

'Ben-Gurion – Epilogue' shows the importance of archives

NATIONAL CENTER FOR JEWISH FILM

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At the MFA opening with director Yariv Mozer, center, and NCJF's Sharon Pucker Rivo, left, and Lisa Rivo

In "Ben-Gurion – Epilogue," director Yariv Mozer endeavors to raise a mirror to Israeli society today.

Drawing primarily upon filmed interviews conducted by the U.S.- born anthropologist Clinton Bailey in 1968, five years before Ben-Gurion's death, Mozer brings to vivid life the profound humanity of the father of modern Israel. For Mozer's peers among the current generation of educated Israeli secularists, Mozer offers reconnection to the foundational ideals of the Jewish state and the aspiration to make Israel a more virtuous, hopeful, joyful country.

Paula Ben-Gurion, the former prime minister's wife, befriended Bailey as a young man on the streets of 1960s Jerusalem; she recognized Bailey was American, thought he looked lost, and invited him to tea. Soon, the Ben-Gurions recruited Bailey to teach at their Negev *kibbutz* while conducting his research on Bedouin oral culture, of which Bailey subsequently became an eminent authority. Ben-Gurion was completely at ease with Bailey, and watching these relaxed 50-year-old films today, we seem to share the table with friends.

Ben-Gurion was then 82 years old, living alone at Kibbutz Sde Boker, performing the chores of an ordinary *kibbutz*nik while writing a history (sadly, not completed) of Israel since 1870.

Ben-Gurion said he felt close to God in the desert. He cherished the dream that idealistic Israelis young and old would flee Tel Aviv to create fresh towns with new values in the Negev; the eternal longing to start over, and do better. At Sde Boker, Ben-Gurion practiced the principle that he envisioned for Israel at its birth: there was no challenge Israel could not overcome. If food can be grown in the desert, then anything is possible.

Recently resigned from the Knesset over differences of opinion and recently widowed, Ben-Gurion's character did not admit negativity. His intelligence, humility and deeply

reflective nature remind us how very much Israeli leadership has changed.

After reposing in different, distant archives for 50 years, the separate audio tapes and silent films of the interviews were rediscovered, rejoined and laboriously synchronized. (See YouTube for a 24-minute video titled, "Ben-Gurion – Epilogue: The story behind the making of the documentary film.") The result interweaves these intimate interviews with archival footage from 70 film libraries worldwide.

The images alone are fascinating: Palestine in the 1870s; banter with his very outspoken wife, a close friend of anarchist Emma Goldman and not much of a Zionist; a visit to Albert Einstein's garden; the Knesset with a stern Moshe Dayan and Golda Meir; sitting with Ray Charles at the piano. On day six of the Six Day War, Ben-Gurion phones his old friend in London, the exiled Palestinian leader Musa Al-Alami, to muse about peace.

The film inspires because Ben-Gurion inspires. He devoted his life to the ideal of *am segulah*, a nation of higher virtues. Ben-Gurion wanted a better life for Israel. He said normal life was impossible without peace. He hoped and prodded for more from Israelis, but also resigned himself to the realities of the moment. He was playful, too, practicing yoga and delighting in showing off his handstand.

Guided by Jewishness, Torah and spirituality, Ben-Gurion remained throughout an insistent secularist. In a wonderful sequence with his friend, Burmese Prime Minister U Nu, he speaks of *anatta*, the core Buddhist belief in "non-self," that right view and right action are necessary for spiritual liberation. He declares his guiding principles: be truthful, help those in need, "love thy neighbor as thyself."

The film shows Ben-Gurion's clear concern was humanity as a whole, not just Jews. He speaks of welcoming Arabs to the desert; he endorsed the return of lands gained in war as a price worth paying. He promoted relations with the West German government as a centerpiece of foreign policy, and as a necessary purge; controversial at the time, that initiative yielded enormous material and moral benefits.

Neither loss of the Knesset's support nor bereavement deterred Ben-Gurion. Asked whether he feared death, he replied, "Will it help me if I fear? Why should I fear death?" He was famous for his frankness and accessibility, and the interviews bring that to life.

Ben-Gurion helped write Israel's Declaration of Independence; he was the first prime minister; he invented the modern Israeli army. He lived at the crux and in the forge of Israel's creation. "Ben-Gurion – Epilogue" resonates with us today for its portrait of a true leader.

"Ben-Gurion – Epilogue" opened the National Center for Jewish Film's 20th Annual Film Festival on May 4, at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts.