

# Israelism documentary with Boston ties examines Jewish identity

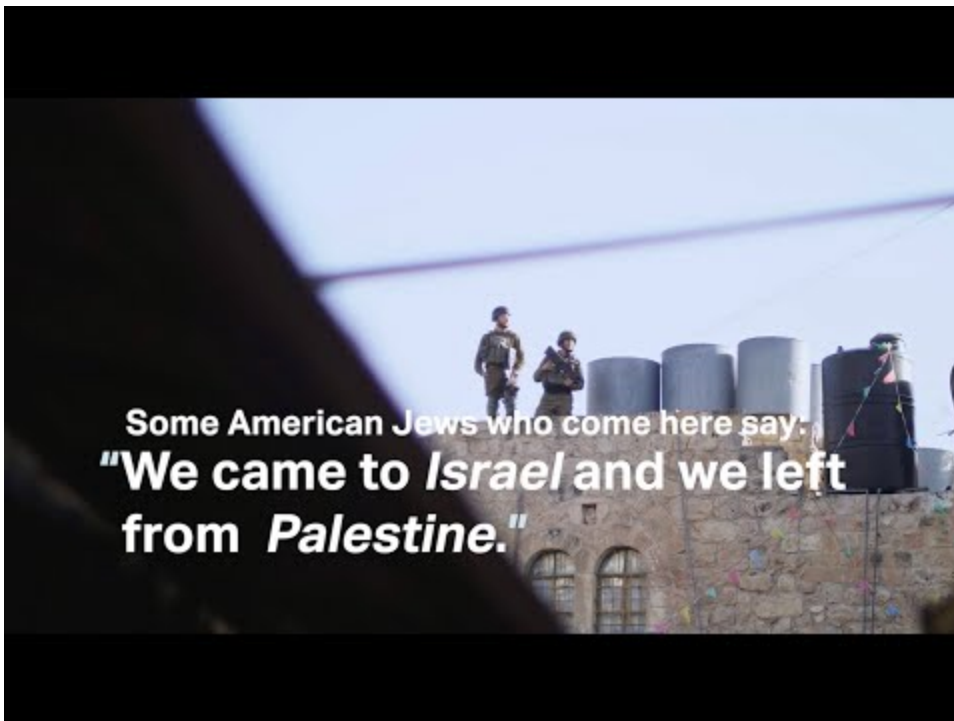
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By Erin Trahan Globe correspondent, Updated January 25, 2024, 12:57 p.m. [Email to a Friend](#) [Share on Facebook](#) [Share on Twitter](#) [Print this Article](#) [View Comments](#)

Simone Zimmerman was a child when she started to learn about Israel. But it wasn't until college that she started learning about Palestine. Once she visited the West Bank as a young adult, she was forever changed. "I don't think I realized the extent to which what I would come to see on the ground would really shock me and horrify me," she says in "Israelism," a new documentary with New England roots.

Her story is one of two at the heart of the film, which scrutinizes the melding of Jewish American identity with the Israeli state and its policies, particularly in regard to Palestine. Though it rolled out slowly to film festival audiences starting last February, and picked up awards along the way, the documentary has drawn more attention amid the Israel-Hamas war and free-speech disputes on college campuses. Since Oct. 7, screenings across the country have been canceled, postponed, and cited in a federal lawsuit.

That [lawsuit](#), filed by six students against Harvard on Jan. 10, accuses the administration of failing to protect Jewish students from antisemitic harassment on campus. The [complaint](#) states that a Sept. 21 Harvard Divinity School screening of "Israelism" — which it says "argues American Jews raise their children with pro-Israel indoctrination" — caused one student to suffer "anxiety and gross discomfort."



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/bondvm3hvGM>

For first-time feature filmmakers, Erin Axelman, of Somerville, and Sam Eilertsen, of Providence, responses to their film show how fraught this moment is when people try to talk about antisemitism. Still, the directors, both of whom are Jewish, believe their film can inspire nuanced conversation — if those conversations are allowed to happen.

Erin Axelman, of Somerville, is the co-director of the documentary "Israelism" with Sam Eilertsen, of Providence. David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

“Students do not like being censored,” said Axelman in a recent Zoom interview, along with Eilertsen. “A lot of students are quite exasperated by not letting Jewish students watch a film made about Jewish people by Jewish people.” By focusing on young adults, “Israelism” also touches on generational differences among American Jews. Axelman and Eilertsen said the project mirrors their own transformation.

Growing up in Norridgewock, Maine, Axelman (who uses they/them pronouns) said they “kind of fell in love with Israel” and at one point considered serving in its military. While undergraduates at Brown University, Axelman and Eilertsen (who graduated in 2013 and 2012, respectively) observed how Jewish American students like themselves often encountered Palestinian history and people for the first time in college, they said.

