

49. The Arrangement

Time of Favor

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Time of Favor (Ha Hesder), directed by Joseph Cedar [A]

Israel, 2000

Mandatory national service is required of most Israeli citizens. When an Israeli reaches the age of eighteen, he or she must go to the induction office closest to home, be tested, and be assigned to a job according to the needs of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Men serve for three years, women for two. Women—and men, in some cases—can substitute community service for military service. Exempted from the draft are members of minority groups—including Muslims, Christians, and Armenians—and the heredim, ultra-Orthodox Jews who consider their full-time engagement in Talmudic studies to be their profession.

The ultra-Orthodox are exempted from service in the IDF under an agreement made in 1948 between David Ben-Gurion's government and the remnant of the scholars studying in yeshivas—schools devoted to learning and interpreting Jewish religious texts—who arrived in the new state from Europe when the embers of the Holocaust were still smoking. To continue this tradition of religious education after so many Jewish scholars had been murdered in the Holocaust, the yeshiva scholars were exempted from military duty. It would have been difficult for them to adjust to army life, which was so different from the closed communities in which they lived. Moreover, many were physically not able to meet the army's requirements. Despite the government's gesture toward the ultra-Orthodox, the extreme

heredim honor only Jewish Law—Halakha—and deny the sovereignty of the secular Jewish state.

Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the majority of soldiers who have served in the IDF have been secular. They have hailed from urban centers, agricultural collectives (kibbutzim), or private or collective farms (moshavim). However, the IDF contains a growing group of religious Zionists who follow the philosophy of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who believed in integrating Torah study with the building of the state.

This group is called the national religious sector. It gained tremendous momentum after the Six Day War of 1967, when many Israelis considered their country's victory as the beginning of the Redemption that could culminate in the coming of the Messiah. Modern religious Zionists, loyal believers in Jewish religious law as well loyal citizens of Israel, are found throughout all levels of government, society, and culture. They fulfill all of their civic responsibilities. Their traditional political party, the Mafdal (National Religious Party), has been represented in the Knesset, Israel's parliament, since it was founded. Members of the national religious sector live in all types of agricultural and urban settlements in Israel. The young men are inducted into the IDF—usually into combat units, some of which are coed—and are highly motivated. Many of the national religious women opt to perform community service in uniform, usually as teachers of new immigrant soldiers, or as civilian tutors working with schoolchildren in remote Israeli towns. The members of this sector support the “settler movement” in Judea and Samaria—which Palestinians and more liberal and leftist Israelis call the “occupied territories,” otherwise known as the West Bank and Gaza. For the adherents of the national religious movement, the Land of Israel is indivisible. It was



The Orthodox Israeli soldier Aki Avni (as Menachem) prays. From *Time of Favor* (2000), directed by Joseph Cedar. PHOTOFEST/KINO INTERNATIONAL

promised to the people of Israel by God, as stated in the Bible, and it must be settled in its entirety after the return of large areas of the biblical Land of Israel to Israeli sovereignty—especially the capital, Jerusalem.

There is a more strictly religious Zionist group whose members do not believe in men and women serving together. In order to recruit them, the IDF had to find a suitable solution. In the mid-1950s, the government decided to recruit national religious yeshiva students under a special *hesder* (arrangement) for five years of service, combining periods of Torah study at a yeshiva with periods of active military service, such as training, maintaining equipment, guard duty, and, if necessary, com-

bat duty. A yeshiva for such students is called a *Hesder Yeshiva*.

The name of this film in Hebrew, *Ha Hesder*, refers to the arrangement between the government and the settler movement on army service but embodies a dilemma of loyalty. Does the religious soldier obey his IDF commander or the rabbi who is the head of his yeshiva? The tension between the two loyalties is the dramatic foundation of the film.

Written and directed by Joseph Cedar and released with the English title *Time of Favor*, the film won five Ophir prizes (the Israeli equivalent of Oscars)—for screenplay, cinematography, editing, and best male and female actors (Aki Avni and Tinkerbell, respectively). It was nominated for a Peace Award by the American Political Film Society in 2003.

Born into a religious Zionist family, Cedar defines himself as a National religious Zionist. In order to write the screenplay, he lived for two years in the Dolev community settlement on the West Bank, about six kilometers from Ramat. (It falls under the jurisdiction of the Benjamin Local Council, named for the area allocated in the Bible to the tribe of Benjamin.) This is the first time that an observant Jew has succeeded in making a feature film of international quality about the settlements in Judea and Samaria. From inside knowledge of the National religious community, dubbed yarmulke wearers, he explains the issue of being under dual command (rabbinical and military), and the conflict of loyalty during a crisis. (In Israeli society, the type of yarmulke or skullcap—black, white, or colorful velvet or crocheted; large or small; patterned or embroidered; and so forth—indicates a person's political and religious leanings. Those affiliated with the National religious group are usually associated with crocheted yarmulkes.) The issue of

settlements in the West Bank remains an explosive issue, polarizing public opinion in Israel. Cedar's film not only accurately captured the settler's lifestyle, but it also attracted an international audience.

