Film on feminist peace activists

A Haaretz review, July 14, paired this film with “Encounter Point,” a film that was co-produced by a participant in the 2003 Meretz USA Israel Symposium, Nahanni Rous. Both documentaries were screened at this July’s Jerusalem Film Festival. “Encounter Point” premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and I wrote about it for the May 16 posting of “The SITUATION.”

I saw a pre-screening of “Can You Hear Me” in Jerusalem with other colleagues at the World Union of Meretz. Our Meretz USA colleague, Lilly Rivlin, starts with the hopeful premise that if women were more involved in running the world, it would be a more peaceful place. This is not born out by history, but it can certainly be argued that recent female national leaders who were not known as peacemakers – including Israel’s own Golda Meir, Britain’s Maggie Thatcher, India’s Indira Ghandi, and more than one female leader of Sri Lanka – were forced to play by male rules due to the fact that they were exceptions to the prevailing male dominance of world politics. But at the film’s dramatic high point, Lilly duly documents the manifest failure of two women activists to successfully reach beyond their ethnic boundaries to achieve a personal understanding, a small manifestation of peace. The following is the segment of Ira Moscizwitz’s Haaretz review that deals exclusively with Rivlin’s film:

Lilly Rivlin, who wrote, directed and produced “Can You Hear Me?” traces the rift between Arabs and Jews to the biblical story of Sarah and Hagar – a story she began to film over 20 years ago. “In 1984,” she recalls, “10 good women gave me $1,000 each because I had a good story. I said: If women had rewritten the story of Sarah and Hagar, would it be different? I came here and shot a recreation, and went on for a few years filming women who had a cultural and dramatic take on the story of Sarah and Hagar.”

Rivlin is a seventh-generation Jerusalemite who has spent most of her life in America. She began filmmaking in 1981, documenting a Rivlin family reunion with some 2,500 participants. (Likud MK Ruby Rivlin is one of her first cousins. “We don’t agree on politics,” notes the filmmaker, who also serves as president of Meretz USA.)

In 2002, she began filming Israeli and Palestinian women involved in peace advocacy and tried to combine their narratives with the story of Sarah and Hagar. In the end, the biblical story plays only a cameo role in “Can You Hear Me?” Instead, the two main characters are Leah Shakdiel, an Orthodox Jew from Yeruham, and Maha Abu-Dayyeh, a Christian Arab from Beit Hanina.

The emotional climax of the film comes during a visit by Shakdiel to Abu-Dayyeh’s home. When the discussion turns to Zionism and the Palestinian right of return, the two peace activists find themselves unable to communicate. A tearful Shakdiel accuses Abu-Dayyeh of demagoguery. Abu-Dayyeh shakes her head, a stony expression on her face.

The narrator of the film, Hollywood star Debra Winger, concludes that “the
meeting turned out to be a microcosm of the conflict. Both want something from the other that they can’t or won’t give.” The narrator offers some consolation: “Though Leah and Maha argue, they don’t pick up guns.”

The film also introduces viewers to a number of women’s peace organizations and activists. One of the most striking personalities is Abu-Dayyeh’s mother, Wedad. The silver-haired grandmother (who reminds Rivlin of her aunts in Jerusalem), remains charming while delivering a dire prognosis: “I don’t remember anything as bad as it is now. It will be a massacre, I tell you, for both sides.”

What if women were in decision-making roles regarding war and peace? Israeli peace activist Alona Barkat has a simple answer: “If women ruled the world, we wouldn’t have wars.”

Rivlin is more equivocal: “I’m throwing out the question. I’m encouraging others to think about what it would be like if women were in decision-making positions.”

Meanwhile, Rivlin’s film concludes with another question: “The sons of Sarah and Hagar only come together for their father’s funeral. Is it only death that can bring reconciliation?”