

**2009 NEW YORK SEPHARDIC JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL
DRAWS RECORD ATTENDANCE, MEDIA ATTENTION
INTERNATIONAL AND DIVERSE AUDIENCE**

**15 FILMS FROM 14 COUNTRIES SCREENED
AT WEEK-LONG FESTIVAL**

MANY WORLD, U.S. & NEW YORK PREMIERES

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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New York, NY (March 2, 2009) -- The American Sephardi Federation/Sephardic House, in collaboration with the Yeshiva University Museum, presented the 13th New York Sephardic Jewish Film Festival, February 5-12 at the Center for Jewish History in New York City. It was an exuberant cultural event, drawing sold-out crowds, a diverse, international audience, the participation of notable personalities, scholars, diplomats, and many of the filmmakers themselves.

Building on its growing reputation as a showcase for some of the most unique and riveting films – documentary and feature alike – to emerge from the various Sephardic communities, this year’s film festival raised the bar ever higher. In addition to the interesting, multi-generational audience present at the festival, the roster of fifteen films from such countries as Ethiopia, India, Israel, France, Italy, Spain, Morocco, Tunisia, Peru, Yemen and Brazil, also drew local representatives of the numerous Jewish communities depicted.

The result was a multi-national, magnificent mélange of languages, skin colors, traditions, dress and cultural heritage, gathered under the common rubric of the contemporary Sephardic Jewish experience.

This year’s Festival offered rare glimpses into the hidden secrets of Toledo, Spain, a heartbreaking drama about a Tunisian Jewish family in Paris, a poignant portrait of Iraq’s Jewish society, insight into a uniquely Peruvian slice of Jewish history and many, many other exotic narratives.

The recent terrorist event in Mumbai, India, which ended in tragedy for the local Chabad rabbi and his wife, provided a most timely backdrop for the screening of ***In Search of the Bene Israel***, a film about a small Jewish community in Mumbai that believes itself descended from one of the lost tribes of Israel.

Each of the films screened – including many World, US or New York Premieres -- was a star in its own right, but the opening night offering – ***Zrubavel***, the first Israeli film made by and about Ethiopian Israelis, tells the story of Itzhak, a boy who dreams of being the Spike Lee of Israel and the three generations of his family – sent the excitement through the roof.

Whether it was the captivating presence of Ethiopian singer Meskie Shibrú-Sivan or the gentle disposition of first-time director Shmuel Beru, the tasty Ethiopian food or the avid audience, the combination of elements contributed to a magical and unforgettable event.

That same buzz carried through the weeklong festival, which picked up on Saturday night with a double-feature of ***Comme Ton Pere***, a film from France, directed by Marco Carmel and the New York Premiere of the Israeli film, ***The Seven Days (Shiva)*** by Ronit and Shlomi Elkabetz.

While ***Comme Ton Pere*** portrays a Tunisian Jewish family after it arrives in France, fleeing the tension of the 1967 war in Israel, ***Shiva*** follows a Moroccan Jewish family, the Ohaions, as they mourn the loss of a loved one in the Jewish tradition known as “shiva.” In the course of this observance, bitterness and family feuds soon take precedence over mourning. The atmosphere becomes stifling as family members unearth long-buried truths.

Shiva was presented in collaboration with The JCC in Manhattan's Israel Film Center.

Excitement further animated the Sunday-at-the-Movies atmosphere on the third day of the festival when four extraordinary films were screened, beginning with ***Toledo: The Hidden Secret*** (World Premiere), directed by Jack Matitahu, which tells the story of the great Spanish city from the 4th century up to the time following the Inquisition. The screening was followed by a riveting discussion with professors Jerrilynn D. Dodds of City College/CUNY and María Rosa Menocal of Yale University.

Next up on the Sunday schedule was ***The Fire Within: Jews in the Amazonian Rainforest***, directed by Lorry Salcedo Mitrani, which tells the story of the Jewish men who came to Peru in the 19th century to seek their fortunes in the rubber boom, following their descendents in their quest for authentic identity.

