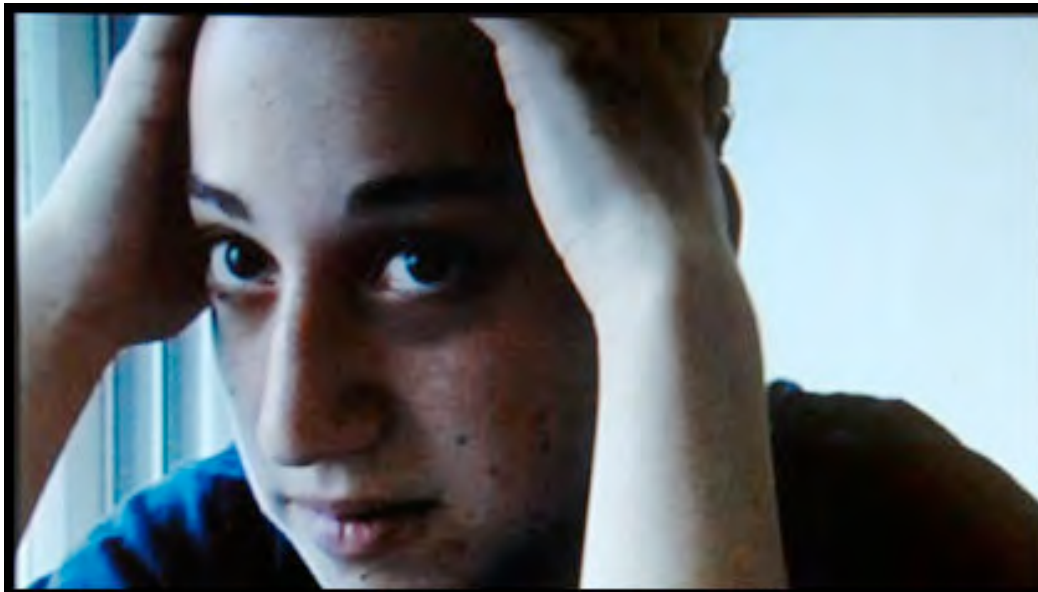




# To see if I'm smiling

(Lir' ot Im Ani Mehayechet)

a film by Tamar Yarom



"A brave and powerful testimony to the corrosive effect of power."

Silver Wolf Jury

*Int'l Documentary Film Festival, Amsterdam (IDFA)*

# To See If I'm Smiling

## Synopsis

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Israel is the only country in the world where 18-year-old girls are drafted for compulsory military service. In this award-winning documentary, the frank testimonials of six female Israeli soldiers stationed in Gaza and the West Bank pack a powerful emotional punch. The young women revisit their tours of duty in the occupied territories with surprising honesty and strip bare stereotypes of gender differences in the military. The former

soldiers share shocking moments of negligence, flippancy, immaturity and power-tripping as they describe atrocities they witnessed and participated in.

The psychological transformation that these young women underwent as a result of military service is both upsetting and riveting. The culture of war transforms people: personalities change, moral codes are subverted, values are supplanted and masks are constructed to dull the pain of what they did and didn't do in uniform. At a time when women in the military are increasingly on the frontlines, and the actions of soldiers all over the world are being questioned, this powerful film explores the ways that gender, ethics and moral responsibility intersect during war.

## Festivals

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For the most updated list, visit [www.wmm.com](http://www.wmm.com).

- Int'l Documentary Film Festival, Amsterdam (IDFA) - **Silver Wolf & Audience Awards**
- Hot Docs - **Special Jury Prize: International Documentary Feature**
- Haifa Int'l Film Festival - **Best Documentary**
- Sarasota Film Festival - **Special Documentary Jury Prize**
- Human Rights Watch Int'l Film Festival, New York
- One World Int'l Human Rights Documentary Film Festival, Prague
- FICCO, Festival Int'l of Contemporary Cinema, Mexico City
- ZagrebDox - Int'l Documentary Film Festival, Croatia
- Full Frame Documentary Film Festival

# To See If I'm Smiling

## Credits

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**2007, 59 MINUTES, COLOR  
ISRAEL, SUBTITLED (HEBREW)**

**PRODUCER / DIRECTOR**

Tamar Yarom

**EDITOR**

Eyal Or

**CINEMATOGRAPHY**

Itamar Mandes-Flor

Shiri Bar-On

Daniel Gal

**ORIGINAL SCORE**

Jonathan Bar-Giora

## Director Biography

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Tamar Yarom was born in Jaffa in 1971. In 1995, she earned her Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from The Jerusalem Hebrew University. She graduated from The London Film School in 1999. Her film *Sob Skirt*, based on her personal experiences as a soldier in the First Intifada, won the Best Drama Award at The Haifa International Film Festival in 2002.

