

'It was clear to me that this attempt to create a utopian reality carries its own destruction'

An 'Inferno' erupts at the Berlin Film Festival

An Israeli artist's short film 'relocates' the Jerusalem Temple in Brazil, where Evangelical Christians are building a massive working replica due to open this year

BY IGAL AVIDAN | February 18, 2014, 9:34 pm |

BERLIN — After 3,000 the Jews are back in the Holy Temple. Pilgrims dance in a circle on a large stage, rhythmically waving their hands up and down. All are wearing festive clothes – the women in white dresses adorned with flowers, the men in white shirts and khaki shorts. A shofar blasts in the distance, sounding *teki'a* and *shevarim*.

This Temple is, however, not in Jerusalem but in the 22-minute-film "Inferno" by Israeli artist Yael Bartana, which was screened February 7-16 in the [Forum Expanded](#) section of the Berlin International Film Festival. The film — controversial and highly aesthetic, with powerful Jewish symbols — was so highly acclaimed by the organizers that it was screened daily at a central cinema.

The impetus for "Inferno" came from an exchange program of Israeli and Brazilian artists focusing on new religious movements in Brazil.

"Eyal Danon, the Israeli curator of this project, told me that the Neo-Pentecostal Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus) is currently building a monumental temple in Brazil modeled after the biblical original," says Bartana.

The 43-year-old artist, known for questioning the collective Jewish identity of Israel, decided to recreate this Temple in her film.

Once in Brazil, Bartana was fascinated (and somewhat amused) to discover Jewish symbols everywhere in the Christian country with a Catholic majority.

"In Rio de Janeiro we toured a large model of Jerusalem from the first century. The guides' narrative included a lot of nonsense. No wonder: most of them had never been to Jerusalem," says Bartana.

In Rio she visited a replica of the Western Wall where Brazilians sell "Jewish" souvenirs. She captures this in "Inferno" where one can see young people selling T-shirts, plates and candles

with graphic symbols of the menorah or the Temple.

“They even sell juice from so-called ‘menorah coconuts,’” she says.

Capturing her actors in these real locations creates very powerful images. In one scene a group of men is seen waving their *tallitot* (prayer shawls) and praying together. Suddenly, a young man in prayer drops his tallit and stands naked before the Western Wall, with two tattooed wings adorning his shoulder blades. In the background a camera-happy tourist and uniformed security guards complement this Brazilian replica of the Western Wall. Much larger than the real one, the “fake” wall is surrounded by modern apartment buildings.

Bartana often integrates jarring geographical displacements into her work. In a 2010 video she filmed actors outfitted as 1930s Zionist pioneers erecting a “Tower and Stockade” (*Homa Umigdal*, the basic necessities for declaring a new settlement under the British Mandate) in the former Warsaw Ghetto. These “Zionists,” she wrote in a manifest of her fictive “group for the renewal of Polish-Jewish life,” dream of returning “to the land of our forefathers, to Poland.”

Bartana places her Temple in São Paulo, Brazil. Named after the Apostle Paul, the metropolis is home to the largest Jewish community in Brazil, estimated at 50,000. Some of the filmed “pilgrims” who walk through the streets of São Paulo on their way to the Temple are Jewish, says Bartana.

These young people look like a combination of Christian Evangelists, Jewish pioneers and top models. They smile as they tread lightly through the slums, carrying rattan baskets full of fruits and vegetables, dragging with them goats and a cow whose horns are decorated with flowers. A few pilgrims stand on the rooftop of a high-rise building and wave to three helicopters, which carry a large menorah, the Tabernacle and a large stone that was quarried in Jerusalem.

The Temple interior was set in a large hangar, home to a samba school, says Bartana. But the exterior resembles that of the Evangelical Temple due to be inaugurated this year.

With more than 10,000 seats, it’s larger than the Cathedral of São Paulo, and at 55 meters is higher than the Christ statue in Rio de Janeiro. The monumental building will be one the largest churches in Brazil.

It cost over \$100 million and is inspired by Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem. In all, the complex will house 36 small churches and several Evangelical media outlets.

Bartana was taken on a guided tour of the huge construction site together with her producer Naama Piritz. “They even interviewed us for their nationwide TV channel.”

The bishop of the massive church complex, Edir Macedo, is a wealthy businessman billionaire who was raised Catholic, converted to a Pentecostal church and co-founded the Universal Church of the Kingdom.

“Macedo decided to bring the new Jerusalem Temple to his followers and even imported Jerusalem stones worth \$8 million,” says Bartana. “He has embraced my film, which suits his messianic ideas.”

Although Bartana has been wandering the world since 1996, her work focuses on Israel. Now she is living in Berlin with her German partner. The two women are raising their two-year-old son, Emil-Uriel, named after his grandfather. "It's important for me that he speak Hebrew because this is my mother tongue," she adds.

As an artist, Bartana wants to raise questions about the displacement of Jerusalem outside of the Holy Land. Adding interest, her high priest in the film is black and his sexual identity is ambiguous.

But while she maintains that she doesn't want to take a position on Jewish messianic movements such as the Temple Mount Faithful, whose goal is to rebuild the Third Jewish Temple on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, her apocalyptic fantasy clearly does.

"Once I heard about the Brazilian temple, I said spontaneously that one has to destroy it," she says smiling. "It was clear to me that this attempt to create a utopian reality carries its own destruction within itself. A look at history suffices to see where utopian movements lead to."

Her temple indeed comes crushing down in a breathtaking way: a large fire breaks out, windows shatter, the large pillars collapse and the pilgrims run for their lives, trampling others who fall to the ground. But they take with them the menorah.

"Inferno" will be screened at the Jerusalem Film Festival in July, a stone's throw from the Western Wall.