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TEHILIM

a film by RAPHAEL NAJARI

MICHAEL MOSHONOV LIMOR GOLDSTEIN YONATHAN ALSTER

ISRAEL / FRANCE - 2007 - 86 MIN - COLOR - 35 MM - 1.00 - DOLBY SR

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SYNOPSIS

In today's Jerusalem, a Jewish family leads an ordinary life. But following a car accident, the father mysteriously disappears. They all deal with his absence and the difficulties of everyday life as best they can. While the adults take refuge in silence or traditions, the two children, Menachem and David, try in their own way to find their father...



About the title Tehilim

Tehilim, the Psalms are poems, songs, teachings and meditations attributed to King David. They form the centerpiece of Jewish liturgy. Tehilim is supposed to accompany Jews in their daily lives, on every occasion: marriage, birth, joy, sadness, grief or despair. It is a text for both the humble and the powerful ; it is the story of a complex and terrible human struggle and a form of exemplary redemption that we are supposed to read and question like an inspiration, hope and reference.

Your films are constantly on the move. You have rarely filmed in France, often in New York and now in Israel. What is behind your cosmopolitan identity ?

INTERVIEW WITH RAPHAËL NADJARI

Tehilim marks a new direction in your work. The film tells the story of the unexplained disappearance of a father, leaving his family to deal with it among themselves. Why did you choose this story ?

I was looking for a simple, personal story to raise very complex issues. A world turned upside down by the disappearance of a man means all the people who knew him have to reinvent themselves. Through the real daily life of a family, I wanted to look at something you never get over: the disappearance of loved ones. It is as if God Himself had abandoned us, revealing our vulnerability and making us start to doubt. Then we find Him again.



Each of the films is an encounter with a community with a different background. In my New York films, *The Shade* and *I am Josh Polonski's Brother*, I worked on Jewish families from Eastern Europe, then in *Apartment #5C*, on Israeli expatriates in the United States. *Avanim*, my first Israeli film, focuses on Middle Eastern Jews and *Tehilim* on a more European, Ashkenazi community. Beyond a recurrent theme, I'm looking for the universal through the particular, for a spark of life that goes beyond identities.

I am not doing a sociological study. I'm trying to spontaneously understand the composite and dialectical dimension of Judaism beyond its different communities. I seek to understand humanity and the possibilities it gives us to discover its beauty,



its richness as well as its taboos, its bad habits, its sadness, its sensitivity and its place in the world.

Tehilim is your second Israeli film. What made you want to keep making films in Israel ?

When you film a story, this story brings the place to life.

The film is about a Jewish family in Jerusalem today. If we look at that in terms of the rest of my work, all the films we've made are about the Jewish world and Israel is an essential step in that world. In Tehilim, I'm not only interested in the ethnic origins of my characters but also the type of Judaism they practice: the Judaism of modern Israeli orthodoxy, which oscillates between a strong tradition and its inscription in the modern world.

Avanim was shot in Tel-Aviv, a flat, coastal town that is the economic center of Israel, whereas Tehilim takes



place in Jerusalem, a mountainous city that is the country's historic and religious center. How did you approach this change ?

In Tel-Aviv, you try to live in the present moment, whereas Jerusalem's architectural positioning in the mountain symbolically seeks eternity. In Tel-Aviv, the issues are modern,

whereas Jerusalem raises more timeless questions.

This fluctuation between places is a reflection of Israel : a fragile balance. I wanted to see Jerusalem as an intimate place, not only as a place of grandeur and torment. It is in this family atmosphere that I tried to find the city's sense of fraternity...

Tehilim was shot the area of Ha'palmakh Street, in a particular religious environment. Why did you choose this neighborhood ?

In the history of modern Jerusalem, Ha'palmach was not originally a very religious neighborhood. It was more a

place for Jerusalem's university elite. For years, this street was a mix of secular and religious inhabitants. Yet in the last few years, the neighborhood has increasingly become more orthodox. In terms of identity, it was one of my most striking discoveries. I remembered a colorful, mixed Jerusalem where I'd been many times and today it has completely changed.

With the production assistants, Meir Tetset and Tom Ashouah and my first assistant, Frédéric Lefebvre, we visited dozens of neighborhoods to try and find an intermediate place, an "in between" in the Jewish part of the city. I wanted to tell the story of "intermediate" Jews, those who form the link between different ways of life. This neighborhood was the closest to the environment of my characters, anchored both in tradition and modernity.

Your actors are all remarkable. Some are « non-professionals » including the children who play the



two brothers at the center of the film. How did you choose them ?

I met them thanks to Amit Berlowitz, the casting director. We met several children and even brothers from a real family. The actors we ended up choosing are not real brothers. What makes them so touching is their

magnificent ability to feel and listen to other actors to create a real family with an imaginary organic bond.

In Israel, there are extraordinary actors. It is important to me to name all my actors and not only the children: Michael Moshonov, Yonathan Alster, Limor Goldstein, Yohav Hait as well as Ilan Dar and

Reout Lev... They all showed impressive courage and generosity that we shared as a team. It is interesting to note that their respective backgrounds are all totally different : some come from theater, others from cinema, and for some it was their first experience as actors.

