

A time TO WEEP

Tisha B'Av is our national day of mourning... and sometimes we can use a little help to get in the mood | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



The Daum family with the Polish family that they visited

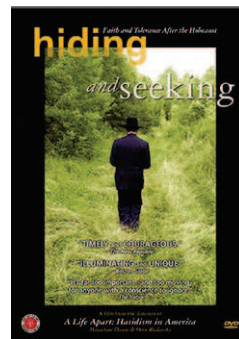
TISHA B'AV (THE 9TH OF THE HEBREW MONTH OF Av), the saddest day in the Hebrew calendar (which this year falls out on Sunday, 26 July), is nearly upon us, the culmination of a gradually intensive three-week period of mourning that begins each year on the 17th day of the Hebrew month of Tammuz. Not only is it a 24-hour fast (similar to Yom Kippur in length, as well as the other restrictions of the day), but we behave like actual mourners, sitting on low stools (or even the ground) for most of the day, even going so far as to deprive ourselves of comfort when we sleep. It's a day on which we're meant to avoid socialising

with each other, including even greeting one another. The sole focus of the day: mourning all of the Jewish tragedies that have taken place throughout our history – from ancient times to the present day – with special emphasis on the destruction of our two Temples.

As part of the mourning, we aren't even allowed to learn Torah on Tisha B'Av, apart from those parts relevant to: mourning in general, Tisha B'Av in particular, and the terrible and heartbreaking details of the destruction of our Holy Temples. It's the one day of the year that we may even find our local shul showing a

video to help pass the time and keep our minds focused on the task at hand (as we're not meant to engage in anything that would divert our attention from mourning, such as surfing the Net). Such videos can range from those created each year especially for the day, by the likes of the Chofetz Chaim Heritage Foundation and Yeshiva University (some of the videos from previous years can be found online) just to name a couple, to documentaries and, in some cases, even feature films that are focused on Jewish tragedies, often with a strong emphasis on recent tragedies such as the Holocaust.

With this in mind, we've assembled some documentaries that are appropriately sad and thought-provoking. One important note of caution: all of the documentaries discussed below contain graphic footage and themes that are often difficult to watch. Most contain actual archival footage from the period of the Holocaust, as well as detailed, harrowing descriptions from actual survivors.



HIDING AND SEEKING: Faith and Tolerance after the Holocaust (2004)

Following the success of his first documentary, "A Life

Apart: Hasidim in America", filmmaker Menachem Daum, a modern-Orthodox Jew and the son of Holocaust survivors, turned the cameras on his own family and produced one of the most gripping and engaging documentaries ever made. Shocked by an extreme and intolerant religious perspective that his wife hears at a class that she attends, Daum travels from his home in Brooklyn to Eretz Yisrael in order to confront his two sons with the shocking statement and gauge whether they have been negatively influenced by such extreme and intolerant views in the course of their studies. Daum's sons, who both learn in kollel (a system where married men receive a stipend for full-time, advanced-level Talmud study) and belong to the Chareidi world, essentially agree

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with the troubling statement, only taking issue with its indelicate expression.

Disappointed and dismayed by their response, Daum insists that his sons come with him and their mother on a trip to Poland to try and find the non-Jewish farmers who, at incredibly great risk to their own lives, hid the boys’ maternal grandfather and his two brothers for over two years, until the end of World War II. It is to these non-Jewish, Polish farmers that Daum’s sons quite literally owe their very existence. Although simple in its premise, the film takes some stunning twists and turns, as we discover that the story and people we meet are more complex than we might expect. This is a thought-provoking and, at times, startling film. One word of caution: don’t read anything about this movie or it’s apt to spoil it for you.



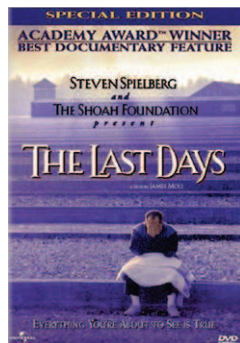
THE LONG WAY HOME (1997)

Academy Award winner for Best Documentary (1998), The Long Way Home begins with the aftermath of the Holocaust and

the displaced persons (DP) camps that were set up to care for survivors. Tragically, suffering and even death did not cease with the end of the war, but carried on in its aftermath for many more years to come in these camps, the conditions of which were little better than the concentration camps themselves. So deplorable were the conditions that Earle G Harrison, who was sent by then president Harry S Truman to investigate, reported: “...we appear to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them except that we do not exterminate them. They are in concentration camps in large numbers under our military guard instead of SS troops.”

Besides the incredibly haunting imagery of the film, which liberally uses archival

footage that was likely recorded as a result of then general Eisenhower’s insistence that the liberation of the concentration camps be filmed, what makes the film so incredibly moving is the heartbreaking narration, often with the various narrators reading the actual words of survivors who detail their own pain, loss, devastation, and humiliation, as well as the poor treatment they experienced before, during and even after the war. Tragically, those in the DP camps had little choice where to go, as they could not return to their countries of origin (and often those who did were killed when they finally did return home) and emigration to then Palestine was strictly controlled and nearly impossible. The film also details the impossible and miraculous struggle to found a Jewish homeland despite incredible opposition that came from all sides.



THE LAST DAYS (1998)

Another Academy Award winner for Best Documentary (1999), The Last Days tells the story of five Hungarian holocaust survivors,

as the Nazis desperately sought to implement their “Final Solution” in the waning months of World War II. The film combines interviews with these survivors along with archival film footage from before, during and after the war, as the subjects tell of what their lives were like before the conflict reached them, including how Polish Jews seeking refuge in Hungary brought hard-to-believe stories of the atrocities being com-

mitted by the Nazis. The interview subjects were not worried by such tales, however, as they saw themselves first and foremost as Hungarians who needn’t be troubled by what was going on 1 000km away in Germany. As the Nazis came to power in Hungary, however, and restriction after restriction was enacted, including forcing the Hungarian Jews to wear yellow stars, it was only then – and far too late – that they started to worry about what was happening.

As the Jews were being rounded up and taken away in cattle cars, Raoul Wallenberg arrived on the scene, leased apartment buildings, and placed the Swedish flag outside them in an effort to save lives – but still, many of the Jews hiding in these “protected” houses were rounded up by the Nazis, taken outside and shot. The interviewees tell of riding in cattle cars to Auschwitz, the entire time believing they were being taken to a vineyard where they would get to work in the fields. They tell in vivid detail of the indignities they experienced and the horrors that they witnessed – and even return to the camps, as well as their family homes, 50 years later, emotionally describing first-hand the things they saw there, while learning for the first time the fate of relatives who they had not stopped thinking about. The film includes interviews with a Greek Jew, who participated in gassing and cremating fellow Jews under penalty of death, as well as a Nazi doctor, who was acquitted at Nuremberg because of his attempts to save Jewish lives via ordering harmless experiments in an effort to keep people alive longer. Also interviewed are some of the soldiers who liberated the camps, with one soldier noting, as images of emaciated Holocaust survivors show on the screen, that he saw many “horrible sights” during the war, but “the worst thing [he] ever saw in his life were the survivors of the Holocaust”. The film details the lives of its subjects up until the then present day when the movie was filmed. ■■

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