It Takes A Village

‘Budrus’ filmmakers examine the possibilities of Palestinian non-violence.

Michael Fox
Special to the Jewish Times

The end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will happen as a result of the everyday efforts of ordinary people, not the proclamations of politicians, according to filmmakers Ronit Avni and Julia Bacha.

“Encounter Point,” their powerhouse 2006 documentary, focused on Jews and Arabs who had lost loved ones to violence but were committed to forgiveness and peace. The duo’s new film, “Budrus,” which will be screened Feb. 23 at the Maryland Institute College of Art, spotlights a Palestinian man who forged alliances between local Fatah and Hamas followers to organize an ongoing protest — joined by dozens of Israelis — to stop the construction of the separation barrier on the titular village’s land.

“The film came about very much in response to a curiosity and a desire expressed in the Jewish community in the West, in America, in Israel, where people were asking where is the Palestinian non-violence movement,” Ms. Avni said. “Often, the phrase that followed the question was something along the lines of, ‘If only Palestinians adopted non-violence, there would be peace.’ The film explores what it looks like when a Palestinian non-violence movement emerges, and what is the Israeli response.

“If there are difficult moments in the film, we hope that that raises a discussion about what we in the international community can do to support truly non-violent methods to resolve the conflict.”

Ms. Bacha and Ms. Avni collected and organized verite footage shot by numerous professionals and amateurs in the northern West Bank town of Budrus (pop. 1,399) from the beginning of the separation barrier in 2003 through last year. Interestingly, and intentionally, they leave the 70-minute film’s ending date vague for viewers.

“‘Budrus’ is happening today in other villages,” Ms. Avni said, “so we didn’t want people to think that the events chronicled in the film were of another era and aren’t relevant today.”

Ms. Avni, who was born in Canada and also holds Israeli and (more recently) American citizenship, and Ms. Bacha (who is not Jewish) see themselves as more than filmmakers. They founded the Washington, D.C., and Jerusalem-based organization Just Vision, not just to funnel financial support for their documentaries but also to provide organized outreach and ongoing influence in support of those working for non-violent resolution of the conflict.

“Media plays a critical role in exposing or obscuring the contribution that civil society has made and can make on this issue,” Ms. Avni said. “There has been a disproportionate coverage of militancy and militarism compared to communities and individuals trying to problem-solve.”

Gandhi Approach

In a sound-bite world, newscasts will always make room for shooting and shouting. But they can’t compress long-term progress into a 60-second segment.

“It’s much harder to tell stories about slow, bottom-up change,” Ms. Avni said. “I think documentary film is uniquely positioned to tell those kinds of stories. They complement other forms of media coverage, and that’s where our contribution lies.”

“Budrus” screened at the Dubai, Berlin and Tribeca film festivals, and received Oscar qualifying runs in Los Angeles and New York this summer. The documentary opened
last December at the Coolidge Corner Theatre in Brookline, Mass.

A liberal Jew, Ms. Avni said she is acutely aware of, and sensitive to, the attitudes of a segment of the American Jewish community vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

"I don’t think the subject in our film questions Israeli concerns about security," she said. "So audiences get to see that it’s not a zero-sum equation. [The Palestinians] are not calling for anyone to be endangered in any way and they are very clear about that. But they aren’t going to sit quietly when they are losing land and their communities are in danger."

In conclusion, Ms. Avni offered a kind of challenge to her fellow Jews.

“What I’d like to see in the Jewish community is a deeper discussion about what constitutes non-violence," she said. “We all have a lot of learning to do to understand it beyond the iconic images and clichés. I think Gandhi would be a good starting point.”

Michael Fox is a freelance writer in San Francisco.

Playing At MICA

The documentary “Budrus” will be shown next Wednesday, Feb. 23, at 7:30 p.m. at the Maryland Institute College of Art, Brown Center, Falvey Hall, 1301 Mount Royal Ave. It will be hosted by Emmy Award-winning editor Geeta Gandbhir (“When The Levees Broke”).

“Budrus” will accompany “The Narcissism Of Minor Differences,” a MICA exhibition exploring the dark side of intolerance. For information, call 410-225-2300 or 410-225-2280.

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