## Director Statement

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In 1988, I was drafted to the Israeli army. I was 18 years old, eager to do my duty and serve my country. During my service I was sent to the Occupied Territories. I entered a world with different rules and different moral codes where the values I was brought up with did not apply. Suddenly, I was one of the occupiers, one of the bad guys.

In this film, I talk to six other female soldiers who served in the Occupied Territories. They tell their story for the first time. The memories they are most ashamed of and wish to forget are recorded on film for everyone to see, judge, and criticize. It took me four years to find these women who were brave enough to participate in this film.

It is something they chose to do knowing it will not erase their past and would not relieve their guilt. But it was their opportunity to do the responsible thing this time. For the girls participating in the film as for myself this film is our political act. It is our cry for a change.

We have learnt a painful lesson about ourselves, and we chose to share it believing our experiences have a real value for anyone who strives to live a moral life.

### **My god, what did we do?**

**(Excerpt)**

By Dalia Karpel

One night, Tamar Yarom was awakened by one of the soldiers in her unit. He said he wanted to show her something in the basement of the abandoned building where they were staying. "Before we opened the door, I heard this awful noise from a generator and there was a strong smell of diesel fuel. I saw a middle-aged Palestinian detainee lying with his head on the generator. His ear was pressed against the generator that was vibrating, and the guy's head was vibrating with it. His face was completely messed up. It amazed me that through all the blood and horror, you could still see the guy's expression and that's what stayed with me for years after - the look on his face."

Yarom, now a film director, made two films following her army service as a *mashakit tash* (welfare officer) in an infantry company in the territories. She was drafted in 1989 and served at a basic-training base near Jerusalem until her unit was transferred to Gaza. She accompanied the recruits from their first day in the army and felt close to them, and they told her about what they did in the territories. "I tried not to judge them. Mostly I was glad that they were feeling good and finally had self-confidence." That's how it works, she adds: "When you're told things that you don't see with your own eyes, you can prettify them in your mind." But then she was taken to that basement.

Why did the soldier take her there? "He wanted to share the horror with me," she says. "Maybe he hoped that I'd do something, that I'd raise an outcry. I don't remember how we left there or what happened afterward. The next day I asked one of the commanders what happened in the basement and he politely explained to me that I mustn't interfere in things that were none of my business. That detainee I saw taught me something about myself that I would never have learned in years of university. And he's imprinted in my memory, engraved in every cell of my being. I saw a person in the lowest, most suffering state. A victim of cruelty I didn't know existed. And I stood there unmoved, apparently."

### **Yarom's position**

All the women in "To See If I'm Smiling" describe themselves as victims of circumstances. But of course that's just one way to see what they felt and did there, and what happened to them.

Asked what her film's political stance is, director Tamar Yarom seems momentarily nonplussed. Her film has no political stance, she says. "It's a mainstream film. Otherwise, people will switch channels. Because who wants to see a film that tells horror stories about military service in the territories?"

She adds: "The film is political only in that the Israeli viewer comes to this subject and projects a lot of his own political meanings onto it. The only thing that has value is the attempt to relate the experience of service in the territories, and women are good at describing emotional situations. Through them you can understand the psychology of the guys who serve in the territories. It's not different, it's just more extreme. It makes no difference what your job is. If you're in the territories you'll be sullied by this thing and come out a different person. I went into the territories with an excellent upbringing and came out a different person. I was afflicted by moral confusion there. That's my position, and the position of the film."



### **FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW: 'TO SEE IF I'M SMILING'**

Israel is the only country in the world where women are drafted for military service.

And if there's anything director Tamar Yarom wants viewers of her somber documentary, which examines female Israel Defense Forces vets, to understand is that war stories and trauma aren't strictly tied to men.

Sharing an array of experiences from their two-year stint in "The Territories," six women put a face on the violence, sexism, and remorse that fills the lives of residents and soldiers living and serving in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"To See If I'm Smiling" is most effective when its subjects crack the polite veneer of patriotism and military code to share their harrowing stories.

For instance, soft-spoken medic Meytal Sandler's anguish is palpable when describing her job of cleaning a Palestinian corpse.

"I close his eyes and keep on cleaning and scrubbing and at some point the eyes open up again," she says in Hebrew. "It's automatic, and it's a very frightening moment. It's like he came back to life. Giving me this stare...I can't allow myself to be disgusted by it."

Blunt Border Police officer Libi Abramov, who served at an IDF checkpoint, describes her reaction to the news of a shot comrade.

"With every Arab I see, I see Hani in my mind. In one shift, there were as many as 70 or 80 people whom I delayed," she says.

"I stood them in a line and decided that they would stay with me for the whole 12- to 14-hour shift, in the sun, in the heat. I made them stand there with me and had them do all kinds of exercises," she adds. "I started shouting at them and asked them 'Why did you do that to Hani? What did she do to deserve it?' No one else was around except my fighters, and they accepted this; it didn't seem strange to them."