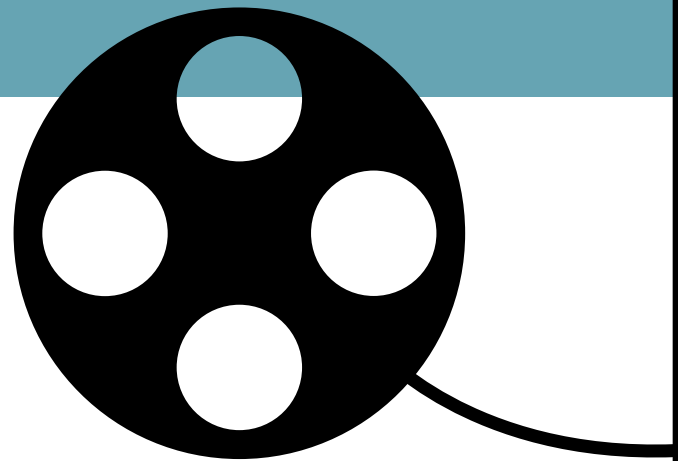


ISRAEL at THE MOVIES

YOUR GUIDE TO EXPLORING 8 ISRAELI FILMS



**Published by the American Zionist Movement
in cooperation with the Jewish National Fund
and the WZO Department for Zionist Activities**

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YOUR GUIDE TO EXPLORING 8 ISRAELI FILMS

WRITTEN BY DEBORAH FISHMAN

PROGRAM DIRECTOR, AMERICAN ZIONIST MOVEMENT

Published by the American Zionist Movement
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I was really moved and touched by how all political borders would just drop down on a cinema set, which made me feel that, at the end of the road, cinema is the tool of communication and the tool of how we can work together, create together, to be able to represent together something that is humanly defensible in front of all the world...

–Hiam Abbass, actress who plays Amal
in “The Syrian Bride.”

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

WHY WATCH ISRAELI MOVIES?

In addition to being fun to watch for entertainment, or as a social activity, movies can be powerful lenses through which to examine society. There is so much that can be learned about history, language and culture just by watching a movie—especially if it is a movie which takes place in a society different from your own. Whether you are looking to teach about Israel, or learn more about it yourself, the movies in this guide may be used for the following purposes:

EXAMINE UNDERLYING THEMES

To provide a foundation for a better understanding of Israeli society, including an ability to identify and explain major recurring themes, preoccupations and challenges facing Israel over the last half-century.

DEVELOP A MORE NUANCED VIEW OF ISRAEL

To move past superficial impressions to gain an understanding of Israel as a real place with real people and real problems.

BRING HISTORY TO LIFE

To learn about history from an Israeli perspective in an engaging way.

EXPAND CULTURAL HORIZONS

To experience and enjoy the cinema of Israel; to be exposed to Israeli culture including societal values, Hebrew language and sense of humor.

THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT FILM

To improve analytical skills and delve deeply into the movies' content and societal implications.

WHY THIS GUIDE?

Movies often rely on cultural references, which someone coming from a different culture may not understand or may miss entirely. This guide provides relevant historical and cinematographic background critical for a full appreciation of these movies.

The ultimate purpose of this guide, however, is to spark a dialogue with the viewers of these movies. Rather than treating film as a passive medium, the guide enables active, critical thinking through thought-provoking activities and questions for discussion. We hope that this information can be used to enrich your experience with these movies and make it more rewarding.

WHO SHOULD USE THIS GUIDE?

Because its goal is to create dialogue, the guide is probably best used in more intimate settings, where a dynamic discussion is most likely to flourish. With this guide, you can lead discussions at synagogues, community centers, classes, film groups and Israel clubs. The information could certainly also be adaptable for a large audience, such as a film festival.

*Please note that the last film in the unit, **Wisdom of the Pretzel**, is **for mature audiences only**. The other films should also be used with discretion with younger audiences (younger than high school) as they may cover themes that are not age-appropriate. **If you are looking for a movie suitable for a younger audience**, please use *Sallah*, *James' Journey to Jerusalem* or *Ushpizin*. Always watch a movie yourself before screening to children (including high school age) to make sure you are comfortable with all of the content that will be shown.*

HOW DO YOU USE THIS GUIDE?

This guide is organized thematically into four different units, each of which covers a major theme in Israeli society. Each unit contains two chapters, each on a different movie which fits under the unit theme. The themes are: **outsiders and integration into Israeli society, Jewish-Arab relations, the role of religion and forging interpersonal relationships in Israeli society.**

There is more than one movie provided per theme for two reasons:

- It gives you more of a selection if you only have time or interest for one movie;
- It allows for an in-depth comparison of the two movies using that theme, if you do choose to screen them both.

In order to select which movies to screen, please read the **Unit Introductions** to get a sense for the overall themes and to decide which theme(s) you would like to cover. Then read the **Chapter Introductions** of the chapters listed under your theme(s) to decide which and how many of the movies you would like to screen. Depending on time and interest, you could choose to screen one movie from each theme, or both movies from several themes.

Each chapter is divided into a **Before the Movie** section, and an **After the Movie** section. The “Before the Movie” section contains information that will be helpful for you to know before beginning to watch, including historical background information and cinematographic background information. The “After the Movie” section contains discussion questions and activities which will help you think about and critically analyze what you have seen. For some of the movies, critical analysis is included, which explores the movies’ themes and societal implications. These pieces of critical analysis represent the viewpoint of the author of this guide and should never be taken as the only (or the best!) answer to the questions about the movies they address.

WHY THESE MOVIES?

There are a variety of strategies one can take in deciding how to go about selecting Israeli films for screening and study, such as choosing only the classics, or only the most recent and most popular.

These movies were selected according to the following two criteria:

- **They have educational value:** They provide a better understanding of Israeli society, its preoccupations and challenges—what matters to Israelis today. Such movies may deal with significant historical events or themes, or they may simply give a better idea of day-to-day life in Israel.
- **They are well-done, quality films:** They can stand on their own artistic merit. Someone not previously interested in or knowledgeable about Israel could perceive them as good films which just happen to have been made in Israel and enjoy them as such.

WHERE CAN I FIND THESE MOVIES?

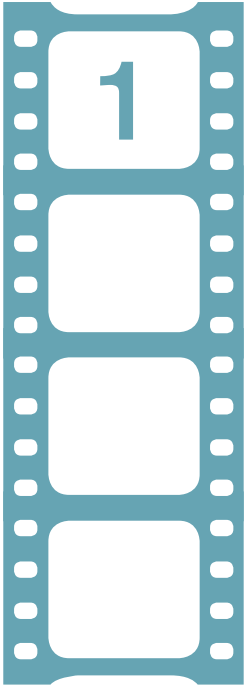
These movies are readily available for purchase online. Try searching for titles at www.israel-catalog.com or www.amazon.com. Prices may vary between \$12 – \$30 per movie. The only exception is *Channels of Rage*, a special documentary available exclusively through Ruth Diskin Films (www.ruthfilms.com). E-mail ruth@ruthfilms.com for ordering information.

Many of these movies may also be available at your local library. University libraries and Jewish community libraries are especially likely to carry these titles.

If you have any questions about the guide or its usage, please e-mail Deborah Fishman at dfishman@azm.org

B’Hatzlacha, and enjoy!

notes



OUTSIDERS AND INTEGRATION INTO ISRAELI SOCIETY

Israel is an improbable melting pot of diversity for people of all religions and races. You don't have to look hard to find people with different frames of engagement with the country. Just walking down the street, you may encounter tourists, people who moved to Israel from other countries—and also those with family history in Israel going back for generations.

One technique for critically examining a society is to view it through the eyes of an “outsider,” someone with no previous frame of reference for the civilization suddenly engulfing him. Since he has yet to become habituated to the society's ways, such an outsider is viewed as more objective than anyone who is a part of the society. At first, he may not even fully comprehend all that goes on around him. Through his process of discovery, the audience can “discover” their own culture with a fresh perspective.

The two movies in this unit, *Sallah* and *James' Journey to Jerusalem*, each visualize an interaction between native Israelis and people from other lands. In *Sallah*, the “outsiders” are new immigrants to Israel (*olim chadashim*), Jews from Arab countries (Sephardim) who poured into Israel in the decade following its establishment in 1948. The movie explores their relationship with the resident population, predominantly Ashkenazim (Jews from European countries). In *James' Journey to Jerusalem*, which takes place in the contemporary period, the “outsider” is an African Christian pilgrim to Israel who comes in contact with Israelis along his journey.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- 1 Different art mediums can be used to express or explain social or historical issues. What qualities unique to cinema make it well-suited to bring to life the meeting of different cultures? What are its limitations as an art form?
- 2 What characteristics are always true of someone called an “outsider”? Which characters in these movies display these characteristics, and in what ways? Do you think these characteristics are the product of stereotypes, or is there some truth in them?
- 3 If you have been to Israel, did you ever feel like an outsider while you were there? What do you think it would take for you to integrate into Israeli society?
- 4 Do you think perceptions of cultural outsiders have changed in Israel in any way in the 40 years between these two films' production? If so, how?



ABOUT THE MOVIE

This movie is a classic social satire—a work of art intended to expose the foolish and the absurd in society using the weapon of wit. Through humorous interactions between exaggerated character types, kibbutzniks, Sephardi Jews, and wealthy American tourists alike are thoroughly satirized in this movie. On a deeper level, the film examines the social implications of the unprecedented numbers of predominantly Sephardi immigrants who flooded into Israel during the early days of its statehood. By following Sallah and his large family as they navigate through Israeli bureaucracy and adjust to their new lives in the Promised Land, the movie dramatizes the growing pains inherent in Israel's process of moving from an idealistic concept to a working reality—a process Israel still struggles with to this day.

USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

CINEMA Social satire in Israeli film

HISTORY Absorption process for new immigrants in the early days of Israel's Kibbutz movement

CULTURE Cultural differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews

BEFORE THE MOVIE

VOCABULARY

Ma'abara Temporary housing for new immigrants arriving in Israel

Olim (*sing. male olah, sing. female olah*) Immigrants to Israel

Shikun Permanent housing complex

Shesh-besh Backgammon; a popular Israeli pastime

Sephardim Technically refers to ancestors of the Jews of Spain (expelled from Spain in 1492); now also used more broadly to refer to Jews of Arab ancestry.

Ashkenazim Jews with European ancestry

Kibbutz (*plural: kibbutzim*) Collective community where everyone lives, owns and works the land together

Kibbutznik One who lives on a kibbutz

????????????????

DID YOU KNOW?

Look out for Chaim Topol, the actor who plays the main character Sallah. Does he look familiar? This film launched his acting career, and later he went on to play Tevya in the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*.

????????????????

PLOT SUMMARY

Sallah Shabatti, a simple Jew from an Arab-speaking country, arrives in Israel with his wife and their seven children to start a new life in the Holy Land. The Shabatti family is placed immediately in temporary housing leaving much to be desired—cramped, inadequate shacks without heat, running water or sanitation. The authorities assure Sallah that soon he will be able to move to a new apartment. When no one has the slightest intention of carrying out this promise, Sallah decides to take matters into his own hands. But his determination is thwarted by the apathetic bureaucracy of the Housing Ministry, and by politicians who renege on their election promises. Desperate, Sallah tries to raise money by demanding a dowry for his daughter, who wishes to marry one of the young members of a nearby kibbutz. But the kibbutz angrily refuses. Finally, Sallah hits upon a successful plan of action: using reverse psychology, he organizes a demonstration in the *ma'abara* demanding the right to stay there permanently.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

WHAT IS THIS MOVIE SATIRIZING?

This 1964 film may be a comedy, but it is also a pointed social satire of what was a very painful social process for Israeli society. In Israel's very first decade of statehood, more than one million Jewish immigrants overwhelmed the 600,000 Jews living in Israel prior to its establishment. A majority of these new immigrants were from the Muslim countries surrounding Israel who were evicted when Israel was founded, their possessions confiscated. Others were Holocaust survivors. Mostly, they were homeless and destitute.

Large-scale immigration to Israel is, of course, ideologically desirable. But, speaking practically, the process of absorbing staggering numbers of impoverished people was not easy for Israel in the early 1950s.

Inevitably, there were logistical challenges—finding the new *olim* housing and work, for instance. The temporary camps set up near existing settlements soon became hotbeds of social problems. Crowded living conditions and rampant unemployment bred frustration, crime and disappointment, leading many immigrants to believe they had found less than the Promised Land. Some camps lasted between 5 to 20 years, and their negative effects had a profound and lasting influence on Israeli society that may still be felt today.

A further challenge was cultural. Most immigrants placed in the *ma'abarot* were Sephardim from Islamic countries in North Africa and the Middle East, whereas the vast majority of the rest of the population were Ashkenazim from Eastern Europe. The clash of cultures created misunderstandings, as seen in the movie when Sallah considers his request for a dowry for his daughter to be completely acceptable and commonplace, whereas the kibbutz believes that to pay money for a woman is old-fashioned and degrading to the woman. Combined with the cultural differences, social and economic gaps between the two groups created resentment and animosity, a dynamic which had a negative impact on the young state's social makeup.

THE KIBBUTZ MOVEMENT

In the early 1900s, the Jews set out to reclaim their ancestral Homeland, what was then Palestine. But they had a problem: the land was a malaria-infested swamp, and they were inexperienced as farmers. They overcame this and many other hardships through banding together in communities. These communities, which came to be known as kibbutzim, were founded on socialist ideals. All property was to belong to everyone collectively, and everyone would contribute to and take from the common treasury, in the Marxist expression, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." All decisions big and small concerning the common property were to be made at community meetings, forums where all members could express their opinions (as seen in the movie). Even children were to be treated communally and raised away from their parents in children's houses. Women were to perform the same roles as men, such as heavy labor and guard duty, with jobs assigned on a rotating basis. The combination of socialist principles with the Zionist desire to work and settle the land of Israel is known as "Labor Zionism."

In the early days of Israel, kibbutzim were instrumental in the settlement, defense and agricultural development of the land as well as in defining the image of Israelis, both to Israelis themselves and abroad. A disproportionate number of Kibbutzniks became Israeli military leaders, intellectuals and politicians. Today, the kibbutz movement has declined due to many factors, including the rise of capitalism. However, there are still over 250 kibbutzim in Israel which contribute greatly to Israel's agricultural production, entrepreneurship and environmentalist movement.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

HOW CAN CINEMA PUT SOCIAL SATIRE IN ACTION?

BOUREKAS

A light and airy puff pastry with a filling (traditionally cheese or potato).

In the early days of the State of Israel, anxiety and tension pervaded the military and political atmosphere. Not surprisingly, Israelis looked for an escape through entertainment. Israel developed its own genre of “escapist” films—films designed to create a mental diversion from the stresses of daily life. Known as bourekas, they were as light as the pastry for which they were named, dealing primarily with simplistic ethnic stereotypes in a comical way. *Sallah* is one example.

RECIPE FOR BOUREKAS¹

Perfect to serve at your next Israeli movie night!

Dough 1/2 lb. margarine, 1 tsp. salt, 3 cups self-rising, flour, warm water

Stuffing 1/2 cup cheese (feta), 1 cup cooked spinach, 3 egg yolks

Garnish 1 egg yolk, sesame seeds to cover

Dough Melt the margarine and mix with flour and salt. Add warm water until able to roll dough. Roll it and cut circles with a cup.

