



A film by Yoav Shamir

93 minutes, color, 35mm, 2009

English and Hebrew w/English subtitles



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SYNOPSIS

What is anti-Semitism today, two generations after the Holocaust? In his continuing exploration of modern Israeli life, director Yoav Shamir (*Checkpoint, 5 Days, Flipping Out*) travels the world in search of the most modern manifestations of the “oldest hatred” and comes up with some startling answers.

In this irreverent quest, he follows American Jewish leaders to the capitals of Europe, as they warn government officials of the growing threat of anti-Semitism, and he tacks on to a class of Israeli high school students on a pilgrimage to Auschwitz.

On his way, Shamir meets controversial historian, Norman Finkelstein, who offers his unpopular views on the manner that anti-Semitism is being used by the Jewish community and especially Israel for political gain. He also joins scholars, Stephen M. Walt and John J. Mearsheimer, while they give a lecture in Israel following the release of their book “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy,” about the un-proportional influence the Israel lobby in Washington enjoys. Yoav visits Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem, the must stop for all world leaders on their visits to Israel. While in Jerusalem, he drops by the house of his grandmother that offers her insight on the issue and declares that she is the “real Jew.”

The film questions our perceptions and terminology when an event proclaimed by some as anti-Semitic is described by others as legitimate criticism of Israel’s government policies. The film walks along the boundary between anti-Zionism, rejecting the notion of a Jewish State, and anti-Semitism, rejecting Jews. Is the former being used to excuse the latter? And is there a difference between today’s anti-Semitism and plain old racism that is affecting all minorities?

Opinions often differ and tempers sometimes flare, but in *Defamation* we find that one thing is certain - only by understanding their response to anti-Semitism can we really appreciate how Jews today, and especially modern Israelis, respond to the world around them, in New York and in Moscow, in Gaza and Tel Aviv.

DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT

I first had the idea to make a film about anti-Semitism when my earlier work *Checkpoint* was released. In one of that film’s many reviews, I was called “the Israeli Mel Gibson,” not because of my good looks, but because the views I had expressed, critical of Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians, indicated that I was anti-Semitic. The author of that review was Jewish himself.

At first I thought it was amusing. Being called an anti-Semite by an American Jewish reporter seemed completely farfetched. How could someone who chooses to live outside of Israel, who did not do military service like me, who did not lose a grandfather in the war like me, have the nerve to call me an anti-Semite?

Until then I had never considered the central role that anti-Semitism plays in our lives. Upon reflection I realized that it is a constant buzz, always in the background, always annoying. After a while, you simply get used to it. How often are we really disturbed by the hum of an electric

fixture or the drone of passing cars? Anti-Semitism may follow us like a shadow, but then again, who really notices his shadow on a daily basis?

Once I did start noticing it, I realized that anti-Semitism is actually a very popular topic in the Israeli discourse. Not a day goes by without at least one article in the newspaper mentioning “Nazis,” “the Holocaust,” or “anti-Semitism.” Having never experienced anti-Semitism myself—the closest I came was being compared to Mel Gibson—I decided to learn something about the subject.

This was the beginning of a long journey, culminating in this film. Anti-Semitism is an enormous word with many different connotations. Because of the events of the recent past, it also designates a very sensitive topic. Anti-Semitism is the ultimate “sacred cow” for Jews. While I did not set out to slaughter that cow, even the most sacred of cows needs to be shaken up every once in a while.

At times I found the subject daunting. No other phenomenon in Jewish history had so much written about it by academics that spent their whole lives studying it. Who the hell was I to think that I might have anything meaningful to add? I was walking on some very thin ice. Nevertheless, I decided to follow my instincts. Any question is relevant if I believe it is; I should never be afraid to ask or challenge even the most hallowed assumptions. The result is a personal journey that reflects things as I saw them. It, it is not intended as an academic essay.

I had embarked on a fascinating quest that meandered between the way young Israelis are raised in the cumbersome shadow of the Holocaust (making this film, in some ways, the last part of a trilogy made in the wrong order: Checkpoint, about Israeli soldiers; Flipping Out, about what happens to these soldiers after they leave the army; and Defamation, which examines Israeli youth before they begin their military service), the Anti-Defamation League, which is the largest organization in the world to combat anti-Semitism, and those who oppose the ADL, including Professor Norman Finkelstein, and John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, the authors of The Israeli Lobby.

My journey took me around the world: from Israel to the US; from Moscow to Rome to Poland. Mostly, however, it was a journey into the human soul, into the way that people think, and in my particular case, how my people, the Jewish people, choose to deal with the past.

I hope that everyone watching this film will find it as thought-provoking as I found my quest, and will honestly question their own assumptions about the issues it raises.

Yoav Shamir, January 2009

BIOS

YOAV SHAMIR, Writer/Director/Cinematographer

Born in Tel-Aviv November 1970

Tel-Aviv university: BA in History and philosophy; MFA in cinema, graduated with honors.

Films as Director & Cinematographer:

- 2001- "**Marta and Luis**" – 50 min documentary. – screened in Edinburgh film festival, IDFA, DOCAVIV and other international film festivals
- 2003- "**Checkpoint**" – 80 min. documentary – Won the first award in IDFA, Toronto, San Francisco, Munich, Madrid, Barcelona, Rome, Belgrade, Rio de Janeiro etc. received over 20 awards, and screened in over 120 int. film festivals.
- 2005- "**5 days**"- 94 min. documentary- participated in Sundance film festival, IDFA, Edinburgh, Melbourne, Gothenburg, Seoul and about 40 int. film festivals- in which won several awards.
- 2007- "**Flipping out**"- 83 min. documentary- Berlinale film festival 2008- Forum. Thessaloniki, Buenos Aires, Krakow, San Francisco, and about 40 more international

KAROLINE LETH, Producer, Copenhagen

In March 2006 Karoline Leth became producer at Tju-Bang Film. In March 2007 Leth became the Managing Director of the company. Tju-Bang Film produced among others THE MONESTARY directed by Pernille Rose Grønkjær, MECHANICAL LOVE directed by Phie Ambo and YOUNG MAN FALLING directed by Martin de Thurah.

In 2008 Tju-Bang Film changed name into SF FILM PRODUCTION given the fact that Swedish Film Industry (SF) bought Tju-Bang Film in 2005 and thereby is the financially strong partner in the company. SF FILM PRODUCTION is the Danish production unit of Swedish Film Industry. The goal of SF FILM PRODUCTION is to produce both feature and documentary with high artistic value. In 2008 Leth released DANISH DYNAMITE a documentary directed by Mads Kamp Thulstrup and Carsten Søsted about the Danish National Football Team. At the same time Leth co-produced ARN I and ARN II – the feature films directed by Danish director Peter Flinth based on the novels by Jan Guillou. In 2007 Leth produced the documentaries CLARITY directed by Ole Bendtzen, THE FACE OF PASSION directed by Judith Lansade and THE CLASS directed by Ida Marie Darger.

From February 2004 until February 2006 Karoline Leth was CEO and producer at Zentropa Real - the documentary division of Zentropa. Leth produced 6 films under Lars von Trier's concept, DOGUMENTARY- among these RAW YOUTH directed by Margreth Olin and GET A LIFE by Michael Klint. Leth also produced THE WEEDS OF LUSAKA directed by Henrik Grunnet. Autumn 2005 Leth launched GUERRILLA GIRL directed by Frank Piasecki Poulsen at IDFA and the film has since that been traveling around the world on documentary festivals – latest at Silver Docs Festival in the US.

Since 2002 Leth has been distributor of director Jørgen Leth's foreign sales.

As for 1999 to 2004 Leth was a producer, teacher and a co-ordinator at The National Film School of Denmark, Documentary Department, where she among others financed and produced 25 documentaries from the 3rd world, in co-operation with the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs / Danida. Among these GROWING UP IN A DAY directed by Phie Ambo which was premiered at IDFA 2003. In the same period Leth also produced 18 graduation documentary films at the film school.

