

# More on Jewish film — as JBFC festival continues

By TRACI DUTTON LUDWIG

What qualifies a film for a Jewish film festival? The question is raised within the momentum of Jacob Burns Film Center's enormously successful "Westchester Celebrates Jewish Film." The festival's programming inspires vibrant dialogue, with films encompassing significant biographies, colorful dramas of Israeli life, Holocaust stories, and universally themed scripts set within a Jewish milieu. Generous with its categorical definition, the festival's selection committee said it considered films which "either explicitly or implicitly investigated Jewish culture or experience" through spiritual themes, historical events, cultural experiences, or even just through a kind of infused humor or an approach to life which "felt very Jewish," explained programming director Brian Ackerman. "Our goal was a broad brush of quality films which could represent the full breadth of Jewish experience," he said.

Speaking generally, Jewish film scholar Michael Taub supports a more critical perspective which qualifies the definition through content. He identified true Jewish films as works which thematically address Jewish issues or interests and furthermore distinguished these films from others which only "happen to be Jewish" because of a Jewish filmmaker, character or inci-



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"3 Mothers," the story of a set of Egyptian-Jewish triplets whose lives are shrouded in secrets and regret, is one of more than 20 films shown in "Westchester Celebrates Jewish Film."

dental setting.

The real value of Jewish film is that it "gives the viewer an opportunity to explore significant issues of the Jewish

identity today throughout the world," said Marvin Israelow, co-chair of the American Jewish Committee's film festival committee. One of America's oldest human rela-

tions agencies and a sponsor of the series, the AJC safeguards Israel and Jewish life around the world and promotes good relations among people through mutual respect and understanding.

Ethan Isenberg, director of "Lonely Man of Faith: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik," emphasized a similar value of understanding. "I believe there is not enough attention given to creating films which can speak to different audiences, as a way of fostering understanding among people," he said. Through the topic and the making of his film, Isenberg aimed to bridge the gap between the core audience of Modern Orthodox scholars and the general audience of secular Jews and even non-Jews. "The film's figure Rabbi Soloveitchik fascinated me because of his unique role as both a guiding light of faith [within the Modern Orthodox community] and an influential intellectual figure outside his community. Although Soloveitchik was dedicated to religious convictions, his messages were universally themed. Rather than speaking of 'the Jew,' he preferred the existential language of 'man.' Equally, he embraced questions and believed in constant rigorous thought. He realized struggles with thought and accepted the ambiguity of contradictions and paradoxes. ... These

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themes speak to people — religious or otherwise especially in our post 9/11 world,” Isenberg said.

To keep his film authentic to the core audience yet accessible to others, Isenberg took great pains to balance the intimacy gained by obsessive research with subtitled translations of difficult words, background explanations, and a biographical mode of personal “storytelling” that was sensitive to the novice. Isenberg said he even worked with a mostly secular crew to ensure that the film never started sounding “too much like an insider language” of Modern Orthodox scholarship.

Ackerman praised Isenberg’s achievement of creating a film both particularly focused on Judaism yet also relevant to a broader audience. “I hope people don’t overlook this film, thinking the topic is too specific,” Ackerman said. “It’s a fascinating film in every respect. I knew nothing about the story, and I was moved in a way which surprised me.” Apparently, Ackerman is not alone. Isenberg has received over 50 requests to show the film at Jewish community centers, schools, colleges and libraries, both here and abroad, and he is working on a theatrical release.

Isenberg said he would like to see more Jewish films step up to their potential and raise awareness about religious subject matter which needs

to be addressed such as people who have become newly religious, converts to religion, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the “Agunah topic” (a legal issue surrounding Orthodox husbands who refuse to give wives documents for divorce).

“I’ve seen a disturbing trend in Jewish film festivals to present predominantly secular themes maybe because of the perception that such films will be more popular with audiences,” observed Isenberg. “Too often, though, when there is a Jewish component of popular film, much of it is predictable or regrettably stereotypical. There are the Holocaust stories, and the typical cast of characters the one-dimensional Yiddish mama, the pious but simplistic old rabbi, assimilated Jews and Jewish jokes.” Isenberg instead sees value in films which conquer stereotypes and open a causeway for learning and understanding. “There need to be more films which communicate the depth and richness of the Jewish culture and faith,” he said. “I hope my film gives people a window so that they will want to learn more. That is the opportunity of the filmmaker.”

While supporting this viewpoint, Taub also recognizes value in the larger range of topics and presentations. He believes Holocaust films are especially crucial because that tragedy informs Jewish cultural heritage and identity. “Directors and producers

have a responsibility to address the ills of our time,” he said, pointing to the example of Steven Spielberg’s “Schindler’s List,” which he estimated “did more to educate people about the Holocaust and tangibly convey human suffering than did almost every book combined.” Visual imagery is immediate and compelling, he explained. When a film is beautifully made through cinematography, angles, music it touches emotion and stays with you in ways that other intellectual material never can. “Experiencing important [Holocaust-related] films as part of an audience is transformative and amplifies their effect,” Taub elaborated. “As a group, you become part of something larger than yourself. You get vibes from other people, absorb their passions, and experience collective emotion. So, it’s important for filmmakers to engage these subjects. Especially now as Holocaust survivors are aging and disappearing, I see great urgency in getting the stories and recording them before it is too late.”

On the other end of the thematic spectrum, Taub shared interesting insight into what he sees as the development of the Jewish figure in comedy. Recently, he said, Jewish themes have increased in mainstream cinema; citing “Keeping Up with the Steins,” “Meet the Fockers,” and “When Do We Eat?” Taub pointed out that this comic genre sees the Jewish character, as well as other characters, behaving

in a supposedly ethnic way, exaggerated for effect. “Such stereotypes are not productive, but compared to Woody Allen’s reflection of himself as a Jew in the 1960s and 1970s, something has obviously changed,” he said. “In [Allen’s] movies, the Jew was pitted against the gentile. Think of the dinner scene in ‘Annie Hall’ which contrasts Allen’s meal with the very proper, controlled family of Hall and an imagined meal with his own family loud, boisterous, with everyone talking at once and reaching for food across the table.” Unlike such portrayals of the Jew as “outsider” or dealing with issues like anti-Semitism, Taub explained that Hollywood now approaches being Jewish in the same way it approaches being Greek or Italian or Hispanic, or any other ethnic group. “Instead of exploiting ‘otherness,’ today’s humor concerns more normal, internal issues — like the dragging on of the Passover Seder in ‘When Do We Eat?’ So — in a way, and in an area where you’d least expect it — we can see that we have made progress,” Taub summarized.

*“Westchester Celebrates Jewish Film 2007” began March 8 and runs through March 29 at the Jacob Burns Film Center, 364 Manville Road, Pleasantville. For a complete calendar of films or to purchase tickets, visit [www.burnsfilmcenter.org](http://www.burnsfilmcenter.org) or call the box office at 773-7663.*