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Student project leads to nationwide tour

John McCurdy
Staff Writer

New Jersey-born, Johns Hopkins University graduate Amy Beth Oppenheimer recently visited Hillel at Emory for the Atlanta debut of her extremely successful documentary, *Faces of Israel*, which broaches the topic of separation of state and synagogue in the young nation with varied and insightful interviews. More than 100 attended the viewing and subsequent discussion; now her tour continues, and the first-time filmmaker expressed great interest in returning to Atlanta (booking information is available at facesthemovie.com).



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John McCurdy: Can you remember how your original vision for the film looked? How does the final product compare to what you had in mind?

Amy Beth Oppenheimer: Initially, it wasn't even going to be a film; it was a thesis paper. I had opportunity to live and study in Haifa and was exposed to a totally different type of Israel, very se It started out as casual conversations, and I was eager to learn more about different hot topics th the pulse of Israeli society. I had this opportunity that many of my friends back home on campus the community didn't, so [I wanted to] find a way to bring the voices of Israelis to American Jewis communities.

As the filming and the editing went along, it became a lot more focused, and I culled it out and did different chapters of the film. At most events, I only screen maybe three of the sections, that way get to make it very interaction- and discussion-based.

JM: How did you go about choosing and then approaching your interviewees? I get the feeling from the trailer that you wanted a very wide variety of opinions.

ABO: The first thing I did was sit down and make categories: [I thought] there should be people from the rabbinate, people more traditional, people less traditional and more secular. Everything started very close to campus: I started out just chatting with students and professors on campus, and from there I branched out to man-on-the-street interviews, stopping people while walking around and having a conversation. From there, I realized that if this was really going to present the breadth of opinion I wanted, and also to give it a little added level of legitimacy, as in this being an important discussion piece, it was important for me to start speaking with some leaders.

So I eventually sought out some members of the rabbinate, and some were much harder than others. I walked into a Tel Aviv rabbinate office, that was the first I tried to go to, and I was kicked out, as I was wearing pants. The Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, Yona Metzger, wasn't going to give me an interview, either through persistence and luck, as I called every single day for a month. Finally, I called and there was a new assistant, and he booked me an hour with the rabbi. I think I had to wait something like three-and-a-half hours past our scheduled time, but I ended up meeting with him.

JM: You've been touring for quite some time now. Are there any questions, comments or discussions particular that stick out in your memory? If not, what has most surprised you about general audience reaction?

ABO: In terms of content of the response, it's been both funny and interesting. I was out at Berkeley about a year ago when [Faces of Israel] first came out and was presenting to a group of totally secular Israelis. What they said to me at the end was, 'It's a very good program, it was a good discussion, but your secular Israelis are not secular enough. They shouldn't just be secular, they should be roasting on Yom Kippur.'

But then, when I was at Yeshiva University, [my film] was already pushing the bounds of a program they'd bring, that it would speak about same-sex unions and Conservative and Reform Judaism. I managed to make it push the edge enough that it makes people at least entertain perspectives that don't normally come across their paths while keeping a certain comfort factor.

JM: In your own words, what do you hope a viewer takes away from Faces of Israel? Do you feel that largely this is what viewers are taking away?

ABO: One goal is bringing together people of diverse backgrounds who don't normally have a chance to interact. It's rare that congregations of different denominations ever come together to discuss their real content, significance and Jewish identity. That's one thing I think the program's accomplished. A lot of places, I'm co-sponsored by a lot of different groups that don't normally get a chance to interact in a real, meaningful way.

But if I were to say what I want an individual person to take away, then it's just to have learned about all these different issues that are going on in Israel today, just to familiarize themselves and consider different perspectives that might not be the same as their own to help form their own opinion about whatever the subject is.

It's important to realize that Israel is only 62 years old, and it's a young and changing state. I mean where was the U.S. when we were 62? There was slavery, we were almost to the Civil War. Israel now, in addition to the political and military policies, is going through an internal reflection period, figuring out what it wants to be, who it wants to be as a Jewish democratic state.

And it's not just a theoretical discussion; these are the issues that are in the Knesset every day, in the Supreme Court, and in the newspapers on the street. Just to have a little taste of how real, alive, and changing these things are--and if the viewer is so motivated, maybe to even become a part of it and be passionate about it where they can make a difference--that's my goal.

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