

Arms for Images

ARI Y. KELMAN

American Jews like their guns at a distance. Despite the participation of Jewish soldiers in each of America's wars — going back to 1776 — it wasn't until 1948 that Jews finally found guns that fit them, culturally speaking. But there was one catch: Those guns were in Israel.

In both films, the U.S. serves as a peaceful place where people can start their lives anew and leave their Israeli guns and battles behind.

And even more: they fell in love with the young, tanned, fit, Hebrew-speaking kibbutznik who knew how to handle them. As American Jews moved into the suburbs and white collar professions, Israelis both worked and defended the land with their hands. As American Jews inaugurated their own Jewish adulthoods in lavish celebrations of b'nai mitzvah, the kibbutznik-cum-soldier became an adult in the line of fire. From the comfort of their own homes, American Jews cheered on their Israeli counterparts, absorbing and adopting the images of Jewish soldiers while keeping the guns themselves at a safe distance.

Nothing captures this exchange better than "Exodus," the 1960 film of Leon Uris' 1958 novel of the same name. The film follows Ari ben Canaan (Paul Newman) as he leads a boat of refugees through a hunger strike from Cypress to Palestine, and then helps orchestrate the defense of Jewish settlements in Israel's War of Independence.

From the first, ben Canaan is not your average Jew. In fact, the first time we lay eyes on him, he is shirtless, emerging from the cold Mediterranean water, sneaking his way into Cypress. From then on, he takes the form of the prototypical "new Jew": a self-confident and self-sufficient Israeli who is not afraid of getting his hands dirty with either mud or blood.

As Jewish historian Deborah Dash Moore reminds us, "Exodus" succeeded because it sold the Zionist project as western — a genre in which both farmers and guns played a major role. By folding Palestine into mythic visions of the American frontier, "Exodus" drew American Jews into its epic wake and helped set the template for American visions of Israel

and Israelis. Moreover, it let American Jews — who famously did not line up at El Al counters to purchase one-way tickets — export philanthropic dollars and import images of Jews fighting Jewish fights with guns.

Ben Canaan became the poster boy for the new Jew. And his image proved so popular and powerful that for about 45 years, American audiences did not see another blockbuster film with an Israeli main character, until Americans were treated to the double feature of Steven Spielberg's "Munich" (2005) and Adam Sandler's "Don't Mess With the Zohan" (2008).

Like the epic "Exodus," both recent films employ a version of the Israeli superstud/soldier myth. But unlike "Exodus," both temper that depiction with heavy doses of ambivalence and regret. "Munich" focuses on the character of Avner (Eric Bana), who leads a team of Mossad agents to exact revenge on those responsible for the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games. Avner never sits comfortably in his role as hired killer, and even though he carries out his task, by the end of the film he literally disappears into the New York skyline.

Sandler's "Zohan," a parody of the Israeli super-soldier, shares Avner's discomfort. He moves to New York to start his life over as a hairdresser in an effort to make the world "silky smooth." Like Bana's Avner, but with a perverse sense of humor, Zohan eventually partners with and marries the sister of his long-time nemesis and they build a mall together. In Brooklyn.


In both films, the U.S. (and specifically New York) serves as an alternate fantasy of the new Jewish future — a peaceful place where people can start their lives anew and leave their Israeli guns and battles behind.

"Munich" and "Zohan" are no less reflections of American Jewish fantasies of Israel than their predecessor. All three films strive, on some level, to explain the Israel-Palestine conflict to American audiences — both Jewish and not. "Exodus" did this in terms of the myth of the American frontier; "Zohan" and "Munich" do this in a more sentimental register, allowing their characters to embody America's collective ambivalence around the meaning of Israel and its ongoing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

Yet, despite their different endings, each

Ari Y. Kelman is an assistant professor of American studies at the University of California, Davis. He is the author of *Station Identification: A Cultural History of Yiddish Radio in the United States*.


film participates in a similar exchange of arms for images. Each exports guns and violence to the Middle East, leaving American Jews to watch, support, cheer, cry, sympathize, and criticize from their seats. The relationship between Jews and guns remains exportable, as American Jews can thrill vicariously at films

like “Exodus,” and express their ambivalence through characters like Zohan and Avner, as long as those images keep their guns at a distance. Despite their differences, all three films agree that Jews and guns still only belong over there, even or especially as over there seems to grow ever more distant from right here. 

Ethics continued from page 20

inherent connection between ethical considerations and their Jewish identities. A certificate must not only help exploited workers but must also seize what might be “teachable moments” of the grandest proportions.

With the *Tav Chevrati* having reached a certain degree of maturity, I no longer assess its success simply in terms of the number of new restaurants that join our ranks on a monthly basis. For me, success is the world-renowned Rosh Yeshiva who proudly tells his students that, when entering a restaurant, he first looks for a

Tav Chevrati and only afterward for a traditional kashrut certificate. Success is the 50-year-old mother who boasts that her ninth-grader only eats in places bearing our certificate. Success is knowing that we have not only made a difference in the lives of thousands of restaurant workers who now receive their due, or thousands of people with disabilities who can now enjoy a night out like anyone else, but it is the knowledge that we are educating the next generation of young Israelis to take small steps to create a more just society inspired and informed by Jewish values. 

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