

For Immediate Release

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**“Roots and Origins”
The 9th International Sephardic Jewish Film Festival**

**THE AMERICAN SEPHARDI FEDERATION WITH SEPHARDIC HOUSE &
YESHIVA UNIVERSITY MUSEUM PRESENTS THE BEST IN SEPHARDIC
JEWISH CINEMA FROM AROUND THE WORLD**

**Ninth Annual Series of Fiction and Documentary Films, Including World Premiere
of *Last Jews of Baghdad*, Panels, and Lectures**

February 3 - 9, 2005

American Sephardi Federation with Sephardic House

Yeshiva University Museum

The Center for Jewish History

15 W. 16th St. (between 5th and 6th Aves.)

The 9th International Sephardic Jewish Film Festival, *Roots and Origins*, is a cinematic celebration of the rich history, culture and identity of Sephardic Jewry, exploring its historical roots all over the world. Leaving Spain in the 15th century, the Sephardim settled in many different lands until many finally made their way to North America beginning 350 years ago, in 1654. Thought-provoking and entertaining, personal and historical – always educational – the International Sephardic Jewish Film Festival is gaining prominence as a cultural and artistic event in the Jewish community and beyond.

Following on the success of previous years, we once again bring over a dozen contemporary and classic films about Sephardic Jewry to New York. With 13 screenings at our state-of-the-art facility at the Center for Jewish History, and three screenings at the dynamic JCC facility on the Upper West Side on Monday, February 7th, this year's Festival should be our biggest and best ever. Kicking off an exciting week of films, the **Opening Night Screening and Reception on February 3rd**, will be the New York premiere of *The Last Sephardic Jew* and a Q & A with its Spanish director **Miguel Angel Nieto**. In this moving film a young Sephardic rabbi, Eliezer Papo, takes a trip into the past, journeying all the way back to medieval Spain in search of answers to the puzzle of why the flourishing Jews of that country were forced to convert or flee. *The Last Sephardic Jew* follows the post-Inquisition wanderings of Spanish Jewry, bringing to light the hidden traces of Jewish life in such far-flung destinations as Thessaloniki and Istanbul. This film is presented with the co-sponsorship of the Instituto Cervantes.

Also making its New York premiere is the superb exploration of Jewish life in the years before the Iranian Revolution, *Abjad*. Directed by acclaimed Iranian filmmaker Abolfazl

Jalili (*Delbaran*), Abjad is a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age tale, and a moving story of blooming romance between Muslim and Jewish teenagers. Their touching love story is surrounded by a country about to fall sway to revolutionary madness, and the faith and determination of Maassoum's family. Another story of strong family bonds is on display in Daniel Wachsmann's *Barmitzvah*. Coming on the heels of the director's *Menelik: Black Jewish Prince*, one of the most acclaimed films of last year's festival, *Barmitzvah* is a heart-wrenching and gripping portrayal of a family, and a northern Israeli community, desperately struggling to maintain equilibrium, in the face of economic travail, the ever-present specter of violence, and personal strife. One father's efforts to provide a bar mitzvah for his son forms the core of this warm-hearted film about family bonds.

This year's Sephardic Jewish Film Festival also features a wide range of documentaries on the Sephardic experience. Perhaps most relevant, in our current political moment, is *Last Jews of Baghdad: End of an Exile, Beginning of a Journey*. Making its world premiere at the festival, *Last Jews of Baghdad* studies the evisceration of the once-flourishing Iraqi Jewish community through anti-Semitic persecution, and the horrific regime of Saddam Hussein. *Last Jews of Baghdad* takes a historical and personal look at the persecution, torture, escape and exodus of over 160,000 Iraqi Jews between 1940 and 2003 utilizing documentary footage and interviews with the Jews who fled their beloved homeland of over 2500 years.

