

Oral history offers selective, insider glimpse of Israel's prime ministers

By Michael Fox

Depending on your perspective and your politics, Moriah Films' adaptation of "The Prime Ministers" is a pride-inducing tour of the first three decades of Israel's existence or a stunningly blinkered view of ancient events.

That's the nature of oral history: It's resolutely subjective.

"The Prime Ministers: The Pioneers," a nearly two-hour illustrated interview with Ambassador Yehuda Avner that draws on his best-selling memoir, screens March 30 in the Hartford Jewish Film Festival.

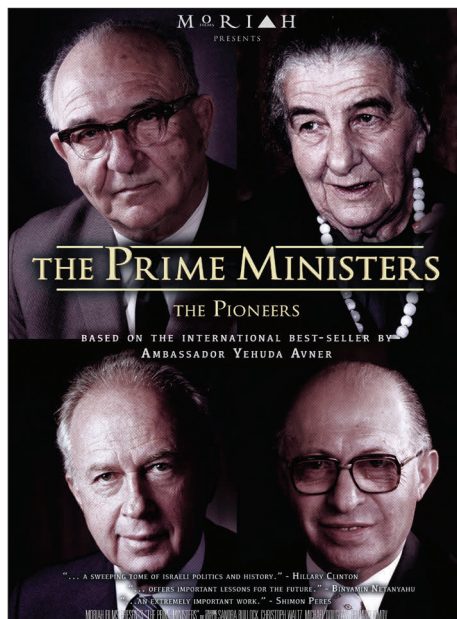
The British-born Avner originally moved to Palestine in 1947, but it wasn't until the mid-'50s that he settled permanently in Israel and found himself drawn into the inner circles of power as a press aide and speechwriter.

An enthusiastic raconteur, he recounts detailed anecdotes like the one about Levi Eshkol and Lyndon Johnson bonding over a newborn calf at the President's Texas ranch, and the resulting agreement to sell Phantom jet fighters to Israel.

Avner provides 90 percent of the dialogue in the film, augmented by a handful of speeches, texts and conversations delivered by actors. In a misguided strategy of employing name talent, director Richard Trank miscast Leonard Nimoy as the voice of Levi Eshkol, Sandra Bullock (!) as Golda Meir, Michael Douglas as Yitzhak Rabin and Christoph Waltz as Menachem Begin.

Trank has produced and/or directed numerous feature-length documentaries for Moriah (the film division of the L.A.-based Simon Weisenthal Center), including the beautifully crafted Academy Award-winner "The Long Way Home" (1997).

Their extensive body of work, which includes "It Is No Dream: The Life of Theodor Herzl" (2012), amounts to an impassioned, multi-pronged argument



for Zionism. While one may concur that the basis for a Jewish state needs to be reiterated when Israel's unpopularity and anti-Semitism (which are not the same thing) are rising, one must also be sensitive to advocacy taking precedence over a broader view of history.

The Six Day War, for example, naturally takes up a chunk of the film. Avner emphasizes that Yitzhak Rabin, then chief of staff for the Israel Defense Forces, argued forcefully for taking East Jerusalem from Jordanian soldiers, and the happy Temple mount happily came under Jewish control for the first time in centuries.

The war also put thousands of Palestinians under Israeli military rule, a situation that continues to this day. Avner never mentions them, except for a reference or two to terrorists. Neighboring countries, meanwhile, are enemies whose relevance on the geopolitical scene is as pawns of the Soviets or purveyors of oil.

Understandably, Avner evinces a subtle "you're with us or you're against us" attitude throughout the film. Richard Nixon is revered for airlifting tanks, planes and materiel to Israel in the middle of the Yom Kippur War (even as the Watergate scandal was eroding his hold on the presidency).

The segment on that war reveals Avner's tacit position that Israel is incapable of mistakes. In fact, the nation was not merely surprised by the holy day attack but militarily unprepared. Golda Meir was subsequently forced to resign, thanks in part to a push from Rabin that Avner considers disrespectful or worse.

He tells a story of Golda speaking to a group of reservists on the Golan Heights during the war, ostensibly to suggest she was a much better human being than politician. In fact, one comes away from "The Prime Ministers: The Pioneers" with the feeling that Israel's first and greatest leaders were anything but Machavellians or ideologues.

The great attraction of oral history is access to the inner dealings of powerful or talented people. At the end of the day, Avner provides that in abundance, with the sense of intimacy – and history – enhanced by a trove of marvelous archival footage and still photographs.

Moriah is in production on a sequel, "The Prime Ministers: Soldiers and Peacemakers," that picks up after 1974 and is slated to be released later this year.

Michael Fox is a freelance film critic.

"The Prime Ministers" will be screened at the Mandell JCC Hartford Jewish Film Festival, Sunday, March 30, 4 p.m. at Digiplex Destinations, Wintonbury Mall, 863 Park Ave., Bloomfield. For tickets call (860) 231-6316, (860) 236-4571, or email tickets@mandelljcc.org. For more information on the Film Festival visit hjff.org.

Connecticut Premiere

The Prime Ministers- The Pioneers

Sunday, March 30 • 4:00 PM
Digiplex Destinations, Bloomfield
Tickets \$11 In Advance • \$14 At Door



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