

THE RUINS OF LIFTA

A film by Menachem Daum & Oren Rudavsky

77 min / English / 2016 / Color / USA / Digital



FIRST RUN FEATURES

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Logline

The mega-narratives underlying the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Holocaust and Nakba, are pitted against each other in the ruins of an Arab village emptied in 1948.

Short Synopsis

Lifta is the only Arab village abandoned in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that has not been completely destroyed or repopulated by Jews. Its ruins are now threatened by an Israeli development plan that would convert it into an upscale Jewish neighborhood. Discovering that his parents' Holocaust experiences may have distorted his views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Menachem—the filmmaker and an Orthodox Jew from Brooklyn—sets out to establish a personal relationship with a Palestinian. He meets Yacoub, who was expelled from Lifta and now leads the struggle to save the haunting ruins of his village from Israeli plans to build luxury villas on the site. Learning that Lifta was once a place where Jews and Arabs got along, Menachem joins Yacoub's campaign in the hopes that Lifta can serve as a place of reflection and reconciliation. This sets up a climactic encounter between a Holocaust survivor and a Nakba refugee among the ruins of Lifta.

Long Synopsis

In this new documentary from filmmakers Menachem Daum and Oren Rudavsky (*Hiding and Seeking, A Life Apart*), audiences will travel to Lifta—the only Palestinian village abandoned during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that has not been destroyed or repopulated by Jews. The land and its buildings, at the western entrance to Jerusalem, is a place of great beauty and significant history, yet is rarely a destination on any tourist map. Lifta is now threatened by an Israeli development plan that would convert it into an upscale Jewish neighborhood and forever change its character. With the support of the Palestinian and Jewish Coalition to Save Lifta, Lifta has become a battleground between developers, the Israeli Land authority, and its defenders. Lifta's unique history and architectural treasures have made it a candidate to become a UNESCO World Heritage site, pending far from certain Israeli government approval.

The story told in *The Ruins of Lifta* revolves around the conflict's underpinnings: the Holocaust and the Nakba (the Palestinian exile of 1948). It begins with filmmaker Menachem Daum's parents' devastating Holocaust experiences. Their perspective (as seen in the film *Hiding and Seeking*) deeply influenced Menachem's views of non-Jews, the Polish people, and Palestinians. An Orthodox Jew who grew up among Holocaust Survivors, Menachem Daum began questioning the narrow views of his community. He sets out to examine those views by establishing a personal relationship with a Palestinian. The first Palestinian he meets is Yacoub Odeh, who was expelled from Lifta in 1948 and now leads the struggle to save the haunting ruins of his village from Israeli plans to build luxury villas on the site.

When Menachem learns that Lifta was once a place where Jews and Palestinians got along, and that his revered uncle might have been involved in Jewish militia attacks on Lifta, he seeks out family members as well as Israeli and Palestinian witnesses and historians. These include Benny Morris, Hillel Cohen and Palestinian lawyer Sami Arshid. Menachem meets members of the Coalition to Save Lifta, including Yacoub, Daphna Golan and Ilan Shatyer and debates joining Yacoub's campaign with Dasha Rittenberg, a Holocaust Survivor in New York who is a close friend. In a move at reconciliation, he sets up a climactic encounter between Dasha and Yacoub among the ruins of Lifta.

Rudavsky and Daum present this unique story, a microcosm of the Middle Eastern conflict, with unprecedented honesty and compassion.

Director's Statement

I first visited Israel in 1968 as Israelis and people all over the world were still celebrating the Israeli victory in the Six Day War against three of Israel's enemies. At the time, we were all certain that this was the turning point, when Israel, having decimated the forces of its enemies, could look ahead to a positive future. We all celebrated the re-unification of Jerusalem and thought the Occupied Territories would be the bargaining chip which would bring peace with Israel's neighbors. Over the ensuing years, all these dreams proved wrong. The Yom Kippur War, the failure of the Oslo Accords and the stalemate between the Palestinians and the Israelis on reaching a settlement on terms that both sides basically know the parameters of, has been deeply disillusioning to Israeli and American Jews and to the Palestinian people.

