

A gunslinging rabbi takes on an antisemitic whodunit in this thrilling Jewish Western

Screening March 16 at the Boca International Jewish Film Festival, 'Guns & Moses' targets all-too-real themes for US Jews while keeping audiences on the edge of their seats

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Rabbi Moses 'Mo' Zaltzman, played by actor Mark Feuerstein, in 'Guns & Moses.' (Courtesy)

In the High Desert region of California, an improbable modern-day gunslinger is learning to shoot — and not doing very well at it. He unloads at an image of a gunman and a hostage, leaving bullet holes in the hostage.

The twist: The gunman is a rabbi, named Moses “Mo” Zaltzman. He and his wife Hindy are raising their kids in a Southwestern small town, where he runs the High Desert Jewish Center. Clad in a black hat and coat, the normally mild-mannered rabbi has reluctantly taken up firearms lessons to protect himself, his family and his congregation in the wake of a deadly — and allegedly antisemitic — attack at a gala.

Get ready for a very different kind of Western with a very catchy title, “Guns & Moses,” from two veteran LA-based filmmakers, the husband-and-wife team of Salvador and Nina Litvak. Shot in late 2022, it boasts an appearance by the legendary Christopher Lloyd as a Holocaust survivor.

Currently on the festival circuit, the film has taken on added significance in the post-October 7 world in which Jewish businesses, institutions, and places of worship have been targeted around the globe.

“This idea that Jews are in danger, Jews are under attack and need to fight back is something that we knew would always be relevant,” Salvador Litvak told The Times of Israel over Zoom. “[We] could not have imagined the world

that the movie would be coming out in ... Sadly, it just makes the movie so much more relevant.”

Litvak is a member of an organization called Magen Am, or “Shield of the Nation,” which teaches people to become volunteer security guards at synagogues.

“If we mean it when we say ‘never again,’ we can’t just rely on other people to protect us,” said Salvador Litvak, a Chilean-American whose grandmother and mother survived the Holocaust. “We have to step up and protect ourselves. I didn’t own a gun before I joined Magen Am. It’s just not something I was familiar with or knew about.”



A still from 'Guns & Moses.' (Courtesy)

After screening at the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival in February, “Guns & Moses” will screen in person at the Boca International Jewish Film Festival on March 16 and will stream from the festival’s website from March 16-31.

Litvak said that “a lot of people... respond very positively to its message of standing up for what’s right, of not being a soft target, of standing alongside the Jewish people when they’re being attacked... of having responsible and realistic and authentic use of firearms in a thriller.”

“At the end of the day,” he added, “we can have all the messages, and all the important messaging, that we want. The movie has to work as a piece of entertainment before any of the messaging can get through. And we worked really hard to make it a taut, exciting and surprising action thriller.”

A serious satire

The Orthodox Jewish filmmakers have a diverse portfolio. Their previous films include “When Do We Eat?”, a comedic culinary exploration of the seder table, and “Saving Lincoln,” a historical drama about Abraham Lincoln’s devoted friend, Ward Hill Lamon. The Litvaks also run the Accidental Talmudist nonprofit that provides daily Jewish wisdom online, and last year, Salvador Litvak’s book “Let My People Laugh” was released. It’s a comprehensive book of Jewish humor, with one joke appearing early in “Guns & Moses.”

Mayor Donovan Kirk, played by Neal McDonough, left, speaks to Alan Rosner, played by Dermot Mulroney, right, while Rabbi Mo Zaltzman, played by Mark Feuerstein, center, looks on, in 'Guns & Moses.' (Courtesy)

Joking aside, security is on a lot of people's minds these days. It was a preoccupation before October 7 as well. The filmmakers conceived of a Jewish-themed project addressing security following a real-life tragedy: In 2019, a gunman [entered a Chabad house](#) in Poway, California, on the eighth day of Passover, fatally shooting a woman and injuring three others, including Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein and an 8-year-old girl. The gunman pleaded guilty to murder, attempted murder, and hate crimes charges — and to arson in a previous incident involving a mosque.

