

Four entered a *Pardess*: on Eran Barak's film - Pardess Katz, My Love

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The Babylonian Talmud tells the tale of Rabbi Akiva and three other sages who entered a *pardess*, from which only Rabbi Akiva emerged unscathed. All the others went astray in the mundane world: one died, another lost his mind, and the third became a heretic. Perhaps unconsciously, the latest film by Eran Barak, **Pardess Katz, My Love** draws inspiration from that *aggadah* (legend), though the *pardess* (literally, "grove")¹ in the film is far from being that described in the Talmud, or even its etymological incarnation as paradise. Barak depicts four men who entered or, more accurately - were dispatched to - a Zionist transit-camp sixty years before, and only one of managed to leave it, the one symbolically named Israel. The search for Israel, the baby said to have died in Malben Hospital in 1949, and whose body was spirited away by the authorities, is what motivated director Eran Barak to launch his quest. According to the laws of the genre, a quest inevitably yields discoveries that were not expected, certainly not by the director who steers the investigation. The genre is that of a road movie, and though Barak's journeys do not cross vast distances, his screenplay's dynamics match the genre's defining laws. That is, an event or discovery generates a mystery, that impels the protagonist, usually the film's director who accompanies the journey with his voice, in the first-person, relating his quest and mirroring its advancing stages. A road movie naturally tends to be revealing and include more than the director's defined reason for embarking on his journey. A fine example of this is Arnon Goldfinger's much-praised film **The Flat** (2012), in which a collection of letters that the director finds by chance leads to journeys across Israel and elsewhere, until he tracks down the mystery's solution.

¹ *Pardess* is another name for the Jewish belief dealing with what is known as the "secrets of the divine wisdom". The Talmud also uses the acronym *pardess* to summarize different approaches to the interpretation of Torah texts - Pshat (literal), Remez (allegoric, hinted at), Derash (comparative), Sod (secret, esoteric).

Israeli Cinema and the Quest

Over the past decade, Israeli cinema has returned to the past, to closely-guarded or repressed family secrets. Many reasons caused this new trajectory: sometimes a mortifying story that no one wants to disclose, as it would throw blame on the whole family, and in other cases - and this typifies the contemporary trend in Israeli documentary film - it explores the disturbing encounter between the individual and the state. Although the narrative of that encounter is lost, it has left scars like landmarks, and revealing the scars triggers a major, wide-ranging inquiry. Noteworthy in that context is Arnon Goldfinger's film **The Flat** (2012). It deals with the opening of a Pandora's box, containing a private Israeli past, and lays bare the convoluted relations of German-born Israelis (the director's grandfather, who was a judge in Israel, and his wife) and their private life, which wasn't completely suitable to their position.

Like **The Flat**, this latest film by Eran Barak - whose film **Hunting Time** (2102) aroused immense curiosity - also focuses on the narrative around a search, the quest for a silenced family story. Here, though, the grandfather wasn't a judge, and made do with raising a large family and managing a synagogue in Pardess Katz. The story is told in a minor tone and doesn't roam to remote places, beyond the neighbourhood. The metonymic opening sequence succinctly portrays the fatigue that besets the place: in the opening shot, the camera moves through the peeling wooden frame, from the sunlight into a shadowy room, where a man in underpants is sitting, his eyes closed, on pale sheets. Like the image of Christ being taken down from the cross, the figure of the man is shown briefly, causing the spectator to wonder who he is and where he is. What is his connection with the film's narrative? In the next shot, the lighting is softer and we see an old woman dozing on a chair next to a couch, where a man is lying, half-asleep. The third shot, more dynamic than the preceding ones, shows a cart and horse, trundling down empty streets at midday. Then the director appears, running towards the camera, and launches into a monologue that continues throughout the film: "I knew filming in Pardess Katz would be a mistake. I knew something would break - my heart or the camera. However much I tried to escape Pardess Katz, I always failed". His rapid movements, the escape that the voiceover describes, is accompanied by figures of people walking backwards. Viewers wonder whether the retreating director and those he abandoned will eventually find a meeting-point.