Given this stalemate, what can Jews – or Palestinians - do to not feel hopeless and helpless? For me the answer has been to tell the story the best way I know how – through my filmmaking. In two films over the past five years, I have tried to tell a story that respects the narratives of the dreams of all parties to the conflict. In one film, *Colliding Dreams*, I have sought to tell the history of Zionism: the dream and the reality of the various movements that embrace Zionism and of the Palestinian people who have opposed it. Through an open discussion with some of the most thoughtful inhabitants of the land, I have sought to learn and impart what I have learned to a wider public.

At the same time, I'm well aware of the fact that any film can only impact those who are open to its message. And so I also have worked on another film, *The Ruins of Lifta*, which is a microcosm of the story of Zionism in the land of Israel. Working with long-time partner and friend, Menachem Daum, the film's co-director and on screen guide, I have participated in an attempt to meet the Other – in this case a Palestinian named Yacoub Odeh. Yacoub grew up in Lifta until his family felt compelled to leave in 1948. *The Ruins of Lifta* has been a film of discovery and in a partnership begun in 1992 when we made *A Life Apart: Hasidism in America*, followed by *Hiding and Seeking*, Menachem and I have doggedly tried to tell a quite personal story of two families, intersecting in Lifta. We all need to throw Hail Mary passes on the subject of peace in Israel and this is our Hail Mary pass. If we don't try – each and every one of us – to understand each other – then the future may truly be hopeless.

The beautiful village of Lifta, one of the few remaining sites where Palestinian homes have not been re-inhabited by Jews or been destroyed, serves as a reminder of our difficult history together and an opportunity to share the story of the conflict. We believe – as others do not – that through telling the story, as we Jews do of our exodus from Egypt, we will become more sensitive to the plight of those less fortunate among us. And this sensitivity may eventually lead us to the path of resolution. That is our goal in this film.

– Oren Rudavsky

Filmmaking Team Biographies

Menachem Daum (co-director and co-producer) was also co-producer and co-director of *Hiding and Seeking: Faith and Tolerance After the Holocaust* and *A Life Apart: Hasidism in America*. *Hiding and Seeking* was fortunate to be started with an initial National Endowment for the Arts grant and then received major funding from the Independent Television Service. After its theatrical release *Hiding and Seeking* went on to a very successful national broadcast on POV and won numerous awards. *A Life Apart* is a 95-minute 35mm documentary that received major support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Narrated by Leonard Nimoy and Sarah Jessica Parker, it explores the post-Holocaust revival of Hasidism in America and the intergenerational transmission of Hasidic values from Holocaust survivors to their American-born children. After a successful theatrical release and national PBS broadcast, *A Life Apart* went on to win numerous awards including a CINE Golden Eagle and was nominated for a national Emmy. Daum is also a frequent contributor to PBS's Religion and Ethics Newsweekly.

Oren Rudavsky (co-director, co-producer and director of photography) was co-producer and co-director, together with Daum, on *Hiding and Seeking* and *A Life Apart*. He was also director of photography on both of these films. Oren Rudavsky is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. He has received two National Endowment for the Arts filmmaker awards, three National Endowment for the Humanities grants, several New York State Council for the Arts awards, and many other awards and commendations. His most recently completed film, *Colliding Dreams: A History of Zionism*, is a feature length documentary that was supported by a media grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. He was the producer of a range of multi-screen and single screen films for the Russian Jewish History Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow. He is currently working on a documentary about Joseph Pulitzer.

Nick August-Perna (editor) has worked with Rudavsky as co-editor of *Colliding Dreams*. He recently completed work as co-editor of *Sacred*, a feature documentary for PBS. His projects have had international theatrical release and have been aired on HBO, National Geographic, and PBS. Nick post-produced a National Geographic multi-media series on the world's polluted oceans and recently finished editing a documentary to be aired on PBS about the 1965 grape strike which led to the creation of the United Farmworkers of America. He also edited an hour-long documentary for National Geographic on the resurgence of the illegal ivory trade between Africa and China. Nick co-directed and edited *The Swell Season* in 2011, a feature-length documentary about Academy Award-winning musicians Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova. The film, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, has won awards internationally and has since been released theatrically nationwide and internationally.

