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The Big Lie at the Heart of the Myth of the Creation of Israel

An Interview with Lia Tarachansky

by DOUGLAS VALENTINE

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Lia Tarachansky's heart-wrenching documentary, *On the Side of the Road*, reveals the Big Lie at the heart of the myth of the creation of Israel.

Tarachansky had to break through a lot of personal and social barriers to produce this often infuriating film about the Nakba, the "catastrophe" of 1948, when approximately 750,000 Palestinians (a number that has grown to 1.5 million refugees living in camps over the ensuing 67 years) were expelled from their homes and forced into squalid camps, where they are denied basic human rights.

Tarachansky's toughest challenge was overcoming her own deeply ingrained assumptions. Born in Kiev in 1984, her youth, as she described it in a previous interview, was "a shifting, uncertain reality. While I was only learning to read, my parents split, the Chernobyl nuclear reactor blew up, and the Soviet Union collapsed. I was too young to understand what was happening when we evacuated the city and prepared for what would turn into years of economic uncertainty."

A Zionist, her mother took Lia and her sister to Israel where, she told her children, “banana-eating monkeys sit in palm trees,” and “everyone is Jewish.”

Those were among the first myths to fizzle out. A computer engineer, Tarachansky’s mother found work changing diapers in a retirement home, while Lia went from “being the only Jew in my Soviet kindergarten to being the only Russian in my Israeli elementary school.”

“We went from the façade of ‘equality for all comrades’,” Tarachansky said, “to the façade of ‘equality for all Jews’.” As she discovered, “Israel is a striated society, even among Jews, in terms of access to economic justice and rights.”

As she grew into adolescence in the settlement of Ariel in the occupied West Bank, Tarachansky also heard rumors of non-Jews inhabiting the land. As strange as it may seem, the settlers had no contact with the Palestinians living all around them. The Arab inhabitants of Israel were stereotyped as “terrorists” intent on slaughtering Jewish settlers, to be avoided at all costs.

Unfortunately, these stereotypes resonate as indisputable truth in America, which officially backs Israel’s war of attrition against the Palestinian peoples. Witness Illinois’s recent, unanimously passed law making it illegal to invest state pension funds in organizations that support the Boycott Divest Sanction (BDS) movement.

As in America, racial, cultural, class and religious prejudices dictate unjust social norms in Israel and determine its government’s repressive policies. The result is that Jewish Israelis celebrate and legalize their ethnic superiority and moral right to discriminate against Palestinians.

Crashing the Party

Having been a Zionist settler, Lia Tarachansky empathizes with Israeli Jews. Instead of condemning them, she examines and tries to understand her personal transformation, and that of other Israelis who are seeking to escape from embedded but false assumptions. Tarachansky’s film is about people who are struggling to deal honestly with the Nakba. This capacity for critical thought and self-examination is what enables Tarachansky to show so convincingly how and why the Zionists have locked themselves in a prison of their own making.

As she explains, the film is shot from the point of view of “return.” Perhaps even a return to sanity.

The documentary begins on balmy May 15th, Independence Day, with fireworks exploding in the night sky and Eitan Bronstein from Zochrot (an NGO dedicated to exposing the truth and raising awareness about the Nakba) posting signs and handing out fliers that show an Arab holding a key to his former home.

Recoiling in horror at what she views as a mortal threat, an Israeli woman proudly proclaims, “I’m a racist.”

She says to Bronstein, “It’s a pity people like you are even alive.”

What Bronstein is doing isn't popular. And it's not just public opinion he is challenging. At the time the documentary begins, the Israeli government is enacting a law to repress the true history of the Nakba, and in the process, wash away Israel's sins. The proposed law will make it illegal to mourn 'the catastrophe' on Independence Day. It will turn what Bronstein is doing into a crime. It's an anti-democratic, racist, and discriminatory law, but, as we learn, Dov Yermiyah was the only Jewish member of Knesset to speak against the law, which passed by a vote of 37-25. The full 48 members of the opposition at the time did not vote against this bill, most simply abstained.

Going against society is never easy, even when the society embraces immoral positions. But heroic individuals do exist, and Tarachansky's documentary also features Tikva Honig-Parnass. Raised in a Jewish community in Palestine, Honig-Parnass fought in the 1948 war and later served as the secretary of the Unified Workers Party in the Knesset (1951-1954). Over 30 years ago she broke with Zionism and joined the Socialist organization known as Matzpen. Since then she has played an active role in the movement against the second phase of the occupation that began in 1967, as well as in the struggle for Palestinian national rights.