Karoline Leth has been as well a performing jazz-singer and music instructor and is still working on developing concepts for theatre.

SANDRA ITKOFF, Producer, Los Angeles

Sandra Itkoff has been an award-winning filmmaker for over sixteen years, creating and producing documentary film and children's television. She is the recipient of many international awards for her films, including the DuPont Journalism Award.

Ms. Itkoff is currently in production in *The Truth Will Set Your Free* about the Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson, the only openly gay bishop ever to be consecrated since the time of Christ. She is also presently producing the animated children's series *Grossology: The Science of Really Gross Things* for Nelvana and Discovery Kids.

Ms. Itkoff's last film *The Killer Within*, Macky Alston directing, premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival.

She consulted on *Prisoner of Paradise* for Alliance Atlantis and PBS, which was nominated for a 2003 Academy Award. Ms. Itkoff's film *Drag Kings on Tour*, a road-documentary, premiered on the Discovery Channel and won Best Documentary/Audience Awards at Outfest Los Angeles, San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival and Toronto Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. Ms. Itkoff is also currently in production on *The Ten Commandments*, a ten-film series that uses the Ten Commandments as a framework for a provocative look at contemporary society.

Ms. Itkoff and director Judith Helfand have been collaborating on *Cooked*, a film in preproduction on the politics of poverty and climate change.

Ms. Itkoff executive produced the highly acclaimed four-film PBS series *Cadillac Desert* that focused on the epic political and environmental struggle for water in the modern American West. *Cadillac Desert* garnered record ratings for PBS when it aired. She also executive produced *The Twentieth Century Project*, a six-film series financed by The Walt Disney Company in which directors explored personally compelling topics that spanned the Twentieth Century. Directors who participated in the project include Norman Jewison (*Moonstruck*, *In the Heat of the Night*), Barry Levinson (*Diner*, *Rain Man*), Garry Marshall (*Pretty Woman*), Gregory Nava (*El Norte*), Robert Townsend (*Hollywood Shuffle*), and Robert Zemeckis (*Forrest Gump*).

PHILIPPA KOWARSKY, Producer, TelAviv

Philippa Kowarsky graduated with an M.A. in Communication Policy Studies, at City University of London. From 1993 she has been working in the Film & TV industry in various fields such as production, development and sales.

In 1997 Philippa established Cinephil, a sales and co-productions company. Today, Cinephil is a home to independent Israeli, Palestinian and international productions, a contact for co-productions, introducing partners from all fields in the industry and following through projects to

their completion.

Documentary films co-produced by Cinephil include:

Flipping Out by Yoav Shamir, ***Watermarks*** by Yaron Zilberman, ***Years of Blood*** by Dan Setton, ***Trembling Before G-d*** by Sandi Dubowski.

Films distributed by Cinephil: ***Unwanted Witness*** by Juan Jose Lozano, ***Ice People*** by Anne Aghion, ***Miss Gulag*** by Maria Yatzkova, ***Souvenirs*** by Shahar Cohen and Halil Efrat, ***9 Star Hotel*** by Ido Har, ***Cocalero*** by Alejandro Landes, ***No. 17*** by David Ofek, ***Ford Transit*** by Hany Abu-Assad and many more...

Cinephil exclusively represents documentaries by Amos Gitai

Cinephil also makes feature films – co-producing and distributing them. Films co-produced by Cinephil: ***Sweet Mud*** by Dror Shaul, ***Someone to Run With*** based on the novel by David Grossman, by Oded Davidoff.

More information: www.cinephil.co.il

KNUT OGRIS, Producer, Vienna

Born in 1952 in Bad Aussee, Austria, Knut Ogris has worked in cinema since 1975 in a variety of roles, such as Location Manager, Unit Production Manager, Assistant Director, Producer, and Executive Producer. He has produced countless hours of both feature and documentary projects for Austrian and international television as well as domestic and international theatrical distribution.

Arion Film and its successor company Grey Panther Films specialized on TV productions, documentaries, commercials, and in corporate films. Since 2000, Knut Ogris has worked as Executive Producer with various national and international production companies, including Extrafilm, Vienna, Bonusfilm, Vienna, Pale Blue Productions, Mödling, AMF, Vienna and a1plus Film, Vienna, focusing mainly on European and international coproductions.

Following the successful completion of the French-Swiss-Austrian coproduction Henry Dunant: Red on the Cross, he founded Knut.Ogris.Films in 2006, a production company aimed at further extending and intensifying the close cooperation between scriptwriter, producer, and director on a European and international level.

MISCHA KRAUSZ, Composer

- born in afritz, a small village in carynthia /austria, october 2nd 1954
- raised in vienna
- has two daughters, esther and ela
- ela has a daughter of her own, leonie, turning him into a grandfather
- married to claudia since 2003.

- studies of the violoncello at the age of ten
- studies of electric bass at the vienna conservatory of music
- completion of the vienna conservatory of music with a degree
- studies of orchestration at the berklee college of music
- working as a bass player
- writing arrangements and producing music for jazz and pop projects for his own label
- recording/mixing/mastering is completed with priority at his own Studio Bartberg

More information: www.mischakrausz.at

CREDITS

Director and Cinematographer: Yoav Shamir

Editor: Morten Højbjerg

Composer: Mischa Krausz

Sound Design: Birgit Obkircher

Line Producers: Nynne Marie Selin, Ori Bader, Guy Sidis

Producers: Karoline Leth, Knut Ogris, Philippa Kowarsky, Sandra Itkoff

Produced by SF Film Productions, Knut.Ogris.Films, Cinephil, Reveal Productions Inc.

With support from The Austrian Filminstitute, ORF Film/TV Convention, DR, The Danish Filminstitute, YLE, Nordisk Film&TV Fond, Hartley Film Foundation, Zukunftsfonds Republic of Austria, Nationalfonds Republic of Austria, BMfUKK, The Rabinovich Foundation of the Arts, The Second Authority for TV&Radio, VPRO

PRAISE FOR YOAV SHAMIR'S DEFAMATION

WINNER- Grand Jury Prize, 50th Festival dei Popolei International Documentary Film Festival
WINNER- Times BFI London Film Festival Grierson Award For Best Documentary
WINNER- Special Jury Award- Tribeca Film Festival
WINNER- The Stanley Kubrick Award for Bold and Innovative Filmmaking - Traverse City Film Festival
WINNER- Audience Award - Documenta Madrid
WINNER- Audience Award - Warsaw International Film Festival
WINNER- Special Mention -Kosovo International Documentary Film Festival
NOMINATED for Best Documentary - European Academy Awards
NOMINATED for Best Documentary - Asia Pacific Screen Awards
OFFICIAL SELECTION- Berlin International Film Festival
OFFICIAL SELECTION- 2009 Hot Docs Film Festival
OFFICIAL SELECTION- 2009 Silverdocs Film Festival
OFFICIAL SELECTION- 2009 Seattle International Film Festival

CRITIC'S PICK! "Disarming, surprisingly funny ... essential viewing!"
–[New York Magazine](#)

"Alternately sweet-tempered and outrageous ... will spark long arguments deep into the night among Jewish and non-Jewish viewers alike." – Andrew O'Hehir, [Salon](#)

"A must-see for thoughtful friends and critics of Israel." – David Lamble, *Bay Area Reporter*

"The most important Jewish movie of the year." –Akiva Gottlieb, [The Jewish Journal](#)

"An incredibly bold and brave film." – Filmmaker Michael Moore

"An ace slice of provocative, timely docu-making... at once intelligent, wry and -- there's no way around it -- quintessentially Jewish, in the best sense." – Leslie Felperin, [Variety](#)