Story Summary

The film begins with aerial footage of the bustling modern highways and large buildings situated at the western entrance to Jerusalem. The camera then descends, as if on an archeological dig, into a valley that reveals layers of imposing stone ruins. Inside one of the ruins we meet Menachem, who, as the film's guide, informs us of the plans to raze the remnants of this last unpopulated Arab village, Lifta, and replace it with luxury villas.

The film then travels to New York where Menachem lives and where he visits Dasha who, like his parents, is a Holocaust survivor from Poland. Menachem's parents raised him to believe that all Poles, as well as Palestinians, are incorrigible anti-Semites. We see Menachem's father in archival footage tell him just that, and then we see Menachem meeting young Poles who voluntarily restore abandoned Jewish cemeteries where his ancestors still lie. Realizing his parents' Holocaust trauma led them to overgeneralize about all Poles Menachem now questions whether or not he also inherited a distorted view of all Palestinians. To answer that question he must do something he has never done before: go to meet Palestinians not as abstractions but as real people.

The first Palestinian Menachem meets is Yacoub Odeh who now lives in East Jerusalem. Yacoub is a leading member of the Coalition to Save Lifta. The Coalition, composed of Israelis and Palestinians, is fighting the Israel Land Authority's efforts to develop the village where Yacoub was born. The development plan, if successful, would erase most signs of the village's Arab history and heritage. Yacoub tells Menachem of his memories of his family's expulsion from Lifta in 1948, when they were "kicked out of their home" by members of a Jewish gang.

Yacoub's family story intersects with Menachem's in a surprising and complicating way. Menachem had an uncle, he tells Yacoub, whom he had always viewed as a hero. His uncle, named Mayer Yosef, was an idealist who saw no future in Poland. He left to come to Palestine, where he joined the Lehi, known by the British as the Stern Gang. His uncle was one of those gang members who used violence to evict Arabs. Yacoub sees no heroism in that, challenging Menachem, "How do you look upon such a person? At no time can you see him as a hero."

In response to Yacoub's challenge, Menachem embarks on an exploration of Lifta's former residents, to find out what really happened there and what role his uncle may have played in its history. Over home movies and archival footage, and interviews with family members, Menachem tells the story of his uncle, the embodiment of the muscular promise of Zionism. Mayer Yosef was a Hasidic boy who grew into a strong man, admired and idealized by his family. While yet in Poland he joined the Betar Zionist Youth, a self-defense force founded by Ze'ev Jabotinsky. After illegally arriving in Palestine in 1939, he joined the Jewish Brigade, and then Lehi—Fighters for the Freedom of Israel. Mayer Yosef's daughter and granddaughter recall a hero and a patriot who kept his underground militia exploits secret. His daughter also remembers Lifta as a place where Arabs threw grenades at cars bound for Jerusalem and where "murderers who killed Jews" found a place to hide out.

Historian Hillel Cohen complicates the picture. He tells Menachem that the Arabs of Lifta had a range of viewpoints about the use of violence. The more affluent Liftawis, those like Yacoub's family who lived in its beautiful stone houses, tended to resist calls for violence. The poorer Lifta was, those who lived in Lifta's mud huts, were more likely to engage in violent acts against Jews. Menachem is troubled to learn

that regardless of whether they supported or opposed violence against Jews, all Liftawis were collectively punished and uprooted in 1948.

Daphna Golan, a Jewish co-founder of the Coalition to Save Lifta, talks about Lifta as once being a place where Jews and Arabs got along and even developed close personal relationships. Menachem, who was raised to believe that Jews and Arabs had always been natural enemies, finds this hard to believe. He travels to Ramallah, in the Occupied Territories to meet with Palestinians exiled from Lifta and learns about their relations with Jews prior to 1948. We hear of happy childhoods, of weddings legendary for their food and generosity, and of peaceful coexistence between Arabs and Jews. For Menachem, the Palestinian account of co-existence with Jews in Lifta is particularly challenging.

Menachem engineers a meeting between Dasha and Yacoub, Holocaust survivor and Nakba refugee, in Jerusalem. "I believe, Menachem tells Dasha, "in the power of two people meeting, not to compare their sufferings, not to get involved in arguments about politics that cannot be resolved, but first meeting as one human being meets another... I'm hoping maybe there will be a little bit of better understanding from one side to the other. It is an experiment."

