

'When My Speech Was Called Antisemitic, I Was Shocked'

Thursday 29 February 2024, by [ABRAHAM Yuval](#), [ANDERMAN Nirit](#) (Date first published: 28 February 2024).

Winning the prize for best documentary at the Berlin Film Festival was supposed to be the pinnacle of Israeli filmmaker Yuval Abraham's career. The response to his acceptance speech for 'No Other Land' has left him stunned - but not into silence

Israeli filmmaker Yuval Abraham. In the most severe cases, death threats were posted on social media. Credit: Emil Salman

On Saturday night, it seemed for a brief moment as if the world was sending a signal of sanity, normality and hope amid all the chaos and pain this country has recently experienced.

["No Other Land," a film made by four young Israeli and Palestinian directors](#), won the best documentary award at the Berlinale - one of the world's most prestigious film festivals. It was a win against all odds, especially as one of the four had never directed a film before. Two of them had already packed their bags and returned home. The other two stayed for the closing ceremony in Berlin and went up on stage to make an emotional speech when their film was pronounced the winner.

Basel Adra told the audience that it was difficult to celebrate when tens of thousands of his fellow Palestinians were being slaughtered in Gaza and his community of Masafer Yatta in the West Bank was being leveled by Israeli bulldozers. That latter point, in fact, was the subject of their documentary. He then urged the German government to stop sending arms to Israel.

Watch on X: Yuval Abraham's speech at the Berlin Film Festival.

Yuval Abraham, one of the film's two Israeli directors, talked about the differences in basic rights between the two peoples that inhabit his land. "I'm living under a civilian law and Basel is under military law," he said. "I'm free to move where I want in this land. Basel is, like millions of Palestinians, locked in the occupied West Bank." He also used the word "apartheid," stressed the word "occupation" and expressed hope for an imminent cease-fire in Gaza.

The fact that other speakers used the stage that evening to express solidarity with the Palestinians and call for a cease-fire caused the Israeli ambassador to Germany, Ron Prosor, to call the festival to task the next day. "Under the guise of freedom of expression and art, antisemitic and anti-Israel rhetoric is celebrated," he stated. Berlin Municipality, meanwhile, announced that it was opening an investigation into whether the festival organizers had ensured that the awards ceremony reflected a wide range of viewpoints and, if not, why.

Israel's Channel 11 (from the Kan public broadcaster) poured fuel on the fire when it aired a segment about the award that included Abraham's remarks [under the chryon "The Israeli filmmaker's antisemitic speech."](#)

A screenshot from the report on the film on KAN 11. The banner reads: 'The antisemitic speech of the Israeli creator.'

From there, the situation quickly went downhill. Abraham found himself facing attacks on social media. The mildest of them accused him of hypocrisy. In a long and angry post, for instance, the Arab-Israeli activist Yoseph Haddad said: "We are tired of your hypocrisy and of those who live among us and hate their country more than they love themselves."

In the most severe cases, death threats were posted. "I want to see you return to Israel, you son of a bitch," someone wrote. Another stated: "Palesti-nazi blood sucker, it's a pity they didn't take you to Gaza. You should have been blown away, as you deserve, a long time ago. Hope you see your family murdered and raped before they rape you for 100 days."

Just one day after Abraham and his fellow filmmakers had felt on top of the world, he suddenly found himself surrounded by hate. On Sunday, he boarded a plane for Israel and by the time he reached his stopover in Athens, he realized the storm of hatred was now being directed predominantly at him.

'I know there's a lot of criticism of the things that were said and that's okay, I encourage criticism. It's legitimate that people voice criticism, and as a rule I'm someone who listens to criticism. But to call a speech by an Israeli filmmaker antisemitic is crazy.'

"They sent me the Kan segment with the 'The Israeli filmmaker's antisemitic speech,' and at the same time I began seeing that on Instagram and Facebook, I'm getting dozens, if not hundreds, of anonymous messages like 'When you're back, we're waiting for you, you son of a bitch' and 'I'll hunt you down at the airport,' he told Haaretz earlier this week.

