

“Kippur” and “Dream Square”: Imagining a multicultural Space¹

Film review -

Kippur (Israel, 2000) – directed by Amos Gitai

Dream Square (Israel, 2000) – directed by Benny Torati

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Among the films awarded prizes at the 2000 Israeli Oscar ceremonies were Benny Torati's movie *Dream Square* and Amos Gitai's *Kippur*. Torati received the award for Best Director of the year and Gitai for the Best Movie. In spite of the fact that they each deal with completely different subject matter, the two films do share something: both deal with a personal journey in the footsteps of memory. Furthermore, both Torati and Gitai cope with experiences from the past which have been inscribed in the memories of many people – my own as well. For example, the interweaving of the classic Indian film in the plot of Torati's movie, which I will discuss in a broader sense further on, touches on a folklore well-known to me – as a boy I watched numerous Indian films and until this day I can still recollect some of the great heroes of Indian cinema as well as the tunes and soundtracks from different movies. When George Mandavon asks Israel, “the Indian”, (Yosef Shiloah) what is the best Indian film of all times that was shown in his father's, Morris Mandavon's, moviehouse, I did not have to wait for his answer. “Sangam”, I whispered to myself. Likewise, the war experiences in Gitai's film rouse echoing memories buried deep within from the days I took part in the Yom Kippur War. Like Gitai, I also have imprinted memories of anxiety, feelings of hopelessness and chaos which prevailed during those first few days of the war. From my own personal experience, I could easily identify with those soldiers in search of a military unit to join and take part in battle with. I can therefore say, that both of these films deal, more or less, with the experiences which formed my own personal and collective identity.

However, like any personal journey in pursuit of one's past, both Gitai's and Torati's are evasive, mocking the viewers as well as the makers of the movies themselves. One can never return to the depths of oblivion and salvage past experiences as if they were sitting there, waiting to be uncovered and reassembled just as they once used to be. The very act of drawing out these

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experiences sifts, molds and forms them in a manner that renders them new shape and meaning. That is, these acts are usually instigated by the desire to write a personal narrative, and such writing, like the writing of history in general, is harnessed and subordinated to the needs and interests of the present. Hence, the present serves as a privileged prism through which we recount and reconstruct the past. We may say, therefore, that the needs of the present determine, to a great extent, the past and what it stores.

The present is not the sole factor which hinders an individual's ability to directly connect with his own personal regions of memory; one always reconstructs his/her past experiences while forming respective collective identities. This predicament is inevitable. An individual's identity is always formed and shaped within a social and cultural context, whether sufficiently articulated or implicitly assumed. Thus, even when it successfully challenges the collective identity of the society in which he/she lives, its norms and values, this challenge presupposes a collective point of view from which the challenge becomes possible. This is, then, the paradox involved in the practices that challenge collective identities: they require an alternative collective identity to act as a stronghold from which the challenge may be launched.

This paradox is evident in the films of Gitai and Torati. Neither of the films intends to construct collective identities. On the contrary, it seems that Gitai and Torati are keen on making a personal statement, free of the strangling grasp of any collective narrative or collective identity held in the pillories of well-defined national goals and values. Nevertheless, their films, each in its own unique way, assume an alternative collective narrative or take part in the construction and shaping of such a narrative. In challenging the national collective identity, both films participate in the formation of an identity of a sub-collective or sub-group.

To begin with Gitai's movie, one may say that it takes a winding path to form an alternative collective identity that painfully grapples and struggles with Israel's national narrative and its basic values and myths. Gitai relates the story of an individual (and of a public) who has interwoven his identity with the identity and faith of Israel's national collective. This is an autobiographical story of an artist (i.e., the movie maker) whose past (like many others') was intimately intertwined with a formative and fatal event in Israel's recent history: the Yom Kippur War. The story is told from a point of view which alienates the past and its events. The artist does not pretend to relate past events and experiences from the point of view of the past, but rather from a point of view that is situated in the present. The hero – who represents Gitai – was not, at the time the war broke out, estranged to the national narrative and to the war as he now is, in the present. Like numerous others, he willingly surrendered himself to the national narrative and its values, and voluntarily took part in the war; the antagonistic view on the war, then, is one of the present upon the past. He narrates the story from the perspective of one who is currently going through a process of disillusionment towards his past, even alienated by it.

