

The Jewish Channel comes to Boston

Mass. has a new source for Jewish arts



The Jewish Channel welcomes staff members from The Forward for its The Forward Forum segment.

By Lorne Bell
Advocate Staff

From the annual Boston Jewish Film Festival to Brookline's kosher restaurants and the 106-year-old *Jewish Advocate*, Greater Boston is packed with Jewish culture. And in July, residents of the Commonwealth were introduced to yet another source of Jewish arts and entertainment: The Jewish Channel.

"Boston is a strong and highly educated community when it comes to consumption of Jewish culture, and one that we think will be particularly receptive to our kind of content," said Aaron Hornung, spokesperson for The Jewish Channel. "It's a real match for us."

The Jewish Channel launched in the New York metropolitan area in late 2007 and has since expanded to New Jersey and Connecticut, amassing more than 20,000 viewers. It is now available to Massachusetts Verizon FIOS subscribers as an "on-demand" channel, meaning customers can access all of The Jewish Channel's programming at any time for a monthly \$5.99 fee.

The channel is backed by a team of television executives that have worked for some of the industry's most successful networks and media companies, including Showtime, The Food Network, Rainbow and Time Warner. But addressing the viewing needs and desires of the Jewish community – especially a community as diverse as Massachusetts' – is no easy task, according to Hornung.

"The Jewish community has so many different interests, it would be strange to try to serve them all with one program," he said. "Instead, we have a multitude of programs that cover the spectrum of

politics, ideology, denominational affiliations, education and cultural proclivities, and viewers can choose what they want to watch and when they want to watch it."

The network's offerings include an extensive library of independent Jewish- and Israeli-themed movies, including "Amen," a 2002 film by Oscar-winning director Costa-Gavras. The movie examines the life of the Nazi SS chemist who created Zyklon B and his efforts to stop its use in the gas chambers of the Holocaust. Other film genres are also represented, like the 2005 documentary "Awake Zion," which explores the similarities between Judaism and Rastafarianism.

And although feature and documentary films make up 85 percent of The Jewish Channel's offerings, original series and programs are also available. Viewers can tune in to see in-depth discussions with editors and journalists from The Forward, New York's leading Jewish newspaper. The ongoing series, "Rabbis Roundtable," brings together rabbinical leaders from every denomination to discuss issues and current events affecting the Jewish community at home and abroad. And subscribers can access a wide range of news, lifestyle, holiday and children's programming.

Verizon FIOS spokeswoman Heather Wilner said the company's customers demand new and innovative viewing options, and The Jewish Channel fills that need.

"We are always looking at channels like [The Jewish Channel]," said Wilner. "We have other types of multicultural content in our lineup and are in the process of adding more. It's definitely something we focus on."

The Jewish Channel is not the

first Jewish-themed network to hit the air. Shalom TV, the brainchild of Rabbi Mark Golub, launched in select markets in 2006 as a paid on-demand channel. The channel offers movies and original programming, including Talmud study, Hebrew instruction and interviews with authors, scholars and public figures from the American and Israeli Jewish communities.

But in February 2008, Golub decided to forgo charging viewers for Shalom TV, and the channel is now broadcast nationally through Comcast. The decision, he said, is a reflection of a challenging market.

"I don't believe any Jewish channel will make it as a pay channel – there aren't enough eyeballs to give it enough of a subscriber base," said Golub. "But The Jewish channel may have a different formula. [In-house] production is the most expensive aspect, so they may be able to succeed on whatever number of subscribers they can get."

According to Hornung, The Jewish Channel has been "wildly successful," and is rapidly gaining subscribers. And the response to the network's films and original programming, he said, has encouraged its cable carriers to expand into new markets.

"The Jewish community has consistently made the choice to pay for quality Jewish media, whether through Jewish newspapers, books, movies or cultural events, and that is consistent with the choices people are making [in subscribing to] The Jewish Channel," he said. "We have a lot of interest and we've done well reaching a critical mass that will keep us going forward."



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