"Cheerfully incendiary."-Scott Foundas, [The Village Voice](#)

"This is muscular, intelligent documentary filmmaking of the first order—trenchant, controversial, riveting." – Harvey S. Karten, *Compuserve/Movieweb*

Surprising, honest, appealing... does a remarkably good job of blending and pacing complex, wide-ranging storylines. -Stuart Klawans, [Tablet Magazine](#)

"Soul searching, startling...(Shamir is) dazzlingly skilled at capturing characters in humorous and emotional situations that allow viewers to reach their own conclusions."
-Bernard Dichek, *The Jerusalem Report*

"A surprise...part personal journey, part political odyssey, part classic verite...lighthearted [but] also heartfelt." – Jennifer Dworkin, *Film Comment*

"(Shamir) lets his subjects say exactly what they think and, perhaps, almost too much of what they mean...balanced, intricate, impressive. If you can get through the film with your blood pressure under control."
–George Robinson, [The Jewish Week](#)

"Works brilliantly...shocking, sometimes quite surprisingly funny, as well...Defamation is an education!"
-Jennifer Merin, [About.com](#)

"Truly courageous...the Israeli Michael Moore." –[Time Out New York](#)

“An exceedingly intelligent film... riveting, fascinating, infuriating ... vital and timely...If you want to understand something about this relationship between modern middle-class American Jewry and the current (sorry) state of the Jewish Homeland, you should see this film. Take your children, and your children’s children, with you when you do.”— Pamela Cohn, [Hammer to Nail](#)

“Profound and passionate.”-Ray Bennett, [Film Journal International](#)

“An irreverent poke with a sharp stick to the viewer’s carefully cherished self-perceptions...valuable, and rare: a film that catalyzes people into talking.”-Michael Fox, [J Weekly](#)

“One of the most powerful anti-Zionist films ever seen in movie theaters in the United States...Don't miss this outstanding movie.”-Louis Proyect, [The Unrepentant Marxist](#)

“Funny, probing, enlightening, provocative and above all, brave.”-Shelli Sonstein, [Clearchannel](#)

“Deceptively simple...thoroughly refreshing.”- Kristin McCracken , Zachary Wigon, [Tribeca Film Blog](#)

“A serious documentary with a light touch explores intelligently the very touchy topic of anti-Semitism.” – Ray Bennet, [Hollywood Reporter](#)

“A surprisingly effective and daring road movie.” – Erica Marcus, [San Francisco Bay Times](#)

“What an intellectual (and emotional) pleasure it is to be buffeted between laughter, surprise and the kind of thought-provoking intelligence that DEFAMATION (*Hashmatsa*), the new film by Yoav Shamir, provides!...bracing and salutary.”-[TrustMovies](#)

“The one must-see film at this years’ San Francisco Jewish Film Festival.”
– Shai Ginsberg, [Jewcy](#)

“A well-researched, unapologetically subjective doc on contemporary anti-Semitism.”
– Howard Feinstein, [IndieWIRE](#)

“Darkly humorous.” –Jonathan Curiel, [San Francisco Chronicle](#)

“Bracing, daring.” – Seán Martinfield, [San Francisco Sentinel](#)

“Biting and highly entertaining.” – Ali Hazzah, [Eye For Film \(UK\)](#)

“By far the most interesting film I saw at Tribeca this year ... very worth seeing.” –Mark Slutsky, [Montreal Mirror](#)

SELECTED PRESS

http://www.tribecafilm.com/news-features/features/Defamation_Let_the_Debate_Continue.html

TR|BECAfeatures

11.16.09

Defamation: Let the Debate Continue

By Kristin McCracken , Zachary Wigon

After sparking intense debate at film festivals around the world (including TFF 2009), Yoav Shamir's controversial documentary about anti-Semitism will reach everyday audiences this week.

Note: These pieces were originally published as [Discover: Defamation](#) and [Faces of the Festival: Yoav Shamir during the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival](#).



Discover: Defamation

By Zachary Wigon

Congratulations to **Yoav Shamir**, director of **Defamation**, which won a TFF 2009 **Special Jury Prize**. **Defamation** is a film designed to raise questions and provoke discussion. Shamir, a young Israeli filmmaker, adopts a deceptively simple pose as he ventures into

addressing the issue of contemporary anti-Semitism. "What is anti-Semitism?" he asks his Israeli grandmother. "I've lived in Israel all my life. I don't know."

So Shamir journeys out into the world to try to understand the nature of anti-Semitism today. What is it? Where does it pop up most often? Who is afraid of it? His journeys take him to a far-flung assortment of places, meeting a wide variety of people who provide this film with a startlingly wide web of different opinions on the issue. He gets unprecedented access to **Abraham Foxman**, head of the **Anti-Defamation League**, and later follows him on a trip to Europe. He goes with a class of Israeli high school students to Poland, to survey the remains of concentration camps and the museums within. He interviews African-American residents of Crown Heights, a Brooklyn neighborhood that has had tension between African-Americans and Jews for years. He talks with **Norman Finkelstein**, a professor and author who has published extensively on Israel, all of his work highly critical of that nation.

As Shamir presents so many different views of this intricate issue, one begins to see its many facets materialize, almost presenting itself as a physical structure. The issue of anti-Semitism is such a sensitive subject, brought up so often, that to hear it dealt with so thoroughly is, in fact, thoroughly refreshing. One of the things that lends the film credibility is that Shamir is so clearly without an agenda; if he has one, it has been disguised extremely well. He's an Israeli Jew who is extremely inquisitive, and extremely good at playing the devil's advocate. He argues the opposing side to Foxman, but then also argues the opposing side to Finkelstein, who is 180 degrees removed, philosophically, from Foxman. He questions the residents of Crown Heights when they bring up **The Protocols of the Elders of Zion** in a positive light during an on-the-street interview.

The most harrowing and insightful section of the film is Shamir's footage of the Israeli students in Poland, who are constantly told to fear for themselves and be extremely careful, as they are in perpetual danger from neo-Nazis. The neo-Nazis never appear, but the young kids do seem to buy the line, and appear understanding when they are told that they cannot leave their hotel room at night. This makes their emotional responses to the truly horrific sights at the concentration camp museums all the more intense. Without giving anything away, suffice it to say that the closing of that narrative strand leads to a definitive comment by Shamir, one that gives the audience his own point of view in no uncertain terms.



Faces of the Festival: Yoav Shamir

By Kristin McCracken

Israeli filmmaker Yoav Shamir tackles the 800-pound gorilla in the room in *Defamation*, his partly-funny, mostly-serious look at anti-Semitism.

What makes *Defamation* a must-see?

It is about anti-Semitism—not a very sexy subject—but it is done in a glib approach and it provides an insight into the core of Jewish identity and the way it influences the conflict in the Middle East. It has created a lot of controversy wherever it has been shown—so if you want to know what everybody is talking about, check it out.

What's the craziest thing that happened while making the film?

It's a documentary about anti-Semitism—so if you are expecting drugs, sex and rock n' roll kind of crazy, you are in the right place, but probably not in the right time.

If you could have dinner with any filmmaker (alive or dead)—who would you want it to be?

I would like to have **Groucho Marx** and **Larry David** for the first and main course, and then to be left alone with **Veronica Hart**, the beautiful director and former porn star. Then I will obviously have a drink and a cigar with Groucho and David to tell them all about it.

What piece of art (film/book/music/what-have-you) do you recommend to your friends?

I am not recommending anything anymore—every time I recommend something that I like, I end up lending it out and never seeing it again. On second thought, I recommend **Ulysses**, since it has been laying in my restroom for too long.

Where did the film premiere? What happened at those screenings?

Before Tribeca, the film premiered in the last **Berlin Film Festival**, and received an

enormous amount of press and sold out screenings. This is my fifth film, and I have never seen the audience respond so loudly—it was an incredible experience.

