

And now for something completely different:

HEEBONICS

Filmmaker explores spirituality in India

By **RITA POLIAKOV**
Staff Reporter

Ben Feferman did not find his spirituality at a synagogue or a Shabbat dinner. He found it in India.

Feferman, who started the film production company Fef Films, spent six months in India with a cameraman and a mission – to explore the link between Judaism and eastern spirituality.

“I grew up not religious at all. Actually, I was really against Judaism,” he said.

This changed when he was about 21 years old, around the same time that he started reading about eastern spirituality and Buddhism.

“I decided if I’m going to start exploring other paths, I’d like to explore Judaism,” he said. “I started to go to Israel and to really make the effort to learn where I come from first. From there, I wanted to explore the world.”

As Feferman started researching the idea of Jewish Buddhists, a statistic from the *Los Angeles Times* caught his attention.

“[It] said one-third of all Buddhist converts were Jewish. When I read that statistic, it really blew me away,” he said. “It really made me think... ‘What is it about Jewish people that points them in the direction of the East?’ That’s when I decided I was going to take an indefinite break to go to India.”

Feferman also decided to turn his journey into his first documentary, which he called *The Wandering Jew*.

During his trip, the filmmaker visited meditation centres, monasteries and ashrams, which are places of religious retreat.

“It took some time to get adjusted and get oriented with the whole Indian scene,” he said, adding that he was often exposed to poverty in India. “It really grounded me in terms of the way I lived, the way I spend my money.”

Feferman started spending about \$10 a day, ate simple meals and, every once in awhile, would sleep on front porches.

Feferman arrived in Mumbai two weeks after the city was attacked by several gunmen, who claimed about 101 victims.

“A lot of people told me it’s not safe to go,” he said. But Feferman refused to postpone his trip.

“This event really brought the community together,” he said.

As time went on, Feferman found a way of identifying the Jews in a monastery.

“I would stand at the back of the class. When everyone would bow down to the guru, it was always the Jews who wouldn’t bow down. I started to notice

this trend,” he said. “It didn’t matter how religious they were, they just couldn’t fully bow down. I’d go up to them after, I’d say, ‘I know you’re Jewish.’ They’d be so shocked.”

This was how Feferman began collecting Jewish stories. It was also how he learned that Jewish Buddhists are tied to their religious roots.

“I think it’s something in the Jewish soul, there’s some sort of mechanism that just wouldn’t [bow]. The idea of idol worship is so deeply engraved,” he said.

Feferman found that many of the Jews he was meeting were backpackers, tourists or businessmen.



Ben Feferman, 26, turned his spiritual journey in India into a documentary.

“It was a real mix, but they seemed to get along very well,” he said.

His documentary, which he has submitted to the Toronto Jewish Film Festival, centres on the stories of seven “wandering Jews.” One of the most memorable Jews is a psychiatrist from Baltimore who changed his name to Siddhartha. (Siddhartha Gautama is the Buddha’s name.)

Currently in his late 60s or early 70s, Siddhartha

was the only person who truly worked to distance himself from Judaism, Feferman said.

“Siddhartha was really someone who stripped himself of his past and wanted to start anew,” he said. “He changed his name, stopped contact with his family and really went on a spiritual quest.”

While Feferman was intrigued by Siddhartha’s story, he doesn’t necessarily agree with his point of view.

“I believe that in order to be in touch with your spiritual self, you first have to walk the path that you were born to,” he said.

For Feferman, this path also involves the struggle of intertwining other religions with Judaism.

“It’s sort of been really ingrained that anything outside of Judaism is wrong. You’re a traitor, a heretic. Everyone’s taught that,” he said.

“I felt like I was teetering this line... I want to



be able to explore spirituality outside of Judaism, but at the same time I’m very happy where I am Jewishly.”

While Feferman spent six months filming, he spent about four months editing his footage.

“One of the main problems is that everything’s in my head... It was my own personal journey. I didn’t have a conclusion, I sort of had to be very artistically open-minded,” he said. “It was an incredible experience because I got to relive the trip in the editing room.”

Throughout the process, Feferman was determined not to preach.

“I’m not saying it’s right to go to India, I’m not saying it’s wrong. I’m just saying I felt the urge to do it. These are our stories, you make your own decisions,” he said.

To watch a trailer of the movie, visit www.thewanderingjew.ca.