Tarachansky films Honig-Parnass while she visits a village she helped destroy, and records her while she speaks about her personal struggle to overcome denial. Tikva explains why she and her comrades were prepared to believe the lies they were told by their leaders in 1948. As the deputy mayor of Kedumim settlement, Shoshana Shilo, says later in the film, they were told it was an "empty land" consisting only of "Arabs and malaria."

The cause was said to be just, but Jews were a substantial minority in Palestine prior to 1948, with most arriving in 1948 only after the purge. Moreover, the Anglo-Americans who ruled the United Nations partitioned Palestine without consulting most Palestinians, while those who were consulted, rejected the plan. Although the UN plan was not implemented, as Gary Leech explains, "the Jewish population in Palestine unilaterally announced the creation of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948."¹

"By the end of 1949," Leech said, "Israel had destroyed more than 400 Palestinian villages, massacred thousands of civilians and forcibly displaced almost a million Palestinians, who ended up in refugee camps in neighboring Arab countries. In other words, with the Jewish people having just endured the horrors of the Holocaust, the Zionists were now carrying out, according to Pappe, the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people."

"We didn't care where they went," a veteran who fought with the Palmach tells Tarachansky. 'Ruhu el Gaza, Go to Gaza,' we told them, as we expelled them." Referring to the massacre at Burayr, a village in the south of the country, he says remorsefully, "We killed 70 people there."

Facing the Facts

Lia Tarachansky began her own research into the Nakba after her mother remarried and the family moved to Ottawa, Canada. Lia was 16 at the time. In Canada, half a world away from settlements and Israel's closed society, her personal transformation began. She met anti-Zionist

Jewish students, read many books, including Ilan Pappé's The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine and, as she told Sarah Levy in a previous interview, met a Palestinian for the first time.ⁱⁱ

"The strongest thing for me was having a conversation with a Palestinian for the first time, when I was at school in Canada. I was standing somewhere in the university and this guy comes up to me and asks for directions. And we start talking and he says, "You have a strong accent, where are you from?" and I say, "Oh, I'm Israeli," and he says amiably, "Oh yeah? I'm a Palestinian!"

"So he asks for directions and then he goes on his way. And as he walks away I realize that I'm holding my purse just a little bit tighter, that my whole body is kind of uptight, and it takes me a couple minutes to calm down from being terrified for my life. But then out of that brief interaction I realized: he knows I'm an Israeli, he told me he's a Palestinian, and he didn't try to kill me. That was revolutionary for me because, I'd been told my whole life that Palestinians are just brainless, emotional, primitive murdering anti-Semites who just want to kill Jews all the time. And here was this totally polite sensible nice guy and yet he was a Palestinian.

"I know it sounds horrible, but for me, that was something that didn't fit with anything I had known before. So it actually began a very violent process of tackling a lot of the mythology that I thought was true about the conflict."

While a student at the University of Guelph, Tarachansky read Stanley Cohen's monumental book, States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering. As her awareness grew, she shifted her career path from medicine to journalism and eventually got a job with The Real News Network. She eagerly became its correspondent in Israel and Palestine, where her research became a part of her job. She went to archives, looked at maps, and located villages that had been abandoned and destroyed during the Nakba. She also located veterans of the 1948 expulsion, one of whom, Amnon Noiman, she interviewed over a period of four years for the documentary.

Noiman is the central character in the documentary. A droll octogenarian, he wonders if his marriage of 56 years will last. He's smart and funny, but tormented. He grapples with his guilt as he and Tarachansky visit places where he and the Palmach (the strike force of the Hagana) massacred people and expelled them from their villages, later burning them to the ground.

"It's been eating me up," he says. "They ran away and we shot them... I was 19. I was a fool. That's why I'm in such despair. Because there will always be new 19 year olds."

When Arabs would return to prune vines their families had tended for centuries, the Zionist militias would wait in ambush and shoot them.

"Most people left on their own," Eitan Bronstein explains, "because after a few massacres and after you shoot a few people in the head...you don't need many for people to flee."

