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Community to celebrate Israel's independence together

Sara Gilbert

In honor of Israel's 63rd birthday, local organizations from all over Rockland County will come together and celebrate as one community with programs for both children and adults.

The programs, sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Rockland County, the Jewish Federation Education Center, JCC Rockland, local schools and synagogues, are meant to appeal to a broad swath of the community and to different age groups. They begin at 4 p.m. on Tuesday, May 10 at the Rockland Jewish Community Campus, 450 West Nyack Rd. in West Nyack and are



Director Amy Beth Oppenheimer in Israel.

Students in third to seventh grade and their families will celebrate from 4 to 6:30 p.m. with Israeli food, games, music, a dance performance by Reuben Gittelman Hebrew Day School students and a performance by a cappella group Trey Kaley and others.

"We hope that the hands-on experiences will make an impression that will last students a life time, or at least until it is time for them to sign up for birthright Israel where they can have the experience of Israel first-hand," said Laurie Hoffman, the executive director of Rockland Jewish Federation Education Center, who is anticipating that nearly 400 students will attend the program.

Just some of the local schools and synagogues participating include Beth Am Temple, Congregation Shaarey Israel, Nanuet Hebrew Center, New City Jewish Center, Orangetown Jewish Center, Reuben Gittelman Hebrew Day School, Temple Beth El, Temple Beth Sholom and Temple Beth Torah.

The second half of the county-wide program, geared toward adults, begins at 7 p.m. and features a film about Israel that tackles some of the complex issues facing the state today.

The film, "Faces of Israel," a discussion about marriage, state and religion in the Jewish homeland, is directed by Amy Beth Oppenheimer.

Eight months ago, Oppenheimer and her husband, Yair Horowitz, left their New York City apartment, sold their belongings and began traveling North America in an RV bringing "Faces of Israel" to Jewish communities all around the country.

"I realized I spent so much time creating the film and the educational program that I wanted to spend at least as much time bringing it around to different Jewish communities," she said.



The 74-minute documentary released in 2009 is broken into ten chapters; each addressing a different issue that arises daily in Israel as a result of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's decision on May 14, 1948 to declare Israel both a Jewish state and a Democratic nation.

The Chief Rabbinate in Israel is responsible for, among many other things, deciding what constitutes a legal marriage and divorce. Because the organization is almost entirely ultra-Orthodox, other religious denominations, as well as secular Jews, have little to no voice.

Just some of the important questions broached by Oppenheimer in this thought-provoking film include issues of civil unions, same-sex marriages, conversions, different types and levels of religious observance and what a "Jewish state" means.

According to Daniel Sonnenschein, JCC Rockland's shaliach, or Israel emissary, the film is "a great vehicle to creating a better understanding of the complex diversity of Israeli society that makes it so unique and fascinating" and therefore quite fitting for a day of celebrating Yom Ha'atzmaut and Israel's rich diversity.

In 2007, Oppenheimer was living in Haifa, Israel where she constantly would come across Israelis dealing with these issues.

"I wanted to capture a lot of the conversations I was having and be able to bring them to the American Jewish community and spark the conversation here and film was really just the best way to do that," said Oppenheimer, 25.

The film includes interviews with almost 30 individuals including Rabbi Yona Metzger, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel; Rabbi Yitzhak Peretz, director of the Sephardic chief rabbinate; Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman, the rabbi of Congregation Kol HaNeshama; and Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum, head of marriage department of the Masorti Movement.

"The first time I walked into the Tel Aviv chief rabbinate office I was promptly kicked out," said Oppenheimer. But she was persistent and called both the Ashkenazi and Sephardic chief rabbinate offices every day for a month. Finally, one day a new assistant answered the phone and she was given a half hour meeting with Metzger. "Once I had that meeting it opened up all these doors."

The film evenly depicts all view-points, from members of the chief rabbinate to the Reform movement, ultra religious to completely secular and anywhere in between.

"I try not to push one message or another because the questions and the conversations are a lot more important to me than the answers," said Oppenheimer. "But personally I think there is value in having religious pluralism in Israel, but what that means is hard to say."

The hope, she said, is to open people up to all perspectives.

According to Hoffman, although the film and discussion are a different way of celebrating Israel's Independence than they have done in the past, "our Federation is about getting the community together.

"...because the film is not shot from a certain point of view and is endorsed by all the movements. We hope that our Rockland community can come together to celebrate Israel's Independence and learn something in the process," said Hoffman.

For more information about the film visit www.facesthemovie.com. For more information about the county-wide Yom HaAtzmaut celebration contact Laurie Hoffman 362-4200 ext. 130 or lhoffman@jewishrockland.org or Daniel Sonnenschein 362-4400 ext. 115 or daniels@jccrockland.org.

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