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Star by Vered Kaminski

# Tzivi's Guide to the 2007 Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema



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**A Mensch's Guide to Campus Activism**

From Israel advocacy to philanthropy and volunteering, from immigrant rights to politics, how are Jewish students on colleges and universities finding their voice—and making a difference? Prepared by and for students, the Mensch's Guide, the center section of this issue, is designed to help college students become active on campus and connect their Judaism to worldly issues. P. 37.

**Chicago's Festival of Israeli Cinema**

This year's Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema—which runs in the Chicago area from Oct. 18-28—showcases 18 films, addressing topics from family dynamics and intergenerational conflicts, to drug abuse and mental illness. Each film displays artistic courage, according to JUF News arts & entertainment columnist Jan Lisa Huttner, who offers readers a sneak preview of the flicks. Film festival coverage begins on P. 46.

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**Tziviah bat Yisroel v' Hudah (Jan Lisa Huttner) is the managing editor of Films for Two: The Online Guide for Busy Couples (www.films42.com).**

# Tzivi's Guide to the 2007 Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema



## Tzivi's Guide to the 2007 Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema

By JAN LISA HUTTNER

Photos courtesy of the CFIC

"One needs courage in order to say, 'We also have problems at home,' but without courage there is no real art." So said screenwriter Hanna Azulay Hasfari about her 1994 film *Shchur* (widely credited as the first "important" film about Mizrahi family life in Israel). Jewish Americans already know that Israelis have tremendous physical courage, but every new batch of films brings fresh evidence of artistic courage as well.

The 18 films scheduled for this year's Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema running from Oct. 18 - 28 run the gamut. I found some excellent and others less so, but all were interesting and worthwhile.

Keep in mind as you watch that many of these films had their first public screenings at the 2006 Jerusalem Film Festival last July, just when Israel's border with Lebanon was erupting into flames. So these "pre-war" films all depict internal conflict: souls in torment; families in crisis.

Maybe next year we'll get some comedies, and sometime after that some films about Lebanon, but this year's schedule deals with addiction (*Salt of the Earth*), betrayal (*Aviva My Love and Miracle*), drug abuse (*Someone To Run With*), homosexuality (*Paper Dolls and Things Behind the Sun*), mental illness (*Sweet Mud*), and the painful consequences of failures to communicate (*Pesya's Necklace*, *Sisai*, *Three Mothers and Tied Hands*).

### Feature Films

Aviva My Love 46  
Dear Mr. Waldman 46  
Kululush  
Little Heroes 46  
Salt of the Earth 46  
Someone To Run With  
Sweet Mud  
Things Behind the Sun  
Three Mothers  
Tied Hands 46

### Shorts (under 60 min.)

Empathy 46  
Facing the Wind  
Miracle 46  
Pesya's Necklace 46

### Documentaries

The Ashkenazim 46  
Paper Dolls 46  
Rakasa  
Sisai 46

46 highly recommended

Please keep your ears sharp as you watch this year's films. The English subtitles rarely tell you what language is being spoken, yet language is often the clue to a character's identity. If you listen carefully, you'll be able to tell. Most often the characters speak Hebrew, but some of the characters in this year's films also speak one or more of the following: Amharic, Arabic, French, Russian, Tagalog, and Yiddish. This may be your first exposure to some of these languages, and that in itself will tell you a lot about life in Israel today!

### New Themes

The Holocaust has never been a big theme for Israeli filmmakers. Thus I was surprised to see Holocaust-themed films in each of this year's three categories: *Dear Mr. Waldman* (in the feature category), *Pesya's Necklace* (in the shorts category), and *The Ashkenazim* (in the documentary category). I called Dani Dothan in Tel Aviv to learn more. Dani is co-director of *The Ashkenazim* along with his wife and partner, Dalia Meyerovich, and he gave me two compelling answers: self-reflection in response to Mizrahi demands for greater political participation, and the integration of more Russian immigrants into mainstream society.

