



‘Eye-opening’, ‘I didn’t know’: Documentary exploring rise of antisemitism sparks local reflection

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EAST BRUNSWICK – Impactful. Heartbreaking. Informative. Powerful. Insidious. Eye-opening. Horrific. I didn't know.

Those were some of the reactions to a private screening of “October 8,” a documentary by executive producer Debra Messing and director Wendy Sachs that examines the alarming rise of antisemitism in America, presented to more than three dozen local elected, civic, education and faith leaders in Middlesex and Monmouth counties.

Presented June 12 by the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey and Menemsha Films in coordination with Mayor Brad Cohen, the film, through meticulous investigation, reveals how over decades, Hamas and other terrorist groups created sophisticated networks in America to permeate U.S. institutions.

The documentary also examines the role and use of social media as a weapon in fanning flames of antisemitism, disinformation and propaganda, especially among teens and college students, and how organizations such as Students for Justice in Palestine stoked flames of antisemitism and anti-Zionism on campuses.

"I watched much of the 'October 8' film in stunned silence," said Highland Park Mayor Elsie Foster. "I've known since the winter of 2023 that Jews in the U.S., and in our area, have faced some very nasty and uncompromising opponents. But I never realized that the crowds on college campuses that want to erase Israel are so widespread, menacing, and dehumanizing to Jews. What I've seen in this film makes me more sympathetic to the security concerns and the apprehensions that I see in my local Jewish community."

The documentary details the events of Oct. 7, 2023 when Hamas attacked Israel, killed more than 1,200 people, including at least 46 American citizens, and took 251 mostly civilian hostages, including children, into Gaza. More than 50 hostages are still being held in Gaza by Palestinian terror groups as the two sides continue to wage war.

But that's not the focus of the film, said Susan Antman, executive director of the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey. Rather, it examines the aftermath of Oct. 7, the continued rise of antisemitism globally and how the roots of indoctrination and disinformation run deep.

"'October 8' is about what happened after Oct. 7, and long before Oct. 7, as extremist groups and foreign adversaries of the United States have systematically sought not just to degenerate Israel and incite antisemitism, but to undermine and devour American society, our Western values and democracy itself," she said. "As community leaders, we all know how the lack of knowledge, misinformation, disinformation are destabilizing factors in our own backyards. "

The event's goal was to support local officials and educators in combating antisemitism and reinforcing multicultural acceptance, Cohen said.

"Do not think that this is a conflict and an issue that is only happening somewhere on the other side of the globe," he said. "It is happening right here. This is all part of a well-orchestrated plan that's designed to look at and to change what's going on right here in the United States."



Cohen cited the most recent incidents of antisemitism and violence including the arson attack on Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro; the murder of two innocent victims, including Sarah Milgrim, the niece of Rabbi Eric Milgrim, rabbi emeritus of Temple B'nai Shalom in East Brunswick, outside the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.; and the firebombing attack on Jews in Boulder, Colorado.

The mayor said he believes more people need to be involved in the conversation about antisemitism, particularly non-Jews.

"There is power in involving the non-Jewish community about what's going on without the noise around them so that they can get a clear view of the chronology and how all of this has been going on as part of a much bigger picture," Cohen said. "It's important that they see it."

More: [New Jersey ranked third highest in nation in antisemitic incidents last year](#)

"We know that social media is a powerful tool for students, especially for information," offered East Brunswick Superintendent of Schools Victor Valeski. "But I think this reinforced the fact for me that for some of our students, social media becomes a single source. And they're not seeing two sides of a situation. It's something we're going to have to work on in the future in the school district and continue to work on. And we know that's an issue already because of situations we have already encountered with students."

Dr. Jaime Falco, an East Brunswick Board of Education member, relayed her experience witnessing protests in San Francisco during an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, a month after the Oct. 7 attack.

"I was personally shocked and surprised to see that there were anti-Israel demonstrations and support of Palestine where it had nothing to do with the subject matter," Falco said.

"And I saw and learned tonight how deeply pervasive this has been – what an orchestrated event. I just feel like the movie gave a very good explanation and timeline for how that could happen in a country like ours."

Matthew Nezaria, a rising junior at Rutgers where he's a member of the Alpha Epsilon Pi Jewish fraternity, said antisemitic occurrences at the fraternity house have escalated, and hatred has spilled out to campus.



Nezaria recounted an incident this past school year while walking home on Easton Avenue late at night, he was questioned by four young men about his ethnicity and the conflict. It led to a disturbing exchange, and he was met with the suggestion that all Jews should die.

"I thought maybe I can change a mind. Maybe I can influence these people to think a different way about a certain topic, about a certain issue, when they see me, a Jewish-Israeli student, trying to work with them, really try to work with them," Nezaria said.

Nezaria also shared a story involving his younger sister who faced antisemitic comments from an East Brunswick High School teacher who is no longer in the classroom.

Local leaders simply attending the film screening makes a huge difference, according to Stacy Gallin, director of CARMA Center to Combat Antisemitism and Reinforce Multicultural Acceptance.

Gallin reinforced the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey's initiative and aim to provide resources, programming and education to prevent indoctrination and promote multicultural acceptance, as well as the need for defining antisemitism, such as the continued efforts to pass the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism legislation in New Jersey.

"That's what it means to be an ally, and we can't do this by ourselves," she said. "... Because it's not just a Jewish issue. It's a human issue, and that's what we're dealing with now. That's what I think this film showed. We are all members of humankind, and we're all entitled to be treated with dignity and respect, but that means that we have a responsibility to treat others with dignity and respect. And I would say that if there's one thing that we all leave here with tonight, it's the hope that we can teach the next generation that."

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