

New film spotlights Israel's hoops 'miracle'

NJ native Tal Brody claimed iconic victory over USSR put his adopted country 'on the map'

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In 1965, Trenton native Tal Brody made a momentous decision. Having just led the U.S. basketball team to a gold medal in the Maccabiah Games — the quadrennial sporting event that brings thousands of Jews from around the globe to Israel — the 21-year-old point guard from the University of Illinois passed on a career in the NBA to make aliya.

A dozen years later, Brody — the 12th pick in the NBA draft for that season — led Maccabi Tel Aviv to an improbable victory over the Soviet Union's Red Army Team to win the European Basketball Championships in Brussels. It was a David vs. Goliath story that became known as the "Miracle on Hardwood" (three years before Team USA beat the Russians in ice hockey for the "Miracle on Ice").

In the post-game euphoria, Brody joyfully shouted in halting Hebrew that Israel was now "on the map! And we are staying on the map — not only in sports, but in everything!"

To mark the 40th anniversary of that iconic game, writer/director/producer Dani Menkin has teamed up with executive producer Nancy Spielberg to echo Brody's declaration in the feature documentary *On the Map*.

The three of them appeared at a March 9 fund-raiser at the Crystal Plaza in Livingston.

Menkin's enthusiasm for the project went beyond the usual build-up; it was evident that the project is quite personal for him.

The game "is one of my first childhood memories," the 45-year-old Israeli told *NJ Jewish News*. "I remember my dad picking me up and taking me on his shoulders to the Kings of Israel Square [now Rabin Square in Tel Aviv]. It was like Independence Day. That's what brought me to this film."

He compared the victory with the moon landing in 1969. "For people to hear Tal Brody say 'We're on the map' was just as significant as Armstrong's 'One small step....'"

Spielberg admitted to the *Jewish News* that she was not a big basketball fan nor did she know about Brody's contribution to Israeli culture. But after Menkin pitched the idea, she knew she wanted to get involved.

"I love the way [Menkin] handles his topics," she said, referring to his award-winning *Dolphin Boy* and *39 Pounds of Love*. "He had this nuanced 'feel good about Israel without being in your face' vibe, and when he started to talk about it, I said, 'This is incredible. I want to be a part of it.'"

An intimate group of about 75 people enjoyed a spread of Israeli delicacies prior to remarks by the film's creators as well as Brody himself and Ido Aharoni, consul general of Israel in New York.

Menkin and Spielberg — a producer of *Above and Beyond*, a 2014



Dani Menkin and Nancy Spielberg flank former NBA commissioner David Stern in a promo shot for their documentary *On the Map*. Photo courtesy Nancy Spielberg

documentary about American pilots who flew for Israel in 1948 — shared their vision with the audience, showing clips from *On the Map* as a teaser for what they can expect from the finished product. Similar events are planned for Chicago and Illinois, among other locales.

Aharoni praised the film for telling the inspiring story "of ordinary people achieving extraordinary things."

"I can't remember a story in my lifetime that encapsulates that tough Israeli spirit...like the story of Maccabi Tel Aviv of 1977," Aharoni said. Like Menkin, he also had fond memories of the aftermath. "I was there dancing with 400,000 other Israelis... when Tal and his friends showed up with the European Cup."

Brody — who was inducted into the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame, U.S. National Jewish Sports Hall of Fame, and Israeli Basketball Hall of Fame — explained why he was so taken with Israel and what it meant to be considered the leader of the 1977 team. He shared anecdotes about the tremendous steps the tiny nation had made over the years on the international basketball scene, recalling times when there were no indoor courts, when games were played in sandstorms or had to be postponed because of rain.

Brody, who is now a quasi-official goodwill ambassador for the sport, represented Maccabi Tel Aviv when it became the first non-U.S. basketball team to be honored at the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2008 for an exhibit titled "Putting Israel on the Map."

The majority of the documentary is in the can. Funds raised going for-



Tal Brody, right, with Menkin at a fund-raiser for *On the Map*. Photo by Ron Kaplan

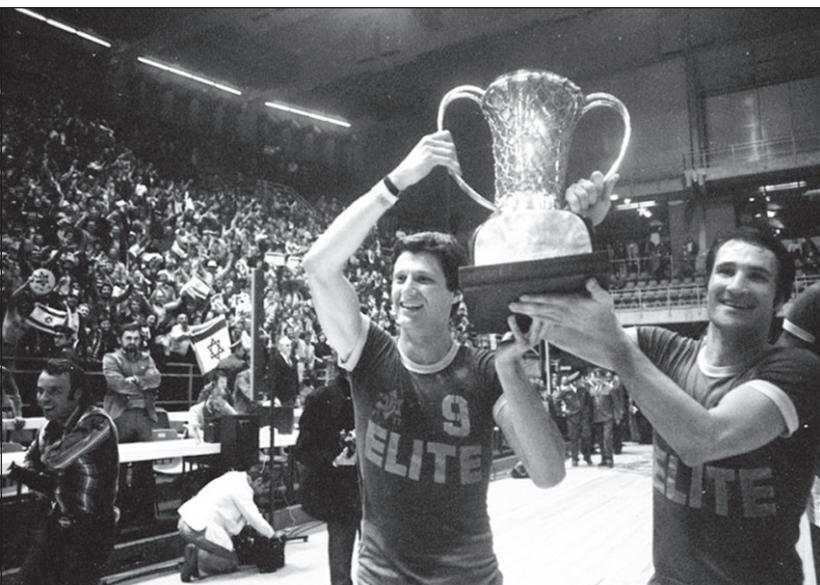
ward will be applied toward post-production work, distribution, and fees for entering film festivals. All parties involved are convinced they have a winner on their hands.

"People really look up to [Brody]," Spielberg told *NJN*. "We all take proud ownership when it's one of us who gets to a certain level...and we all feel very proud as if we were family. So I think New Jersey people feel a familial pride, even without knowing it."

"He's one of ours. He's a Jersey boy," said Spielberg, who was born in Camden, just a (very) long basketball pass away from Brody's birthplace. ■

For more information or to contribute, visit jewcer.com/project/on-the-map.

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Tal Brody, right, celebrates with the European Basketball Championship trophy following Maccabi Tel Aviv's win over the Red Army. Photo courtesy jewcer.com/project/on-the-map