

Participation and Representation of People with Disabilities in Film – A Necessary Component of Social Change

In 2021 the Movie CODA won 3 academy awards, one for best picture. The main characters are a young hearing woman and her two deaf parents. The movie is a great example of the right way to portray people with disabilities in film as well as correct casting with the two parents, and other characters, played by deaf actors. It is a great example for depicting participation and creating inclusion, unfortunately CODA is still an outlier.

Movies do not only portray reality, they impact and change it. Movies that show the public sphere as it is and as we aspire it to be are an important component in the way the public learns to accept others as part of society. This is true for ethnic minorities, people of color as well as people with disabilities.

Representation of people with disabilities in movies is at an especially dire state. In a recent study done by the University of Southern California on the 100 most successful movies of 2019, only 2.3% of characters were with disabilities in comparison to 20% of the general population. In 48 movies there was no representation at all. Unfortunately, these statistics have not seen any significant change in the past 5 years.

On the Israeli film industry, we have no hard data. For many years we have seen the portrayal of people with disabilities in mainstream Israeli films as in the movie "I Don't Give a Damn" (1987/Shmuel Imberman) about how a young soldier deals with his injury and how society relates to him. In a more recent example "Laces" (2018/Yankale Goldwasser) depicts a father raising his adult son who has a cognitive disability. Having said that, equal and fair representation and participation of people with disabilities in Israeli movies does not exist.

This week the Israeli Film Festival is opening in the UK. Beit Issie Shapiro has decided to support the festival in order to highlight this crucial component of social change towards a society where people with disabilities are equal and fully engaged. People with disabilities are part of society and any one of us can find himself part of this minority in an instant. People with disabilities are the largest minority and they cross all sectors of society. They are rich and poor, urban and non-urban, young and old, gay and straight, Muslim and Jew. As an organization advocating for social change, we would like to see the Israeli film industry take an active role in the process. An industry that shows society as fully participatory, exactly as we would like to see it.

Our goal is not only that people with disabilities will be portrayed as their proportion in society. The way they are portrayed is equally, if not more important. We would like to see a wide variety of people with disabilities who are strong, leaders, raising families, sexual, managing difficulties – like all of us, since they are part of us.

Beside representation, inclusion of people with disabilities in the industry is just as crucial. We expect to see more actors with disabilities, directors, writers, critics, backstage operators. Israeli society is already expecting this. In a recent survey done by IPanel and funded by the Ruderman foundation 70% of those surveyed said they see representation of people with disabilities as important. 91% stated that they would be less likely to go to a movie that misrepresents people with disabilities. It is time that the film industry becomes a leader and not a follower – and there is no time like the present to start.

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