### New Stars

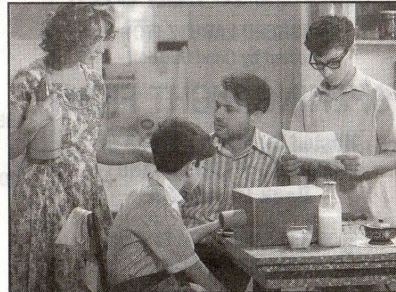
The star of my top pick for 2007 (*Dear Mr. Waldman*) is Rami Heuberger, someone best known in Israel for his television roles (although he had a

bit part in *Schindler's List* very early in his career). After receiving an Ophir nomination for his *Waldman* role as "Moishe," a Holocaust survivor living with his second family in Tel Aviv, he was cast in the American adaptation of Amoz Oz's novel *The Little Tailor*, which premiered last month at the Haifa Film Festival.

So I'm probably one of many who expect to see more of Rami in the future.

### New Filmmakers

I predict we'll also be seeing a lot more from Adi Refaeli, the talented director of the narrative short *Empathy*. Adi began her directing career in community television. She attended Kineret College School of Film, and *Empathy* was her graduate film. The premiere was held at



The Waldman Family in *Dear Mr. Waldman*

last year's Jerusalem Film Festival, and also was shown at Israel's International Women's Film Festival in Rehovot. It has now reached America, where *Empathy* recently won the Judges Award for Best Short from the Red Rock Film Festival in Utah. It has also received positive reviews after film festival screenings in Boston, Indianapolis, Manhattan, and Syracuse, N.Y.

## 2007 Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema

### Top Picks

My favorite feature film this year is *Dear Mr. Waldman*, written and directed by Hanan Peled. (This is Peled's directorial debut; he already is well known in Israel as a screenwriter.) He's clearly telling a semi-autobiographical story very close to his heart. Moise (Heuberger) and Rivka (Jenya Dodina) are both survivors. Rivka is determined to move on with her life, but Moise is more of a dreamer. They have two sons, Jonathan (Roy Mayer), who's brusque and practical like his mother, and Hilik (Ido Port), who has his father's more creative temperament.

The film is set in the early 1960s; posters advertising Kirk Douglas as Spartacus are plastered everywhere, as if in deliberate counterpoint to testimony from the Adolph Eichmann trial (always playing in the background on family radios). Hilik is a smart boy, and he's aware that his father is no Spartacus. Although Rivka and Jonathan refuse to acknowledge his vulnerability, Hilik can see that Moise's defenses are crumbling, so he steps up and takes the weight onto his young shoulders. Can he find a way to protect Moise, and maybe do something to make him happy?

Peled does an excellent job of containing the emotions. Watching the film, I felt transported. Hilik reminds us of the mindset of all those who asked themselves to be heroes in the nascent Jewish state.

This theme is carried over in my favorite documentary, *The Ashkenazim*. To become Israelis, the children of survivors had to bury their own fears and support their parents' attempts to



Dani Dothan & Dalia Meyerovich, co-directors of *The Ashkenazim*.



Gila Almagor in *Three Mothers*

build new lives. Emotions were suppressed along with Diaspora languages, habits, and customs. As we learn from watching *Dear Mr. Waldman* (and *The Summer of Aviya*), neighbors did not want to hear the woes of survivors, and talking about the past was taken to be symptomatic of mental illness.

In *The Ashkenazim*, Dothan and Meyerovich focus on a new generation. These 30-somethings feel empowered to ask their grandparents questions that their own parents never dared to ask. Israelis in this "third generation" (the second generation to be born in Israel) are now reaching back to reclaim Eastern European culture; they're cooking old foods and singing old songs, all of which are new to them.

Is this symptomatic of "post-Zionism"? In a way, yes. As Yosefa Loshitzky says in her insightful book, *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen*, Zionist ideology assumed that everyone had "come to Israel voluntarily driven by ideological (Zionist) motives." Today many Israelis are acknowledging that "the Jewish state of Israel is basically a multicultural society of immigrants dominated by ethnic diversity and social polarization." Because most Jewish Americans are Ashkenazim, this film can be our entryway into fascinating and uniquely Israeli issues.

