

Films to Enjoy on DVD or on PBS

Just in time for Pesach, there are a slew of films available on DVD that are worthwhile additions to an adult library, and, if the older children happen by, can only enhance their own understanding of Jewish history.

On April 1, at 9pm, many Public Broadcasting Stations throughout the country will air a two-hour documentary entitled "Jerusalem: Center of the World: The Epic History of the World's Most Contested Piece of Real Estate."

Those expecting to find the usual PBS Israel-bashing, Jews-are-not-entitled screed, will be delightfully surprised. This film, directed by Andrew Goldberg, who also served as executive producer, and hosted by Ray Suarez, senior correspondent on The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, makes no secret about the fact that the Hebrew Bible is the source of Jerusalem's holiness.

Not a News Story

The film makes clear that while Jerusalem played a constantly shifting role in Christian and Islamic history, its centrality to Jews has always been as permanent as the Torah itself.

The modern conflict between Israel and the Arabs is not neglected, but the documentary does not focus on current events. If anything, the film is an attempt to understand the

ancient historical roots of the conflict. There is no evidence here that either Mr. Goldberg or Mr. Suarez is an ideologue.

"Jerusalem is a place that's supposed to be respected and loved and celebrated, and yet it's a boiling pot of anger and rage," Mr. Goldberg said in a recent interview. "I thought maybe for a minute we could talk about the celebration of a place that is usually discussed only in terms of conflict and death."

Search for G-d

A detailed history of Jerusalem is beyond the scope of this film, but Mr. Goldberg uses his two hours to explore the question of why, for more than 40 centuries, untold numbers of, first, Jews, followed by Christians and Muslims have come to the Holy City to look for G-d. For billions more, Jerusalem stands as the emblem of their faith. Mr. Goldberg's quest is to understand and explain the historical facts and beliefs that have led so many thousands to live and die for this city.

Using the accepted Jewish dating system of BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE, Mr. Suarez travels deep into the city. He seeks to retrace the steps of Abraham and David, as well as the central personalities in the Christian Bible and the Quran.

With the wonder of any first-time visitor to Jerusalem

intent on exploring the fruits of Israel's archaeological teams, Mr. Suarez travels deep into the city to touch the walls of Hezekiah's famed underground water-filled tunnels, built more than 2500 years ago. Later, he faces the same wall the Biblical King David likely confronted when he conquered the city in the 10th century BCE.

Temple Mount

The film identifies Mount Moriah, the site of the First and Second Temples, as the focal point of Jerusalem's mystique. At the center of the modest hilltop, a rock, which measures about 60-feet-by-40-feet, is where, according to the Bible, Abraham was tested by G-d with instructions to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The rock was later enshrined by David's son, Solomon, and became the site of the First Temple.

At the Western Wall, Mr. Suarez explains that, roughly 2,000

years ago, when King Herod the Great ruled Jerusalem, he built vast retaining walls around Mount Moriah, where the Second Temple stood. In 70 CE, when the Romans sacked Jerusalem, virtually everything was destroyed, but the Wall remains.

Mr. Suarez and religious-history experts, whose voices add to the story, show that the holiness Christians and Muslims find at the Temple Mount is derived from its importance in Jewish tradition.

Tangled History

The documentary does a wonderful job discussing how buildings and sites throughout the city have become entangled in the history of all three faiths. While Christians accept the Temple Mount as the site where Jesus walked and preached; some Muslims insist, archaeology and tradition notwithstanding, that there was

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never a Temple at the site. For these Muslims, the Dome of the Rock, built in 691 CE, marks the place where Mohammed is said to have ascended to heaven when he journeyed to the "farthest mosque." For them, the Kotel is merely the place where Mohammed tied his steed.

Although the word "Jerusalem" is not mentioned, Muslims place the "farthest mosque" on the Temple Mount.

Over the centuries, as Christians and Muslims traded positions of leadership in the city, mosques were converted into churches, and then back again. At various times, Muslims and Christians took turns evicting each other—and, of course, Jews—from the city, when they were not busily engaged in outright slaughter.

The Christian crusaders converted the Dome of the Rock into a church, but they left the mosque standing, calling it the Temple of Solomon. When the Muslim military leader Saladin reclaimed Jerusalem less than a century later, the mosque was intact, although it had been redecorated with Christian mosaics and paintings.

On DVD

This is history that can be told only by a documentary filmed on location, although the film further illustrates its stories with more than 300 pieces of iconic artwork, showing scenes from the Hebrew

and Christian Bibles, the Quran, the Talmud, and the Haggadah.

If Pesach preparations cause you to miss the PBS showing, do not fret. "Jerusalem: Center of the World" is available on DVD for \$24.99 through <http://www.shoppbs.org/sm-pbs-jerusalem-center-of-the-world-dvd--pi-3511822.html>.

The film is from Two Cats Productions, which also produced, mostly for PBS, "Anti-Semitism in the 21st Century" (2007), "The Armenian Genocide" (2006), and "A Yiddish World Remembered" (2002).

