

French documentary misses nuances

SYMI ROM-RYMER
JTA

Through live interviews of prominent French Jews and clips from other media, *Being Jewish in France*, the new documentary film by French director Yves Jeuland, vividly demonstrates that life as a Jew in France is one of peaks and valleys.

The peaks sometimes reach beyond the successes of the American Jewish experience — France elected a Jewish prime minister in 1936, the equivalent of which has not been reached by a Jewish American — but the valleys bring into sharp relief the relative security of the Jewish community in the United States.

The three-hour film offers a good introduction to the French Jewish experience, but only for those familiar with the nuances of French politics and society. For those who aren't, many underlying issues that Jeuland takes for granted could lead the uninitiated to a skewed understanding of this complex subject.

Strong on narrative but weak on context, the film opens with the Dreyfus Affair of 1894-1906, the episode of the French Jewish captain who, wrongly accused of espionage by the military, unwittingly became the epicenter of a political scandal rooted in vicious anti-Semitism.

Jeuland uses the Dreyfus case as a lens through which the audience is encouraged to view French Jewish history from then to the present. In doing this, he presents the French-Jewish experience in a vacuum, eschewing any discussion of the French political ideology that influenced the status of all minorities in France from the post-Revolutionary era to now.

In the absence of a discussion or even a simple explanation, typical French Republican practices such as the delegation of Jewish religious practice to the private sphere — something to which all religious and ethnic groups were subjected — take on misleading anti-Semitic overtones.

The film becomes particularly limiting when it turns to the present day. Jeuland's insistence on viewing contemporary anti-Semitism through the same lens as the anti-Semitism of the Dreyfus era is an overly simplistic view of France and French history.

The anti-Semitism in France earlier this decade that spurred alarm and concern in



A scene from the documentary *Being Jewish in France*.

both France and throughout the Jewish world actually bore little resemblance to the Jew-hatred of Dreyfus' time, aside from some recycled rhetoric; to draw a direct link between the events is to create a false continuity.

As any Jewish publication will note, stories about the Holocaust and anti-Semitism always will attract interest. But *Being Jewish in France* had higher aspirations. The film aimed to tell a broader story of a complex and fascinating Jewish community made up of Eastern and Western European Jews, of Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities with different traditions and customs who came to France seeking religious, cultural, and intellectual freedoms that were unavailable to them elsewhere in Europe. They have made the French Jewish community among the most diverse Jewish communities in the world, second only to Israel.

Jeuland missed an excellent opportunity to go beyond the traditional narrative of anti-Semitism in France and probe deeper into the psyche of French Jewry. The consequences may be messier, and there may be inherent contradictions of assimilation, loyalty, and pride, but that's what makes the story of French Jews interesting.

Symi Rom-Rymer writes about Jewish issues in Europe. She received her master's degree in French cultural studies from Paris' Columbia University. To find screenings of the film, go to <http://www.brandeis.edu/jewish-film/Catalogue/films/beingjewishin-france.htm>.

THURSDAY, June 18

ONGOING

Temple Beth O'r/Beth Torah, Clark, offers **country line dancing**, 7-9 p.m. Leather-soled shoes are suggested. Admission is \$8, \$7 in advance. Call 732-381-8403.

The YM-YWHA of Union County, Union, invites members of the community to have **lunch at the Y** weekdays for \$1.75 per person. Call 908-289-8112 between 8:30-10:30 a.m. the same day.

WEDNESDAY, June 24

NJ State of Israel Bonds' Health Professionals Division honors Drs. Elliot Rosenstein, Lois Shulman, and Larry Weinstein at its annual **tribute dinner** at 6 p.m. at the Crystal Plaza, Livingston. Guest speaker is Malcolm Hoenlein of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Call 973-994-0516.

The JCC of Central NJ, Scotch Plains, offers **F.A.S.T. Play**, a class taught by a pediatric occupational therapist focusing on foundation and social skills training for preschoolers ages three-five, on Thursdays. The one-hour class for three-year-olds starts at 12:30 p.m.; for four- and five-year-olds, 1:30. Contact rbrous@jccnj.org or 908-889-8800, ext. 204.

The JCC of Central New Jersey, Scotch Plains, offers 30-minute **yoga classes for special needs children**, taught by fitness director Karen Rosen in a one-on-one setting. Contact krosen@jccnj.org or 908-889-8800, ext. 224.

SUNDAY, June 28

Jewish singles ages 60+ hold a **meet and greet** at Bistro 1051, Clark, at 12:30 p.m. RSVP to 908-687-0274.

Shternie Block continues **Parsha with the Commentaries**, a free class for women, on Tuesdays at noon at the Union County Torah Center, Westfield. Contact 908-789-5252 or info@torahcenter.org.

SPOTLIGHT ON

Artist takes top prize

Westfield resident Millicent K. Brody received first place honors for her photograph *Medium Rare* at the 2009 Union County Senior Art Exhibit. The winners were announced at the Elizabethtown Gas Co. Liberty Hall Center in Union on June 10.

Brody's photo will join the work of other winners in an exhibit at the Freeholder's Gallery at the Union County Administration Building in Eliz-



abeth. Their work will be reviewed by another set of judges at the state level, which will take place at the Meadow Lakes Community in East Windsor in October.

A freelance writer specializing in food, Brody's columns appear regularly in *New Jersey Life Magazine*, *Edible Jersey Magazine*, *The Courier-News*, *Home News Tribune*, and *Asbury Park Press*.

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