"The main project since Forty-Eight," he adds, "is to shut the door, to prevent their return. The Nakba is this central point of preventing return. And since then, we've prevented and denied their right of return."

“Without understanding 1948 you simply don’t understand where you live, and we Israelis simply have no idea what the conflict we live in is all about.”

Palestinians were driven from land they’d lived on for thousands of years, so Jews could prosper. And while the film is not about Palestinians as much as it is about the self-delusions that pervert the collective Israeli consciousness, it does include the perspective of Khalil Abu Hamdeh, whose grandparents were expelled in 1948 and whose families have been living in the West Bank under the yoke of Israeli occupation ever since.

Tarachansky films Hamdeh after he gets a permit to leave the Asqar Refugee Camp where he lives, near the northern West Bank city of Nablus. The camp looks like bombed-out Belfast, with scrawny kids playing in rubble. Together they visit Qaqun, the village where his grandmother fled. Qaqun is now a national park. His grandfather’s village, near Jaffa, was razed to the ground.

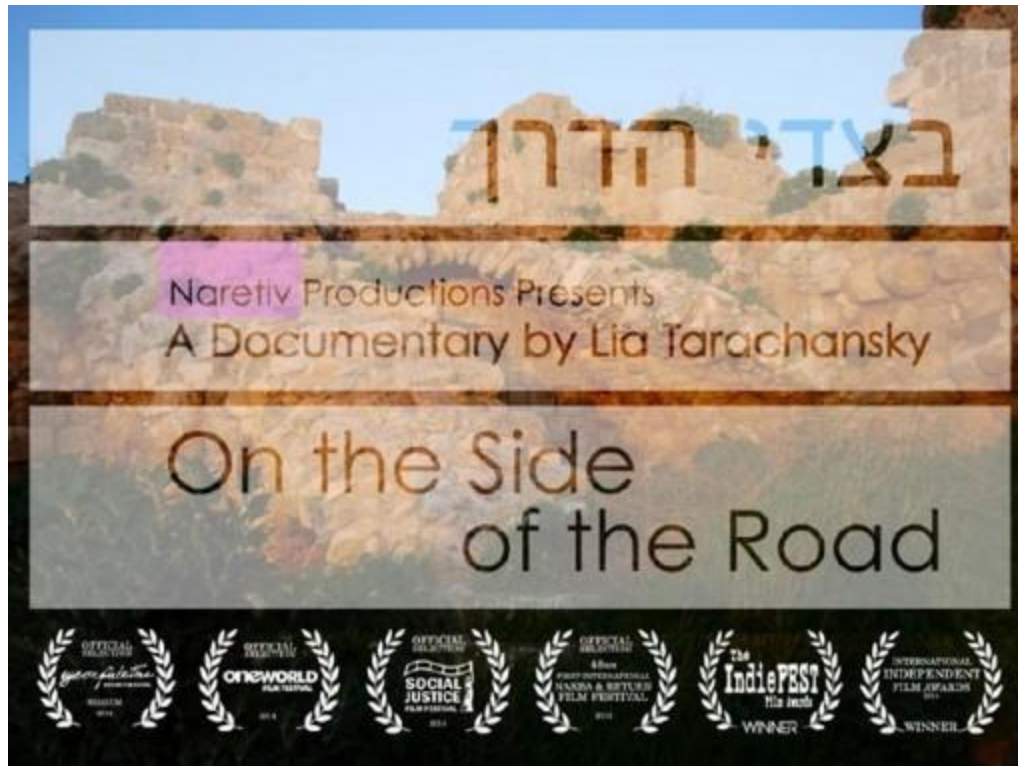
“How can it be,” Tarachansky asks of one of the veterans in her film, “that three years after the Holocaust the Jewish people kill, massacre, steal, rape, and pillage what was left?”

Honig-Parnass responds: “It’s a mistake to think that a personal experience, such as losing family in the Holocaust, is motivation for a more humanitarian worldview. Quite the opposite, it’s not the personal experience but the ideology that you use to interpret it.”

The documentary ends a year after it began, with Eitan Bronstein crashing another happy Israeli Independence Day celebration. The police are irritated because he intends to distribute fliers with names of villages that were destroyed in the Nabka. The cops say his fliers are inciting materials and a disturbance to the peace.

A bystander IDF soldier watching the ruckus turns to Tarachansky’s camera and says “You’re lucky the cops are here. If we had the chance, we’d shoot you one by one.”

