



A CRITICAL LOOK: 'There is a lot of hypocrisy here with people acting like we are the only ones that ever get attacked,' says filmmaker Yoav Shamir (left).

Demystifying anti-Semitism

In 'Defamation,' filmmaker Yoav Shamir embarks on a personal journey to examine the role that anti-Semitism plays in the way that Jews relate to the world

Bernard Dichek

WHILE VISITING THE MAJDANEK CONCENTRATION camp in Poland, an Israeli high-school student reflects on how learning about the Nazi horrors may affect the way Israelis perceive the suffering of others. "When we see an Arab home demolished by the army on the news we say it's not that bad, we faced worse," says 16-year-old Nofar from Haifa. "They packed us into trains and forced Jews to kill Jews. It could be it doesn't bother me. I say: 'So what? The Arabs have lots of houses.'"

Israeli filmmaker Yoav Shamir is concerned about attitudes like the one expressed by Nofar, one of the high-school students who appear in his provocative new documentary "Defamation," which had its American premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York in April and opens in Israel this month.

In the 93-minute soul-searching film, Shamir embarks on a personal journey to examine the central role that anti-Semitism plays in the way that Jews relate to the world.

Do Jews in Israel and abroad devote too much attention to the subject, asks Shamir, and if so, what are the consequences of this preoccupation?

Shamir examines how Jews perceive anti-Semitism from several different angles. He observes how Nofar's class from the Ironi Aleph High School in Haifa is prepared for their Holocaust education trip to Poland and records their impressions when they get there; he offers an inside glimpse into the workings of the U.S.-based Anti-Defamation League

(ADL), the international organization involved in the fight against anti-Semitism. Shamir probes reported anti-Semitic incidents in Brooklyn and Moscow; and he lends an ear to controversial figures such as American academic Norman Finkelstein (who resigned from DePaul University in the wake of a campaign to derail his tenure bid) and John Mearsheimer (co-author of the 2007 book "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy"), both of whom contend that anti-Semitism shouldn't be confused with anti-Zionism and what they consider to be legitimate criticism of Israel.

But if this sounds like a heavy-handed film weighed down by monotonous talk, it is anything but that. Shamir, 38, is a prizewinning filmmaker ("Checkpoint," "Flipping Out"), dazzlingly skilled at capturing characters in humorous and emotional situations that allow viewers to reach their own conclusions. He has a knack for gaining close rapport with people from all walks of life and for getting them to express their innermost feelings. In scenes that range in location from a street corner in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, where a group of Afro-Americans weigh the pros and cons of robbing Jews versus blacks, to the site of the Babi Yar Holocaust memorial in Kiev where American Jews debate whether they love Israel or America more, it is not what the characters say so much as the way they say it that gets under the viewer's skin.

In March, when "Defamation" was shown at the Thessaloniki Film Festival, the film was loudly applauded by an audience that watched it with rapt attention. "The film really shows in a poignant way just how complicated the Jewish people are," noted a visibly moved member of the audience, Greek filmmaker Ioanna Tsinividi, in an interview with The Jerusalem Report.

In portraying the divergent Jewish views about anti-Semitism, Shamir starts with Abe Foxman, who heads the ADL, which was founded in 1913 and today has a \$70 million budget and 30 offices worldwide. A Holocaust survivor, Foxman has worked with the organization for over 40 years and is probably one of the best-known figures in the American Jewish community. Early on in the film we see Foxman introducing Shamir to ADL staff members. "He's not going to hurt us but he's a good journalist so he wants to get some good stuff."

The stuff that Shamir gets about the ADL, a non-profit organization, is indeed good, but is not necessarily good in the way that Foxman might have wished. Shamir does not directly criticize the ADL, but subtly questions some of the ADL's interpretations and assumptions in a way that proves damning. With the assistance of ADL staff Shamir tries to document filmworthy examples of the 1,500 anti-Semitic incidents that the ADL reported in the past year. After a bit of digging Shamir does find a few incidents but neither of them, a New York City policeman's use of a mild obscenity in describing a Jewish funeral and a stone-throwing attack on a bus carrying Chabad schoolchildren in Brooklyn, seems to warrant the ADL's ominous warnings about the current state of anti-Semitism in the United States.

Shamir is more pointed in his commentary when he delves into another aspect of the ADL's activities. He accompanies Foxman on a trip to Ukraine where he and other ADL mission members meet with leading political figures in the Ukrainian government. Foxman points out that the politicians want to meet with the ADL because of their desire to strengthen ties with the U.S. government. "They do believe that we can make a difference in Washington, so how can you convince them otherwise?" says Foxman, who proudly notes that the ADL meets with at least 40 heads of state during U.N. General Assembly meetings.

