

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

Israelism

by Bob Rosen



ISRAELISM. (2023). DIRECTED BY ERIN AXELMAN AND SAM EILERTSEN.

***Israelism*. (2023). Directed by Erin Axelman and Sam Eilertsen. 84 min. www.israelismfilm.com**

Do you ever wonder why some Jewish supporters of Israel are so zealous, even fanatical? Why some friends who are very progressive, or radical, on other issues, fiercely defend a brutal occupation? A new film called *Israelism* offers a possible explanation: Maybe they were just brought up that way.

This engaging and powerful documentary shows the extensive network of Jewish schools, summer camps (complete with military games), and synagogue groups that create a supportive and passionate culture for children and teens that teaches them that Jewishness means love of Israel, that Israel is a beautiful homeland where they're always welcome, and, as they get older, that defending Israel in a world of enemies is their privilege as well as their duty. Exciting (and carefully curated) trips to Israel through Birthright and other well-funded organizations; rousing group trips to AIPAC conventions; mega-events featuring celebrities, "hot" IDF soldiers, and passionate speakers – the film captures the deep appeal of this indoctrination and the vast network that facilitates it.

But, thankfully, some escape. The film features two young American Jews who ultimately rejected the myths they'd grown up with. Simone Zimmerman, initially a promising youthful advocate for Israel, meets real Palestinians as an undergraduate at Berkely, decides to visit the West Bank to see for herself what Jewish settlers are doing, and ultimately co-founds IfNotNow, a Jewish group that opposes the occupation. "Eitan," eager to do his part, joins many of his peers in heading to Israel to enlist in the IDF. But when Israeli soldiers brutally kick a shackled Palestinian detainee he is responsible for transporting, Eitan is shaken. "I didn't even speak up," he

tells us, and the growing guilt gnaws at him, eventually, despite his shyness and shame, leading him to tell his story publicly back home.

But there's more than just disillusioned youth on display here: a few talking heads on both sides (including the odious Abe Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League), a Palestinian-American who offers alternative tours, footage of demonstrations in support of Palestine, and even a couple of rabbis. Though a little redundant toward the end (as many documentaries are), this is one terrific film. You don't have to be Jewish to find it deeply frightening as well as hopeful—and, best of all, perfectly suited for encouraging necessary discussions in your classroom.

Bob Rosen is a member of the editorial board of *Radical Teacher*.

Editorial note: If you are in fact discussing the current war on Gaza or the occupation more broadly with students, [Scholars Against the War in Palestine \(https://scholarsagainstwar.org/\)](https://scholarsagainstwar.org/) has an incredible array of documents, resources, lesson plans, etc. to help facilitate such important conversations.



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