What is the nature of this present point of view? This is an outlook which seeks to liberate itself from the national narrative and its primary values, even when it is dealing with the very stuff out of which this narrative is usually made: war. How can one deal with war without strengthening and glorifying the national narrative and its values? It looks as though this question constitutes the main challenge with which Gitai was struggling while filming and directing the movie. To confront this challenge successfully he employed varied means. Firstly, the plot of the movie, drawn from Gitai's experiences and memories of the Yom Kippur War, is clearly anti-war. As opposed to the long tradition of war films, this is an anti-epic. It is absent of all pretense, or so it appears, to "recount heroic events in an elevated style" (see the entry "epic" in Webster's dictionary) or, to "reflect the destiny of nations through the deeds and characteristics of the heroes" (see the entry "epos" in the Hebrew Even-Shushan dictionary). He presents the grotesque image of a senior career officer (Guliano Mar) who rejoices in battle and boasts he is going "to screw the Arabs" and "reach Damascus within two days". It is hard to miss the association with David Elazar, commander-in-chief during the Yom Kippur War, who confidently and arrogantly vowed that the IDF would "break the Arabs' bones" within days. Later scenes of the movie reveal a military enclosure filled with the bodies of dead Israeli soldiers while their commanding officer – the same Guliano Mar – is being evacuated, suffering from shell shock. Secondly, despite the fact that this is a war movie, there is, in fact, no war – there is only scenery of war. The viewers see tanks and armored vehicles moving before their eyes in futile courses, not knowing where to, and why they are moving in one direction or another. Thirdly, the method of filming the scenes gives the viewer an immense feeling of alienation from the actual events. This effect is obtained by many scenes being shot from a distance and submerged in a veneer of mist and haze.

To the spectator it is obvious that Gitai wishes to demystify and de-glorify the war, as well as depersonalize those participating in it. The movie relates the trials and travails of an air-borne rescue team which, by definition, is not a combat unit; this is a team whose activities are somewhat military and somewhat humanitarian. The movie does not impart heroism on its "heroes", not even the heroism complementary to those who deal in the saving of human lives, as can be seen, for example, in the movie "M.A.S.H.", starring Donald Sutherland and Elliot Gould. Even though "M.A.S.H." is clearly an anti-war movie, it glorifies the medical unit and its heroes. This is not so in Gitai's film. One of the most imposing scenes in the movie is when the rescue team fails to save the life of a wounded soldier who it is trying to evacuate from the field of battle. The team embarks on its missions awkwardly; it seems helpless and acquiesces with its defeat. The team's depiction does not even leave room for glorified anti-heroes, for it provides little information about the characters, their identities, weaknesses, fears and dilemmas. This parsimonious handling of the characters then makes it virtually impossible to identify with any of them. And perhaps this was the intention. Gitai incessantly and repeatedly describes scenes

in which the rescue team participates in evacuating the casualties, up until the members of the rescue team are themselves wounded by a direct missile hit on their helicopter and are then evacuated from the combat zone. The viewers may get the impression that the director is purposely trying to turn their viewing into a loathsome experience, or perhaps the war: more wounded, more casualties, another rescue mission, and so on and so on – until one feels truly fed up with this war, and all wars in general.

Although there is a measure of stereotyping, it seems that the collective identity which Gitai is a participant in forming, is that of a group that is hesitantly developing a post-Zionist or post-national ethos. This identity is of a group the majority of which is secular-educated-Ashkenazi (a Jew of European descent) of the upper socioeconomic class who has undergone, or is currently undergoing a process of alienation from Zionism and its values. This is an identity of a group that wants to transform Israeli society into “a sane society”, a group which has grown jaded with the national struggle and is yearning for it to end. This is an identity of a group that has no interest in taking part in any war meant to ensure “strategic depth” or to hold on to “holy places”. This is an identity of a group that is rapidly losing the ardor and the motivation required to encourage its children to serve in combat units because it sees the army conducting a war with whose goals it does not agree. Therefore, it is possible to conceive Gitai’s antagonistic relation to the Yom Kippur War actually as antagonistic feelings directed at the war of the Intifada, one that is currently ongoing, and less towards the war of the past.

