

## Marking a New Holy Community: *God's Neighbors* and the Ascendancy of a New Religious Hegemony in Israel

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Menny Yai'sh's recent film, *God's Neighbors* (המשגיחים, 2012) opens on a peaceful Friday eve with Avi (Ro'ee Asaf), a rough-looking but attractive young man, who performs the ritual of *Kiddush* or sanctification of the wine, that ushers in the Jewish sabbath. When he is done eating alone with his father, Avi retires to his room to study scripture, basking in the sweetness of the Torah and relishing the peace and quiet of the holy day after a long week of hard work. But his blessed reverie is soon interrupted by loud music that comes from the street below. Looking down, he sees a group of young Russians drinking and making loud merry in the yard to the sound of booming music. Faint cries by neighbors in surrounding flats to keep the music down in honor of the sabbath are rebuffed vulgarly and dismissively by the carousing Russians. This incenses God's first neighbor, Avi, who calls on God's two other neighbors, his friends Koby (Gal Friedman) and Yaniv (Itzik Golan), to help him drive the Russians out. What follows is probably one of the most articulated action scenes in Israeli cinema to date, a rapid action sequence, in the course of which the Russians are violently beaten and forced to leave, bleeding and humiliated, to the sound of cheering neighbors.

Piety and violence distinguish God's three neighbors, Avi, Koby and Yaniv, who after returning to the faith, became religious vigilantes in their working-class urban neighborhood of Bat-Yam. Avi is the leader of the gang. During the day he helps his father in their produce store. In his free time, he makes religious trans music. Having recently joined the Breslev hasidic sect, the three friends practice their new-found faith in some of their former gang ways, imposing God's laws on their neighbors by force: they beat up drunks, impose the sabbath on local businesses, force neighborhood women to dress more modestly, and fight a rival Arab gang. Their lives are a strange mixture of a lackadaisical drug culture, religious faith and tough street action.<sup>1</sup> But Avi's life changes

<sup>1</sup> Avi appears to belong to what is popularly known as the NANACH (ננאך) faction of the Breslev hasidic sect, the most visible faction of the sect because of the habit of its members to proselytise by playing music and dance in the

when a pretty young woman, Miri (Rotem Zisman Cohen), moves into the neighborhood. At first, Avi tries to impose a stricter dress-code on her, but eventually he falls in love with her and is transformed by his love into a kinder and less vengeful religious person.

I want to propose that, *God's Neighbors* marks a significant cultural moment in the legitimation of Jewish religiosity in Israel and records an important moment in the country's metamorphosis in recent years from a secular, liberal society to a more fundamentalist religious one. The film demonstrates this change in three interrelated ways. First, by combining Jewish religiosity with a powerful and aggressive Israeli Mizrahi masculine identity, the film re-legitimizes Jewish religiosity, presents it as attractive and sexy and declares it as the new Israeli hegemony. Second, by abstaining from killing members of a rival Arab gang, the film symbolically minimizes the conflict between Jews and Arabs and advances the importance of mythical Jewish time over Zionist historical time. Finally, by ending happily with a union between Avi and his girl Miri, the film provides a neat closure that offers an alluringly simple hasidic-like tale to Jewish life in Israel today, promising rewards to the righteous, who believe in *hashem*, the Lord.<sup>2</sup>

The secular nature of early Zionism is a commonplace that need little elaboration.<sup>3</sup> Zionist culture, which was greatly influenced by the civic religion of European bourgeois nationalism also developed as a reaction to Jewish traditional life and religious practices in Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> But Zionism did not only preserve the secular liberalism of the Haskala, the Jewish Enlightenment. It

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streets. While the simple, working-class Avi fits the general Breslev emphasis on the simplicity of faith and its rejection of philosophical sophistry, his violence is less fitting of the sect's history and profile. On this paradox and the creation of a new Israeli religiosity, see below.

<sup>2</sup> The process of Israel's religification toward the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first has been acknowledged for some time now. For a collection of articles that neatly summarize and record the process, see a journal issue that was dedicated to the phenomenon, *Israel Studies Review*, Vol. 27, Issue 1, Summer 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The religious origins of Zionism are not disputed, and could not have been otherwise, as many of its founders and early practitioners came from Jewish traditional and religious backgrounds. Indeed, Jewish secularism hardly existed anywhere in the world before the rise of Zionism. But while the nature of Zionism as a particularist European movement was shaped in many ways by the religious legacy of its founders and practitioners, that legacy was ultimately used to create a distinctly secular movement in the Yishuv and then the young Israeli State. One needs only to look at some of the headings in one of the more comprehensive recent studies about native Israeli culture, Oz Almog's, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), to see this: "Idealistic Euphoria," "The Elect Son of the Chosen People," "Monks in Khaki." Almog's use of religious language is telling of the quasi-religious zeal that animated the Zionist pioneers and that is most often found in messianic religious movements.

<sup>4</sup> On some of these developments, see Goerge Mosse, *Confronting the Nation, Jewish and Western Nationalism* (Brandeis University Press, 1993), Alain Dieckoff, *The Invention of a Nation, Zionist Thought and the Invention of Modern Israel* (Columbia University Press, 2002), Michael Berkowitz, *Zionist Culture and West European Jewry before the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

was also inspired by the great social reform movements of the time, such as socialism and communism, which were decidedly anti-religious. When it later transferred to Palestine and developed there, it continued to be animated by the anti-religious sentiments of its early thinkers, a sentiment that eventually grew to outright animosity of what came to be known as the Zionist or Israeli "negation of exile." Moreover, the Zionist notion of negation-of-exile was premised on the differentiation between traditional, which usually meant Ashkenazi, religious Jewishness, and the new Hebrewism which was cultivated in the Palestinian *Yishuv*.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, the image of the new Hebrew that developed in Palestine during the 1930s and 1940s was inspired by European national models. On the other hand, some of its traits, like overt masculinity and aggression, were a reaction against stereotypical images of Jews in the European antisemitic imagination as feminine and weak. Indeed, it is another commonplace that, the differences between the two, between the old, diasporic, Ashkenazi Jewishness, and its converse image of Palestinian new-Hebraism, were often gendered. Traditional, religious Judaism was cast as feminine and inferior, and the new, secular Judaism in its Zionist iteration cast as masculine and superior.<sup>6</sup>

