



DELVING DEEPER

A LOOK AT JEWISH IDENTITY AND THE 23RD ANNUAL CENTRAL FLORIDA JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL

This year, the Central Florida Jewish Film Festival presents a diverse array of films, taking its viewers from icy seas to distant stars. Yet no matter how different these films appear at first glance, one theme in particular unites each story: *Jewish identity*. The J met with festival committee member **Harriet Weiss** to learn more about this year's selections...

What can you tell me about the festival's selection process? What drew the committee to these films?

We're partners with the Enzian. We start by picking out 15 films that we like the most, and we present them to the Enzian. Then they offer some movies back, and eventually we compromise. We have different things in mind. Enzian looks at production, how the film is made, that sort of thing. Our committee is more focused on finding great stories. *Moment Magazine* just gave one of our movies a great review, *Honeymoon*. I think younger audiences will enjoy that.

A common thread this year is Jewish identity. The film that explores this idea most is, I think, *American Birthright*. The central question, "Why marry Jewish?" raises an even more important question: why BE Jewish? After all, if being Jewish isn't important to you, then why would marrying Jewish be a priority? So, I ask you: why is Judaism important to you?

Judaism is important to me because that was my upbringing—very family-oriented, Jewish holidays with everyone in New Jersey. My father

was more religious than my mother, and I liked that a lot. He went to a shul, and my mother and I went to a Reform temple. I remember carrying flags, singing, such happy memories connected to Judaism and family. I love it, I love Judaism. I grew up in the 1940s, right after the war, and there was still a lot of antisemitism in America—but I don't think they knew what was happening in Europe. When I was a child, maybe seven or eight, there was a lot of antisemitism in my neighborhood, and we were one of two Jewish families on our street. I remember children throwing stones and saying, "Harriet killed Christ!" I asked my mother, "Did I kill Christ?" We eventually moved from Jersey City. From then on, I decided I would never let that happen to my children, ever.

I found this documentary to be a very refreshing change of pace. In recent years, the "observant Jew becomes secular" narrative has become very popular (see Netflix's *Unorthodox*, *My Unorthodox Life*, and *One of Us*). *American Birthright* flips that narrative on its head. Becky Tahel's journey leads to a deepening of her religiosity, and the film concludes with her wedding—which