

Tiny Torah travels from hell on earth into outer space

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) Nearly a decade ago, Dan Cohen set out to make a film about the Holocaust and dead astronauts, a story some told him would be too depressing to tell.

Released last year, "An Article of Hope" unflinchingly delves into two tragedies -- one almost too massive to contemplate, the other fresher in our minds.

"It's some very, very dark and depressing subject matter, but really the message of the movie is hope," said Garrett Reisman, a Jewish former astronaut who is helping to promote the film. "Embedded in these two incredibly tragic events, of a completely different scale, there is the story of the constant human desire to achieve goodness."

"An Article of Hope" takes us to the launch site at the Kennedy Space Center on January 16, 2003, with intimate footage of the astronauts' faces as they ride and then walk toward the space shuttle Columbia.

On board the Columbia is a crew of seven -- six Americans and Ilan Ramon, Israel's first astronaut and the son of a survivor of Auschwitz. Also aboard, in Ramon's care, is a Torah, given to him by another Holocaust survivor.

Joachim Joseph, an Israeli physicist, was born in the Netherlands, and deported as a boy to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp with thousands of other Dutch Jews. There, at 13, he was secretly bar mitzvahed with a small Torah -- the scrolls of the Hebrew Bible -- that had been smuggled into the camp.

As Joseph recounts in the documentary, his dying rabbi pressed the Torah into his hands, and asked him to promise to protect it. Use it, he said, to tell the story of what happened here.

Joseph, who died in 2008 before the film was completed, explains in the documentary why Ramon asked permission to take the Torah on his mission: "He thought he would show it to the world as a symbol of how a person can go from the depths of hell to the heights of space."

"An Article of Hope" uses the 60-year journey of the Torah to weave together the stories of Ramon and Joseph, with footage from NASA, animated drawings of Joseph's life in the camp and television news accounts of the day the Columbia was lost.

We learn that Ramon, a decorated fighter pilot, was a hero in Israel well before he became an astronaut. In addition to Joseph's Torah, he brought to space a picture of the Earth, from the perspective of the moon, drawn by a Jewish boy killed at Auschwitz.

We learn that Joseph was a climatologist who worked on an experiment Israelis had prepared for the Columbia, and that he had never, until Ramon asked him about the little Torah in his home, figured out how to fulfill his boyhood promise to the rabbi.

Cohen, a former news producer who lives in the Washington, D.C., area, made the film on a \$300,000 budget, collaborating with established Los Angeles producers Christopher Cowen and Mark Herzog. Cowen convinced actor Tom Hanks, who shares the producers' fascination with space exploration, to sign on as an executive producer.

For more than a year, the documentary has made the rounds of film festivals, both Jewish oriented and not. Synagogues and Jewish community centers have organized special showings, often inviting Cohen and others involved with Holocaust remembrance and the space program to speak on panels afterward.

"You are devastated by the end of the film but there is a hopefulness," said Hilary Helstein, executive director of the Los Angeles Jewish Film Festival, where the film won best documentary. We showed it a year ago, "but people are still talking about it."

Howard Elias, who runs the Hong Kong Jewish Film Festival, said friends were skeptical when he told them he wanted to open it last November with "An Article of Hope."

"They said, 'Nobody wants to see a film about a dead astronaut.'" But, as Elias predicted, the audience voted to award it first prize.

While "An Article of Hope" has resonated among Jewish filmgoers, Cohen wants to show it nationally, on public television.

The Public Broadcasting Service is eager, but requires financial support from the producers. Cohen has to raise \$35,000 more to guarantee it an airdate. He wants to time it to mark the 10th anniversary of the last flight of the space shuttle Columbia, which exploded on Feb. 1, 2003.

As a Jewish director, Cohen was moved to create a documentary that would teach about the Holocaust. But he aimed for a universal story, and decided the best way to achieve one was to focus on the Columbia crew, and how they became a family.

"They are a shining example of the magnificence of diversity and what diversity brings to the world," said Cohen. "And woven around them is the story of the Holocaust and this little Torah scroll, in this horrific moment in our history, in which there was an attempt to stamp out diversity."