A brief survey of "strong men" in Israeli cinema, will reveal an array of usually military heroes, whose strength, at this early stage of Zionism, lies in their ability to curb their power and aggression through what may be paraphrased as the "Jewish man's burden." This usually meant that a historical consciousness of Jewish vulnerability was channeled into responsible social democratic sensibilities that were often laborite and Ashkenazi as well.<sup>7</sup> A classic iteration of this image is Uri in the 1967 cinematic version of Moshe Shamir's well-known and influential 1947 novel, *He Walked in the Fields* (הוא הלך בשדות, Dir. Yosef Millo). Uri is a native Israeli farmer-soldier, whose love for the "civilizing" mission of Zionism is exemplified by his death for his country on the bat-

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<sup>5</sup> Much has been written about the anti-diasporic aspect of Zionism. For a representative article, see Eliezer Schweid, "Rejection of the Diaspora in Zionist Thought", in *Essential Papers on Zionism*, Y. Reinhartz & A. Shapira eds. (Cassell, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> This has also been amply discussed in academic literature in the last twenty or so years. For two representative examples in English and Hebrew, see Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (University of California Press, 1997), and Michael Gluzman, *The Zionist Body, Nationality, Gender and Sexuality in Modern Hebrew Literature* (הגוף הציבורי), (Hakibbutz Hame'uhad, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> This dynamic eventually changed as the state matured and developed. The formerly curbed aggression was gradually released by the next generations, who were not haunted by personal memories of persecution and felt little need to keep the ethics that followed from them and distinguished the founding generation.

tlefield. Versions of this stock image were reworked throughout the decades in films such as the 1979 *Wooden Gun* (רובה חוליות, Dir. Ilan Moshenson), where the aggression and militarism of the teenage hero are mitigated by his consciousness of the Holocaust; in the 1982 *Repeat Dive* (צלילה חוזרת, Dir. Shimon Dotan), about tough commando soldiers who become sensitive and vulnerable by the bitter cost of war; in the 1986 *Two Fingers from Tyre* (שתי אצבעות מצידון, Dir. Ellie Cohen), about the moral conflict of Israeli soldiers who are torn between their humanity and their military duty during the 1982 Lebanon War; and even in a relatively recent film like the 2004 *Walk on Water* (ללכת על המים, Dir. Eitan Fox), which repeats the lessons of *Wooden Gun* in an adult version. None of these heroes are religious nor Mizrahi for that matter.

The first way *God's Neighbors* advances a religious agenda, then, is by changing this dynamic, reversing the association between religious Judaism and weakness and femininity. While the film is not the first to do this, the "un-Zionist" alliance it creates between Jewish religiosity, power and violence, is one of the most poignant articulations of a development that has long been underway in Israel. By making the main characters strong, masculine, attractive *and* religious, *God's Neighbors* breaks the old Israeli associations between Jewish religiosity, weakness, and un-sexiness to present a new kind of Jewish-Israeli heroes for the twenty first century. Their Mizrahi identity is an important aspect of their character as well.

In an earlier article about the changing perception of Mizrahim in Israeli culture, I argue that, their acculturation in Israel involved both an acknowledgement of their Jewishness as well as an appreciation of their masculinity.<sup>8</sup> This integrated agenda was promoted, probably inadvertently, in many of the popular ethnic comedies of the 1970s and 1980s, known as Bourekas films, in two major ways. First, in the conspicuous attention Bourekas films pay to non-Ashkenazi Jewish reli-

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<sup>8</sup> So-called Mizrahi Jews are Jews who immigrated to Israel from Muslim countries in the Near East, from Morocco in the west to Iraq and beyond in the east and Yemen in the south. Their designation as Mizrahi, that is "eastern," was made in reference to their non-Ashkenazi, that is, non-European origin. I argue that, their absorption into Israeli culture after the 1950s occurred in two major ways. The first was to "jewifying" an immigrant population that was deemed too un-Jewish, that is, Arab, by the absorbing Ashkenazi culture. The second was an attempt to contain the threatening, "dark" masculinity of Mizrahi men by taming it through marriage to Ashkenazi women. Both took place primarily in popular cinema, known as the Bourekas film genre. See, Yaron Peleg, "From Black to White: The Changing Image of Mizrahim in Israeli Cinema, 1960-2000." *Journal of Israel Studies*, Volume 13, Number 2, Summer 2008, pp. 122-145.

gious rituals. Second, in the naturalistic portrayal of non-Ashkenazi men in those films as sexual and criminal.<sup>9</sup> This was an important divergence from the regnant Zionist discourse at the time, which shunned Jewish religiosity and tended to accentuate instead a native and secular national Israeli Jewishness. As a result, by the 1990s, Mizrahi religiosity, renamed traditionalism (*masortiyut*), was the most widely accepted and uncontested form of Jewish religious expression in Israel, as opposed to the more problematic religiosity of the orthodox and later the settlers. Bourekas films did not bring about this change, of course. They simply processed it artistically, giving expression and eventually sanction to a form of Jewish religiosity that was very different from what was known and legitimately accepted in Israel until the Mizrahi immigration waves.<sup>10</sup>

Bourekas films also recorded a change in the perception of Israeli masculinity, which eventually became associated more with Mizrahim than with Ashkenazim. This was due firstly to the bourgeoisification of the old Ashkenazi elites. The offspring of the socialistically-minded and ascetic pioneers, who eventually became established, did not uphold their parents' fervent ideology. Eventually, and quite naturally too, their comfortable, middle-class status weakened their Zionist, pioneering fervor. It also relaxed their anti-diasporism, mitigated some of the negative associations with diasporic Judaism, and reestablished, even if symbolically, their affinity with their European grandparents. Secondly, the old Israeli masculine idiom, that was discarded by the growing Ashkenazi middle class, was taken up by Mizrahim instead.<sup>11</sup> Initially, masculine associations of Mizrahim were more negative, linking them to social disorder and crime. But as they were integ-

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<sup>9</sup> See Raz Yosef, "The Invention of Mizrahi Masculinity," *Beyond Flesh, Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israeli Cinema* (Rutgers U Press, 2004), pp. 84-117.

