



## Don't Want to Die in America

**Aviv Peretz conducted the interview with film director, Shlomi Eldar  
Written by Aviv Peretz & translated by Michelle Shabtai**

*The Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival (SVJFF) will screen the Northern California premiere of FOREIGN LAND on Thursday November 8 at 8:30pm, and Saturday November 10 at 6pm, at AMC Saratoga 14 in San Jose. Special guest speaker, director Shlomi Eldar, will attend both screenings, with Q&A discussion follow. Tickets available online and at the ticket booth: [http://www.svjff.org/films/foreign\\_land.shtml](http://www.svjff.org/films/foreign_land.shtml)*

Two months ago, when *Foreign Land* won the Israeli Academy Awards for Best Documentary (the Ophir Award), director Shlomi Eldar stepped up to the stage excitedly. From his pocket he pulled out a folded piece of paper, spread it out and read, "I started filming *Foreign Land* six years ago—which is considered a long time in filmmaking, yet a blink in the lifespan of a state. Six years ago, no one would have considered turning up at the courthouse with a D-9 bulldozer, artists weren't persecuted and threatened, bereaved parents weren't reprimanded, Arabs didn't flock to the polls, annexation was an outlandish notion associated with marginal right wingers, religionization didn't exist in our lexicon, and there was no national law that determined so definitively that Arabs, Druze, and Karachay-Cherkess are second-class citizens."

Eldar has always been an opinionated journalist, not to say anti-establishment. For years he served as a political reporter for Israel's TV Channel One, and in 2003 joined Channel 10 News where he worked as correspondent for the Palestinian Authority for a decade. But only after his two documentaries—the first titled *Precious Life*, that won an Ophir Award and was shortlisted for Oscar-nominated documentaries—did Eldar begin to present himself foremostly as a director and then as a journalist.

By the end of 2012, Eldar decided to resign from Channel 10. In previous interviews he explains that the stories he wanted to convey as a reporter — for example the plight of the Palestinians — were no longer what the Israeli public wanted to hear, and he watched with horror how his reports were pushed to the back end of the News. When he left Channel 10, Eldar was appointed columnist of the Middle East's News called *Al-Monitor*, a position he holds to this day. However, a more significant development occurred during this time; Eldar sent a research proposal to the Wilson Center in Washington DC; his proposal was accepted and he emigrated

with his family to the United States. That was five years ago, and since then they've been living there. "We're happy here but I don't know whether we did the right thing," he concludes.



Shlomi Eldar



Scene from 'Foreign Land'

The documentary film, *Foreign Land*, that will be screened at the Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival (SVJFF), tells of the changing face of Israel through two central figures; Shlomi Eldar, observing Israel from his home in Maryland, and actor Ghassan Abbas, star of the 1980s Israeli TV series *Ha-Mis'ada Hagdola* (The Great Restaurant), who feels that he doesn't belong in Israel due to racism that he's experienced there. "I think that what concerns me and others about Israel," says Eldar, "is the process that Israeli society is undergoing. Whoever doesn't agree with the right-wing settlement-oriented political agenda, and whoever thinks that there's still hope, is viewed as a traitor and hounded with curses and threats. It's a profound social rift that touches almost every facet of life, and its source is at the top, that is Netanyahu.

When asked about viewers' reactions to the film *Foreign Land*, Eldar says that he's seen people crying, unable to get up from their seats. "One of my friends wrote to me saying that 'this film beats you mercilessly. Unlike other films that end on a happy note, this film does not deceive you. It doesn't claim that everything's going to be alright.'" The reactions I've received about the film are much more meaningful and moving than those I received for *Precious Life*, because in *Foreign Land* people aren't moved by a story, rather it touches them on a deeper, more emotional level. I think that those who cried, cried for the State of Israel. Later in our conversation Eldar mentions that some Israelis responded to the film by saying, "'We didn't hear anything, we didn't know.' People prefer not to listen to the News, not to turn on their televisions, to continue living their lives — preferably in Tel Aviv, the bastion of sanity — and turn a blind eye to the situation. Despair colors everything."

