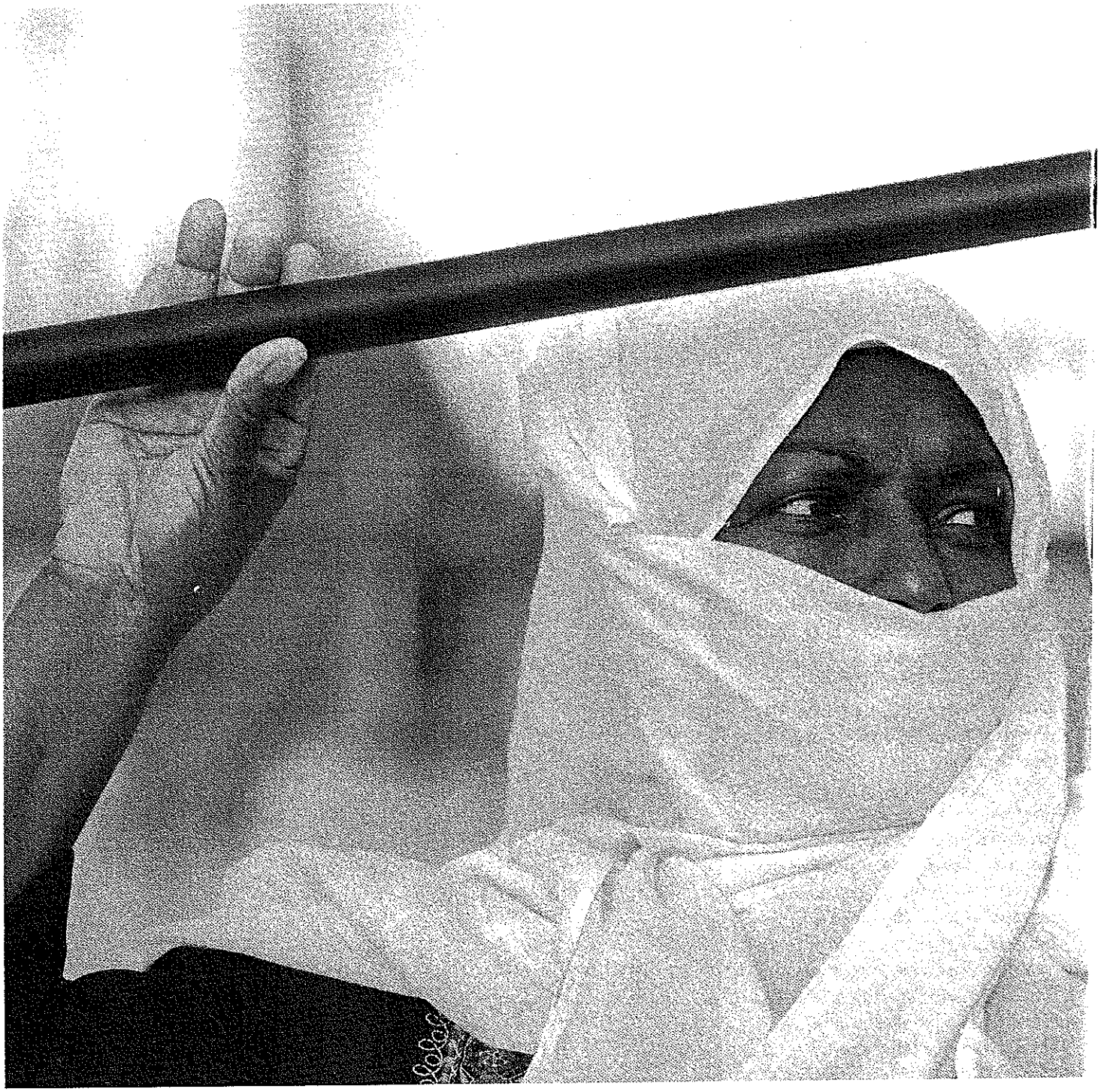