Stuffing Mix all the ingredients. Put one teaspoon of stuffing on each dough circle. Fold in half. On top, spread yolk and sprinkle sesame seeds. Place on a well-greased cookie tray and bake at 350° F until golden (approx. 15-20 min.). Serve hot.

BIOGRAPHY OF A SATIRIST

The director Ephraim Kishon (1924-2005), a grand master of Israeli satire, was a journalist, screenwriter and director who made a career laughing at the disorder inherent in Israeli society.

Kishon arrived in Israel when in his 20s, after surviving several concentration camps. As an immigrant to Israel from an orderly European country (he was born in Hungary), he could see the idiosyncrasies in how things were run in Israel in a way that sabras (native Israelis) never could. Kishon was awarded the Israel Prize for lifetime achievement in 2002. The judges' panel described him as “a light rescued from the fire of the Holocaust, who scaled the heights of satire in the world.” In his own words, Kishon wrote in his book *The Scapegoat concerning the Nazis*, “They made a mistake—they left one satirist alive.”

WHY WAS SALLAH ONE OF THE MOST COMMERCIALY SUCCESSFUL FILMS IN THE HISTORY OF ISRAELI CINEMA?

At the time of the movie's debut, many people were still living in *ma'abarot*. *Sallah* hit home as a social satire because it addressed what were viewed as highly relevant and contemporary social issues, including the chaotic absorption process which was still underway and the ideology of Labor Zionism as manifested in the kibbutzim. *Sallah* was the first film to satirize Labor Zionism.

Sallah won many artistic awards, including two Golden Globes for best film and best leading actor, first prize for script writing and acting in the 1964 San Francisco Film Festival, and a nomination for the Oscar in the Foreign Film category for that year.

AFTER THE MOVIE

ACTIVITY

Find scenes in the film which represent each of the following themes. What do these examples say about the message of the film overall?

- The arbitrary and inhuman nature of the absorption process
- Bureaucracy as heartless, dumb and impervious to the plight of individuals
- Election fraud
- The kibbutz movement as preaching its ideals without practicing them
- Fundraising fraud, raising money for Israel by taking advantage of the gullibility of rich American Jews
- The economic inequity between rich and poor in a socialist society
- The Ashkenazi prejudice against Sephardim

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1 UNIT THEME: Sephardim as “The Other”

- Did you identify with any of the characters? In what way? Which characters did you identify with more, the “insiders” in Israeli society (kibbutzniks, politicians, etc.) or the “outsiders” (Sallah, Sephardi immigrants)?
- What makes Sephardim the “others” in terms of their appearance, manner of speech, lifestyle, customs, family, attitude to gender, work ethic, religious beliefs?
- According to this movie, is integration of “the other” into society possible? Through what ways and to what extent?

2 CINEMATIC THEME: Social Satire

- Immigrating to Israel is known as *aliyah*, meaning literally in Hebrew “ascending,” which implies that Israel is spiritually a “higher” place. (Moving away from Israel is known as *yerida*, “descent”). In what ways does this movie match and/or parody this ideal with the reality of immigrating to Israel?
- How does the film satirize the wealthy Americans? Kibbutzniks? The Sephardi immigrants themselves?
- What is it about Sallah that makes the politicians think he is a *ma’abara* leader? What does the election scene say about Sallah and the democratic process?
- According to a Hebrew saying, “*Tamid meqablim mah she’lo rotzim*” (“You always get what you don’t want”). Have you ever used reverse psychology? Do you think it is effective? Did you find Sallah’s use of this adage realistic?

3 HISTORICAL THEMES: Immigrant Absorption/Kibbutz Movement in the Early Days of Israel

- How is the tree-planting scene symbolic of the entire process of immigration?
- How does Sallah treat and view women? How does this differ from the kibbutzniks’ attitude? Give concrete examples.
- Why is the idea of paying a dowry so divisive between Sallah and the kibbutzniks? What added information do the arguments over dowry give us about the respective societies and the differences between them? How does the outcome of the monetary exchanges reflect Kishon’s own opinion on the issue?
- What did you think of the depiction of the kibbutz community? Would you want to live on a kibbutz? Why or why not? How would your life change if you went to live on a kibbutz?

4 CULTURAL THEME: Cultural Differences Between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews

- How does this movie portray the differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews?
- To which of the following do you think the depictions of the Sephardi and Ashkenazi characters contribute and why? a) The movie's comedic value b) Portraying the characters realistically c) Projecting demeaning attitudes towards these two groups of people
- What do you think is the attitude of the filmmaker to Sephardim, Ashkenazim and the differences between them?

QUOTE ANALYSIS

Read aloud and analyze the following quotes. What do they tell us about the differences in attitudes between the Sephardim and Ashkenazim?

“ **Immigration official:** How many children do you have?

Sallah: Six.

Official: It says here seven.

Sallah: All right then, seven.

Official: (referring to an old woman) Is this a relative of yours?

Sallah: Don't know. Maybe she's a relative. Why else would she have come with us all the way from outside Israel to here? A relative.

Official: Who understands you people?!

“ **Driver:** Big guy—a kibbutznik!

Sallah: But his trac...his vehicle is bigger.

Driver: It's not his, it belongs to the kibbutz.

Sallah: And who does the kibbutz belong to?

Driver: To the kibbutznikim, who else?

Sallah: So why isn't that his?

Driver: It's not his! ...Well, it's his, but it's not his.

Sallah: Mister, do you even hear what you're saying?

Driver: Sure! Look at 'em...living together, eating together, working together...all the property belongs to everyone.

Sallah: Really? To everyone? And our house is there too?

Driver: No no, it's a little further up.

Sallah: Baruch Hashem.

“ **Sallah:** Ziggy...that's an Ashkenazi name, isn't it?

Habuba: But Daddy, Mr. Goldstein is Ashkenazi.

Sallah: They're good for losing at *shesh-besh*, not for marrying!

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

SALLAH THE WISE? OR SALLAH THE FOOL?

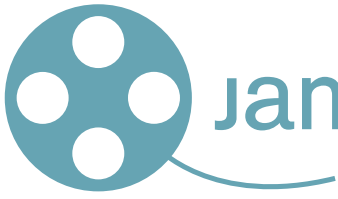
Since this film belongs to the genre of light *bourekas*, simplistic characters may be expected. In literary terms, Sallah falls predictably into an age-old character type: the “wise fool” who manages to overturn the establishment to get his own way. He is the “little guy” who outsmarts “the system”—whether through wisdom or stupidity remains unclear.

Unfortunately, Sallah’s “foolish” side incorporates many negative and demeaning stereotypes of Sephardi Jews: he is illiterate and lazy, an alcoholic given to gambling who is patriarchal, coarse and primitive. Our uneasiness with the reliance on ethnic stereotypes only increases when we learn that the actor playing Sallah, Topol, was himself Ashkenazi, as was the writer of the story, Kishon, who, unlike his character, personally became very successful in his career soon after making *aliyah* in 1949. On the other hand, the film became so popular because viewers invariably identify with Sallah, who is perceived as a much better man than the educated, sophisticated and powerful representatives of the new state. The heartless bureaucrats, political crooks and insincere kibbutzniks who surround Sallah, act as a foil, or means of contrast, highlighting his fundamental, if clumsily executed, desire to do the right thing. Putting aside political correctness, Sallah’s image ultimately is endearing, despite, or perhaps because of, his many faults.

Regardless of your view on Sallah as a character, he does fulfill an important function as a roving hero, or “picaro” in literary terms. It is through the process of wandering through his environment that he manages to focus the viewer’s attention on a string of societal issues.

ACTIVITY

**Divide into two teams: those who think Sallah is wise, and those who think Sallah is a fool.
Hold a debate, making sure you use specific examples from the film to support your opinion.**



James' JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

2003, 87 min

ABOUT THE MOVIE

In this tale of a modern-day pilgrimage to Israel gone awry, James, an African Christian, journeys from worship of a far-off, idealistic land to immersion in modern-day Israeli society. After being mistakenly imprisoned and just as mistakenly released, James finds himself as an illegal worker, performing low-wage labor cleaning houses. James has a unique perspective as an “outsider” who is suddenly confronted with concepts such as capitalism, with all its advantages and dangers. This movie also features the reappearance of Sallah (from the previous movie, *Sallah*) as an old man acting as James’ mentor, adding a creative element of cinematic continuity and also providing the opportunity for social commentary about the progress of Israeli society.

USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

CINEMA “Outsiders” as vehicles for exploring and critiquing society

HISTORY Revival of the classic movie character Sallah for a cross-generational dialogue

CULTURE Societal consequences of the pragmatic capitalism practiced in modern Israeli society



BEFORE THE MOVIE

VOCABULARY

Framer Someone who lets others take advantage of him/her

Kombina Shady business deal

Hafif A half-done job

????????????????

DID YOU KNOW?

Ironically, when the actors came from South Africa to perform in the film, one was arrested and held at Ben Gurion airport because he was assumed to be not a tourist but an illegal worker. He had to be bailed out.²

????????????????

PLOT SUMMARY

James is a young man slated to be the next pastor of Entshongweni, a small village in Africa. He is sent by the people of his village on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. His mission is to witness firsthand what the holy city is like, so that he can return home to report back all of the marvelous sights he has seen. However, when he arrives in Israel, the immigration official does not believe that he has come for religious reasons. Convinced that his true motive is to make money working in Israel, she puts him in prison to await the next flight back to Africa. Ironically, her actions do turn James into an illegal worker. With the help of a crooked immigration official, an Israeli man, Shimi, takes him out of prison to use him for low-wage work cleaning houses in Tel Aviv. Shimi manages many foreign workers “rescued” in the same way. In the process of working to pay back his bail money, James gets caught up in the materialism of Israeli society. Before long, it is unclear whether James will ever make it to Jerusalem to fulfill his pilgrimage.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

WHAT DOES A MOVIE MADE IN 2003 HAVE TO DO WITH A MOVIE MADE IN 1964?

James' relationship with Shimi's elderly father Sallah is not only special within the bounds of this film. According to director Ra'anan Alexandrowicz³, Sallah represents the continuation of the life of the main character in the movie *Sallah* (see pg. 4). Fifty years later, we find erstwhile immigrant Sallah teaching the ropes of Israeli society to the latest arrival, James.

In a throwback to the Sephardi-Ashkenazi tension in *Sallah*, Sallah is played by Arie Elias, a Jewish Iraqi immigrant who fought for many years to make his way in the primarily Ashkenazi world of theater. Elias won an Israeli Oscar for his portrayal of Sallah in *James' Journey* and was subsequently honored with a life-achievement award.

A HERO'S JOURNEY

The traditional tales of cultures around the world generally follow a basic pattern, termed by scholar Joseph Campbell the monomyth. Examples include the religious stories of Moses, Jesus and Buddha, Greek mythology such as the tale of the Minotaur, and Homer's *Odyssey*. Latter-day storytellers have consciously adopted the model, including George Lucas in *Star Wars*. This movie, identified as a journey from its title, does, in fact, loosely reflect the model. There is a hero (James), who leaves home and enters uncharted territory. There, he comes across a "wise man" (Sallah), who instructs him about the ways of the new world he has entered and gives him advice for coping with it.

AFTER THE MOVIE

ACTIVITY

Here is the English translation of the lyrics to the movie's theme song (sung in Zulu).
Read it and then discuss the questions that follow.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Let's sing of that tale that begins | 9 It will keep him safe and can't lead him astray |
| 2 In a faraway village | 10 Soon he will see that holy city |
| 3 The best young man was sent on a pilgrimage | 11 See it with his own eyes |
| 4 A long journey to Zion | 12 He'll come back and tell us |
| 5 Where the heart of the world is | 13 About the place where our dream lies |
| 6 To the Promised Land | 14 Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem |
| 7 Beyond the seas | 15 You are our only destiny. |
| 8 Zion's light in his heart to guide his way | |

- Why do you think the movie begins and ends with this song? What is its function in setting up a framework for the movie? Describe the song's language and message and discuss how they compare and contrast with what we see of James' actual journey in the rest of the movie.
- What is the effect of the cartoon figures that look like they come from illuminated manuscripts which accompany the song? Why are they shown instead of actual scenes of Africa or Jerusalem?

- Why do people go on pilgrimages? What is the importance of seeing with your own eyes a place with which you have such an emotional and spiritual connection? Based on the rest of the movie, what are the risks involved with carrying out such a pilgrimage?
- Can James' journey properly be described as a pilgrimage? Why or why not?
- How can you interpret the fact that this song is sung even at the church which James attends while actually in Israel? Why would this be necessary when they are in reality so close to Jerusalem?

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1 UNIT THEME: James as an “Outsider”

- In what ways does this movie show James to be “the other”? How does James' societal status affect his beliefs and actions?
- To what extent do you think a person's attitudes and priorities are a product of the surrounding society and his/her place in it?

2 CINEMATIC THEME: “Outsiders” as Vehicles for Exploring and Critiquing Society

- What do James' experiences in Israel tell the audience about Israeli society?
- Do you think James (an African Christian on pilgrimage to Israel) is a good choice as someone to explore and critique Israeli society? Why or why not?
- How would the movie have been different if it focused on Shimi's perspective instead of James'?

3 HISTORICAL THEME: Revival of Classic Movie Character Sallah for a Cross-Generational Dialogue

- If you have seen *Sallah*, compare and contrast Sallah in this movie to the original Sallah. Do you think it plausible that this is the same character?
- Why do you think the director chooses to recycle a classic character rather than make up a new one? What advantages does this give him? What limitations?
- **Activity:** Think about your favorite movies (could be American or Israeli). Pick a movie character that you would want to recycle into a new movie, which will take place when this character is older. How would s/he be different in this new movie? How would s/he be the same? What statement or message would you hope to make by using this character: about the character and about society as a whole?

4 CULTURAL THEME: Societal Consequences of the Pragmatic Capitalism Practiced in Modern Israel Society

- How is this movie a moral parable?
- What is the movie's message and societal implications?
- What values do you think society has taught you? Is there a time when you felt social pressures to conform? When have you felt like you were entering uncharted waters, guided only by your own internal compass?
- As the movie was shown in festivals abroad and sold in America, some Israelis criticized *James' Journey* for disseminating criticism of Israel at a time when world opinion of Israel was already quite negative. In response, director Alexandrowicz said, “When you begin to ask filmmakers to think in a PR-related way, you arrive very quickly at a very dangerous situation where you get filmmakers that behave like Soviet filmmakers used to be... So I completely reject the idea that as a filmmaker you have to think how your film will be perceived outside.”¹⁴ Do you agree with the critics or with the director? Explain your viewpoint.

QUOTE ANALYSIS

Discuss these quotes from the movie using the questions that follow.

“ **Immigration official:** (in English, to James) Why not go to work in America, Germany, France? (In Hebrew) We barely get by in this godforsaken place.

- What is ironic about this attitude from someone born and raised in Israel? What message does it send about Israelis and their view of their own country?

“ **James:** If I tell the people back home what this place is like, they won't believe me. They'll be mad at me.
Skomboze: Why?
James: It must be different in Jerusalem. I'm sure of it.

- What do you think James told his fellow villagers about the trip when he returned home—the truth or a more idealized version of his travels?

(after Sallah makes money playing shesh-besh by exploiting James' throwing talent)

“ **James:** You're a very bad man, Mr. Sallah.
Sallah: Things here aren't like in your village stories. Here, we prey on each other.

- Why do you think an elderly man like Sallah would spend his time cheating his friends out of their money playing board games? Does it say more about his personality or his place in life and society?