The cops smile.



I recently had the honor of interviewing Lia Tarachansky. She and I are not strangers. Lia contributed a poem to an anthology I edited, *With Our Eyes Wide Open: Poems of the New American Century*.ⁱⁱⁱ Her poetry, like her film, deals largely with the contradictions of Israeli society. Before we begin the interview, I'd like to present a prose-poem she wrote about the on-going Nakba:

(04/12/2014)

The Wife of the Accused

The wife of the accused is 23. She is eight months pregnant. She still has pimples on her face. She is very pale. She stands her elbow at a right angle against her back. Like an old, old woman. The day her husband went missing she left her house.

She knows too well the ways of the army. She doesn't want to die when they come to demolish the home. They didn't come with charges, or a warrant. They came with sledgehammers and broke everything. She stayed at her parents' place. The next night they came with dogs. And sledgehammers. And broke the broken rubble. The next night they came with an army jeep to her parents' place and took her. They drove to her home and made her watch. They blew up her house, and made them watch. The wife of the accused and her unborn baby.

DV – Hi Lia. Many thanks for answering some questions about this difficult subject. In a recent interview you said that the latest attack on Gaza brought a lot of the fascists out of the closet. How is fascism manifesting itself in Israel? Is the Nakba law a manifestation of Israeli fascism and racism?

LT – Israeli fascism is complex and manifests itself in many different ways. By the early 20th century understanding of fascism, meaning a social movement that forces all to align to one communal line of thinking, and bans all others Israel is not a fascist state because the State exerts little pressure on Israeli Jews to conform. However, the pressure comes from the society itself. In essence, it is easy to indoctrinate a people that wants to be indoctrinated. Since everyone is a part of the army, or at least knows and loves someone in the army, the army's actions are considered outside of what is legitimate to criticize, and along with it, the bigger policies of the Israeli security echelon. There are many elements to it, from Israeli media to politicians, to school education. They all play a part in Israelis' collective ignorance of the reality they impose on the Palestinians and the justifications for that reality. They also play a major part in reinforcing Israelis' collective denial, as we talked in our interview. In this kind of environment it is easy for fascistic movements to arise, as we've seen they've come and gone throughout Israel's history and are now getting stronger. During the Gaza attack this summer we saw people attacking anyone who speaks Arabic or looks Arabic on the streets of Jerusalem, mobs running through major streets in both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv screaming "death to Arabs" and "Turn Gaza into a Cemetery" as you can see in my reports for The Real News Network. These people believe Israel is a Jewish state and should be Jewish-only, and that anyone who thinks differently must be silenced, if necessary, by force. I do not put the blame for their behavior at the feet of a few radicals, but squarely at the feet of the Prime Minister himself, who incites and allows politicians within his government to incite the masses in such a way. Further, I think since the very essence of Zionism has never been defined – what does it mean a Jewish state? A Jewish-religious state? A Jewish-majority state? A Jewish-only state? These ambiguities allow for all kinds of interpretations, including fascistic ones.

DV – What exactly is the Nakba law?

LT – The Nakba Law was proposed in 2009 and a diluted version of it passed in 2011. Essentially it forbids any body that receives any part of its budget from the government (such as funds, community centers, or schools) to commemorate the Nakba on the Israeli day of Independence. If they do, their budgets get slashed by a certain amount. The main impact of the law wasn't so much the punishment that it legislated but the cooling effect that it had on the Palestinian (20% of the population) and other citizens of Israel from commemorating the tragedy that began in 1948 when two-thirds of the Palestinians who lived on this land became refugees. It basically criminalized history and the commemoration of the survivors' pain and sent a clear message that only one version of history is legitimate, the version of the victor.

DV – What is life like in the various Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, as opposed to life in a Palestinian refugee camp?

