



RAMLEH

A film by Michal Aviad



A WOMEN MAKE MOVIES RELEASE

WMM • 462 Broadway, 5th Floor • New York • NY • 10013
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Synopsis

RAMLEH follows the lives of four women in the town of Ramleh, in the heartland of Israel, between the Israeli general elections of 1999 and 2001. The film gives a new understanding to the ways religion, fundamentalism and tradition influence day-to-day life in Israel and the region.

Sima and Orly have chosen to follow the path of the Jewish ultra-orthodox "Shas" party, which has become the third largest political party in Israel. Svetlana, a new Jewish immigrant from Uzbekistan, is searching for a new identity. Gehad, a Palestinian Muslim, alternates between a career and strict tradition that does not allow her the freedom she seeks.

RAMLEH invites us to take a glimpse at the stories of women who have a lot in common but live in a religious, national and cultural labyrinth that does not allow them to meet. As the filmmaker observes these women, she slowly realizes that her own journey is tainted by her inability to decipher the complex social-political puzzle of Ramleh and its inhabitants.

Human Rights Watch Film Festival
One World Film Festival
Munich International Documentary Film Festival
FIPA? Festival International de Programmes Audiovisuels
Jerusalem International Film Festival
San Francisco, Washington and Maine Jewish Film Festival
Istanbul International Documentary Film Festival
Dallas Video Festival
Kalamata International Documentary Film Festival
Macedonia Human Rights Film Festival
Pristina Human Rights Film Festival
World Summit International Film Festival
Mumbai International Film Festival
Israel Film Festival (New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Boston)
Manchester Film Festival
Hartford Jewish Film Festival
Halfway to Hollywood Film Festival
Immaginaria Women's International Film Festival
Unabhaengiges FilmFest Osnabrueck
Sguardi Altrove Women's International Film Festival

2001, 58 min, Color, Video

Hebrew, Arabic and Russian with English subtitles



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Credits

Director, Writer & Co-Producer

Michal Aviad

Co-Producer

Yulie Gerstel

Cinematographer

Yoram Millo

Editor

Era Lapid

Music

Johnathan Bar-Giora

Funders

The New Foundation for Film and Television (Israel), Soros Documentary Fund (U.S.A.),
Te'ad – Channel 2 (Israel), Samuel Rubin Foundation (U.S.A.), The Film Project (Israel), The
Public commission for Arts and culture.



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DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY



MICHAL AVIAD has been working as a director and producer of documentary films in San Francisco and Tel Aviv since 1986.

Among her films are the 1987 award-winning American documentary *Acting Our Age* (60 min, 16mm), which she produced and directed. The film explores women and aging and was part of many international film festivals including the U.S. Sundance Film Festival and the Telluride Film Festival. The film was aired in many

countries and was selected in 1988 to be the first program on PBS's P.O.V documentary series.

In 1992 Aviad produced and directed *The Women Next Door* (80-min, 16mm). Filmed during the Intifada, the film examines the roles of Palestinian and Israeli women in the conflict. The film was part of the Forum in the Berlin International Film Festival where it received Honorable Mention. It took part of many festivals including Jerusalem, Pesaro, Munich, Chicago, San Paolo, Portugal, and INPUT '93. The film was aired in many countries including a national broadcast on PBS's P.O.V. series.

In 1995 she directed *Ever Shot Anyone?* (produced by Amit Goren, 60-min, beta.) This documentary explores Israeli male culture from a woman's point of view. The video was part of the Hong Kong International Film Festival, Feminale, the Leipzig Film Festival, INPUT '96, London Jewish Film Festival, Washington Jewish Film Festival, Flaherty film Seminar and many others. It was aired in Canada, Israel, Holland, Denmark, Russia and other countries.

In 1997 Aviad completed producing and directing *Jenny & Jenny* (60 min Beta), a film on two teenage working-class Israeli girls. *Jenny & Jenny* was awarded Best Israeli Documentary for 1997 from the Israel Film Institute. It was part of the Jerusalem International Film Festival, Denver Film Festival, Boston Film Festival, Feminale, San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, Films des Femmes in France and INPUT '98. To date it was aired in Germany, Sweden and Israel.

In July 2001 Aviad completed directing and co-producing *Ramleh* (60-min Beta, co-produced by Yulie Gerstel,) a social-political film about the lives of four women in the town of Ramleh. Ramleh, a Jewish-Arab town, is a powerful example to the disintegration of a country of displaced people torn by religious, national and cultural differences. The film premiered at the Jerusalem International Film Festival.