"Even though I'm a journalist and have often written things that are far more critical than what I said in the speech, never once did I experience anything like this. I never got such a severe reaction. It was really scary. I was undecided whether I should return [to Israel] or not. In the end, I decided to delay my flight by a day. That's why I'm speaking to you from Greece. I'm scared. It's been super-stressful."

Abraham's lawyers, Michael Sfard and Alon Sapir, contacted Kan and [demanded an on-air apology for the speech being labeled antisemitic](#) and for the news item to be removed from all of the network's platforms.

"It seems that it's not hatred of Jews but a desire for equality between peoples that you see as antisemitism," the lawyers wrote. "It's hard to imagine defamation worse than the one you aired (and under the circumstances, in fact, incitement to violence against him). The affair is doubly serious when it's aired by a public broadcaster against a well-known journalist who has even worked professionally with the same news network that has now chosen to so blatantly defame him."

A demonstration against the eviction of the residents of Masafer Yatta, in front of the Supreme Court in Jerusalem, in 2022. Credit: Emil Salman

Kan did subsequently remove the item from all its digital platforms and deleted relevant posts on social media. While it has yet to issue an on-air apology, a spokesperson told Haaretz on Monday: "We want to make it clear that it would have been better to have used a different wording [on the chyron]. However, as was noted during the evening news broadcast, Abraham's speech failed to relate to Hamas, and to October 7 and the hostages, which grieved many Jews and Israelis, which is a shame."

Twenty-nine-year-old Abraham, a journalist for the Local Call website, says the experience has not only been stressful but insulting - "because Kan is a broadcaster that has interviewed me in the past. There are people there who are my colleagues, journalists I admire. When my speech was aired with the caption 'antisemitic,' I was shocked. I felt that some kind of line had been crossed.

"I know there's a lot of criticism of the things that were said and that's okay, I encourage criticism," he adds. "From my perspective, it's legitimate that people voice criticism, and as a rule I'm someone who listens to criticism. But to call a speech by an Israeli filmmaker antisemitic is crazy. I really hope they'll apologize, because I feel that they have declared open season on me."

Observing reality

The documentary at the center of the storm chronicles the expulsion of Palestinians from their villages in the Masafer Yatta area of the South Hebron Hills. In May 2022, after a lengthy legal battle, Israel's High Court of Justice ordered them to evacuate their homes after it accepted the state's claim that residents began squatting there after the Israeli army declared it a military zone in 1981. The film also shows settlers attacking Palestinians, with the army in many cases standing by.

In addition to Abraham and Adra, the documentary's other directors are Hamdan Ballal and Rachel Szor.

"Our Palestinian partners have been living for more than two decades in Masafer Yatta, a community of about 20 villages in the South Hebron Hills. Basel and Hamdan live there and have documented their lives, what is happening around them and the reality of life under the occupation. I went there with Rachel Szor almost five years ago," Abraham relays. "On the first day I arrived in Basel's village, a convoy of bulldozers with dozens of Border Police came to destroy a sheep pen belonging to one of the residents. They used stun grenades, employed a lot of violence and spent a lot of money [on the operation]. I remember being shocked to discover that this is what the army does," he adds.

Basel Adra, left, and Yuval Abraham in 'No Other Land.' Credit: Rachel Shore

After that first visit, Abraham and Szor kept going back to the area and became friends with Adra and Ballal. They decided to make a film together that would show Israel's actions. "In other words, the way in which martial law is used to push Palestinians off their lands - mainly by destroying homes and schools, cutting water pipes and so on," he explains.

Over time, he and Adra became part of the film, which also examines the connection that developed between them and makes it possible to get a observe the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians. "That's why when I said in my speech that I live under civil law and Basel under military law, I was highlighting an essential part of both the film and the reality of Masafer Yatta," Abraham notes. "And I think that all of us as Israelis need to look this reality in the eye in order to change it."

