

'Home Game' Portrays Disengagement's Human Side

Written by David Morris

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Trauma. Confusion. Abandonment. Words that no doubt capture the emotions felt by close to a million Israelis living in the northern part of the country this past summer during the 34-day conflict with Hizbullah in southern Lebanon. Yet these same words reflect similar emotions experienced just a year earlier during the summer of 2005 when the approximate 9,000 Israelis living in the 22 communities of Gush Katif in Gaza were told they must leave their homes and be resettled in other parts of Israel. The Disengagement Plan called for the evacuation of all Jews by Aug. 15—the day after Tisha B'Av--and the eventual handing over of the entire area to the Palestinian Authority.

As the evacuation deadline was approaching, Avi Abelow, a young businessman living in the community of Efrat located between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, decided he must make a personal commitment. He would go to Gush Katif and spend time meeting and encouraging its residents. Following the 1967 Six Day War, Jewish settlement activity began in northern Gaza and peaked in the 1970's. Many of the settlements established were seen as 'agricultural miracles' as they succeeded in growing, literally out of sand, top-quality tomatoes, exotic fruits and exquisite flowers for export to Europe.

"Although my personal politics would have favored a different solution, I saw what was happening as a human tragedy to be shared with fellow Jews who had invested years of their lives building up this area and now saw it come crashing down," Abelow said. "Of course the subject of the Gush Katif settlements was and for many will always remain a very political one. But since the Disengagement, what has happened to these families is a story I believe deserves greater empathy on the part of all Israelis and all Jews throughout the world. For those who lived there, the withdrawal is not going to be seen as a piece of 'history' but rather as an event that changed everything. They had to pay the price for all of us and I think we should at least attempt to understand their plight."

Abelow took his video camera along to document what he saw—the protests, the maze of military checkpoints and the attempts by both the army and police to keep other Israelis from entering Gaza.

"I had plenty of difficulties driving my car around, needing to take back roads and often driving through fields in order to reach a settlement," said Abelow. "I noticed that others were filming the events happening around me and I'm sure there were many people filming things I didn't know about and in places I couldn't possibly get to. But I never imagined I would eventually leave my job in Tel Aviv and decide to make a full length documentary based on material taken right from the videos of

Gush Katif residents."

Abelow knew an upcoming Israeli filmmaker, Yaron Shane, and together they began looking at the some 80 hours worth of footage given to them by 16 different families. They kept seeing scenes from the annual high school basketball tournament between the area's 22 communities that had been taking place amidst all the world media attention concerning the pullout. They also learned that the final championship game was scheduled for August 15--the very last day residents were told they all must leave Gaza.

Shane says he and Abelow initially prepared a four-minute clip for Internet play only and that they never intended on making a full-length documentary.

"When we saw the site counter quickly rack upwards of 50,000 hits, we knew we had to produce a longer, more detailed look at the turbulent events," says Shane. "We began piecing together into a cohesive whole the different personal and public dramas taking place both within the tournament and outside the gym."

Abelow explained that once he and Shane saw the high level of emotion surrounding the basketball tournament and the suspense of who would make it to the final, it was very clear this would be the film's backdrop. They named it 'Home Game.' The film chronicles daily life before and during the evacuation of the 30-year-old farming community of Netzer Hazani, in the southern Gush Katif settlement bloc, as its teenage basketball players prepared for the annual tournament.

Abelow, the film's producer, was recently in South Florida for two days trying to build support and convince every synagogue, federation and JCC to show it. He arranged for two screenings at a small synagogue in Miami Beach (where his grandparents belong) and another at the Palm Beach Orthodox Synagogue.

"Our goal is for every Jew to have the opportunity to see 'Home Game' and to put aside their political orientations and religious affiliations. Whatever baggage they have that keeps them from feeling empathy for the families and especially the youth of Gush Katif, we want them to leave at the door," Abelow said. "We hope this film can create greater tolerance between different sectors of Israel's population."

Over 10,000 people in Israel, the United States and Great Britain have already attended screenings often held at Jewish community centers, synagogues and private homes. Abelow is working on presenting the film on Israeli television and in the country's cinematheques and film festivals.

A.B. Yehoshua, the award-winning Israeli writer and recipient of the Israel Prize commented on the documentary saying, "I viewed the film 'Home Game,' and found that it was made in an objective manner, in order to portray the difficulties and the lives of those people living in the settlements of Gush Katif. This cinematic work is fair despite the ideological position behind which it stands. It is definitely worthwhile to see this film in order to expand one's point of view regarding the reality of Israeli life. "

So far Abelow has single-handedly managed to screen 'Home Game' in some 120

different locations in Israel.

"We started in the religious community and we've expanded rapidly into the secular community. We would like to establish a tradition of showing this film on Tisha B'Av and then discussing its implications in terms of Jewish history. Yes, right now I am looking for money to enable us to expand the number of screenings around the world. But more important than the money, I would like Jews everywhere to plan to visit Israel soon and make a special effort to meet some of the people who experienced this traumatic event."

For information, visit: www.homegamethemovie.com