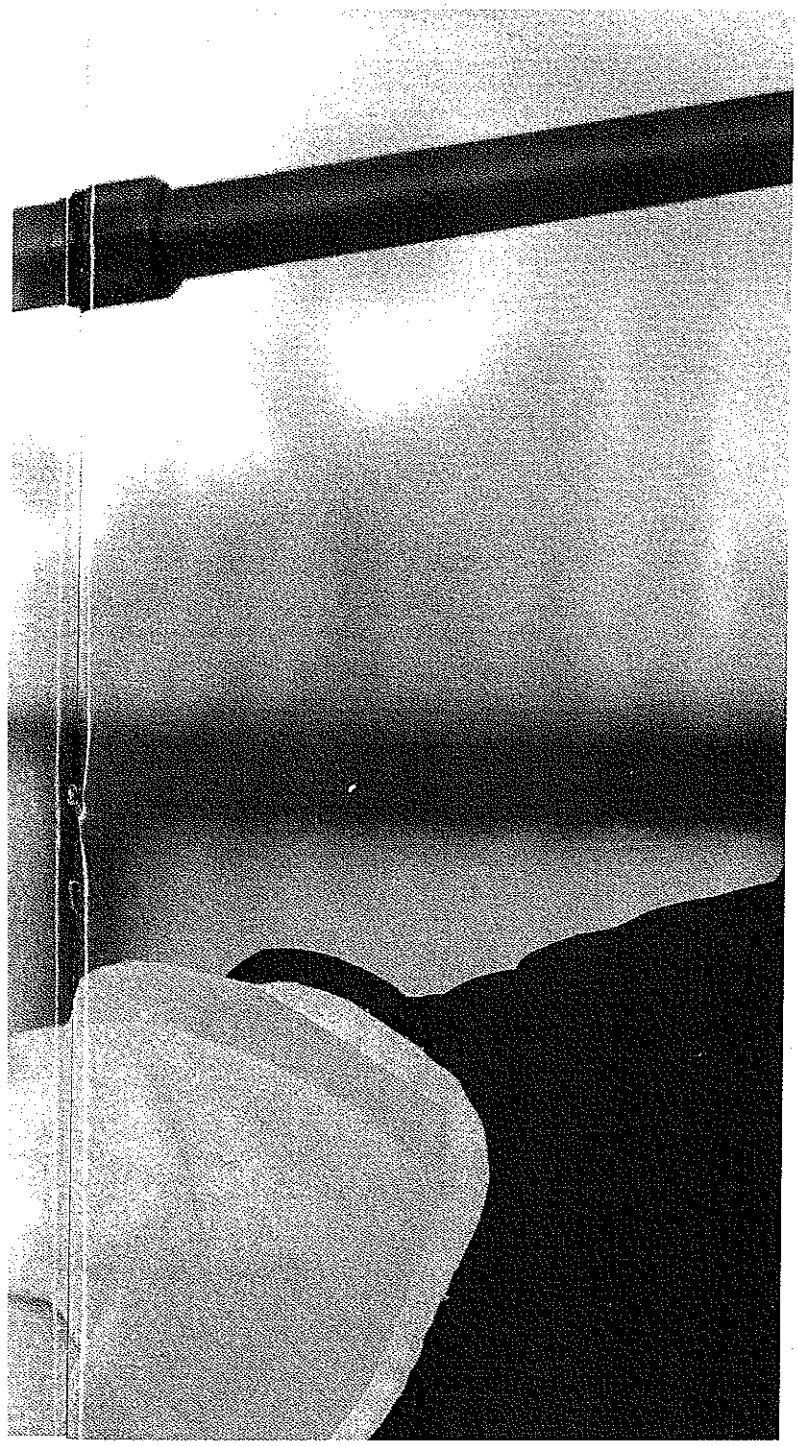