Eran Barak constructs his screenplay from the outside in, like peeling an onion, from what the eyes see to what the heart conceals. And if what the eyes see is Uncle Gabi, the half-naked man sleeping on his bed, the heart conceals the tragedy encapsulated in the documentaries produced by the Israeli army's propaganda unit. Two excerpts from those films are integrated in **Pardess Katz, My Love**, showing women soldiers dispatched to teach life skills to Mizrahi immigrants. Confronted with these films, whose date of production and makers are not cited, one cannot help recalling the film by Yitzhak (Tzepel) Yeshurun, **Bi'ur ha'ba'rut (Eradicating Illiteracy)** (1965), an obviously Zionist film that deals with Zionism's mission of culturizing the immigrants originating in Arab nations. Accompanying Yachin Hirsch's sensitive cinematography is a didactic, authoritative voiceover, seemingly overflowing good will, that directs viewers to believe that the immigrants filmed were facing a cultural revolution, and that the Jewish people restored to its historical homeland from countless diasporas, is not just getting an old/new home but also its very own, brand-new culture. Reading

between the lines, though, one sees that the authoritative tone didn't presage good tidings. What the immigrants ultimately received were condescending attitudes that disparaged their culture to the extent of wiping it out, and enforced foreign norms and practices on them – sometimes in the name of progress, and sometimes in the name of eradicating otherness and uniting the Zionist collective.

Ella Shohat's groundbreaking work, *Israeli Cinema: East / West and the Politics of Representation*, published in the USA in 1989, was the first to take issue with Zionism's colonialist aims. Initially, Israeli society did not accept the book (the overwhelming reaction was "colonialists? us?!") and it took some years for Shohat's arguments to become integral to the Mizrahi discourse and the wider Israeli discourse. Zionism's cultural colonialism is no longer a concept beyond the pale – at the most it is a linguistic coinage aimed at describing the complexity that the first Zionists confronted when they came to build a new country, and their specific ways of dealing with it. Over the years, cultural colonialism targeted many other groups, such as Holocaust survivors, Georgians, and Ethiopians, who faced a choice – accept it or reject it. The multicultural society that crystallised in Israel, before the surprised eyes of Zionist circles, is perhaps the triumphant answer to the founding fathers' cultural crushing. What is multiculturalism, though? Isn't it a term created by the "Language Laundry" to describe excluded and detached populations, who have never crossed the boundary separating the hegemonic from the Others – and maybe never will? This open question is not this article's focus, and remains unanswered here.

"I never knew where this family begins and where it ends"

As we've seen, Eran Barak's film aims to explore a family secret concerning Israel, the blond blue-eyed infant who vanished in 1949, probably abducted, from a hospital. Sitting by the window, his mother recounts her tragedy; it happened when she was 16, yet she sounds as if it happened yesterday. A Tunisian immigrant couple bring their sick oldest child to the Malben hospital in Pardess Katz. When they come to visit him, he is nowhere to be found and they are informed that he has died. The confused parents ask for his body, for burial, and are told that the hospital has already handled the matter. Without a body, the family continues mourning for years, always expecting Israel's return. The story of the lovely baby who disappeared is passed down through the generations, until Eran Barak takes up the challenge and launches a quest to discover the fate of little Israel, who disappeared years before he himself was born.

The journey leads him to different stations in his family's homes, and into virtual spaces like those preserved in stills and home movies. As his journey progresses, he gets closer to Israel. The growing intimacy between the director and his vanished uncle is wholly represented by a voiceover, until it becomes clear that the director has made Israel into his alter ego, incorporated him into his body. What results is an interesting situation, in which the director talks to Israel, excitedly and hesitantly, and this becomes a dialogue between them, emanating from the director's body. It is not by chance that Eran Barak chooses Israel as an alter ego. He remembers his father's advice, years before, that if he wants to succeed in life he must leave Pardess Katz: what this also implies is that he must cut himself off from his family, because it apparently embodies the silenced tragedy of Israel's melting-pot.

