

Shame on the city of Takoma Park

There were so many things wrong with how the city of Takoma Park handled the screening of “The Occupation of the American Mind” that we find little basis to excuse the mistakes as naïve, innocent or unintended. Given how the screening and its related programming played out, and the multiple opportunities the city of Takoma Park had (and either ignored or rejected) to handle things more carefully and sensitively, we can’t help but conclude that the entire program was intentionally insensitive to the state of Israel, and knowingly bordered on being anti-Semitic. And we don’t make these observations lightly.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is fraught with tension and deep political and emotional differences. Anyone

presenting a program on the topic — particularly around a film that is controversial — knows that every aspect of the exercise is fraught with significant communal risk. So what did Takoma Park think would happen when it decided to screen a decidedly anti-Israel film that blames the Jewish state for everything that has gone wrong for the Palestinians, and accuses Israel of spinning a “Protocols of Zion”-like web to ensnare the American media into unquestioning support?

As reported in our pages over the past several weeks, there were many questions about how the screening was approved, as well as alarm regarding a hate-mongering panelist chosen to present at the program. Given the poor choices made by Takoma Park, it is not at all surprising

that the panel “presentation” was pathetically short on “dialogue” and distressingly long on negativity, stridency and anti-Israel sophistry that was remarkably uninformed and insulting.

The event panel did not include participants from the Israeli government or the PLO. Washington’s well-respected JCRC was invited to attend, but refused to participate since it found the film anti-Semitic. For a brief moment, Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, of the District’s Ohev Sholom — the National Synagogue, agreed to participate on the panel, only to withdraw upon learning that panelist Taher Herzallah, of the American Muslims for Palestine, had publicly called for violence against Israel and accused Jewish Birthright participants of being involved in ethnic cleansing.

That left professional facilitator Theo Brown and Matthew Mayers of J Street to round out the panel with Herzallah. It wasn’t pretty. Mayers — who deferentially kept pushing that there are two sides to every story and two narratives in every conflict — was simply no match for the uncontrolled and deliberately offensive Herzallah, who wouldn’t even recognize the existence of the State of Israel, saying, “Why should the colonized be asked to recognize the colonizer?”

It’s tiresome. And it couldn’t have been good for anyone. So what was the leadership of the city of Takoma Park thinking when they approved the plan? Clearly, they weren’t thinking very much. And that may account for why they acted so foolishly in allowing the offensive screening and program to go forward. ■

VOICES

Why I went to Takoma Park

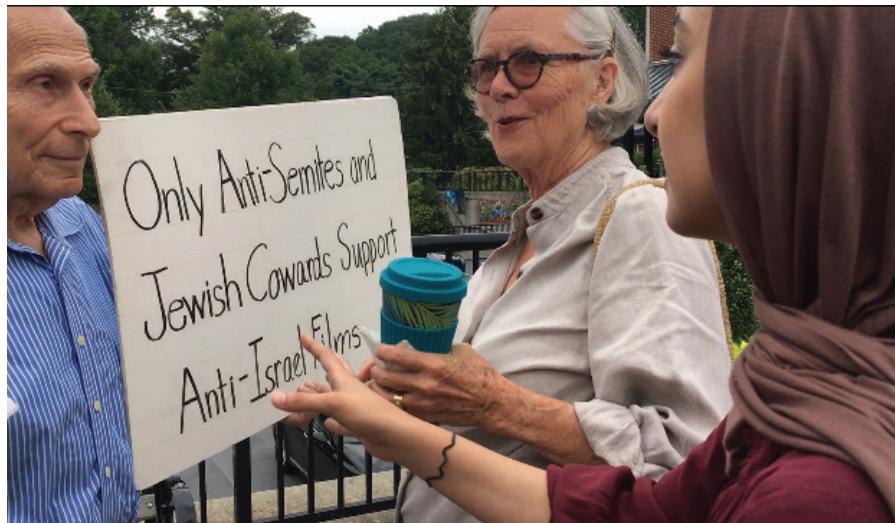
By Saul Golubcow
Special to WJW

Last Tuesday, I was part of the overflow audience of a few hundred at Takoma Park Community Center to watch the disturbing documentary “The Occupation of the American Mind.” What I saw was Israel portrayed as a vicious, illegitimate entity brutally killing and oppressing Palestinians.

Worse, the film promotes a conspiracy theory that from 1948 to the present, Israel and its financial supporters control the media, Congress, and the minds of Americans.

The panel discussion that followed was intended as a forum for the considered exchange of thoughts. That’s not how it turned out. Taher Herzallah, of American Muslims for Palestine, monopolized the discussion. Belligerently, he threw out catch phrases and slogans to demonize Israel. Anyone thinking differently, he insisted, was not worth hearing because “the narrative of the colonizer [meaning Israel] is not a viable narrative.” Asked if he would acknowledge Israel’s right to exist, he flatly refused, exclaiming “not at my expense.”

The other discussant, Matthew Mayers from J Street, did little to



Opposing views meet outside the Takoma Park Community Center.

Photo by Samantha Cooper

Asked if he would acknowledge Israel’s right to exist, Herzallah flatly refused, exclaiming “not at my expense.”

slacken my tensions. While at the end he affirmed Israel’s right to exist, his other comments were either timid or critical of Israel calling the film “an advocacy piece” and “one sided,” but not anti-Semitic.

My heart sank as I watched the majority of the audience applauding segments

of the movie vilifying Israel and the American Jewish community, laughing and sneering at opposing opinions, and being whipped into voiced approvals by Herzallah’s strident polemics of hate. I looked around at the sneerers and hooters (including a few Jews) and thought, yes, it can happen here.

I left shaken and worried, but I’m glad I went. With white supremacist forms of anti-Semitism, I know what we are facing and how to fight back. But I was horrified, not fully knowing what to make of people who view themselves as fair-minded, wishing to create safe space for a “community learning experience,” but who cheer on the defamation and debasement of a certain segment of a community.

That’s why, feeling myself to be the “enemy,” I was heartened not only by Jewish organizations such as the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington’s refusal to participate in a forum sponsoring blatant anti-Semitism, but also by the actions of eight members of the Montgomery County Council, Comptroller Peter Franchot and individual Maryland legislators across religious and political lines protesting the presentation.

Coming was painful, and so it must have been for a handful of others who spoke truth to bigotry. And by coming, I know the fight will be long and difficult. There will be a next time, and we will need more than a few of us to speak up. ■

Saul Golubcow writes from Potomac.