

LA  
CINÉMATHÈQUE  
**FILM CLUB**



Israeli Series  
Autumn/Winter 2016-2017

An Introduction to Israeli  
Cinema

# Cinema of Israel

Article sourced from Wikimand: [http://www.wikimand.com/en/Cinema\\_of\\_Israel](http://www.wikimand.com/en/Cinema_of_Israel)

## History



Movies were made in Mandatory Palestine from the beginning of the silent film era although the development of the local film industry accelerated after the establishment of the state. Early films were mainly documentary or news roundups, shown in Israeli cinemas before the movie started.

One of the pioneers of cinema in Israel was Baruch Agadati. Agadati purchased cinematographer Yaakov Ben Dov's film archives in 1934 when Ben Dov retired from filmmaking and together with his brother Yitzhak established the AGA Newsreel. He directed the early Zionist film entitled *This is the Land* (1935).

In 1948, Yosef Navon, a soundman, and Yitzhak Agadati, producer of the first Hebrew-language film with his brother, Baruch Agadati, found an investor, businessman Mordechai Navon, who invested his own money in film and lab equipment. Agadati used his connections among Haganah comrades to acquire land for a studio. In 1949 the Geva film labs were established on the site of an abandoned woodshed in Givatayim.

In 1954, the Knesset passed the Law for the Encouragement of Israeli Films (הישראלי הסרט לעידוד החוק). Leading filmmakers in the 1960s were Menahem Golan, Ephraim Kishon, and Uri Zohar.

The first Bourekas film was *Sallah Shabati*, produced by Ephraim Kishon in 1964. In 1965 Uri Zohar produced the film *Hole in the Moon*, influenced by French New Wave films.

In the first decade of the 21st century, several Israeli films won awards in film festivals around the world. Prominent films of this period include *Late Marriage* (Dover Koshashvili), *Broken Wings*, *Walk on Water* and *Yossi & Jagger* (Eytan Fox), *Nina's Tragedies*, *Campfire* and *Beaufort* (Joseph Cedar), *Or (My Treasure)* (Keren Yedaya), *Turn Left at the End of the World* (Avi Neshet), *The Band's Visit* (Eran Kolirin) *Waltz With Bashir* (Ari Folman), and *Ajami*. In 2011, *Strangers No More* won the Oscar for best Short Documentary. In 2013 two documentaries were nominated the Oscar for the Best Feature Documentary: *The Gatekeepers* (Dror Moreh) and *Five Broken Cameras*, a Palestinian-Israeli-French co-production (Emad Burnat, Guy Davidi).



Author Julie Gray notes "Israeli film is certainly not new in Israel, but it is fast gaining attention in the U.S., which is a double-edged sword. American distributors feel that the small American audience interested in Israeli film, are squarely focused on the turbulent and troubled conflict that besets us daily."

2014 was the best year for Israeli films at the Israeli box-office. Israeli-made films sold 1.6 million tickets in Israel in 2014, the best in Israel's film history.

## Israeli Film

Article sourced from My Jewish Learning: <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/israeli-film/>



Israel is a young country, and cinema is a young art form. But the relationship between Israeli cinema and its establishment has often been an uneasy one. Nonetheless, the history of Israeli cinema mirrors the history of Israel itself.

One of the first-ever motion pictures was filmed in Ottoman Palestine by the French Lumiere brothers. It is known popularly as *Train Station in Jerusalem* (1896). Its exotic, panoramic views are as transfixing today as when they were first screened for a European audience.

*Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel) itself remained the focal point of filmmakers through the period of the British Mandate. The first feature-length film in Hebrew was *Oded the Wanderer* (1933). It depicts a young *sabra* [Jew born in the land of Israel] who gets separated from his classmates on a school trip. In a typically didactic effort, the film emphasizes the importance of working the land and restoring a Jewish connection to it.

Most productions made during the years before and the first years of Israeli statehood, stressed these and other Zionist ideals. A common trope was the heroism of the Jewish pioneers, not just in settling the land, but also in fighting for their survival.

The most prominent Israeli manifestation of this type is probably *Hill 24 Doesn't Answer* (1955). Filmed with a relatively expensive budget, it tells the stories of four fighters from diverse backgrounds in the War of Independence. They die, but their deaths are not in vain—their mission is accomplished and the eponymous hill is awarded to Israel.

Ephraim Kishon's first movie, *Sallah Shabbati* (1964), is radically different from these standard productions featuring heroism, nobility, and sacrifice. It shattered all box-office records and is still shown frequently in *ulpanim* [Hebrew-language training] in Israel. *Sallah* hilariously subverts the self-important idealism that was so pervasive both in Israel and in Israeli films. It was nominated for an Academy Award, and stars Haim Topol as a Sephardic immigrant [that is, a migrant from Mediterranean lands], lazy and endearing, who manipulates the system for his own advantage.

The late '60s saw the emergence of a new force in Israeli cinema, the so-called *Kayitz* (in Hebrew, an acronym for Young Israeli Cinema) group. The French *nouvelle vague*—New Wave—movement and its concept of the auteur had begun filtering through to Israel.

Developments in cinema were also running parallel to developments nationally, as the [1967] Six-Day War changed Israel's view of itself. Israelis were bored with the Zionist fables, and were less worried about imminent destruction. However, there was no context in which to place the cinematic innovations as there was elsewhere. In literature, there was an uninterrupted tradition going back thousands of years, and writers were able to draw on a rich heritage to lend resonance and context to their work. In film, forging a modern native tradition with artistic integrity proved more difficult.

Uri Zohar's *Three Days and a Child* (1967), based on a short story by A.B. Yehoshua, garnered Oded Kotler the Best Actor Award at the 1967 Cannes Film Festival. It is a psychological drama, which explores the ambivalence of a man during three days when he baby-sits the son of his ex-girlfriend. It strives, in ways the story does not, to normalize life in Israel and the existential dilemmas faced by its citizens. However, this very effort makes it less successful than the work by Yehoshua, who knows that nothing universal can arise without attention to the particular, and that Jerusalem is not Paris. Despite its lack of complete success, the film is of seminal significance in its effort to project a fully realized artistic vision onto the screen.