Husband-wife filmmaking duo Nina and Salvador Litvak co-directed 'Guns & Moses.' (Courtesy)

The film opens along similar lines. (Although it's never stated, Litvak said that Mo is for all intents and purposes a Chabad rabbi.) A shooting punctures what had been a spirited gala, held to celebrate plans for a new synagogue — and to honor the solar-energy entrepreneur who made it possible. The gunman has gotten away, and the few clues suggest antisemitism as a motive and a self-styled “white warrior” as a suspect. Clay Gibbons, a local gun-owning youth whose car is emblazoned with the numbers “88” — a neo-Nazi code for “Heil Hitler” — is arrested and incarcerated. It sounds like an open-and-shut hate crime. Mayor Donovan Kirk gives a rousing speech in defense of the Jewish people.

Ah, but the Litvaks dig deeper. Their goal was to create a thriller, having watched a thriller a day (excluding Shabbat) as inspiration over three years. Before long, the viewer is pulled into the whodunit. Clay is more complex than he seems. As the rabbi points out, he had previously persuaded Clay to stop blasting music outside the storefront congregation and come inside for brownies — and a searing moment of truth from an Auschwitz survivor congregant played by Lloyd, who is arguably best known as Doc Brown from the “Back to the Future” franchise.

'Guns & Moses' director Salvador Litvak, left, with actor Christopher Lloyd. (Courtesy)

Lloyd, who is not Jewish, “took the role very seriously,” Salvador Litvak said. “He hired his own dialect coach to get that Eastern European Ashkenazi accent and make it work.”

“Chris did such a good job,” Litvak said. “He was amazing to work with. He’s an icon. It was the coolest thing in the world to work with Christopher Lloyd.”

Gradually, the rabbi learns that the victim at the gala — renowned for his work with green energy — was involved in some shady dealings and had multiple enemies. As for the victim’s Israeli wife, she has her own murky backstory.

“One of the things that’s challenging in a murder mystery is that there has to be multiple suspects who could believably have committed the crime,” Litvak said. “Only one of them is guilty. The other ones have to be suspicious enough that we think they might have done it, but ultimately there has to be an innocent explanation.”

Mo takes on the role of amateur sleuth, showing detective instincts worthy of Hercule Poirot or Elsbeth Tascioni. In doing so, he becomes the target of unwanted attention, including in a memorable chase sequence filmed at a real-life thermal solar facility. In Litvak’s words, this cat-and-mouse sequence amid the mirrors at the facility is an homage to the classic Hitchcockian thriller “North by Northwest.”

Normally a soft-spoken man given to self-doubts, Mo lets his bodyguard Brenda, a Latina military veteran, teach him how to shoot. Lesson one starts unpropitiously, but the rabbi gets better. The directors decided to incorporate an actual firearm lesson into the screenplay. Actor Mark Feuerstein, who plays Mo, is shown in real time learning shooting techniques from Brenda. The rabbi wants to protect his wife Hindy and their four kids. Eventually Hindy joins him at the shooting range, and they fire a rifle and a Glock, respectively.

A still from 'Guns & Moses.' (Courtesy)

“That’s all very real,” Litvak said of the film’s portrayal of firearms training. “And I think people in the firearms community very much appreciate that ... America has a lot of arguments with itself about the role of guns in our society and Second Amendment rights, but I think something we can all agree on is that people who have guns should be trained extensively on how to use them safely.”

Guns, green energy, allyship with Jews, Israeli counterterrorism operations, neo-Nazis and white supremacy — there are abundant themes in this film. At its heart, though, it’s a story about a reluctant hero who leads fellow citizens on a quest to defeat the bad guys. In other words, a neo-Western.

The film’s use of a quote from Rabbi Hillel accentuates this quite well: “In a place where there is no man, be the man!”