<sup>10</sup> The traditional Jewish communities that were always in Palestine did not figure prominently in the Zionist discourse and were not a relevant point of reference as part of it.

<sup>11</sup> See Peleg, *ibid.*, p. 131-132. Some of this also had to do with the changing nature of Israeli society after the big immigration waves from muslim countries. The mizrahification of Israeli society awakened an Ashkenazi nostalgia in some. On this fascinating social change that undermined the Ashkenazi establishment, which built the country and led it initially, see two telling polemical monographs, Baruch Kimmerling's, *Ketz shilton ha'uchsulim* (The end of the UCHSUL hegemony [UCHSUL=Ashkenazi, Secular, Veteran, Socialist, National-Zionist]) (Jerusalem: Keter, 2001), and Merav Rosensthal-Marmorstein's, *Hanidon: Ashkenazim* (See: Ashkenazi) (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 2005). Both books examine what they define as the demise of the founding Ashkenazi legacy in Israeli politics and culture and the rise of a rival culture that, among other influences, is partly religious and partly Mizrahi. On other aspects of the legitimation of Mizrahi culture and its spread in Israel, see Hannan Hever, Yehuda Shenhav, Pnina Mutzafi-Haller eds., *Mizrahim beyisrael* (Mizrahim in Israel) (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hame'uchad, 2002). Finally, on one of the most visible signs of the Mizrahification of contemporary Israeli culture - music, see Seroussi & Regev, *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

rated more comfortably into the Israeli collective with the passage of time, such links diminished, as we shall see below.<sup>12</sup>

Generally speaking, though, Israeli religiosity and Israeli masculinity were separated as cultural idioms. This is certainly true of films that cultivated the image of the New Hebrew, as noted before. But it also obtains for Bourekas films, which do not emphasize the connection.<sup>13</sup> When these idioms were brought together for the first time after the rise of the settler movement on the West Bank following the 1967 War, the combination proved highly problematic. A poignant illustration of it is found, for example, in the 2000 film *Time of Favor* (ההסדר, Dir. Joseph Cedar). In its portrayal of the making of *Yeshivot haahesder*, the Jewish seminaries that combine Torah study with military service, Cedar's film examines the explosive combination, literally, between fundamentalist religion and politics. The young men in the film, Yeshiva students who train to become soldiers in designated religious units, are torn between their allegiance to their charismatic rabbi and their loyalty to the state. The rabbi's surreptitious political agenda, to infiltrate the Israeli military and political power structure and usurp it, is carried by his students to extremes when one of them plots to blow up the Dome of the Rock mosque on Temple Mount in Jerusalem in preparation for building the third Jewish temple.

The settlers' reinterpretation of the Zionist legacy is a theme that recurs in other films by Cedar, who seems fascinated by their bastardization of it.<sup>14</sup> Of particular interest in the context of this discussion is Cedar's examination of the mixture of masculine and religious ideals as part of the settlers' claim that, their settlement efforts and their resistance to Arab violence make them true inheritors to the early Zionist pioneers. Unlike the rest of the country, which betrayed Zionism in its search for middle-class comforts and its increasing criticism of IDF policies as a corollary of it, the

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<sup>12</sup> Complete integration has not been achieved yet in Israel and many Mizrahim continue to be hampered, even today, by their ancestors' painful absorption process. At the same time, the playing field today is much more levelled in comparison to the past.

<sup>13</sup> Many Bourekas films also associate religiosity with diasporism. But unlike Zionist anti-diasporism, their rejection of it marks a wish to fit better into the secular Israeli absorbing culture. Judaism in those films is not cast as feminine and inferior but simply old-fashioned, an obstacle to integration. See for example the sabbath scene in the 1972 film *Salomonico*, in which the younger generation of the family cannot wait to be dismissed from table to go hang out with their classmates and friends, much to the dismay of their parents.

<sup>14</sup> By "settlers" here and elsewhere in the article I refer primarily to the ideological core of a much wider sector in Israeli society, that may not always agree with the policies and actions of the sector's ideologues.

settlers offer an old-new alternative. Their willingness to establish new communities in the "wilderness", their determination to defend them against hostile Palestinians, as well as their high participation in army combat units, are brought as proof of their patriotism. For the settlers, these are modern iterations of the settlement and defense ethos that distinguished the early Zionists. The analogy rings false to Cedar, who presents them as living comfortable lives in villages built for them by the government, working in cushy government jobs, and conveniently protected by the IDF. One of the most intriguing ways Cedar criticizes this discrepancy is by examining the new connections it creates between Jewishness and masculinity.<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned before, the early Zionist pioneers were famously secular. Against their diasporic Jewish parents, cautious, compliant and meek, they cultivated a more defiant persona that was daring, independent and bold. These traits were most sharply displayed by their very physical appearance. The shaved and tanned faces of pioneering men, their scanty clothes and their sandals, were a reaction against the beards and heavy clothes of their tefilin-bound fathers.<sup>16</sup> Many posters from the beginning of the twentieth century clearly display this new aesthetic by setting up strapping young men, who are usually poised in the middle of a field, holding a plow in one hand and a gun in the other. These images are not different from the kind of symbolism that was used at the same time in other European countries to represent The Nation. In other words, there was nothing particularly Jewish about them, which was precisely the point.<sup>17</sup>

From the 1970s on, under the influence of the settlement movement and its new ethos, these early Zionist images slowly began to change and undergo an aesthetic metamorphosis that incorporated more distinguishing Jewish signs. Modeling themselves after the early pioneers, the religious settlers in the West Bank cultivated many of the same traits, but they modified them to accommodate their religious beliefs. For reasons of modesty, the pioneers' shorts were replaced with long

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<sup>15</sup> For some statistical data, see Asher Cohen and Bernard Susser, "Religious Pressure Will Increase in the Future," in *Israel Studies Review*, Vol. 27, Issue 1, Summer 2012, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> The reference here is to Shaul Tschernichovsky's famous poem, *Facing the Statue of Apollo* (לנוכה פסל אפולו), in which the poet laments how diasporic Judaism has taken the ancient, free and mighty Jewish spirit ויאסרוהו ברצועות של תפילין, and bound it with straps of phylacteries. Kol Kitvey Shaul Tschernichovsky (Am Oved, 1990), p. 85-87.