Directors of the new documentary "Israelism," Erin Axelman and Sam Eilertsen, pose for a picture at the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival. Pat Mazerra

Axelman took a junior-year semester off to travel in Israel and the West Bank and to volunteer at a hostel in Nazareth. Back at school as a student activist, they brought left-wing Israeli and Palestinian speakers to campus, helped host thematically-related film festivals, and participated in facilitated, inter-Jewish dialogues about Israel.

"To be honest, that was one of the best experiences I had," said Axelman of conversing with other Jewish people. That's when they began to realize, "even the most pro-Israel students had their doubts."

"It's a very common story," said Eilertsen. But neither he nor Axelman had seen it told in a compelling way on film.

They set out to make "Israelism" in late 2015 in what became a lengthy process. Eilertsen described early cuts as "Ken Burns broad strokes of history." They worked without funding for the first four years and interviewed more than 70 people, including the activist and author Noam Chomsky, an emeritus professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who appears in the finished film. Eventually they focused on the personal accounts of two young Jewish Americans, Zimmerman from Los Angeles, and Eitan (who declined to use his last name) from Atlanta.

“The people we chose for the narrative very much represent many, many other people,” said Eilertsen, who has worked as a director of photography and editor for more than a decade.

Early in the film, Zimmerman holds up Israeli and American flags she made at Jewish day school in the late 1990s. “Israel was just treated like a core part of being a Jew,” she says. “So you did prayers. And you did Israel.” But the film shows that later, as a Berkeley undergraduate, she begins to separate those identities. Over the rest of the film, she comes to terms with her own gaps in knowledge about Palestinian people and history. Eventually she cofounds [IfNotNow](#), a primarily Jewish anti-occupation advocacy group.

Meanwhile, Eitan describes a childhood raised in a conservative Jewish family that led to Israeli military service as a young adult. Over an animated scene depicting his time in the West Bank, Eitan recounts witnessing the beating of a Palestinian detainee in his charge: “I felt responsible, but my commander wasn’t saying anything, so how could I say anything?” he recalls. Thinking back on that time, Eitan says in the film, “just working in checkpoints, patrolling villages — that in itself was immoral.”

An image of Israeli soldiers as seen in the new documentary "Israelism." Ben Grayzel

In the film, both Zimmerman and Eitan acknowledge facing backlash for speaking out against Israel. “Israelism,” too, has encountered backlash. Hunter College and University of Pennsylvania are among the institutions that canceled or delayed screenings over what Axelman called “vague concerns for safety.” Emerson College also postponed a Nov. 9 event rescheduling it for Feb. 1 to have time for “internal dialogue.”

As Axelman and Eilertsen approach a crop of Boston screenings, they said they don't anticipate any issues.

Still, when reached by the Globe, contacts for events at MIT on Jan. 26 and Boston University on Feb. 5 asked to not be named.

"I do not want my name used in any capacity as students have been doxed for expressing views on Palestine across the United States," wrote the MIT contact, a member of MIT's Coalition for Palestine, a collective of 14 student groups. MIT organizers anticipate a campus police presence.

Eilertsen related the attempts to shut down "Israelism" on college campuses to the resignations of former presidents Liz Magill of University of Pennsylvania and Claudine Gay of Harvard. "It's really evidence of a coordinated right-wing, bad-faith campaign," he said.

"Feeling uncomfortable and anxious is a part of education," said Axelman. "When I began understanding the occupation, and I saw it up close, I was unbelievably uncomfortable." Axelman said that discussing what it means to feel safe, whether in college classrooms or as Jewish or Palestinian people, comes up frequently in post-film discussions.

As Axelman pointed out, America's changing relationship to Israel during the war, coupled with campaigns against "Israelism," have only spurred more demand to see the film. They currently have more than 1,000 screening requests. But calling the film — or those who discuss it — "antisemitic," they said, "makes fighting real antisemitism much more difficult."

## **ISRAELISM**

At MIT, Jan. 26 at 5:30 p.m. RSVP required. Priority seating for MIT students and staff. Erin Axelman and Sam Eilertsen in person for Q&A.

At Emerson College's Bright Lights Cinema Series, Feb. 1 at 7 p.m. Open to public. Erin Axelman and Sam Eilertsen in person for Q&A.

RSVP and streaming options: [www.israelismfilm.com](http://www.israelismfilm.com)

*Erin Trahan is affiliated faculty in Emerson College's visual media arts and journalism departments. She can be reached at [erin@erintrahan.net](mailto:erin@erintrahan.net).*