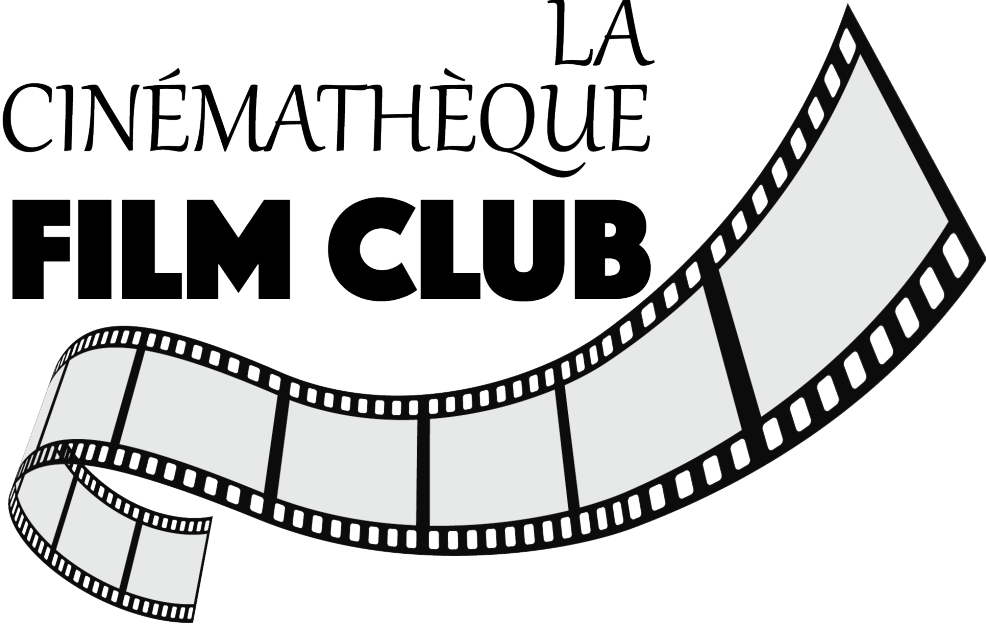
The '70s saw the ascendancy of the so-called "bourekas films." Many Israelis looked to these home-grown farces (and some melodramas) for an escape from the tension of their lives. In no way sophisticated, and as unpretentious and insubstantial as the pastries that gave them their name, these bourekas films fit the bill.

Finally, in 1978 the Fund for the Encouragement of Quality Israeli Cinema was established. Not coincidentally, the second wave of Kayitz filmmakers emerged in the late '70s and early '80s. One of the most important members of this generation is Uri Barabash, whose made-for-television drama, *My First Sony*, is being screened at the Israel Film Festival. His work deals with issues like mental illness, the rehabilitation of criminals, and the pressures of basic training. His most well-known film is *Beyond the Walls* (1986), which deals with Arab-Jewish relations in a prison and was nominated for an Academy Award.

In the 1990s, Israeli cinema came of age in many ways. The expanded population and economy, along with a less defensive, insular perspective of Israeli society, have contributed to an explosion in both the quantity and quality of films. Many Israelis stopped going to domestic films at the time of the bourekas movies, and continue reflexively to avoid local productions. Others see all films as ambassadors, and thus want them to represent Israel in the best light possible.

Unsettling is an understatement for the situation in Israel today. What course even the immediate future will take is uncertain. There are explosive, rival visions of the character and nature of the state. These conflicting views have the potential to provide fertile nourishment to a film industry that is increasingly gaining respect, both at home and abroad. As Israel continues to mature, we can only wait and see what form Israeli cinema will take as it matures too.

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Eran Riklis  
b. 1954

*Cup Final*  
1991

## Cup Final

Hal Hinson • November 06, 1992

Article sourced from *The Washington Post*: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/cupfinalnrhinson\\_a0a7c5.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/cupfinalnrhinson_a0a7c5.htm), *underlined, blue hyperlink*



The combination of the plain-spoken and the miraculous is rare enough in any of the arts, but even more so in the movies. But that's precisely the mix that Eran Riklis accomplishes in his exhilarating anti-war film "Cup Final." Stylistically, this enormously gifted Israeli director's effects are so spare that we're left unprepared for the poetic richness that his story delivers. It's a powerful film, and yet one of the most unassuming great movies ever made.

"Cup Final" slips nicely in step with a growing column of films -- "Glengarry Glen Ross," "Reservoir Dogs" and "Laws of Gravity" -- that show men being men; in this case, the men are a gang of PLO rebels fighting the advancing Israelis as they march through Lebanon. The year is 1982, and the eight members of this makeshift platoon seem hopelessly outmanned by the well-supplied Israelis. But when they capture an Israeli reservist named Cohen (Moshe Ivgi), they realize they have a valuable commodity in hand. If they can get him -- and themselves -- to Beirut alive, he could be used in a possible trade for PLO prisoners.

The getting-there-alive part is the really tough aspect of this plan. What Riklis never lets us forget is that there is a war -- not a scuffle or a conflict, but an all-out war between ancient enemies -- going on. And that every movement, even the most, taken-for-granted, casual act, like going to the bathroom, is fraught with danger. For everyone in the film, the next step could be their last.

The rebels, who are led with cool efficiency by Ziad (Muhamad Bacri), are used to this sort of chaotic life. They're reconciled to fighting a war that began before they were born and that they're certain will outlive them. Riklis's subject, though, is not the divisions between the PLO soldiers and their Israeli captive, but the things that they have in common.

To examine these human connections between the combatants, Riklis uses sport, specifically soccer, as a metaphor. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon just happens to coincide with the playing of the World Cup soccer matches in Barcelona. And, as the enemies compare their various enthusiasms for certain players and teams, it turns out that they share the same passion for team Italia, which is moving up through the ranks to the finals.