What bothered many people is that you mentioned the Gaza war and the occupation in your speeches, but not the October 7 attack and the Israeli hostages. Is that what you had planned?

"The speech wasn't planned at all. We didn't expect to win, so it was kind of improvised by the two of us. I didn't mention the hostages in my speech, but right after that, in an interview that was broadcast live by the German media, I called for their release. This is an issue that concerns me personally and I have written about it before. Beyond that, I also think that the call I made - to reach a political solution and cease-fire - will help bring back the hostages much more than continuing the war and the use of more force, which today we already know puts them at great risk.

"As for October 7, I didn't relate directly to the shocking crimes Hamas perpetuated on October 7 in my speech, or to the crimes that Israel has perpetrated in Gaza since then. I spoke mainly about the ties between Basel and me, because that seemed to me the most relevant thing in relation to the documentary. That relationship between us is part of the film, as are the unequal relations between Israelis and Palestinians. In a 90-second speech, that seemed like the right thing to focus on."

In retrospect, after seeing the reaction, would you have changed anything?

"I don't know because, as I said, the speech was impromptu. In such a situation, you say what's in your heart at that exact moment - and I respect what was in my heart at that time. I also think there's something wrong about these journalists' questions, which are like a Shin Bet security service interrogation. I'm not talking about you, but about the way they attacked me - because I think the bottom line is that even if I had mentioned the hostages and October 7, the main thing was that I called for an end to the war, I called for an end to the occupation and I spoke about apartheid.

"I have a hard time with that [questioning], because a lot of people in the media in Israel don't talk about what's happening in Gaza at all. So there's something unfair about expecting me to talk about everything in 90 seconds. As a journalist, I talked about October 7 right after it happened and I called it a war crime. And I call what is happening today in Gaza a war crime.

"But the ability to relate to both these things does not exist within most of the Israeli media, which only talks about October 7 and ignores the mass killing that has been happening in Gaza since then. Therefore, it's hard when these people come to me and ask me to apologize, because I feel it puts me in some position of shame - even though I don't feel I have anything to be ashamed of.

"Our activity stems from a desire to reduce violence and suffering, and to draw attention to structural violence, its political roots and the military occupation. I think it's important as a joint statement of Israeli and Palestinian artists, so that we have a future in this country."

Berlin Municipality opened an investigation into how the film festival failed to ensure a balance of opinions. This came following your speech, but also others at the closing ceremony who expressed support for Palestine and not Israel.

"Many Israelis are now asking this question: why is the world focusing on what's happening in Gaza and not on what happened on October 7. I think one of the reasons is that the mass killing of October 7 is a thing of the past, while the mass killing in Gaza is still going on. Every day in Gaza, at least 100 people are killed. It is absolutely true that if October 7 had happened over and over again over a period of months, no one - myself included - would be speaking about anything else. But the fact is, both today and in the past, most of the civilians who are being killed are in Gaza. I think that's why people don't create a symmetry. And this issue is important because when that symmetry doesn't exist in reality, trying to create such a balance is problematic.

“Another thing I want to say is that I totally believe in balance when it comes to listening to all voices, Palestinians and Israelis, and in thinking about a future where respect and security for everyone who lives in this space between the river and the sea is fully met. And I hope that our film, which deals with the evacuation of Palestinian villages from Masafer Yatta – a subject that most of the Israeli media does not cover – will succeed in stimulating a discussion that has not existed in Israel for many years, about the military regime and the future of equality in this space. To me, this discourse is important.”

Nirit Anderman

P.S.

- Haaretz. Feb 28, 2024 3:27 pm IST:
<https://www.haaretz.com/life/2024-02-28/ty-article-magazine/.premium/when-my-speech-was-called-antisemitic-i-was-shocked/0000018d-efc4-dd8a-a5af-effe1d7c0000>