"Sometimes when I visited, everything looked like a repeat broadcast of a Tunisian telenovela"

Israel's disappearance seems to provide excellent material for a telenovela. And yet the family can't relate their own telenovela because they are so engrossed in the telenovelas transmitted by Tunisian TV, which like a mirror image reflect life in Pardess Katz. In the room, and within the virtual space of the television, men are strewn idle and fatigued on couches, waiting for something to happen. In the world of the film, as in the broadcasted world from Tunisia, women tend to those men - broken and exhausted by life - and serve them glasses of tea. This ploy of *mise-en-abyme* lets Barak broaden the film's imagined space, by showing, still in the framework of a Tunisian television broadcast, a child on a ship's deck sailing into the distance. Is this Israel's fate? Does Tunisian television have mystical relations with this worn-out Tunisian family from Pardess Katz?



"When I was born, my father left, saying: 'If you want to make something of yourself, get out of Pardess Katz'"

Not only telenovelas from Tunisian television inspire the family's dreams. News broadcasts from what was the only Israeli TV channel in the 1970s - which screened a series on the lives of beautiful Israelis, **Hedva ve'Shlomik** (1971), by Shmuel Imberman - described Pardess Katz as "a den of thieves and drug depots, like a way-station on [criminals] road to the big village, Tel Aviv". Integrate into Barak's film, the report presents Pardess Katz as a foreign space detached from hegemonic Israeliness. Its narrator broadens the scene and explains the sight of men in white under-vests clustered around a gambling table: "Strange things happen in Pardess Katz, but the neighbourhood's men prefer not to talk about it [...], needless things that irritate powerful people, whom you don't see in the mornings. That's why men here are absorbed in dominoes and backgammon, invaluable for passing time since many here don't know how to fill it. To win, you must have good dice, the unemployed men in the club told me. But good dice probably come when you have luck. And it seems that there isn't a lot of luck in Pardess Katz."

In the course of the film, Eran realizes that his only option is to talk to the family's lost member - Israel - who crossed the lines and disappeared from the Pardess Katz space. What begins with a soft, excited voice gradually becomes a tale of identification with someone who took a different escape-route - if you like, following the Talmudic tale - the one who came out of the *pardess*. Eran sees in him the survivor of the tragedy called Pardess Katz, where half-dressed burly men lounge in endless melancholy on sofas,

listing all their missed opportunities ("I could have been a great actor", Aryeh confides, "like Paul Newman"). But is Israel still alive? Because if he isn't, Eran will remain the sole survivor of that Israeli tragedy.

Searching for Israel, his alter ego, the director performs actions that give his quest with a performative character. He arrives at the remains of the Malben building, where Israel's parents saw their son for the last time, and hangs photographs of the family there. Later he builds a house for himself in the ex-territoria of a row of palm-trees that once led to the hospital, where he sets a table with dishes cooked by Israel's mother, the director's grandmother. He sits down and invites Israel to join him. Then a miracle happens: Israel, so far only a kind of remote fantasy, starts talking from his throat. He turns down Eran's invitation. Disappointed, Eran sums up his quest with a hurt-filled tone: "Bye, Israel. I'm not coming back here again. I hope you're happy. And if one day you feel you're someone else, don't hesitate, come back to Pardess Katz. If you think about it, that's what separated you from your family - this row of palm trees. Goodnight, Israel."



The end of the film provides the only possible closure to a narrative of hope that persisted for too long. With his own hands, using his camera, the director demolishes all hope of ever finding that lost son, of a family reunion that could have happened but never did. On a main street in Pardess Katz, we see a nurse in white uniform cradling what looks like a baby wrapped in material. She walks towards the improvised house that Eran built, and starts unwrapping the cloth, which is in fact a rolled-up map. As she spreads it out, nothing recalls the lost infant, Israel. Another illusion disintegrates, another story terminates. The scars inflicted by the drama of little Israel will probably persist in the awareness of that generation in Pardess Katz. Unrelenting memories, that dictate their spineless behaviour, lack of mental powers, passivity, their capitulation. Eran Barak, who's one of the third-generation of immigrants, understands that the choice is his - he can walk out of the *pardess*, leave Pardess Katz, and save his life. And so the film's name - "Pardess Katz, my love" is heavily dosed with irony. My love - really? Where children disappear, only horror and anger can prevail. The film's director, Eran Barak, chose a different trajectory. He tore off his white under-vest and went ahead, far from his beloved Pardess Katz.