As the rebels march with their prisoner toward Beirut, they stop whenever possible to keep track of the matches (which, ironically, Cohen has tickets for), and, in the process, they discover that they have much more than sports in common. In one marvelous scene, Cohen shows his captors a picture of his wife; as the photo is passed from man to man, each one gives their proud hostage a subtle thumbs-up, as if to say, "Nice work, Cohen."

Yet, still, they are enemies; yet, still, they fight and kill each other. And why? Riklis asks. Because they have always been enemies. Nobody in this group wants to kill Cohen, and Cohen doesn't want to kill them, because they have seen each other as human beings -- men with families and dreams just like their own.

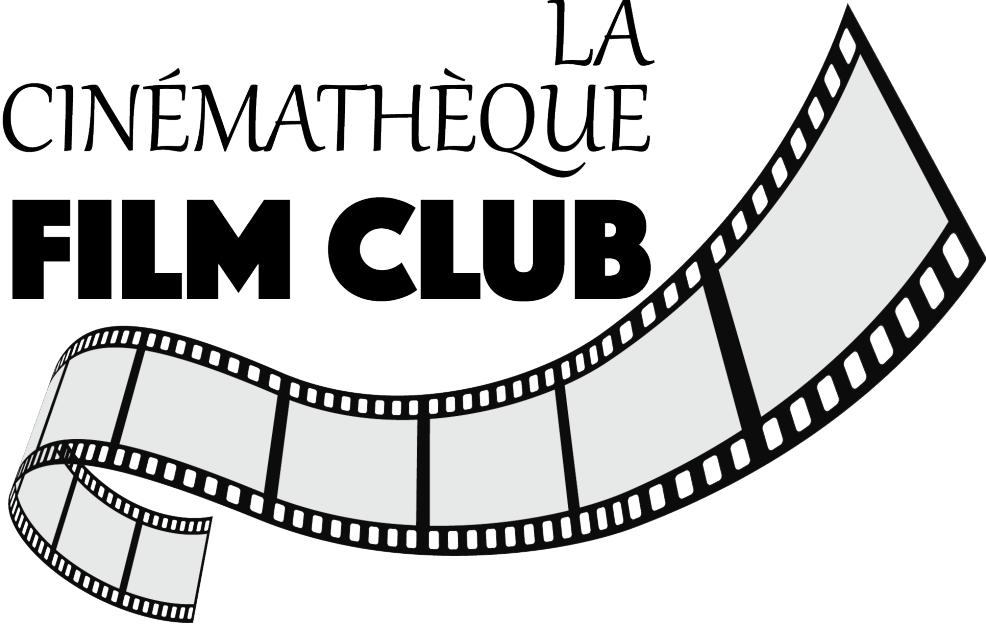
This refusal to take sides is Riklis's greatest achievement -- that and his work with a remarkable ensemble of unknown but marvelously gifted actors. Ivgi and Bacri are beautifully mismatched: Ivgi is short and intense; Bacri is lean and laconic, like a Palestinian Clint Eastwood. Together, they become a kind of war-zone Mutt and Jeff.

The story, though, has to end tragically, and when it does, the loss of these makeshift friendships only makes the pain that much more intolerable. Riklis shows that wars are fought not between nations, but between men -- men who, if religious faith were removed from the picture, might be hanging over each other's backyard fence as true friends. It's a devastating notion, and a surprising, stirring film.

### **Selected Filmography as Director**

- **Love Letters to Cinema** (2014) short
- **A Borrowed Identity** (2014)
- **Zaytoun** (2012)
- **Playoff** (2011)
- **A Soldier and a Boy** (2011) short
- **The Human Resources Manager** (2010)
- **Five Men and a Wedding** (2008) tv series
- **Lemon Tree** (2008)
- **The Syrian Bride** (2004)
- **Pituy** (2002)
- **Vegvul Natan** (2002) documentary
- **The Truck** (2002) tv series
- **Volcano Junction** (1999)
- **Kesef Katlani** (1996) tv series: 11 episodes
- **Sipurey Efram** (1995) tv series
- **Straight Le-La'inyan** (1993)
- **Zohar** (1993)
- **Cup Final** (1991)
- **B'Yom Bahir Ro'im et Dameshek** (1984)

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Joseph Cedar  
b.1968

Time of Favor  
2001



# Time of Favor

Courtesy of Kino Lorber: Experience Cinema

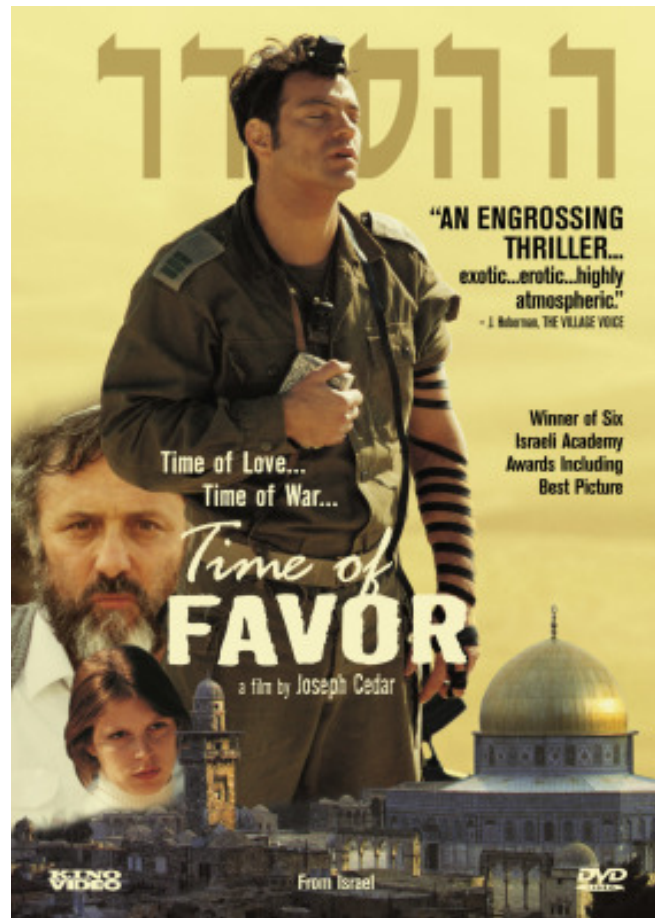
<https://www.kinolorber.com/film/view/id/546>