It seems, however, that Gitai was reluctant in reaching the logical conclusion of his attempt to free himself from the national narrative and its main values. This reluctance is expressed in the scene in which the doctor of the rescue team (Weintraub) recounts stories of the horrors his mother went through during the Holocaust. And thus, in a most unanticipated way, and contrary to the film’s internal logic, the Jewish national narrative suddenly bursts forth in all its immensity. We suddenly see concentration camps sprouting up, and the Holocaust intervenes in the process of liberation from the national narrative and undermines its success. Suddenly we witness a recoiling from “breaking all the rules” and the need for a collective anchor is revealed in all its strength. The director and his hero return to their roots, to the familiar and safe shores of the Jewish national collectivity– the Holocaust. The Yom Kippur War too, as in the preceding Six Day War, and the following Gulf War, is suddenly presented as an imminent holocaust, as something threatening to destroy the Jewish nation and expose the Jewish people, once again, to the menacing prospect of outright extinction. It is possible that the role of the Holocaust in Gitai’s movie is to provide a restraining power working against the formation of a strict post-Zionist and post-national identity. It appears as though Gitai’s journey in pursuit of his past flirts seriously with post-nationalism and perhaps even with the notion of converting Israel into a state of all its citizens. Yet, it is only a flirt. It seems that Gitai is having second thoughts on the matter; he refuses (or is unable) to sever

the ties with the warm and familiar bosom of the liberal left which is still deeply committed to the national and Zionist ideology.

Contrary to Gitai's film, Torati's contains a plot, or even multi-plots. In addition, he does not deal with materials that typically make up national identities and narratives - wars. This film does not seek to form an identity of a sub-group while struggling with Israel's national identity and its contents. Its central plot deals with the Mandavon family, described as the informal, unchallenged leader of a neighborhood on the border of the city of Tel Aviv. The father of the family, Morris, died in 1995, and a year later the family conducts a memorial service. The father's brother, Avraham, comes back to the neighborhood especially to attend the memorial service after a long period of absence which, in fact, began on the wedding day of Morris and Senyora over three decades ago. Nissim, Morris's youngest son, dreams his father asks him to open the moviehouse he and his brother Avraham jointly owned, which was immediately shut down when Avraham left the neighborhood. Nissim and his brother, George, decide to comply with their father's "wish" to reopen the moviehouse, even if only for a single showing, in memory of the old days. They want to show a movie from the past. They want to show the most grandiose movie that was ever shown in their father's moviehouse. "Sangam", which in Indian means encounter, is the obvious choice- "the Indian movie of all times". "Sangam" is a devious, melodramatic love story which tells the story of two friends, Gopal and Sondar, both desperately in love with the same woman, Radah. Radah, on the other hand, loves Gopal, but he does not reveal his love for her because he knows how much Sondar loves her. Gopal gives up Radah to Sondar. The plot concludes with Gopal's suicide - an act of supreme self-sacrifice which removes the threat hovering over the marriage of Radah and Sondar. Thus, we have here a plot within a plot. In the course of the movie it becomes clear that the movie "Sangam" was *the* movie Senyora and Avraham used to watch alone together on many occasions, late at night after all the neighborhood had left the moviehouse sorrowful, yet satisfied. "Sangam" told the story of Morris's and Avraham's love for Senyora, and her love for Avraham. Like Gopal, Avraham relinquished his love for Senyora for his brother, Morris, but Morris was unaware of this until his dying day. On the day of Senyora and Morris's wedding Avraham left the neighborhood: his heart could not bear living so close to Senyora after she had married his brother. Will Senyora and Avraham go back and watch "Sangam" together? Will they be able to realize their love after a thirty-year separation?

As he leads us through a winding plot, Torati shows some of the more colorful members of the neighborhood and describes the daily life. *Dream Square* does not, therefore, deal with national narratives and does not entail memories of war, and this is not all. The movie does not even mention the state or its institutions: in Torati's journey down memory lane there are no governmental offices, there is no city hall, or bank, or police. And thus, for example, when the law is disrupted, the community's apparatus of law and

justice takes actions to restore order and punish the culprits: when one of the neighborhood youth tries to steal gas balloons from the yard of an elderly lady, a citizen of the neighborhood, Morris Mandavon's sons beat him with their fists and he drags himself away, bloody and beaten. One is left with the impression, as George Mandavon promises the old woman, the young thief will never do that again.

