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An Interview with Shimon Dotan, Filmmaker and Director of *The Settlers* (2016)

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Abstract

This is an interview with Shimon Dotan, director of *The Settlers* (2016).

Author Notes

William Blizek is the Founding Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film, and is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is also the editor of the Continuum Companion to Religion and Film (2009).

The Settlers, a documentary film made by Shimon Dotan, had its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival. It examines the history of decades-long Israeli settlements on the West Bank territory. William Blizek, the founding editor and reviewer for the *Journal of Religion and Film* had the opportunity to interview Shimon Dotan about his new documentary film.



Shimon Dotan and William Blizek at the Sundance Film Festival January 2016. Courtesy of Monica Blizek. Park City, UT January 2016.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

William Blizek: It seemed to me that the documentary *The Settlers* was honest and remarkably unbiased. Did you work hard to keep from taking sides?

Shimon Dotan: I don't think we can ever make a movie, even a documentary, that is entirely unbiased. The filmmaker always has to decide where to point the camera. The filmmaker always

has to decide what to include in the film and what to exclude. There are approximately 400,000 settlers on the West Bank, for example, and I interviewed only about 50 of them. The filmmaker always makes choices.

Blizek: I understand the idea that filmmakers cannot be entirely unbiased, but it seems to me that some filmmakers come to their craft with a particular message that they want to send, while other filmmakers try to let the film speak for itself. And, it seems to me that you have let the settlers speak for themselves. In that sense the movie seems unusually unbiased.

Dotan: Thank you. I did work very hard to include voices with which I personally would not be in agreement.

Blizek: If we let the movie speak for itself, or maybe more accurately, we let the settlers speak for themselves, we discover that there are many religious fanatics among the settlers, and religious fanatics will stop at nothing in order to achieve their goals.

Dotan: Yes, this is why they assassinated Yitzhak Rabin. During his first term as Prime Minister, Rabin made it clear that the settlements were illegal and a serious drain on the resources of Israel.

Blizek: He says, in a clip from the movie, that it costs \$250,000.00 to provide protection to each family in the two settlements he had just visited.

Dotan: He made it clear during his first term that he opposed the settlements and that is why after being elected again to the position of Prime Minister the fanatics killed, assassinated him in 1995. They are a cancer on the democratic fabric of Israel.

Blizek: Some of the religious fanatics do not want a two state solution. In fact, they want all of the land from the Nile River to the Euphrates River in Iraq.

Dotan: Yes. They do not worry about borders. Much of the land that they believe belongs to the Jews is in Jordan. But, Jordan is its own country and Jordan will not give them land in the way that Israel has given land on the West Bank to the settlers.

Blizek: Hasn't the State of Israel been complicit in the establishment of the settlements on the West Bank?

Dotan: Yes. In many ways. Even now, Israel could remove the settlements by simply turning off the water and electricity that it now provides the settlers. Most of them would not remain on the West Bank without the water and electricity supplied by Israel.

Blizek: What many of the settlers want is a land that is only for Jews. Isn't that a form of apartheid?

Dotan: Yes, it is. The religious fanatics want not only to live on the land, but to rid the land of everyone else. In the movie one of the settlers tells me of the plot to blow up the mosque on the

Temple Mount. He gives me very specific details. And they would have done it if they had not gotten caught. Around the world we disregard religious fanatics at our own peril.

Blizek: Given what the movie tells us about the settlers, what do you think the future holds?

Dotan: I do not take it upon myself to look into the future. My purpose in making the film is to provoke a discussion about the way things are, a discussion or dialogue that will make the future somehow more positive. I want to encourage a discussion that brings an end to war and an end to the violence of the present.