

## ABOUT THE MOVIE

This movie takes place at a yeshiva in a West Bank settlement, where a love triangle involving the rabbi's daughter threatens to push one of the suitors to a violent action concerning the Temple Mount. Through a plot which narrates the making of a Jewish terrorist, this movie delves into questions of loyalty, the tension between the political and the personal and the value of an individual. With these themes, the movie explores the line between devotion and fanaticism and what could prompt someone to cross it, and the price an individual should pay for the sake of a larger group within the grand scheme of an ideological mission.

## USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

**CINEMA** Use of cinema to explore themes relevant in the lives of cast members

**HISTORY** Historical importance of the Temple Mount

**CULTURE** Religious extremism in Israeli society



## BEFORE THE MOVIE

### VOCABULARY

**HaHesder** (The Hesder) Name of this movie in Hebrew. A Yeshivat Hesder is an Israeli institution that combines Talmudic study with military service in the Israel Defense Force.

### PLOT SUMMARY

At a yeshiva in a West Bank settlement, the attempts of Rabbi Meltzer to play matchmaker have disastrous consequences. He wishes for his star pupil Pini to marry his headstrong and independent-thinking daughter Michal. However, Michal favors the handsome Menachem, who commands an Israeli army unit composed entirely of Rabbi Meltzer's pupils. When Pini realizes that he has come out on the losing end of the love triangle, he decides to take drastic and violent action. He enlists Itamar, another pupil of Rabbi Meltzer and soldier in Menachem's unit, in a plot to blow up the Temple Mount. Rabbi Meltzer is already under the scrutiny of the Mossad (Israeli intelligence agency) due to his radical teachings which advocate regaining the Temple Mount. But, when questioned, he insists that his students understand that he is talking about ideas, not realities. Despite the intervention of the Mossad and the military, it seems that ultimately only Menachem and Michal might be able to stop their friend's terrifying plot.

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

## WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE TEMPLE MOUNT?

It is important to understand exactly what Rabbi Meltzer is advocating when he envisions thousands of Jews praying on the Temple Mount.

The Temple Mount is Judaism's holiest site, the location of the First Temple (built c. 967 BCE, destroyed c. 586 BCE by the Babylonians) and the Second Temple (rebuilt c. 516 BCE, destroyed in 70 CE by the Romans' siege of Jerusalem). According to Jewish belief, the final Third Temple will be rebuilt on this same spot with the coming of the Messiah.

The Temple Mount is also one of the most contested religious sites in the world. Two Muslim shrines, the Dome of the Rock (built c. 690 CE) and the Al-Aqsa Mosque (built c. 710 CE) also stand on the site. When Eastern Jerusalem was under Jordanian rule (1948-1967), Jews were forbidden from entering the Old City. Since then, under Israeli rule, Jews have had access to the Kotel (Wailing Wall), a retaining wall dating from the time of the Second Temple, while the Muslims manage their own shrines with a Muslim Council. Nevertheless, the spot continues to constitute a delicate political issue.

Aside from the political situation, Orthodox rabbinical consensus forbids Jews from entering the Temple Mount until the coming of the Messiah, declaring it punishable with *karet* (being spiritually cut off from the Jewish people). Nevertheless, some rabbis maintain that it is permitted and even commendable to visit some parts of the Temple Mount. In May 2007, a group of right-wing Religious Zionist rabbis entered the Temple Mount, eliciting widespread criticism from religious Jews and secular Israelis alike. An editorial in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* accused the rabbis of "knowingly and irresponsibly br[inging] a burning torch nearer to the most flammable hill in the Middle East."<sup>11</sup>

### HAHESDER

The setting for a good portion of this movie is a hesder yeshiva. In Hebrew,

*hesder* means "arrangement." Israeli men are generally required to serve three years in the IDF, but ultra-Orthodox men studying in yeshiva are typically exempt from military duty. Enrolling in a hesder yeshiva is an arrangement allowing religious men to perform their duties of military service and religious study simultaneously. In the hesder program, men are officially soldiers in the IDF for five years: 16 months is usually active training and service, and the remainder of the time is used for Torah study. It is possible for students from the Diaspora to attend a hesder for 1-2 years.

#### **Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, the head of Yeshivat Har Etzion, wrote about the hesder experience:**

*"Hesder at its finest seeks to attract and develop bnei torah ["religious individuals"] who are profoundly motivated by the desire to become serious talmidei hachamim ["religiously learned"] but who concurrently feel morally and religiously bound to help defend their people and their country; who, given the historical exigencies of their time and place, regard this dual commitment as both a privilege and a duty; who, in comparison with their non-hesder confreres love not Torah less but Israel more. It provides a context within which students can focus upon enhancing their personal spiritual and intellectual growth while yet heeding the call to public service, and it thus enables them to maintain an integrated Jewish existence."<sup>12</sup>*

# CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

## WHAT CONNECTIONS EXIST BETWEEN THIS MOVIE'S DEPICTION OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND REAL-LIFE EVENTS?

