

On Screen

Humanistic and integrative psychotherapist Ruth Gilbert considers the roles of dreams and ghosts in the Netflix drama Shtisel

Michael Aloni as Akiva Shtisel

Set in an ultra-orthodox Jewish community in Jerusalem, Israeli television drama *Shtisel* provides a poignant and sometimes funny depiction of families, dreams and ghosts.

The residues of death permeate *Shtisel*. As ghosts haunt the inner worlds and homes of the living, these 'kitchen table ghosts' epitomise an uncanny convergence of the familiar and strange.

Throughout each series, the character Akiva Shtisel's identity is (re)formed in relation to a sequence of such ghost visitations by his dead mother, a wraithlike boy and, later, his dead wife. It is as if, psychotherapeutically, these ghosts enable a gradual process whereby his tendency towards melancholia shifts to mourning.¹

Psychoanalysis is intrinsically concerned with the ghosts who linger within the human psyche.² In these terms, ghosts can be understood as intergenerational reverberations as well as manifestations of unconscious, repressed or split-off parts of the self. Freud's theories are clearly foundational in this respect: 'In analysis, a thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an unlaidd ghost.'²

While many traditions value the symbolism of dreams, the Jewishness of *Shtisel* brings a particular cultural inflection to this mode of understanding. As the Talmud puts it, 'A dream not interpreted is like a letter unread.' The imperative to interpret is, therefore, compelling. Following a dream in which he meets his mother's chilly ghost, a destabilised Shtisel asks his father, Shulem, 'What do these dreams mean?' The question remains unanswered.

Shtisel is replete with such moments, which illustrate the cryptic nature of spectrality. The viewer, as well as the characters, might try to make sense of



Akiva Shtisel is haunted by the ghosts of his family

Image: Dori Media

'Psychoanalysis is intrinsically concerned with the ghosts who linger in the psyche'

these mystifying spectral sequences but, ultimately, they elude analytical interpretation. So, as in many modes of psychotherapy in which both client and therapist learn to sit with uncertainty, no singular or definitive meaning can be imposed. As they inhabit the psyches of the haunted, *Shtisel*'s ghosts become internalised therapists, opening the way to moments of realisation.

This opaque process is exemplified in series two when Shulem dreams of his dead mother's ghost. She is knitting with a tangle of cassette tape while singing an imaginary family song. From a classic psychoanalytical perspective, the symbolism evokes the earliest interconnected moments between mother and baby. Shulem, the bereaved son, is momentarily soothed by his dream. In some ways, the ghost-knitting of the tape, a jumbled cord of communication, has temporarily healed the primary umbilical rending; but the navel remains a bewildering scar.

As Freud observed: 'There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure... at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled... This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches into the unknown.'³

And, in this reaching down into the unknown, the navel of the dream, *Shtisel* suggests that perhaps there is no need to tie up loose ends. Instead, we meet our own ghosts, along with our clients' ghosts, in the profound uncertainty of human experience. ●

References

- (1) Freud, S (1917). 'Mourning and Melancholia'. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916)*: 237-258
- (2) Frosh, S (2013). *Haunting: Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmissions*. Palgrave Macmillan
- (3) Freud, S (1900). *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Franz Deuticke, Leipzig & Vienna

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Email editor@ukcp.org.uk