Currently Aviad is working on *For My Children* (co-produced by Yulie Gerstel), a personal film about the history and events in the life of one family of immigrants and refugees. This film, which is co-produced with Israel and ZDF-ARTE will be ready in Summer 2002.

Aviad teaches film production at Tel Aviv University. She is also the coordinator of the Tel Aviv International Students Film Festival.

By Uri Klein/ Ha'arez

In *RAMLEH* Aviad continues her journey into the ideological, historical, cultural and political labyrinth that is the country in which she lives. Four years after *JENNY & JENNY*, her beautiful film about two cousins from Bat Yam, her new film brings the story of four women that live in Ramleh: two ultra-orthodox who rediscovered religion and enthusiastically support the party of Shas, one immigrant from Bukhara and the fourth, an Arab teacher. On this basis Aviad weaves her net, which captures the four women in the threads of tradition and religion, patriarchy and power, alienation and detachment, dependence on the past, longing for the homeland and a more and more fragile hold in a belief of better life.

The film which takes place between the rise of Barak and his fall, is a profile of a moment of consciousness. It is a strong, frightening depressing film. But it is also a film that wishes to know, to understand. And thus, as the best documentaries do, it succeeds in turning the image of the other into the image of oneself, and with it turns the terror into an expression of the need to find a moment of rest.

Irit Shamgar/Ma'ariv, 15/7/01:

"Michal Aviad's documentary *RAMLEH* was an excellent opening of the Volgin Competition at the Jerusalem Film Festival.

The stories of three women in the town of Ramleh were for the viewers an unfamiliar reality. An educated Arab woman, who is finishing Law school but is tied to conservative family tradition that will not allow her to develop an independent life; an immigrant from Bukhara, who is raising two daughters on her own and is unemployed; and born-again Jewish orthodox women, who are proud to cover their heads and teach their babies to kiss photos of Rabbis.

Michal Aviad paints a frightening and sad picture of a hopeless world. Women who are tied to tradition move in closed circles. And maybe the saddest of all are those who choose this fate out of a seemingly free will. The women of Shas took part in the film under the open eyes of their husbands.

Like in her previous film *JENNY & JENNY*, *RAMLEH* excels in its direct, critical and full of respect treatment of its subjects. Aviad looks from the outside but she also enters inside. She creates identification but with it describes a scary yet relevant reality that exists 20 minutes away from Tel Aviv.

Aviad's look is never condescending. She looks at her protagonists at eye level and she does it with wisdom and a lot of talent."

July 2, 2002

Films Reveal Israeli, Palestinian Women's Lives

Run Date: 06/27/02

By Jennifer Friedlin

WEnews correspondent

At the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, an Israeli and a Palestinian-American filmmaker screen their visions of women's lives in the conflict zone.



NEW YORK (WOMENSENEWS)--The daily news reports about the Palestinians and Israelis provide a consistent view of the bloody conflict orchestrated by a predominantly male cast of politicians, soldiers and suicide bombers. For those interested in gaining a different understanding of Israeli and Palestinian societies, two filmmakers have created documentaries that shed light on the complex reality of life along the western banks of the Mediterranean. At the Human Rights Watch International