<sup>17</sup> See note 1.

trousers, the tanned faces were covered with beards, and the famous *blorit*, the prodigious forelock of the early *sabra*, was topped by a yarmulka. A gun was also added sometimes, especially as Palestinian in the territories became increasingly resentful of the settlers' and resisted their presence.<sup>18</sup>

In his first two films, *Time of Favor* (2000) and *Campfire* (2004, מדורת השבט), Joseph Cedar presents this image as Frankensteinian, a golem which has risen against its master, as the Hebrew saying goes. In *Time of Favor*, the wholesome Yeshiva students, cleanly turned out in their pressed white shirts, neat haircuts and skullcaps, with their fresh faces bedewed with Hebrew youth, in the words of poet Natan Alterman, turn out to be evil terrorists.<sup>19</sup> The film provides chilling glimpses of these distortions. After receiving operating directives from his rabbi, thinly veiled as a blessing to go forth and multiply the religious soldiers in his unit, lieutenant Menachem is celebrated as a new prince in his synagogue. As he stands quietly smiling, Menachem is surrounded by dancing circles of young Yeshiva students, who solicit Heaven's good will for his new military appointment.<sup>20</sup> The young men are dressed in their Sabbath best, but they are also his soldiers, including his second in command, Itamar (Micha Celektar), who will later help steal explosives from the army base to use for a Jewish terrorist plot.

Indeed, the problem with these zealous new, religious Hebrews, is foreshadowed by their alter-ego, Pini, a gifted Yeshiva student whom the rabbi designates as groom for his pretty but rebellious daughter, Michal (Tinkerbell). Unlike Menachem and the others, Pini is not a quintessential model of the new Jewish manhood, cultivated in the hothouses of Judea and Samaria. Both as a Torah prodigy, as well as someone who is disqualified from military service for health reasons, he actually echoes the old, diasporic Jew. So when Michal refuses to marry him, this darker shadow of the more proper and clean-cut Hesderniks goes berserk and nearly succeeds in blowing up the

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<sup>18</sup> For the sake of my argument I am distilling an image here that does not represent all settlers, of course. See note 13 above.

<sup>19</sup> The reference here is to Natan Alterman's famous poem, "The Silver Platter" (מגש הכסף), which immortalizes the lovely and young men and women who gave their lives for the country in 1948. The poem has become a standard piece during commemoration ceremonies for the fallen in Israel.

<sup>20</sup> The young men sing part of the "Avinu Malkenu" prayer, usually sung during Yom Kippur, to ask for God's forgiveness and solicit his good will. The significance in this context is clear.



mosque on Temple Mount. The dichotomy represented by the differences between the wholesome and manly Menachem and the diasporic Pini might be a holdover from a previous era. Inasmuch as Menachem is the only one genuinely troubled by the religious-political tensions of his role, his image harks back to the veteran, ethical Sabra. But Menachem is both alone in this fight as well as not very determined. The future, warns the film, lies with the malevolent spirit which Pini represents.

The sense of Jewish power the rabbi and his disciples have is not a constructive compensation anymore for persecution in the Diaspora, as was the case with Zionist pioneers. Instead, it is viewed as extremist. Cedar's critique resides precisely in the fanatical image that emerges from the combination of Jewish religiosity with aggressive masculinity. His men look clean-cut on the outside, but turn out to be morally crooked on the inside. In one of the most poignantly subversive moments in the film, the commander of the new religious army unit, in which Pini serves too, is taken into custody for being an accessory to the terrorist plot and brutalized violently by Israeli secret police agents. The humiliation of an IDF officer, the apple of Israeli consensual culture and a representative of its recreated Hebrew masculinity, who falls on his knees and begs for mercy in his prison cell, becomes a punishment for his confusion of roles, for mixing Zionist [military] politics with Jewish religion.

A similar analogy, perhaps even more symbolic, is made in *Campfire*, Cedar's other film about the national religious community. The film takes place in the early 1980s and is the story of a family of three, a widow and her two teen-age daughters, who struggle for recognition and respect as independent women in an oppressive, masculine world. The mother, Rachel, tries to qualify as a member of a group of settlers who plan a new community in the West Bank by trying to conform to their righteous requirements. In the mean time, both she and her daughters are subjected to the demeaning pious, patronizing and sexual predatory practices of the men in their religious community.

At one point in the film, a religious youth group watches “re-runs” of the 1977 action film, *Entebbe: Operation Thunderbolt* (מבצע יונתן), about the daring Israeli commando operation for the

release of a hijacked airliner in Entebbe, Uganda. The young religious boys and girls are shown watching one of the most patriotic highlights of the film, during which the operation's commander, Yoni, gives his men a pep talk before going into action about their duty as soldiers and citizens of the Jewish state. The scene ends symbolically enough with an excerpt from Entebbe that announces, "Yoni is dead." This statement suggests an intriguing proposition: the death of the kind of exemplary manhood of earlier times, the demise of the mythological citizen-soldiers of the past. The proposition is exemplified later in the film, when the youngest daughter, Tammy (Hani Furstenberg), is sexually molested by a blondish (=Ashkenazi) religious soldier on leave, as well as by another boy from the youth group, the son of the leader of the religious community. What Cedar may be suggesting again is that, when the defiant masculinity inherited from pioneering Zionism is combined with religiosity, the concoction is lethal and explosive.<sup>21</sup>

The identification of Tammy's two sexual molesters as Ashkenazi is important because it highlights the connection to the Zionist legacy and especially to its problematic relationship with religion. Indeed, Tammy's attraction to Rafi (Oshri Cohen), a Mizrahi-looking classmate she fancies, can be understood as a critique of it. Although Rafi is also a member of the religious youth movement, he is gentler and less religiously fanatical than his friends, suggesting perhaps the sort of more common-sensical religiosity usually associated with Mizrahim. A similar dynamic is played out in the relations between Rachel (Michaela Eshet), Tammy's mother, and her suitor, Yossi (Moshe Ivgy). After a year of widowhood and a number of failed dates, Rachel finally settles on an old bachelor. A virgin at forty something, the Mizrahi looking Yossi is accommodating to a fault, a refreshing change from the string of menacingly aggressive Ashkenazi men Rachel and her daughters have to contend with in the film.

