

# 'Faces' film explores Israel's religious variety

JOSEPH LEICHMAN

**W**ith the recent ascendancy of Avigdor Lieberman, the controversial Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home) party leader, issues pertaining to Israel's religious character have never been more germane. Lieberman's party won 15 seats in the Knesset on a platform that included, among other policies, the disunion of synagogue and state and the granting of civil unions.

A new documentary, "Faces of Israel: A Discussion About Marriage, State, and Religion in the Jewish Homeland," polls virtually every Jewish ideology — from haredi to secular — on the factors that define Israel as the Jewish homeland.

"Faces of Israel" will debut at the Riverdale Y on Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. After the film will come a cross-denominational panel discussion including Rabbi Julia Andelman (Cong. Shaare Zedek, Manhattan), Rabbi Yosef Blau (Yeshiva University), and Rabbi Steven Burton (Cong. Shaarei Shalom, Riverdale), moderated by Rabbi Seth Farber of IJM: The Jewish Life Information Center in Jerusalem. Tickets are \$5 and can be bought at [facesthemovie.com](http://facesthemovie.com).

Amy Beth Oppenheimer, the "Faces" director, grew up in Leonia in a Modern Orthodox home and what she called a "left-wing Orthodox-right wing Conservative world." Now a Riverdale resident, the Frisch School and Johns Hopkins University alumna first took interest in synagogue/state issues when studying in Israel.

"Many Jewish day schools provide a fantastic education, but do a less-than-stellar job of teaching controversial issues. Israel as a Jewish state is certainly one of those nuanced areas," said Oppenheimer.

"In the fall of 2006 and winter of 2007 I was living in



In the film: Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum



In the film: Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger with diplomats



Israel and going to college there. A combination of the people I was studying with and the classes I was taking continued to raise questions about Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and the tension between these ideas."

Marriage was of particular concern. "It's a rite of passage that almost every Israeli experiences, so I spent a lot of the semester in discussions about it."

Although Oppenheimer had no filmmaking experience, she gamely toted a handheld video camera around the University of Haifa campus. Soon, what started as an idea for a political science paper became a cross-denominational film project. She interviewed Israelis of all persuasions, from openly gay university students to Conservative adherents to ultra-Orthodox couples and secular Israelis. Oppenheimer even obtained an exclusive interview with Israeli Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger.

Said Oppenheimer, who works full-time in management consulting, "I had a list of about 20 questions that I would ask the interviewees. The structure and storyline emerged from the footage rather than being planned."

Eventually, Oppenheimer broke "Faces" into 10 chapters, each devoted to a particular theme. The movie



Amy Beth Oppenheimer



In the film: Tsachi and Shirli Fistel, a secular couple

explores topics like the meaning of a Jewish and democratic state, the role of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, the position of Conservative and Reform Judaism in Israel, and the status of civil and same-sex unions in Israeli law.

"What I really wanted to do was bring the voices of Israelis to the American people," said Oppenheimer. "I knew if I really wanted it to be representative of the whole spectrum, I'd need those different ideologies represented."

"One of the feelings I wanted to create was [the interviewees] engaging in a passionate dialogue. I wanted it to feel like they were discussing their ideologies and beliefs with each other."

Institutional copies of "Faces of Israel," intended for use in schools and workshops, are available at the Website. They come with background information and educational resources. Oppenheimer said she has already received orders from a number of high schools and universities.

On Wednesday night, Kehilat Hadar and Anshe Chesed will partner to present "Faces" on the Upper West Side. On subsequent nights, Lincoln Square Synagogue, West End Synagogue, Hampton Synagogue, and various Hillels will screen the film.

All of which is remarkable, considering that when Oppenheimer first started filming, she had zero experience behind the camera. Upon her return from Haifa, Oppenheimer "lived in the Hopkins digital media center during nights and weekends," learning the ins and outs of filmmaking.

Some aspects were more complex than she ever imagined.

"The very first thing you do after you finish filming is upload your footage and watch it frame by frame, writing down each sentence and logging the time clip every 30 seconds," said Oppenheimer.

"It's almost like writing a book or a play where you go back and pick the sentences or ideas that are most relevant."

The process taught her not just to edit film, but also to adjust her own point of reference.

"I probably started out rooted in the perspective I was raised. Part of the fun and part of the challenge of making a film like this is not advocating one perspective. So my gut reaction was to come at the film from a certain approach, but it was really important to take a step back."

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