

**EDITORIAL** | MAY 26, 2017

## **Film archive's essential role in modern Jewish history**

Providentially for the Jewish people, Thomas Edison's perfecting of the motion picture in the last decade of the 19th century coincided with the rise of Zionism; this enabled the documentation of the two most meaningful events in Judaism since the destruction of the Second Temple – the founding of the modern State of Israel and the Holocaust – as well as events in Jewish life and history both profound and prosaic.

Recently, we have been treated to several excellent films telling the story of modern Jewry. Harvey Bravman screened an early cut of "Soul Witness," an oral history of the Holocaust, culled from video interviews recorded in the 1990s with survivors in and around Brookline, which would have never come to light had the tapes not been archived.

Multiply that by a score and you have the just-concluded 20th annual festival of the National Center for Jewish Film. The center, housed at Brandeis, founded by Sharon Pucker Rivo and run by Rivo and Lisa Rivo, for 41 years has been archiving all manner of Jewish films, documentary and narrative, well-known and obscure. For collecting, restoring and in many cases rescuing these historical artifacts of great significance to the Jewish people, we give them our highest commendation.

A pair of films from the festival exemplifies the rich diversity of the center's collection and the insights it offers.

Yariv Mozer's documentary, "Ben-Gurion – Epilogue," features footage from 1968 interviews with the 82-year-old founder of the Jewish state; the film became possible in 2016 when a copy of the audio and a silent print of the footage were discovered separately and reunited.

Ernst Lubitsch's brilliant 1942 screwball comedy and political satire, "To Be or Not to Be," stars Carole Lombard and Jack Benny as married thespians whose theater troupe gets involved in a dangerous spy plot in Nazi-occupied Warsaw.

What strikes us about the Ben-Gurion documentary is his melancholic reaction to what one would think is Israel's triumphant struggle for independence. "I fear," he says, "we may be more successful at war than at peace."

At the same time, what strikes us about "To Be or Not to Be" is the film's brazen, riotous resistance to what one would think was the disheartening onslaught of fascism and anti-Semitism in Europe. "We do the concentrating," says a Nazi buffoon, "and [the Jews] do the camping."

Both movies show us the power of film, perhaps unique among media, to open a window onto the experience of our people, and the necessity of holding onto these celluloid artifacts.