

'Worlds collide' in a very New York film about an Israeli card game

Julia Gergely March 4, 2024 2:37 pm



([New York Jewish Week](#))— When Barry Bernstein, a fictional theater teacher at a Bronx public school, learns the entire budget for the spring musical has been eliminated, he has to figure out a way to raise \$10,000 — quickly.

But first, Barry pays a routine visit to his elderly grandfather, who tells him, “You know, when your mother and your aunt were kids and I needed money, I just headed down to Rego Park” — referring to the Queens neighborhood where an

Orthodox-run gambling ring runs games of Yaniv, an Israeli card game that Barry's zayde calls the "blackjack of the Jewish people." From there, Barry knows what he must do.

Yaniv, a real-life card game that is said to have been originated by Israeli backpackers during their travels in Southeast Asia, is both the premise and title of a new feature film, "Yaniv," premiering in New York on Tuesday at the Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan ahead of a limited theatrical release in April. The 80-minute film is co-produced and co-written by childhood friends Ben Ducoff — who is, in real life, a film teacher at a Bronx public high school — and Amnon Carmi. Carmi serves as director and Ducoff as the star.

"Yaniv" is the Jewish duo's first feature film, although they have made many short films together. "We've been best friends and creative partners for over 20 years," Ducoff said. "We met at recess in fourth grade."

[Yaniv is a popular pastime in Israel](#), where soldiers often play it in their down time during their service, Carmi, who lived in Tel Aviv for two years, told the New York Jewish Week.

"In my time living there, during in my early 20s, I learned it and quickly fell in love with it — it's really easy to learn how to play and to teach," he said. "So I showed Ben and, before you know it, it spread like wildfire, and it became a huge part of our lives. It just felt like a common sense thing to include it as a

major thematic element in the film.”

However, Ducoff jokes that they can “neither confirm nor deny” that underground Yaniv gambling rings exist in real life.

Aside from being inspired by their favorite card game, the creative pair, both 31, said they have long been interested in the way different Jewish groups interact — especially secular and Orthodox Jews — and wanted to explore that relationship in a film.

“We’re originally from [Cleveland, which is a very pluralistic Jewish community](#), so we grew up with Reform, Conservative and Orthodox communities all mixed together,” Ducoff said. “We were exposed to it growing up and it always fascinated us.

In the film, the teachers Barry and Jonah are secular Jews who have rarely interacted with Orthodox Jews — their apprehension is palpable when they first infiltrate the gambling group. Meanwhile, the Haredi players are equally as suspicious of the two non-observant strangers.

“When the secular and the religious worlds collide, despite the fact we’re all Jewish, there’s still this big wall,” Carmi said. “A lot of the movie is kind of Orthodox Judaism through the eyes of secular Jews.”

“I felt that very much in real life — it’s so crazy that these are

my people, but we could not be so different," he added.

"We're not making fun of the Jewish culture or any denomination of it. It's a respectful view and focuses on the moral core of it all."

In order to make the film, the duo tapped on an unlikely source: [Ducoff's students in his filmmaking class at HERO High School](#), who had paid roles in front of and behind the camera as they filmed during the 2022 summer break. "Our principal was really supportive," Ducoff said. "We were able to partner with the city so that the students that we brought into this filmmaking program would actually get paid for their work."

"It's really validating to see how committed and professional those students can be — they rivaled the commitment of our paid season crew members, they were that good," Carmi said. "It's mostly experiential learning — yes, we taught them how to set up lights and how to figure out spreadsheets for budgeting and organizing shots — but this just comes from their own creativity and hunger to learn and be successful."

In fact, Carmi and Ducoff said they worked across several different communities in order to make the film — Mitchell Fields, their theater teacher from their Cleveland high school, plays the grandfather, while several other actors are former coworkers of Ducoff's from when he worked at [Eyal Shani's fast-casual Miznon restaurant](#) several years ago. The pair

even worked with the Chabad of Rego Park to use the space as a crew headquarters while filming.

“For me, that was the best part, just seeing all these worlds collide,” Ducoff said, adding the Chabad rabbi wouldn’t accept payment in exchange for the space — instead, he only asked that Ducoff and Carmi wrap tefillin with him.

“I think the greatest part for me is that [Carmi] and I have been making movies for so long, since we were 9 years old. This was always the dream, to be able to make a big project like this together,” he said. “That’s just the beautiful part — my instinct as a 9-year-old was correct, that I would be able to make moves with him and that we can make a career doing this.”

“Yaniv” will premiere in New York on Tuesday, March 5 at the Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan (334 Amsterdam Ave.). Carmi and Ducoff will be around beforehand for a Q and A and to teach audience members the game. [Get tickets and info here.](#)