Winner of six Israeli Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and highly acclaimed in its U.S. theatrical release, *Time of Favor* weaves an intricate tale of passion, loyalty and conspiracy amidst the contemporary political powder-keg and timeless austere beauty of Israel's West Bank. In a film the New York Times calls an "arthouse thriller," deft characterizations and a fine-tuned plot depict the people and stakes behind an Israeli settlement with a clarity and complexity not hinted at in today's headlines.

A highly respected soldier in the Israeli Defense Forces, Menachem (Aki Avni) is also a devout student of controversial West Bank settlement leader Rabbi Meltzer (Assi Dayan). Despite the army's doubts and the Israeli Secret Service's suspicions, Menachem receives permission to lead an army unit made up of his fellow students from Rabbi Meltzer's West Bank Yeshiva. Rabbi

Meltzer's star pupil and Menachem's best friend, Pini (Edan Alterman), gladly accepts the Rabbi's invitation to court his beautiful, headstrong daughter, Michal (Tinkerbell). But Michal, suffocated by settlement life and repulsed by her father's expectations, is drawn not to Pini's religious devotion but to Menachem's quiet strength. As the Rabbi's agenda, the Army's control and Pini's desperation all build to a boil, Menachem and Michal's secret passion threatens to destroy more than just their reputations. A violent scheme to blow up the Temple Mount soon puts all their allegiances to the test.

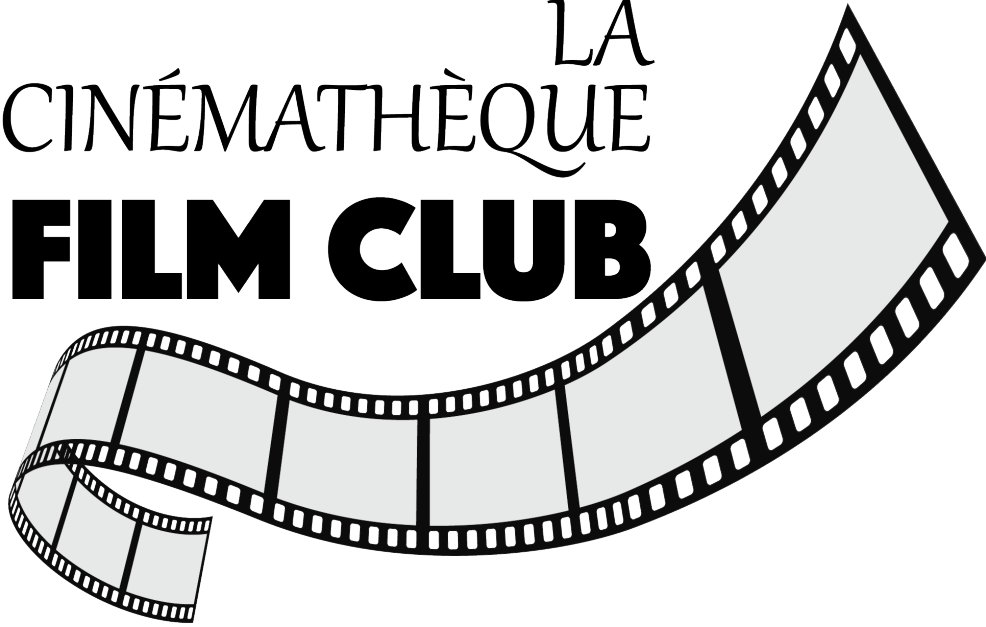
From a peaceful desert sunrise on the Wailing Wall to a frantic chase through an 1800 year-old network of tunnels, *Time of Favor* raises issues of religious faith and duty to one's nation that are inextricably relevant to our lives today.



## Filmography

- **Norman: The Moderate Rise and Tragic Fall of a New York Fixer** (2016)
- **Footnote** (2011)
- **Beaufort** (2007)
- **Campfire** (2004)
- **Time of Favor** (2000)

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Keren Yedaya  
b.1972

Or (My Treasure)  
2004

## Or (My Treasure)

Courtesy of Kino Lorber: Experience Cinema

<https://www.kinolorber.com/film/ormytreasure>

Visually controlled, emotionally precise and dramatically intricate, Keren Yedaya's *Or (My Treasure)* combines uncompromising realism with compassionate storytelling. Winner of the 2004 Cannes Film Festival *Camera D'Or* for best debut film, *Or* is the work of an "uncommonly sensitive" filmmaker who delivers "walloping irony" (*Time Out New York*) without resorting to audacious showmanship or self-conscious technique.

*Or* (Dana Ivgy), a pretty and popular Tel Aviv high school student, works nights at a neighborhood restaurant while taking her first tentative steps out of innocence and into first love. But *Or*'s real full-time job is looking after her mother Ruthie (Ronit Elkabetz - *Late Marriage*). After 20 dehumanizing years of curbside prostitution, Ruthie's survival instincts have begun to deteriorate, and it's up to *Or* to see that mother and daughter don't both wind up on the street together. *Or*'s love, loyalty and resourcefulness are put to the test as Ruthie's compulsive self-destructiveness keeps driving her back into prostitution. As the cruel realities of marginalized city life multiply, *Or* is forced to choose between her mother's bottomless needs and having an uncorrupted life of her own.

