

WISDOM OF THE PRETZEL

2001, 101 min

WARNING This movie contains sexual language and content and should be shown to appropriate audiences only.

ABOUT THE MOVIE

This movie features the lives of young people in Tel Aviv, their aspirations, preoccupations and day-to-day interactions. The movie begins as a humorous tribute to the lustful instincts, fanciful thought processes and all the excitement and insecurities of youth. However, it slowly deepens into a serious and philosophical examination of the relationships the characters choose, the life decisions they make and the regrets with which ultimately they must live.

USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

CINEMA The making—and remaking—of a movie

HISTORY Tel Aviv as Israel's secular culture capital

CULTURE The culture of young Israelis today

BEFORE THE MOVIE

PLOT SUMMARY

Golan is almost thirty years old. He thought that at this point in life he would be a married CEO. Instead, he resists growing up and spends his life in search of the love of his life. But when he is set up on a blind date with his best friend's sister, this irresistible yet unpredictable girl causes him to question the meaning of life and his place in it.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

WHERE IS THIS MOVIE GOING NEXT?

This movie, which was nominated for 10 Israeli Oscars, is writer Ilan Heitner's adaption of his own novel in collaboration with director Dani Menkin.

Menkin and Heitner are currently working to adapt *Wisdom of the Pretzel* to the American screen in a project by Hear No Evil Films/Hey Jude Productions. Filming is scheduled to take place in New York City in spring 2008. The remake will star the American actor Anthony Rapp, known for his roles in *School Ties*, *Dazed and Confused* and *A Beautiful Mind* and in off-Broadway and Broadway productions. Also starring will be the Israeli actor Assi Cohen, previously seen in *Munich*, *Yossi & Jagger* and *Bonjour Monsieur Shlomi*.

Menkin, known as a sports reporter for the Israeli Sports Channel, has made documentaries including *Like Arosesti*, about Israeli basketball, and *39 Pounds of Love*, about an Israeli-American born with muscular dystrophy. He also created a television series for National Geographic, broadcast around the world, and FACT, an Israeli version of *60 Minutes*.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

WHAT DOES “TEL AVIV” MEAN?

The name Tel Aviv—actually borrowed from Ezekiel 3:15—literally means “hill of spring.” What is a hill of spring? A *tel* is technically a heap of ancient ruins which grows over time as each new era builds on the foundations of the last, and “spring” signifies rebirth. As the revitalization of a civilization, Tel Aviv is an extremely Zionist vision. In fact, Tel Aviv is the title given to the Hebrew translation of Herzl’s utopian romance *Altneuland* (literally: “Old New Land”).

Herzl would be extremely impressed with the Tel Aviv of today, which clearly lives up to its name. Founded in 1909 as a suburb of the ancient port city of Jaffa, Tel Aviv is now a vibrant, cosmopolitan city—with the highest cost of living in the Middle East⁶—with Mediterranean beaches and a hip clubbing scene. It is also the center of what is known as Silicon Wadi (*emeq hasilicon* in Hebrew), the area in which many of Israel’s high-tech industries are based. Along the lines of Herzl’s vision of a secular ingathering of Jews, Tel Aviv is about as good as it gets.

AFTER THE MOVIE

ACTIVITIES

- Describe your version of *Wisdom of the Pretzel* taking place in New York. Who are the characters? What is the plot?
- Imagine what happens to the characters and their relationships after the story ends. Describe the nature of their relationships and what the characters will be doing in 1 year and in 10 years: a) Diklah and Golan b) Golan and Sharon c) Batzal and Ruth d) Yoss and Galit

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

UNIT THEME: Relationships

- Relationships that are seen as stereotypically more “Israeli-style” tend to be close, without emotional space between the two parties involved. On the other hand, “American” relationships are stereotypically more polite and artificial, with room for the parties to secretly disagree to avoid unpleasant conflict. In what ways are the relationships in this movie “Israeli”? Are there aspects of certain relationships which you would characterize as “American”? Which and why?
- Which relationships in the movie would you call “successful” and why? What does this movie say about the necessary ingredients for a successful relationship? Is a romance different from a friendship in terms of what makes it successful?
- What is the relationship between younger people and older people in this movie? What is the opinion of the younger people of the possibility of older people having wisdom to share with them? Where do the younger people actually look for wisdom?

2 CINEMATIC THEME: Movie Re-Making

- What changes in plot and cast of characters will be necessary to alter this movie to suit the New York setting and the tastes of an American market? What aspects of this movie would the general American public find hard to understand or relate to?
- Would you be enthusiastic about watching an adaptation of this movie set in New York? Why or why not?

3 HISTORICAL THEME: Tel Aviv

- Based on this movie, how would you describe the atmosphere of “the scene” of young people in Tel Aviv and the attitudes of the people involved?
- If you have ever visited Tel Aviv yourself, do you think the movie’s depiction of Tel Aviv is accurate? Why or why not?

