

*Shtisel*: faith, family, art and the glaring necessity of grace

I love everything about Netflix's 2 season show *Shtisel*. The characters are real and believable, the acting is excellent and it deals with three of my favorite topics: faith, family and art. It also demonstrates the limits, confusion and pain of life without grace.

The story line centers around Shulem *Shtisel* and his family. His wife is dead, his mother is aging and his children and grandchildren experience all the frustrating heartbreaks of life. All of this in the context of an orthodox Jewish family living near Jerusalem. As we are privy to peak behind the curtain of their mysterious sub-culture, I was struck initially by two things. One, their habitual practice of bringing God into their everyday life challenged me. Not that we have to practice our awareness of God in the same way, but the clear reminder that God is the center of life reminded me of my own lack of attunement to God in the warp and wove of everyday living. . Secondly, I was reminded that though their culture is very different than ours, they struggle with the same problems of disappointment, love, forgiveness and conflict with in the family structure.

My initial reaction to this series led to an insight that's had me wrestling with the themes of art and faith. Four of the characters wrestle deeply with these themes. Due to their commitment to not let personal vanities and entertainment stain their relationship with God and their community we see them trying, unsuccessfully to repress their drive to let art enrich their lives. Ruchami hides Anna Karenina under her mattress, Schulem secretly listens to comedy CD's to lift his depression, and Nuchum gets rid of his favorite classical music piece only to have the music fill his head anyway. And then there's Akiva. A beautiful painter who struggles openly with his desire to please God and his community and yet use the very gift that God has given him to bless others.

As a gentile Christian the end of season two struck me with a force I don't often experience in art. As Schulem struggles with his son's artistic expression we see how the law he lives by is torturous. The exhaustive legal code embraced by his community of faith doesn't lead him to a peaceful existence with his family or himself. It's wrapped around his neck like a noose leaving no room for a comprehensive experience of art's beauty or the inevitable differences that occur within families. His perceived righteous standing of himself (and others) before God is not based on a relationship established through Grace. Shulem, loves his family and he loves God but he's misguided on how to apply this love. I know he's not "real" in the literal sense but I'd love to see how the grace of Christ's gospel could change *Shtisel* and his family. Yes, he's a character in a television show but he's also all around us in various disguises.

*Shtisel* isn't glitzy and that's part of its appeal. It has no sex or nudity and very little language that would offend. It leaves the characters to drive the story and draw us into a world both very different and very much like our own. A world that is difficult and beautiful and in need of artistic expression. A world that is in need of Grace.