Seeking the Other
The Film Class *(above) was directed by Uri Rosenwaks (near right), standing with one of the film's Zanzibar producers; Yulie Cohen.*

Keeping It Reel

With a range of gripping stories and insights, Israeli documentary films are thriving.

By **Sara K. Eisen**



The focus of Israeli documentary films can vary widely: In *My Brother*, director Yulie Cohen records her attempt to reestablish contact with her estranged ultra-Orthodox brother. *The Lady of the Arabs* explores the scandal that occurred when a Druze model was forced to withdraw from an Israeli beauty pageant. *Tzni'ut*, religiously mandated modesty, is the subject of an upcoming film by Anat Zuria.

Documentary directors come from all walks of life. Cohen, for example, a 6th-generation Israeli, is devoutly secular; Ibtisam Mara'ana, director of *The Lady of the Arabs*, is Palestinian; Zuria is modern Orthodox.

Yet, their documentaries have a common denominator: They unflinchingly examine the realities of Israeli society, whether in the political, religious or social realm. Cohen, Mara'ana and Zuria as well as Uri Rosenwaks, who directed a movie about black Bedouins, and Yael Klopmann, whose film expands on the recent evacuation from Gaza, represent a small piece of a rich and growing field.

ISRAEL'S VITALITY IN THE GENRE IS CLEAR. THE COUNTRY has a plethora of filmmakers (and seven film schools) who make about 100 documentaries a year, versus about 15 feature films.

"There are no documentary festivals in the world where we aren't represented," says Ilana Tsur, founder and director of Docaviv, the nine-year-old Tel Aviv-based international documentary film festival (www.docaviv.co.il). One of a number of documentary film venues in the country, Docaviv has matured into an 80-movie happening showing socially conscious fare from Israel and around the world. Over 20,000 viewers come to the 10-day festival, which includes four prestigious film competitions.

Outside Israel, Europe is the biggest market for Israeli documentaries. But, notes Ruth Diskin, one of Israel's leading distributors of independent Israeli films (www.ruthfilms.com), Israeli documentaries are in high demand around the globe—at university archives, art house cinemas and television stations. They are contenders for many of the industry's top awards at events such as the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam; Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival; Festival de Cannes; Edinburgh International Film Festival; Berlin International Film Festival; and, in the United States, the Sundance Film Festival.

Tsur, a former radio and television producer as well as a filmmaker, attributes worldwide interest in the genre to the global post-9/11 reality. Knowing the stranger, she explains, has become an international priority.

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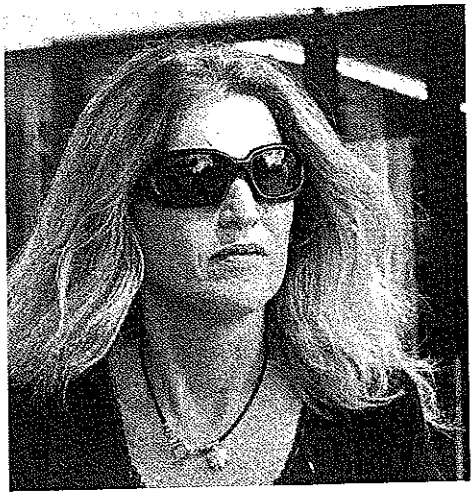