How did you get such insider access to the people in your film?

My experience as a documentary filmmaker taught me that if your protagonists have strong and solid convictions as to what they do, they will not be shy about it. In this case, everybody had very strong convictions, which made my life easier.

What else should we know about the film?

You know too much already! I don't want to add any more spoilers. Go and watch it.

Defamation opens at **Cinema Village** in New York (and also in **San Francisco and Los Angeles**) on Friday, November 20.

Learn more from **First Run Features**.

Film

November 17, 2009

Israeli Documentary Challenges Jewish Responses to Anti-Semitism

BY AKIVA GOTTLIEB, CONTRIBUTING WRITER



Israeli high school students at Auschwitz as seen in "Defamation." Photo courtesy First Run Features.

Yoav Shamir's provocative new documentary, "Defamation" ("Ha Shmatsa"), suggests that today's anti-Semitism, however pernicious, reflects little more than petty ignorance. The Israeli filmmaker's central inquiry is whether the contemporary Jewish response to anti-Semitism is disproportionate in its force, and, if so, whether that response is detrimental to Jewish interests. That the two-part question is asked so forthrightly is enough to make "Defamation," which First Run Features will open in Los Angeles Nov. 20, the most important Jewish movie of the year.

Shamir began the project in response to criticism of his earlier documentary, "Checkpoint," a study of the impact of Israeli military checkpoints on Palestinian lives. A Jewish-American journalist referred to Shamir as "the Israeli Mel Gibson," implying that his censure of Israeli policy made him an anti-Semite. Recognizing that as an Israeli he had never directly experienced anti-Semitism, the naive but inquisitive filmmaker set off on a globetrotting mission to understand the term and its many uses. Almost immediately, he was led to Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League, who granted Shamir unprecedented access to the ADL offices and allowed him to tag along on leadership missions to Europe. Foxman would soon regret the gesture. In a statement issued earlier this summer, after the film won the Special Jury Prize at the Tribeca Film Festival, the ADL denounced "Defamation" as "neither enlightening, nor edifying,

nor compelling. It distorts the prevalence and impact of anti-Semitism and cheapens the Holocaust.”

Director Yoav Shamir. Photo courtesy First Run Features

“I think I was very fair with the ADL,” Shamir said, speaking to The Jewish Journal by phone from his home in Tel Aviv. “And they were fair with me, about giving me access and letting me do my own thing. I respect them for that. They truly believe that what they do is the greatest thing for Israel and for the Jewish people in general. I disagree with them.”

While filming at the ADL’s New York offices, Shamir discovered that the ADL’s everyday work mainly consists of tracking down minor grievances. “Every time [a teacher] doesn’t get to take leave on one of the Jewish holidays, \$40,000 gets spent,” Shamir said. There’s a “big gap between the amount of money and time and energy and focus that’s put toward this fight, compared to the real problem.”

Indeed, according to a recent ADL survey conducted after the film’s completion, anti-Semitic attitudes in the United States have reached a historic low.

A former soldier who spent time in the occupied territories, Shamir strongly disagrees with what he sees as the ADL’s unwarranted meddling in Israeli policy. In one scene, an American ADL delegate refers to Israel as the Jewish people’s “insurance policy,” implying that Israel’s strength is a way to ensure the continued existence of Jews in the Diaspora. “[Israelis] are paying a very dear price for being an insurance policy for these people,” Shamir said. “Once a whole country is driven by fear and by irrational decision-making ... this is a very dangerous game to play. That’s something that American Jews should think about. Their support for AIPAC or the ADL has a tremendous influence on us, and as long as they keep interfering in our internal policies, they are driving us to a place where they themselves probably wouldn’t like to be.”

The question, upon the release of “Defamation,” is whether American Jews will be at all receptive to the film’s point of view.

Philip Weiss, an investigative journalist who runs the Mondoweiss Web site, called it “a great film” that emphasizes how “Jewish identity is changing.” What struck him most was the film’s portrait of Foxman, which Weiss found both “devastating and sympathetic.” It “gave me tremendous sympathy for Foxman,” he writes. “He is locked in his childhood of suffering. It makes perfect sense that he has projected his childhood demons onto the world, but they are just demons.”

One of the most provocative scenes in the film concerns Shamir’s interview with Norman G. Finkelstein, the controversial scholar and author of “The Holocaust Industry” (Verso, 2001), which argues that the Holocaust has been exploited for use as an ideological weapon by Israel. The film positions Finkelstein as Foxman’s intellectual antagonist; both men are sons of Holocaust survivors, but they have taken their personal missions to opposite extremes. In the film, Finkelstein offers a reasoned critique of the ADL’s project, but then seriously undercuts his argument by making a Nazi salute to the camera and referring to Foxman as “worse than Hitler.” Reached by

e-mail, Finkelstein wrote, "I did not see the film and don't intend to. I am told it depicts me as a lunatic."

Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, who has not yet seen "Defamation," told The Journal, "There's a great danger when you legitimize them. A person like Finkelstein ... self-hating Jews. It might make for a more interesting film. I understand. People say, 'That's interesting — I want to see what this guy has to say.' But we legitimize him."

One glaring absence in Shamir's film is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, whose vitriolic anti-Israel rhetoric and nuclear ambitions have made him the anti-Semite watchers' ultimate concern. Shamir said he made a deliberate decision to keep Iran, as well as the entire Arab world, out of "Defamation." "The interesting thing about this whole debate is that everyone in this film — except ["The Israel Lobby" authors] [Stephen] Walt and [John] Mearsheimer — are actually Jewish," Shamir said. "It's very much an internal Jewish debate. And most of the time, we are upset about being the center of attention ... asking 'Why are people always picking on Israel?' We are always the ones most affecting it. And we are the ones paying the price for it."

Indeed, Shamir is less interested in arguments about how serious the threat of anti-Semitism is than in another, more philosophical line of inquiry. It's the issue he explores in the film, alongside Israeli high school students visiting Auschwitz on a March of the Living trip. It's also a question he hopes "Defamation" will pose to American audiences willing to give it a chance: "How do we choose to deal with our identity?"



FOCUS

Jewish directors challenge Israel

By Sakhr al-Makhadi at the London Film Festival

A series of controversial Israeli films are provoking outrage and plaudits in equal measure at the London Film Festival.

The best documentary award has gone to one of the year's most controversial films.

Defamation is a polemic by Israeli filmmaker Yoav Shamir. In his expose of America's Anti-Defamation League (ADL), he claims anti-Semitism is being exaggerated for political purposes. He argues that American Jewish leaders travel around the world exploiting the memory of the Holocaust to silence criticism of Israel.

He gets inside the ADL, which claims to be the most powerful lobby group of its type anywhere in the world. With unprecedented access, he travels with them as they meet foreign leaders, and use the memory of the Holocaust to further their pro-Israeli agenda.

At one point, an ADL leader admits to Shamir that "we need to play on that guilt".

Shamir says his film, *Defamation*, started out as a study of "the political games being played behind the term anti-Semitism".

"It became more a film about perceptions and the way Jews and Israelis choose to see themselves and define themselves - a lot of the time unfortunately choosing the role of eternal victims as a way of life."

Israel's national psyche

He wanted to find out how this mentality has become part of Israel's national psyche. The film suggests that the attitude is thrust upon children from an early age. School trips to concentration camps in Poland run year-round.

From just 500 children in the 1980s, he claims around 30,000 are now flown to Europe every year.

He discovers that the trips are not designed to educate, but to provoke an emotional reaction. They fly out of Israel euphoric, and end their journey in tears, talking about their shared hatred.

They are accompanied by secret service agents who prevent them from talking to any locals - they are led to believe that most Poles are anti-Semites.

