



Jeremy Piven in "The Performance." (Courtesy Sparks Go)

From dance to drama to docs, Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival wants you to watch

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With more in-theater movies and a range of genres for the whole family, the 33rd [Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival](#) is fully back from its pandemic pause.

While the festival, which also offers online screenings, is rich in entertainment value, there's also a somber undertone as audiences contemplate a year since the Hamas attacks, and a year of war.

Tzvia Shelef, the festival's executive director, said that global reaction to those events make it all the more important right now to support Jewish and Israeli films.

"Since Oct. 7, very few festivals around the world are showing Israeli or Jewish content," she said. "So I feel it's very important that we are [showing it]."

The festival kicks off on opening night on Oct. 26 in Palo Alto with an in-theater showing of "The Performance," a new film based on a 2002 short story by Arthur Miller, set in 1937.

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In it, Jeremy Piven plays a Jewish American tap dancer who is offered the chance to perform for Hitler. The film examines how far ego and self-interest can push a person to ignore the evil that's in front of them. Variety [called it "impressive"](#): "The key to Jeremy Piven's complex and compelling portrayal of Harold is his exemplary ability to convey the willful blindness of someone who, while certainly not himself receptive to Hitler's dictatorial manipulation, can nonetheless talk himself into benefitting from it. And besides, just look at how clean the streets are in a well-regulated society." It's directed by Shira Piven, the actor's sister, who will be at the opening night for a Q&A after the film.

If watching a film in the theater surrounded by the rustle of popcorn is your thing, on Oct. 27 you can spend the whole day at the movies, at the AMC Saratoga in San Jose. That day, the festival will show four films consecutively, each with a separate admission.

It starts at noon with "Shari and Lamb Chop," a documentary about [Shari Lewis](#) and her iconic puppet. (The film was also shown at the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, where J.'s David A.M. Wilensky was [able to "interview" the puppet](#) and find out that Lamb Chop loves latkes.)

The documentary takes viewers from Lewis' TV roots in the early 1950s through her success as an innovator of children's entertainment, and will be followed with a special Q&A with Lamb Chop herself, with the assistance of Lewis' daughter, puppeteer Mallory Lewis.

That same day, festival goers can watch ["Telling Nonie,"](#) a timely Israeli documentary that delves deep into the complexity of Israel's relationship with Gaza. An Israeli security services agent tormented about what he did in Gaza in the 1950s meets an Egyptian supporter of Israel in this award-winning 2023 film.

Also shown that day will be the Italian historical drama ["Kidnapped: The Abduction of Edgardo Mortara,"](#) directed by the renowned [Marco Bellocchio](#). The film is based on the true story of a young Jewish boy taken from his parents by emissaries of the Pope in 1858.

The day will round out with ["Running on Sand,"](#) an Israeli comedy about an Eritrean refugee who is mistaken for a star soccer player.

For those who prefer to watch online, the festival has two dozen offerings over the course of two weeks. Some are followed by prerecorded panels with the subjects of the film, or the directors or producers, including "Without Precedent: The Supreme Life of Rosalie Abella." Abella, a Holocaust refugee from Poland who was the first Jewish woman to serve on Canada's Supreme Court, will appear in a post-movie program.

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There's also "Rabbi on the Block" with director Brad Rothschild and Rabbi Tamar Manasseh, "Home" with director Benny Freeman, "My Father's Secrets" with Michel Kichka, "The Catskills" with director Lex Gillespie and "Screams Before Silence" with former Meta/Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg.

"Screams Before Silence" — a 57-minute documentary in which Sandberg interviews eyewitnesses, first responders, medical and forensic experts and survivors of the Oct. 7 Hamas massacres in southern Israel — has already received wide notice for its unflinching focus on acts of sexual violence committed by Hamas and other attackers during their violent incursion.

The entire lineup, with times and instructions on how to watch at home, is [available online](#).

The festival closes with a gorgeously shot documentary about an Indian ballet dancer and his relationship with his Israeli mentor. "Call Me Dancer" is the story of Manish Chauhan, from Mumbai, whose dreams of becoming a professional dancer are nurtured by an Israeli ballet instructor, Yehuda Maor. A fictional version of Chauhan's story was made in India, the film "Yeh Ballet." Maor has strong local roots, having lived in San Francisco for decades before moving to India.

With movies about dance opening and closing the festival, Shelef hopes that it will be an engaging, thought-provoking and, yes, entertaining two weeks for the festival's supporters.

The festival returned to live, "in-person" screenings in 2023 after the disruption of the Covid pandemic. This year there are six movies being shown in theaters, with 25 showing online; check the website for dates and times. Last year, the SVJFF had 6,000 online views and expects more this year.

"A lot of people still want to be at home," Shelef said. "They find it very comfortable, less traffic. Covid is still a thing."

Still, she said, there's nothing like a movie theater.

"As a community, I would love to have more people in the theater, because it's such a great experience, and gets our community in one place," she said.

[Silicon Valley Jewish Film Festival](#)

Oct. 26-Nov. 10. Screenings in Palo Alto, San Jose and online. Tickets \$10-\$40, virtual pass covering 18 movies \$275. Tickets available online at svjff.org. (Some films online have geographical viewing limitations; please check before buying.)