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400 Meters

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Treatment: 400 Meters

By Luke Tress and Brandon Berry

Synopsis

The village of Netiv Haasara is the closest Israeli community to Gaza. The village's greenhouses abut the concrete separation wall, and some homes in the village are only 400 meters from homes in Gaza. It is the summer of 2015, one year since the Gaza War, or Operation Protective Edge, and 10 years since the Israeli withdrawal of all settlements and security personnel from the strip

Since 2001 nearly 20,000 rockets have been fired from Gaza into Southern Israel, mostly since the withdrawal. Last summer, 4,500 rockets were fired. Hamas also fired mortars, launched drones, and attacked through 32 attack tunnels, one of which came up a few hundred meters from the village. Hamas commandos launched an attack on a beach a couple of kilometers from the community. A 2008 study found that 75-94% of children in the area exhibit symptoms of PTSD.

There were also major operations in 2006, 2009 and 2012.

Residents of the village, which has about 1,000 families, remember their connection with their neighbors across the border. Gazans worked on Israeli farms and Israelis sold their produce, shopped and went to beaches in Gaza. Some residents still speak to friends on the other side. The village, like most in the area, is politically left-leaning and most residents still firmly believe in the possibility of peace, unlike most urban Israelis in the south. Residents of the villages voted overwhelmingly for the left in the last election, despite the recent war, while over 80% of residents of nearby cities voted for the right.

We find out that is actually because of their closeness to Gaza that they strongly support peace efforts. The older characters all had close relationships with Gazans before the borders were closed.

Their strong sense of community and hope for a stable peace agreement inspire them to remain in the area. The residents of the village attribute the problems to the rise of Hamas in the early 2000s and their takeover of Gaza in 2006, shortly after the failed Israeli withdrawal in 2005. They blame leadership on both sides for not resolving the issue.

Treatment

We will follow five characters tracing the area's descent from idyllic agricultural villages to a sporadic war zone, their different ways of coping and raising their families in the area. The first act will introduce the place and the situation, the second will describe their experiences with violence in the area, and the third act will show how each character deals with the threats in their own way.

The film will start with Micha Smilovitz, a TV cameraman who has lived his entire life in Netiv Haasara. He gives us a tour of the village, taking a call from the village's chief of security, who reluctantly gives him permission to drive in an exposed border area. We are allowed to drive, but not to stop anywhere due to intelligence on snipers on the area, he explains.

Micha takes us to his father's house, also in the village. He shows us a rusted Qassam rocket which landed in his father's greenhouse, explaining that it is a "first generation Qassam," and that the green paint on the rocket's fins shows that it was launched by Hamas.

Next, Roni Keidar shows us photos from the previous village, also called Netiv Haasara, which was established in the Sinai in 1973 and evacuated as part of the

Camp David Accords. Archival footage will show the 1967 war where Israel took the Sinai, the establishment of the village and the withdrawal to Gaza. They ironically went to the Gaza border because it was a peaceful area at the time. The withdrawal is significant because Egypt was Israel's greatest enemy and the Camp David Accords led to peace. Roni and Tzameret Zamir both think the same could happen with the Palestinians.

Next Micha Bitton, a singer and guitarist, show us his studio, introduces himself and talks about the time before the withdrawal. Arabs built his home and worked with his family, he says.

Archival footage will show the painful Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the violent takeover by Hamas afterwards.

The second act will begin with Micha Smilovitz parking next to the concrete separation wall, in violation of the rules, to quickly point out to us visible Hamas positions inside Gaza, then pointing us to the anti-sniper walls and village homes behind us.

Next we will see local artist Tzameret Zamir showing a collection of rockets on her porch which she has found in the area. There will be a short montage of people living and working in the area.

Tamir Manobella introduces himself and takes us to the area's high school. He tells us a story about being the "school terrorists" in more innocent times, then shows us a plaque with the names of former students who were killed in the army or terrorist attacks, including friends of his.

Micha Smilovitz takes us to the village's greenhouses overlooking the Erez border crossing into Gaza. He points out a roof where he was targeted by rocket attacks. Archival footage shows the attack taking place

All of the characters talk about the war last year and their expectation of worse conflicts in the near future. They talk about the war being the most severe yet and the tunnels, which were not known to be a significant problem before.

The third act begins with Tzameret bringing us to the separation wall. She speaks to soldiers on guard duty there. She describes the area and tells us about a rocket attack that hit the village while she was bringing her kids to school and a neighbor who was killed by a mortar. She tells us about the attack on the beach near the village where she used to spend her summers growing up. She shows us some of her artwork on the wall, which she has decorated with murals. She brings groups of Israelis and foreigners to the wall to contribute to the project. The wall has a huge dove painted on it and the word "peace" written in Hebrew, English and Arabic. The wall faces outwards, and she wants the peace mural to be visible to residents of Gaza.

Tamir brings us to a monument in a nature reserve overlooking the border. Beneath us are soldiers and about half a kilometer away are Palestinians burning garbage. Tamir tells us that they are not his neighbors, although they once were when they worked with his father. He says making connections are no longer possible due to fear.

Micha Smilovitz tells us that the problems are the result of poor leadership on both sides. He says his close friend, who lives across the border, would say the same thing. He does not say the problem will be solved.

Micha Biton plays a song about his hope that peace and quiet will come, explaining that he once believed that this would happen. He talks about how they know through experience that peace is possible because they used to have good relationships with Gaza residents they worked with. He talks about a concert he did recently called the "No Borders Concert" with Palestinians meant to increase coexistence.

Micha Smilovitz is overlooking the Erez border crossing. He says during the war there were missiles flying everywhere, but now it is peaceful and beautiful. "Hopefully it will stay," he says, although he does not sound convinced.

The film ends with a montage of the area and the characters with Micha Biton's song, "That it will come," about hoping for quiet in the area despite their exhaustion.

Structure and style

The film is meant to portray people's experience living in a volatile area, and provide a window into a larger conflict. The characters describe their own experiences and their impression of the community and the conflict. It is mostly driven by dialogue from the characters as they show us the area and their own work and projects, with some footage of sit-down interviews, similar to Werner Herzog's films, such as "Into the Abyss." It is a very beautiful environment, but also periodically a war zone. The village is very green, with flowers, trees, and playgrounds everywhere, and surrounded by farmland. It is surrounded by several high concrete walls though, and protected by the military. There are bomb shelters everywhere and safety rooms in every house. We also plan to use archival footage from last summer's war, including videos of tunnel, rocket and commando attacks that took place in the area. The soundtrack will be three songs by Micha Biton performed on an acoustic guitar, with translated lyrics which help illustrate the story. Title cards and graphics will provide some brief background and statistics.

Audience

The film's targeted audiences are Israelis and American Jews. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict gets a lot of media attention but the conditions in the villages in the south and the Israeli left in general are underrepresented. They are the civilians on the front line of the conflict on the Israeli side, and their attitudes towards the situation are surprising and important, especially considering the violence in the country in recent weeks.

The film also deals with the more universal theme of coexistence, and whether this is possible after so much violence. The personal connection the characters have with Palestinians is being lost as the new generations are more separated. Not one of the characters says there will be peace. The most they say is it is possible. We are not trying to make a statement. The borders cannot be opened while Hamas is in control and the characters all strongly support the military. We just want to show the situation as it is on the front line of the conflict.