But Shamir wonders about the wisdom of reinforcing this perception. In a voice-over comment he remarks: "So I think I get it, it's like a poker game in which Foxman bluffs the other side into thinking we have more power than we really have, but the downside is that this can result in envy, even hate."

One person who is a lot less friendly towards the ADL than the Ukrainian politicians is Norman Finkelstein, an American political scientist known for championing the Palestinian cause and for his outspoken criticism of Israel. Finkelstein contends that because of his views, Foxman and other Jewish groups were instrumental in getting him fired from his teaching position at DePaul University. (Finkelstein was denied tenure and resigned in 2007 after reaching a settlement with the university.) Shamir gives Finkelstein a generous amount of screen time during which he accuses Israel of making cynical use of the Holocaust in order to shield it from what he considers to be its brutal policies in the West Bank and Gaza.

The loose rein that Shamir gives Finkelstein, however, soon begins to work to Finkelstein's disadvantage as he begins to rant and rave about Foxman, comparing him to Hitler and on-camera giving him the Nazi salute. As Finkelstein loses control, the audience draws its own conclusions. "Part of being a filmmaker," says Shamir in an interview with *The Report*, "is knowing when to give people enough rope to hang themselves." Another part seems to be knowing how to ask questions. Or

appearing not to know how.

Serving as both camera operator and interviewer, Shamir frequently gives the impression he is more of the former than the latter. It's an approach that lets him make provocative queries in a casual way. Take for example the bumbling, Woody Allen-esque way he engages John Mearsheimer. Prior to his meeting with Mearsheimer, Shamir notes that many Jews have accused the University of Chicago political science professor of being an anti-Semite because of the contentions he makes in "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy."

"But did you kind of, like kind of, like ever take a few minutes to question yourself if you are an anti-Semite... did you like try to think about it, like you know, between yourself and yourself, like I don't know like maybe... like some of it was influenced by something which is, you know, could be interpreted as anti-Semitic?" Mearsheimer, appearing relieved to be given a chance to respond to this charge, indicates that he never "had any doubt" that he could not possibly be an anti-Semite. He also wistfully adds that once someone has been called an anti-Semite it is something that is hard to shake off.

IN DOCUMENTING THE ISRAELI HIGH-SCHOOL TRIP TO Poland, Shamir requires little in the way of interview technique. Here he finds it sufficient to present some very unsettling scenes in order to raise questions about the value of these expeditions. Shamir notes that about 30,000 Israeli teenagers currently visit the concentration camps of Poland as part of their high-school studies, considerably more than the 500 or so that made the voluntary trip in the '80s when he was a student.

Prior to their departure, the teachers provide the students with more than just historical background about the Holocaust. They also warn them about the dangers lurking among present-day local Polish populations. Coming out of these preparatory lessons, one of the students remarks: "We grow up in this spirit of knowing that we are hated [as Jews]." And another states: "If a kid knows from the start that he is hated and what happened to his family in the Holocaust, it evokes anger towards the other side." What follows later on during the actual trip is a striking illustration of self-fulfilling expectations.

In one stunning scene that bears this out, we see several of the students approach a group of elderly Polish men sitting on a bench. Neither the Polish men nor the Israeli girls are able to speak each other's language and their attempts to communicate with each other fail. To viewers, who can observe what is happening through sub-

titles, it is clear that the Poles are simply engaging in friendly banter. But the girls reach a different conclusion. They are convinced that they are being insulted and run off to tell others about the incident.

Another one of the students, when asked why he is staying in his room, indicates that he is afraid to go out "because there are Nazis here that could do things to us. They told us that we are in a hostile country." Later on, the line between the past and the present becomes even more blurred. After the students visit the concentration camps and participate in exercises in which they are encouraged to identify with the Jewish victims, many appear to be in severe distress. One girl sobbingly protests "They told me soon you'll cry too... I didn't do anything to anyone."

We are left wondering what she means by this. Is she upset because of her identification with the concentration camp victims or is she dis-

'There is this perception in the Jewish world that there is almost something mystical about anti-Semitism. It's as if anti-Semitism is this thing that can't be explained and that will always be there.'

— director Yoav Shamir



COURTESY GNEPHIL-DISTRIBUTION & CO PRODUCTIONS



COURTESY GNEPHIL-DISTRIBUTION & CO PRODUCTIONS

SCENES FROM 'DEFAMATION': Abe Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League (top); Israeli teens prepare to visit concentration camps in Poland

traught because she feels that she has been put in a position where she has been forced to cry?

