

“Sons of Abraham”

A film directed by Wafa’ Jamil

By Ziad Jayyosi Cinema Critic

At the beginning, it is necessary to indicate that this film is directed by the Palestinian director, Wafa’ Jamil. It is the fourth film directed by her and the second one in English, in addition to many documentary films, which motivated me to raise a question before even seeing the film. It is an important question; Why Abraham sons? And, why this name in particular?

We have been living in an area where national conflict with religious roots occurs. On this land, there are three religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism. All these religions admit that Abraham is the father of all prophets and all three religions have affiliations to him. Additionally, this name was used as a political term in one period by King Hussein, the late King of Jordan who was important in regional politics, who called for coexistence between Abraham’s sons, with all their religions, in one land called Palestine.

In her previous films “The Lost House” and “The Roots”, Wafa’ Jamil was exploring the roots that connect man to his land. But what does Wafa’ want from her new film?

The director introduces the 30-minute film by saying, “the film tackles the issues between the various religions and uses methods of discovering new tools that exceed the religious pressures and psychological frustration. The film was shot in the Bavaria Mountains in Germany during an academic summer camp that included several participants from Palestine, Iraq, Bosnia, Holland, and Germany.”

Here we notice an important issue of presentation as Palestine and Iraq are under occupation. Iraq is occupied by the coalition forces of America and Britain; occupiers that planted seeds of civil war based on sectarian purification. We touched the various sects that have conducted the purification of complete suburbs of other sects instead of resisting the occupiers. In Palestine, under the occupation of Israel, the purification of sects against Arab Palestinians, whether they are Muslims or Christians, is a transfer policy that has been implemented under religious cover based on a religious myth of God’s promise. However, the Israeli occupation

has failed till now to ignite a sectarian problem between Muslims and Christians although several attempts have been made, such as attacking churches and Christian educational institutions. Bosnia has suffered from its religious sectarian wars, and Germany suffered from a Nazi rule that practiced oppression against other religions and sects. The Germans still suffer from guilt towards others, particularly the Jews who exploit this and the Germans through it.

The opening scene in the film is footage of the gas fired use to manipulate the glass. Did the director mean to give us a sign? From the start, the subject tackled by the film is an important issue. The first story told is that of Tariq Yaghmour, a Palestinian artist from Bethlehem, a city that witnesses coexistence between Muslims and Christians under the Israeli occupation. Tariq is specialized in the art of glass and we see him practicing his art in molding a piece and then introducing himself. In a later scene, the artist Tariq is filmed with the Palestinian group in the Jordanian plane that took them to Germany in a clear sign that under occupation we lose the simple rights, such as an airport and national planes. The Gaza airport was completely destroyed at the beginning of the second intifada although it had been under the security control of occupation before that.

The Palestinian group arrives and meets the other groups in front of a large mural. They stand looking at it and point to where they are in this mural that starts with Abraham, the father of prophets, and the branches that emerged from him till this day. We find these religions and branches emerged from him, including the Sunni and Shia'a. So, from the beginning it is a start to a dialogue. When any of the female participants ask Tariq Yaghmour where he fits on this tree, he replies in the highest part. One woman replies, "this time you might not be in the highest." This is a clear indicator, caught by the director, of the background held by the participants in this summer course.

As the workshop sessions start, it is important to note the tone set by the first session, which carries important signs in it. We find Peter, the Director of Wings of Hope, a German, begins by saying that after the collapse of the communist regime that ended the conflict between the capitalism and communism, we find that a new conflict starts between Islam and Christianity. This new religious conflict inside everyone is why we will look to our holy books to discover the common elements in them. Judaism is not a direct part of this conflict and so is not represented in this session.

So, it is the idea adopted by the West, that the conflict is a religious one that has pitted civilizations against each other and not a conflict resulting from occupation or the controlling of nations' wealth and freedom. The conflict of civilizations is just a cover for the American need, influenced by Europe, to continue the growth of capitalism through its control and turning nations into consumers for the sake of the capitalist project.

The directors of this academic summer camp project aimed to create a sort of communication and dialogue between the participants. So, the activity the German proposes is a game that all the participants play; this game is just a symbol to build a world network. All stand in a circle around a pile of colorful ropes and each individual talks about a wish and about his desires and then picks up a rope, holds one end while throwing the other end to someone who he thinks is close to his beliefs. At the end of the game, we see a network of intersecting ropes; each rope is caught by two sides. The intersection of ropes symbolizes the intersection between participants coming from various places. The participants from Holland and Germany, we discover, are Iraqis that became citizens in these countries. We conclude that the aim of dialogue sessions is to create one "color" inside the communities themselves, which include various races and national identities, as prevention from internal conflicts that we have seen starting to touch Europe, especially in France and Germany. These conflicts have been between the native people and immigrants that took the form of religious and national conflict.