We made this film like a story of everyday life. In this family at the heart of the film, with the father, mother, two children, grandfather and uncle, they all had to resemble one another. Something had to tie them together but with each of them holding his own specific and contradictory positions.

The film was a sort of laboratory, a « work in progress » in which improvisation played an essential part. Can you tell us about your direction method ?

Vincent Poymiro, the co-writer and I worked for three years on the story's framework. We elaborated dozens of versions, which gave me control over the film's main themes. Then, due to logistical problems and in agreement with my producers, I reworked the material, spending night after night (including during shooting) reconsidering all these themes before submitting them to the actors.



Sean Foley, the editor and I worked in parallel to evaluate the film's directions during shooting.

This « ongoing » writing was finished only when we did the sound editing, which gave the screenplay material an openness and fragility. When we recorded Nathaniel Mechaly's music in Tel-Aviv, we « discovered » the film with all its narrative layers and its true meaning.

When the actors came on the set, they didn't always accept everything changing all the time. We let ourselves be swept along by each scene, completely caught up in the story, creating something hybrid, like a thought being reconstructed or a thought in movement.

You shot in H.D. video that you used like a 35mm camera. What did this technique offer you ?

The cameraman Laurent Brunet, the technicians, the producers and I asked ourselves a simple question. How can we work best in terms of lighting and image

given our budget restrictions? We had to work in video but the story required a warmer treatment than HD video allows right now. We decided to shoot with traditional lenses on the HD video camera. Video became an intermediary format between the lens and the final film. Thanks to this method, we got the essence of traditional footage and we forget the coldness of video captors.

Tehlim reminds me of l'Avventura by Michelangelo Antonioni: a main character disappears, leaving a sense of emptiness around him and making others question the meaning of their existence.

Do you claim this as a reference ? What are your influences ?

I don't like claiming references, especially since there is nothing new under the sun. Energies run through us. I try not to be too aware of influences. It is obvious that

I have literary, philosophical and religious references but I try not to think about it...

I think the film creates a sort of mental shift following the father's disappearance, which is never explained and generates incredible tension.

There are a lot of films on the idea of a disappearance.

It is a very disturbing theme : being already in the midst of a tragedy without having the right to grieve. It is even worse.



In the film, the characters are often positioned at the edge of the frame.

This is a sort of visual representation of the abyss that separates them...

Framing is always the extra actor in a film because it creates a point of view on the story. There is not only an abyss between the characters. There is also the power of what is off-screen: an absent figure watching the story, whom we don't see. It could be the father.

The characters try to fill the emptiness. They try their hardest to live in the present but are always being watched by someone...

The family at the center of the film is racked with deep running tensions. The mother comes from a secular family, which is one of the reasons for her conflict with her husband's religious family. The oldest son respects religion at home but he takes off his kippa when he goes out to meet his friends and his girlfriend. Is this a microcosm of Israeli society?



It is always hard to illustrate an idea. We often get lost in metaphors. Viewers have to try and project their own experience. I prefer not revealing everything, using a simple problem to try and induce thought. The little story of Menachem's kippa clearly illustrates his

relationship to religion and his parents. This relationship changes throughout the film.

Alma, the mother, seems to only consider the material implications of her husband's disappearance, although she is in fact a loving mother totally devoted to her children and that is her way of expressing love. All the characters try to make this disappearance into an opportunity to reinvent themselves as better people. They

all have positive projects that cannot be completely positive until they take others into consideration.



But it is also a conflict within Judaism, between tolerant Judaism dedicated to dialectical questioning of reality, represented by the father, and more militant Judaism that seems to have an answer to everything, represented by the grandfather and the oldest son...

It opposes two forms of Judaism. I don't know which of them is right. I can't take the risk of presenting a solution. We'd be surprised to discover a real offer of help among those who seem the most intransigent and a hardness among those who prone tolerance. We can't be naive any longer. It is too costly to believe the world is full of people who are good or bad, yet I believe we need the two terms because dialectic can't function without them. We need both orthodoxy and reform. As long as the two positions exist, the world keeps functioning. We also know that positions that want to win out over others are not viable.



It is interesting that the youngest child has the right intuition, allowing him to see that his brother has gone astray. It is as if his vision is still pure.

His is a character that was created little by little. In different versions of the screenplay, he didn't exist. This child understands the tensions and the stakes. He knows how to ask questions and make people think. He represents a form of hope beyond the different positions. Acting-wise, the interaction between the two brothers gave me everything I was looking for, as if their relationship was a character in its own right. This relationship is marked by a great respect, possibly inherited from their father, that promises the possibility of reconciliation : this is Jerusalem's condition.

Your film fits into a Jewish tradition of ethical questioning. You show that the border between good and evil is sometimes very fragile: we firmly believe we're doing good while we do harm...