What is clear though to Asaf Sinai, one of the teachers accompanying the trip, is that there is a need to rethink the merit of trips of this kind. "The Germans started this death industry but we are perpetuating the memory of it... We have to remember what happened but if we do it too much it prevents us from being a normal people."

Shamir, in his conclusion to the film, echoes Sinai's statement and indicates that he believes it is time for Jews to "live in the present and look to the future."

SITTING IN A CAFÉ IN A NORTH TEL AVIV SUBURB during the Passover holiday, Shamir reflects on his original motivation for making the film. "But this attitude only isolates us and causes us to be separate from others. It's always them and us," he observes as he orders a cappuccino and croissant. The stockily-built film-maker has a wide-eyed boyish face, a friendly, personable manner and doesn't need any prodding to speak as openly and directly as the characters in his film.

The Israeli high-school trips to concentration camps ought to be canceled, he says, so long as they are offered in their current format. "The way they work today the trips lead students in the wrong direction. It is important for kids to know what happened, but not what happened to us as Jews but rather what happened to us as people."

Asked what he meant when he mentions in the film that he has never personally experienced anti-Semitism, he explains that he is referring to acts of discrimination like being refused to be able to rent an apartment. "There is a lot of hypocrisy here with people acting like we are the only ones that ever get attacked," he says, his voice growing passionate. "I

have Arab friends who find it impossible to find anyone willing to rent them an apartment in Tel Aviv. We need to get our own house in order and do something about all the graffiti here saying 'Death to Arabs' before we get excited about a swastika in a cemetery in Paris. By being obsessed with being victims we lose sight of the horizon."

Shamir studied filmmaking at Tel Aviv University after he became restless working in high-tech. He first gained international acclaim with "Checkpoint" (2003), a sensitive portrayal of encounters between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians at military checkpoints. To make the film, Shamir spent more than 100 days filming on his own in the West Bank. "Checkpoint" won many prestigious awards at film festivals and was broadcast on TV stations around the world. The film, which shows empathy to both sides, is also one of very few films on the subject of Israeli-Palestinian relations that has been favorably received by both Israeli and Palestinian audiences. One Palestinian commentator, recalls Shamir, wrote that the film made him for the first time feel a sense of compassion towards Israeli soldiers.

His subsequent films include "5 Days" (2005), in which Shamir was given exclusive access to the IDF commander in charge of the evacuation of the Gaza settlements, and "Flipping Out" (2006), a look at the drug-taking journeys of young Israelis to India.

Shamir notes that "Defamation," along with "Flipping Out" and "Checkpoint," is a sort of trilogy about Israeli young people made in the wrong order: "Checkpoint" is about Israelis in the army; "Flipping Out" deals with what happens after they leave the army; and "Defamation" portrays them before they begin their military service.

His latest film has its Israel premiere at Tel Aviv's DocAviv Documentary Film Festival this month where it was selected to launch the festival. It's then expected to be released in movie theaters around the country. In addition to its New York screenings, is it scheduled to be shown at film festivals in Toronto, San Francisco, Melbourne and London later in the year.

"Defamation" is by far Shamir's most expensive production. With filming taking place in dozens of locations in the United States, Europe and Israel, the film had a whopping budget of 580,000 euros.

The film's biggest backer was The Austrian Film Institute, which chipped in 200,000 euros. "I felt that with anti-Semitism growing in Europe in recent years, in particular in Paris, in eastern Germany and in Poland, it was my duty as a second-generation member of a perpetrator country to see if I could do something," Knut Ogris, the film's Austrian co-producer, tells The Report.

Another leading funder was the Danish Film Institute, which contributed 130,000 euros. "The film turned out better than I ever dreamed it could," says Danish co-producer Karoline Leth, who worked closely with Shamir over a five-year period. She notes that one of the surprising aspects of the film for her was the finding that Orthodox Jews perceive less anti-Semitism than their secular counterparts.

She bristles at the suggestion that there might be something odd about a Danish producer wanting to make a film about such an Israeli or Jewish subject. "The subject of anti-Semitism is a world issue and it's very much in the Danish tradition of filmmaking to look at something like that," she said in a phone interview with The Report. "I think the film is really about perceptions and how people look at the same thing differently depending on their identity and where they are placed," she observed.

Drawing a comparison to a film that she is now working on about Muslims, she indicates that films like "Defamation" demonstrate that there is no singular way of categorizing a nation or people. "'Defamation' shows that Jews are not of one opinion but [have] many millions of different opinions."