

## "The Museum" points out the tension between religious faith and the archeological approach

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Meir Schnitzer, Maariv 1.12.17

Hadrian was a wicked emperor. He destroyed Jerusalem, outlawed circumcision and prayer, and ordered the execution of the Ten Martyrs including Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion. The Talmudic sages labeled him one of the Jews' most fearful enemies. On the other hand, in the European humanist tradition, this same despicable Hadrian is considered a pursuer of peace, a patron of the arts and an inspired statesman. How can these two opposite approaches be brought together when preparing a unique exhibit based on the only three bronze statues of the emperor to survive the last 2,000 years, one of which belongs to the Israel Museum, the others to the British Museum and the Louvre?

The very vocal discussion of how to view Hadrian is typical of many of the people who appear and are interviewed in the excellent documentary film "The Museum," directed by Ran Tal who is well known for his previous works, "Children of the Sun" and "The Garden of Eden." The zigzag between different ways of looking at eternity, the heart of existence and the claim of any museum or house of antiquities is the central contradiction between religion - any religion - and these institutions. The need for museums to present the past with the many ways of addressing it is what magnifies this type of contradiction which builds up as one watches Tal's film.

Another example of the type of issue which results from the different traditions concerning Hadrian is found in the wing of the Israel Museum dedicated to artifacts from Egypt's Pharaonic Era. Tal's camera captures two religious Jews coming away from the exhibit with dour expressions. It turns out they found no mention of the Exodus in the exhibit, since according to the archeologists it never happened. This brings up the question once again: is the museum - a sort of contemporary temple - a seat of religious faith or of the archeological approach which doesn't necessarily support the religious myths?

Another example of the complexity of the modern perspective is the Palestinian collection kept in the Israel Museum's storerooms. Over the years, since the battles of the Independence War came to an end, artifacts from abandoned Palestinian villages have been collected and have accumulated in the museum's cellars. These artifacts have never been exhibited to the Israeli public, for several reasons: One, so as not force Zionism to base its claim to the land on the stubborn enemy, i.e. Palestinian nationalism; two, the artifacts were generally gathered without the permission of the refugees who were expelled from the villages; and three, it's hard to believe that a Palestinian exhibition in the Zionist museum's halls will be welcomed by the members of a nation that never existed, at least according to Golda Meir.

The great advantage of "The Museum" is enhanced by the basic fact that Ran Tal isn't the one who brings up these dilemmas. They crop up on the screen of their own accord over the course of his documentary effort, making them more authentic and

devoid of a predetermined agenda. Frederick Wiseman, the lauded American documentarian, earned his fame through his (very, very) long films in each of which he focuses on one institution or another - a hospital, a municipal library, an opera house, a school, and so on - in an attempt to capture, without interfering, the daily life of the institution being filmed, thereby understanding its operating mechanism.

Tal prefers the impressionistic, perhaps eclectic, perspective on an established institution like the Israel Museum. This may be a result of the fact that the massive Jerusalem museum has never defined its purpose; part of it is devoted to archeology, another part to chronicling the Jewish world, there are ethnographic wings, and there are also sections that feature the fine arts - painting and sculpture.

A priori, this panoply doesn't allow the documentarian to focus on a single thesis, and Tal was wise to forgo in advance the didactic tone that films like "The Museum" often tend to adopt. The viewer will find it hard to learn the place's history. On the other hand, it really doesn't matter, since Tal prefers to explore the psychology and viewpoints of the individuals who work at the museum - ushers, curators, the director, the kashrut supervisor, porters - as well as some of its visitors.

The highlight of the film seems to be two separate scenes that capture the way blind people see the various exhibits. In the first instance a blind woman sits in front of a painting while her partner describes its content and the impression it projects, inspiring her to comment on what he sees and what she pictures. In the other instance a group of blind people find themselves in an exhibit hall featuring a sculpture by Alberto Giacometti and they experience the modern sculpture through the sense of touch.

The film wanders among the exhibit halls and wings in a fairly associative way; here and there decisions regarding direction and editing are influenced by the motion within the given frame, and more than once Tal separates the object being filmed from the recording of what the object is saying in an obviously non-synchronous manner. This is an example of a wise esthetic choice which adds a subtle tension to the image.