The end result is disturbing. The victim mentality is being used to justify Israel's occupation and colonisation of the West Bank and siege of Gaza.

In the film, one Israeli Jew tells Shamir that she refuses to get upset by Israeli aggression against the Palestinians because "we" faced worse. To her, the Holocaust justifies anything the Israeli army does.

And for Shamir, that is the real danger. "We are experiencing the most right-wing government we've ever had, and there is very little room for discussion. Putting so much focus on hate and the negative, I don't see it as a healthy thing."

In Israel, the film has received a mixed response. "It's kind of a love or hate type of response to the film," Shamir says. "It's very hard to get people to come and watch documentaries in the cinemas in Israel."

Touchy subject

In the UK, too, there is anger towards *Defamation*.

Mark Gardiner from one of Britain's biggest anti-Semitism campaign groups, the Community Security Trust, believes the film could put Jews at risk.

"All of a sudden some bloke appears out of nowhere, oh he's an Israeli, oh he's a Jew, therefore what he says must have more credence than what organisations like my own and the ADL have said for years - I think that shows a deep-seated bias."

And he is furious at the suggestion that anti-Semitism is being used for political purposes.

"This assumption that people are saying it because they're being malicious, because they know that it's not anti-Semitic, but hey lets use anti-Semitism in order to win the Israel case, that's what I find really really offensive," Gardiner says.

Shamir is not surprised by reactions like that.

"Anti-Semitism is a very touchy subject and making a film about anti-Semitism is almost like walking on thin ice, you're going to hurt people's feelings."

Martial Kurtz from the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) believes the film can make a difference to activists like him.

He says all too often Israel's supporters label groups like the PSC as anti-Semitic.

"There are many Jewish organisations which campaign [with us] against the occupation, campaign against the siege in Gaza," he says. "So the whole argument falls flat."

What's hate got to do with it?

Yoav Shamir's controversial new doc, Defamation, takes on anti-Semitism

By Dennis Harvey



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FILM Like so many recent it's-true-if-we-say-so slogans, "A Republican is a Democrat who's been mugged" is smugly, fundamentally misguided on more levels than can be addressed here, suggesting that only conservatives have the horse sense to grasp that it's a big, scary world out there. Interpreted another way, however, this catchphrase contains a grain of truth: the sense of victimization can be blindsiding. When you begin to perceive all criticism as persecutorial, you might forget it's possible to be wrong.

That's the worry driving Yoav Shamir's *Defamation*, which opens Friday following a stormy reception at July's San Francisco Jewish Film Festival. The documentarian (2003's *Checkpoint*) says that as an Israeli Jew he's never actually experienced anti-Semitism. So he sets out to explore that prejudice's status quo — or so he claims, somewhat disingenuously. Because *Defamation's* real agenda is positing anti-Semitism as a distorted, exploited, propagandic bludgeon used to taint any critique of Israeli government policies or the foreign lobbies supporting them.

This is a theory bound to inflame angry emotions, not least the "self-hating Jew" accusation. It must be said that Shamir lays himself at risk — à la Michael Moore — of selectively gathering

only evidence that supports his agenda. Anti-Semitism certainly *does* exist today, in many different forms, around the world. But the only folks Shamir finds to spout negative stereotypes are some African American Crown Heights youths — whose complaints about their insular neighbors seem reasonable enough until they cite Nazi best seller *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as an important ethnic expose — and his own granny. (Bizarrely, she opines that Jews are indeed money-hoarding shirkers of "real" work — albeit only *foreign* Jews, not industrious Israelis like herself.)

Yet if *Defamation's* deliberate omissions and occasional snarky tone hamper its case, Shamir nonetheless makes legitimately troubling points. He views Israeli media as obsessing over any incidents of global anti-Semitism (and ignoring decreases) much as the U.S. media endlessly dwells on certain lurid crime stories — because their public loves to feel indignant.

More than 30,000 Israeli high schoolers now go on field trips each year to European Holocaust sites. But their experience is heavily stage-managed, with Secret Service guards ensuring they have no contact with locals — in Poland a group is kept sequestered in their hotel because (they're told) this "relatively hostile country" is rife with neo-Nazis.

No wonder when two girls briefly try to bridge the language barrier with some old men in a park, they instantly assume they're being insulted. (They are not, as the exchange's subtitled translation reveals.) This thrilling experience of actual, or at least assumed, anti-Semitism reinforces what one student calls "what makes us special: that no one can stand us, but that we are proud of it."

"Everyone knows the Jews are hated. We are raised that way," another proclaims.

Getting ample cooperation (now regretted) from its Manhattan H.Q.'s staff, Shamir suggests the Anti-Defamation League also inflates anti-Semitism's modern-day realities to exert political muscle, and to dismiss any criticism of Israel as simple Jew-hating "in disguise." When a British academic at an ADL conference rather mildly asserts anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism can indeed be separated — is it racist to think the West Bank settlements and occupation of Palestinian lands unjust? — he's denounced as an outrageous provocateur.

The most controversial interviewee is Norman Finklestein, whose book *The Holocaust Industry* got him pilloried as a Holocaust denier (untrue) and quite likely cost him his teaching position. The son of Shoah survivors, he thinks "the Nazi Holocaust is now the main ideological weapon for launching wars of aggression" and that "pathological narcissism" desensitizes many American Jews to other people's sufferings. (One U.S. rabbi here theorizes that the sense of ongoing historical persecution has replaced religious observance as many Jews' primary source of ethnic-cultural identification.)

Finklestein can be persuasively reasonable. To *Defamation's* credit, however, it doesn't yell "Cut!" when he whips himself into a crank-case frenzy that masochistically self-destructs his credibility. Absolute righteousness ain't pretty, anywhere on the political spectrum.

DEFAMATION opens Fri/20 at the Roxie. Posted Wednesday November 18, 2009



Defamation

Hashmatsa (Documentary -- Israel-Austria-U.S.-Denmark)

By **LESLIE FELPERIN**

A Cinephil (Israel)/Knut Ogris Films (Austria)/Reveal Prods. (U.S.)/SF Film Production (Denmark) production, with the support of the Austrian Film Institute, ORF FilmTV Convention, the Danish Film Institute, Danish Radio TV, YLE-Finnish TV, Nordisk Film TV Fond, Ministry of Integration Denmark, Hartley Film Foundation, Zukunftsfonds of the Austrian Republic, Nationalfonds of the Republic of Austria, the Federal Ministry for Education, Art and Culture, the Rabinovich Foundation for Arts, the Second Authority for TV & Radio. (International sales: Cinephil, Tel Aviv.) Produced by Karoline Leth, Sandra Itkoff, Philippa Kowarsky, Knut Ogris. Directed, written by Yoav Shamir.

With: Abraham Foxman, Norman Finkelstein, Stephen M. Walt, John J. Mearsheimer.
(English, Hebrew, Polish, Russian dialogue)

Is anyone who expresses anti-Zionist opinions necessarily also anti-Semitic? Is anti-Semitism itself still an endemic and dangerous global problem? Has remembering the Holocaust become an unhealthy obsession, perhaps with a hidden agenda? Will readers regard a Jewish critic as a self-hating Jew just for considering Israeli helmer Yoav Shamir's personal, occasionally irreverent "Defamation" an ace slice of provocative, timely docu-making? No doubt the first three questions -- and many more -- will stir up red-hot debates wherever "Defamation" unspools, which is likely to be at numerous further fests (although some Jewish-themed ones may balk) and on upscale channels.

Shamir, whose previous docu features ("Checkpoint," "5 Days," and "Flipping Out") explored various aspects of current Israeli life, lays his cards on the table from the start by saying he's never directly experienced anti-Semitism himself. After a comical interview with his own 92-year-old grandmother (who claims Jews abroad really are lazy and make money off others so they don't have to work), Shamir sets out to assess whether anti-Semitism still lurks underneath the surface of supposedly civilized societies, or is just a scarecrow used to drum up political support for right-wing Zionism.