**PERETZ:** In the film, Ghassan Abbas says, "Hatred is the disease of this country, which doesn't relent." I imagine the symptoms of this disease affected you when the film was screened on Kan (the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation).

**ELDAR:** I must say that I thought I'd be cursed more. I was called 'Israel hater' and so on, but I'm surprised by the low number of negative responses.

**PERETZ:** How did you feel when Israel's Minister of Culture and Sport, Miri Regev, said that "this is a film about the identity and sense of belonging of a person who left Israel yet chooses to teach us values"?

**ELDAR:** I think that the question today is not only 'who is a Jew?', but 'who is an Israeli?' Is the definition of an Israeli only someone who currently lives in Israel; or someone who was born in Israel, is an Israeli citizen and loves Israel, even though they don't live there now? When Sheldon Adelson's wife donates tens or hundreds of millions of dollars, in Sheldon's name, no one ponders her 'Israeliness' or 'Jewishness', but when it's convenient others are allowed to be harassed. When Israeli government ministers come to the IAC in the USA, to talk to those who feel Israeli and promote Israel, that's fine. However, when one's view doesn't fit the right-wing agenda, suddenly they're told that they have no right to criticize Israel."

**PERETZ:** The film doesn't mention the backstory leading to the increasing alienation and hostility towards Israeli Arabs, that is the result of Israel being targeted by missiles and terror attacks for years. I'm not justifying this animosity—nothing can justify a situation where an Arab-Israeli boy hands over his ID card to a policeman and is then severely beaten—but if someone who watches this film is unfamiliar with the Arab-Israeli conflict, this complexity is not brought to their attention.

**ELDAR:** Studies show that most Arab Israelis want to be part of Israeli society. The alienation of some stems from neglect. You can argue that there have been several recent terrorist attacks conducted by Arab Israelis, but of all the attackers one is from the Arab city of Umm al-Fahm, another from Wadi Ara, and another from Tel Sheva, and that's about it. To say that all Arab Israelis are traitors and a fifth column, as Lieberman claims, is a far stretch. Suppose a Jew gets caught shooting up a school in the USA, killing some teenagers, does that mean that all Jews are to blame? That all Jews must be expelled from the United States? Latest statistics show that over the past decade the number of Arab Israelis students enrolled in universities has increased by 80 percent. Most Arab Israelis propel towards academia because it's the only way they can endure living in Israel, and even that isn't guaranteed; that's also the reason they're drawn towards fields like education and paramedical professions. In the film *Foreign Land* Ghassan says that his Hebrew teacher would beat students to force them to learn the language, saying that, 'Those who don't know Hebrew won't be able to be breadwinners.' Today, for Arabs to survive in Israel, knowing Hebrew is not enough, they have to obtain bachelor's and master's degrees."

Eldar began shooting this film unaware that he would find himself moving to the USA during filming. Every few months he would travel to Israel to film Ghassan, but Eldar wasn't happy with the footage he collected. "I'd often return from Israel saying, 'I don't have a film. Nothing happens in it. I don't see any process.' In a documentary the protagonist needs to undergo a certain process; beginning at a certain point and embarking on a journey. However, I don't

think that anything dramatic happened to Gassan during the shooting of the film—he starts with despair and ends up in greater despair. I, too, didn't undergo any considerable development—I merely took a few steps. Only when I realized that movement of the film entails the process that Israel is going through, did I know that I had enough content for a film."

**PERETZ:** The film is titled *Foreign Land* and you often depict parallels between the United States, which for you is a foreign country, and Israel, which is a foreign country for Ghassan Abbas. Yet there is no correlation between your feelings of foreignness, regarding language barriers and cultural gaps, to the foreignness experienced by Israeli Arabs. The narratives are completely different. Why did you choose this parallel?