4 CULTURAL THEME: The Lifestyle of Young Israelis

- Can you sympathize with the movie’s characters? What similarities do you share with this group of friends? What differences set you apart?
- Do you have a favorite character? Who is it and why?
- How do the characters form life decisions? Do you think the ending of the movie changes the characters’ lives and decision-making processes in any lasting way?
- Why is this movie entitled “Wisdom of the Pretzel”? What is the wisdom?

QUOTE ANALYSIS

“ **Diklah:** What do you wanna be when you grow up?

Golan: I have no idea. As time goes by, I feel as if I know less and less. At this rate, by the time I’m 30, I won’t know anything... You suddenly find yourself asking questions you thought were crazy, like: who am I, what am I, what do I want. And no one has the answer. It just gets more complicated.

- Where does Golan stand in terms of finding answers to these questions by the end of the film? What is the movie’s message concerning the process of personal discovery?

“ **Golan:** It puts things in proportion. Go out, have fun, because the only thing you have at that age are the memories of the crazy stuff you did when you were young.

- How does this conversation from Golan and Diklah’s first date foreshadow events that happen later in the movie? What does Diklah’s subsequent rendition of “memories of crazy stuff” emphasize about her personality and character? Do you think the story attracts or repels Golan? What attracts Golan to Diklah in general?

“ **Golan:** My dad says that if you don’t pick up 10 cents you’re not worth 10 cents.

Diklah: My dad says that if you pick up 10 cents you’re worth 10 cents.

Golan: Why is it that those great sentences always have contradictory sentences that sound right too?

- What does this quote say about youth’s search for wisdom? Do you think the quote has any relation to the movie’s title?

“ **Diklah:** Are you crying? Caricatures make you cry?

Golan: Don’t you get emotional from things like this?

Diklah: I get emotional from different things. Besides, I never cry.

- In “Behind the scenes” clips, Golan questions the director as to why he is made to cry at this point, saying that it does not make sense to him. What do you think the director had in mind?

“ **Golan:** I’ve had it with this Lego! This will determine if I work or not? Gimme a break! You loser! This is your job? Standing there like a jerk, watching people play Lego? And you look like the back of a bus!
Golan: (*thinking*) Why do they do this to us? Must I humiliate myself just to get a job? And what for? Money? To be stuck in traffic in the world’s fastest car? To eat nothing when you’re starving? To live in some crazy house and be lonely and scared, and for people only to like you because you have money? Who said this pot-head has less fun than the suit in the Mercedes? What’s it worth if you’re never satisfied and just want more and more? After all, we all wind up in the same place. And what are we left with there?

- What was it about the Lego exercise which upset Golan so much, based on his subsequent philosophical musings? Why is there such a big difference between what Golan says out loud and what he says to himself? Can you empathize with his reaction?

“ **Golan:** You expect me to stay with her just because she’s your sister? So that I don’t hurt you?
Guy: You’re not hurting me, you’re hurting yourself. You’re incapable of having a real relationship with anyone, every time it gets serious you weasel your way out, which leaves you alone, not me.

- Why do you think Golan breaks up with Diklah?

“ **Batzal:** She’s amazing. I never knew there were such girls. She’s pretty, but grew up as if she were ugly. Only girls from the countryside are like that nowadays. She’s unaware of her beauty. It’s amazing. She wasn’t raised on MTV, cafes, after-parties, makeup. 5 AM she was in the cowshed, then the kitchen, then all kinds of environmental activities, Greenpeace and stuff.

- What do you think his friends in the room are thinking while Batzal is extolling the virtues of his new girlfriend? Do you think the qualities he describes above are inherently assets, or that Batzal sees them positively because of his infatuation?

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

WHAT IS THE WISDOM OF THE PRETZEL?

“ **Golan:** Look what I found. Look at that girl. We’re going to the Sinai, first time one-on-one, I just hope she digs it. She’s such a nut, look what she’s wearing to the Sinai.
Storekeeper: She’ll lie on the beach like a Bedouin princess, she’ll love it.
Golan: How do you know?
Storekeeper: The pretzel!
Golan: The pretzel never lies, man.

This quote is the sole mention of pretzels in a movie entitled *Wisdom of the Pretzel*. The storekeeper does not even appear to have any real reason to refer to “the pretzel” at this moment; it seems as though he could just as easily have pointed to any other item in his store.

Perhaps, then, subscribing to the “wisdom of the pretzel” would involve following an arbitrary, whimsical philosophy—the belief that you can make do by improvising with whatever you happen to have on hand. The characters in the movie surely reflect such an attitude in their actions and lifestyle. When they stumble across the big questions in life, they may desperately look around for something upon which to make a decision, but what ultimately guides them is a whim, something as trivial and irrelevant as a pretzel. For instance, why does Golan call to ask for the number of the girl he met at the wedding? They asked him to re-do a form at a job interview and he walked out. Why does Golan go back to comfort Diklah at the very end of the movie? He got a flat tire. He lives in a world where the vicissitudes of life seem to consist of a string of unpredictable coincidences as twisted as a pretzel, and fate capriciously takes its toll. Perhaps he and his friends feel that a more systematic approach would not necessarily even make a difference.

Or maybe they truly believe in the power of signs, inconsequential to the uninitiated, but ever-persuasive to the young and eternally optimistic.