The experiment is nearly derailed, when Yacoub refuses to enter the planned meeting site, because he will not enter a hotel built on confiscated Arab land. In the end, the two finally meet, first sitting in a van, then walking, Dasha leaning on Yacoub's arm, on a rocky path in Lifta. The start of the conversation, a mildly contentious affair, does not exactly live up to Menachem's lofty expectations. Dasha speaks of the near destruction of the Jewish people as a justification for the State of Israel, provoking Yacoub to ask, "why do you involve us in your problem?" when it was the Germans, not the Arabs who were at fault. In the end, however, they come to a place of some mutual understanding. "A home is home," Dasha tells Yacoub, responding to the account of his displacement from Lifta. "People need homes... I feel your hurt. I really do." Their mutual empathy confirms for Menachem that their two narratives are not mutually exclusive and that he no longer needs to choose between one or the other. Menachem also concludes that we must look at the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict the way it actually was and not through the prism of the Holocaust.

Bookending the film with dramatic aerial footage of Lifta we learn that as a result of the Coalition's efforts Lifta has been nominated for consideration as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. However, final approval is contingent upon the Israeli government's agreement to preserve Lifta.

Topic Summary

The Israel-Palestinian conflict has been on-going for nearly 100 years, since the Balfour Declaration designated part of Palestine as a homeland for the Jewish People in 1917. During the last 60 years, we have experienced the on-going occupation of the West Bank and the threat of violence or war between Israelis and Palestinians. Americans are deeply concerned and divided over the conflict and recently the movement to Boycott, Divest and Sanction Israel has grown within religious groups and on college campuses. Meanwhile, the entire region of the Middle East is embroiled in warfare and Israelis are also politically pitted against each other as democratic values and ideals are challenged.

The Ruins of Lifta tries to take a radically different approach to the conflict than many other films, by seeking common ground between Jews and Palestinians in a series of encounters in the abandoned village of Lifta, on the outskirts of Jerusalem. We are Jewish Americans with a strong belief that we

must involve ourselves in areas where our government has committed vast resources and where a majority of the world's Jews live. We believe that individuals can play their part – however large or small in influencing people's perspectives – in the firm belief that that is one route to changing behavior and political options.

Lifta itself is important because it stands as one of the last reminders of Palestinian life before 1948 and the existence of the State of Israel. It is important because efforts have been underway for a decade to radically transform what to many is sacred space – a quiet sanctuary where dialogue may be possible. The Jerusalem Land Authority has been trying to develop the land of Lifta in a way that would make its present beauty and Palestinian character, mostly invisible. Lifta thus stands as a cultural landmark, recently designated as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations, a designation that will mean nothing unless the Israeli government agrees to this recognition. Our story is urgent because without intervention, this place and opportunity may be lost.

Lifta is a place that Palestinians visit to remember their cultural heritage. It is a place that some Jews visit to understand their Palestinian neighbors, while the majority of tourists, through no fault of their own, pass it by without even knowing it exists.

Menachem Daum and Oren Rudavsky have worked together in the past, most notably on the award winning film *Hiding and Seeking* which in many ways is a prequel to the present project – and is a film that is used by groups visiting Poland over the past ten years in efforts to broaden Jewish and Polish dialogue. *Hiding and Seeking*, which tells the story of Jews visiting the Polish farmers who hid their relatives in World War 2, effectively questions the idea that all Poles are somehow complicit with the Holocaust and also questions Jewish exceptionalism. The film forces viewers to consider how each community has brought their prejudices to their understanding of the past and the present.

After making that film, Menachem began to question his own prejudices vis a vis Palestinians – prejudices that many Jews and Americans feel. This led to his and Oren's pursuit of the narratives of both sides in the conflict. In our work, which consists of several film projects on the theme of reappraising historical beliefs, we have tried our best to look anew at issues of great concern. We are storytellers and we believe as Jews who have been deeply involved with Israel, that we have an obligation to share this story.

Menachem tells this story despite the condemnation of his community and family. Why? Because his American, Jewish and universal beliefs forbid him to do otherwise. These are some of the lessons our film hopes to teach – the search for honest understanding - seeking justice for the “other” – compassion and trust.