LT – Living in an Israeli settlement in the West Bank is similar to any North American suburb. The town is even structured like American suburbs and usually serves a commuter town for people who work in the center of the country and want a bigger back yard than they would be able to afford living near their workplace. There are few jobs in the settlements themselves, except for the nine industrial parks (where the majority of jobs are staffed by West Bank Palestinians anyway). In a way, because these are gated communities surrounded by fences and walls, and checkpoints, and the military, they create a bubble in which generations are born and

grow up in blissful ignorance of their surroundings. Until I left the settlement I didn't even know the names of the Palestinian villages directly around Ariel, and have of course never met anyone who lived there. I was brought up to believe that we were on the frontier of defending the land of Israel from its unnatural, enemy inhabitants, and saw all those Palestinian communities as something dangerous and alien. I wouldn't pretend to know what life in a refugee camp is like as I come from the privileged, Jewish population but from my many visits and friends in Palestinian refugee camps, I can tell you life there is very hard. In essence, whatever territory UNRWA was given for these camps when these people first became refugees, whether in 1948 or 1967 is the same territory they still have. Balata Refugee Camp in Nablus, in the Northern West Bank for example is one square kilometer. On this territory now three generations live, in intensely dense conditions, where streets look more like tiny alleyways. These communities have also limited access to electricity and are stuck in a legal limbo regarding their rights and are therefore left in a precarious situation. This is why it is no surprise that much of the armed resistance comes from these camps. When people are left with nothing to lose, they are willing to do the unimaginable.

DV – How do Palestinians earn a living in Israel?

LT – About a quarter of a million Palestinians work inside Israel. Many get permits from the Israeli administrative body in charge of the West Bank, known as COGAT. This body works with Israel's various security agencies in deciding whom to give permits and whom to deny. Primary on the list of people denied are anyone whose home was demolished or whose relatives have been killed by Israeli forces as they are at "a higher risk to seek revenge", according to COGAT's regulations. Most, therefore, sneak into Israel to work in precarious work without a permit. This attests to two things, the first is that the so-called Security Wall, or Segregation Wall has not helped in preventing suicide attacks, as the Israeli government claims, because if anyone can just sneak in, so can terrorists. This goes to prove that the Wall is indeed used to cement Israel's land grab, as attested to its route going deep into the West Bank in most places, and not running along the 1967 "Green Line". The second thing that this proves is that the vast majority of Palestinians simply want to live in dignity, to earn money and raise their children, something that should give the Israeli people hope.

Most Palestinians who work in Israel either work in construction or in the lowest positions in the service industry, such as dishwashing or cleaning. They leave the West Bank for weeks at a time, sleeping either at their workplace (if they work construction) or three/four people to a bed in rented apartments and returning to their families every few weekends to give them the money they make. I have to add here that according to the Oslo Agreements, Israel collects these workers' taxes and is supposed to then transfer these taxes to the PA to be returned to the workers, but this has never happened, so in essence these workers work pay taxes to Israel, yet are not citizens of Israel, and do not benefit from the government's use of their taxes, which in many cases go to support the Occupation infrastructure.

DV – Are there economic reasons for the oppression of the Palestinians? Do they serve as a source of cheap labor for Israelis?

LT – Yes, but that's not the main reason: as we've seen since the Second Intifadah, their use as a cheap labor source can be easily replaced with migrant workers from Asia and Eastern Europe.

The economic benefit is more complex than that. First of all, the Palestinians are a captive market for many Israeli goods, both in the West Bank and in Gaza. Secondly, Israel's number one industry is the arms industry, which benefits immensely from having a population on which it can routinely test its inventions, be they crowd-dispersal weapons, drones, or other weapons, and especially technologies developed for Homeland Security, which Israel exports around the world. These are Hi-Tech surveillance and intelligence gathering tools with which the various Israeli intelligence agencies monitor the Palestinian population and which are then sold around the world.

These are just two ways Israel benefits from the Occupation. If you want to know more about the economic element of it, I recommend the work of Shir Hever, who wrote *The Political Economy of Israel's Occupation*, the database *Who Profits*, the research centre *Al Shabaka*, or the work of Dr. Neve Gordon, whose website <http://israelsoccupation.info> has a ton of great resources.

DV – Do you feel the BDS movement will help force Israel to moderate its oppressive policies toward Palestinians?

LT – I don't know, but I think the tactics used so far haven't helped in bringing the powerful to the table to negotiate in good faith. Perhaps this kind of pressure will work as it did in Apartheid South Africa, but I hope that our "day after" will be far better than theirs.

DV – Short of Israel giving back everything it's stolen from the Palestinians, what is the solution to this problem?