Torati describes the daily routine of a Mizrahi community of the nineties, one that has frozen in time – they live and act according to cultural codes established back in the sixties. For example, even in the late nineties the residents of the neighborhood still burn the effigy of De Gaulle in the Lag Ba'Omer bonfire, the same De Gaulle who declared an embargo on weapons to Israel following the Six-Day-War. Do the people of the neighborhood still hold a grudge against De Gaulle, or Brezhnev, the leader of the USSR whose effigy still continues to burn in the bonfires of Lag Ba'Omer as well? Why does Torati freeze his heroes in time? Why do they refuse to grow up? Does Torati exercise same artistic liberty employed by Gunther Grass in his novel *The Tin Drum*? Do Torati's heroes - like the boy Oscar in *The Tin Drum* who refused to grow up because this is how he expressed his protest against the way the German society was developing during the second World War – also refuse to grow up for similar reasons? Does Torati want to emphasize the fact that his heroes feel alienated from the social and cultural realities outside of their neighborhood? Does Torati, using heroes frozen in time, want to propose a Mizrahi identity that challenges Israel's collective identity?

Watching the movie gives one the impression that Torati is presenting a legend woven in a cultural, and perhaps geographical, ex-territory. A foreigner watching this film will learn nothing of "ethnic tensions and social strives" in Israeli society, because the story takes place within the boundaries of a homogeneous community. The Israeli viewer, on the other hand, certainly knows that the community described exists in Israel and one of the shots even places it in the city of Tel Aviv. Except for this one point of reference, Tel Aviv too is not relevant to the life of the community. As aforementioned, the collective identity of which Torati participates in its forming is Mizrahi. But the Mizrahi character of this collective identity does not arise out of defiance or protest against a national, collective identity. On the contrary, the Mizrahi identity of the sub-group exists, at least on the surface, without having any dialogue with the national collective identity. In my opinion, this fact turns Torati's film into a most subversive one. The subversive element of the film can perhaps be appreciated by comparing it, for example, to Ram Levy's movie *Bread*, starring Etty Ankri, Moshe Ibgi and Rami Danon. *Bread* is a movie about Mizrahim who confront the Israeli establishment and blame it for the distress, the poverty and the social alienation in which they exist. It thus creates a dichotomy between "us" and "them", between Mizrahim and the state, or perhaps between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. In Torati's film we do not find confrontations of this type. There is something serene, unapologetic, confident and comfortable in the way

he participates in the forming of a Mizrahi identity, something that disconnects the reality he describes from Israel's national narrative. Torati does not seek recognition for Mizrahi identity, he does not demand apology and forgiveness for "mistakes of the past" and he makes no pleas to enter the gates of the national collective. In his journey down memory lane, Torati seems to partake in the forming of a Mizrahi isolationist identity that neither openly revolts nor angrily protests against Israel's national narrative.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that one cannot view the Mizrahi identity rising out of Torati's movie as an authentic Mizrahi identity. This does not mean that Torati does not succeed in connecting with this kind of identity; it is just that this kind of identity does not even exist. Torati's journey into the past indeed allows us to appreciate the arbitrary way in which not only Mizrahi identity is shaped and formed, but the collective identity for all it is. The arbitrary character of Mizrahi identity, on one hand, and its concrete *reality* on the other hand, can be appreciated when we think about the success of the Indian movies and Greek music turning into its foundation stones. This cultural material has no essential link with "Mizrahi identity". This, again, does not mean that Mizrahi identity should draw its characteristics from other, more authentic materials; rather, it means that Mizrahi identity, like other collective identities, is an identity the contents of which are not pre-written, but are continuously given to changes and shifts. Moreover, one cannot speak of a monolithic Mizrahi identity: while Torati is taking part in forming a certain Mizrahi identity, other Mizrahi identities are being formed (the Shas movement, for example). However what is unique in the Mizrahi identity which emerges from Torati's film is, as aforesaid, its indirect and elegant subversion of the national collective identity.

Challenging the national collective identity is a common motif of the two different movies reviewed. The conscious or unconscious attempt of both artists to form collective identities that depart from the national narrative blends in well with the multicultural project. As I understand it, this is a project which rejects, firstly, all attempts to enforce a common collective identity on a heterogeneous society characterized by diversity of national, cultural, racial, ethnic groups, and secondly, it allows different groups to form, shape and preserve their own cultural identities. This does not mean that Torati and Gitai's films are the result of an ideological climate that upholds the value of multiculturalism. On the contrary, even though institutional efforts to enforce a unified collective identity on the Israeli society are not as strong as they were in the past, these efforts are still strongly felt in all regions of public and cultural activity in Israel. Challenging the collective identity with these two films proposes new horizons for the imagination of a multicultural Israel that encourages the formation of different collective identities existing, hopefully, side-by-side in harmony.