Let's say that good and evil are relative, not absolute, even if we always have to look for what is fair. It is as if values were the result not of conservatism but rather, a movement of thought, which always has to reinvent itself so as not to lose its true nature. Judaism allows us to realize this via a back and forth motion between study and practice. Judaism is not a solution. It is an environment of questions that demands more than commitment. It demands intelligence beyond religion. It is a paradox and this paradox is its essence.



Interview by Ariel Schweitzer

RAPHAËL NADJARI, DIRECTOR

Born in France, Raphaël Nadjari studied visual arts. In 1999, he moved from Paris to New York, where he made his first feature film, *The Shade*, a modern adaptation of « A Gentle Creature » by Dostoyevsky. The film was made in English with Richard Edson in the lead role, a figure of independent cinema, who played in Nadjari's next two New York films. *The Shade* was selected for the Cannes Film Festival in 1999 in the section Un Certain Regard. *I am Josh Polonski's brother*, shot in super 8 mm, was presented at the Forum of the Berlin Festival in 2001, and *Apartment #5C* at the Cannes Directors' Fortnight in 2002.

In 2003, Nadjari moved to Tel-Aviv, where he made *Avanim*, entirely in Hebrew. The film was selected for the Berlin Film Festival, then for Premieres at the MOMA for the museum's reopening. Nadjari received the France Culture Prize for best filmmaker of the year in 2005. His Israeli period continues with *Tehilim*, shot in Jerusalem. Raphaël Nadjari currently lives between Paris and Tel-Aviv.

FILMS

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|------|--|
| 2007 | TEHILIM
produced by Geoffroy Grison, Fred Bellaïche, Marek Rozenbaum, Itai Tamir
Festival de Cannes, official selection in competition |
| 2004 | AVANIM
produced by Geoffroy Grison, Marek Rozenbaum, Itai Tamir
Berlinale, <i>Panorama</i> |
| 2002 | APARTMENT # 5c
produced by Marin Karmitz, Alain Sarde, Geoffroy Grison
Festival de Cannes, <i>Directors' Fortnight</i> |
| 2001 | I AM JOSH POLONSKI'S BROTHER
produced by Geoffroy Grison, Caroline Bonmarchand, Francesca Feder
Berlinale, <i>Forum</i> |
| 1999 | THE SHADE
produced by Francesca Feder, Geoffroy Grison
Festival de Cannes, <i>Un certain regard</i> |
| 1998 | SNOW BIRD (short film) |

SCREENPLAYS

- | | |
|------|--|
| 1999 | LE P'TIT BLEU (TV fiction) directed by François Vautier,
produced by Geoffroy Grison, Francesca Feder |
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MUSIC

Nathaniel Mechaly, composer

Born in 1972, Nathaniel Mechaly joined the National Conservatory in Marseille, then Paris and Boulogne where he studied the cello, chamber music and electro-acoustic composition. He was awarded several prizes unanimously.

Since 1996, he has composed many original soundtracks for television, (CinéCinéma, Paris Première, TF1, France 3 Youth News and many THEMA evenings for Arte), advertisements and short films.

After a fruitful collaboration and many projects with Gabriel Yared, he began composing for the cinema in 2004

with *Avanim* by Raphaël Nadjari, *Ushpizin* by Gidi Dar, *Revolver* by Guy Ritchie, *La Boîte noire* by Richard Berry and *The secret* by Vincent Pérez among many others. He also composes for the theater and contemporary dance, particularly for « le Groupe Dunes ».



The soundtrack for *Tehillim* was recorded in just under five nights at Studio Hook in the south of Tel Aviv.

This is Raphaël Nadjari and Nathaniel Mechaly's second collaboration since *Avanim*.

« We were looking for childhood, a fairytale, an imaginary Jerusalem, the mystery of a father disappearing, just like that, in the middle of a city...

To get there, we chose simple instruments : an electric piano, a xylophone bought at Tel-Aviv market, and an old cello. We had

to breathe an extra dimension into the film whose scenes were made up of small nothings, a sense of absence and expectation, of everyday life.

And the music encountered the image. »

CAST

Michael Moshonov	Menachem
Limor Goldstein	Alma (the mother)
Yonathan Alster	David (the little brother)
Shmuel Vilojni	Eli (the father)
Ilan Dar	Shmuel (the grandfather)
Yoav Hait	Aharon (the uncle)
Reut Lev	Dvora
Dov Berkovitz	the Rabbi
Ilanit Ben Yaakov	Orna
Naomi Tzwick	the grandmother
Robert Hoenig	Inspector Kaufman

CREW ETC.

Director Raphaël Nadjari
Screenplay Raphaël Nadjari and Vincent Pymiro

Producers Geoffroy Grison, Fred Bellaïche, Marek Rozenbaum, Itai Tamir
Coproducer Noah Harlan
Associate Producer David Nadjari

Director of Photography Laurent Brunet
Music Nathaniel Mechaly
Production design Dror Sarogati, Benny Afar
Editing Sean Foley
Sound Tulli Chen, Chen Harpaz
First Assistant Director Frédéric Guillaume Lefevbre

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