The organizers of this event, the Wings of Hope and the International Center of Bethlehem, took the group to another location; an old hut which was built in 1886. It is on the side of a steep mountain and the participants had to exert great effort to reach it. The site was not selected haphazardly. It was as if the organizers wanted the participants to perceive that whatever the difficulties, there must be a result if man works to reach his goals. I discovered that in the history of Switzerland, the first Zionist Conference was held just 11 years after the building of this hut. It was in this conference that the Zionists stated their goal of establishing their own state of Israel within 50 years, which was accepted in 1947 through the United Nations decision to partition Palestine. So, did they select this location because of its history or was it by chance?

In the hut, there were other dialogues. All the participants spoke about themselves. Merza, who came from Bosnia said, "I was working in a non-governmental institution and I was fired from work based on my religious background." So, to create a sort of harmony between the attendants, each group was requested to offer something about their

country that represents its heritage, i.e. beverages and popular foods. Tariq from the Palestinian group offered things that he considered representative of the Palestinian heritage, such as dancing, Za'atar and olive oil as a food, and the water pipe. I think Tariq was wrong in offering the water pipe as it was not a Palestinian heritage but a Turkish one and entered Palestine at the end of the Ottoman era. It would have been better if he had presented another thing that introduces our traditions such as carvings from olive tree wood. This historical art is well-known in Palestine and the olive tree is a symbol in both Islam and Christianity.

The dialogue is completed with discussion about the psychological conditions that are created by conflicts and wars. Peter indicates that it is abnormal to live under occupation and it is abnormal to live with frustration caused by war, occupation, and civil war as in Iraq, Palestine and Bosnia. Each participant is asked to draw his life in the shape of a diagram. Participants also talked about the life they lived in their countries because of war and their reflections on their psychology. So, you see models from Iraq, Palestine, and Bosnia in the language that they lived. This related to what Tariq, the main figure in the film, said when talking about the 1st and 2nd Intifada and the martyrdom of his brother, an 18 year old student, at the hands of an Israeli soldier who was only a few meters away and could have arrested him or shot him in the feet instead of his head. He also talked about the martyrdom of his friends in Bethlehem by the Israeli soldiers.

In a trip by the group, the organizers of the study seminar took them to the military camp "Dachau", the main location of the Nazi SS forces known by its oppression and practice of torture and eradication. Upon looking at the pictures of torture, Tariq said, "I feel that I am in my country where the memory of the Palestinian detainees as well as torture methods spread and the photographs of this site annoy me and remind me of the wall built by the Israelis in our land."

Germans always insist on these tours, motivated by guilt of Nazi era and its eradication of Jews and others, as historians have confirmed. However, the Jews often point to this single event to say that they were the only people who suffered from the Nazi plan of eradication in order to exploit the world, in general and the Germans, in particular. At the end of the tour in the camp, some participants light candles for the souls of victims. However, Tariq who has a feeling inside about the real victims does not light a candle and instead he passes by the candles. The camera caught the shot of his feet near the candles to move us to the lit candles in a church carrying the photographs of peace and love. It is as if the female

director wants to say that we are the people who deserve these candles. In Palestine, Muslims and Christians are the victims of racial and Zionist discrimination and throughout history Muslims and Christians lived peacefully. So, if the Jews are the victims of oppression of the West, why do we become the victims? The Jews lived with us for centuries without any religious or racial oppression until Zionism came and changed the situation and oppressed the Arabs regardless of their religions. The camera continues to capture film from the church taking beautiful footage to take us away from Dachau camp.

The camera returns with us to complete dialogue as talking is about exploiting religion from the politicians, the issue of terrorism devastate the world and taking about participating Israelis next time claiming that the attendants from various religious and cultural backgrounds so that the participants in the dialogues upon returning to their countries under conflict to take a role in leading societies and so he differences appear clearly .Tariq says that Israelis who might attend without influencing the decision as in their society have no political role and as Israel occupies my country, I refuse to sit with any Israeli even though I refuse to sit with any Jewish not Israeli. If occupation is removed my homeland, I have no objection to sit with any body although some Palestinians accept sit in with Israelis but not me. This principle situation leads that the German Aneta to make special conditions for whom to be invited for participation in next terms.

At the end of the film, the participants listened to a song about peace and love. The film ends with the expression of the participants' wishes and comments, which focus mainly on the hope for peace to prevail all over the world and for the cessation of conflicts and wars so that justice and freedom will prevail in this confused world. Tariq says, "I encourage the youth to participate to search for ones-self and exchange ideas and experiences." Then the participants leave the camp to return to their countries. The camera captures the scene of the car stopping at an intersection and pans the traffic light as if the director wants to say, from here we leave each other and return to our homelands and that everyone will leave with a special color they will hold inside them like the traffic light. The film ends with scenes of the beautiful nature and the participants playing sport to help them to relieve tension. The film closes with shots from the steep mountains as if the director wants to say, whatever the trials and difficulties; whatever the ignorance of others to our just cause, the sun will rise one day and then beauty will prevail.

At the end, it is necessary to note that although this film was covering the event of the Wings of Hope Foundation and the International Center of Bethlehem, the director was able to convey good ideas through revelation and using symbols in several scenes and the capacity to move from one scene to another smoothly. The film's music was selected well although taken from several artists and the technology used for the production footage and sound quality was good.

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