“ **Sallah:** A *frayer* is someone who lets you get the better of him. It's someone who doesn't grab what's right under his nose.
James: But Our Lord said, "Whoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."
Sallah: (holding out his two arms like they are nailed to a cross) And how did he wind up? A *frayer*.

- What is the fundamental conflict between Christian philosophy and Israeli pragmatism? How would a Christian respond to Sallah's offensive suggestion?

“ **Shimi:** Jerusalem isn't going anywhere. It's been there for 3,000 years.

- What is the significance of the fact that James repeats this exact statement later in the movie?

“ **Shimi:** You don't make money by working. You have to think, not work. You should make the money, and other people should do the work.

- What do you think Sallah was referring to when he said this? Is James' practical implementation of these words faithful to the original intention?

“ **James:** Your house is nice, but a million dollars is a lot of money. If you don't take it, you are a *frayer*.
Sallah: On the contrary, Reverend. If I take it, I'm a *frayer*. If I sign, I'll never see my son again.

- a) Do you think James would have given Sallah the same advice at the beginning of the movie? b) Why does Sallah apply the term *frayer* to the outcome of never seeing his son again? Do you think this application of the term is consistent with its use in other places in the movie? Why or why not?

“ **Shimi:** This is James, my best worker. I can trust him with my eyes closed.

Racheli: He’s just like part of the family.

- Do you think Shimi and Racheli are sincere in this sentiment? In what ways has James become “part of the family”? In what ways does he remain an “outsider”?

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE RE-INTRODUCTION OF SALLAH?

Through the introduction of multiple generations, the movie is able to illustrate transitions in Israeli society while calling attention to tensions in the gap between Sallah’s generation and that of the present day. Society has progressed from Sallah’s emotional attachment to the land to Shimi’s preoccupation with personal prosperity—how much money he could gain by selling that land. As the outsider, James is caught in the middle, with Shimi and Sallah each giving him contradictory orders to assert authority. James’ perspective as an outsider magnifies the pathos of Shimi’s plan to put Sallah in a home for the elderly, since this concept does not exist in Africa.

“James is for me a metaphor for the Zionist dream. He comes with this beautiful, spiritual, ideal dream and while trying to make it come true in the real world, not only he changes but the dream changes.”

DIRECTOR Ra’anan
ALEXANDROWICZ IN
AN INTERVIEW⁵

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF JAMES’ EXPERIENCES IN ISRAELI SOCIETY?

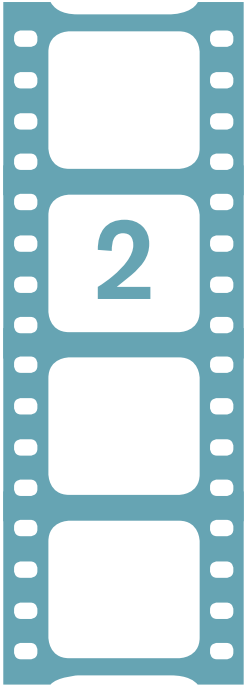
James is more than just a character. He is used as a device to expose the director’s views concerning what is lost in moving from an idealistic dream to a reality. When Israel was transformed from a socialist model to a capitalist system, the process created a prosperous economy and a higher standard of living, but it inevitably brought about other, negative consequences, such as corruption and a proliferation of illegal workers.

At the beginning of the movie, Sallah says of James, “He’s a real Zionist. Like in the good old days.” James’ initial spirituality and idealism acts as a foil (means of highlighting through contrast) to a society where even people are viewed materialistically—as seen when James is wrongfully imprisoned and just as wrongfully released due to calculating assessments of his potential worth as a low-wage worker. The fact that even a righteous man like James is fascinated with and sucked into this mentality demonstrates the potency of this fatal allure and is meant to be representative of what happened to the greater society.

But if James’ human frailties can be broadly extrapolated, then his journey can also be considered metaphoric for all human quests great and small.

“I think each of us has his or her Jerusalem toward which we aspire to reach. Whether we reach it, or even remember where we were headed, is another issue.”

“DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT” FROM
DIRECTOR Ra’anan ALEXANDROWICZ⁶



JEWISH-ARAB RELATIONS

It seems inevitable that the topic of Jewish-Arab relations, such a pressing issue in Israeli society, should make its way into Israeli cinema. What is striking is not that it has been addressed, but rather the sensitive way Israeli artists have explored human and social tensions within the raw political conflict. The open environment allows for and encourages honest discussion from all parts of the political and ideological spectrums.

The two films covered in this unit are very different from each other in many ways. *Channels of Rage* is a documentary recording events over several years, while *The Syrian Bride* is a feature film about the fictional events of one day. *Channels of Rage* deals with the world of two Israeli rap stars, one Israeli and one Palestinian, while *The Syrian Bride* takes place amidst the people and culture of the Druze in the Golan Heights. But the two films share a commitment on the part of Israeli directors to observe the world around them with intelligence and candor, and to recognize that there is no easy solution to the complex problems faced by their country.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- 1 What can you learn from these two films about Jewish-Arab relations? How is the medium of film uniquely suited to convey this information?
- 2 How do these films make you feel about Israel?
- 3 Do these films make you feel optimistic or pessimistic about the future of Jewish-Arab relations? Why?
- 4 Do you think these same films could have been made by Arabs outside of Israel? Why or why not?

ABOUT THE MOVIE

This movie is a documentary which follows two popular rap artists, one Israeli and one Palestinian, and the deterioration of their personal relationship in the wake of the Second Intifada in 2000. The documentary demonstrates how a political situation can have a profound impact not only on music and the arts, but also on the life of the individual. The film also introduces the audience to many elements of Israeli culture and the music scene, including left-wing Israeli rock star Aviv Geffen.

USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

CINEMA Use of documentary format in portraying Arab-Israeli tensions in Israeli society

HISTORY The effects of the Second Intifada on Israeli society

CULTURE Learning about Israeli and Palestinian musicians and their music



BEFORE THE MOVIE

Subliminal Kobi Shimoni, 28, is the son of Jewish refugees from Arab countries—his mother is from Iran and his father from Tunisia. He has been performing music since age 12 and has adopted the rap name “Subliminal”. At 15, he met Yoav Eliasi, who became his performing partner under the name “The Shadow” (Ha’tzel). The two founded the record label TACT (Tel Aviv City Team), which includes other Israeli rappers and singers and has released more than 10 hit singles in Israel. TACT has also collaborated with rappers from other countries, including Wyclef Jean and rappers associated with the Wu-Tang Clan.

MC Tamer Tamer Nafar, 28, goes by the rap name MC Tamer. In 2000, he founded the first Palestinian rap group, DAM, with his brother Suhell and their friend Mahmoud Jrere. The group has performed in Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Europe and the United States.

Aviv Geffen Aviv Geffen, 34, is a leftist Israeli rock musician. In the 1990s he was extremely popular among Israeli youth known as the “Moonlight Children” as the icon for his generation’s dissatisfaction with the government, desire for change, and hope for peace with Israel’s neighbors. His music addresses themes including love and peace, death and suicide, and refusing to serve in the army (though he was officially dismissed from the IDF for medical reasons, some claim he was a conscientious objector). His most famous songs are “Cloudy Now” (Achshav Meunan), his first hit, and “Cry for You” (Likvot Lecha), whose lyrics were eerily prophetic of the assassination of Rabin at a rally on November 4, 1995, a rally at which he had chosen to perform that very song.

ABOUT THE MUSICIANS IN THIS FILM

PLOT SUMMARY

Subliminal (Kobi Shimon) is a proud Zionist Israeli rapper. MC Tamer (Tamer Nafar) is a Palestinian-Israeli rapper. Both are rising Israeli rap stars who share a belief that rap will have the power to bring about much-needed peace and coexistence in the Middle East. However, their vision is shattered with the eruption of the second Intifada in September 2000. With interspersed scenes of rallies and other historical events, this documentary paints a picture of the drastic plummets in mood, morale and Arab-Israeli relations experienced in Israeli society during this time. The audience learns about anti-occupation rallies on the left and the cooperation of Aviv Geffen with Tamer to produce a music video. In addition, the documentary shows how these events and public attitudes affected the artistic development of these two rappers as well as the vicissitudes of their relationship.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

WHAT WERE THE EFFECTS OF THE INTIFADA ON ISRAELI SOCIETY?

The Second Intifada was an unprecedented wave of Palestinian terrorist attacks targeted at Israeli civilians, including deadly suicide bombings and shootings. The violence began in September 2000 following the disintegration of the Camp David negotiations. It claimed approximately a thousand Israeli lives and wounded countless others.

This documentary shows how the impacts of the Intifada ricocheted through many areas of Israeli society. For instance, the Intifada caused precipitous drops in attendance at nightclub concerts, crowded places which might be targeted for terrorist attacks. This decline has implications not only for the weakening of Israeli economy, but also for the country's social scene, and consequently its morale. As Kobi says, "When you... perform in a place that holds 2000 people and only 100 show up after months of performing in places that hold 300 people and 1000 show up, it bums you out."

In addition, the Intifada deeply affected the attitudes of individuals and their perception by and of society as a whole. Through the deterioration of Tamer and Kobi's relationship after the Intifada's outbreak, we witness historical events as a force in our personal lives.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

This movie is different from the other movies covered in this guide in two respects: it is a documentary, and it relies heavily on music and lyrics for character development, narration of a historical period, and representation of ideological beliefs and social realities. Watch for the lyrics to learn about the mindsets of the characters and their respective audiences.

ACTIVITY

Below are some translations of Tamer and Kobi's lyrics.
Compare and contrast how they deal with the following themes:

Nationalism • Violence • Religion • Personal Responsibility • Politics and the Government

“ TAMER

The minority is opening its mouth. You say the Arabs are primitive, you say the Arabs are aggressive. Say we are criminals and barbarians, we aren't! But just in case we are, this is what the government did to us!

Where's the fairness when I live in a tin nest and he lives in a ritzy residence?

Listen to the words. I'm sure everyone's alive just to make sure we aren't. Divided and torn. Who? The Arabs of '48. An Arab who doesn't forget Allah. Why when Jews are hurt you see them protesting in the streets? You see their anger erupt. There's a cop with a club, not violent, telling them to go home. But when the Arabs are hurt, it's a different story. The cops go into every house, killing the children's moms. They don't want the kids to be orphans, so they kill them too. A 13-year-old with a body full of holes is asked: Why are you afraid of the government? Poor world. Sleepless eyes. Fear and horror. Poor man! Tearing eye, the heart is sad. Strange world. No one to complain to.

Peace on paper won't change the situation.

I started dying from the infection that keeps approaching my people. So I protect the Arabs through the microphone. Gimme a mic and you'll see how good we go together, like Lewinsky and Clinton. TN is here and no one saw me coming. The faces of the racists look like cats afraid of the water. But I'm original and my mind is criminal.

“ KOBİ

My mother land, All that was mine, Even my country became an international punching bag. That they will determine my destiny: to be or not to be... Closed my eyes, screamed: live and let live! These are not my people, disillusioned dreamers, weak souls in the rubbish, cannot be! Who am I? What am I? Where did I come from? I'm here and I came here, *Hadi ardi hona biladi* (Arabic: This is my land and this is my country).

Carry words like weapons. One more page to finish this chapter. When will the struggle end? One year to the millennium and the country's still dangling like a cigarette in Arafat's mouth.

Three eyes open, ears listening. Conspiracies are being whispered. Pouring rain. The deal is in vain. The roof is leaking, my frustration I'm masking. The heart is burning, troubles falling. Your hands can't catch them. Hot flames need to be smothered, enough! Boom, bye bye, everything is falling by. Doors closed at my back, my front and my side. Dear G-d, I wish you could come down. My enemies wanna destroy me. We're nurturing our haters, enough! We all have good intentions but we are feeling the tension. I'm lying in the battlefield. Sub[liminal] is offended by what he hears on TV. Politicians are arguing between right and left. Divide and Conquer: united we stand, divided we fall.

But we're here to stay. Zionism's in our blood. I am a Jew who respects Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and all the others too. My thirst is quenched, I ain't thirsty for blood. Understand, blood spills blood and it spills more blood. Then his uncle comes and his blood is spilled too!

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

UNIT THEME: Jewish-Arab Relations

Role of the Individual

Think about these quotes from the scene on the bus:

“ Only in Israel. Russian, Ethiopian, Arab and Persian rappers can stand on one stage!
Film the coexistence! Film it!
Only hip-hop will bring peace!

- In light of the rest of the movie, what do you think of these statements? What would it take for them to really come true? To what extent do you believe a positive political climate is essential for individuals to coexist?

“ **Tamer:** The problem isn't between Kobi and Tamer. If it were, just a few rap beats and everything would work out, right?

Kobi: Do you want to hear something funny? The problem is between Kobi and Tamer.

- To what extent can individuals maintain relationships when on opposite sides of major ideological, political, and physical conflicts? In the quote above, who do you feel is right, Tamer or Kobi?

Peace Process

Activity: Rate the effectiveness of the following in working towards a solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict on a scale from 1-10 (10 being the most effective). Compare your ratings with those of others and discuss any differences between them.

- Politicians negotiating peace deals: ____
- Individual Arabs being friends/ working with individual Israelis: ____
- Using “rage” (violence, etc.) to make a point: ____
- “Channeling” your rage through music you can share with others: ____

2 CINEMATIC THEME: The Documentary Format

- What are the advantages of the medium of documentary as opposed to feature film in portraying the Arab-Israeli conflict? What are the disadvantages?

3 HISTORY: The Second Intifada

Find evidence in the movie for how Tamer and Kobi each view the Intifada in the following contexts:

- How it affected “their people” and its meaning to them in a nationalistic sense
- How it affected “the other side” and how they feel about this effect
- How it affected their personal relationship, why, and how they feel about this effect
- How it affected their music and personal success (how each is perceived by Israeli and by Palestinian audiences)
- Compare and contrast the relationship between Tamer and Kobi at the beginning of the movie to their relationship at the end. What makes the relationship viable to begin with? Why does it deteriorate?
- How and why are personal friendships affected by the larger political picture? To what extent do you think this also happens in your own country? Has it ever happened to you?

4 CULTURE: Israeli and Palestinian Musicians and Their Music

- What did you think of the music in this film? What did it make you think about and what feelings did it inspire in you?
- How are rap music and rap stars in Israel similar to and different from their American equivalents?
- What are the advantages of using music as “channels of rage”? In what ways does it or doesn’t it work to solve problems? Consider the following quote:

“ **Tamer:** (after fight broke out) We’re an angry nation, I’m angry too. It’s in our blood, I don’t know... It’s all bottled up inside... I may be happy now, but someone could tick me off any minute... I’m against that, I get a grip of myself... In the music, like now, I’m stressed, I pound on the mic, and it makes me feel great... Everyone has their own way of releasing stress.

- What meaning does the music in this movie have for Israeli society? Do you think it can influence society? Or is it only a “channel of rage”?

