

A new Israeli film tackles the taboo: Did six million Jews die in the Holocaust?

Filmmaker David Fisher's latest documentary, the controversial 'The Round Number,' explores how the toll was determined and why many are loath to call it into question

By **AMY SPIRO** 17 January 2022



Filmmaker David Fisher (left) speaks to retired Israeli Supreme Court justice Gabriel Bach, who served as the deputy prosecutor in the trial of Adolf Eichmann. (Leigh Heiman)

new documentary film by Israeli filmmaker David Fisher is provoking controversy for its attempts to confirm whether six million Jews were killed during the Holocaust.

The film, titled “The Round Number,” played at the Jerusalem Film Festival last year and aired on Sunday evening on the HOT8 channel in Israel. The film deals with the round number of six million Jews killed in the Holocaust, how it was established and why it has become so untouchable, despite obviously not being an exact figure.

“‘The Round Number’ explores why and how the number six million was written into the canon, and what its meaning can teach us about the Holocaust,” according to a description of the film shared by its distribution company.

Fisher speaks with a wide range of historians and other figures in the film, in an attempt to answer the question.

“Nobody responsible or no self-respecting historian will tell you that six million [Jews] were killed in the Holocaust,” Hanna Yablonka, a professor of Holocaust studies at Ben-Gurion University, tells Fisher in the film.

History professor Omer Bartov, meanwhile, tells Fisher that the exact final figure will never be truly known. “One of the characteristics of genocide is that you’ll never know all of the victims,” said Bartov.

Fisher, 65, the child of two Holocaust survivor parents, has produced more than a dozen films over the years. The origins of “The Round Number” can be linked back to his award-winning 2011 film, “Six Million and One,” which traces the filmmaker’s father’s experiences in the Holocaust and the trauma that remained with him for the rest of his life.

“Both of my parents, who are Holocaust survivors, lived their lives like victims,” Fisher says in the trailer for “The Round Number,” adding: “So from my perspective, the number is not six million, but six million and two.”

Fisher, who acknowledges that even asking such a question is controversial, said he was not seeking a definitive answer or figure.

“I wasn’t trying to do a count myself and I didn’t seek out people who were involved in the counting,” Fisher [told Haaretz](#) in a recent interview. But he noted that he came across a variety of different numbers from historians and other figures over the years, suggesting that the number could be higher or lower than six million. “So I was curious where this number six million came from, and how it became so fixed and so sanctified that people warn you to leave it alone.”



A still from filmmaker David Fisher's 'The Round Number.' (Courtesy)

“The number six million has become an institution, and I wanted to stick a pin in it to try to understand where this number came from,” Fisher added.

Yad Vashem historian Dina Porat, who was interviewed for the film, said it treads on dangerous ground.

“The film will leave the borders of Israel, it already has captions in English, and it is a problem,” Porat told Channel 12 news of her concerns that it will call Holocaust memorial and memory into question. “I’m worried about it.”

Fisher told Channel 12 that the touchy nature of his latest film has made it difficult to sell to film festivals abroad.

“In Germany they told me, We can’t allow ourselves to air such a film to our audience,” the filmmaker said. “We are worried that the film will come across as if we are supporting Holocaust denial.”

When the film was released in Israel last year, it was praised for its nuanced approach to a complicated and highly controversial idea.

“‘The Round Number’ is a thought-provoking film, even provocative in its own humble way,” wrote a film reviewer for Yedioth Ahronoth, “about a pain that will not abide, about historical truth, and about the secularization of holiness.”