Desperate Hours revisits a little-known story of Jewish survival. During the dark days of World War II, diplomats and clergy in Turkey worked relentlessly to save their country's Jewish population. Victoria Barrett's documentary utilizes interviews with survivors and witnesses to tell this mostly unknown story, and bring the heroism of everyday Turks to light. *Desperate Hours*, winner of the Grand Jury Award and the Audience Award at the 2003 D.C. Independent Film Festival, will be followed by a round-table discussion, led by the Consul General of Turkey.

To pay tribute to the French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida, who passed away in October, we are showing Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman's documentary *Derrida*. Acclaimed by the Los Angeles *Times*' Kenneth Turan as "a first-rate documentary," *Derrida* is a playful and witty introduction to the life and thought of the philosopher, whose own roots as an Algerian Jew were an overriding concern of his illustrious intellectual career.

Other films being shown at this year's festival include:

Bonjour Monsieur Shlomi

In Shemi Zarhin's touching debut film, young Shlomi is the peacemaker in his eccentric family, keeping everyone satisfied while remaining distinctly under the radar for his relatives, peers, and teachers. When a determined principal discovers the truth about Shlomi's talents, though, everything about his life begins to change. The San Francisco *Chronicle*'s Ruthe Stein called the film "an Israeli *Good Will Hunting*." A great film about awakening to the possibilities of tomorrow.

La Terza Luna

A lush, romantic Italian film about Jews hiding out in Venice during the dark days of World War II. A musician and his female protégé rehearse their latest work, an operatic adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, echoing the love triangle between the pair and her constantly lurking husband. Beautifully joining history with romance, the past with the present, *La Terza Luna* is graced by winning performances and glorious Italian music. Referencing the long history and metaphorical resonances of the Shylock story, and of the exodus from Egypt, Matteo Bellinelli's operatic film is a rich tapestry of Jewish history.

Pillar of Salt

Based on the autobiographical novel by sociologist Albert Memmi, *Pillar of Salt* captures the cultural richness and social complexity of a Jewish boy's life in Tunisia, North Africa. Alexander, age 13, is an expressive and intelligent boy who sensitively responds to conflicting pressures from surrounding French and Arab societies. A rare opportunity to see the unique customs of Jewish life in Tunisia, including Sabbath dinner and Alexander's bar mitzvah.

The Rock and the Star

In the late 16th century, when the Inquisition's tentacles spread to Brazil, the Spanish Jews who had fled there made their way to the city of Recife, then under Dutch control. *The Rock and the Star*, making its New York premiere at the Sephardic Jewish Film Festival, tells the story of the Jews' brief respite in Recife, before most of them were forced to move on again, and become the first Jewish settlers in what would become New York City.

Ticket Information:

\$10.00 General Public; \$8.00 American Sephardi Federation/Sephardic House, and Yeshiva University Museum members, seniors and students; \$40 Festival Subscription pass good for five films not including Opening Night. Reservations for specific screenings must be made at time of purchase. Opening night screening and reception \$35.

Tickets can be purchased in advance through the Center for Jewish History Box Office, 15 West 16th Street. Mon-Thur. 12-5pm; Fri. and Sun. 12-3pm; and two hours prior to screenings, or by calling 917-606-8200. Tickets include entrance to Yeshiva University Museum at the Center for Jewish History. Galleries will be open 15 minutes prior to screenings, except Saturday and Monday.

General Information

American Sephardi Federation, Sephardic House, and Yeshiva University Museum are located at The Center for Jewish History at 15 West 16th Street (between Fifth and Sixth Avenues), New York City; 212-294-8350; www.asfonline.org.

Yeshiva University Museum gallery exhibition hours are: Tuesday- Thursday and Sunday from 11:00 AM to 5:00 PM. Admission for museum galleries is \$6.00 for adults; \$4.00 for seniors and students. Museum members and children 5 and under are admitted free. Yeshiva University Museum can be visited on the Internet at www.yumuseum.org or www.cjh.org.