QUOTE ANALYSIS

Answer the questions by comparing the quotes that follow.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

- What is the importance of the decision of Kobi or Tamer to use Arabic, Hebrew or English in their music? If language dictates audience, should it also dictate the message? If you were a performer, what would be the advantages and disadvantages of having an audience that feels exactly the same way you do? How would it help you or hinder you in advancing your message?
- “ **Kobi:** What upsets me is that he [Tamer] speaks to me in one way that he wants peace, and everything’s great...and in his songs, I heard that he says: ‘The Zionist enemy,’ ‘Jewish Nazis’ and stuff... When I talk to him, I hear ‘x’, [but] everyone tells me they hear ‘y’. He shouldn’t say one thing in Hebrew, something else in English and something entirely different in Arabic.
- “ **Tamer:** When I sang in Hebrew for the Israeli audience and told them that we’re Arabs and you did things to us, they’d go, ‘He’s so cute,’ all those Yuppies, but here with an Arab audience they feel like I do. The whole Arab thing.
- “ **Kobi:** If it’s up to me, making music is fine, but I always said that I use music as a means. My goal is to relay a message.
Interviewer: Why [the chorus *Biladi*] in Arabic?
Kobi: Because the people who are supposed to understand it, understand Arabic.
- “ **Kobi:** (to Tamer) People don’t know what your opinion is. People will judge you...saying: ‘He’s against the Zionist enemy,’ just like they turned me into the ‘Settlers’ Kid,’ the guy who’s against Arafat... That’s why you gotta watch out. You’re just coming out now, and gaining power, and you put your foot in this big game, so make sure you convey your position very clearly.

2 NATIONAL UNITY

- What messages do Tamer and Kobi send about the importance of political unity? What challenges exist in creating unity in Palestinian and in Israeli society?
 - “ **Kobi:** *(on stage)* Is there anyone here who has something bad to say about Tel Aviv or our holy Zion, eh?.. You know what, you're in Zion, in Israel, in Tel Aviv! There is only one! Listen up, guys, we say: Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Israel, Palestine, guys, we're together! ...But if someone comes to fight, we'll eat them alive!
 - “ **Kobi's father:** If we renounce ourselves, we won't have the strength to fight our enemies from the outside. And from the inside.
Kobi: And from the sides. And from the middle.
 - “ **Tamer:** I want the people to understand, there's a difference between the representatives and the people.
Yoav: But what you don't understand is that the people elected them.

3 IDENTIFICATION OF A MUSICIAN WITH POLITICAL CAUSES

- Why do you think prevailing attitudes about the national identity of an artist—whether that identity is Israeli, Palestinian, or even American—could affect the reception of his or her music? Would you think about music with a “leftist” message differently depending whether it was produced by an Israeli, Palestinian or American artist? What about a “right-wing” message? How so?
 - (Tamer on the phone under home custody)*
 - “ **Caller:** What about the gigs in Egypt?
Tamer: There aren't any for now.
Caller: You're gonna give up the dream of 'invading' Arab countries?
Tamer: The Arab world doesn't like us too much.
Caller: Why?
Tamer: The Arab world regards us as Israelis, and the Israelis regard us as Palestinians.
Caller: So where will you find yourself in the end?
Tamer: I really don't know. We're traitors, we're scum. We live in Israel. I'm serious when I say our situation is the worst of all. I'm the one who didn't flee his lands, and you call me a traitor? I don't wanna hear the Egyptians talking about traitors, they're the ones who keep selling us out.
Caller: So you're not optimistic about the next tour.
Tamer: No.
 - “ **Kobi:** Isn't Aviv Geffen a leftist?...They didn't want to play [my song] “Living from Day to Day” on the radio. If you wanna be played, you gotta be some pathetic guitar-playing crybaby... If you don't want to play [my song], there's only one reason: you think the message sounds right-wing, so you censor it.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

WHAT IS IT REALLY LIKE TO BE A RAP STAR?

The two main characters, Kobi Shimoni and Tamer Nafar, are not your everyday individuals: they are both rap stars. As such, they are role models who can set trends amongst their fan followings almost without being aware they are doing so. If Kobi wears a conspicuously large Star of David pendant and declares, “The Star of David is cool,” the result is predictable: suddenly everyone on the street will do the same.

Of course, this influence extends more deeply than clothing. The two are icons of their respective political ideologies, and their fans look to them for cues for what to believe in a confusing world in the throes of the Intifada. When fans at a Subliminal concert chant, “Death to the Arabs!” Kobi declares, “Cut it out, not death to the Arabs, but life to the Jews!”—and they stop.

In the United States, rap has social implications, spreading messages that set precedents and reinforce perceptions of wealth, race and class. Kobi and Tamer each believe in the power of music to be relevant to and transformative for society.

Kobi aims to encourage others to embrace the Zionist principles embodied by his music and his persona as a self-styled Jewish rap star. His baggy clothes and gold chains may imitate the American rap scene, but Subliminal’s actual messages contrast with those usually exposed by American counterparts. “Zionist hip-hop” is patriotic and pro-army, eschewing drugs, alcohol and violence. Kobi explains, “People always say to me, ‘Rap is protest music. So, what is there for a boy from a good neighborhood to protest about?’ My protest songs aren’t about not having enough food, but about my country not having enough pride.” Kobi’s unabashed love for his country stems in part from his family history—his parents were refugees from Arab countries who were able to begin a new life in Israel.

THE SYRIAN BRIDE

2004, 98 min

ABOUT THE MOVIE

A Druze bride is on her way to marry a Syrian man with the full knowledge that, once she crosses the border into Syria, she can never come back to Israel to visit her family again. Through this story, the movie explores the nature of borders, real and imagined, and the power they have over our lives. This movie is subtle in that it does not directly address any of the burning political questions it exposes, such as whether the Golan Heights should be under Israeli or Syrian control. Rather, it follows one family over a single day, gently exposing the complicated connections between them and the nature of the community to which they belong.

USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

CINEMA Cross-cultural collaboration in movie production

HISTORY The importance of the Golan Heights

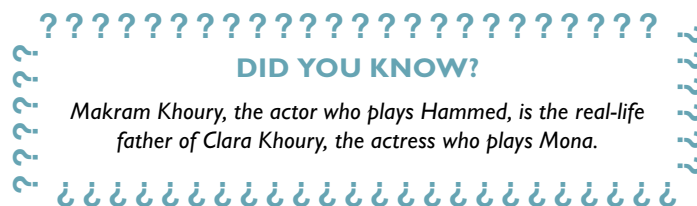
CULTURE Druze society

BEFORE THE MOVIE

PLOT SUMMARY

It is the wedding day of Mona, a Druze woman who lives in a village on the Israeli-Syrian border. It may also be the saddest day of her life. She has agreed to marry a Syrian television star she has never met. To do so, she must cross the border into Syria, and she will never be able to return to visit her family due to the political situation between Israel and Syria.

Her entire family gathers together to say goodbye to her, including her brother Hattem, ostracized from the family due to his unacceptable decision to marry a Russian doctor; another brother Marwan, a shady womanizing merchant; her sister Amal, who is trapped in an unhappy marriage; and her staunchly pro-Syrian father Hammed, whose recent stint in Israeli prison due to his political activities does not stop him from participating in a rally on his daughter's wedding day, which could land him back in jail. At the border, the paperwork for Mona's life-changing trip to Syria becomes complicated when Syrian officials decide to take issue with an Israeli exit stamp on Mona's passport, their way of refusing to recognize the 1967 Israeli takeover of the Golan Heights. As a UN liaison officer races back and forth across the border with the offending passport, it is unclear whether the wedding will take place at all.



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE GOLAN HEIGHTS?⁷

WHO ARE THE DRUZE?

The Druze come from a religious group which split off from mainstream Islam in the 11th century. It is difficult to determine their religious beliefs or their numbers because they practice taqiyya, concealing their true convictions while outwardly accepting the beliefs of the people amongst whom they live.

Here are some general statistics:

- **Syria:** Largest population of Druze
- **Lebanon:** The Druze make up the highest percentage of the population, compared to Druze percentages of total population in other countries
- **United States:** Approximately 20,000 Druze live in the US (Institute of Druze Studies)
- **Israel:** Home to 118,000 Druze (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2007)
 - Galilee: 70% of the Israeli Druze community
 - Haifa: Another significant Druze population
 - Majdal Shams, where this movie takes place, is the largest Druze village in the Golan Heights.
- **Syria, Israel and Lebanon:** The Druze have their own religious court system and official recognition as a separate religious community.

AZZAM AZZAM, PROUD ISRAELI DRUZE

While in Egypt on a business trip, Azzam Azzam, a Druze, was arrested for industrial espionage on behalf of Israel. An additional allegation claimed he was using women's underwear soaked in invisible ink to pass information to the Mossad (Israeli intelligence unit). No credible evidence was presented at his trial, nor has any been found since. Nevertheless, he was jailed in Egypt for eight years. In Egyptian-Israeli negotiations in 2004, Egypt finally released him, in exchange for which Israel released six Egyptian students captured in Israel on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks. According to Ha'artez⁸, immediately upon returning to Israel, Azzam Azzam had an emotional telephone conversation with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

He said, "I love you very much. I told my brothers that if I don't get out when Arik Sharon is prime minister, I never will. I am lucky to have been born in Israel and I'm proud of it."

A strategic point of great military importance, the Golan Heights towers up to 1,700 feet above the bordering Huleh Valley, one of Israel's richest agricultural areas. The Golan Heights is also critical for Israel as a source for water from the Jordan River watershed and Sea of Galilee. While the Golan Heights were under Syrian control from 1948-1967, Syrian troops used the position to snipe at the Israelis below, forcing kibbutzniks to sleep in bomb shelters and requiring that northern Israeli roads be swept for mines before use.

Since Israel gained control of the Golan Heights in the 1967 Six-Day War, the UN has continued to hold by 1967 Security Council Resolution 242, which declared the Golan Heights "Israeli occupied territory." However, Israel maintains retaining the Golan Heights is justified by Resolution 242 itself, which calls for "safe and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force." Members of the UNDOF (United Nations Disengagement Observer Force) continue to maintain what is known as the "UNDOF Zone" and are usually the only individuals allowed to cross the Israeli-Syrian border.

Despite the 1981 Israeli Golan Heights Law, which extended Israeli civilian law to everyone living in the Golan Heights, most Druze in the Golan Heights have chosen to retain Syrian citizenship. Druze religion requires loyalty to one's nation of residence, but Druze fear ill-treatment by Syrian authorities should the Golan Heights ever be returned to Syria. As seen in the movie, pro-Israeli Druze are ostracized by pro-Syrian Druze. At the same time, many Druze prefer to remain in Israel due to the advantages offered by a democratic society and the superior standards of living. Most Druze in Israel outside of the Golan Heights do consider themselves Israeli, with all the same privileges and responsibilities as other Israelis. Israeli Druze served in the Israeli army voluntarily from 1948-1956, and their army service has been compulsory ever since. In the 2006 Lebanon War, the all-Druze *Herev* (Sword) Battalion fought valiantly, reportedly killing 20 Hezbollah fighters without suffering any casualties.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

ARE THE ACTORS' BACKGROUNDS AND PERSONAL BELIEFS IMPORTANT TO THE MAKING OF A FILM?

The script of *The Syrian Bride* was written with collaboration between Eran Riklis, who is Israeli, and Suha Arraf, who is Palestinian. Most of the Druze characters are played by Palestinian actors.

Hiam Suha, the Palestinian actress who played Amal, said her personal background helped her to feel closer to her character. Like Amal, she came from a traditional family where the decision to pursue a career was frowned upon. “When I read the script, I really had the feeling that Amal wasn’t different from me,” she said in a “Behind the Scenes” interview.

Clara Khoury (Mona) had already acted in the role of a bride who must navigate political boundaries on an unhappy wedding day, except in the previous role her feelings as a Palestinian came more clearly into play. In the movie *Rana’s Wedding* (2002), she performed the part of Rana, a young Palestinian woman who, following an ultimatum from her father, flees from East Jerusalem to Ramallah to marry her lover. This storyline is used by Palestinian Director Hany Abu-Assad⁹ to advance an unambiguously pro-Palestinian political agenda, dramatizing roadblocks, shooting soldiers and demolitions along the bride’s trip.

Hiam maintains that, regardless of one’s personal background, the characters in the *Syrian Bride* are applicable on a universal level:

“ The film, even if it’s not the political issue of it that comes out, it’s just how do you share the suffering of a family because of the bureaucracy or because of the borders we stuck in their life physically... It’s a human portrait of all these members of this family with all the contradictions that could exist between them and all the... individualities, the social pressure and political pressure they could have... Still, an American father would see the father as a father, an American bride would see the bride as a bride... this is a universal language that gets to everybody.

Nevertheless, Clara revealed that the acting was easier due to the fact that she was playing opposite her real father. In a “Behind the Scenes” feature, she revealed:

“ In my goodbye scene with him, I thought about something very extreme. Like, something is going to happen and that’s it, I’m never going to see him again. Or touch him, or look into his eyes or hug him. I tried to bring as much as I could from myself, from my personal relationship with my real father. Every time I looked into his eyes, I started to cry, every take. I cried and cried. It was there, I didn’t have to try that hard.

AFTER THE MOVIE

ACTIVITY

Collect “evidence” as to the importance of the following factors to each main character: a) nation of residence/patriotism b) family c) religion. What is revealing about the way different characters prioritize? How do their decisions in terms of priorities affect their lives?

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

UNIT THEME: Israeli-Arab Relations

“**Hiam Abbass:** Especially when we (Israelis and Palestinians) can meet artistically around something that really we want to get from that country locally to become a very universal sharing with the entire world, it works.

Interviewer: You’ve got to get a better public relations company, because we need to hear that, and I think the rest of the [US] country needs to hear that...

Hiam: Palestinians are Israelis living in Israel, because the Palestinians in Israel are Israelis by identity, and when you live in a country you just belong to the country and you grew up in that country, you study in that country, you speak the language of that country, and I think if [we] tr[ie]d to solve [our problems] by ourselves, I think humanly we would be able to do it... We live it daily there and we know what it means and we are into...talking with each other.

– From an American interview with Hiam Abbass (*Amal*).

- How does this movie reflect or not reflect Hiam’s attitude as she expresses it here? Do you think the movie is optimistic or pessimistic? Why?
- Why is Mona called the “Syrian” bride? What is ironic in this classification, or in the fact that she is classified at all? Why do we tend to put things, including people, into categories, and in what sense is it (or isn’t it) useful?
- How would you characterize the relationships between Israelis and Druze in this movie? What factors contribute to the character of these relationships? Do you think these relationships are realistic?
- What is the importance of borders? What are their advantages and disadvantages? What borders are important in your life?
- What is the significance of using Palestinian characters to play Druze roles?
- How do you believe actress Clara Khoury (Mona) thinks about her two stints as a bride (see “Cinematographic Background”)? How do you think she compares or differentiates between the two experiences?

2 CINEMATIC THEME: Cross-Cultural Collaboration in Movie Production

“It was no problem for a Jew from Israel to get into a Druze Syrian village and make the film with Palestinian actors from Israel and Israeli actors from Israel. I was really moved and touched by how all political borders would just drop down on a cinema set, which made me feel that, at the end of the road, cinema is the tool of communication and the tool of how we can work together, create together, to be able to represent together something that is humanly defensible in front of all the world.

– Hiam Abbass (*Amal*), in an interview at an American film festival.

- Why do you think that cinema could be especially effective at erasing borders between people of different nationalities? Why would it be more effective than other kinds of collaborative projects? Or do you disagree with Hiam?

3 HISTORICAL THEME: The Importance of the Golan Heights

- What is the significance of the movie’s setting? Could the movie have taken place in a different setting?

