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A Classroom Film That Explores the Tensions Over Marriage in Israel

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Israelis who plan to marry but don't want their weddings performed by a government-approved Orthodox rabbi have an alternative: They can leave the country.

"Ironically, this is the only democratic country in the world in which a Conservative rabbi cannot officiate a marriage according to the law," Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman, head of Jerusalem's progressive synagogue Kol HaNeshama, tells his interviewer in a recently released documentary, "Faces of Israel."

Prevented from performing marriages for his own congregants because he's not Orthodox, Weiman-Kelman is one of more than two dozen native and American-born Israelis featured in "Faces of Israel," a classroom-friendly documentary by first-time filmmaker Amy Beth Oppenheimer.

Subtitled "A Discussion About Marriage, State and Religion in the Jewish Homeland," the 75-minute film focuses on the Orthodox rabbinate's control of marriage, required among Israeli Jews to be an Orthodox ceremony, regardless of the bride and groom's religious preferences. Civil ceremonies are not legally recognized in Israel.

Relying on commentary from a secular kibbutz resident and the Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Israel, among others, the documentary examines tensions arising from the legally mandated status of marriage as a religious affair.

Those tensions range from matters of the ritual to the very right to wed. As one documentary participant notes, tens of thousands of immigrants from the former Soviet Union — now legal citizens but not recognized as Jews by the rabbinate — cannot get married in a government-recognized ceremony.

The result, besides a smoldering resentment of the rabbinate among nonreligious Israelis, has been an exodus of engaged Israeli couples to other countries — especially Cyprus — where they can marry in the manner they choose. Owing to international treaties to which Israel is a party, Israel must recognize those marriages once the newlyweds return home.

"I was always interested in how you balance having a Jewish state and a democratic state," said Oppenheimer, who started the film when she was a political science student at Johns Hopkins University. "These are two notions that sometimes work together, and sometimes are in tension."

Composed mostly of interviews shot in 2007 and 2008, the film features a diverse cross-section of Israeli society. It premiered in March at the Riverdale YM-YWHA in the Bronx. The documentary was shown at an educational conference in Australia in June, but most of its screenings have taken place at American synagogues and university Hillels, including those at Columbia; the University of California, Berkeley; Rutgers, and Tufts.

Targeted at viewers in the eighth grade and older, the film also has been screened in recent months at Ramah summer camps in the Northeast and at Edu-Palooza, a conference sponsored by the Board of Jewish

Education of Metropolitan Chicago.

The film is designed, Oppenheimer said, as a “springboard to discussion,” and arrives with background materials on Israeli history, law and government structure, as well as questions to facilitate dialogue. Schools and other educational institutions pay \$250 to \$400 for the documentary and accompanying materials, depending on the number of times they plan to show the film.

With participants ranging from a gay university student to female marriage counselors at Haifa’s municipal rabbinate, the film showcases views that are often in conflict with each other.

“Not every group is represented,” Oppenheimer said, “but I wanted to get each [major] viewpoint included.”

While representatives of municipal rabbinates argue on behalf of the Orthodox status quo, other perspectives include that of a United States-born Modern Orthodox rabbi who opposes both intermarriage and the mixing of synagogue and state in Israeli weddings.

Taking on its interconnected topics in chapters of six to 12 minutes, “Faces of Israel” also examines such organizations as Itim and Tzohar, which advocate various types of reform or seek to diminish tensions among the country’s different Jewish communities.

Oppenheimer, raised in New Jersey and now a resident of New York City, said that the project resulted from informal conversations she initiated during a year-long study program in Israel — conversations she followed up with taped sessions in the offices and homes of interviewees.

The participation of Yona Metzger, Israel’s Ashkenazic chief rabbi, was “part persistence and part luck,” she said — the result of numerous interview requests submitted even after she was given a “categorical ‘no.’” The session, she said, was finally added to the rabbi’s schedule by a new assistant unaware of Oppenheimer’s previous outreach efforts.

The interview with Metzger, in turn, opened the way to conversations with other religious officials, including the director of Israel’s Sephardic rabbinate and municipal rabbinate spokesmen in Tel Aviv and Haifa.

Now 23, Oppenheimer works primarily as a management consultant but also devotes time to arranging screenings of her movie, a largely self-taught effort partly funded with an undergraduate research fellowship from Johns Hopkins. Fall screenings are currently planned at Yeshiva University and the University of San Francisco.

With its diversity of opinions, “Faces of Israel” leaves ample space for viewers to reach their own conclusions — which is precisely the director’s goal.

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