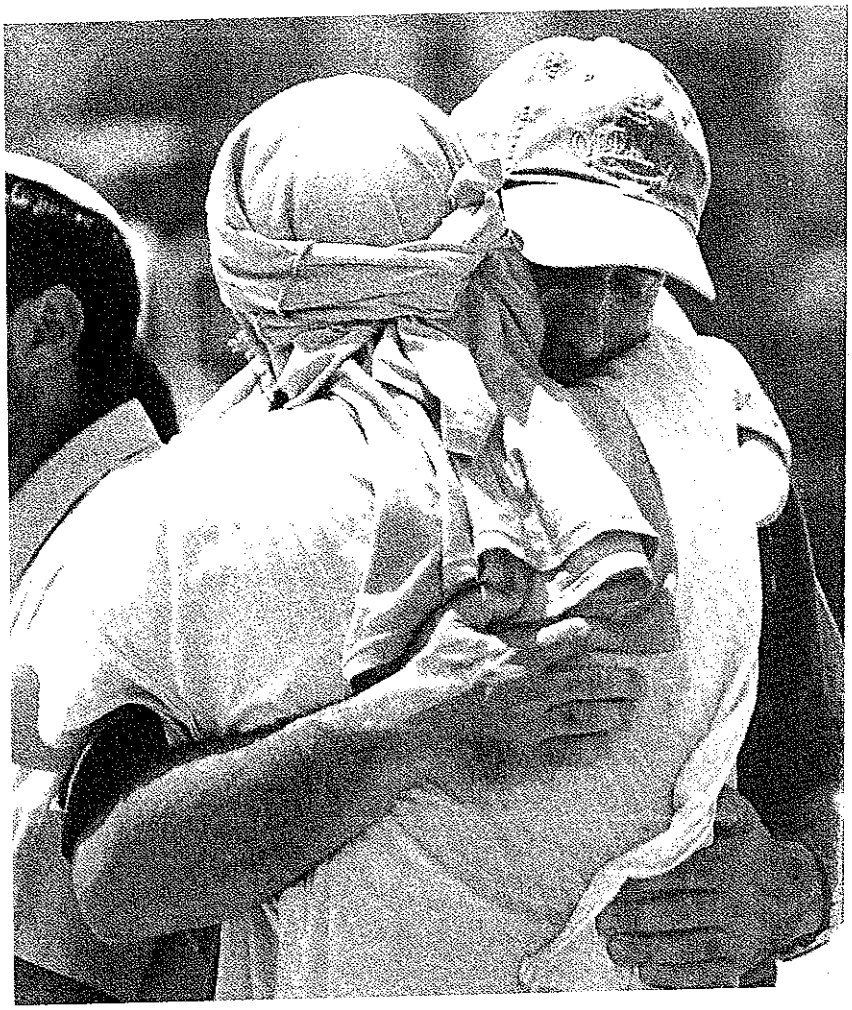

On Brotherhood *Yael Klopmann (above); an embrace in Gaza, from* Storm of Emotions.

THIS ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND THE other is Cohen's life work. Her "Mine?" series—*My Terrorist* (2002), *My Land Zion* (2004) and *My Brother* (2007)—is devoted entirely to the director's encounters with her existential opposites. The trilogy's deeply personal films are self-narrated and follow the director's meandering quests for identity—whether as a victim, a Zionist or a Jew. Her angst is palpable, but as a seeker she is attractive and compelling.

She is best known for *My Terrorist,* her provocative first film. Cohen, who worked as a flight attendant, was the victim of a 1978 Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine attack on an El Al flight crew in London. One of the terrorists, Fahad Mihyi, killed a flight attendant and wounded three others, including Cohen. Cohen records how, decades later, she reaches out to her incarcerated attacker. In a series of letters to Mihyi, she questions the accepted truths surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the nature of forgiveness.

Her second film, *My Land Zion,* has the (then) militantly secular and leftist Cohen confronting the Palmach-generation Zionist mythology with which she was raised by filming religious West Bank settlers. She questions her children's future in Israel and dissects her conflicted feelings toward a settler family.

The film was initially entitled *My Settler,* until the subject of the film, uncomfortable with Cohen's antagonism toward Jews living beyond the Green Line, ceased collaboration with her. Viewers of *My Terrorist* and *My Land Zion* have wondered which "other" was harder for Cohen to confront—the terrorist or the settlers.

"[Israelis] are always checking boundaries," observes Diskin, who served as a juror at the Munich International Documentary Film Festival last May.

In *The Film Class,* it is the subjects of the documentary—black Bedouin women—who are crossing boundaries. Directed by forty-something Rosenwaks, a veteran filmmaker, it relates the experiences of a group of black Bedouin women in the Negev town of Rahat to whom he gave a course in filmmaking. In 2007, it won Best One Hour Documentary at the Annual Documentary Awards in Israel. More recently, it was given a special UNESCO mention at the Zanzibar International Film Festival.