**ELDAR:** It wasn't planned. My personal life brought me here, and it became part of the story. It was difficult for me to introduce myself as a character in the film, but I soon realized that it was necessary for the film. Living in the United States, I began to feel alienated, not in the way that Ghassan Abbas feels but it is nonetheless a feeling of foreignness. I'm from the Israeli majority — privileged, a recognized journalist who never felt discriminated against — yet suddenly I was tasting foreignness for the first time, so it almost went without saying that I would be a part of it. The theme of the film is not only foreignness, but the process a person goes through when looking from the outside at the developments that Israeli society is undergoing. When I moved to the USA, the producer of the film said to me, 'When you're outside Israel you can see the whole forest.' Back then I didn't understand what he meant but now I realize that when you're here, and you have that distance, you're able to view the changes taking place in Israel much more clearly. Looking at the big picture you can see that Israel is undergoing a dramatic process. People tell me that the USA is in the midst of a more chaotic process, with a president who has no inhibitions. To them I say that, firstly, I don't identify with the USA on a deep enough level to feel that my home is being destroyed. Secondly, since America is such a huge place it's going to take a very long time to destroy it. Thirdly, Israel and the USA differ — dangerous developments in the USA won't change the fundamental character of the USA, while similar processes in Israel do affect the country's essence. In recent years—some say since Prime Minister Yizhak Rabin's assassination—the identity of Israel's future is being determined. There's never going to be peace; it'll be either a bi-national state or one that forever continues to live by the sword. And what's determined—whether it's the strengthening of settlements in such a way that it'll be impossible to uproot them, or to withdraw from some of them for the sake of potential peace, or the dramatic changes in the Supreme Court driven by Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked, or the religionization within Israel's education system pushed by Minister of Education Naftali Bennett — these are things that cannot be changed.

**PERETZ:** Most Israelis relocate to another country around their 20s to 30s, while only a few do it in their 40s. Actually, I don't know anyone, except you, who relocated in their mid-fifties.

**ELADAR:** I came to the United States at the age of 57, but I didn't come declaring that I was relocating. Relocation was not my intention at all. I initially came for one year as a sort of refreshment. When that year was up I received an offer to join the University of Maryland. The year after that I was offered to move to NYU. In the fourth year I went to edit an unfinished film that I had made. And now I got an offer to make a TV series in the USA. Somehow, my life

circumstances have brought me here, stemming from a reality that arose from my professional situation in Israel which is somehow connected to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and from Netanyahu's attempt to pulverize the Israeli media.

**PERETZ:** How was the transition experience for you?

**ELDAR:** The move was very easy for me because I worked within a framework and field that I was familiar with. The moment I landed at the Wilson Center I was invited to lectures and discovered things I hadn't previously been exposed to during my professional life. For me it was a fascinating process.

**PERETZ:** Didn't you experience a language crisis? After all, you went from being a man for whom words are his main tool of expression, fluent in your language, to a man stumbling and trying to gain footing with a new one?

**ELDAR:** Of course. When I arrived in the USA I was sure, as many Israelis are, that within a year I'd speak English fluently. This isn't going to happen; I'll never speak English fluently. I've come to terms with it. Sometimes, when I'm invited to give a lecture in English, I decline, because I realize that when you give a lecture in English it's not enough to speak in English and utter the right words, rather you have to know — as I do in Hebrew — how to play with language, to crack a joke here, to use a nuance there. I don't have this skill in English. Once I was asked to film something with Tom Friedman, whose film critique of *Precious Life* changed my life. After conversing with him I was left with the feeling that he must think I'm a man... how shall I say it gently? of very basic thinking. You use the right vocabulary, you're close to saying what you want but often fail to express yourself in the way that you intended. I've got a problem with simple words. I remember the first time I went to a supermarket looking for breadcrumbs but didn't know the English word for breadcrumbs. Day-to-day words I find missing in my vocabulary and at this stage won't be able to catch up; I need to ask my son for help. It reminds me of the time my parents were new immigrants and I, who was born in Israel, had to correct their Hebrew. My mother, an Iraqi immigrant, would learn to write the Hebrew alphabet in the afternoon, in the very same classroom that I attended. She reminds me of myself... You ask me whether I see myself living the rest of my life here in the USA? To paraphrase Ghassan Abbas, who says that he doesn't want to die in Israel—I don't want to die in America. I don't want to grow old here either."

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