

WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT

The Golan Heights:

The Golan Heights is a region of land nestled between the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) to its east and the Hermon Mountain to the north. The Jewish connection to the Golan Heights region dates back to the days of the Bible, when Jews first settled in the land of Israel following the Exodus from Egypt.

The region has been volatile since the birth of the nation of Israel in 1948. During the era from 1948-1967, Syria's army frequently shelled Israeli towns and kibbutzim along the border. During the Six-Day War of 1967 the Jewish border towns were shelled so heavily that local leaders successfully lobbied the government to attempt to take over the region. Following Israeli victory in the war, most of the Syrian residents fled the Heights for Syrian-controlled territory, though a few remained in Druze-controlled parts of Israel. Israeli settlements and towns began to sprout in the Heights immediately following the territories conquer.

Israel officially annexed the Golan Heights into the country in 1981 and at that point extended the right to Israeli citizenship to all Druze residents in the territory. Those that refused citizenship gained the status of "Israeli residents."

Today the region contains 33 Jewish communities, in addition to the many Druze ones, though it remains a controversial territory as its annexation was not recognized by the international community. It also remains highly coveted for its strategic position and its extremely fertile land that is watered with rivers that source almost one third of the Kinneret. It is due to this that every major negotiation with the Syrian government has centered around the possibility of exchanging the region for peace.

In Israel there is a diversity of opinions as to the future of the territory, specifically as to whether it should be exchanged for peace and the status of Israelis living there.

Who are the Druze People?

The Druze are a unique religious community that began with a split from Shiite Islam in the 11th century. According to Druze beliefs, the religion is secretive and known only to their sages while the rest of the population lives ignorant of its intimate details. They do not allow any new believers and they harshly shun mixed marriages. Any person who marries a non-Druze or has children with one is excommunicated and his children are not accepted as part of the people. Though their religion stems from Islam, Druze do not identify themselves as Muslims, nor do they believe in the principles of the Islamic faith.

Today, there are over one million Druze throughout the world, with the majority concentrated in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. There are approximately 118,000 Druze in Israel, about 100,000 of whom are citizens while the rest are "residents" in the Golan Heights region. Israel formally recognized the Druze as a unique religious community in 1957—a status they have not gained in any other country. That same year it became mandatory for all Druze to serve in the IDF. The Druze have an extremely high rate of service, with a high percentage of the population rising to high-level ranks such as officers and generals. Due to the fact that the Druze believe that this world is really only a corridor to the afterlife, they do not believe in aspirations for independence, and instead have a policy of loyalty to their current nation of residence.

Relations between the Israeli government and the Druze population of the Golan Heights were favorable following Six-Day War, until Israel officially annexed the territory in 1981. The annexation was followed by strong opposition by the Druze of the region, leading many of them to protest by refusing official Israeli citizenship. Those that accepted citizenship risked excommunication from the community, which explains why a large percentage of the Druze who live in the region today are recognized only as official "residents" of the state with murky

SHOWBILL



The Syrian Bride

In Majdal Shams, the largest Druze village in the Golan Heights (located on the Israeli-Syrian border) Mona, a Druze woman, is engaged to marry Tallel, a television comedian in Damascus, Syria. Though they are set to wed, Mona and Tallel have never met since they live in two enemy states. Mona is in a bind because she knows that if she moves to Syria she will lose her undefined nationality and will never be allowed to return home to her family in Israel.

Several complications impede the happiness of Mona's family. An insane bureaucracy jeopardizes the wedding ceremony. Mona's older brother, Hatten, married a Russian woman eight years ago and was banished from Majdal Shams by both his father and the community's religious leaders. Her sister, Amal, has two teenager daughters and intends enroll in a university, but her husband Amin is opposed to it. This film grants us a rare opportunity to reflect on issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and tradition vs. modern lifestyle from a female perspective.

FeminIsrael is a joint project of WZO-Hagshama and the American Zionist Movement held in conjunction with Women's History Month. Celebrated in March each year, FeminIsrael is a project geared towards highlighting and celebrating Israeli women, their accomplishments, and their contributions to Israeli society and the world.

Even before the establishment of the State of Israel, women have played major roles in Israel's social, political and cultural development. Israel continues to be at the forefront of women's rights, and serves as an example of equality for the global community.





FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Family vs. Ideology: Throughout the films we see many instances in which there is a conflict between maintaining family unity and faith in ideology. Mona is torn between abandoning her family Israel and joining her future husband in Syria. Mona's father struggles over possibly sacrificing his relationship with his son due to his religious ideology and risks missing his daughter's wedding due to his anti-Israel outlook. Many of us have had to face internal conflict in which we were forced to choose between ideologies, beliefs, and family values. Which way do you find yourself leaning, most often? Have you been able to successfully bridge the values? Do you feel that you have similar experiences in regard to your bonds with Israel?

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Prison or Freedom: Early in the film Mona and her sister, Amal discuss their decisions regarding the wedding and their mutual feelings as if they are in "prison." Amal feels imprisoned by her life with her husband who doesn't allow her to develop as a person while Mona is off to Syria, where she will forever be apart from her family and "caged" by the fence that marks the border. On the other hand, while they live in a traditional community, we can see how women are progressively more "liberated" with each passing generation. Can these two paradoxes coexist? Can a woman living in a conservative society in today's modern world balance between the two cultures?

Women, Minorities, Israel: This unique film allows us a glimpse into the life of a woman that lives as part of a minority within Israel. In light of the stories and individual experiences of the characters in the film, do you think Israel is a place where a woman—particularly one from a minority—can live with dignity and equality? What are the strongest attributes that Israel should maintain and the most glaring weaknesses that should be improved in order to elevate the status of women?

TRIVIA

- During the film we encounter two Red Cross volunteers. From what countries do these two women hail?
- Over the course of events in the film, the characters witness a change of guard in the Syrian leadership. What is the new President's name?
- Most of "The Syrian Bride" is set in Majdal Shams, however a few of the scenes take place in a nearby city. What is the name of that northern city?
- Mona's older brother, Hatam, married outside of the Druze community and therefore had to leave the village. Where is Hatam's wife from and what is her profession?
- Amal, Mona's older sister was accepted to an Israeli university. Where does she plan to study?

FOR FURTHER REVIEW

Nimrod's Fortress: As Mona's brother, Hatam, and his family ascend the Golan Heights; we catch a sweeping view of ancient ruins known as Nimrod's Fortress. This medieval fortress was built, conquered, and fortified over centuries by Muslims, Crusaders, Mongols, and Turks. The fortress, which sits 800 meter above sea level on a narrow ridge, nestled between the Golan Heights and Mount Hermon, is currently a National Park. Beneath the fortress flows the Baniyas, one of the tributaries of the Jordan River. Next time you're in Northern Israel, climb up and visit!

Golan Apples: When Yosef, the clerk at the Ministry of Interior, is sent to do his duty at the Golan Border Crossing, his colleague asks him to bring back "Golan Apples." One of the agricultural staples of the region, apples grow well in the Golan's fertile volcanic soil. A popular snack in Israel (and a motif throughout the film), Apples are an important economic contributor to Druze farmers, who are granted special permission to export them to their families in Syria