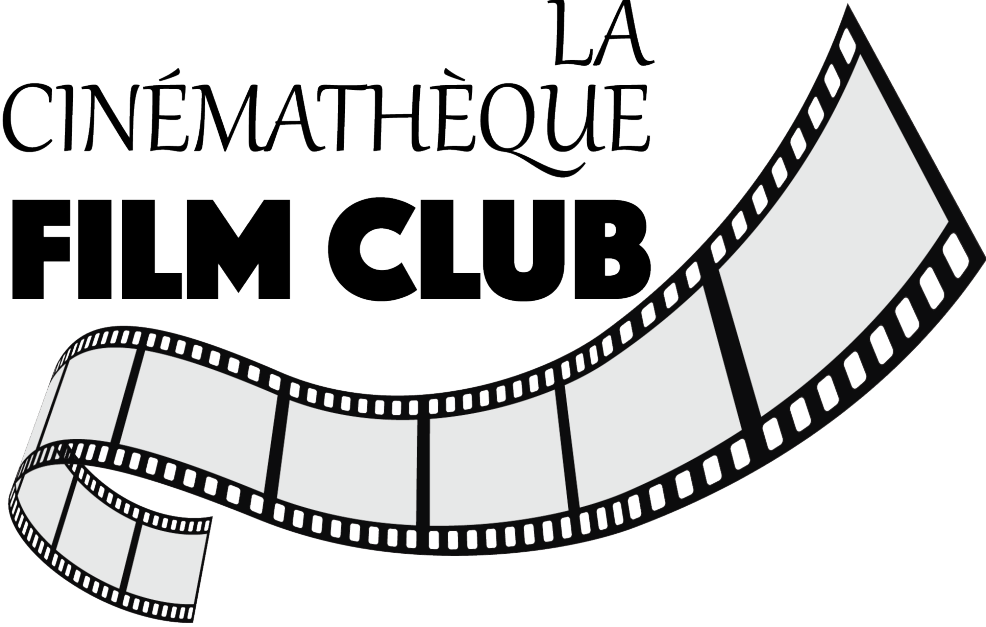
A harrowing urban chronicle and a subtle coming of age journey, *Or* is a truly modern tragedy that plays out inside dark apartment blocks, under cold neon lights and in shadowy back alleys. Yedaya's graceful directorial restraint and Dana Ivgy's and Ronit Elkabetz's "unflinching performances" (*The New York Post*) give *Or* an intimacy that sidesteps preachy social outrage and knee jerk moralizing, while savagely indicting street prostitution as the degrading modern-day slavery that it is.



### Filmography

- **That Lovely Girl** (2014)
- **Jaffa** (2009)
- **Or (My Treasure)** (2004)
- **Les Dessous** *short* (2001)
- **Lulu** *short* (1999)
- **Elinor** *short* (1994)

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Ari Folman  
b.1962

Waltz with Bashir  
2008

## Film Review: 'Waltz with Bashir'

Naira Antoun • 19 February 2009

Article sourced from *The Electronic Intifada*: <https://electronicintifada.net/content/film-review-waltz-bashir/3547>

*Waltz with Bashir*, an animated documentary film charting the director's quest to recover his lost memories of the 1982 massacres at the Palestinian refugee camps Sabra and Shatila in Beirut, Lebanon, has been released to international acclaim. The film presents itself, and has largely been received, as a soul-searching and honest account of a journey to face up to guilt and responsibility. More than a quarter of a century after the atrocities in Sabra and Shatila, during which approximately 2,000 civilians were brutally murdered, we are witnessing a perverse moment: an apparently "anti-war" Israeli film wins several Israeli and international film awards in a context not only of Israel's ongoing brutal occupation, violations of international law, racism and denial of refugee rights, but also while fresh atrocities are committed by Israeli forces in Gaza.

One night in a bar, a friend tells director, Ari Folman, about a recurring dream connected to his time in Lebanon in 1982, and Folman is alarmed to discover he has no memory of his own army service in Lebanon when he was 19. This serves as the point of departure for Folman's cinematic journey. In an attempt to piece together what happened, he talks to several old friends who also fought in Lebanon. They are a motley assortment of middle-aged men, self-deprecating, liberal, essentially likeable characters. One of Folman's first stops is with an old friend he served alongside and who now lives in Holland, having made a living selling falafel. "Healthy and Middle Eastern food is popular" he remarks wryly, unperturbed by the wholesale appropriation of Palestinian and Arab culture. But *Waltz with Bashir* has bigger fish to fry than falafel; it is a film charting an Israeli quest to remember — or to forget — the Israeli role in the brutal massacre of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila. Or at least, this is the film's ostensible purpose.

Several times, Folman talks to his psychologist friend, who appears wise and grounded and acts as a moral compass throughout the film. He is an Ashkenazi secular Jewish version of a priest — the couch is a kind of confessional, where one goes to seek validation and also redemption. When Folman first talks to him about his flashbacks, his friend — speaking in the voice of therapist, priest and philosopher — offers reassuring reflections on memory: "We don't go to places we don't want to," he says. "Memory takes us where we want to go." To read against the grain of the film's tropes of memory, remembering and moral reckoning, is to recognize this comment as an apt description of the entire film — the remembering that the film undertakes does not take Israelis to places where they really would not want to go.

To say that Palestinians are absent in *Waltz with Bashir*, to say that it is a film that deals not with Palestinians but with Israelis who served in Lebanon, only barely begins to describe the violence that this film commits against Palestinians. There is nothing interesting or new in the depiction of Palestinians — they have no names, they don't speak, they are anonymous. But they are not simply faceless victims. Instead, the victims in the story that *Waltz with Bashir* tells are Israeli soldiers. Their anguish, their questioning, their confusion, their pain — it is this that is intended to pull us. The rotoscope animation is beautifully done, the facial expressions so engaging, subtle and torn, we find ourselves grimacing and gasping at the trials and tribulations of the young Israeli soldiers and their older agonizing selves. We don't see Palestinian facial expressions; only a lingering on

dead, anonymous faces. So while Palestinians are never fully human, Israelis are, and indeed are humanized through the course of the film.

