

Convicted by a kangaroo court

Eyal Sivan has been the target of a witch hunt for an entire week. Since publication of reports that he will direct a film supported by the Rabinovitch Foundation he's been called "anti-Israeli" and "pro-Palestinian," but he's remained silent. "I've been abandoned," he says, and claims that the reports were intended to influence the decision of the public committees. Merav Yudilovitch, Ynetnews, 30 April 2007 (Israel Culture).

For a whole week Eyal Sivan has been in the headlines on news pages, op-ed pages, and the internet. An entire week in which expressions such as the following have appeared next to his name: "prominent hater of Israel," "sick phenomenon," "Israeli expatriate who serves as a propaganda machine for the liquidation of the Zionist enterprise."

A whole week in which Sivan has remained silent. For most readers the name means nothing. Now it is time to meet the man: Eyal Sivan, director, academic, lecturer in film studies, a controversial figure now fighting for his artistic life.

Last Wednesday an item appeared in the press stating that Sivan had been chosen to direct a film called "Jaffa" as part of a combined project of channel 8, the Rabinovitch Foundation, and the Jerusalem Cinematheque. The initial item was published more than a week before the advisory committee to the public council and the Rabinovitch Foundation board of directors convened to decide on the recommendation.

The item did not speak about the film itself, other than in a terse sentence that is part of the TV channel's response. Instead it pointed its arrows at Sivan himself, calling him "anti-Israeli," "pro-Palestinian," and claiming he "presents Eichmann as a nice person" in his 1999 film "The Specialist".

The item was sufficient to ignite the media and to bring out the heavy artillery against Sivan. Minister Ya'akov Edri, who is responsible for the celebrations of Israel's sixtieth birthday next year, called Sivan "anti-Jewish" and demanded that the Minister of Education and the Mayor of Jerusalem use their authority to stop the scandal.

MK Yoel Hasson was quick to express his point of view in a letter sent to the press and to Giora Eini, director of the Rabinovitch Foundation. "Sivan holds radical, pro-Palestinian views, has lived in Paris in recent years, and often speaks out against Israel and its policy, including statements that Israel is a historical error... Is it possible that he should enjoy public money in the state he loathes so much?"

Hasson was not the only one demanding that the Rabinovitch Foundation rethink a decision that has not yet been made. "We have had many controversial films, but when I analyze the public outcry that has arisen here, there is no doubt that the discussion is not about the film project but about the director," says Eini.

Sources close to the advisory committee fear that the media uproar will affect the decisions of the foundation's public committee.

"To its eternal disgrace, the Rabinovitch Foundation will be remembered as the body that capitulated to McCarthyism if it decides to overturn the advisory council's

decision. This would be the first time that political pressures are driving people crazy and causing them to disqualify a person without addressing his art at all. This type of de-legitimization is an undemocratic act that will open a dangerous Pandora's box," they say.

It was journalist Ben Dror Yemini who actually talked somewhat about the film itself, which he called a story about capitalism and Zionist colonialism that exploits Palestinians.

"This is a story about the Engineering Corp's bulldozers. They are not just contractors carrying out war crimes.... They are also uprooting Palestinian orchards. Not because of terrorism, not because of terrorist attacks, but in order to satisfy the greed of the Israelis..." he writes. "To whom does the following script belong? To the devotees of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion? To a group of neo-Nazis in Germany? To the Islamic Jihad's propaganda department? Or perhaps to Israeli cultural institutions?"

In this interview Sivan breaks his silence, confronting the accusations for the first time and speaking about intentional bending of the facts. He views this as a test, an example of the use of violent means in an effort to influence the public committee's decisions.

"The series of reports are character assassination, an indictment and a verdict without trial. We have here betrayal, assisting a terrorist organization. This is intentional bending of the facts. People are not allowed to judge and decide for themselves, they have contempt for them and they are directing their thoughts."

You've remained silent for a week. Why have you chosen to respond?

"For exactly the same reason I make films. I don't create for the readers of Ha'aretz, I believe in the screen and the public and in each person's ability to look, think, and form his own opinion without guidance from above. This is out of control. We've come to a point where you can sell the readers anything. Someone wants the people not to think for themselves, not to question what they read in the paper but just to pass on those rumors. It's populism."

Is it personal persecution? Has someone decided to settle accounts with you?

"No, I think there are people who have a hard time with the fact that it's impossible to put me into the usual boxes. I don't go around with a terrorist, I'm not eccentric, I have not had contacts with a foreign agent."

Let's say that the board of directors of the Rabinovitch Foundation decides to overturn the decision by the professional committee. Could you continue to work on the film?

"And let's say that I decide not to make this film and instead to make a film about the trauma of schoolchildren in Sderot, do you think the Ministry of Education would approve me filming in the school? Or let's say that I ask the IDF spokesman today for approval to film, do you think there's a chance he'd cooperate with me?"

So the campaign has succeeded?

“Yes. Once a person is called an anti-Semite, a Hamasnik, anti-Israeli, it takes root. Sexual assault can become a crime that is not a disgrace. What was written about me in recent days is not a crime, but it is a disgrace. If the measure of being pro-Israel is how many sexual assaults I've committed or how much money I've stolen from public committees and whether I've exploited innocent taxpayers, I understand why I'm called anti-Israeli. I've been convicted in a public kangaroo court without the right of defense, without proof, on the basis of rumors. Without the State Comptroller, without reports, without the law. I've been thrown to the dogs, because in a situation where people go around with exposed nerves and existential fear, I've become a target. It isn't just that I mustn't be given money from a foundation; it isn't clear why I'm being allowed to breathe.”