3 CULTURAL THEME: Druze Society

- Which characters can you sympathize with the most? Which can you sympathize with the least?
- Would you have made the same decisions as Mona? As Amal? As Hattem? Why or why not?
- What do you think is motivating Mona to marry a Syrian? Is this an example of the influences of society, which convinces women they need to belong to a man in order to be a viable member of society? Or are there other factors at play? What evidence do you have?
- Is Amal's husband criticizing her due to his principles, or because he is afraid the villagers will gossip about how he is unable to control his own wife?
- What statement does the lack of information about Mona as a character make in terms of her treatment by her family and by society? What is the importance of her story in the overall story?
- To what extent do you believe the depiction of Druze in the movie is representative on a larger scale?
- The movie's closing scene shows Mona and Amal walking purposefully in opposite directions, towards their respective futures in Syria and Israel. What do you think each is setting out to do? Do you think the physical contraposition is in any way representative of other kinds of opposition? Or are they in fact "walking the same way"?

QUOTE ANALYSIS

“ **Mona:** I'll be lonely there. I'm afraid.

Amal: Don't be afraid. Tallel will love you and you will love him. It won't be like your previous marriage. It's different this time.

Mona: What makes you so sure? Life with him could turn out to be a lot worse than my life now. Perhaps I'm going from one jail to another one.

Amal: Stop it. You'll have a much better life there.

Mona: And what if we don't get along? I won't be able to come back here.

Amal: Stop being so pessimistic! Stop it!

- Imagine Mona's thought process in agreeing to marry Tallel. To what extent do you think she is conflicted about her decision? What information do we have from Mona that can be used in answering these questions? What do you think the quality and quantity of this information, especially considering that "The Syrian Bride" is the title of the movie?

“ **Hattem:** It's been 8 years, and he still won't talk to me. I thought he would soften up over time.

Evelyna: Maybe we shouldn't have come here.

Hattem: How long can one hide? Enough!

- What is revealing about Hattem's choice of the word "hide"? Why do you think Hattem left the village in the first place? Why did he come back for his sister's wedding?

“ **Israeli Photographer:** Are you worried because you don't know him? There are no rules. Marriage is like a watermelon. You can't tell what's inside till you open it up. It's a matter of fate.

- What is the role of the Israeli photographer in this movie? How does this role relate to his profession?

“ **Jeanne:** Can't you just call Damascus and check with him?

Syrian official: This thing has to go all the way up to the president himself. No one can solve it.

- To what extent are the movie's characters passive? Which characters take active roles in their own lives and to what extent? How does this relate to the previous quote about "a matter of fate"?

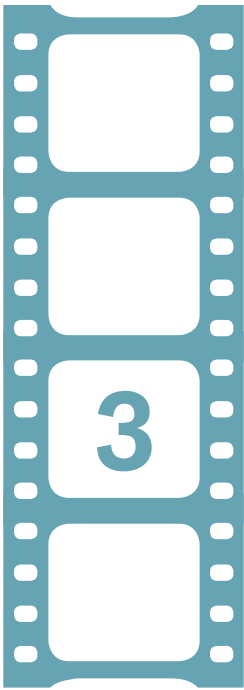
CRITICAL ANALYSIS

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE LACK OF FULL DEVELOPMENT OF MONA'S CHARACTER?

In a movie entitled "The Syrian Bride," one would expect to learn a little more about the bride herself. Why is she getting married? What are her plans for the future? What was her life story leading up to this special day? What is her personality like? On all of these topics, the movie is virtually silent. Instead, Mona's role as a bride seems simply to create a premise for the other family members to unite to send her off. Through the depiction of her family members, not through Mona herself, the movie directly explores the social fabric of her traditional, insular community. For instance, through the story of Hattem and his Russian wife Evelynna, we learn about the seemingly insurmountable borders between this village and other cultures. Marwan's philandering and shady business deals are easily tolerated, but Hattem, who is happily married with a son, is ostracized simply because he married a foreigner. His wife is given no respect for her expertise as a doctor in Russia. Instead, the villagers ridicule her for not knowing how to chop tomatoes.

The audience can observe Mona's family, but Mona's process of interpreting her family remains impenetrable. Mona's sister Amal, an intelligent, free-thinking woman, clashes frequently with her traditional husband, who resents her decision to wear pants and aspirations to pursue higher education. Despite observing the distress of her sister's marriage and having an unsuccessful marriage in her own past, Mona makes the decision to give up ever seeing her family again in order to try her luck with a man she has never met in Syria.

The majority of the "evidence" we do have about Mona as a character comes from her actions, not from her words. The stark importance of the times when she does choose to act stands out even more when it is considered that the majority of her actions are passive as she docilely obeys family members, photographers and UN observers in her attempts to navigate hostile borders on her wedding day.



RELIGION IN ISRAELI SOCIETY

The struggle to define the role of religion in Israeli society caused great controversy long before Israel as a state even existed. Two opposing conceptions of Zionism existed at the turn of the 20th century. Eastern European intellectuals espoused Cultural Zionism, envisioning a modern, secular Jewish state based on ethnic, nationalistic and cultural Judaism. In contrast, Religious Zionism visualized a Jewish state in Israel in a religious context, with Jewish Torah law at its center.

The question of whether Israel should be “a state of Jews” or a “Jewish state” continues to cause a rift in Israel today. As of 2007, one fifth of the Israeli Jewish public defines itself as secular (*chilonim*) and one third as religious (*datim*), while half considers itself to be “traditional” (*masorti*), maintaining some connection with religious observance but not strictly following religious law (according to the Israel Democracy Institute¹⁰). Rising tensions largely stem from the fundamental belief of religious Israelis that the laws of a Jewish state must be guided by religious Jewish principles. Since Israel’s establishment, the Chief Rabbinate has held jurisdiction over all Jews concerning such issues as Jewish marriages and burials, defining “who is a Jew” for matters of immigration and conversion, and observance of the Sabbath and *kashrut* (dietary laws).

However, secular and traditional Israelis do not wish to be bound by Jewish religious law, especially since they already feel connected to Judaism through living in Israel, being surrounded by other Jews and speaking Hebrew. Friction is also apparent when ultra-Orthodox (*haredim*) receive exemptions from military service and some *datim* refuse to carry out military orders (especially concerning settlements) for religious reasons.

Across the secular-religious divide, each side sees the other as one-dimensional and seeks to define itself as the other’s opposite. The religious see the secular as empty, lacking in values and hedonistic; the secular view the religious as backward and hypocritical, with an agenda of conquering society for their own purposes. Naturally, these stereotypes are culturally reinforced in the realm of film.

This unit examines *Time of Favor*, which deals with the line between devotion and fanaticism in a West Bank yeshiva, and *Ushpizin*, the first movie to be made by members of the ultra-Orthodox community in collaboration with secular filmmakers and aimed for general audiences.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- 1 What is the goal of these movies? What message do they send to Israeli society and internationally concerning Judaism and how it is practiced in modern Israel?
- 2 How do these movies portray the relationship between secular people and religious people in Israel today?
- 3 Could these movies take place anywhere except Israel? Are movies dealing with religious themes in Israel important or even relevant to people who do not live in Israel and aren’t Jewish? Why or why not?
- 4 How (and to what extent) do these two films overcome the following challenges facing films that deal with religious themes? a) Making them interesting/relevant to audiences not knowledgeable concerning these religious issues b) Presenting what are oftentimes controversial, nuanced and sensitive issues in a clear and unbiased way c) Representing the religious community accurately and knowledgeably

ABOUT THE MOVIE

This movie takes place at a yeshiva in a West Bank settlement, where a love triangle involving the rabbi's daughter threatens to push one of the suitors to a violent action concerning the Temple Mount. Through a plot which narrates the making of a Jewish terrorist, this movie delves into questions of loyalty, the tension between the political and the personal and the value of an individual. With these themes, the movie explores the line between devotion and fanaticism and what could prompt someone to cross it, and the price an individual should pay for the sake of a larger group within the grand scheme of an ideological mission.

USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

CINEMA Use of cinema to explore themes relevant in the lives of cast members

HISTORY Historical importance of the Temple Mount

CULTURE Religious extremism in Israeli society



BEFORE THE MOVIE

VOCABULARY

HaHesder (The Hesder) Name of this movie in Hebrew. A Yeshivat Hesder is an Israeli institution that combines Talmudic study with military service in the Israel Defense Force.

PLOT SUMMARY

At a yeshiva in a West Bank settlement, the attempts of Rabbi Meltzer to play matchmaker have disastrous consequences. He wishes for his star pupil Pini to marry his headstrong and independent-thinking daughter Michal. However, Michal favors the handsome Menachem, who commands an Israeli army unit composed entirely of Rabbi Meltzer's pupils. When Pini realizes that he has come out on the losing end of the love triangle, he decides to take drastic and violent action. He enlists Itamar, another pupil of Rabbi Meltzer and soldier in Menachem's unit, in a plot to blow up the Temple Mount. Rabbi Meltzer is already under the scrutiny of the Mossad (Israeli intelligence agency) due to his radical teachings which advocate regaining the Temple Mount. But, when questioned, he insists that his students understand that he is talking about ideas, not realities. Despite the intervention of the Mossad and the military, it seems that ultimately only Menachem and Michal might be able to stop their friend's terrifying plot.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE TEMPLE MOUNT?

It is important to understand exactly what Rabbi Meltzer is advocating when he envisions thousands of Jews praying on the Temple Mount.

The Temple Mount is Judaism's holiest site, the location of the First Temple (built c. 967 BCE, destroyed c. 586 BCE by the Babylonians) and the Second Temple (rebuilt c. 516 BCE, destroyed in 70 CE by the Romans' siege of Jerusalem). According to Jewish belief, the final Third Temple will be rebuilt on this same spot with the coming of the Messiah.

The Temple Mount is also one of the most contested religious sites in the world. Two Muslim shrines, the Dome of the Rock (built c. 690 CE) and the Al-Aqsa Mosque (built c. 710 CE) also stand on the site. When Eastern Jerusalem was under Jordanian rule (1948-1967), Jews were forbidden from entering the Old City. Since then, under Israeli rule, Jews have had access to the Kotel (Wailing Wall), a retaining wall dating from the time of the Second Temple, while the Muslims manage their own shrines with a Muslim Council. Nevertheless, the spot continues to constitute a delicate political issue.

Aside from the political situation, Orthodox rabbinical consensus forbids Jews from entering the Temple Mount until the coming of the Messiah, declaring it punishable with *karet* (being spiritually cut off from the Jewish people). Nevertheless, some rabbis maintain that it is permitted and even commendable to visit some parts of the Temple Mount. In May 2007, a group of right-wing Religious Zionist rabbis entered the Temple Mount, eliciting widespread criticism from religious Jews and secular Israelis alike. An editorial in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* accused the rabbis of "knowingly and irresponsibly br[inging] a burning torch nearer to the most flammable hill in the Middle East."¹¹

HAHESDER

The setting for a good portion of this movie is a hesder yeshiva. In Hebrew,

hesder means "arrangement." Israeli men are generally required to serve three years in the IDF, but ultra-Orthodox men studying in yeshiva are typically exempt from military duty. Enrolling in a hesder yeshiva is an arrangement allowing religious men to perform their duties of military service and religious study simultaneously. In the hesder program, men are officially soldiers in the IDF for five years: 16 months is usually active training and service, and the remainder of the time is used for Torah study. It is possible for students from the Diaspora to attend a hesder for 1-2 years.

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, the head of Yeshivat Har Etzion, wrote about the hesder experience:

"Hesder at its finest seeks to attract and develop bnei torah ["religious individuals"] who are profoundly motivated by the desire to become serious talmidei hachamim ["religiously learned"] but who concurrently feel morally and religiously bound to help defend their people and their country; who, given the historical exigencies of their time and place, regard this dual commitment as both a privilege and a duty; who, in comparison with their non-hesder confreres love not Torah less but Israel more. It provides a context within which students can focus upon enhancing their personal spiritual and intellectual growth while yet heeding the call to public service, and it thus enables them to maintain an integrated Jewish existence."¹²

CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

WHAT CONNECTIONS EXIST BETWEEN THIS MOVIE'S DEPICTION OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND REAL-LIFE EVENTS?

BIOGRAPHY OF A WRITER-DIRECTOR

This film is the debut of writer-director Joseph Cedar, whose personal life has straddled the United States and Israel. Though born in New York, he grew up in an Orthodox religious community in Israel from the age of six. A former infantry paratrooper with a yeshiva background, Cedar returned briefly to New York to study film at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. Regarding his decision to make his career in the Israeli film industry rather than Hollywood, Cedar told *The Jerusalem Post*, "I have an American film in my head, but this isn't the right time. [To work in America], I would have to relinquish the control over my movies I have in Israel" (October 3, 2004). Cedar's life experiences, including living on a settlement for more than a year while writing this movie, give him a highly relevant perspective on the issues and questions he raises in this movie, such as the idea of "belonging" to a community and the conflict between the individual and the grand scheme of an ideological mission. Cedar further investigates the social dimension of the settlement movement in a subsequent film, *Campfire* (2004).

Time of Favor was an Israeli box-office phenomenon which won five awards from the Israeli Film Academy Awards in 2000. Though the movie is fictional, there are a startling number of unexpected intersections between the people and propositions of the movie and historical fact.

The American Political Film Society nominated *Time of Favor* for a Peace Award in 2002 because of its relevance to and reflection of two major historical events.

Research for the movie was underway when, on November 5, 1995, Prime

Minister Yizhak Rabin was assassinated during a peace rally in support of the Oslo Accords. The assassin, Yigal Amir, strongly disagreed with the Oslo Accords, which called for an Israeli withdrawal from parts of the Gaza Strip and West Bank and affirmed a Palestinian right of self-government within those areas. Though he will spend the rest of his life in prison, Yigal Amir believes to this day that his murder of Rabin was justified according to his interpretation of Jewish law. Amir claims to have put into action *din rodef* ("law of the pursuer"), a Talmudic concept which, in one controversial reading, sanctions the killing of a fellow Jew in order to prevent him from handing Jewish land over to non-Jews. Amir, a right-wing radical, studied for five years at Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, the first hesder yeshiva.

On September 28, 2000, Ariel Sharon visited the Al Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount. Though he did not enter any Muslim mosques, Palestinian stone-throwers attacked Israeli police once he left. Palestinian sources have repeatedly cited this occasion as the provocation of the Second Intifada, a deadly campaign of Palestinian terrorism (even though it is known that the Palestinian leadership was strategically planning this Intifada ever since withdrawing from the Camp David peace negotiations). The fact that this event could be considered for use in justifying the killing of hundreds of Israeli civilians demonstrates that Rabbi Meltzer's vision of praying on the Temple Mount is an ideal that, if practically attempted, would most likely have dire and bloody consequences.

In another historical peculiarity, the radical Rabbi Meltzer who calls for a Jewish takeover of the Temple Mount is played by Israeli actor and director Assi Dayan. This actor's own father, General Moshe Dayan, was actually a hero of the Six Day War of 1967, in which the Israelis finally gained control of all of Jerusalem. Ironically, following this momentous reunification, it was General Dayan himself who gave administrative control of the Temple Mount to the Muslim Council and ordered Israeli flags removed from the Dome of the Rock. As a secular and pragmatic kibbutznik, Moshe Dayan believed the Temple Mount was more important to Judaism historically than as a holy site. When he saw rabbis gathering on the Temple Mount immediately after Israel assumed jurisdiction, he is reported to have said, "What is this? The Vatican?"

ACTIVITY CHARACTER ANALYSIS

HOW ARE MENACHEM AND PINI DIFFERENT CHARACTER TYPES? HOW ARE THEY THE SAME?

Compare the following two quotes and use them to think about the questions that follow.