Days into the class, when the students were asked about their backgrounds, it became clear that they did not know their own basic history. So Rosenwaks changed direction, unraveling the knot of silence around the Bedouin community. However, in *The Film Class,* it is Rosenwaks's students who do the filming, telling the story of their unfolding ability to tell a story. The students' discovery is made via interviews with their elders—in one wonderful scene, an ancient village man recounts the sad history of their tribe while sitting on a mat on the floor—and a trip to Africa, where the students and Rosenwaks visit a banished black Bedouin man living abroad. He had

Israel's vitality in the documentary genre is clear, and films from the country are shown at festivals worldwide.

attempted to marry a white Bedouin woman and nearly caused a caste war. The truth they uncover—that their ancestors were brought to Palestine from East Africa as slaves by Arab traders during the 19th and early 20th centuries and that their community has since endured severe discrimination at the hands of the white Bedouin population—is dramatic and unsettling. It seems that the prejudice had been so taken for granted that the women are almost unaware of an alternate reality.

Rosenwaks's story is really about education as empowerment. Empowering women is also the concern of Mara'ana and Zuria. Both employ a lush visual style. However, Zuria focuses on concepts—such as modesty or divorce—while Mara'ana, who defines herself as a Palestinian with Israeli citizenship, relates tales of struggling individuals, including her own story.

Lady of the Arabs *A scene from* 3 Times Divorced *(above); Ibtisam Mara'ana.*

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"Making movies gives me a voice as a woman and as a repressed Palestinian," says Mara'ana, 31, who was born in Fureidis (Arabic for paradise), a village in northern Israel.

Her rich investigative films have won several prestigious awards in her five years as a director, including Best Documentary Award (short to mid-length) at Hot Docs in 2006 for *Badal*, which explores marriage arrangements in Palestinian society, and Best Israeli Film in 2007 at Docaviv for *3 Times Divorced*. The latter is about Palestinian divorcée Khitam, separated from her six children by paternalistic Muslim law that automatically grants men both divorces and custody of their children. In addition, her ex-husband is an Israeli citizen; Gaza-born Khitam is not, so has no legal recourse in Israel.

IN HER FIRST AWARD-WINNING FILM, *PARADISE LOST*, Mara'ana searches for Suuad George, a female Palestine Liberation Organization activist now living in England. Since Mara'ana's parents and neighbors refuse to dig up Fureidis's history, which so consumes the director, Mara'ana hopes that George, who grew up in the area, can shed light both on the village's lost past and Mara'ana's visceral identity as a Palestinian woman.

Mara'ana finds George and, more sentimental than militant in her middle age, the former activist returns with Mara'ana to Fureidis. Their seaside discussions on Palestinian identity at sunset are the spine of the film.

But it is when Mara'ana's camera meanders that other truths emerge: The director confronts the unchanging role of the town's women and the Muslim radicalization of her birthplace; her own mother returns from a hajj devoutly Muslim, quits her job as a nanny for a Jewish Zikhron Yaakov family on religious grounds and chides her daughter about her immodest dress.

Mara'ana's conclusion—shown in a beautiful shot of her waiting for a train to Tel Aviv—is, despite knowledge of the past, to simply embrace the future. It's why she lives and works in Tel Aviv (tacitly sharing a pervasive Israeli attitude: Change is nearly impossible, so one might as well enjoy life).

Her current project, in collaboration with Israeli producer Barak Heymann, is *The Lady of the Arabs*. It documents the scandal that ensued when Angelina Fares, the first Druze supermodel, competed on the Israeli beauty pageant scene. Two of her uncles threatened to murder her, resulting in their arrests, and Fares ultimately withdrew from the Miss Israel competition.

Zuria, 45, a painter and journalist-turned-director from

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Jerusalem, also uses the documentary film medium as an artful form of activism. She exposes what she sees as the repression of women by Jewish law. As with Rosenwaks's film and Mara'ana's body of work, the lifting of taboos is central to Zuria's directorial raison d'être—though another hallmark of her films is her sensual style.

