

Home and Away

How the Gaza evacuation played out for a basketball team

by **Ron Kaplan**
NJJN Staff Writer

If ever the concept of sports as a metaphor for life was appropriate, it was for the residents of Netzer Hazani, site of a popular annual youth basketball tournament. If sport is a conflict with winners and losers, it mirrored that settlement in Gush Katif located in the Gaza Strip, which was shut down during the disengagement of Israeli settlements in 2005.

Avi Abelow, a 33-year-old expatriate New Yorker living in Efrat, tells this emotional story in his new film, *Home Games*.

When Abelow learned the community was earmarked for dismantling, he took an unpaid leave from his job as a management consultant to offer his services as a translator for members of the international press covering the story. Anticipating confrontation between settlers and the IDF soldiers charged with removing them, his Efrat friends and neighbors purchased a video camera and asked him to record any altercations.

Fortunately there was no violence, but he told *NJ Jewish News*, on the day the Netzer Hazani residents "were taken from their homes, I documented everything I could, running around from house to house."

Abelow, who made aliya when he was 16, decided to raise money for the displaced families by putting the video on the Internet. With the help of a friend in the movie industry — Abelow has no such experience — he whittled four hours of material down to four minutes. As a premium, he promised donors a full-length video as a thank-you. Unfortunately the footage was not up to

snuff in terms of quality or quantity. "My friend told me to go back to the families to see if they might give me videos they had taken." He eventually collected more than 80 hours from 16 Netzer Hazani families dispersed throughout Israel.

That was a light bulb moment for Abelow. The home movies provided "a whole different perspective of who these people are and what they went through." He



Avi Abelow, producer of *Home Games*
Photos courtesy Avi Abelow

ditched his original plans and expanded the project for a mainstream audience. "It was a very big challenge, taking the most hot-potato topic of our time for the Jewish people and Israel to make a movie that any Jew around the world would watch."

He credited the basketball angle to *Home Game's* "brilliant" director, Yaron Shane. "Sport is something anyone can connect to regardless of religious orientation and political perspective. The whole motif of sport is struggling to win."

With the tournament such a center point of the community, many Netzer Hazani residents indeed had footage of the contests. "How better to get across the understanding people who struggle to stay in their homes...with the parallel of the struggle to win a game," Abelow said.

In an example of made-for-movie serendipity, the Netzer team, a perennial champion, played in the title game on Aug. 15, the day the Israelis were ordered to leave. A storybook ending would have the team winning the championship again, but such was not the case.

Abelow enlisted some of the team's players and supporters to fill in the gaps from the disparate videos; their narration — interspersed with dramatic footage of town meetings, peaceful rebellion, and ultimate resignation — makes for emotional viewing.

"The real tragedy is not what [audiences] saw in the movie itself. It is that most of the Jews in the world, including Israel, allow their political opinions to stop them from empathizing with fellow Jews.... This movie for me is critical to use as a message to fellow Jews of all persuasions."

Abelow acknowledged there would always be differences within the Jewish community. "You don't have to agree on everything, but it's learning how to work together...to make the situation better. If we can do that in a marriage, if we can do it in families, if we can do it in businesses, why can't we do it for the Jewish people?"

For more information on Abelow's project, visit www.homegame-movie.com.

Ron Kaplan can be reached at RKaplan@njewishnews.com.



Members of the last Netzer Hazani basketball team

Schechter update

Boys' hoops team wins international yeshiva tourney

by **Adam Shapiro**

On Feb. 24, the Solomon Schechter Day School of Essex and Union boys' varsity basketball team capped another successful season with a 51-34 win over host school Beth Tfiloh in the 20th Annual Joseph Weiner Memorial Tournament in Baltimore.

This marks the third time in four years the Roadrunners have won the tourney.

The girls' varsity team had a terrific showing as well, but was unable to come home with a title of their own.

Individuals on both teams were recognized as some of the top players in the tournament. Whitney Gruhin, Michael Gorshein, and Jordan Marcus were chosen

for the All-Tournament First Team. Sarah Drill, Ilana Herzberg, and Ethan Cohen were chosen for the All-Tournament Second Team. Marcus was also named tournament Most Valuable Player, and Steven Balter was awarded the Sportsmanship Award.

The athletes had a great time playing highly competitive basketball and hanging out with other Jewish students from all across North America, including Beth Tfiloh, Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy of Overland Park, Kan., the Tannenbaum CHAT School from Toronto, and — closer to home — the Moshe Aaron Yeshiva High School of River Edge.

Adam Shapiro coaches the SSDS girls' varsity basketball team.



For the third time in four years, the Schechter boys' varsity team won the Joseph Weiner Memorial Tournament, held in Baltimore. Team members are, from left, Jason Steinberg, Ben Julie, Oren Erlich, Noah Drill, Ian Stanford, Ethan Cohen, Jordan Marcus, Etan Tammam, Michael Gorshein, Alex Coopersmith, Michael Hochberg, David Wolkoff, and coach Sandy Pyonin. Missing from the photo is Steven Balter.

Photos courtesy Solomon Schechter Day School of Essex and Union



Members of the girls' varsity basketball team included, from left, standing, Sammy Glickman, Ilana Herzberg, Leah Efron, Britty Cohen, Stacey Cohen, Danielle Erlich, Whitney Gruhin, Sarah Drill, Gaby Blady, and coach Adam Shapiro; and, kneeling, Dalya Zucker, Lindsay Aaron, and Sabrina Katz.