Film Festival in New York, which will end today, Israeli filmmaker Michal Aviad and Palestinian-American filmmaker Mai Masri each presented their startling films to packed audiences. While their documentaries explore vastly different issues, Aviad and Masri are both women making movies that look at life through the eyes of average Israeli and Palestinian women and girls. In "Ramleh," Aviad weaves together the stories of three women living in the ethnically mixed working-class Israeli town for which the film was named. By focusing on Svetlana, a recent immigrant from Uzbekistan; Gehad, an Arab Israeli; and Sima, a Jewish Israeli of North African descent, Aviad explores unique subsets of Israeli society. Not only are her characters women in a militarized culture, they are also members of ethnic groups marginalized by the dominant Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe. "All of my films deal with women's issues as an added complexity to other issues," said Aviad, 47, who was in New York last week for the screening of her film. "I'd like people to be aware of the complexity of the situation. "Film Shows Israeli Women Facing Discrimination on Many Levels Not only do Svetlana, Gehad and Sima represent groups of Israelis that are often at odds with one another, as women they must also cope with the restrictions their similarly gender-biased communities impose. Abandoned by her husband while still living in Uzbekistan, Svetlana, 33, is seen in the film struggling to build a better life for herself and her two daughters in Israel. Throughout the documentary Svetlana, a savvy woman who lacks formal education, is seen walking the city's dusty streets in search of a minimum-wage job. Along the way, she encounters a number of potential male bosses who are condescending and sexist. She eventually lands a job as a manicurist. For Gehad, 31, education results in little freedom. Although she is studying to become a lawyer, as a Muslim Palestinian she will never be seen as an equal by the Israeli establishment. Being a woman only compounds the difficulties. With the men in charge at home, women are forbidden from living on their own or choosing their spouses. Disobeying can lead to death. As Aviad notes in the film, six "honor killings" in Ramleh have gone uninvestigated. At the age of 26, Sima already has three children and by the end of the film a fourth will be born. She grew up poor and married at 17. Since marrying, Sima and her husband have returned to a form of Jewish fundamentalism that has appealed to masses of Sephardic Jews with roots in Arab countries. Treated as second-class citizens by the Ashkenazi elite, these Israelis found themselves living on society's economic, geographic and political fringes. Eventually, their frustration fueled the rise of the fast-growing, ultra-Orthodox Shas party, which offers followers spiritual and economic support as well as a strong sense of ethnic pride. Sima's life now revolves around taking care of her children--and having more--while her husband concentrates on studying Judaic teachings. Although she is perhaps the most content of the three characters in the film, Sima's satisfaction underscores the unsettling truth about

the effect religion can have on the disenfranchised. By concentrating on these three compelling women, Aviad offers a frank look into cross-sections of Israeli society rarely seen by the outside world. She also delivers a menacing message: Given that the women in "Ramleh" represent sizable minorities within Israel's population of 6 million, Aviad reminds the viewer that behind the all-encompassing Arab-Israeli conflict lurk many economic, political and religious problems inside the Jewish state. Palestinian Teen-agers Look to Past, Future While Aviad's film highlights Israel's inner tensions, Masri looks at the issues brewing around the country's edges. In "Frontiers of Dreams and Fears," Masri focuses her lens on two teen-age Palestinians: Mona, lives in the Shatila refugee camp in Beirut, and Manar, resides in the Dheisha refugee camp in the Palestinian-controlled city of Bethlehem. Thanks to the Internet, the girls are able to meet online and build a relationship based on their mutual desire to return to the villages in Israel that their grandparents fled as a consequence of the 1948 Israeli War of Independence. Mona, a 13-year-old who tends toward the poetic, and Manar, a charismatic 14-year-old, have grown up in camps where running water and electricity are scarce. The short supply of such basic amenities is, however, matched with an abundance of family stories about their former homes in the hillsides of Israel. Although three generations have passed since Israel was established and these villages were destroyed, the stories continue to exert a powerful role in shaping the young Palestinians' sense of themselves. "In the younger generation that sense of identity [which is connected to the land] is even stronger," said filmmaker Masri, a 43-year-old Palestinian-American who divides her time between Beirut and London. "They hold onto it and reconstruct their sense of identity from stories and their own imaginations. The ideal image, which isn't necessarily true, keeps them going, helps them to survive. "In one particularly poignant scene, Mona opens a letter Manar sent after she visited the village where Mona's grandparents once lived. As Mona sifts the dirt from the envelope of the destroyed village of Saffouria through her fingers, one wonders if any refugee is ever capable of forgetting "home. "The film reaches its climax when Mona and Manar, joined by dozens of their friends from the camps, meet at the Lebanese border in June 2000, just after the Israeli military ended its 20-year occupation of southern Lebanon. Through a barbed-wire fence the children exchange kisses and gifts in an emotional meeting that embodies a potent combination of history, friendship and national longing. "The ability to break these barriers gives these young people the chance to exchange ideas and build relationships," said Masri, noting that over time these interactions have the potential to develop into a stronger force of resistance against Israel than the one that already exists. Yet, as political as the underlying message of the movie is, Masri's real strength comes in her ability to demonstrate the teen-agers' boundless humanity. Despite the poverty and the fear that mark these children's lives, they also manage to laugh, dream and hope. As the film airs on television and in theaters around the world, including in Israel, Masri hopes her message about Palestinian humanity will cause people to act on behalf of the children whose lives are on the line every day. Masri said that while she believes the Israelis and Palestinians would one day find a solution to their conflict she is concerned about the number of people who might die in the interim. "The question is how many thousands of people will die before we reach the conclusion that both people need peace with justice?" she said. Jennifer Friedlin is a freelance writer based in New York.