Echoes of dripping water and shots of the pale winter moon are central to her first film, *Purity* (2002), winner of the 2004 SCAM prize for Discovery of the Year in France, among other top awards. The film spotlights a hidden facet of Orthodox married life, the laws of *taharat hamishpaha,* ritual purity. These laws involve the physical separation from one's spouse that starts with menstruation and culminates in a trip to a *mikve*, ritual bath, which renders the woman permissible to her husband again.

"People don't deal enough with the philosophy behind Jewish law," Zuria says. Her complex film follows several women living—and struggling—with various aspects of the law. One, for example, has medical issues that render her "impure" nearly all of the time.

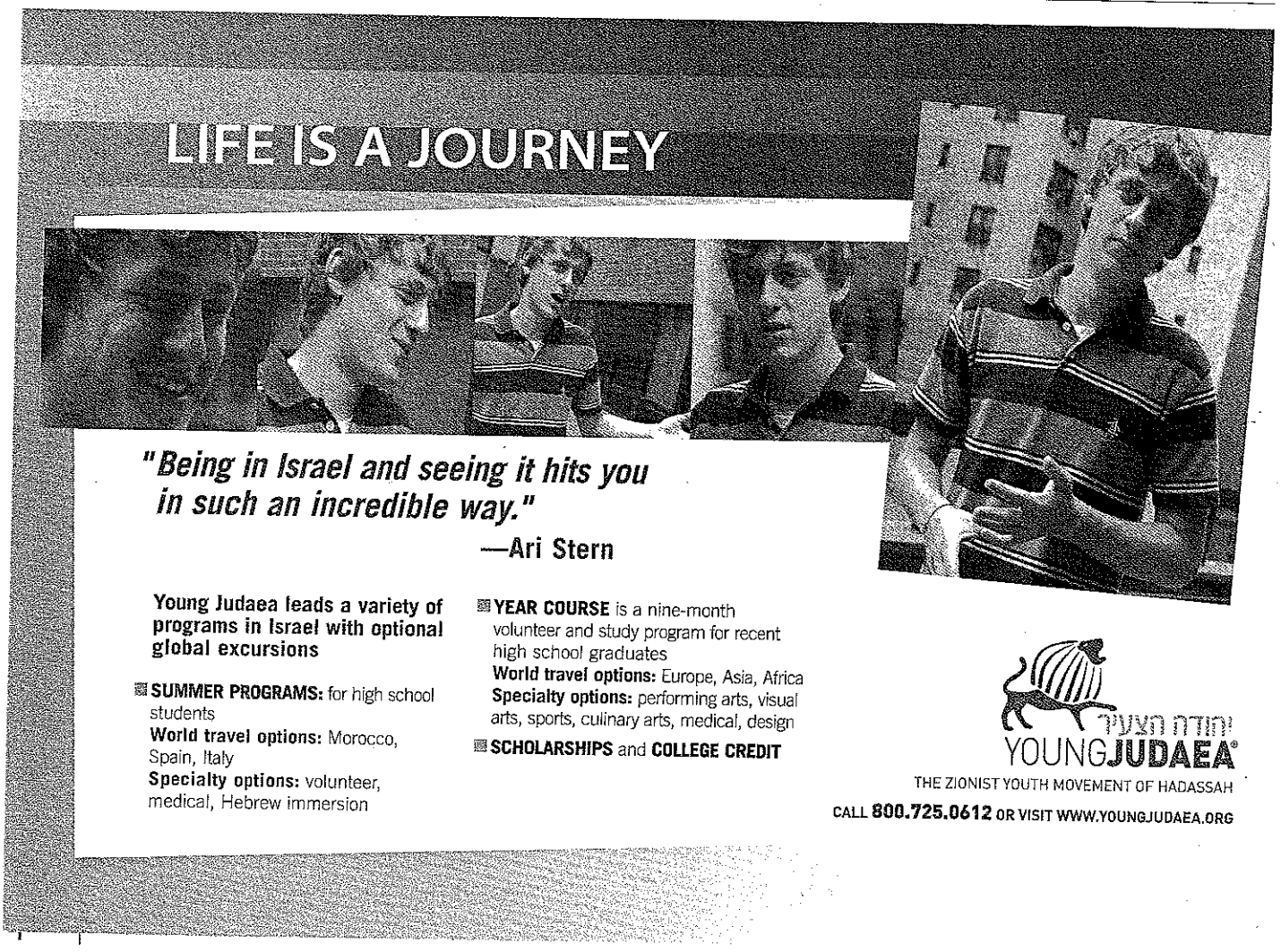
The film caused a storm in Orthodox circles and generated much discourse in the media. Detractors described it as shallow and pejorative while supporters called it brave and timely. The Hebrew daily *Maariv*'s Web site got hundreds of comments responding to its glowing movie review, with readers calling Zuria "lower than the Dead Sea" and also "deserving of a lifetime achievement award."