LT – Well, I wouldn't simplify this conflict like that, but there are many solutions on the table. As I'm sure you know there is the well-known Two State Solution, but also the One State Solution, and more recently, variations of the Swiss Solution, meaning a multi-national federation or confederacy. I shy away from the kind of thinking that believes that every problem has a solution, or that everything that breaks can be made whole again. I think the work that we have to do to repair the massive damage that was done is a multi-generational and extremely complex work, but of course the first step is equality, from the river to the sea.

DV – Will Palestinians ever be allowed to return to their homes?

LT – I don't know how to read the future, but I think that any solution that doesn't include the Palestinian refugees will be refused by a Palestinian leadership that wishes to survive to the handshake at the end of the agreement.

DV – There is a huge information war going on to rationalize international support for Israel. How does Israel manage to successfully define itself as a victim when it is openly racist and the aggressor?

LT – I think that Israel is a different context than the colonial regimes in Africa, in the sense that it was created because of oppression. If it was not for European anti-Semitism, Israel would not exist. It was therefore created as a result of centuries of crimes against the Jewish people, and that has created a sense of victimhood in our collective psyche that's going to take longer than a

few decades to repair. That, however, is separate from Israel's policies. The Israeli government plays on that psyche, on that consciousness both at home and abroad to recruit the Israeli people and to enlist the support of its friends abroad. I think that more importantly than that, however, is that Israel serves as a convenient laboratory for those said friends, and its collapse (largely due to the racist and aggressive policies you've alluded to) will be the end of a long experiment both in colonialism but also in the idea that you can have a state for one group, at the expense of others. That you can have an "Ethnocracy", a term defined by Oren Yiftachel as the kind of state Israel is, and the kind of state many Europeans wish their countries were. Right now we're seeing this idea battle itself out in the laboratory that is Israel, and there are many victims of it, the Palestinians of course but also the African refugees, the migrant workers, and I would argue the Israeli Jewish people themselves as they are increasingly incited against living in a multicultural and therefore stronger society that is based on the values of democracy and equality and not perpetual war.

DV – People who advocate BDS are often slandered as anti-Semitic. Is it an unstated but intentional Israeli policy to publicly slander people as anti-Semitic if they criticize Israel?

LT – I don't know what the Israel government does intentionally or unintentionally but it is a perversion of real anti-Semitism to claim that criticism of the state of Israel is anti-Semitic. I think that it blinds us from deciphering what real anti-Semitism is (and I have seen that it is still alive and well) and is in my opinion this kind of perversion is very dangerous.

DV – In an attempt to limit the free speech of US citizens, representatives in Illinois voted unanimously to prevent state pension funds from participating in BDS. The US Congress sends \$3 billion of US tax dollars to Israel every year, over the objections of an increasing number of its citizens. How does Israel manage to retain the unconditional support of US and Canadian politicians?

LT – I think you should ask American and Canadian journalists that question.

DV – You have toured the US, Canada, Europe and Israel with your film. How has it been received? How and why are reactions different in different regions? Are non-Israelis aware of the Nakba? Do they care?

LT – I have been very lucky to have screened my film in Europe, Canada, and the US, as well as in Israel/Palestine and I would have to say that the reception has been incredible. Most people find the film thought-provoking, which is the highest honor a filmmaker can hope for from her audience. Many people of course find it very hard to watch, as it reflects a certain reality in Israel that many wish either wasn't there or wasn't seen. I have been doing my best to continue my communication with the folks who found the film particularly hard, but it's a full-time job to be in so many communications at once. I invite people to go visit and see the reality for themselves, and hope that my film will help them, in as much as it can, understand what they see when they get there.

DV – When will your audience be able to buy DVD's of your documentary film, "On The Side of the Road"?

LT – This summer. I invite your readers to check at www.naretivproductions.com for the exact release date of the DVD.

DV – Are you working on a new project? Can we look forward to another documentary from you?

LT – I have recently completed another documentary with Canadian journalist Jesse Freeston. You are welcome to read more about it on our site www.naretivproductions.com It is a film entitled ETHNOCRACY IN THE PROMISED LAND: ISRAEL'S AFRICAN REFUGEES, and as the title says it profiles the kind of state Israel is, and why it refuses to give asylum even to those who have never been in conflict with it, and who seek refuge from war and hunger. The film was a commission of TeleSUR TV and will be screened in Spanish and English this summer.

DV – Thank you very much.

LT – You are very welcome.