Judging by the evidence offered here, both opinions look plausible. Shamir engages thinkers from across the spectrum, from Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League, which collects evidence of anti-Semitism, to left-wing academic Norman Finkelstein, whose controversial book "The Holocaust Industry" argues that what the Nazis did is used today to justify Israel's maltreatment of Palestinians.

As journalism, pic is impressively evenhanded (as were "Checkpoint" and "5 Days"), even though the filmmaker never attempts to disguise his own left-leaning sympathies. He can't resist skewering the ADL a bit, making Foxman look somewhat sinister and Machiavellian behind his front of affability. Then again, persuasive but embittered Finkelstein, caught ranting about the "warmongers of Martha's Vineyard," doesn't come across too well either.

The most comic and disturbing sequences spring from footage of Israeli high school students visiting extermination camps in Poland. Struggling to come to grips with what the Holocaust means for their generation, they eat candy while watching archive footage of emaciated Auschwitz victims (a moment worthy of "Seinfeld"). Later, some kids confess they're scared to leave their hotel rooms because they've been warned by their teachers and the Secret Service agents accompanying them that the country is fit to burst with anti-Semites who mean them harm.

Use of hand-drawn graphics to identify onscreen figures amps up the comedy effectively, as does editor Morten Hojbjerg's deadpan use of abrupt cuts, which dampens subject matter's potential grimness. End result is at once intelligent, wry and -- there's no way around it -- quintessentially Jewish, in the best sense.

Reviews - Specialty Releases

Film Review: Defamation

A serious documentary with a light touch explores intelligently the very touchy topic of anti-Semitism.

Nov 19, 2009

-By Ray Bennett

For movie details, please [click here](#).

Israeli filmmaker Yoav Shamir tackles the thorny and provocative issue of anti-Semitism in his documentary *Defamation* and finds a deep divide between Jews who see it everywhere and Jews who find it nowhere, least of all in America. The film is presented as the journey of a young man who has grown up in Israel without experiencing anti-Semitism on a quest to discover what it is and how it affects people.

Taking an understated but determined approach, Shamir variously interviews his grandmother, blacks and Orthodox Jews who are neighbors in New York, rabbis, professors, Israeli school kids on a trip to a Polish concentration camp, and members of the Anti-Defamation League.

Everyday folk display the usual type of ignorance about people they hardly know and the scholars argue fiercely from opposing perspectives and deliver scathing diatribes about right-wing politics in Israel, while the rabbis appear the most sanguine about prejudice in modern life.

The fiercest opponents turn out to be in the United States, where Prof. Norman Finkelstein, who has written about what he calls "the Holocaust industry," and Abraham Foxman, who is the very active national director of the ADL, are vocal enemies.

Each was touched personally by the Holocaust but they hold opposing views on the nature of anti-Semitism and its impact on the world in general and Israel in particular. Their divide is profound and passionate, and Shamir takes time to allow both of them to make their case.

The most affecting scenes, however, involve the class of Israeli teenagers visiting Auschwitz. They speak beforehand of how they are taught that anti-Semitism flourishes everywhere in the world and that by traveling beyond their nation's borders they are

constantly at risk.

Shamir uses his camera as an unblinking but compassionate observer as the youngsters make the emotional journey from giggling innocence and guarded fear into the camp's horror, where the crushing images leave them distraught and weeping, and then angry.

Their plight causes the director to offer the thought that perhaps it's time to stop dwelling on the past, as horrific as it has been. Maybe, he says, it's time to live in the present and look to the future.

[-Nielsen Business Media](#)

THE L MAGAZINE

Is Anti-Semitism Good for the Jews?

by [Andrew Schenker](#)



Defamation

Directed by Yoav Shamir

Is contemporary anti-Semitism largely a Jewish invention? A number of the subjects in *Defamation*, Yoav Shamir's instructive documentary, would say so. While its opening scene, in which a man tells the camera that "Jews control the world," establishes anti-Semitism as a legitimate ongoing presence, the film is more concerned with the uses Jewish leaders make of this perceived threat. Beginning as an Abraham Foxman-sanctioned look into the workings of the [Anti-Defamation League](#), the world's leading watchdog for anti-Jewish sentiment, the film soon veers into more subversive territory. A heated discussion of Afro-Semitic relations in Crown Heights with a group of black subjects aside, Shamir remains a largely neutral presence behind the camera, but in his choice of subjects and arrangement of material, he leaves little doubt about where he stands.

Soon Foxman—the militantly pro-Israel head of the ADL—gives way as the film's representative figure to his opposite number, [Holocaust Industry](#) author Norman Finkelstein. In rhetoric as fiery as Foxman's, this child of survivors explains how Israel and pro-Israel Americans play up anti-Semitism, repeatedly invoking the legacy of the Shoah in order to deflect criticism of Israel's Palestinian policy. Apparently it's working, since when Shamir follows a group of Israeli schoolchildren on a visit to Auschwitz, the kids easily make the Nazi-Palestinian connection and several seem primed for vengeance. Still, it speaks to

Shamir's considerable achievement that, while he privileges those subjects who still care to differentiate between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, Foxman nonetheless emerges as a forceful and vaguely sympathetic figure, even as he repeatedly damns himself with his misplaced rhetoric.

Opens November 20

HASHMATSA / DEFAMATION (2009): Interview With Yoav Shamir

by [Michael Guillen](#), November 3, 2009 2:46 PM

Simone Bitton's *Rachel* took the bullet for Yoav Shamir's [Hashmatsa / Defamation \(2009\)](#), which I would have predicted to be the target of outrage at the 29th San Francisco Jewish Film Festival (SFJFF). By the time *Defamation* finally screened, voices were perhaps already hoarse from shouting? Fortunately, Shamir's latest has not had to go the torturous route suffered by *Rachel* and, hopefully, audiences during its theatrical run at San Francisco's [Roxie Film Center](#) (beginning November 20, 2009) will be allowed to independently decide where to situate themselves along the spectrum of conflicted opinion on the film's subject issue. Even at [IMDb](#) the film's synopsis has been written by someone unable to refrain from judgment--which I would have thought would be in clear violation of [IMDb's](#) policies--but, when I contacted [IMDb](#) about this, they recommended I debate it on the discussion board. The prospect of being accused of being anti-Semitic for defending [IMDb's](#) synopsis policy seems a thoroughly unattractive road to travel; but, perhaps it's a journey I will have to take?

As the film's website states, *Defamation* wryly explores what anti-Semitism means today, two generations after the Holocaust. In his continuing exploration of modern Israeli life, director Yoav Shamir (*Checkpoint*, *5 Days*, *Flipping Out*) travels the world in search of the most modern manifestations of the "oldest hatred", and comes up with some startling answers. In this irreverent quest, he follows American Jewish leaders to the capitals of Europe, as they warn government officials of the growing threat of anti-Semitism, and he tacks on to a class of Israeli high school students on a pilgrimage to Auschwitz. The film questions perceptions and terminology when an event proclaimed by some as anti-Semitic is described by others as legitimate criticism of Israel's government policies. The film walks along the boundary between anti-Zionism, rejecting the notion of a Jewish State, and anti-Semitism, rejecting Jews. Is the former being used to excuse the latter? And is there a difference between today's anti-Semitism and plain old racism that is affecting all minorities?

Yoav Shamir was born in Tel-Aviv in November 1970. He graduated high school at Vitzo France, an art school. He specialized in photography. He then went on to Tel-Aviv University where he earned a B.A. in History and Philosophy. He later received an MFA in cinema and graduated with honors. *Defamation* is Shamir's fourth feature length documentary. Arguably, [his statement at the film's website](#) states all that Shamir perhaps needs to say about his film; but, I nonetheless welcomed the chance to sit down and discuss it with him.