The film was shot at Mitzpeh Yeriho (the name literally means Jericho Overlook), in the Judean Desert. The primordial landscape of Jerusalem and the reddish Judean Hills provide the natural setting for this story. The protagonists include Rabbi Meltzer (Assi Dayan), the charismatic rabbi of a small settlement who is also the principal of a high-school yeshiva that includes a preparatory program for the IDF. This type of high school is very different from an ultra-Orthodox yeshiva, whose curriculum consists only of the Talmud, the Bible, and Jewish law—no instruction in secular studies, math, or foreign languages. The high-school yeshiva in the film integrates secular and religious studies to prepare students to enter civil society in any profession they select, while it is assumed that all will be inducted into the IDF after high school and before their university studies. The academic level is usually high, and students have the drive to excel in all their studies. The IDF preparatory component teaches leadership training and Israel's geography and political history. Graduates of this type of integrated training served as outstanding combat soldiers in the Second Lebanon War (2006) and the recent Operation Cast Lead, the war in Gaza in 2008.

Rabbi Meltzer, who runs his school and community very authoritatively, is idolized by his students, who consider him to be the "Talmudical genius of the current generation." A widower, the rabbi plans to promise his daughter, Michal (Tinkerbell), in marriage to his best student, Pinhas (Idan Alterman). Michal is in her late teens, while Pinhas, or "Pini," is in his early twenties. Thin, pale, and diabetic, he is a religious zealot.

The plot revolves around two axes: Rabbi Meltzer and his present and former students Pini—another Talmudical genius, in spite of his poor health—and Menachem, a successful combat officer (Aki Avni, a star of Israeli television who, after this film, left Israel to try his luck in Hollywood); and Itamar (Micha Selektar), now married and a father. Inspired by Meltzer, the three—who have been best friends since their student days—dream aloud of blowing up the al-Aqsa Mosque, which is situated on the Temple Mount—above the sacred Western Wall, a remnant of the Second Temple, Judaism's holiest site. This scene is an exposition of the messianic expectations of the three friends, who ardently await the building of the Third Temple, but for whom removing the al-Aqsa Mosque is only a theoretical prospect. The second axis is the relationship between the rabbi and his daughter, who rejects Pini in favor of Menachem.

The film begins with a long shot of a winding, deserted road in Judea. A soldier stands at a hitchhiking post and thumbs a ride to his settlement. (Israel has official hitchhiking stations where soldiers can stop cars for rides home on weekends, a leftover from the early days of the state when there was little public transportation and few private cars.) This shot shows the remote location of Menachem's community.

Based on their devotion to their country and religion, the Jewish settlers are committed to making this barren region bloom and to defending it at all costs. From this perspective, the view of the empty road has a symbolic significance for the future. Rabbi Meltzer dreams of establishing a renewed Kingdom of Israel and redeeming the land from its desolation. Immediately after Menachem and Michal meet hitchhiking to the settlement, the scene moves to a darkened alley where three shadows walk stealthily, fearing discovery.

They are Menachem, Pini, and Micha. The alleyway is in the Old City of Jerusalem, in an area located near the Temple Mount. After they sneak past Israeli security guards and Waqf personnel (the Waqf is the Arab religious authority in charge of Muslim holy places), they lower themselves down to bathe in the waters of the underground Gihon Spring. The underground tunnel dates back to biblical times. It was hewn into the rock to bring water to Jerusalem when the city was besieged by the Assyrians. The waters of the Gihon still flow in the same channel, and immersion in it is believed to be more spiritually enriching than purification in the water of a mikvah, or ritual bath. The channel of the Gihon is located beneath the al-Aqsa Mosque, which stands on top of the Temple Mount.

Ultra-Orthodox non-Zionist rabbis strictly prohibit stepping onto the Temple Mount, since this is the site of the destroyed First Temple, built by Solomon, and the Second Temple, built by Herod. As long as the Messiah has not yet come, and the Holy Temple has not yet been rebuilt, Jews—especially those who have not undergone religious purification—must not step onto the site. This prohibition has been breached by other rabbis (usually religious Zionists) who believe that ever since Israel regained control over the Temple Mount in the Six Day War, Jews are obligated to rebuild the Holy Temple there. For political convenience, the government of Israel adheres to the ultra-Orthodox ban and forbids Jews to climb the Temple Mount.

Thus, these three young men are violating the ban by immersing themselves in the Gihon. Their clandestine bathing in this place brings them into a world of mystery and sacred awe. Their proximity to the al-Aqsa Mosque and the possibility that dynamiting it could ignite the Middle East in a bloody jihad—a holy war waged by Muslims

against “unbelievers”—arouses the young men’s adrenaline and sense of religious duty.