### BIOGRAPHY OF A WRITER-DIRECTOR

This film is the debut of writer-director Joseph Cedar, whose personal life has straddled the United States and Israel. Though born in New York, he grew up in an Orthodox religious community in Israel from the age of six. A former infantry paratrooper with a yeshiva background, Cedar returned briefly to New York to study film at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. Regarding his decision to make his career in the Israeli film industry rather than Hollywood, Cedar told *The Jerusalem Post*, "I have an American film in my head, but this isn't the right time. [To work in America], I would have to relinquish the control over my movies I have in Israel" (October 3, 2004). Cedar's life experiences, including living on a settlement for more than a year while writing this movie, give him a highly relevant perspective on the issues and questions he raises in this movie, such as the idea of "belonging" to a community and the conflict between the individual and the grand scheme of an ideological mission. Cedar further investigates the social dimension of the settlement movement in a subsequent film, *Campfire* (2004).

*Time of Favor* was an Israeli box-office phenomenon which won five awards from the Israeli Film Academy Awards in 2000. Though the movie is fictional, there are a startling number of unexpected intersections between the people and propositions of the movie and historical fact.

The American Political Film Society nominated *Time of Favor* for a Peace Award in 2002 because of its relevance to and reflection of two major historical events.

Research for the movie was underway when, on November 5, 1995, Prime

Minister Yizhak Rabin was assassinated during a peace rally in support of the Oslo Accords. The assassin, Yigal Amir, strongly disagreed with the Oslo Accords, which called for an Israeli withdrawal from parts of the Gaza Strip and West Bank and affirmed a Palestinian right of self-government within those areas. Though he will spend the rest of his life in prison, Yigal Amir believes to this day that his murder of Rabin was justified according to his interpretation of Jewish law. Amir claims to have put into action *din rodef* ("law of the pursuer"), a Talmudic concept which, in one controversial reading, sanctions the killing of a fellow Jew in order to prevent him from handing Jewish land over to non-Jews. Amir, a right-wing radical, studied for five years at Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, the first hesder yeshiva.

On September 28, 2000, Ariel Sharon visited the Al Aqsa complex on the Temple Mount. Though he did not enter any Muslim mosques, Palestinian stone-throwers attacked Israeli police once he left. Palestinian sources have repeatedly cited this occasion as the provocation of the Second Intifada, a deadly campaign of Palestinian terrorism (even though it is known that the Palestinian leadership was strategically planning this Intifada ever since withdrawing from the Camp David peace negotiations). The fact that this event could be considered for use in justifying the killing of hundreds of Israeli civilians demonstrates that Rabbi Meltzer's vision of praying on the Temple Mount is an ideal that, if practically attempted, would most likely have dire and bloody consequences.

In another historical peculiarity, the radical Rabbi Meltzer who calls for a Jewish takeover of the Temple Mount is played by Israeli actor and director Assi Dayan. This actor's own father, General Moshe Dayan, was actually a hero of the Six Day War of 1967, in which the Israelis finally gained control of all of Jerusalem. Ironically, following this momentous reunification, it was General Dayan himself who gave administrative control of the Temple Mount to the Muslim Council and ordered Israeli flags removed from the Dome of the Rock. As a secular and pragmatic kibbutznik, Moshe Dayan believed the Temple Mount was more important to Judaism historically than as a holy site. When he saw rabbis gathering on the Temple Mount immediately after Israel assumed jurisdiction, he is reported to have said, "What is this? The Vatican?"

# AFTER THE MOVIE

## ACTIVITY CHARACTER ANALYSIS

HOW ARE MENACHEM AND PINI DIFFERENT CHARACTER TYPES? HOW ARE THEY THE SAME?

Compare the following two quotes and use them to think about the questions that follow.

### “ MENACHEM

Company D, you are nearing war. I want to tell you that war is not always against an enemy. War is first and foremost against yourselves. A brave, strong soldier is one who can overcome his own weaknesses. And that is the real battle.

### “ PINI

(to Itamar) Listen to me, listen, we're going in now. Don't think about anything, zero, nothing. That's exactly what the rabbi was talking about.... Remember? All becomes insignificant compared to what we're doing. Think only of that. We are going to put history back on its proper course. After this everything will change...What we're doing is a privilege. And it's a privilege that'll be missed if we don't go in now.

- What are the differences in the approaches of Menachem and Pini to inspiring their companions? Which approach do you think is a) more appealing? b) more effective?
- One of the biggest differences between the secular characters (the Mossad agent, policemen and Mookie) and religious characters (Menachem, Pini and Itamar) is that the secular characters do not seem willing to trust anybody. Do you think this is realistic? How does faith affect issues of trust and loyalty in your life?
- Do Menachem and Pini have different opinions concerning the price an individual should pay for the sake of a larger group? If so, what are the differences?
- Do you think there is any turn of events that could have made Menachem into a Jewish terrorist?

## THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

### 1 UNIT THEME: Religion in Israeli Society

- What is the nature of the relationships between secular and religious Jews as seen in this movie? How are these relationships influenced by the underlying differences in the two views of how and why the world functions, as embodied in the enigmatic idea *L'shma*? (see “Quote Analysis”)
- In what ways is religion important to Michal? How do her views of religion differ from her father's?

