Shabbat at a rabbi's house or synagogue."

No matter what, "Guns & Moses" will surely be a gamechanger – and a positive one at that. "Jews are strong and warm and entrusted with a mission to be a light unto the nations," Salvador said. "I've been praying every day that this movie should be a kiddush Hashem."

To learn more about "Guns & Moses," visit [Picturesfromthefringe.com](https://picturesfromthefringe.com). ■

Kylie Ora Lobell is the Community Editor of the Jewish Journal.



Once the two decided they wanted to make a thriller, they watched one thriller a day, a tradition they've kept up for years.

How Filming 'Guns & Moses' Brought Two Sisters Closer to Judaism » by Ayala Or-EI

IN SALVADOR LITVAK'S NEW MOVIE, "GUNS & MOSES," Mila Brenner, 19, and Juju Brenner, 12, play the daughters of Rabbi Mo Zaltzman (Mark Feuerstein). The Zaltzmans live in a small, quiet town where a neo-Nazi teen is accused of murder. The rabbi steps in to prove the boy's innocence and confronts a far more sinister villain. The film also stars Christopher Lloyd, Dermot Mulroney, Neal McDonough, and Alona Tal.

The film premiered last week at the Los Angeles Jewish Film Festival, followed by a Q&A with the director, and Feuerstein, Michael B. Silver, and the Brenner sisters.

"This is the first time we are playing sisters and also Jewish characters," Mila said. "And not only are that, but they are Orthodox. We didn't know much about this world, so we watched a couple of documentaries and read a lot online to understand what it's like. Why do girls cover their bodies? Why our mom in the film, portrayed by Alona Tal, wears a wig? It removed a lot of stereotypes for us."

The Brenner sisters were born in Los Angeles to actress/producer Shirley Brenner and artist Bruce Rubenstein. They started acting and modeling at a young age. Previously, Juju played the younger version of the Sarah Jessica Parker character in "Hocus Pocus 2," and Mila had guest roles in the TV series "Mom" and "Ray Donovan."

"We grew up in a non-Orthodox household. Although our parents are both Jewish and celebrate the high holidays, we didn't know much about the Orthodox lifestyle. We are so grateful to be cast in these roles because it has taught us so much about Judaism and brought us closer to being Jewish," Mila said.

Filming took place in Santa Clarita and coincided with Hanukkah 2022. One of the sisters' favorite memories was celebrating the holiday on set. "Sal, the director, is religious and lit the candles with us and everyone on set, including the non-Jewish crew members. He told us tales about Hanukkah," Juju said. "He was not only a director but a teacher. He explained why each tradition is practiced. It was very educational."

Mila plays Esti, the eldest daughter. Talking about their character, she said Esti "is very strong and brave, acting like the brain of the family. She handles all the technical aspects, is very intelligent and tech-savvy. I related to her a lot."

"I played the younger sister who basically always follows her older sister and likes to do what she's doing, just like in real life," Juju added.

Director Litvak, known as "The Accidental Talmudist," who is co-editor of The Journal's "Table for Five," grew up with two Holocaust survivors, including his grandmother Magda who was pregnant with his mother during the war. He said he couldn't imagine that the film he made before the war in Israel would be so relevant just a few months after production. "We conceived 'Guns & Moses' in the wake of the synagogue shooting in Poway, California. We knew antisemitic attacks would always be relevant, but we never imagined that the most deadly attacks since the Holocaust would occur on Oct. 7, during the post-production of our film."

One of Mila's favorite memories of shooting "Guns & Moses" was meeting actor Christopher Lloyd ("Back to the Future"). "It was an honor meeting him. He is such an iconic person. We had a scene together, and while



we were waiting for them to set the shot, it was super cold. We were freezing. I was with my mom, and I told her, 'It's cold AF.' Christopher looked puzzled and asked me, 'What does 'AF' mean?' I whispered in his ear, and his face brightened. He smiled and said, 'I like that. I'm going to use it.' So now I can say I taught Lloyd a bit of Gen Z slang."

Mila, who was accepted to Loyola Marymount University, said she never experienced or witnessed antisemitism until Oct. 7. "Unfortunately, I know of many friends at U.S. campuses who were segregated just because they are Jewish. They were told they couldn't be in certain parts of the campus or couldn't walk freely, and these are universities they were accepted to and paid for. It's unimaginable."

Although it's the first time the two have played sisters, they have collaborated before on different projects. Previously, Mila directed a six-minute short starring Juju, "Not My Circus," and recently, they worked on a music video for Juju's single "Buzzin'," which was released on all music platforms and became popular on TikTok. The music video was shot around Los Angeles and features a hybrid



Filming took place in Santa Clarita and coincided with Hanukkah 2022. One of the sisters' favorite memories was celebrating the holiday on set.

reality versus fantasy narrative and was done in collaboration with YMI Jeans.

"It was really fun to film, although a bit challenging," Juju said. "There were times when people walked into the frame, and we needed to reshoot the scene."

"People kept asking, 'Who is that?'" Mila, who directed the video along with Antonio Chavez Trejo, said. "The vibe of the video was 'follow your dreams and live your best life.' We shot in the most iconic locations in L.A. such as Santa Monica Pier, Hollywood Boulevard and the view of downtown. We were surrounded by people and tourists who tried to touch a piece of the glamour of the city and it was a great opportunity to showcase all the places our city is famous for."

The sisters hope to collaborate more in the future, both in film, TV and music videos. ■