*Empathy*, my top pick in the shorts category, takes all of these complex dynamics for granted. It's sort of an Israeli version of *Crash*, but I actually think it's much better. *Empathy's* special achievement is to balance the

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ISRAEL

2007 Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema

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scenes so that you come to see each unique point of view. There are Ashkenazi characters, Mizrachi characters, Russian characters, Palestinian characters, and each one is presented with empathy. The individuals in this film are remarkably well depicted; writer/director Adi Refaeli makes us understand why they all do the things they do, even when specific actions are reprehensible. One chain of events represents the whole, and the urgent plea of this novice filmmaker is obvious: before lashing

out at "the other" think through the consequences—not just how you might impact them but what damage you could do to your own soul in the process.

Finally I recommend *Little Heroes*, which is about a group of kids who band together to save a couple injured in a car accident. Each member of the cast is endearing. Even though I knew from the get-go that everything would work out OK, I still suffered with them and worried about them, holding my breath until everyone was safe and homeward bound.

Top Performances

Two of my favorite performances this year are given by relative newcomers: Rami Heuberger (who plays Moise in *Dear Mr. Waldman*), and Adva Bulle (who plays Tali in *Empathy*). The other top performances are given by two of the greatest actors working in Israel today.

Vladimir Freeman plays a man named "Valera" in a profoundly moving short called *Miracle*. Vladimir has become ubiquitous in recent Israeli cinema, to the extent that almost every time the script calls for a Russian doctor, there he is. (Two of the best of these roles were in *Broken Wings* and *The Schwartz Dynasty*, both now available on DVD.) Typically a supporting actor, in

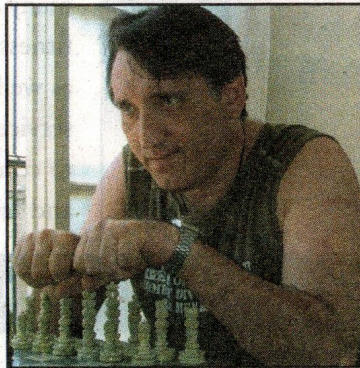
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*Miracle* he plays the lead. It's wonderful to see him stretch himself to fill the screen.

No one on the 2007 schedule compares to Gila Almagor, the queen of two films this year: *Three Mothers* and *Tied Hands*. These roles are completely different and equally eloquent. Gila is at the very top of her game in *Tied Hands*, a heartbreaking drama about the mother of a young man dying of AIDS. You may think you don't want to see something so downbeat, but if you don't go you'll be cheating yourself; her performance is magnificent.

Gila began her screen-acting career in the 1960s, but her international breakthrough came



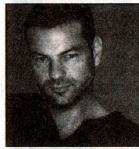
Vladimir Freeman in *Miracle*.

in 1988 when she starred in *The Summer of Aviya* (playing a character based on her own mother). She received the Silver Bear in 1989 at the Berlin International Film Festival, which she shared with Kaipo Cohen (the actress who plays Gila herself as

See page 61 for times and venues, or visit [www.chicagofestivalofisraelicinema.org](http://www.chicagofestivalofisraelicinema.org)

a girl). She also wrote Aviya's screenplay and five years later she wrote a sequel called *Under the Domim Tree* (also starring Kaipo Cohen and also available on DVD). One of the most remarkable things about Gila is that she's equally compelling as Ashkenazi characters (in *Aviya* and *Tied Hands*) and as Mizrachi characters (in *Shchur* and *Three Mothers*). When Steven Spielberg needed someone to play Eric Bana's mother in *Munich*, she was the obvious choice. She has earned her place as an Israeli icon. ■

2007 Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema



A chat with Aki Avni

**ISRAELI HEARTTHROB AKI AVNI** (who received an Ophir Award from the Israel Film Academy in 2000 for his performance as "Menachem" in Joseph Cedar's film *Time of Favor*) will be a special guest at this year's Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema. Aki will introduce his new film *Salt of the Earth* at the Wilmette Theatre on Thursday, Oct. 25, and take questions from the audience after the screening. I called him in LA to discuss his transatlantic career.