* * *

Michael Guillén: I don't know whether you're more brave for having tackled the issue of anti-Semitism in your documentary or for interacting with your audiences after they've seen the film.

Yoav Shamir: [Laughs.]

Guillén: *Defamation* has shown at several festivals, premiering at Berlin, going on to Tribeca, HotDocs, among others. Have you attended most of those festival screenings?

Shamir: Yes, quite a few.

Guillén: How do you prepare yourself for that confrontation with your festival audiences? You know the atmosphere will be contentious.

Shamir: I don't really think about that. I just put myself out there. Every question that is asked or every remark is legitimate because I allowed myself the same freedom in making the film. I don't get offended by any question, remark or statement. Sometimes people need to express their point of view and--because they've given me 90 minutes of their time to watch the film and have bothered to stay for the Q&A--if they feel a need to stand up to make a statement, even to say the film is rubbish, within the rules of the game I find it fair.

Guillén: This documentary tackles a difficult, sober and serious subject but counters the heaviness of the subject with light flourishes: irreverence, graphics, comic editing, subjectivity. At [Screen Daily](#), Howard Feinstein described *Defamation* as "unapologetically subjective", whereas at [The Auteurs Notebook](#) Danny

Kasman has noted that you've allowed the material to "overstate itself" such that it could be argued your subjectivity has, in fact, trumped (or become?) the film's content. I, however, much appreciated *Defamation's* sense of humor. I laughed a lot. I'm not Jewish so I'm not sure if that colors my appreciation of the humor. Can you speak to your decision to exercise this light touch and to enfold subjective humor into your voiceover and the film's editing?

Shamir: When I started to make this film, I realized it was going to be a very touchy subject. The more I filmed, the more I realized *just* how touchy a subject and how passionate people were about their points of view and the ways they see the world. I don't know how many films or documentaries there have been about anti-Semitism, but I suspect most of them have been basic archival black and white footage films that feature interviews with Holocaust survivors. If I tell you I'm going to make a film about anti-Semitism, this is automatically what will come to people's minds. Either it will be a film about the Holocaust with black and white archival footage and interviews with survivors--which most of the time serves as a type of catharsis for the viewers and, many times, for the people who have made the film--or audiences will come expecting a film that says how terrible the state of anti-Semitism is in the world today, complete with statistics and examples. In wanting to make my film, I came up against these expectations. Personally, I would not come to a theater to watch a film about anti-Semitism because, up front, I would already be thinking that this is not the kind of film I want to watch. I've already seen hundreds of them and I don't feel like watching another one like that. I wanted my film to get close to people, to reach the audience, to shake up their paradigms and their convictions. By using a lighter tone, it helped the audience to maintain interest. It helped them get away from their expectations and their beliefs. It got their attention. Humor, for me, is a great tool to reach people.

Guillén: One of the ways the humor came across was that--rather than being a film specifically about the defamation of anti-Semitism or, as you say, a film that confirmed presumptions of how terrible the state of anti-Semitism is in the world today--instead, the film became an exposé of in-fighting among Jews. *Defamation* appears to focus more on the slander Jews perpetuate on one another. In fact, my understanding is that the genesis of this film was in response to your being called an anti-Semite by a Jewish American journalist because you expressed a critical view on Israel's policies toward the Palestinians in your previous film *Checkpoint*. For me it's an interesting perspective to realize that--even among Jewish people--there is not a clear idea of exactly what anti-Semitism *is*, which forced me to go to the dictionary. To my surprise, the dictionary definition revealed that Semites are members of "any of various ancient and modern people originating in southwestern Asia, including the Akkadians, Canaanites, Phoenicians, Hebrews *and* Arabs." At what point did the term anti-Semitism become appropriated by the Jewish community as a phenomenon exclusive to them?

Shamir: You know, in one of the interviews for the film conducted with a Jewish person, he told me that anti-Semitism means hating Jews more than you have to, which is a funny way of looking at the term. It's true that Semite refers to all the people who are living in the region of Israel--and, yes, Arabs are also Semites--but, eventually the term has been dominated by the Jews and has lost its 19th century definition, which related to the race of the Semites. The term has come to mean a phenomenon specifically targeted towards Jews.

Guillén: I'm interested in how you've structured the documentary to maximize the issue's polarizing potential; its main thrust being to situate the audience somewhere inbetween. As Ray Bennett wrote for [The Hollywood Reporter](#): "The fiercest opponents turn out to be in the United States, where Prof. [Norman Finkelstein](#), who has written about what he calls 'the Holocaust industry,' and [Abraham Foxman](#), who is the very active National Director of the ADL [the [Anti-Defamation League](#)], are vocal enemies. Each was touched personally by the Holocaust but they hold opposing views on the nature of anti-Semitism and its impact on the world in general and Israel in particular. Their divide is profound and passionate, and Shamir takes time to allow both of them to make their case." As Ali Hazzah wrote for [Eye For Film](#): "they come off as monomaniacal obsessionists, each obdurate in their point of view." Clearly it was your intent to stage polarity between these individuals? Can you speak to how you effected this but kept the balance?

Shamir: We chose Foxman for the film obviously for being a key player in the arena fighting anti-Semitism--perhaps *the* most important figure in that respect--and then we wanted someone who could be in opposition to him. It was difficult to find someone with enough credence to be accepted in that opposition. For example, here in the

United States both the Republican and Democratic parties are accepted within the framework of their opposition. Whether you like McCain or you like Obama, most people consider them both legitimate players. Eventually, a voter decides which of the two they'll vote for. With anti-Semitism, however, the anti-Semitic discourse is ruled or owned by people like Abe Foxman. Anyone who says anything differently becomes marginalized and rendered illegitimate, as if there can be *no* opposition to the anti-Semitic discourse. It's not like you have two forces who are equal. One of them is the establishment--which dominates the discourse with 80%-90% of the Jewish people siding with him--and then what's left is an individual like Norman Finkelstein who has been forced into an extremist characterization; but, what Finkelstein is saying, even in his book **The Holocaust Industry**, is not that extreme. Even [Abba Eban](#), one of the best-known Israeli foreign ministers, famously stated: "There's no business like the Shoah business." That point of view *came* from Israel. The views which Finkelstein represents were already acceptable in recent Israeli history; but, for some reason, the point of view of the Anti-Defamation League has come to dominate the discourse. With *Defamation*, I wanted audiences to think, "Yes, that makes sense and *this* makes sense. Oh, there *is* anti-Semitism; but, oh, it's not like *that*." I like that audiences move along this spectrum and re-think and adjust their positions and views.

Guillén: Critic [Jason Bailey](#) considered your final voiceover a "misfire" for not acknowledging that the film, and the issues it addresses, are too inscrutable. He felt that the efficacy of the final sequence didn't require a director to come in to tell the audience what to think and that the documentary had already effectively motivated people to situate themselves towards the issue according to their own convictions. Bailey charged that your final voiceover negated that some of your audience might have reached a different conclusion than you. How do you respond to that critique?

Shamir: I don't remember exactly who it was but someone once said that a poem is never finished until it is abandoned. It's the same thing with a film. Whether the final voiceover was the right statement or not, I'm not sure; but, I stand behind the statement. The fact remains that--while for many Jewish people the issues the film revolves around are the bottom-line issues of identity and self-definition and while the film is made from an Israeli point of view--this discourse on anti-Semitism, which has been held largely here in the United States, is an existential one for Israelis. An Israeli kid who is conscripted into the army does not have the perspective that an American Jew has. When this kid reads the reports issued by the ADL about a steep rise in anti-Semitism in the United States, he wonders, "Wow. Is there going to be another Holocaust?" The past is important to remember. We need to know about it. But maybe we need to move on and envision a future we would like for ourselves? To imagine a definition of ourselves that we would like to have? Will it be a negative one or a positive one? That might seem like a simplistic statement in the end--perhaps I could phrase it differently--but, when you make a film, you can't be so careful about everything or you can't make the film.