We most often see Palestinians — when we do see them — being blown to pieces or lying dead, but there is one scene where mourning Palestinian women occupy a street. They don't speak; they cry and shout. We don't see the hard lines of their grief, we don't see their tears. Rather, the focus zooms into the face of the younger Folman watching them as his breathing becomes more shallow, functioning as the emotional anchor of the scene. This is very typical of the film in that the suffering and experiences of Palestinians are significant



principally for the effects that they have on the Israeli soldiers, and never in their own right.

Several critics have noted the real — and horrifying — footage from Sabra and Shatila at the end of the film. Indeed the only people portrayed in the film who are not animated are Palestinians in this footage. There is a woman screaming and crying. She shouts “my son, my son” in Arabic. She repeats again and again in Arabic “take photos, take photos,” “where

are the Arabs, where are the Arabs.” But her words are not subtitled; she is just a screaming woman and her words are irrelevant and incomprehensible. So even in the same gesture whereby we are reminded that the massacre was no animation and it was a real event, the victims of that massacre are presented to us in a way that is deeply dehumanizing and “othering.” The coping of the wailing Palestinian mother cannot compete with the quiet reflection and mild manners of the Israeli veteran. Folman does not talk to any Palestinians and the only Palestinians we see are in flashbacks and this footage at the end of the film. Not only are Palestinians essentially absent then, they are also of one time — Sabra and Shatila. Palestinians are not part of time's passage; they are frozen in an incomprehensible, and in effect inaudible, wail.

It is not that the absence of Palestinians is necessarily a problem *per se*. There are indeed films where what is absent is key, and therefore has a presence that is all the more significant. In Alfred Hitchcock's classic *Rebecca*, for example, the haunting absence of the true central character, the traces of her, the allusions to her, make Rebecca all the more present. Not so with the Palestinians in *Waltz with Bashir*. They are peripheral to the story of the emotional life of Israeli veterans, a story of Israeli self-discovery and redemption. Indeed, it transpires that the filmmaker does not need to find out about Sabra and Shatila for a full understanding of his own role there, of what happened, of his responsibility, of truth. Rather, Sabra and Shatila are a portal to “other camps.” The psychologist-friend cum philosopher-priest-moral-compass tells Folman that this is in fact all about “another massacre,” “those other camps.” At this point it transpires that Folman's parents were camp survivors. “You were engaged with the massacre a long time before it happened,” the psychologist says, “through your parents' Auschwitz memory.” The solution that he suggests is for Folman to go to Sabra and Shatila to find out

what happened. Everything falls into place. This is the meaning of Sabra and Shatila — a means, a mechanism, a chapter in Israeli self-discovery and coming to peace. The Palestinians are doubly absent.

Folman's psychologist friend, like many psychologists one presumes, often talks in therapist mode, in addition to his priest-philosopher mode. He puts forward the idea that Folman suppressed the memories because his 19-year-old self — with the Palestinian camps as simulacrum for those “other camps” — unwittingly associated himself with the Nazis. But, he reminds Folman now, at Sabra and Shatila Folman did not kill, he “only lit flares.” So while Folman has been teetering on the edge of an overwhelming guilt, his psychologist friend drags him from the precipice. Folman and his contemporaries need not carry the guilt of being perpetrators — they were accomplices. They lit flares so that Israel's ally in Lebanon, the Phalange militia butchering Palestinians could see what they were doing.

The question of who was doing whose dirty work is not so easily answered however Israel was nobody's sidekick when it invaded Lebanon. The film does not show us the Israeli shelling of Beirut that led to 18,000 deaths and 30,000 wounded, the violations committed against civilians, the destruction of Palestinian and Lebanese resistance. And what about the fact that the Palestine Liberation Organization and armed resisters had been evacuated more than two weeks before the massacres, and that it was the day after multinational forces left Beirut that Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon made it known that 2,000 “terrorists” remained in the camps? The focus of Folman's quest for responsibility in *Waltz with Bashir* hones in on lighting the flares as the Phalangists “mopped up” the camps. That two months before the massacres Sharon had announced his objective to send Phalangist forces into the camps, that the Israeli army surrounded and sealed the camps, that they shelled the camps, that snipers shot at camp dwellers in the days before the massacres, and then having given the green light to the Phalangists to enter Sabra and Shatila, the Israeli army prevented people from fleeing the camps — all of this is absent in *Waltz with Bashir*.

In the film, it is on the shoulders of the Lebanese Phalangists that responsibility for the massacres is unequivocally placed. The Israeli soldiers have qualms and do not act on them, the Israeli leadership are told and do nothing, while it is the Phalangists who are depicted as brutal and gratuitously violent. But just as this is not a film about Palestinians, nor is it a film about the Lebanese Phalangists — it is a film about Israelis. The point seems to be to set up the young Israeli soldiers as morally superior to these blood-thirsty beasts, not only in that it was not they but the Phalangists who actually massacred and executed, but also in their very way of being in the world, they are superior.

In a moment of what is presumably supposed to pass as brutal honesty, one of Folman's friends remarks sadly of how he realized that he “wasn't the hero who saves everyone's life.” Essentially this is the limit of the notion of responsibility in this film: the Israeli veteran's guilt at not having been a hero. The pain of having done nothing at the time, although there were stirrings in their consciences, even then — which the film contrasts with the Israeli leadership, and most starkly with the Phalangists.

The immediate aftermath of Sabra and Shatila witnessed a rare, if limited, moment of Israeli self-reflection. It seems odd that an Israeli film grappling with responsibility for the massacres completely elides this moment in Israeli history and collective memory. After demonstrations of more than 300,000 persons, the Kahan Commission was set up by the Israeli government to undertake an inquiry into what happened at Sabra and Shatila. The inquiry had several limitations, and one of its conclusions was that Defense Minister Ariel

Sharon was indirectly, but personally, responsible for the massacres, and his ministerial portfolio was taken away. Of course the same Ariel Sharon was later elected and re-elected prime minister of Israel.