“Perhaps I'm the boy who says that the emperor has no clothes”

This isn't the first time the 43-year old Sivan has been at the center of controversy as in 1987 his film, “Aqabat Jaber, Passing Through”, which dealt with the issue of Palestinian refugees, created an uproar.

A strong believer in the right to express his opinions even if they are not popular, Sivan was born in Haifa and grew up in Jerusalem. He was active in a group of students opposing religious coercion. As a young man he demonstrated with members of “Matzpen” in favor of dialogue with the PLO.

In 1985 he went to Paris for a vacation and stayed there for nearly 20 years. In Paris he made his films, most of which are connected to the Middle East and disputed land. The French Jewish community considers him an outcast. French Jewish intellectual Alain Finkelkraut has called him “an anti-Semitic Jew,” and a French court will hear the libel suit on May 2.

For the past three years he has divided his time between Paris and Sderot, where he lectures in the Film Department, but his opponents, he claims, prefer to present him as a foreigner. “It's true that I lived in France, but I make films that take responsibility for what is happening here. I have only an Israeli passport, even though I could have received French citizenship four times. I am Israeli, and this is what gets everyone so angry.”

Six years ago you found a bullet in your mailbox in Paris. Do you still get worked up by the attacks?

“What surprises me is the permissiveness, the fact that this is accepted as a norm, and that people do not oppose this. That there is no one who will ask what is happening here, or how such an attack could be carried out, and how they crudely intervene in a purely professional decision. And what does it mean that members of the profession no longer have anything to say? Is everything politics and force? Is everything determined by journalists and politicians? Where are the workers? The directors? The simple people who live here? Forget Eyal Sivan, I'm talking about a dangerous process.”

Why do you annoy so many people? What is there in you that elicits such extreme responses?

"Perhaps I am the child who calls out: 'The emperor has no clothes!' Perhaps it's because I love the people I film, and I present them as human beings. Perhaps it's because I keep on smiling. It's annoying."

Could it be that you say things people don't want to hear?

"Of course good leftwing films are those that present the checkpoints as something bad, but to make a film about Eichmann that also deals with the Holocaust and with memory and the question of equality? This doesn't fit into any category. They say that the film shows Eichmann as a small cog, this is actually Eichmann's claim, which I oppose, but people don't want to have this discussion, it's more comfortable to present me as an anti-Semite who hates Israel. I have no hatred."

So what are you?

"I am in favor of equality between people, and I don't want to hear about civil equality, that's separation. People in Sderot are entitled to live with the security that people in Ramat Hasharon have. People in Bet Hanun are also allowed to live as securely as people in Ramat Hasharon, and that means that for now, the people who are in a state of equality are the people of Sderot and Bet Hanun. Those who give the order to bomb Bet Hanun and to carry out killings which are followed by missiles falling on Sderot are the people sitting in Ramat Hasharon."

"There is no one person who has the truth"

Sivan's new cinematic project, to be produced by Arik Bernstein and Osnat Trabelsi, is about the Jaffa brand and its connection to Israel. "Jaffa" is the story of an image, a brand that has become a symbol and a synonym for the State of Israel.

"This is a film that will combine tons of photographs and posters and archival films," says Sivan. "Of course the film will present different angles of the story, because this is a story that can be told from a thousand angles, which together will make up the truth. There is no one person who has the truth, and this is precisely the argument—there are those who believe that they have the exclusive truth. I have questions."

Though he has made 15 films, Sivan's request for Israel Film Foundation support for "Jaffa, the Story of a Label," is a first. "Three years after I began to teach in Sderot, a tender was published for a 'past-present' project based on archival material, which is my hobby," he says, listing the films he has made that are based on extensive archival work.

"This script was waiting for an opportunity, and naturally I entered the tender. It's absurd, if I don't approach the Israeli foundations they'll say that I support the boycott against Israel, if I do approach them they'll call me a hater of Israel. You can't win here. No one really talks about art, just as no one dealt with 'Route 181,' which I made with Michel Khleifi, as an attempt to ask the question how it is possible to tell the story

together in order that we can live together in equality.”

When the papers depict you as a supporter of the academic and cultural boycott against Israeli institutions, it looks a bit strange for you to be submitting your project to an Israeli foundation.

“I’ve never joined initiatives calling for a boycott. On the contrary, I am critical of that. To my mind a boycott is absurd. I teach at the Sapir College, I would obviously not call to boycott myself. The fact that Palestinian directors are calling on foreigners to boycott Israel is their affair. I think that they should screen their films here massively and not boycott. I signed a letter of solidarity by people in the Israeli film industry with our counterparts in Lebanon and the territories, while taking responsibility for the fact that our army is perpetrating crimes. This is a legitimate position.”

It is said that you are fond of provocations. What really makes your blood boil?

“Being called an anti-Semite. For me that is a terrible curse, making anti-Semitism banal. Finkelkraut (French-Jewish philosopher) called me a Nazi, and I won’t overlook that because you don’t speak to Nazis, or you fight them and oppose them or kill them. This is part of the world-wide campaign that depicts critics of Israeli policy as anti-Semites. It’s enough to look at talkbacks to see the confusion between anti-Semitism and criticism, between discussion and a desire for equality. Anyone who speaks about equality in Israel is accused of anti-Semitism. It’s a wave that’s become a maelstrom.”