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## Debunking Mideast Myths

*French-Jewish documentary filmmaker Pierre Rehov tries to set the record straight on Jewish and Palestinian refugees, and violence.*

**Ben Cohen - Special To The Jewish Week Special To The Jewish Week**

Towards the end of "Hostages of Hatred," Pierre Rehov's film about Palestinian refugees, there's an arresting moment involving Bassam Eid, a leading Palestinian human rights activist. Like a man possessed, Eid stares into the camera and bellows a challenge to the leaders of the Arab world: Stop using the Palestinian refugees as a political tool. Tell them the truth about the right of return. Tell them it's not going to happen.



It's a powerful moment, because giving up on the right of return means giving up on the myths that have sustained the Palestinian struggle. It's also a moment that is emblematic of Rehov's approach to filmmaking, because debunking myths is what he sets out to do. The result has been a series of striking documentaries shown over three nights earlier this month at a New York festival of Rehov's work.

When it comes to the Middle East, Rehov isn't an outsider looking in. Born into a Jewish family in Algeria, he was 10 when he and his family fled to France in 1962, following the North African state's bitter struggle for independence. "I was just 6 when I saw my first terror attack," he recalled. "My school was bombed by the rebels of the FLN."

Lounging in the bar of a Manhattan hotel on the eve of the festival, and nursing a glass of Californian red wine (Rehov takes pride in being a Frenchman who likes all things American), he explained how he ended up as a documentary filmmaker whose work is enjoying a growing following on both sides of the Atlantic. His first foray into films was in Hollywood, where he produced a biker movie titled "Savage Dawn" — "a big disaster," he admitted with a grin. Returning to France, he established himself as a writer. And then the second intifada began.

What caught Rehov's attention were the television images of Mohammed al Dura, a young Palestinian boy allegedly killed in Gaza by Israeli troops while his father tried to shield him. Rehov did some digging and insists that al Dura was actually shot by Palestinian gunmen. The incident also convinced him to make his voice heard. "I couldn't take the hatred, the bias, the demonization of Israel," he said.

Almost five years later, Rehov is now working on his seventh film about the Middle East. While his prodigious output means that he is regularly filming in both Israel and the Palestinian territories, where he passes himself off as a French journalist, his films are less about current affairs and more about history and psychology. Tracing the "mythology and martyrology" of the Palestinians has been one aim; a sympathetic examination of Jewish claims, and particularly the fate of the Jewish refugees from Arab countries, has been another.

Indeed, "Hostages of Hatred" dovetails neatly with "The Silent Exodus," Rehov's best-known film, which tells the story of the thousands of Jews expelled from the Arab world. The first film takes to task UNRWA, the

UN agency that deals with the Palestinian refugees, for perpetuating a problem that might have been resolved had Arab governments not decided to use the refugee camps as a mobilizing symbol against the Israelis. The second documentary recounts the exodus of the Jews from the Arab countries against a background of mob violence and government discrimination. Unlike the Palestinians, these communities were never even given refugee status. And as "The Silent Exodus" points out through interviews and archive footage, their story has lived in the shadow of the Palestinian experience.

Insofar as all nations have their myths, the Palestinians are not unique. But what emerges from Rehov's films is a sense that the Jews of the Arab world have gotten on with their lives, while the Palestinians are trapped by a self-seeking international bureaucracy working hand in glove with the Arab regimes. In one scene in "Hostages of Hatred," Palestinians in Lebanon's Shatila camp bemoan the fact that even their doctors are not allowed to work outside the camp.

As the old myths persist, new ones spring up. An infamous example is the battle of Jenin in 2002, when Israeli troops were falsely accused by many Western journalists of having carried out a massacre of civilians. Rehov's film on the subject, "The Road to Jenin," shows that myths have power even when they are contradicted by visual evidence. He remembers how an administrator at Jenin's hospital tried to convince him that a wall, intact save for a few holes, had been blasted by Israeli artillery. "At the moment he showed me that wall, he needed to believe that it had been hit by tank shells," Rehov said.

Rehov made "The Road to Jenin" in the hope that it would restore Israel's wounded pride. It also serves as a counterweight to the film "Jenin, Jenin" by the Israeli Arab director Mohammed Bakri. Rehov maintains that Bakri's film is more fiction than fact. When Bakri was recently questioned in an Israeli court by a lawyer representing Israeli soldiers who say the director defamed them, he acknowledged he did not believe indiscriminate killings had been carried out.

Rehov's next film will focus on Palestinian suicide bombers and he's pretty certain he'll be directing a few more after that. He's aware that his ascendant profile means that he faces greater personal risks; when he's reminded of the recent murder of the Dutch director Theo van Gogh by an Islamist fanatic on the streets of Amsterdam, he nods stoically. But he won't stop. "I can't," he said. "It's too fascinating." n

Pierre Rehov's "The Silent Exodus" will be screened Sunday, Jan. 23, 7 p.m., at the Manhattan Beach Jewish Center, 60 West End Ave., 2nd floor, Manhattan Beach, Brooklyn, (718) 648-2610 and Tuesday, Feb. 8, 7 p.m. at the Sephardic Community Center, 1901 Ocean Parkway, Brooklyn, (718) 627-4300.

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