Zuria is glad she touched a nerve. "There needs to be testimony [from women] to raise serious questions about the way the law is designed and applied—especially when it reaches the proportions of being hurtful," she notes.

THE DIRECTOR'S SECOND FILM UPPED THE ANTE BY EXploring the phenomenon of *agunot*—women whose husbands refuse to grant them a *get*, or Jewish divorce. *Sentenced to Marriage,* or *Mekudeshet,* won the Wolgin Award for Best Documentary at the 2004 Jerusalem Film Festival and Best Documentary Award at 2005's Hot Docs. It profiles three women stuck in the quagmire of Israel's religious family courts.

One scene, in which an even-tempered woman breaks down in a fit of screaming after one of her many unsuccessful trip to the rabbinical court to get a divorce from her sadistic, dissembling husband, is particularly haunting.

According to Zuria, the film resulted in a special session in the Knesset on *agunot*, several months of journal-



Empowering Women *(left) Anat Zuria; one of the women waiting for a Jewish divorce in the documentary* Sentenced to Marriage.

istic exposition and was shown en masse to family court judges from both religious and secular Israeli courts.

Zuria's current project, *Modesty,* will examine the Jewish concept of *tzni'ut*, laws requiring a certain covering up of the body as well as a reticence on the part of women.

COHEN'S NEWEST FILM IS ALSO CAUSING CONTROVERSY in a country obsessed with divisions and subdivisions. Now 51, the director is mellower than she was when making *My Land Zion* and has turned the camera further inward. *My Brother*, which debuted at the Haifa International Film Festival last September, is, she says, her most painful journey to date.

Cohen's brother became *haredi* in the 1980s. Today a yeshiva student, he resides with his wife and six children in Bnei Brak and does not talk to his secular family, despite repeated invitations. Cohen's futile attempts to bridge the gap between them are the focus of *My Brother*.

"My dearest brother," the film begins with a voice-over and a piano's lonely tune set against the backdrop of a rainy day, "more than 25 years have gone by since you have turned ultra-Orthodox, and there is no contact between us. Mom and Dad are more than 75 years old now, they are about to sell the house we grew up in, and I feel a bit lost. I want to get to know you...."

Audiences reacted to the sadness of the work and to the secular-religious rift it exposed. But the crux of the film, the filmmaker explains, is her own transformation. In this way, her work mirrors Mara'ana's *Paradise Lost*: While the latter uses a personal journey to tell the larger story of Palestinian identity, Cohen takes a more global Israeli story (family members "lost" to religion) and lets it change her. To better understand her estranged sibling, she begins studying Judaism in various educational programs.

She joins a *beit midrash* for directors, producers, screenwriters and actors run by Keshet TV Network in conjunction with the Avi Chai Foundation, the Gesher Film Fund, UJA-Federation of New York and Alma Hebrew College. The program exposes artists to Jewish source texts, and Cohen becomes fascinated by neo-Hasidic philosophy as well as biblical and Talmudic literature, which, she says, "echo deeply" with her.