In contrast to Cedar's films, the innovation of *God's Neighbors* is to bind masculinity and Jewishness in another, more positive way that leaves out militarism.<sup>22</sup> Cedar's main critique is anim-

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<sup>21</sup> See above, as well as my related article, from which this is taken from, Yaron Peleg, "Ecce Homo: The Transfiguration of Israeli Manhood in Israeli Films," *Israeli Cinema, Identities in Motion*, Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg, eds. (U of Texas Press, 2011), pp. 30-40.

<sup>22</sup> Even if Avi's violence may be a substitute for military violence, the fact that it is sublimated is important in and of itself and certainly an improvement over it.

ated by the settlers' abuse of everything around them, including the Jewish religion, their attitude toward the State, and most of all toward the Palestinians. And although none of those actually appear in the film, the consequence of these abuses for the settlers' own community are translated into the Ashkenazi religious-military freaks that populate them. Ya'ish replaces this kind of problematic Ashkenazi masculinity in his film with a more benign and "genuine" Mizrahi masculinity that lacks overt nationalistic aspects. Avi, the intense hero of *God's Neighbors*, is a simple guy, an unsophisticated street thug, who relates to the god he recently found as a kind of gang leader, whose command[ment]s must be loyally obeyed. At the same time, his religious beliefs do not seem to inform his political opinions or stand in the way of his natural physical urges. When Pini in *Time of Favor* is spurned by the girl he loves, he channels his frustration into a terrorist plot. When the girl Avi fancies rebuffs him in *God's Neighbors*, he simply woos her, like the "real" man he is, until she accepts him.

I want to suggest that, this seemingly superficial analogy nevertheless exemplifies the differences between the two masculinities and their relationship to Zionism. Against the fraught Israeli Ashkenazi masculinity, forged in the crucible of European antisemitism, changed by the country's prolonged state of emergency into overt military machoism and finally mutated into the settlers' evil super-Jew, the Mizrahi masculinities in Ya'ish's film seem uncomplicated and benign by comparison. As former street gang members, with their menacing looks, masculine bravado and adolescent group behavior, Avi and his friends may play homage to the Bourekas stereotypes of Mizrahi men as criminals. At the same time, their religious affiliation tames them. But this is not anymore the Mizrahi traditionalism of previous decades that was displayed in Bourekas and other films. In order to break out of this mould, Avi and his friends adopt a form of ostensibly Ashkenazi religiosity, hasidism.

In some ways, the three former gang members have simply changed one gang for another. Instead of a group of thugs who deal drugs and collect protection money, they attend Torah study and then go out and impose on their neighbors the Jewish laws they learn. The film's opening scene

is a chilling demonstration of their ruthless vigilantism, an example of their personal interpretation of God's laws. This jihadist mode repeats itself several times in the film, as they break the bones of a porn CD seller, shut down a local hairdresser who stays open after sundown on the sabbath, and threaten a young woman to dress more modestly. But their religious affiliation also holds the promise of amelioration, and eventually, the laws they purport to uphold indeed tame them. Whereas their Bourekas predecessors always seemed lost, drifting victims of an absorption process that left them out, and against which they rebelled through crime, Avi and his friends are essentially in a religious group therapy. They are pretty wild at the beginning of the film, but by the end of it, Avi certainly improves and mends his ways somewhat. He avoids killing a rival Arab gang member during a vendetta, and gets together with his girl at the end, disbanding in effect the piety patrol he ran throughout the film.

Comparatively speaking, then, Judaism seems to have different effects on these two different masculinities, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi. Or put another way, the two kinds of masculinities interpret and incorporate Judaism differently. Whereas in the case of the settlers, religion seems to bring out the meanness and aggression that was inherent in the new-Hebrew, Ashkenazi masculinity, religion seems to contain and tame the aggression inherent in the stereotypical Mizrahi "criminal" masculinity. At the end, Jewish religion becomes the most signifying characteristic of these three young men that defines them as Israelis. This is not an identity created as a reaction to a negative impetus in the way the Zionist New Hebraism was a reaction to antisemitism, or the settlers' neo-Hebraism is a reaction to national rivalry. Rather, it is an identity that combines a subjective or personal particularity - Mizrahi, with a bigger communal identity - Jewish and national. That it is Hasidism, a specific Ashkenazi kind of Judaism, is all the more important for it may suggest a genuine hybrid form of an Israeli Judaism, one that is not divided by ethnic or sectarian differences anymore.<sup>23</sup> By joining a hasidic sect, Avi and his Mizrahi mates transcend the narrower definitions that always stood in the

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<sup>23</sup> The religious party, Shas, in Israel, functions somewhat similarly, except that it adopted Ashkenazi religious sectarian characteristics that isolate it rather than integrate it into the country's body politic. Conversely, hasidism, especially the renewed Breslev sect, generally keeps out of parochial politics in Israel. As such, it is a fitting framework for Avi's quest for meaning and purpose that centers on religion and not on the State to provide them.

way of true integration. Their success may perhaps also mark the final death of *Mamlachtiyut* and its discourse of ethnicity, which religion seems to have usurped as a national organizing principle.

Indeed, the film distances itself from the kind of Mizrahi antagonism that animate sectarian parties like Shas in that it does not set up a state apparatus against which the characters in the film rail, as they do most notably in the *ur* Bourekas film, *Sallah Shabbati* (1964, סאלה שבת, Dir. Ephraim Kishon), and in many of its derivatives. In the absence of a “gripe,” then, it is difficult to see them as fighting or reacting against it. Their religiosity is perceived in the film as an attempt to fill the void of a grand national narrative, which has disappeared by now.

The entire ethnic infrastructure of yore is discarded in this film, as we see in one of the most amusing scenes in the film: Avi and his gang mate, Koby, discuss inter-Mizrahi ethnic supremacy while playing backgammon one evening. Naming pop culture Mizrahi celebrities, they compete between Turks and Moroccans for the most accomplished ethnic minority. This is a farcical scene, of course, that makes light of the very premise and dismisses it through humor and significantly, too, by centering it around a backgammon game at an outside cafe. Since the *ur* Bourekas film, *Sallah Shabbati* (1964), backgammon has epitomized Mizrahi slothfulness: grown men idling away hours of each day in a cafe playing games instead of working and feeding their families. The film amplifies these associations only to toss them aside as amusing references to a bygone past that no longer dictates either image or reality.