"Swimming in Auschwitz"

At two very strange times, PBS Channel 13 is showing the film "Swimming in Auschwitz." This documentary, which follows six Jewish women from different countries and backgrounds who were deported to the notorious Auschwitz Birkenau concentration camp during the Holocaust, will be shown on Monday, April 6, at 12:30am, and on Wednesday, April 8, at 4:05am.

A beautifully conceived and executed blend of interview clips, archival stills, and movie footage, the film attempts to chronicle the concentration camp experience through the eyes of the six women who were just teenagers at the time.

The combined stories of the survivors, Eva Beckmann, Rena Drexler, Renee Firestone, Erika Jacoby, Lili Majzner, and Linda Sherman, illustrate their individual, yet universal Holocaust experience.

These women, whose lives became enmeshed with one another, know each other well. In the film, one starts a sentence and another woman finishes it seamlessly.

Few Women Survived

Some Holocaust historians maintain that there are comparatively few stories about women in the camps simply because fewer women than men survived. By documenting the grueling hardships experienced by these six women, filmmaker Jon Kean notes that they were subjected to exactly the same physical conditions that the men endured.

Separated from their families, forced into cramped trains for days without food



"Swimming in Auschwitz," directed by Jon Kean about the experience in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp of six women -- Eva Beckmann, Rena Drexler, Renee Firestone, Erika Jacoby, Lili Majzner and Linda Sherman -- all of whom survived

or water, and then stripped, shaved, and tattooed before being forced to sleep outside while their quarters were prepared with the smell of the crematoria in the air, nine out of ten women did not even survive the initial stages of internment.

For those who did, including the six women in this film, things grew much worse before they got better.

Nevertheless, as the film shows, they found ways to keep their hopes alive. Female prisoners struggled to maintain spiritual resistance through prayer, community, music, and even humor. Through surprising anecdotes, the women in the film reveal the unlikely role laughter played in their survival.

Dangerous Dip

The film takes its title from a powerful episode. One of the women recalls marching through the camp on a particularly hot August day. When the group passed by the swimming pool reserved for Nazi officers, she found it too tempting. To the shock of the rest of the group, she jumped into the pool and swam from one end to the other. And lived to tell the tale.



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The compelling testimonials in the film demonstrate the Nazis' failure to crush the Jewish spirit. The women do not dwell on the physical and emotional hardships. They recall camp families and faith, efforts to raise one another's strength while trying to retain their humanity.

The stories of how they managed to laugh in the face of evil make "Swimming in Auschwitz" a memorial to the martyrs and a celebration of survival.

If getting up in the middle of the night to watch the film is not your cup of tea, a DVD is available at www.swimminginauschwitz.com for \$20 plus shipping and handling.

"At Home in Utopia"

Later in the month, on Tuesday, April 28, PBS will present, at 10pm, "At Home in Utopia," a film by Michael Goldman and Ellen Brodsky about the efforts of Jewish garment workers—communists or socialists all—to build four cooperatively owned and run apartment complexes in the Bronx in the mid-1920s.

From the tenements in Manhattan, using their own networking vehicles in Yiddish, they planned how to pool their resources to build the United Workers Cooperative Colony and the Allerton Cooperative Apartments, also known as "the Coops." The participants bought shares for \$250 per room, and 1,000 rooms were sold.

These Jewish immigrants were not just looking for greener surroundings, although that was certainly part of the draw. Their primary goal was to change the world. They saw the Coops as "a fortress for the working class against its enemies." From this fortress, they believed that, as part of the international movement, they could plan the revolution that would stamp out capitalism and promote the "worker's paradise" in America.

The film is being shown on Sunday, March 29, at 1pm, at the JCC in West Orange, as part of the New Jersey Jewish Film Festival.

Not Just a Slogan

For these families, "Workers of the world, unite" was not just a slogan. Even in their new, comparatively lush neighborhood, where they felt they were living "like the rich," they maintained their goals of combating poverty, antisemitism, and racism through a passionate belief in communism and the union movement.

In the 1930s, they opted to make


their passion for racial justice a reality by integrating their own cooperative house, sometimes called—not necessarily fondly—"Little Moscow." But these efforts at integration seemed to be mostly good intentions. Very few African-Americans actually lived in "the Coops." The vast majority of the residents were Jews.

Narrated by actress Linda Lavin, "At Home in Utopia" tells the story of these gutsy, starry-eyed Jewish revolutionaries. There are contemporary interviews, colorful scenes of the locales, and archival black-and-white footage in which articulate Jewish radicals speak in Yiddish, Russian, and English.

By the 1950s, most of the original

residents were either gone or more interested in the activities of their grandchildren than in attending parades or rallies. Many of their children, having gone onto colleges and universities, were realizing the American Dream and moving to the suburbs, where they sought not cooperative living, but their own homes.

The film makes clear the connection between the Coop's founders and many of the goals adopted by their grandchildren, the generation of the 1960s, but it misses the irony: much of the so-called "New Left" adopted the very antisemitism that the Jewish communists of the 1920s and '30s sought to avoid. ☆



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