"Five years ago, my Jewish identity meant nothing to me," says Cohen, "but now I am more open to finding my own Judaism. I tried to reach my brother, but instead reached myself."

In this vein, another film with an intense look at the meaning of brotherhood is *Storm of Emotions*, directed by Klopmann. It follows the mostly secular men and women of the Israel Defense Forces who were in charge of the evacuation of Gush Katif during the summer of 2006. The documentary won last year's Bronze Remi Award for creative excellence at the WorldFest Houston International Film Festival.

In a pivotal scene, the colonel in charge of evacuating the Neve Dekalim settlement is given a Torah to carry from the synagogue. His embrace with the community's rabbi is complicated and yet simple. At times, the film has a kitschy 1970s cop-show aesthetic, but it works as a lasting comment about Israeli society, its way of coming apart and together minute by minute. Klopmann, in her 9th month of pregnancy while shooting the movie, records in her production notes that "the most painful experience during filming was to be there at the moment of truth...."

It is this type of immediate relevance to their experiences that make documentaries popular with Israeli audiences. The burgeoning of the genre has been helped by several factors. The country is used to being scrutinized on camera. Decades of international and local news programs that have focused on Israel and an information-obsessed public has made the country's day-to-day reality one of the best watched dramas of our age. Even Israeli feature films are driven by deep treatment of serious societal topics (those seeking escapist fantasy or romantic comedy look to Hollywood).

Yet the initial drive toward the documentary format is often pecuniary. Budget concerns borne of the relatively small local box office potential make documentaries—which, at $100,000, cost less than 10 percent of what features do—much more feasible. Funds and foundations such as Avi Chai are essential in supporting filmmaking. The New Israeli Foundation for Cinema & TV and The Tel Aviv Foundation also back documentaries. (The Rabinovitch Foundation and the Israel Film Fund finance features; and The Makor Foundation for Israeli Films concentrates mostly on television.) There are smaller foundations

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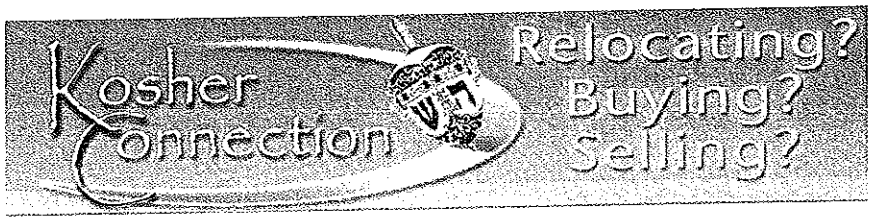

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as well, from the Gesher Film Fund, which supports high-quality Jewish cultural projects, to international backers such as the Danish Film Institute and the BBC.

In an article on Israeli cinema, *Jerusalem Post* film critic Hannah Brown also attributes the industry's growth to local and international Israeli film festivals; the rise of commercial and satellite television; and the passing of the 2001 Cinema Law in which the government raised the amount of funds allocated to local filmmaking.

IN FACT, THE DOCUMENTARY GENRE has achieved enviable ratings even on Channel 2, Israel's major television network. Veteran director Yoram Zack's television series *The Ten Commandments* has garnered the attention, at times, of 22 percent of the viewing public. It consists of hour-long encounters hosted by journalist and attorney Ronel Fisher with modern Israeli implications of God's Top Ten. For example, "Honor thy father and thy mother" was turned into an episode on a man who, years ago on a weekend home from the Army, shot and killed his violent, abusive father, in the process of defending his mother. Other episodes have covered euthanasia, consumerism and spouse swapping.

The series has caught the interest of several European and American producers, who are in negotiations with broadcaster Keshet to export the show. "The films provide a yardstick for the viewer's own values and morality," says Zack, 37.

Herein lies the most salient difference between Israelis and viewers elsewhere. Though people around the world tend to use media as escapism or to gain understanding of global issues, Israelis, for the most part, never truly escape—they simply shift focus to smaller, more manageable conflicts. Like those within their nation and those within their souls. **H**