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Filming Israeli Marriage

March 01, 2010 | Beth Zalcman



Amy Beth Oppenheimer

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How Jewish should the State of Israel be? Who gets to determine what “Jewish” means? “Faces of Israel,” a documentary by Amy Beth Oppenheimer, frames the state’s Jewish-identity questions around the current debate over Israel’s marriage laws—which the ultra-Orthodox now control.

New Voices reporter Beth Zalcman spoke with Oppenheimer to discuss how the film came about and what the chuppah means for Israel’s future as a Jewish democracy.

To learn more about the debate over marriage in Israel, [read Amy's article](#) in New Voices.

BZ: How did “Faces of Israel” come about? What inspired you to make a documentary about the marriage issue?

ABO: I grew up in a right-wing environment, politically and religiously, with a strong connection to Israel. It was only when I went to college and met people with all different beliefs and faiths that I was exposed to other ideas. I began to think “What about Israel?” but now with more of an emphasis on civil liberties.

I spent a year abroad at Haifa University. Asking people [there] what it means to have a Jewish and democratic state introduced me to a whole spectrum of opinion. One of the major issues that had been brought up was the issue of marriage. I had a great opportunity to take the ideas and opinions of these Israelis and introduce them to others outside of Israeli society. I went to a store and bought my first video camera and began recording.

BZ: How did you learn how to make a documentary? What was its most challenging aspect?

ABO: I went through a steep learning curve. I had always liked the arts, but had mainly expressed that through song, dance and theater. It never translated to film. It was also hard because I had no one to guide me, no senior staff member or professor to walk me through the process. It was mainly done through trial and error.

As a director, I wanted the film to be entertaining—yet as an educator, I wanted to include as much footage as possible. Cutting footage was very difficult.

The biggest lesson I learned was the importance of multiple backups. After having two backups crash during the editing of the film, I went out and splurged on multiple backup systems.

BZ: Your film features a lot of well-known figures in Israel. How were you able to get such in-depth interviews?

ABO: I started filming close to campus. I would record conversations with other students and professors. Afterwards, I realized that I would need a diverse spectrum of viewpoints. So I made a list of different opinions I wanted to have represented in the film: gay, straight, secular, religious.

I felt that if my film wasn’t just going to push a pluralistic agenda, than one of the people who should get air time was the Ashkenazic chief rabbi, Rabbi Yona Metzger. I called his office every day to set up an interview and his assistant always gave me the same response: the Rabbi only gives state interviews. I kept calling and one day, a week before I was going to leave for the States, a new assistant answered and scheduled me for an hour appointment.

This interview opened a lot of doors for me. As soon as they heard that the Ashkenazic Rabbi had given me an interview, the office of the Sephardic Chief Rabbi wanted to give me an interview too.

BZ: The project has been featured at college campuses throughout the United States. How have students reacted to the film?

ABO: So far, we have shown it at 60 different venues, from college campuses to JCCs to synagogues. Each viewing is tailored towards the audience that is bringing us. Sometimes we'll show only a few chapters and use those as the basis for a discussion. Every chapter has questions for discussion.

Sometimes audiences are shocked or surprised that there are no interfaith marriages in Israel. It really depends. When I showed the film in Silicon Valley, where there are a lot of secular Israelis, they were all saying that the film wasn't secular enough. In YU, people asked why no one in the movies suggested reinstating the Sanhedrin.

BZ: When you began this project, what did you want the film to accomplish? Has the project met your expectations?

ABO: I wanted a few different things and every event met at least several of the goals. I wanted to bring together a diverse group of people who wouldn't otherwise interact and discuss how Israel is run and how its systems work. I wanted to get people talking about the civil union issue, something that is pulsing through Israel—it is in a bill in the Israeli parliament—but is often overshadowed by security and conflicts.

There are a lot of programs which discuss the conflicts in Israel on college campuses. "Faces" introduces a side of Israel that is not discussed as frequently, but is something that is just as important.

This is a springboard to other topics: gay rights, interfaith marriages. That's why each screening is different.

BZ: What's your next big project?

ABO: I really enjoyed taking my first crack at filmmaking. I've spent a couple of years sharing this with other people and as an educator, I enjoy the educational aspect. I'll probably be staying Stateside for the year to bring "Faces" around the country. After that my husband Yair and I will travel around the world for two years. I'll be packing my video camera.

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