“ MENACHEM

Company D, you are nearing war. I want to tell you that war is not always against an enemy. War is first and foremost against yourselves. A brave, strong soldier is one who can overcome his own weaknesses. And that is the real battle.

“ PINI

(to *Itamar*) Listen to me, listen, we're going in now. Don't think about anything, zero, nothing. That's exactly what the rabbi was talking about.... Remember? All becomes insignificant compared to what we're doing. Think only of that. We are going to put history back on its proper course. After this everything will change...What we're doing is a privilege. And it's a privilege that'll be missed if we don't go in now.

- What are the differences in the approaches of Menachem and Pini to inspiring their companions? Which approach do you think is a) more appealing? b) more effective?
- One of the biggest differences between the secular characters (the Mossad agent, policemen and Mookie) and religious characters (Menachem, Pini and Itamar) is that the secular characters do not seem willing to trust anybody. Do you think this is realistic? How does faith affect issues of trust and loyalty in your life?
- Do Menachem and Pini have different opinions concerning the price an individual should pay for the sake of a larger group? If so, what are the differences?
- Do you think there is any turn of events that could have made Menachem into a Jewish terrorist?

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1 UNIT THEME: Religion in Israeli Society

- What is the nature of the relationships between secular and religious Jews as seen in this movie? How are these relationships influenced by the underlying differences in the two views of how and why the world functions, as embodied in the enigmatic idea *L'shma*? (see “Quote Analysis”)
- In what ways is religion important to Michal? How do her views of religion differ from her father's?

2 CINEMATIC THEME: Cinema Exploring Real-Life Themes

- What does this movie say about “belonging” to a community? How do you think Cedar's perspective as someone who has divided his life between two societies, Israeli and American, comes through in this movie?
- Given his father's role in history and opinion of the Temple Mount, what do you think Assi Dayan thought about his part in this movie? Would you speculate that he intended through his role to highlight the dangers of realistically carrying out what his character was advocating (i.e., he is in agreement with his father) or do you think he has some sympathy for his character's opinion?

3 HISTORICAL THEME: Importance of the Temple Mount

- Given the problems, politically and halachically (in Jewish law), in physically approaching the Temple Mount, what do you think Rabbi Meltzer really wants his students to think about when he paints pictures of Jews praying on the Temple Mount? Is he seriously advocating radical action? Or is he being honest when claiming to speak only in ideas, and if so, what ideas is he trying to convey?
- Pay attention to the physical landscape—the vast West Bank expanses Michal and Menachem contemplate versus the tight and narrow tunnels the two of them run through under the Temple Mount. How do these physical places relate to the emotional spaces these characters navigate?

4 CULTURAL THEME: Religious Extremism in Israeli Society

- From what perspective is this story told? What are the advantages of using this perspective for this particular story? How would this movie be different if we were not sure of Menachem's involvement in the plot until the last moment?
- What do you think drives Pini to take extreme action? Do you think he believes ideologically in what he is doing?
- Do you think Yigal Amir's terrible actuation of a religious conviction in assassinating Yitzhak Rabin is in any way parallel to Pini's decision to blow up the Temple Mount? Think about the relevance of the following exchange to your answer:

“ **Rabbi Meltzer:** Maybe what I say sounds radical, but my students know how to interpret it. The Temple is not a building, the Temple Mount is not a mountain. It's an idea. And my students understand that.
Eitan: You don't need explosives for an idea.

- Why do you think this movie is called “Time of Favor”?

QUOTE ANALYSIS

“ **Mookie:** Tell me, what's this ‘*l'shma*’?

Itamar: It means for the sake of something...For the sake of G-d's Name.

Mookie: I don't understand, you're lying here in the mud for the sake of G-d?

Itamar: Let's say you're eating breakfast. Why do you eat?

Mookie: I dunno, I'm hungry, to have strength.

Itamar: Okay, to have strength. What do you need strength for?... See, that's precisely the difference between us. Forgive me for, really, I don't want to offend you, but all day long you hang around here, eating snacks, you feel good, feel bad, you like, you don't like. I don't know, with us it's different, you see. I eat so that I'll have strength. I need strength to learn the Torah. I learn the Torah for the sake of G-d. That's the ultimate goal. That's ‘*l'shma*.’ That's why I'm lying in the mud now. Get it?

- When Mookie sees that Itamar has died, he mutters to himself: ‘*l'shma*.’ What do you think he is thinking about this newly-learned concept? Do you think it makes any sense to him, given that he himself is a soldier who could potentially also die?

“ **Michal:** I'm serious, what's beautiful about me? Is it my nose, my eyes, my hair? Maybe my body? ... I know what is beautiful to you. When you look at me closely, you see my father.

Pini: That's not true, Michal.

Michal: I'm right. You can't look at me without seeing my father.

- Who do you think Michal is really trying more to reject (and upset), Pini or her father? Do you think that in some way she feels that, if she marries Pini, she will always “see her father” in him? How does the nature of Pini's reaction to the rejection prove or disprove her concerns?

“ **Pini:** It’s a punishment. Nothing happens without a reason. I had to suffer a few blows to understand that. But finally I did...

Menachem: Listen to me, Pini. First thing you need to do is find the best diabetes specialist to treat you. You’re talking like some freak, I can barely recognize you. Second, get up, get dressed, put your shoes on, get back to studying. Get back to yourself. You have to fight, you’re rotting in here.

Pini: Fight? Fight what, Menachem? Fight diabetes? Fight the fact that Michal doesn’t want me? All right. Tell me how to fight that.

- How was Pini’s ultimate action intended to “fight” against any of his problems? What message was he hoping to send through it? Who was his intended “audience”—Menachem, Rabbi Meltzer, Michal or some other party?

“ **Mossad agent:** Let me explain this to you. We used to automatically look for the eccentrics, the ones who raise sheep and think they live in the Bible. But we have no problem with them. We can identify them. Meltzer is another matter. Suddenly a disciple of his pops up at the D.A.’s. Another disciple suddenly gets a column in the paper. See, what just two years ago seemed crazy is now finding its way in through the back door. The line, between the normal and the abnormal, has moved.

- In what sense is the Mossad agent thinking about “normal” vs. “abnormal,” religiously, morally, politically or socially? What do you think would have happened to this “line” following the public’s awareness of what Pini attempted?



ABOUT THE MOVIE

Set in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood, this movie has entertainment value purely as the heartwarming tale of a holiday miracle during the Jewish holiday of *Sukkot*. However, this film also carries great significance as the first of its kind: a movie made by members of the ultra-Orthodox community in collaboration with secular filmmakers and aimed for general audiences. All religious characters were played by religious actors in this movie made on a set where Jewish law was followed, even by the secular camera crew from Tel Aviv.

USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

CINEMA Collaboration between ultra-Orthodox Jews and secular Jews to make a movie

HISTORY History and importance of the Jewish holiday of *Sukkot*

CULTURE The ultra-Orthodox community in Israel

BEFORE THE MOVIE

VOCABULARY

Sukkot A joyful Jewish holiday in the fall

Sukkah Temporary dwelling religious Jews use during *Sukkot* to commemorate the Exodus

Eetrog Citron, one of the Four Spices used during the holiday *Sukkot*, considered a blessing for having male children

Ushpizin Holy guests

Gemach Organization that distributes charity to the needy in the Orthodox community

????????????????????????????????????

DID YOU KNOW?

Screenwriter and starring actor Shuli Rand (Moshe Bellanga) wrote the screenplay based on an incident that actually happened to him: one *Sukkot*, someone named Moshe mistakenly used his sukkah without his permission and had two unruly, unexpected guests. The man begged Rand for forgiveness, certain that all the trouble was a consequence of accidentally stealing the sukkah.

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PLOT SUMMARY

Moshe and Malli Bellanga, Breslov Chasidim, have been married for five years but remain childless. They are too poor to buy the necessary provisions to celebrate the holiday of *Sukkot* until they suddenly receive an anonymous gift of \$1000. As they rejoice in this holiday miracle, little do they know that Eliyahu Scorpio and his friend Yossef have escaped from prison and have come looking for Moshe, their former associate. It is not until after the two criminals set up camp in the Bellangas' sukkah and abuse their hospitality that the Bellangas come to view the treatment of their guests as a test of worthiness.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This movie takes place during the Jewish holiday of *Sukkot*, a seven-day festival with historical and agricultural significance. Historically, *Sukkot* commemorates the forty years of wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt, during which Jews lived in temporary shelters, or *sukkot*. Therefore, celebrating this holiday involves building *sukkot*, eating all meals in them and even sleeping in them. Agriculturally, *Sukkot* is the harvest festival. Part of the holiday's religious service uses what are known as the Four Spices: date-palm branches (*lulav*), myrtle (*hadass*), willow (*aravot*) and citron (*etrog*). The Four Spices are waved in all directions in a prayer for rain to make the crops grow in the coming year.

According to mystical Judaism, the souls of the Jewish forefathers known as the Seven Shepherds of Israel (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and King David) come to visit the *sukkah*. They are known as *Ushpizin*, an Aramaic word meaning "guests." Some recite a mystical invitation to the *Ushpizin* upon entering the *sukkah* for the first time and when eating meals during *Sukkot*. At this time of giving thanks for a successful harvest and in striving to be worthy of these eminent visitors, it is traditional to invite the needy and other guests to holiday meals, underscoring the importance of hospitality in Judaism.

It is said that each of the *Ushpizin* personifies a different aspect of human perfection, so that together they form a model for the perfect man. *Sukkot* falls immediately before the day when the fate of the Jewish People is sealed for the coming year, at a time when Jews are thinking about their path in life. The visiting *Ushpizin* provide examples of positive qualities which can be emulated in the year to come.

Abraham loving, kindness • **Isaac** restraint and personal strength • **Jacob** beauty and truth
Moses eternity • **Aaron** empathy • **Joseph** holiness • **David** kingship

According to another way of understanding the *Ushpizin*, each of them was forced to go into exile and endured due to the protection of G-d, just as Jews today during *Sukkot* leave the security of their permanent houses to dwell in the *sukkah* under G-d's protection.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Screenwriter and starring actor Shuli Rand (Moshe Bellanga) abandoned his acting career once he made the decision to follow an Orthodox Jewish lifestyle—or so he thought. It was an idea from Gidi Dar, the director of two movies in which Shuli acted previously, which brought him back to the big screen. Dar, a secular Jew, offered to make a movie that would be appropriate for an Orthodox Jewish actor, both in content and in keeping with Jewish law in the manner of its production.

Dar signed a contract guaranteeing that the production would comply with Jewish law in that no one would shoot for or work on the film on Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest, and that the set would be kept completely kosher, in accordance with Jewish dietary laws. In addition, Rand's actual wife plays Malli in this movie, because Rand would not act opposite a woman who was not his wife. Though not an actress and initially hesitant, ultimately she agreed to play the part. "In real life," the couple has six children, who were a constant presence on the movie set.

In addition to Rand and his wife, every other actor playing a religious role in the movie was actually religious. Many, like Rand, were former actors who became religious and left the profession. The *etrog* appraiser was played by Michael Weigel, a former actor on a successful Israeli television series; Ben Baruch was played by Avraham Abutbul, formerly in films by action movie mogul Menachem Golan and the brother of Alon Abutbul, an Israeli movie star; and the rabbi was played by Daniel Dayan, a former kung-fu master who acted in Hollywood martial arts movies. For extras for the street scenes, religious non-actors were recruited.

Before going into production, Rand sought the advice and secured the support of his rabbi, Shalom Arush, a leader of the Breslover community. Rabbi Arush was supplied with a cell phone, dubbed "The Red Phone," in case a conflict arose between what Rand believed was Jewish law and what Dar deemed necessary to make the film. The phone was never used.

When the film was released, Dar agreed not to exhibit the film on Shabbat (in Israel only), an arrangement which carried great financial risk. Commercial Israeli movie houses had never before received such a request. Nevertheless, they complied with it, and ultimately the movie was successful.

Shuli Rand won the 2004 Best Actor award from the Israeli Film Academy.



I remember walking around neighborhoods populated only with ultra-Orthodox, feeling for the first time that this is a world completely apart, living by different rules, a fairy tale world. Entering that world was like Alice In Wonderland down the rabbit hole. It didn't look quite real to me.

Every time I visited him, Shuli was becoming a bit more religious. Sitting at home with my wife, I suddenly heard shouts from the street. I recognized Shuli's voice calling my name, and when I opened the door for him and Michal I was shocked to see a fully-costumed Hasidic couple, with the beard and all the rest. It was very strange to see a close friend looking so different. It was almost unreal.

I was very reluctant about the meeting with Rabbi Arush. But when I came into the room I found this man with a smile that could melt a person in two seconds. I was straight with the rabbi, and I think he appreciated my honesty. We talked about the polarity that exists between secular and religious Jews in Israel and his feeling was that a human Hassidic film could help diminish this animosity. Rabbi Arush gave us his blessing and promised to help. It was nothing official but his encouragement opened many doors.

It's complicated to make a film. But then to ask the director to use his art, his tools, not only to try to make a good film but one that adheres to the laws of the Jewish nation! It was a complicated arrangement, but also magical, also beautiful. If we were going to go this deep into this world, and in a way receive its welcome and be guests in this world, we could not break its rules and end up doing things that would appear disrespectful.

Marriage is a complex experience. In many respects, Shuli and Michal bring real life to the film—all the special qualities of a true married couple that cannot be scripted or rehearsed. We managed to convey a feeling of love and romance and intimacy without showing the man and woman touch even once. When you think about what most movies do to create that kind of excitement!

Rabbi Arush said that talent is a gift from G-d, it is part of the world, and it can be used to form bonds between religious and non-religious Jews. Even during the making of the movie, it was an amazing thing to see such a bond grow between the crew and the actors. In some ways, that experience was an even greater achievement than the artistic success of the film.

It would have been easier to get secular actors and dress them up like ultra-Orthodox—like they always do in movies—but it would never be the same. We went through casting agents that told us about actors that had turned to religion, and I quickly found out that they all miss acting very much. Once they understood what kind of film we were doing they jumped at the opportunity to participate.

People from different religious trends, even the most devout, appeared as extras in the film as a 'mitzvah' (good deed). The Tel Aviv crew admitted they had never before seen extras so disciplined and happy to work. The shooting was very difficult but also very special. More and more we were all drawn into this world, entering the language of these people. I got used to talking to the actors in their terminology, explaining that they should use their belief in G-d when acting. In many instances, it helped them overcome their fear of camera. Some of the extras called me, 'Our Rabbi.'

I remember one of the first sneak previews that I attended. There were only 20 people in the theater, all of them religious, from different sects. Everybody began laughing at the right places, and then after 15 minutes, when Moshe says to his wife, 'We need a miracle,' and she replies, 'We'll see miracles,' suddenly I heard one of the viewers say, loudly and completely seriously, 'Amen.' And then more people began repeating, 'Amen, Amen, Amen.' The moment reminded me of the famous story from the beginning of cinema when the Melies Brothers projected film of a train entering a station and people ran from the theater because they thought the train would come bursting through the screen! I understood that many religious people had never seen a film before, and for them moviegoing is perhaps a more naïve and pure emotional experience.

I'd like to think I'm always dealing with faith, just in a very different way than Shuli. This is a movie about faith from within the faith. My job as a director is to make that real as a psychological journey, one that enables all kinds of audience members to identify with this man.

