

Davis, Chuck. *Raising the Sparks: A Personal Search for a Spiritual Home in Judaism*. Boulder, CO: Throughline Productions and Delphi Productions, 2001. Color. 60 minutes. VHS.

Reviewed by Frances Frommer, Mississauga, ON

This documentary video offers a dramatic glimpse into many aspects of Judaism as it presents one man's quest for his spiritual home. Chuck Davis grew up in a Reformed household but left to practice Buddhism for twenty years. Then, at mid-life, when his first son was born, he began an exploration of his Jewish roots. He was motivated to find a meaningful path so he could offer his children an authentic religious background. His questions range from wondering why it is necessary to learn Hebrew, how to cope with his interfaith marriage (he's married to an ex-Lutheran), what is Torah's meaning in today's world to knowing the nature of Jewish meditation, holidays and his relationship to God and to the secular society.

Chuck Davis is a filmmaker who has produced and directed several award-winning films such as *Kosher Valley* (1998), *Second Chances* (1994) and *Cambodian Doughnut Dreams* (1990). He co-produced, directed and narrated this film. The video presents clips from home movies, exquisite natural scenery as setting for talks with rabbis and powerful shots of religious gatherings and family scenes at a Seder and Shabbat table.

The opening scene of the film is the Bris of Davis's eight-day-old son, Ari. Chuck fiercely questions why he and his wife are inflicting this pain on the baby with this circumcision, even though he knows that the event signifies a Jew's covenant with God. Davis was content with the truth he found in Buddhism and his experience of the oneness. Still, he yearns for a connection to both his Jewish traditions and a place where he feels spiritually at home. Chuck is drawn to the Jewish Renewal Community in Boulder, Colorado. This is a movement within Judaism that asks not "How can we maintain our uniqueness as a people?" but "How can we use 3,500 years of Jewish experience to repair the world and ourselves with holiness?" Chuck Davis feels comfortable with this blend of traditional Hasidic elements and postmodern universalism. See the November/December 2001 issue of *Tikkun*, the online magazine of the Jewish Renewal Movement for a discussion on this film ([w.tikkun.org/magazine/index.cfm](http://w.tikkun.org/magazine/index.cfm)).

He finds a wise teacher in Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (Reb Zalman), considered to be the founder of Jewish Renewal. Together, they meet frequently and walk and talk over the course of a year, through the four seasons. With a twinkle in his eye and gentle voice, Reb Zalman assures Davis that he can find ways to transmit the sparks of his heritage, view each practice as a revelation of the presence of God in that moment and identify with both his "Jewish heart and Buddhist soul." Chuck is

encouraged to believe that God can reach through one to heal and perfect both the soul and the physical world.

One rich aspect of the video is that Chuck meets with rabbis of many orientations. Each one shares their beliefs, interpretations and wisdom. Rabbi Jonathan Omer-man emphasizes that Judaism is a path that works and that the greatest truths can be found in silence. David Zeller (Orthodox) states that Jewish law is intended to prevent one from being cut off and encourages Chuck to go with the flow. Rabbi Daniel Siegel (Jewish Renewal) believes that the function of religion is to give us patterns to articulate meaning and to help us to integrate the totality of life. Rabbi Tirzah Firestone (formerly the spiritual leader of the Jewish Renewal in Boulder) engages in a discourse about Chuck's inter-faith marriage and believes that this is the way of our times as divine consciousness is unfolding; still, we are obliged to carry on our forms with children as ways to connect to humanity. Rabbi Marcia Prager (Jewish Renewal) states that Jewish Renewal is a toolbox with Torah as a main tool. She suggests that one can enter into an intimate relationship with the one power—God. Rabbi Michael Lerner (Jewish Renewal/Orthodox) empathizes with Chuck's doubts and the ultimate paradox that we are God and not-God. Finally, Rabbi Ted Falcon (Reform) sees Torah as a living quest—a book that never ends—with many levels of meaning.

At the end of it all, Chuck Davis responds to the richness, beauty and contradictions of Judaism's calls to him. He still values his secular identity, but his heart and soul are open to asking his sons to learn about their Jewish heritage. In addition, he hopes that this chosen path will be an ally in his wife's spiritual search.

The video would offer inspiration and information for any Jewish person struggling with their religious identity. A non-Jew could receive an introductory look at Judaism. Since the film raises issues related to broader spiritual questions (e.g. What is the function of religion? How can one take beliefs and rituals into daily life? How to be religious in a secular society?), there could be a broad audience for the video. The content is relevant to anyone concerned with contemporary society and leading an ethical, connected and meaningful life.

The quest portrayed in the film is limited to Chuck's search and issues. A few words from his wife would have been appreciated and provided an additional dimension directly relevant to women. What would be the questions for a single female, a widow, a single parent, or a divorced woman? Concerns from the viewpoint of a woman are not addressed at all. Still the viewer is given a very honest and open view of a married father's search that leads to some answers and directions for his future and reveals many aspects of contemporary Judaism that might cross the minds of both sexes on a spiritual quest.