To the extent it is consciously retained in the film, Mizrahi identity is constructively folded into Avi's image as a romantic hero. As mentioned before, an analogy can be made between his image here and that of allegedly sexualized Mizrahi men in Bourekas films. Both here and there a menacing Mizrahi masculinity, in danger of disrupting the [Ashkenazi-imposed] social order, is tamed by the film's end through marriage, as in the 1974 film *Kazablan*, for instance. But the analogy only goes so far. Bourekas masculinities were constructed differently, aimed perhaps at imagining the danger and then inoculating it. Avi's image is made according to different cinematic criteria altogether, that of the working-class romantic hero, a simple, uneducated but honest, genuine

and moral person, whose inner worth is revealed through his exemplary (=chivalrous) behavior toward the girl he loves. Since a working-class identity in Israel is still associated mostly with Mizrahim, it is not really necessary to refer to it explicitly, as in *Kazablan*.<sup>24</sup> So while marriage has indeed tamed both heroes, Kaza and Avi, in *Kazablan* it had conferred membership in the Israeli community whereas in *God's Neighbors* it has marked the hero as a good Jew.

Moreover, Avi's obvious sexuality is not problematized anymore, as it was in many Bourkas films.<sup>25</sup> It has now turned into sexiness, which is something completely different. This is precisely the shift suggested by the film. In the forty years that have elapsed since the 1970s, attitudes toward sex and sexuality have undergone big changes. This is especially true for industries like film, that rely on the sexiness of stars and cultivate a celebrity culture to maximize profits. Avi's oozing sexual appeal is no longer a stumbling block on the way to acceptance, as it was regarded in a different Israel and in the Bourkas genre. It has now become a pronounced aspect of his personality and his beautiful physique is deliberately put on display in the film. Thus, toward the end of it, we see him actually taking his clothes off, stepping naked into the sea after praying to God for guidance. Like the naked, working-class James Bond, as played recently by Daniel Craig, Avi's pronounced working-class (=Mizrahi) features are exposed to viewers in all of their glorious authenticity, muscles, scars, tattoos and all.<sup>26</sup>

The second way the film demonstrates the changes in the religious landscape is more blatantly political and relates to the relations between Jews and Arabs. Of particular importance here is the lack of overt political affiliation associated with Avi and his vigilante mates. This is probably another reason why they appear more likable than Cedar's young fanatics, and even their eventual fight with their Arab rivals does not detract from that or marks them politically in any significant way. It simply reflects the vague distaste most Israelis have for Arabs; a distaste that is

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<sup>24</sup> See Yosef, *ibid*.

<sup>25</sup> See Yosef, *ibid*.

<sup>26</sup> See an insightful review by Uri Klein: "Craig is different from all the previous Bonds, less slick, rougher, less charismatic and his working-class origins are much more apparent than in the actors that played him before." "Skyfall, James Bond Returns with a License for a New Life" (סקייפול, ג'יימס בונד חוזר עם רישיון להיות מחדש), Haaretz internet edition, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/cinema/movie-reviews/1.1852292>.

rarely murderous. Location figures prominently in this dynamic. Bat-Yam, where the film takes place, is a working-class city south of Jaffa and directly adjacent to it. An unremarkable city in many respects, it suffers from a bad reputation as a depressed community with large Mizrahi and other "problematic" ethnic communities (Russian, migrant workers, Arabs), and from its proximity to Arab Jaffa.<sup>27</sup> Recently, Bat-Yam has been mentioned in the media in connection with anti Arab rhetoric and violence, probably because of its changing demographics and the general swing to the right of Mizrahi and Russian communities in Israel in recent years.<sup>28</sup> Traditionally, that role has been reserved for the nearby Jaffa, whose poor population of Arabs and Jews often served as a backdrop to it. One of the most recent cinematic portrayals of it can be seen in the film *Ajami* (2009), which corresponds in some telling ways with *God's Neighbors*.<sup>29</sup>

*Ajami* is one of the most mature, complex and honest portrayals of the deadly conflict between Jews and Arabs. Although it takes place in Jaffa, and not in the territories, it faithfully and rather rarely describes the hundred year war between Palestinians and Israelis as all encompassing, as touching every aspect of life in the region. It is confined neither to territory nor to a specific group nor even to time, but combines all of these to paint a dismal picture of an almost mythological fight, an all consuming tribal conflict that appears as if it will go on forever.

At the same time, the unusual story of *Ajami's* making stands in surprising contrast to its bleak message. Created jointly by an Israeli Palestinian and an Israeli Jew, Scandar Copti and Yaron Shani, the film's collaborative production process defies its own pessimism, whose dark depths are probably meant to move viewers to defy it as well. One of the most persuasive ways the film does so is by portraying the conflict as a series of unfortunate coincidences and avoidable misunder-

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<sup>27</sup> In the mid 1990s, the city gained more of an identity following a popular Television series, Bat-Yam New-York, that took these problematic ingredients and turned them into good drama by showing a genuine, primarily Mizrahi community that made no excuses for itself.

<sup>28</sup> For a representative article about the anti-Arab demonstrations in the city see, "An Anti-Arab Demonstration in Bat-Yam: They're Dating Our Sisters" (הפגנה נגד ערבים בבית ים: הם יוצאים עם אחיותינו) <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0.7340.L-4001297.00.html>, 19.12. 2010.

<sup>29</sup> In the past two decades, Jaffa has been progressively gentrified, as high real estate prices push people out of Tel-Aviv to look for alternatives close by. Several upscale apartment complexes that have been built in the city have also helped gentrification, as well as market and municipal pressures on poorer Arab families to sell their large homes to wealthy Israelis. These developments are changing the city profoundly and will likely shrink its Arab community even further and eventually also eliminate ethnic tensions in it.

standings. This is most tragically obvious in the film's climax, in which a series of mistakes culminates in a domino effect of killings that could have been prevented, and should be, says the film.<sup>30</sup>

But while *Ajami* is deeply immersed in the conflict between Jews and Arabs and artistically predicated on it, *God's Neighbors* pays surprisingly little attention to it. Surprising, because several key aspects in it presuppose it: the characters' Mizrahi background,<sup>31</sup> their working class status,<sup>32</sup> their past military service in Israel's Border Patrol,<sup>33</sup> their proximity to Jaffa, and finally the presence of a rival Arab gang spoiling for a fight. Moreover, as the film makes substantial use of cinematic gang vernacular to comment on the lives of Avi and his mates, viewers almost expect the story to develop in that direction, as it does in *Ajami*.