Guillén: The sequence of the young Israeli students on the Holocaust tour was, for me, the film's most disturbing sequence. With all due respect to the young woman in your audience who criticized your selection of this group of kids for sending out what she believed to be the wrong message, I considered her critique manipulative. Clearly, she wanted you to choose a group of kids who represented the opposite viewpoint, *her* viewpoint; but, I don't imagine that you choose kids to represent *any* viewpoint?

Shamir: No, of course not.

Guillén: I imagine they simply reveal themselves in the filming? But I had a question about the tour itself. Is there a basic or established itinerary to the tour?

Shamir: Yes, there's an itinerary for sure. The tour runs seven days. It starts and ends up in Warsaw. The itinerary is arranged both substantively and geographically. For example, they keep Auschwitz for one of the last days after the students have already experienced certain ... understandings.

Guillén: It seemed apparent that the structure of the itinerary was intended for maximum propagandic effect. The tour starts out with "lesser" camps, so to speak....

Shamir: They start with a ghetto and then move to a camp....

Guillén: Culminating in Auschwitz, perhaps the most infamous of the camps, and one to which everyone has an emotional reaction. Most people have a charged response at the mere mention of Auschwitz. Whereas Majdanek--one of the camps earlier in the itinerary--doesn't hold the same charge (not to say the atrocities committed there were any less important). It's in Auschwitz that the kids seem to finally break down and become indoctrinated through grief.

Prior to *Defamation's* premiere at the Berlinale, head of the Forum Christoph Terhechte defended inclusion of *Defamation* in the program, stating it was balanced against Petr Lom's *Letters to the President*, a film which likewise explores the "rehearsal of victimhood, [and] the definition and identification of an entire people and religious community with being the victim", albeit from the perspective of Iranian Muslims. Both *Defamation* and *Letters to the President* address "the delicate matter of confronting the aura of the perpetual victim." Have you seen Lom's film?

Shamir: I haven't seen his film.

Guillén: During the Q&A after *Defamation's* SFJFF screening, you mentioned that both Abe Foxman and Norman Finkelstein hated the film once they finally saw it. Can you elaborate on what their complaints were and what they felt was wrong about the film?

Shamir: I'm not sure that Finkelstein has seen the film. We've received negative comments from him but I'm not sure he's actually seen the film. Maybe he's responding from the trailer or from what he's heard from other people? Foxman issued [a press release at the ADL website](#) addressing his reaction to the film so, perhaps, I shouldn't speak for him?

Guillén: My reaction to Norman Finkelstein was conflicted. I take it you have read both his book [The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploration of Jewish Suffering](#) and the volume [The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy](#) by Stephen M. Walt and John J. Mearsheimer?

Shamir: Yes.

Guillén: Can you recommend them?

Shamir: For sure, yeah.

Guillén: While watching the film there was a lot of tongue-clucking and exasperated sighs from the audience towards the end when you and Finkelstein argued about the Nazis. His anger intrigued me in the sense that it's apparent he's an individual who cannot be divorced from his anger. He had been denied tenure and placed on administrative leave at DePaul University, and then denied access into Israel, which struck me as *profound*. Has there been much discussion about his denial of access within Israel?

Shamir: In Israel? Not so much. Israel is a place where something major has to happen in order to make the news. Even a suicide bombing attack--if it's less than three casualties--won't make the news. So much has happened in Israel that the sensitivity level is low. Israelis need to be shaken strongly to elicit a reaction. I'm not sure how big a deal Israelis made of Finkelstein's denial of access.

Guillén: Equally disturbing to me was the comment made by the couple working for the ADL that Israel is the "insurance policy" for American Jews. You stated on stage at your Q&A that you did not want Israel to be an insurance policy for American Jews.

Shamir: Many American Jews have a multilayered perception of the world. While making the film, this emerged as one of the most fascinating themes. Seemingly, American Jews are happy as American citizens and their lives here; but, somewhere underneath.... It was interesting to note among the ADL circles that they play a little game where they ask: name five non-Jewish friends who will hide you if something terrible happens in the U.S. They can't come

up with five names, so they're asked to name three. They can't come up with three, so they're asked to name one. One of the producers of *Defamation* is a Jewish American woman who told me that one of her best non-Jewish friends admitted she's had nightmares about whether she would hide her "should the Nazis come." Jewish Americans live seemingly happy lives in the American community but underneath there are many layers of insecurity that dominate their thinking. They think that Israel should be there as their insurance policy, which God forbid--and they always go back to history to confirm their fears; who would have thought that anything like the Holocaust could have happened in Germany in the '30s?--so many times they have a similar conception of America. "We're okay now, but it was also okay in Berlin. So in case something terrible should happen, we want to have a strong Israel we can go to." Many of them have houses in Israel. But as an Israeli living in Israel, we pay a heavy price for being this insurance policy.

If I was an insurance agent, and you asked me how to keep your house safe for insurance matters, I would advise you to surround your house with a wall, barbed wire, three alarms and guard dogs and that would pretty much insure that no one would come in and steal your belongings, right? That would be clever advice from an insurance agent. But if you live in the house, you don't want to be surrounded by walls, barbed wire, dogs and all of that stuff because you want to live a normal life. I live in Israel. I want to live a normal life. I don't want my life to be ruled by demons belonging to somebody else who is not living in Israel. If I have a problem with my neighbor, sometimes my neighbor might be right. If I'm occupying his land, anti-Semitism doesn't have anything to do with it. I recognize the fact that occupying his land is wrong. As far as I'm concerned, we should reach a point where we're more concerned about living in a liberal, democratic, tolerant and progressive Israel, which makes its decisions on moral and realistic perspectives. But what's happening in Israel now is mainly being influenced by demons chasing people who live outside of Israel. As an Israeli, this is not a great thing.

Guillén: I admire your concession that Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is wrong and works against achieving--as you say--a progressive and tolerant Israel. But this is a contentious perspective. Where does the strength come from for you to adhere to this perspective?

Shamir: As a filmmaker and as a person, I try to see things without being affiliated to any particular paradigm, especially in the face of Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. Most American Jews have never been to the occupied territories, not as civilians and certainly not as soldiers. I've worn both those hats. I've been there as a soldier and with my own eyes have seen the injustice. Later, while filming *Checkpoint*, I returned as a civilian with a little bit of perspective. In both instances, it seemed wrong to me that we should do such harm against the Palestinians. For me this is a natural response. I wouldn't like people to act that way towards me. Whereas we as Jews are very sensitive to any anti-Semitism levied at us now or in the past, we are not sensitive to the injustice and harm we are causing others. As a person, I find that unfair.

Guillén: Do you have a sense of how much your opinions on this matter are shared by other Israeli Jews?

Shamir: It's hard to quote numbers. Unfortunately, the last election reflects there is less and less tolerance. This is the most right-wing government we have ever had in the history of Israel. Obviously, according to the last election, the majority has proven that Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is not a huge concern for them. But there are still enough people in Israel who would like to see the occupation end. I think most Israelis even now know that we will eventually have to give back the territories; but, for right now, it's a strange relationship with the territories. Unfortunately, many crazy evangelist Americans donate to Israel, and Israel embraces their support without weighing that these people might be religious maniacs with disturbed views on the world. Israel is happy to receive the support from these individuals even if their final goal is that all Jews will become Christians and believe in Christ. Many strange things are happening in that arena.

Guillén: My final question: you've done such a fine job with documentaries, would you ever consider filming a narrative feature?

Shamir: It's my goal to make a feature fiction film. I'm hoping it will happen someday.