Since 1968, the government of Israel has attempted to place a physical barrier between Jews and Arabs at the Temple Mount, realizing how important the location is to both groups. By incredible luck, an attempt to blow up the Temple Mount by a young, mentally ill Australian on August 21, 1969, was thwarted. Michael Dennis Rohan, an evangelical Christian, confessed that he was trying to accelerate the coming of the Messiah by establishing the Holy Temple on the Temple Mount. Since then, the fear of a disturbed “visionary” who might take the law into his own hands has haunted the Israeli government and its law enforcement and security agencies.

There has been a persistent fear that radical religious Zionists might take their rabbis’ sermons very literally. Sermons encouraging students to purify themselves in preparation for the restoration of the Holy Temple could incite them to hasten the coming of the Messiah by destroying the al-Aqsa Mosque.

The three young men in the film discuss the establishment of a combat unit, to be made up of soldiers from their *Hesder Yeshiva*. Menachem, who is an IDF officer, will lead the unit, which Rabbi Meltzer had lobbied the IDF to create. Agencies such as the General Security Service, Israel’s equivalent of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Mossad, the equivalent of the Central Intelligence Agency, worry about what would happen if the rabbi has more influence over this unit than its military commanders do. The unit might act on its religious convictions and disobey orders.

Military units made up of soldiers who are also yeshiva students have existed for decades. The film erroneously portrays the establishment of the unit as an exceptional case. Cedar consciously

made this choice to highlight the rebellion that might arise if the soldiers shifted their loyalty from the IDF military commanders to religious leaders. The fear of such activities derives from incidents in the past, particularly the so-called "Jewish Underground" affair.

During the 1980s, reserve officers living in settlements in the territories took the law into their own hands and created a clandestine organization, dubbed the "Jewish Underground," that intended to attack Palestinian targets in the West Bank. They used standard IDF equipment and randomly murdered three students, wounded dozens of others, and attempted to assassinate three Palestinian mayors. Two of the mayors were seriously wounded; one had to have his legs amputated. A Border Patrol demolitions expert was blinded when he tried to dismantle an explosive device planted by the Jewish Underground. The group was also suspected of planning to blow up the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque, but its members were caught while attempting to blow up five buses in eastern Jerusalem. Indictments were filed against twenty-nine people who belonged to the organization, fifteen of whom were convicted and imprisoned.

Cedar based his screenplay on this event, without knowing to what extent reality would follow his plot. In 2009, after imposing a freeze on the building of new settlements, the government of Israel announced that it would evacuate some settlers from the West Bank, as it had done in the Gaza Strip in 2005. Soldiers from a *Hesder Yeshiva* performed an act unacceptable in an army: they waved a poster during a military ceremony, announcing that their unit would not evacuate their relatives from the settlements. The army considered this open revolt; the soldiers were arrested and sent to military prison. This did not prevent the rabbis of their *Hesder Yeshiva*, Har Beracha,

from giving them and their families money and praising them as heroes. In response, the IDF, headed by Ehud Barak, the minister of defense, severed its arrangement with the yeshiva and prohibited its students from serving in the IDF.

In the film, Menachem takes command of the unit and appoints his friend Micha as second in command, to assist him. "What is the secret of their success?" asks a secular officer of his religious colleague. "It is the call to recite the *Shema* prayer [Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One]," responds the religious officer. "The moment that a religious soldier hears that he's fighting for God, he invests his entire self in the mission and brings about its success."

Meanwhile, Pini is invited to be a Sabbath guest at the rabbi's home, which is a great honor. The invitation denotes Rabbi Meltzer's desire to have Pini for his son-in-law. This plan runs into opposition from Michal, who refuses the arranged match. She has had her eye on Menachem for some time and encourages him to pursue her. Menachem reciprocates her affection and goes to the rabbi to express his feelings. Rabbi Meltzer insinuates that Menachem's love for Michal contains a murderous element since she is intended for Pini: it is as if Menachem has murdered Pini and taken his future bride. Menachem retreats into himself and almost stops visiting the settlement. Pini attempts repeatedly to become closer to Michal, but nothing helps. She spurns his advances. The rabbi pressures his daughter to marry Pini, but instead she leaves the settlement to live in an apartment in Jerusalem.

Pini doesn't "get the girl," but he consoles himself with the rabbi's sermons, which glorify Jerusalem as the pinnacle of the hopes and longings of the Jewish people. Rabbi Meltzer emphasizes that the Temple Mount embodies Judaism's dream of Redemption and the coming of the Messiah. Pini,

the rabbi's protégé, draws the conclusion that the time for action has arrived. He incites Micha to commit a crime by telling him that the rabbi has ordered them to blow up the Temple Mount, and that Menachem is part of the plot. Micha steals explosives and ammunition from the unit's arsenal and brings them to the tunnel under the Western Wall, the same tunnel featured in the earlier scene.