**Jan Huttner: How did you come to acting as a profession?**

Aki Avni: My grandfather had a theater in Turkey; he was an actor and a musician. I started acting since 10 or 11 years old. After the army, I had a radio show, and then a weekly TV magazine show. I made a few films and then I went to acting school. I joined Habima (Israel's national theater), and performed in *Romeo and Juliet* at the Royal Shakespeare Theater.

**In England?**

Yes, in London. I played Tybalt. That was great. Then, I made a few more films and every few years a new TV show. I hosted the special shows on Independence Day, which are the biggest shows on Israeli TV ever.

**So you were the Charlie Rose of Tel Aviv?**

More Jay Leno, more entertaining. Then, five years ago I came to LA with my film *Time of Favor*, which got six "Academy Awards" in Israel. I was privileged that Joseph Cedar picked me up for *Time of Favor*. We worked, I think, three months in my kitchen, days and nights.

**The smartest thing he ever did was cast you as "Menachem."**

*Time of Favor* changed my whole life. I started to travel with the film, all over the world, and when we came to the Israeli Film Festival in Los Angeles, one of the biggest agents in LA recruited me the next morning.

Seeing you in *Salt of the Earth* is a little bit surprising. Usually you're "the good guy" whereas Lior Ashkenazi plays the more dangerous persona.

It was a brave decision to make the antagonist as a protagonist, and to make him likeable and loveable, although he's not the good guy. I said yes to this film because it's not an ordinary film; it's not an ordinary script. As an actor, the first thing that I'm looking at is the challenge. What is my challenge here? That guy is so cold; the conflict between me and the character, this gap is driving me to work harder.

**So you're combining two careers now, as a leading man in Israeli films and as a character actor in American films and TV shows. How is it working for you?**

Language is a barrier, no doubt about it. English is not in my stomach, my soul. I have to do extra work for each word. And I don't have the classical Middle Eastern type of look, so I have to work hard for everything. No doubt about it; it's a challenge.

**Chicago Festival of Israeli Cinema**

The Largest Showcase of Israeli Films in the Midwest  
A Cinematic Reflection of Israel's Diverse Society  
Presented in partnership with the Consulate General of Israel to the Midwest

<p><b>SOMEONE TO RUN WITH</b> (MISHKELI LARUTZ 170) Directed by Shiri Greenberg</p> <p>Hosted By "David Breza at Masada-WTTW11" and Banki Lerner USA</p> <p>2006 JERUSALEM FILM FESTIVAL Opening Night Film</p> <p>2006 OPHIR AWARDS - THE ISRAELI "OSCAR" "Best Supporting Actor"</p>	<p><b>sweet MUD</b> (ADAMA MESHUGA'AT) Directed by Zion Shosh</p> <p>ISRAEL'S SUBMISSION FOR "BEST FOREIGN LANGUAGE FILM" FOR THE 2007 OSCARS</p> <p>2007 SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL "Best Foreign Film"</p> <p>2006 OPHIR AWARDS - THE ISRAELI "OSCAR" "Best Film" "Best Art Director" "Best Cinematographer" "Best Sound"</p>	<p><b>AVIVA, MY LOVE</b> (AVIVA ANAVATI) Directed by Shosh Zuckin</p> <p>2006 JERUSALEM FILM FESTIVAL "Rajon Award Best Screenplay" "Rajon Award Best Actress"</p> <p>2006 OPHIR AWARDS - THE ISRAELI "OSCAR" "Best Film" "Best Director" "Best Actress" "Best Supporting Actress" "Best Screenplay" "Best Editing"</p>
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FOR MORE INFORMATION, OPENING NIGHT TICKETS AND GROUP SALES  
847.675.FEST (3378) [www.chicagofestivalofisraelcinema.org](http://www.chicagofestivalofisraelcinema.org)

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