The World Premiere of the Yemenite film ***Two Legacies***, directed by Einat Kapakh was the third cinematic offering on Sunday. A deeply personal film based

on the life and work of the filmmaker's grandfather, it sheds light on a theological dispute between the two schools of Yemenite Jewry and illuminates the path that led him to become a world renowned Jewish philosopher. The director, Einat Kapakh, led a discussion after the screening of her remarkable film.

The day concluded with the New York City Premiere of ***Vasermil***, directed by Mushon Salmona and the winner of the Wolgin Award at the 2007 Jerusalem Film Festival. A raw and touching film about three teenagers from a tough neighborhood who pin their hopes on soccer as a ticket out of their circumstances, ***Vasermil*** provided emotional closure for the day, giving insight into the Russian and Ethiopian underclass in Israel.

Monday tried to compete with the Sunday schedule by offering three films – an afternoon screening of ***Comme Ton Pere***, the U.S. Premiere of ***From Tripoli to Bergen-Belsen***, by director Marco Carmel, as well as a repeat of ***Zrubavel***.

Dr. Jane Gerber, professor of Jewish History and Director of the Institute for Sephardic Studies at CUNY Graduate Center was on hand for a post-film discussion following ***From Tripoli to Bergen-Belsen***, which presented rare archival footage and personal testimony attesting to the traumatic experience of Tunisian and North African Jews during World War II. As this narrative has been largely suppressed and is therefore little known, Mr. Carmel's film represents an important historic contribution.

Films about Iraqi and Indian Jewry lit up the Tuesday marquee-- ***Baghdad Twist***, directed by Joe Balass, a visual memoir of one family's life in Iraq before escaping to a new home in Canada in the fall of 1970 and ***In Search of the Bene Israel***, directed by Sadia Shepard, which documents the filmmaker's quest to know her family legacy by returning to her grandmother's birthplace in India.

Both films are important contributions to the history of Jews from these respective cultures, offering archival images, home movies, family photographs and other mementos of the thriving and exotic Jewish communities of Iraq and India. Sadia Shepard joined members of the audience for a very lively discussion after her film.

The final film on Tuesday evening was the evocative ***Villa Jasmin***, directed by Férid Boughedir. A historical film veiled in romance, ***Villa Jasmin*** sheds light on the experience of French/Tunisian Jews during the era of the Vichy Government under German Occupation.

The penultimate night of the festival presented a varied menu of offerings, including a repeat screening of ***Villa Jasmin*** and two U.S. Premieres of films by director Shaul Kesslassi – ***Between Revolution and Tradition*** and ***About Sugarcane and Homecoming***. While the first paints a portrait of the Cuban Jewish community, the second film presents the story of a community in the

Northeastern part of Brazil, as it pursues its own quest for identity and faith...in the face of rejection by mainstream Jewish authorities.

Rabbi **Marc D. Angel**, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Shearith Israel, led a warm and enlightened post-screening discussion.

While *Vasermil* was screened at the uptown JCC in Manhattan, the ASF presented *Tree Of Life* by director Hava Volterra for its final film of the day.

Traveling to Italy after the death of her father, Volterra is intent upon tracing the roots of his family tree. With her 82 year-old aunt, they travel from city to city, dig through ancient manuscripts, interview a wide range of quirky scholars, and piece together the fascinating and humorous stories of her own Italian Jewish ancestors.

A noteworthy credit of the film is the animation and music by Golden Globe nominated composer, Carlo Siliotto.

And then, a full week after the remarkable opening night of the 2009 New York Sephardic Film Festival, the magic was still in the air at the closing night screening of the Moroccan film, *Where Are You Going, Moshe?* As with the first night of the festival, the event was sold-out and a sumptuous spread of ethnic, in this case Moroccan, food was served to the assembled guests. Director Hassan Benjelloun's film captivated the crowd and provided funny yet touching insight into the exodus to Israel of Moroccan Jews in the early 1960's. ASF's Moroccan-born Board member, Carlos Benaim, led the post-screening discussion.

The fifteen films presented at this year's New York Sephardic Film Festival are notable for their groundbreaking artistry, unforgettable narratives and imagery, and for expanding the public's awareness and understanding of the richness and diversity of the Sephardic experience. Plans are already underway for the 2010 New York Sephardic Film Festival. Please visit www.americansephardifederation.org for information for dates, when they become available. Pictures from the festival are also available on the site.

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