Rabbinic authorization for a crime recalls an extremely traumatic event in Israeli history: the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on November 4, 1995, by a radical religious Zionist who felt that he had rabbinical sanction to kill Rabin as a *moser*, someone who gives away the Land of Israel or delivers Jews into the hands of non-Jews. The Oslo Accords heralded the return of territory occupied by Israel to the Palestinians in return for a peace agreement. The Oslo Accords were intended to be the framework for future negotiations between the Israeli government and Palestinians, within which all outstanding "final status issues" between the two sides would be resolved. Some religious right-wingers considered Rabin as fitting the description of a *moser*. It is still unclear if the assassin acted alone or if some rabbis confirmed his opinion, and if so, who they were.

In the film, it is Pini who decides to bomb the holy site. He goes behind Menachem's back and deceives Micha into believing that Rabbi Meltzer had approved the plot. If Pini and Micha accomplished their goal, it would endanger state security and the well-being of all Israelis. Just before setting out on his private mission, he boasts to Michal of his plan.

Michal dutifully notifies the police and security forces. They set out to trap the attackers, without knowing where and how they intend to

strike. They suspect Menachem is implicated because he is Pini's friend and commander, and it is from his unit that the explosives were stolen. At the climax of a battle exercise, Menachem is arrested as his soldiers look on, and is brought in to be interrogated by the General Security Service. The interrogation produces no results. Menachem knows nothing and cannot reveal anything. When Michal arrives and explains, Menachem understands what has happened and sets out to stop Pini and Micha.

Menachem's character epitomizes the religious Zionist: a moral person and peerless warrior, a disciplined soldier, obeying God and the rabbis and also adhering to the civil law of the land. Menachem's reputation may be compromised by extremist religious interpretations that could destroy the delicate balance between religious and secular Zionists. The popular Israeli television star Aki Avni plays Menachem. Avni has built his career on playing many roles as the tough soldier who is nevertheless sensitive to the needs of his men, and beloved by those in his command. Rabbi Meltzer is portrayed by the noted actor Assi Dayan, son of General Moshe Dayan. Dayan served as the Israeli minister of defense during the Six Day War, granted the Waqf control over the Temple Mount, and established Israeli governance in the territories conquered in that war. It is interesting to watch Assi Dayan's performance as someone who both continues and subverts his father's legacy.

The one flaw in the film was the casting of Idan Alterman as Pini. He fails to develop his complex role as the Talmud student turned terrorist. Alterman is too well known to Israeli audiences as a gifted comedian. Most of his performances are in nonsense roles; he is short and small of stature, with a silly smile permanently on

his face, like an Israeli Buster Keaton. Neither the audience nor the critics found his portrayal of Pini credible.

Cedar collaborated on the screenplay with Jackie Levy, a national religious entertainer and comedian with perceptive insights about the precarious relationship between the religious and secular sectors. The screenplay exposes the ambivalence of life in the yeshiva and in civil society: the predicament of translating a rabbi's zealous sermons into political action while still honoring the obligations of the citizen vis-à-vis secular law. Cedar and Levy propose that Israel should not point fingers at Menachem and those like him, who constitute the majority of religious Zionists, without sufficient evidence—as Israeli leftist organizations did when they cast aspersions on national religious circles for complicity in the Rabin assassination. Cedar and Levy concede that there are rogue religious Zionists like Pini in the community, but they are few in number. After all, Pini is depicted as arrogant and sickly. His diabetes may symbolize not only physical illness, but mental illness as well. Cedar is using the exceptional case to warn against one possible scenario. He lifts the veil from national religious society and does not idealize it.

Nevertheless, *Time of Favor* received critical acclaim in Israel for its pioneering glimpse into the national religious subculture. It challenged prejudices that secular Israelis often harbor toward the settler movement in general, and Orthodox soldiers in particular. Respect for state policy is exhibited in both the religious and secular sectors of Israeli society. The majority of yeshiva students object to disobeying the government. The film

shows that they are not a monolithic group and emphasizes that most of them are like Menachem. They defer to their military commanders when their religious sentiments contradict their obligations as soldiers. In addition, the film gave Israeli audiences insights into the complexities of life for religious soldiers and the tensions in their communities, as exemplified in the romantic triangle between Menachem, Pini, and Michal. Mutual trust between religious and secular Zionists eroded around the time of the Rabin assassination, and when the Jewish Underground was exposed. Cedar's film aims at reestablishing that trust.

Background: <http://www.jcpa.org/jpsr/s99-yc.htm>;
<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3819361,00.html>.

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