As Folman and those he speaks with recount what happened when they were in Lebanon, there is a lot of “while they’re shooting at us from all directions,” “we are attacked, we retaliate.” There is no sense that Israel invaded Lebanon — the word “invasion” is barely used in the whole film. The soldiers are young men going off to war in fighting spirit, fantasizing about women, wondering at how to prove their masculinity, licking the wounds of being dumped by girlfriends. They are singing songs with upbeat tunes and lyrics such as “Good morning Lebanon ... you bleed to death in my arms,” “I bombed Sidon,” “I bombed Beirut, I bombed Beirut every day.” These lyrics are



supposed to grate, but one nevertheless gets a sense of naive hapless kids who have no sense of the trauma that they are unwittingly walking into. One imagines that Folman would respond to the criticism that Israel’s role is not made clear in the film, that these hapless kids are also members of an invading army committing acts of aggression, by saying that this would be going into the realm of politics, and rather this is intended to be a human film. One of the more disquieting views coming from admiring quarters is that the film is great for a general audience because one doesn’t need to know any background information to appreciate the film. That Israel launched a brutal offensive that led to the deaths of thousands of Lebanese and Palestinian civilians is apparently not relevant. With “politics” and the “background” rendered off-limits, we are left with something that is misleading and inane. Its principal message becomes “war sucks.” And why does war suck? Because it is traumatizing — principally for the soldiers. When *Waltz with Bashir* won the Golden Globe for best foreign film in January, while the force of the Israeli military machine was being unleashed against Gaza, while war crimes and atrocities were being committed by Israeli soldiers, Folman could only muster, “My film is anti-war, and therefore would, sadly, always be relevant.” Given the evasion of responsibility and decontextualization that lie at the core of this film, this was hardly surprising.

In the final analysis, this is what *Waltz with Bashir* is about: the evasion of responsibility. It is not that the self-reflection offered by the film is only partial, and that we would simply be nay-sayers to be dissatisfied with it. Because there is no sense of what the Israeli role in Lebanon was, because it is about ethically and morally redeeming the filmmaker and his contemporaries — and by extension the Israeli self, military and nation, the Israeli collective in other words — because of all this, the film is an act not of limited self-reflection but self-justification. It is a striving towards working through qualms to restabilize the self as it is currently constituted; it does not ask challenging questions that would destabilize that self. And we are reminded of the psychologist’s comment near the start of the film: “We don’t go to places we don’t want to. Memory takes us where we want to go.” Perhaps this explains how at the same time that Gaza was being decimated, Israel heaped acclaim and awards on *Waltz with Bashir*; in addition to numerous international awards, the film scooped up six awards at the



Israeli Film Academy. Indeed, the same Israelis who flocked to see the film gave their enthusiastic approval to Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. According to a poll released on 14 January by Tel Aviv University, a staggering 94 percent of Israeli Jews supported or strongly supported the operation.

What is alarming is not the approbation that the film is enjoying. That is to be expected. What is so disturbing about the reception of *Waltz with Bashir* are those liberal Arabs, Palestinian and others, who have been gushing. There is no reason to be so easily satisfied, to ask for so little from Israelis. If Palestinians do not continue to call Israel to account, then who will?

In his anti-colonial classic, *The Wretched of the Earth*, psychiatrist and revolutionary Franz Fanon includes at the end a series of case studies of his patients. There are torture victims. But there are also torturers who are unsettled, who are suffering, who are having nightmares. Fanon brings out the absurdity — and inhumanity — of the notion that they want therapy to be at peace with what they do, and clearly have every intention of continuing to do. *Waltz with Bashir* answers the collective Israeli call for precisely this kind of therapy.

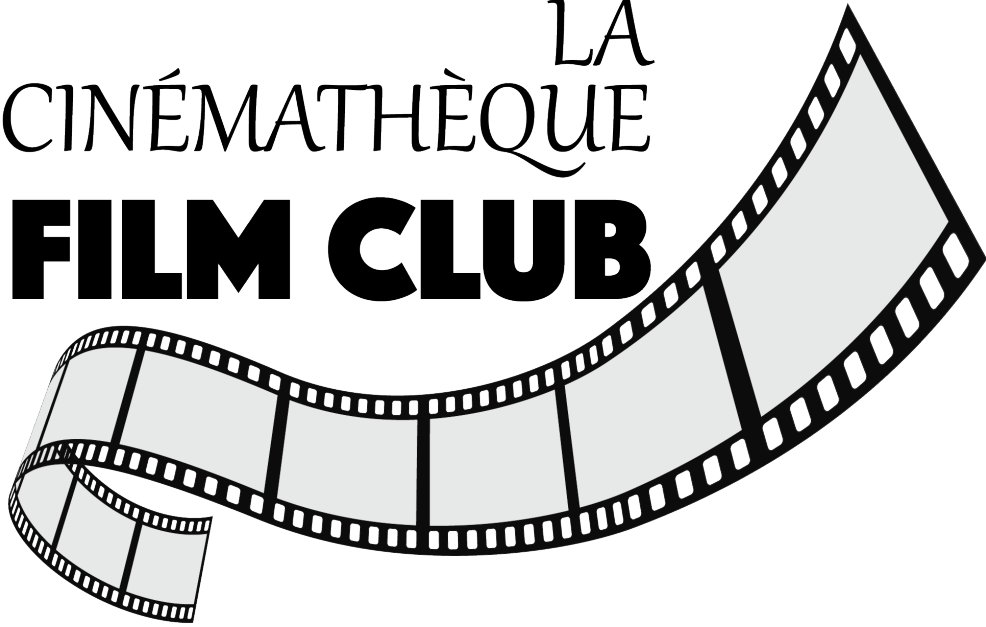
*Naira Antoun lives in London and works in the field of education.*



#### Filmography (as director)

- **The Congress** (2013)
- **Waltz with Bashir** (2008)
- **Made in Israel** (2001)
- **Saint Clara** (1996)

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Ronit Elkabetz  
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Gett: The Trial  
of Viviane Amsalem  
2014

# Gett, The Trial of Viviane Amsalem

Matt Zoller Seitz • 19 February 2015

Article sourced from Roger Ebert: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/gett-the-trial-of-viviane-amsalem-2015>

4/4 Stars

With "Gett, the Trial of Viviane Amsalem," siblings Ronit and Shlomi Elkabetz prove that they rank with the finest filmmakers alive.

