

Israeli Actors Face a New Bias in Hollywood; But They Are Determined to Keep Fighting



by Howard Lovy

OPINION



Michael Aloni as Gabriel, Hila Saada as Rosa, and Swell Ariel Or as Luna in a photo from “The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem” production. Photo: Yes Studios.

Just being Israeli in Hollywood means that “your existence is a political act,” Swell Ariel Or told me during a recent conversation about her career as an actress. Swell, best known for her starring role in the Netflix hit *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*, now faces a reality where casting decisions are no longer based primarily on talent or professionalism, but on her identity as an Israeli.

“If, before October 7, getting a role was 30 percent talent, 20 percent how you look, 20 percent how you sound, and 10 percent based on your previous work — like, that was the whole equation

— now I feel like at least half of it is about where you come from and where you stand on the [Middle East] conflict,” she said.

Swell’s experience mirrors what many of us are seeing across creative industries. As an author and editor, I’ve seen the same bias take hold in the literary world. Jewish authors and publishers are being shut out, marginalized, or blacklisted based on their support for Israel or their Jewish identity. Like the author community, Swell’s strategy for overcoming this bias involves creating “more connections with Jews or allies in the industry,” she said.

Or’s new film, *Kissufim*, directed by Keren Nechmad and now streaming on Netflix, is set in 1977 and follows the lives of young Israeli soldiers and volunteers living on a kibbutz near the Gaza Strip. The film, inspired by Nechmad’s personal connection to the kibbutz through her father, captures a moment of youthful idealism as the characters experience love, friendship, and the challenges of coming of age. Against the backdrop of post-Yom Kippur War Israel, *Kissufim* explores the tension between the personal and political, highlighting the characters’ struggles with the trauma of war and the hope for peace.

Tragically, many of the current residents of the real-life Kibbutz *Kissufim*, where much of the movie was shot, were among the victims of the October 7 terrorist attacks. Swell and the film’s cast and crew had worked closely with members of the kibbutz during production, forming bonds with many who later lost their lives. The crew had received security briefings from local residents before filming, some of whom were later killed in the attacks.

Still, Swell believes that *Kissufim* has the potential to educate US audiences about the idealistic foundations of Israel, particularly through the lens of kibbutzim. She expressed concern that many, especially anti-Israel activists, mistakenly view kibbutzim as

“right-wing, illegal settlements, extremists,” when in reality, they are communities of “people of peace” who want to “work the land” and have historically been strong advocates for Israeli-Palestinian cooperation.

The film aims to humanize Israelis by depicting the daily lives of kibbutz residents.

When I first interviewed Swell last year, just after the October 7 attacks, she was starting to use her platform on Instagram to raise awareness about Israel and combat antisemitism. Now, nearly a year later, I asked her how those efforts were going. While she sees some progress, the situation is still tough. “I feel like it’s getting better a little bit,” she said, but quickly added, “It’s not good yet.”

Swell explained that her approach on social media is not about directly confronting or trying to persuade people who hold anti-Israel views. “My goal is not to convince them,” she said. “It’s to make them think about a more complex situation.”

She wants her followers to see the humanity in Israelis and to understand that their experiences are not so different from people around the world.

“What’s the difference between the Nova Festival and Coachella?” she asked, highlighting the similarities between Israeli and American youth cultures to bridge the gap in understanding. She hopes to expand perspectives and dispel myths about Israel, particularly for younger audiences who may have only been exposed to negative portrayals of the country.

Swell also addressed an open letter signed by more than 200 actors and celebrities, including people like Ben Affleck, Jessica Chastain, and Dua Lipa, urging President Biden to call for a

ceasefire in Gaza. She noted that while the hostages were mentioned, there was nothing about the horrors of October 7.

What would she like to say to her fellow actors? “I wish I could talk to them, just like have coffee and talk,” she said.

Swell noted that every time she returns to Israel, she disconnects from the Hollywood world to reconnect with her roots. But now that she’s back in Los Angeles, she’s ready to resume the fight against antisemitism in whatever way she can.

As for upcoming projects, Swell is waiting to see where Kissufim takes her career, and whether it opens new doors. She’s also hopeful for potential future seasons of The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem, though she didn’t have any concrete updates. “Hopefully, I’ll be back home soon with a project or a next season of something,” she said.

Swell remains determined to pursue her acting career despite the challenges Israeli actors face in Hollywood. “I’m still fighting and going to auditions because I feel like it’s a trend and it’ll pass,” she said. “I think that I believe in the goodness of people.”

I’ve interviewed many authors who were blackballed for their Jewish or Zionist identities. Their solution has been to find allies, build new networks, and most of all, keep writing. Swell is doing the same. Like those authors, she won’t let the haters win.

Howard Lovy is an author and editor based in Michigan who is working on a book on how to fight antisemitism. His novel, “Found and Lost: The Jake and Cait Story,” will be released in 2025 from Vine Leaves Press.

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