

Film looks at being Jewish in Israel

BY MAXIM ALMENAS
Staff Writer

During her final year of undergraduate coursework, Amy Beth Oppenheimer lived in Israel and studied at Haifa University in the north of the country. Haifa is a very diverse city, with many native Israelis but also with many Russian immigrants and Israeli Arab citizens. Oppenheimer befriended many individuals from diverse backgrounds on campus and asked them important yet fundamental questions such as:

■ What does it really mean to have a Jewish and democratic state?

■ What is the role of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, and what should it be?

■ Should non-Orthodox denominations of Judaism be represented in the state Rabbinate?

These conversations were important but often abstract. But when Oppenheimer mentioned the topic of marriage and civil unions (which are currently against the law), every interviewee perked up and became more engaged.

"They had a marriage story or their mother's cousin's uncle had a story about going through the marriage process in the state Rabbinate offices," said Oppenheimer. "Marriage was a concrete topic that most people could relate to and I knew then that it would be the perfect foil for a film on religion and state in Israel."

Oppenheimer recently began screening her documentary "The Faces of Israel" which explores that topic. The following questions and answers are derived from a recent interview with her.

Q: Why did you choose to do a film on several broad topics: marriage, state and religion?

A: As an international studies and Jewish studies double major, I was always very interested in how countries approached issues of religion and state. There are a number of models for this across the globe. In the U.S., there is technically a separation between "Church and State," but we are essentially a Christian country and, come December time, everybody knows that. In Saudi Arabia, there is rule according to Muslim law, which is enforced by the religious police. In England, there is the official Anglican Church. Israel is a democracy, but it's also a Jewish State. Yet nowhere in Israel's "Declaration of Independence" did it specify what it means to be a Jewish state and how Jewish tradition should influence Israeli law, if at all.

Q: How do these topics differ in Israel compared to the Jewish community in Leonia?

A: In Leonia, you can walk down Broad Avenue to City Hall (which I did a year and a half ago



PHOTO COURTESY OF AMY BETH OPPEINHEIMER

Leonia film director Amy Oppenheimer at the public debut of her documentary on the marriage process in Israel with the lead expert from the film, Rabbi Seth Farbert.

when I got married) to fill out the appropriate paperwork. One check and one witness later, you're done. And you're married. Congratulations. No one will tell you who you can or cannot marry because of religious reasons. Israelis still have to go through the bureaucracy of getting their paperwork done, but they also have to grapple with an Ultra-Orthodox Rabbinate who dictates who they can marry, how they can marry and if their significant other is "Jewish enough" to be married through the Rabbinate at all.

Q: What does it mean to be Jewish?

A: The question "Who is a Jew?" has recently risen in prominence in the U.S., in part due to significant coverage by the *New York Times*. There are multiple definitions of "Jewishness" at work: According to the Right of Return, any individual with a Jewish grandparent has the right to immigrate to Israel and receive expedited naturalization to becoming an Israeli citizen. Historically, this definition was put into place as a reversal of WWII discrimination policies. In Nazi Germany, if you had

a single Jewish grandparent that was "Jewish enough" to be sent to the death camps with the rest of the Jewish community. This is why Israel offers itself as a safe haven to anyone who would have been Jewish enough to be targeted and murdered.

However, according to the Israeli Chief Rabbinate (and in accordance with Orthodox and Conservative Jewish law), Jewish lineage is matrilineal in nature and therefore a Jew must have a Jewish mother. So, if you have a Jewish grandparent but your Mom is Protestant, you're out of luck. Reform Judaism defines Jewish ancestry through both the mother and the father.

This produces a very complex situation where many individuals (including hundreds of thousands of Russian immigrants to Israel) are Jewish enough to move to Israel, but not Jewish enough to marry there (marriage is under the jurisdiction of the Rabbinate) and accordingly have no legal recourse to marry in their own State.

Q: What was the most challenging aspect of making this film?

A: The learning curve! I had nev-

er made a film in my life and had little to no guidance or mentorship in creating my first documentary. I have learned a great amount about every aspect of filmmaking from perfecting the lighting and audio "pre-shoot," storyboarding, each chapter of the film and translating modern Hebrew into English. Most importantly, I learned the importance of backing up my work as my hard drive crashed three times during the film's development, each of which was a major setback to my production timeline.

I originally began making the film because the issues were incredibly important and no film or educational program existed that addressed important issues of Jewish identity, organized religion, pluralism and inclusivity, etc. I was determined to fill that niche. However, I have since fallen in love with film and have many ideas for my next project.

Q: Were your original viewpoints on these topics changed after you made the film?

A: Certainly. I tried to be as objective as possible in order to fairly and honestly bring the viewpoints of all Jewish Israelis to the

American people. However, they didn't always make it easy. I was kicked out of a Rabbinate office during my first attempt to film in Tel Aviv. I wasn't wearing a skirt (immodest), had a video camera in hand and they must have thought that I was "up to no good." This initial rejection made me somewhat antagonistic to the state-sanctioned Rabbinate, but I knew that it was important to withhold judgment and give it a second try, and I subsequently had very positive experiences in other offices. The people "make" the experience and many Israelis feel positively (an exciting new interaction) or negatively (a necessary nuisance) toward the Rabbinate depending on the experience they have.

Q: Are American Jews now more or less engaged with this way of life in Israel and how are they affected?

A: This is such a hot issue in the Jewish newspapers now. There is currently a major "conversion controversy" in both the US and Israel, which is certainly affecting American Jews.

Q: What do you hope people come away with after seeing this film?

A: I hope that people will have a better understanding of the intricacies of Israeli society. The state is only 60 years old and is still working through what it means to be both Jewish and democratic. Most importantly, I hope that the film will bring diverse groups together and empower individuals to reflect on the issues and find their own voices and positions in the spectrum of ideas presented.

Q: Would you like to add anything else?

A: Three things:
■ Filmmaking is empowering and easy. Granted, it's a learning curve but anyone can pick up a video camera and begin capturing your passions and sharing them with others. I'd be happy to speak with anyone who'd like to learn more about filmmaking.

■ These issues are not specific to Jewish Israelis. Civil unions are illegal for all citizens and everyone is required to marry through her respective religious tradition. This is an evolving hot topic, however, and we may see civil unions legalized for non-Jews as early as this year.

■ The Faces of Israel film is totally independent and publicity will be very grassroots. Please spread word of the film to friends or organizations who might be interested. To learn more, check out the film trailer, read advance praise and find out how to bring the film to your community visit www.facesofisrael.com

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