Indeed, toward the end of the film, two of Avi's mates finally summon him to join them in a vendetta against the Arabs. Getting all worked up, they pack weapons, get into a car and speed to Jaffa. When they spot members of the Arab gang on one of the streets, they hurl a molotov cocktail at them, then jump out of the car with drawn guns, ready to kill. But here is where the story suddenly takes an unexpected turn. Trembling with rage and pointing a gun at one of the Arabs, who is lying down, expecting his life to end any second, Avi deliberately misses and shoots the ground next to him. He has chosen not to kill his enemy, despite the eager calls from his surrounding gang members to do so, to go ahead and press the trigger.

Avi's motivation is not immediately clear because he has been portrayed as hot-headed and violent up to that point. One of the most obvious explanations to the change in his behavior, of which this is the last in a series of gradual changes, is his strengthening relationship with his girlfriend, Miri. This is, again, a generic cliché: the girl as a mitigating factor, a beast charmer after the manner of Delilah. Avi's burgeoning romance is certainly a softening factor. But it is only part of

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<sup>30</sup> The unique collaborative production process also included non-actors from the urban neighborhood the film takes place in, who were coached for several months prior to shooting and did not work with a prepared script but improvised during filming. The result is arguably a more authentic reflection of the Arab-Israeli *sitz im leben*.

<sup>31</sup> Mizrahim in Israel are more popularly associated with nationalism and anti-Arab sentiments for reasons that have to do with their history in and proximity to Arab culture, which complicated their absorption into an Ashkenazi Israel.

<sup>32</sup> Working-class, lower socio-economic sectors in most democracies tend to be more politically conservative than other parts of society, which in Israel is often expressed by anti-Arab sentiments.

<sup>33</sup> The Israeli Border Patrol (Mishmar hagvul) is a paramilitary police unit, comprised of policemen and soldiers alike. Its role is to assist the police in civic peacekeeping as well as terrorist prevention activity. The unit has a high quotient of Mizrahi Jews and Druze soldiers and has a reputation of being violent especially toward Arabs.



the picture. A bigger part of it, I think, and certainly more narratively significant, is the small place given to the rivalry between Arabs and Jews in the story. Already before we get to this point in the plot, the Chekovian gun, so to speak, looms intermittently and ominously in the shape of a car full of defiant Arab gang members. Driving occasionally by the kiosk, where Avi and his mates hang out and play backgammon, the Arabs slow down and crank up the volume of their ethnic music, which spills onto the street, and look provocatively at the Jews. This annoys Kobby at one point, who begs Avi to go after the bastards and get them and their "ugly music". But Avi is not interested, dismissing both the Arabs and Kobby's childish antics.

Coming, as it does in the story, before the clash with the Arabs, it prepares us, perhaps, for the subsequent twist that occurs when the proverbial gun is finally used. Cinematic gang conventions seem to lead us toward yet another articulation of the seemingly endless Mid-Eastern conflict, as portrayed in *Ajami*. Yet with an heroic gesture, taken from the conventions of another genre, as we shall presently see, Avi passes his "trial," curbs his urge to kill, and by doing so, terminates the cycle of violence. He also makes sure none of his friends do so either by actually firing a shot, which means they have to quickly leave before the police arrives.

Given the dramatic makeup of the story, Avi's abstention should not really be surprising. Since the Arabs do not figure in it significantly, it would make little sense for him to kill one of them now and upset the story's narrative balance. The fact is that, the story has marginalized Arab presence to such an extent that it constitutes a minor and insignificant part of it. This is certainly a reflection of Israeli everyday reality, in which Israeli Arabs are practically non-existent. But it is less plausible in cities that have mixed populations where gang violence occurs, and for a film that deals with both. That the Arabs have such a minor role here is, therefore, significant and point perhaps to the ascendancy of a new Jewish religious ethos over the older Zionist one. Avi's refusal to participate in the gang war, and symbolically the bigger Mid-Eastern conflict, represents a disengagement of sorts from the Israeli here and now, an attempt to suspend "Zionist" historical time and return, at least partly or temporarily, to mythological, religious Jewish time. Does *God's*

*Neighbors* suggests a new religious *mamlachtiyut*, in which national politics lose some of their centrality making more space for the politics of religion instead?

A short comparison to another religious film, *Ushpizin* (2003, Dir. Giddi Dar), may help clarify the point as well as introduce the third religious aspect of the film, its happy Jewish ending in the manner of a naïve, pious or hasidic tale.<sup>34</sup> *Ushpizin* takes place in Jerusalem in an ultra Orthodox hasidic community and tells the story of a humble, righteous and loving married couple, Moshe and Molly Ballanga, whose poverty is embittered by their inability to have children. Structured like a hasidic tale, the story unfolds at the time of the festival of Tabernacles (Sukkot), during which Moshe and Molly are put to a series of difficult tests. At the end of the film, having withstood their trials and proved their belief in God, the loving couple is rewarded with a child, a baby boy.

*Ushpizin* was a religious project in a way, because its writer and main actor, Shuli Rand, is a *ba'al tshuva*, a secular man who found God and became ultra orthodox. Rand got permission from his rabbi to make the film as a way to reach out to secular Israelis. Mr. Rand did not think his film would swell the size of his community by a rush of secular viewers, who would clamor for a religious return to the faith. Rather, both the narrative hasidic elements, as well as the more modern romantic sensibilities of the story, were used to paint a more positive picture of his community to a generally hostile secular Israeli public.<sup>35</sup> The hasidic elements present a neat and attractive tale and seem like a genuine expression of his sincere faith, while the love story at the center appeals to secular viewers. For *Ushpizin* is also a romantic comedy, one of the most popular of all cinematic genres. The only difference is the religious context and the charming component of "miracles", in which the naive couple believes and which film, as a medium, efficaciously renders.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Hasidic tales are numerous and different. Generally speaking, though, most of them are predicated on a strong and naïve religious faith and on miracles that prove divine providence and reward the righteous for their trust and belief.