### 2 CINEMATIC THEME: Cinema Exploring Real-Life Themes

- What does this movie say about “belonging” to a community? How do you think Cedar's perspective as someone who has divided his life between two societies, Israeli and American, comes through in this movie?
- Given his father's role in history and opinion of the Temple Mount, what do you think Assi Dayan thought about his part in this movie? Would you speculate that he intended through his role to highlight the dangers of realistically carrying out what his character was advocating (i.e., he is in agreement with his father) or do you think he has some sympathy for his character's opinion?

### 3 HISTORICAL THEME: Importance of the Temple Mount

- Given the problems, politically and halachically (in Jewish law), in physically approaching the Temple Mount, what do you think Rabbi Meltzer really wants his students to think about when he paints pictures of Jews praying on the Temple Mount? Is he seriously advocating radical action? Or is he being honest when claiming to speak only in ideas, and if so, what ideas is he trying to convey?
- Pay attention to the physical landscape—the vast West Bank expanses Michal and Menachem contemplate versus the tight and narrow tunnels the two of them run through under the Temple Mount. How do these physical places relate to the emotional spaces these characters navigate?

### 4 CULTURAL THEME: Religious Extremism in Israeli Society

- From what perspective is this story told? What are the advantages of using this perspective for this particular story? How would this movie be different if we were not sure of Menachem's involvement in the plot until the last moment?
- What do you think drives Pini to take extreme action? Do you think he believes ideologically in what he is doing?
- Do you think Yigal Amir's terrible actuation of a religious conviction in assassinating Yitzhak Rabin is in any way parallel to Pini's decision to blow up the Temple Mount? Think about the relevance of the following exchange to your answer:

“ **Rabbi Meltzer:** Maybe what I say sounds radical, but my students know how to interpret it. The Temple is not a building, the Temple Mount is not a mountain. It's an idea. And my students understand that.  
**Eitan:** You don't need explosives for an idea.

- Why do you think this movie is called “Time of Favor”?

## QUOTE ANALYSIS

“ **Mookie:** Tell me, what's this ‘*l'shma*’?

**Itamar:** It means for the sake of something...For the sake of G-d's Name.

**Mookie:** I don't understand, you're lying here in the mud for the sake of G-d?

**Itamar:** Let's say you're eating breakfast. Why do you eat?

**Mookie:** I dunno, I'm hungry, to have strength.

**Itamar:** Okay, to have strength. What do you need strength for?... See, that's precisely the difference between us. Forgive me for, really, I don't want to offend you, but all day long you hang around here, eating snacks, you feel good, feel bad, you like, you don't like. I don't know, with us it's different, you see. I eat so that I'll have strength. I need strength to learn the Torah. I learn the Torah for the sake of G-d. That's the ultimate goal. That's ‘*l'shma*.’ That's why I'm lying in the mud now. Get it?

- When Mookie sees that Itamar has died, he mutters to himself: ‘*l'shma*.’ What do you think he is thinking about this newly-learned concept? Do you think it makes any sense to him, given that he himself is a soldier who could potentially also die?

“ **Michal:** I'm serious, what's beautiful about me? Is it my nose, my eyes, my hair? Maybe my body? ... I know what is beautiful to you. When you look at me closely, you see my father.

**Pini:** That's not true, Michal.

**Michal:** I'm right. You can't look at me without seeing my father.

- Who do you think Michal is really trying more to reject (and upset), Pini or her father? Do you think that in some way she feels that, if she marries Pini, she will always “see her father” in him? How does the nature of Pini's reaction to the rejection prove or disprove her concerns?

“ **Pini:** It’s a punishment. Nothing happens without a reason. I had to suffer a few blows to understand that. But finally I did...

**Menachem:** Listen to me, Pini. First thing you need to do is find the best diabetes specialist to treat you. You’re talking like some freak, I can barely recognize you. Second, get up, get dressed, put your shoes on, get back to studying. Get back to yourself. You have to fight, you’re rotting in here.

**Pini:** Fight? Fight what, Menachem? Fight diabetes? Fight the fact that Michal doesn’t want me? All right. Tell me how to fight that.

- How was Pini’s ultimate action intended to “fight” against any of his problems? What message was he hoping to send through it? Who was his intended “audience”—Menachem, Rabbi Meltzer, Michal or some other party?

“ **Mossad agent:** Let me explain this to you. We used to automatically look for the eccentrics, the ones who raise sheep and think they live in the Bible. But we have no problem with them. We can identify them. Meltzer is another matter. Suddenly a disciple of his pops up at the D.A.’s. Another disciple suddenly gets a column in the paper. See, what just two years ago seemed crazy is now finding its way in through the back door. The line, between the normal and the abnormal, has moved.

- In what sense is the Mossad agent thinking about “normal” vs. “abnormal,” religiously, morally, politically or socially? What do you think would have happened to this “line” following the public’s awareness of what Pini attempted?