Every shot, cut, line, performance, indeed every moment in this feature is perfectly judged, always conveying precisely what it needs to convey in order to define its characters and move the story forward. And yet the result never seems merely neat or efficient. Even though "Gett" tells of 45-year-old Israeli woman seeking a divorce from her domineering husband, and makes unsettling points about what it means to be a woman in a religiously conservative country (or a woman in any society), the film is less an object lesson, lecture, or problem picture than a comedy-drama about the complexity of people and the elusiveness of truth.

Most of the film takes place in a small courtroom, with the plaintiff, Viviane (co-director Ronit Elkabetz, who's also an accomplished actress), suing her husband Elisha (Simon Abkarian of "Zero Dark Thirty") for divorce. For women, divorce is much harder to obtain in Israel than in other Westernized countries. In fact, the husband holds most of the cards and rarely has to lay any of them down. The male-dominated, religiously orthodox panel of judges overseeing the case (led by Rabbi Solomon, played by Mandy Patinkin-lookalike Eli Gornstein) insists on a high standard of proof from Viviane—so high, in fact, that what should be a simple matter of filling out forms becomes an ordeal that would tax the patience of Job.

As depicted here, an Israeli woman can't split from her spouse without proving extraordinary abuse or neglect. A simple assertion of "We don't get along" or "This marriage was a mistake" is not enough. All the husband has to do to preserve the status quo is avoid taking action—and that's what Elisha, a magnetic yet tactically aloof man, does in the first part of "Gett," asking for delays, failing to show up in court, and otherwise stonewalling and dragging things out in an attempt to wear Viviane down. He doesn't want to grant her wish. We wonder why. There seems to be little love left between them. Is his intransigence a matter of male pride: the fear of losing face? Or does he truly love her, so much that he'd rather be miserable with her than let her go?

The movie keeps us guessing, and even as it tightens the emotional screws, it never stops being enjoyable. That's because the filmmakers treat the courtroom as a golden opportunity for people-watching. Both the judges' elevated bench and the small tables at which the plaintiffs and defendants sit or stand feel like halves



of a stage. Viviane and Elisha mostly seethe in silence, listening as their lawyers spar. The barristers are very different but seem evenly matched: pragmatic, skeptical Carmel (Menashe Noy) stumps for the plaintiff; the defendant is represented by his wily and talkative brother Shimon (Sasson Gabai), whose folksy demeanor becomes at once more endearing and more unsettling once

you figure out that it's his most potent weapon.

Center stage is a smaller, podium-like table where character witnesses for Viviane and Elisha come to testify. When we get accustomed to the movie's distinctive rhythms, we lean forward in our seats a little bit whenever a new face appears, because we know the character is going to be different from, but as fascinating as, whoever stood there last.

Part of the fun lies in watching these witnesses come in with a rehearsed, polished story, only to relinquish it once judges and opposing counsel start poking holes in their facades. The cream of the crop includes Viviane's sister-in-law Rachel, a volcanically spirited woman whose testimony becomes a comic tirade against the inequities of male-female relations and the sham of marriage-as-partnership. There are also great, wise bits of observational humor involving the witnesses' inability or refusal to take direction from the judges.

The inertia at the heart of Viviane's plight makes watching "Gett" an unexpectedly tense and claustrophobic experience. For a film in which the characters do a lot of talking but not much moving around, and that unfolds in a handful of mostly small and plain locations, it's as relentless as an action-adventure picture. This is partly because the stakes are so basic and clear (Viviane is miserable and depressed, and wants to be free and happy) but also because the filmmakers have chosen to tell the story in a highly, ahem, unorthodox way: by adopting the perspectives of different characters from one moment to the next; positioning their shots so subjectively, and with such geographical precision, that we feel as though we've been dropped into a new consciousness, and allowed to see through fresh eyes. We might wonder why we're seeing a character in profile for several long seconds, or from a very low angle, or partly hidden behind another character's shoulder, and then a cut will establish who's doing the looking, and all at once we find ourselves thinking about what the information at that particular moment means to the person who's seeing and hearing it as it's being delivered.

The film's stylistic boldness might not have been necessary: the script is so tight and propulsive and the large cast so skilled that the moviemakers could have just pointed the camera at the characters and probably created a reasonably thoughtful and engaging drama. But the direction is a masterstroke because it adds a literary or even poetic dimension to the movie, finding a visual analogue to the idea that the truth varies depending on who you are and where you stand.

The filmmakers' previous work, "To Take a Wife" and "7 Days," were superb as well, but this one is a step up in ambition and exactness. Every touch enriches or builds out the story, and yet "Gett" never loses focus on the heroine's plight. We're always with her, and often the throwaway touches are more devastating than the larger setbacks, as when a judge asks her if she wants water, and she politely declines, and a bailiff leaves the room anyway. You just know he's going to return with a glass of water anyway, and sure enough, he does. Rarely has such a simple gesture so clearly communicated what it means to be the heroine in a narrative you cannot control.

### **Filmography (as director team)**

- **Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem** (2014)
- **Edut** *Shlomi Elkabetz only* (2011)
- **7 Days** (2008)
- **To Take a Wife** (2004)