<sup>35</sup> See Shmulik Duvdevani, "Nes Gadol Haya Po," <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-2958697,00.html>, 05.08.04.

<sup>36</sup> Prior to the 2000s, very few films about the life of orthodox or ultra orthodox Jews were made in Israel. One exception to this were the pathetic comedies about a hapless, young orthodox groom, called Kunileml, which appeared in earlier decades and painted a sorry picture of the religious in Israel; a picture that stuck for a long time. See Ronnie Perchec, "Haregesh hadati bakolnoa hayisre'eli" (Religious Sensibility in Israeli Cinema), in *Mabatim Fictiviyim* (Fictive Looks – On Israeli Cinema), Nurit Gertz, Orly Lubin, Jud Ne'eman eds. (Open University Press, 1998), pp. 328-341.

But *Ushpizin* tells the story of a very unique community, one that is radically different from general Israeli society. The film does not have an integrative agenda and makes no claims other than ask viewers to recognize the community as different but legitimate. It may, in the name of contemporary multiculturalism, wish to be seen as equal to other communities in a postmodern/postzionist Israel. While it remains sectarian by the faithful way it depicts the seclusive ways of the sect, it demands equality of representation and consideration as part of the new mosaic called modern Israeli society. This is certainly different from the old reluctance of the Israeli ultra-orthodox to acknowledge the State. But essentially, the film remains a story about an “eternal” community, one that exists in a timeless zone of religious rituals and practices, disconnected from historical time in any meaningful way. Despite its superficial use of a politics of representation, the story is predicated on the conventions of an abiding religious faith rather than those of time and place.

*God's Neighbors* is very different, of course. Avi is an Israeli Everyman and so are his "gang" members. His neighborhood looks like similar neighborhoods throughout Israel. There is nothing remarkable about it, which is precisely the point. Even his membership in the Breslev hasidic sect does not diminish his all-Israeli image but perhaps even enhances it. This claim is powerfully made already in the opening scene of the film, mentioned above. The fight with the Russians stages an Israeli show of force, during which the invading and polluting outsiders are repelled from the midst of the "holy" community. The Russians exhibit an aggressively un-Israeli behavior, as Friday evenings are amongst the most peaceful times on the Israeli calendar, when many Israeli Jews get together with their families and eat a festive meal then. Public drinking of alcohol is also a rarity in Israel, or at least was so until fairly recently. Speaking Russian loudly, therefore, drinking alcohol in public and especially disrespecting the eve of sabbath, all paint the Russians as foreign and alien to the Israeli space. Avi's fight against them and their defeat is readily perceived, therefore, as a triumph, not necessarily of a religious agenda, but of a civic Israeli one.

Consequently, Avi's first, commanding appearance in the film is not seen as that of a jihadist or crusader. Like the neighbors who cheer him, viewers initially see him as a vigilante for a com-

mon Israeli civic agenda. It is only subsequently that we understand the degree of his religious involvement. But by that time, he has already found a warm place in our hearts as a defender of the civic status quo. We may disapprove of his violence, but we applaud the results of his actions.

Another mitigating factor that diminishes the alienation that his religious affiliation might raise in viewers is the fact that, he is fully integrated into the community. Unlike Moshe Ballanga in *Ushpizin*, who was also a hardened criminal once, and turned his life around at the price of cutting himself off from society by joining a seclusive religious sect, Avi's religiosity is not regarded as an obstacle, as isolating him from the greater community. If anything, and especially after the terrific violence he displays in the opening scene, it is seen as calming and therapeutic. His religious schooling provides a positive framework that curbs his violent tendencies and harnesses his negative energy. Better a hasid, as it were, than a gangster. Moreover, Avi's hasidic affiliation also gives him a leadership role. Since the working-class, Mizrahi community he lives in is already traditional, studying Torah elevates him and adds a value to him that he formerly lacked. Toughened and sexualized by a Mizrahi masculinity, and ennobled by the study of Torah, Avi makes not simply a leader, but a Jewish leader.

This is another reason why it is not only his love for Miri that tames the shrewish Avi, but religion as well. The local neighborhood beauty would probably not have considered the menacing gangster as a lover had his religious observance not evoked in her a gentle nostalgia for her own traditional upbringing, as she confesses to him one night when the two sit and coo lovingly on a park bench. So in spite of her unpleasant encounter with him in the beginning of the film, when he threatens her to dress more modestly, religion is also that which brings them together. At the end, Miri too becomes enthralled by religion, and finds a respite from her troubled life in its comforting bosom. But this is not the sectarian Judaism of *Ushpizin*, but a Judaism that is much more Israeli and encompassing.

Finally, then, the "hasidic" or naïve narrative elements in *God's Neighbors* become a story for and of the nation at large, not just a simple tale about the faith of one righteous couple in a small

and exotic religious community. Both the trials Avi is put to, his clash with the Arabs, as well as his happy union with Miri at the end, make up the naive elements of the tale as well as the modern love story. Generally speaking, such narrative features are unusual for Israeli cinema, where most ethno-national clashes end badly, and where happy endings are an even greater rarity. *God's Neighbors* flaunts this pattern and breaks it and by doing so proposes a different national pattern, one in which Jewish religious time and Jewish religious practices figure more prominently as determining factors.

These new parameters are elegantly suggested in the film, whose closure neatly complements its opening. Whereas the film opens with the ritual of *kiddush*, the sanctification of the wine that ushers in the sabbath, it ends with the ritual of *havdala*, which announces the end of the sabbath and the beginning of the new work week. The opening scene “sanctified” Avi and anointed him as a kind of local Jeanne d'Arc, who goes out to fight for god and country. The concluding scene shows that he has matured and learned to differentiate, to literally make a *havdala*, which means separation in Hebrew. Both scenes take place around the sabbath table. In the opening scene, Avi and his father dine alone. In the concluding scene, Miri has joined them as Avi's bride to be. This neat and happy ending is a reward for Avi's good behavior and a fulfillment of his quest for meaning and purpose. That it is the Jewish religion and not the Israeli state that provides both is certainly ironic. And whether it is a wish or a warning remains an open question until the very end.