AFTER THE MOVIE

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1 UNIT THEME: Religion in Israeli Society

- What is the relationship between the secular world and the religious world in this movie? What parts of this relationship do you find authentic? Are there parts that seem misleading?
- How would this movie be different if it were set in an ultra-Orthodox community in the United States instead of in Israel?
- How does religion as you see it practiced in this movie differ from the religion you practice?

2 CINEMATIC THEME: Collaboration Between Ultra-Orthodox and Secular Jews in Movie Production

- What issues do you think were most challenging for the religious actors during the making of this film? What issues were challenging for the secular actors? What tensions do you think could have been in play?
- What do you think was the goal in making this movie? What messages does it convey? Do you think the goal was different for the secular and for the religious actors and producers involved?
- Do you think the film is aimed more for a secular or religious audience? Why? How do you think you could change the movie so it would be more relevant to the audience you did not pick?
- **Activity:** Refer to the quotes from Director Gidi Dar on the previous page. Pretend you are Shuli Rand. Write your own “memoirs” about the making of the movie, including your meeting with Rabbi Arush, your feeling about the religious actors in the movie and their work alongside the non-religious camera crew, and your overall hopes and fears during the movie’s production.

3 HISTORICAL THEME: History and Importance of the Jewish Holiday of Sukkot

- What did you learn about the Jewish holiday of *Sukkot* from this movie? How is the way you observe *Sukkot* different than the way it is observed by the characters in this movie? How is it similar?
- What themes make this movie especially suited to *Sukkot*? Can you think of ways in which other Jewish holidays might be suitable settings?
- What do the characters in the movie learn about each of the traits of the *Ushpizin*? (see “Historical Background”)
- How does Malli’s decision to leave home and the outcome of this decision relate to the story of the *Ushpizin* and of Jews today who leave the security of their permanent houses during *Sukkot*?

4 CULTURAL THEME: Culture: The Ultra-Orthodox Community in Israel

- Which characters in this movie could you identify with and why?
- Would you want to live in the community where this movie takes place? Why or why not?
- In what ways are the lives of the main characters different from your life? In what ways are they similar?

QUOTE ANALYSIS

“**Moshe:** Why has the Lord commanded us to stay in the *sukkah*? Not only stay there, but everything: eat, drink, sleep, all in the *sukkah*. Why is that? G-d wanted us to feel that just as the *sukkah* is a temporary dwelling, so is this world, temporary, passing, where we're merely guests.

- What does it mean to be a “guest” in this world? How does it imply that we should treat this world and our experience in it? What do you think this means to Moshe in terms of the way he lives his life?

“**Rabbi:** Look what our teachers wrote here, a marvelous thing: When a man passes a test, he progresses. Right? He thinks that he earned some rest. It's then that he's given an even harder test. No 'rest.' No rest in this world. Above all Moshe, don't get angry. G-d Almighty, save us from anger.

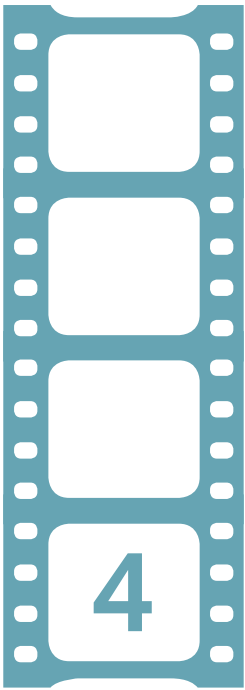
- What role does anger play in this movie? What is the significance of Eliyahu's reminiscence of how Moshe used to have a hot temper? Based on his behavior in this movie, to what extent has Moshe resolved his anger management problems and how?

“**Eliyahu:** Let's make the man happy. We messed him up for no reason.

- Why does Eliyahu emphasize that it was “for no reason”? In Eliyahu's mind, would it be justified if he had a reason for upsetting Moshe? Does the quote imply some irony when compared with a religious standpoint from which “everything happens for a reason”?

“**Eliyahu:** Moshe, from all my heart, I want to tell you something. You changed completely. The truth: at first you pissed me off. I didn't believe you one bit, but now I see it's for real. I have respect for that.

- Do you think Eliyahu is being sincere in this remark, or is he trying to make Moshe feel better? Do you think it matters to Moshe what Eliyahu thinks? Did this entire *Sukkot* have any effect on Eliyahu and Yossef? Why or why not?



INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Quality Israeli movies have universal appeal because they depict vivid, believable characters and the complexities of the relationships between them. The characters may operate against the backdrop of political situations and social norms not found in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, while watching interactions between characters, viewers will be able to clearly identify with the basic human emotions and chemistry which play themselves out in Israeli culture, both when it comes to serious issues and also in day-to-day life.

In *Walk on Water*, a web of unexpected relationships sheds light on a host of serious issues which, through the identities of the characters, become intertwined, such as Israeli-Palestinian relations, Holocaust retribution and homosexuality. *Wisdom of the Pretzel* provides a window into the lives of young people in Tel Aviv, their endless (if not always successful) pursuit of romantic relationships, their struggle to determine the meaning of life and the painful process of growing up.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- 1 How can you relate with the characters in these movies? Do you think their relationships seem realistic?
- 2 How are these movies “Israeli” in subject matter and content? How are they universal?
- 3 In what ways are the types of relationships and the way they form and develop in a society indicative of the society as a whole? What can you learn from Israeli society from these movies?
- 4 How do the characters change and develop as a result of the relationships they forge in these movies?

walk on water

2004, 103 min

ABOUT THE MOVIE

When Eyal, a tough Israeli agent, is given the assignment to kill off an aging ex-Nazi, he never suspects that this one mission could change his life. His interactions with characters such as the young Germans Axel and Pia, and Rafik, a gay Palestinian, yield powerful insights into the qualities of manliness, the fabric of personal relationships and the nature of forgiveness.

USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

CINEMA Recurring themes in multiple movies made by a director

HISTORY Holocaust retribution; Second Intifada; responsibility of the individual as a theme in history

CULTURE Culture of the Mossad (Israeli intelligence agency); Israeli attitudes towards Germans; stereotypes of Israeli men

BEFORE THE MOVIE

VOCABULARY

Mossad The Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations, referred to as the Mossad (The Institute), is responsible for Israeli intelligence collection, counter-terrorism and covert operations, a role roughly equivalent to that of the United States CIA. One unique component of its function is facilitating *aliyah* where it is forbidden. Despite being largely powerless during World War II, the Mossad succeeded in bringing to Israel approximately 100,000 Jews (many of them Holocaust survivors and Jews driven out of Arab countries) in the period from its inception in 1938 to Israel's founding in 1948. More recently, the Mossad supported Operation Moses, which brought Ethiopian Jews to Israel in 1984, and the evacuation of Jews from war-torn Sarajevo to Israel in 1992. The Mossad also engages in targeted assassinations of terrorists.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Walk on Water was extremely successful internationally, making a total of \$7 million worldwide, the most of any Israeli movie. In the United States, it grossed \$142,000 in 29 theaters in one weekend (March 2005).¹⁴

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PLOT SUMMARY

Israeli Mossad agent Eyal is given a simple task to get his mind off his wife's recent suicide: track down and kill an aging ex-Nazi officer, Alfred Himmelman. In the guise of a tour guide, Eyal befriends his target's grandson Axel, who is in Israel visiting his sister Pia, who lives on a kibbutz. Eyal accompanies Axel to the Dead Sea, wines and dines with the siblings in Tel Aviv and escorts them to a nightclub recommended to the liberal Axel by a Palestinian waiter. Axel is gay, whereas Eyal thinks of himself as a macho Israeli man. Nevertheless, when Eyal travels to Berlin, believing the old man will resurface at his son's birthday party, he is uncertain whether he can go through with his assignment.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

HOW DO THE INTIFADA AND THE HOLOCAUST EACH CONNECT TO THE QUESTION OF AN INDIVIDUAL'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR SOCIETY AS A WHOLE?

“ **Axel:** You didn't have to do that.

Eyal: Why not?

Axel: It wasn't too much money for me. I feel so bad for those shopkeepers.

Eyal: Oh, the poor Palestinian shopkeepers. *(In Hebrew):* I forgot you Germans are so sensitive. Human misery always touched your hearts.

This movie adeptly ties together two somber historical periods widely separated geographically and chronologically: the Holocaust and the Second Intifada. Both periods have had lasting traumatic repercussions. In both cases, one of these consequences was a breakdown of trust between the adversaries involved—and the animosities have been perpetuated to this day by their descendants.

Two moral questions are involved in tying together these two periods. The first is retribution versus forgiveness. As a Mossad agent, it is part of Eyal's job to assassinate known terrorists, performing retribution with each assignment. But should the terrible crimes committed with the murder of six million Jews be avenged even sixty years later? As the child of Holocaust survivors, Eyal struggles with forgiveness of a Nazi perpetrator, now aged and dying, as well as of his children and grandchildren.

Second, to what extent can individuals be held responsible for the actions of the population as a whole? The Second Intifada was an unprecedented wave of Palestinian terrorist attacks targeted at Israeli civilians. Even though Eyal has no evidence whatsoever that the Palestinian waiter Rafik is a terrorist or in any way involved with terrorism, Eyal carries over his feelings towards the Palestinian terrorists with his icy reception of Rafik, treating him with great suspicion and refusing even to listen to him.

The Intifada had an enormous effect on day-to-day life in Israel. Eyal complains about the trivialities, the fact that cell phones never work after a suicide bombing because everyone simultaneously calls to make sure friends and family are safe, and that the radio only plays sad songs befitting of the mood of national mourning. But Eyal's attitude of annoyance belies grief and anger, which surfaces at such times as when he says to his boss, "I'm stuck with this pseudo-liberal who talks about suicide bombers' motives. I almost punched him." This movie examines the historical legacy of ethnic conflicts and the rigidity and lasting effects of the social prejudices they create.

WANNSEE

Wannsee, the wealthy Berlin suburb where Axel and Pia's parents live, was the historical location of the infamous Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942. The purpose of this conference was to inform senior Nazi officials and senior governmental administrators of the plans for the "final solution to the Jewish question": systematic genocide. Though the conference was only 90 minutes in length, postwar writers viewed it as extremely significant as the moment when the leading German ministries became official accomplices in Hitler's heinous plan. The 2001 BBC/HBO film *Conspiracy* was scripted according to the exact timeframe and minutes of the original meeting. Today the villa where the conference took place is a museum.

HOLOCAUST RETRIBUTION

It is factually true that, after the war, the Mossad carried out operations to find and capture Nazi war criminals in hiding. Most famously, in 1960, a team of Mossad agents captured Adolf Eichmann, a former high-ranking Nazi SS officer responsible for mass deportations of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps in Eastern Europe. Eichmann was living under a false identity in Argentina, along with his wife and four sons, one of whom, Ricardo Francisco Eichmann, was born in Argentina in 1955. Eichmann was brought to trial at an Israeli court in Jerusalem and indicted on 15 criminal charges, including crimes against humanity, crimes against the Jewish people and membership in an outlawed organization. In his own defense, Eichmann insisted he was only "following orders." He was hanged in the only civil execution in the history of Israel, which has a general policy of not using the death penalty.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

WHAT THEMES IN THIS MOVIE RECUR IN THE DIRECTOR'S OTHER MOVIES?

Many movies directed by Eytan Fox explore the themes of homosexuality and of Israeli-Palestinian relationships.

Fox himself is openly gay. His partner of over 18 years, Gal Uchovsky, has been involved with the scriptwriting for many of Fox's films, including this movie. A writer and journalist, Uchovsky has been one of the most influential gay men in Israel as a vocal advocate for gay rights.

Fox's early films with homosexual undertones include his first short films *Time Off* (1990) and *Gotta Have Heart* (1997). In addition, Fox directed *Florentine* (1997-2000), the first Israeli TV show with gay main characters, which examined the life of young people in Tel Aviv before and after the Rabin assassination and won a TV drama award. *Yossi and Jager* (2002), Fox's breakthrough international hit, is the love story of two male officers in the IDF.

Fox credits his awareness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to his mother. When he was two, his family emigrated from New York City to Israel, where his mother became a community activist in Jerusalem's French Hill neighborhood and member of the Jerusalem Council. She died while Fox was making *Walk on Water*. After her death, Fox and his siblings visited Isawiya, an Arab village close to French Hill, and began a project to improve its living conditions in their mother's name.

In addition, Fox revealed to the French gay magazine *Têtu* that he fell in love with a Palestinian man during his military service at age 18, an experience which he describes as having a significant impact on him. (July-August 2007 issue, pg. 24). After *Walk on Water*, Fox returned to the theme of Israeli-Palestinian relations in *The Bubble* (2006), the story of a gay relationship between an Israeli and a Palestinian in Tel Aviv.

In 2006, Fox was the first to receive the Decade Award, given to a filmmaker whose work significantly contributed to Jewish cinema over at least ten years.

MOVIE TRIVIA

- The actress who plays Pia, Caroline Peters, revealed in an interview on Israeli TV that her actual grandfather was a Nazi.
- The hotel that the audience is led to believe is in Germany was clearly filmed in Israel, as on one camera shot mezuzot (religious items affixed to doorposts in Jewish homes/Israeli hotel rooms) can be seen up and down the hallway.

FOX ON ACTOR LIOR ASHKENAZI (EYAL)

"He's a superb actor and he became a very close friend," says Fox. He being a straight role model and me being a gay director made for our relationship [to be similar to the one in] the film..." People in Israel were like, 'What's going on here? Why are they so close? There must be something happening we don't know,' and we're like, 'No, no, we're just very close friends.'"¹⁵
Lior Ashkenazi also appears in Fox's latest movie The Bubble.

AFTER THE MOVIE

ACTIVITY

Discuss the movie's ending.

- **Pretend you are Axel.** Go around the room and have each person share whether, as Axel, he or she would have done what Axel did. Those who disagree should debate with each other as to what course of action would be most moral and most in Axel's character.
- **Pretend you are Eyal.** Now pretend you are Eyal, and repeat the above as Eyal.

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

UNIT THEME: Relationships

- 1 • Do the characters and their relationships seem realistic? To what extent and in what ways are the characters stock characters or stereotypes? Can you pinpoint specific moments when characters break out of their "stereotypical" roles?
- How do set characteristics such as nationality, sexual orientation and family background inform a person's relationships with the outside world? To what extent can beliefs based on this information change over time?

2 CINEMATIC THEME: Recurring Themes in Multiple Films by a Director

- What do you think was the director's overall message about homosexuality? About Israeli-Palestinian relations?
- If you were a director, would you want all your movies to share a common theme? Why or why not? If you were a director and had to pick one theme for your movies, what would it be?

3 HISTORICAL THEME: Responsibility of the Individual as a Theme in History

- Why do you think Wannsee was chosen as the location for Axel and Pia's family home?
- Do you think Eyal's experiences as a Mossad agent carrying out targeted assassinations have unduly impacted the decisiveness of his feelings towards Palestinians? Or is this simply intrinsic in his personality?
- Have you ever thought about, or actually practiced, boycotting German products (cars, visiting Germany, etc.) because of the Holocaust? Do you know if your parents or grandparents feel differently about this topic than you? If so, can you explain this generation gap?
- Do you (or have you observed anyone else) make assumptions about Israelis or Palestinians based on what is happening with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

4 CULTURAL THEME: Gender Roles in Israeli Society

- Describe the function of the women (Pia, Eyal's wife) in this movie. How are they different from their male counterparts?
- In what ways is Eyal a stereotypical Israeli man? Are there any preconceived stereotypes you have of Israeli men which Eyal does not embody? What messages does the movie send about "manliness," in Israel and also universally?
- Where does the theme of water appear in the movie? What is its significance?

QUOTE ANALYSIS

“ **Axel:** (tries to walk on the sea and falls in)

Eyal: (sarcastically) Bravo. You did it.

Axel: You don't understand. You can't just come to the Sea of Galilee and start walking on water. If you could, everybody would be doing it. You need to prepare yourself.

Eyal: And how would you do that? Please enlighten me.

Axel: Well, you need to completely purify yourself. Your heart needs to be like it's clean from the inside: no negativity, no bad thoughts.

Eyal: And then?

Axel: And then you can walk on water. I'm sure of it.

- Based on this scene, why is "Walk on Water" the title of this film? Does this explanation of what is required to walk on water relate in any way to what is required to build a relationship, as seen with the relationships in this film?

“ **Pia:** (to Axel in German) Sometimes it's difficult. People are very direct here. They just ask you, 'Was any of your family a Nazi?' It's interesting that when I say yes, they look at me with pity. But they stay friendly. Nobody's ever been unfriendly because of it.

Axel: If you accept yourself, others will accept you too.

Pia: And that's where you're wrong, little brother. You really are naïve.

- Compare Axel's suggestion here with his advice to Eyal about walking on water in the previous quote. How do you think his attitude relates to his position as a homosexual in a correct and polite German household? Do you think this approach is practicable, or is Pia right in calling her brother naïve?

“ **Eyal:** Menachem, let's be honest here. No one gives a damn anymore. He'll die by himself soon enough.

Menachem: I want to get him before G-d does.

- Do you think Menachem's attitude here is morally just? Do you think such an action would bring you closer to being able to "walk on water" or further away?

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

HOW DO CHARACTERS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS HELP THEM TO SEE THEMSELVES IN A NEW LIGHT?

The movie approaches the deep and painful subjects of the Holocaust and the Intifada through the fascinating angle of relationships between individuals who happen to be members of different groups involved. As an added contrast, the movie uses sexual orientation to explore masculinity and what it takes to be a man. Initially informed by historical, cultural and social biases beyond the characters' control, the chemistry between characters changes as they interact.

Eyal is a stereotypical Israeli man, sure of himself to a point of fault. Even facing the suicide of his wife, he stubbornly refuses to seek outside help and talk to a psychologist, despite his boss's express instructions to do so. When Axel asks whether it is true that Israeli men never talk about their feelings, Eyal answers, "I don't know. I really don't like to talk about it." His inability to access and assess his emotions is symbolized by his inability to cry, supposedly caused by a medical problem. His frequent use of eye-drops reminds the viewer of Eyal's condition and also connects with the theme of water, highlighted with the movie's title.

Eyal is the son of Holocaust survivors who also suppressed their emotions. Eyal relates, "That's how I grew up. No German products in the house, no traveling to Germany, never talking about it. When they [my parents] were alone and didn't think I was listening, they spoke German."

After Eyal's wife's death, it is another man, Axel, who gains access to Eyal's emotional side. This process is cemented in a humorous way when Eyal purchases for Axel a "Folk Dances of Israel" CD, an item strictly taboo to the macho Israeli man. Eyal bemoans to Axel, "Do you know how humiliating it was to walk into Tower Records and ask for this music? You should have seen the guy there, how he looked at me." Furthermore, despite Eyal's self-proclaimed homophobia, he steps up to defend Axel's gay friends in Berlin, a scene in which Eyal is at his most masculine.

Ultimately, it is on Axel's shoulder that Eyal cries, and the powerful ending of the movie speaks volumes about the true meaning of masculinity, which may have nothing to do with sexual orientation at all.

Over the course of the movie, Eyal develops the ability to see people as individuals and not merely as representatives of the larger movements and forces at work in the world. Gradually, he is even able to see himself this way.



WISDOM OF THE PRETZEL

2001, 101 min

WARNING This movie contains sexual language and content and should be shown to appropriate audiences only.

ABOUT THE MOVIE

This movie features the lives of young people in Tel Aviv, their aspirations, preoccupations and day-to-day interactions. The movie begins as a humorous tribute to the lustful instincts, fanciful thought processes and all the excitement and insecurities of youth. However, it slowly deepens into a serious and philosophical examination of the relationships the characters choose, the life decisions they make and the regrets with which ultimately they must live.

USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

CINEMA The making—and remaking—of a movie

HISTORY Tel Aviv as Israel's secular culture capital

CULTURE The culture of young Israelis today



BEFORE THE MOVIE

PLOT SUMMARY

Golan is almost thirty years old. He thought that at this point in life he would be a married CEO. Instead, he resists growing up and spends his life in search of the love of his life. But when he is set up on a blind date with his best friend's sister, this irresistible yet unpredictable girl causes him to question the meaning of life and his place in it.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

WHERE IS THIS MOVIE GOING NEXT?

This movie, which was nominated for 10 Israeli Oscars, is writer Ilan Heitner's adaption of his own novel in collaboration with director Dani Menkin.

Menkin and Heitner are currently working to adapt *Wisdom of the Pretzel* to the American screen in a project by Hear No Evil Films/Hey Jude Productions. Filming is scheduled to take place in New York City in spring 2008. The remake will star the American actor Anthony Rapp, known for his roles in *School Ties*, *Dazed and Confused* and *A Beautiful Mind* and in off-Broadway and Broadway productions. Also starring will be the Israeli actor Assi Cohen, previously seen in *Munich*, *Yossi & Jagger* and *Bonjour Monsieur Shlomi*.

Menkin, known as a sports reporter for the Israeli Sports Channel, has made documentaries including *Like Arosesti*, about Israeli basketball, and *39 Pounds of Love*, about an Israeli-American born with muscular dystrophy. He also created a television series for National Geographic, broadcast around the world, and FACT, an Israeli version of *60 Minutes*.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

WHAT DOES “TEL AVIV” MEAN?

The name Tel Aviv—actually borrowed from Ezekiel 3:15—literally means “hill of spring.” What is a hill of spring? A *tel* is technically a heap of ancient ruins which grows over time as each new era builds on the foundations of the last, and “spring” signifies rebirth. As the revitalization of a civilization, Tel Aviv is an extremely Zionist vision. In fact, Tel Aviv is the title given to the Hebrew translation of Herzl’s utopian romance *Altneuland* (literally: “Old New Land”).

Herzl would be extremely impressed with the Tel Aviv of today, which clearly lives up to its name. Founded in 1909 as a suburb of the ancient port city of Jaffa, Tel Aviv is now a vibrant, cosmopolitan city—with the highest cost of living in the Middle East⁶—with Mediterranean beaches and a hip clubbing scene. It is also the center of what is known as Silicon Wadi (*emeq hasilicon* in Hebrew), the area in which many of Israel’s high-tech industries are based. Along the lines of Herzl’s vision of a secular ingathering of Jews, Tel Aviv is about as good as it gets.

AFTER THE MOVIE

ACTIVITIES

- Describe your version of *Wisdom of the Pretzel* taking place in New York. Who are the characters? What is the plot?
- Imagine what happens to the characters and their relationships after the story ends. Describe the nature of their relationships and what the characters will be doing in 1 year and in 10 years: a) Diklah and Golan b) Golan and Sharon c) Batzal and Ruth d) Yoss and Galit

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

UNIT THEME: Relationships

- Relationships that are seen as stereotypically more “Israeli-style” tend to be close, without emotional space between the two parties involved. On the other hand, “American” relationships are stereotypically more polite and artificial, with room for the parties to secretly disagree to avoid unpleasant conflict. In what ways are the relationships in this movie “Israeli”? Are there aspects of certain relationships which you would characterize as “American”? Which and why?
- Which relationships in the movie would you call “successful” and why? What does this movie say about the necessary ingredients for a successful relationship? Is a romance different from a friendship in terms of what makes it successful?
- What is the relationship between younger people and older people in this movie? What is the opinion of the younger people of the possibility of older people having wisdom to share with them? Where do the younger people actually look for wisdom?

2 CINEMATIC THEME: Movie Re-Making

- What changes in plot and cast of characters will be necessary to alter this movie to suit the New York setting and the tastes of an American market? What aspects of this movie would the general American public find hard to understand or relate to?
- Would you be enthusiastic about watching an adaptation of this movie set in New York? Why or why not?

3 HISTORICAL THEME: Tel Aviv

- Based on this movie, how would you describe the atmosphere of “the scene” of young people in Tel Aviv and the attitudes of the people involved?
- If you have ever visited Tel Aviv yourself, do you think the movie’s depiction of Tel Aviv is accurate? Why or why not?

4 CULTURAL THEME: The Lifestyle of Young Israelis

- Can you sympathize with the movie’s characters? What similarities do you share with this group of friends? What differences set you apart?
- Do you have a favorite character? Who is it and why?
- How do the characters form life decisions? Do you think the ending of the movie changes the characters’ lives and decision-making processes in any lasting way?
- Why is this movie entitled “Wisdom of the Pretzel”? What is the wisdom?

QUOTE ANALYSIS

“ **Diklah:** What do you wanna be when you grow up?

Golan: I have no idea. As time goes by, I feel as if I know less and less. At this rate, by the time I’m 30, I won’t know anything... You suddenly find yourself asking questions you thought were crazy, like: who am I, what am I, what do I want. And no one has the answer. It just gets more complicated.

- Where does Golan stand in terms of finding answers to these questions by the end of the film? What is the movie’s message concerning the process of personal discovery?

“ **Golan:** It puts things in proportion. Go out, have fun, because the only thing you have at that age are the memories of the crazy stuff you did when you were young.

- How does this conversation from Golan and Diklah’s first date foreshadow events that happen later in the movie? What does Diklah’s subsequent rendition of “memories of crazy stuff” emphasize about her personality and character? Do you think the story attracts or repels Golan? What attracts Golan to Diklah in general?

“ **Golan:** My dad says that if you don’t pick up 10 cents you’re not worth 10 cents.

Diklah: My dad says that if you pick up 10 cents you’re worth 10 cents.

Golan: Why is it that those great sentences always have contradictory sentences that sound right too?

- What does this quote say about youth’s search for wisdom? Do you think the quote has any relation to the movie’s title?

“ **Diklah:** Are you crying? Caricatures make you cry?

Golan: Don’t you get emotional from things like this?

Diklah: I get emotional from different things. Besides, I never cry.

- In “Behind the scenes” clips, Golan questions the director as to why he is made to cry at this point, saying that it does not make sense to him. What do you think the director had in mind?

“ **Golan:** I’ve had it with this Lego! This will determine if I work or not? Gimme a break! You loser! This is your job? Standing there like a jerk, watching people play Lego? And you look like the back of a bus!
Golan: (*thinking*) Why do they do this to us? Must I humiliate myself just to get a job? And what for? Money? To be stuck in traffic in the world’s fastest car? To eat nothing when you’re starving? To live in some crazy house and be lonely and scared, and for people only to like you because you have money? Who said this pot-head has less fun than the suit in the Mercedes? What’s it worth if you’re never satisfied and just want more and more? After all, we all wind up in the same place. And what are we left with there?

- What was it about the Lego exercise which upset Golan so much, based on his subsequent philosophical musings? Why is there such a big difference between what Golan says out loud and what he says to himself? Can you empathize with his reaction?

“ **Golan:** You expect me to stay with her just because she’s your sister? So that I don’t hurt you?
Guy: You’re not hurting me, you’re hurting yourself. You’re incapable of having a real relationship with anyone, every time it gets serious you weasel your way out, which leaves you alone, not me.

- Why do you think Golan breaks up with Diklah?

“ **Batzal:** She’s amazing. I never knew there were such girls. She’s pretty, but grew up as if she were ugly. Only girls from the countryside are like that nowadays. She’s unaware of her beauty. It’s amazing. She wasn’t raised on MTV, cafes, after-parties, makeup. 5 AM she was in the cowshed, then the kitchen, then all kinds of environmental activities, Greenpeace and stuff.

- What do you think his friends in the room are thinking while Batzal is extolling the virtues of his new girlfriend? Do you think the qualities he describes above are inherently assets, or that Batzal sees them positively because of his infatuation?

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

WHAT IS THE WISDOM OF THE PRETZEL?

“ **Golan:** Look what I found. Look at that girl. We’re going to the Sinai, first time one-on-one, I just hope she digs it. She’s such a nut, look what she’s wearing to the Sinai.
Storekeeper: She’ll lie on the beach like a Bedouin princess, she’ll love it.
Golan: How do you know?
Storekeeper: The pretzel!
Golan: The pretzel never lies, man.

This quote is the sole mention of pretzels in a movie entitled *Wisdom of the Pretzel*. The storekeeper does not even appear to have any real reason to refer to “the pretzel” at this moment; it seems as though he could just as easily have pointed to any other item in his store.

Perhaps, then, subscribing to the “wisdom of the pretzel” would involve following an arbitrary, whimsical philosophy—the belief that you can make do by improvising with whatever you happen to have on hand. The characters in the movie surely reflect such an attitude in their actions and lifestyle. When they stumble across the big questions in life, they may desperately look around for something upon which to make a decision, but what ultimately guides them is a whim, something as trivial and irrelevant as a pretzel. For instance, why does Golan call to ask for the number of the girl he met at the wedding? They asked him to re-do a form at a job interview and he walked out. Why does Golan go back to comfort Diklah at the very end of the movie? He got a flat tire. He lives in a world where the vicissitudes of life seem to consist of a string of unpredictable coincidences as twisted as a pretzel, and fate capriciously takes its toll. Perhaps he and his friends feel that a more systematic approach would not necessarily even make a difference.

Or maybe they truly believe in the power of signs, inconsequential to the uninitiated, but ever-persuasive to the young and eternally optimistic.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 From the Israeli Consulate. For more recipes, visit <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/facts%20about%20israel/israeli%20cuisine/>
- 2 Jewish Film Archive, <http://www.jewishfilm.com/jz39.html>
- 3 Interview, http://www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-/module/displaystory/story_id/22362/edition_id/450/format/html/displaystory.html
- 4 ibid
- 5 ibid
- 6 <http://www.popmatters.com/film/reviews/j/james-journey-to-jerusalem.shtml>
- 7 With information from http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Peace/golan_hts.html
- 8 www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=510375
- 9 Also the director of the controversial *Paradise Now* (2005), about the psychology of suicide bombers
- 10 <http://www.idi.org.il/english/article.asp?id=22112007112505>
- 11 <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/859573.html>
- 12 <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/ral2-hes.htm>
- 13 From www.ushpizin.com
- 14 <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3063416,00.html>
- 15 <http://www.socal.com/articles/1483-0.html>
- 16 Worldwide Cost of Living Survey 2007, <http://www.mercer.com/referencecontent.jhtml?idContent=1268475>



american zionist movement

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the American Zionist Movement is to strengthen the connection of American Jews with Israel; develop their appreciation of the centrality of Israel to Jewish life worldwide; deepen their understanding of Israeli society and the challenges in faces; encourage travel, long-term visits and Aliyah to Israel; and to facilitate dialogue, debate and collective active action to further Zionism in the United States and abroad.

ZIONIST MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS

Ameinu, American Friends of Likud, American Zionist Youth Council, AMIT, ARZA-Association of Reform Zionists of America, Baltimore Zionist District, Bnai Zion, Herut, N.A., Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, MERCAZ-Zionist Organization of the Conservative Movement, MERETZ-USA, NA'AMAT USA, Religious Zionists of America, Russian American Jews for Israel, Zionist Organization of America, Zionist Student Movement

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