

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Ahed's Knee was written with a sense of urgency – a feeling that urged me to write, to write it all down, to write fast, right through to the end. It was a feeling that had more control over me than I over it. The film came about from something that happened in June 2018.

I got a call from a woman who introduced herself as the deputy director of Israel's Libraries, at the Ministry of Culture – she invited me to present my film *The Kindergarten Teacher* to the Library of Sapir, a tiny, remote village in the region of Arava, at the other end of Israel. There's a wide desert, few people living there, lots of sand – it's a place I'd never been before.

Over the phone, she sounded unexpectedly young for her position, and very kind. As she tried to answer my questions, she told me how her passion for literature – a passion she developed as a young girl, without any support from her relatives that didn't like reading – led her to run the local library down the street, and later to hold a position at the Ministry of Culture. She said that over the two previous years libraries had become key cultural centers in villages where you couldn't find cinemas or theaters. So, the whole cultural, artistic activity was handled by the people in charge of libraries within the ministry of Culture, in other words by herself.

Just before we hung up, she mentioned a form I had to fill out and sign so that my presentation of the film could be greenlit. In addition to some technical info I was supposed to include in the form, I was expected to pick out of a list of topics that of my presentation – and promise to discuss that topic with the audience, and no other.

That seemed fishy to me. Especially these days when free speech in Israel has turned into a gloomy winter sun, growing dark and dying. And the leader of that anti-free speech campaign happens to be the minister of Culture herself.

I said to the Libraries' deputy director, "I assume that the list of topics complies with the topics allowed by the government, and that those people have trouble accepting other people's opinions. And that they silence whoever disagrees with them".

After a short silence, she said to my surprise, "I'm not proud of what I do in this job. For the past two years, they've tried to control everything. They can't stand whoever disagrees with them". She immediately begged me to sign the form anyway and to still come to the desert place to present my film to the people in this remote village.

After we hung up, I called a lady friend of mine who works as a reporter for the only high-brow, independent paper left in Israel. She was also surprised by such a straightforward confession coming from a key civil servant, and she asked me if I could record her unbeknownst to her. I thought it was impossible ethically speaking. I pictured how devastating it would inevitably be for the young woman I'd been talking with, once the recording was out in the open. In the best-case scenario, she'd be dismissed from the Ministry of Culture and she'd no longer be eligible to work as a civil servant.

I went down south to Arava. The desert all around me was boundless and empty. What few people I came across were Israelis of a kind I wasn't familiar with. I signed the form in question. When I met with the audience, after the screening of the film, I more or less spoke as I usually did. Maybe unconsciously I was getting more careful.

A few months later, the minister of Culture initiated the law of loyalty to culture, forbidding the funding of any artwork deemed unfaithful to the government. This law could be passed at any time. The relative democracy that still prevailed is gradually shrinking. We're experiencing the end of a certain Israeli mindset – true or false – that I grew up in. This definitely marks the end of Israel as I've known it.

It could be the inevitable fate of a country ever at war – the fate of a country where everyone, including myself, has experienced war, took part in it, in violence. I don't have a clue. I'm neither a historian, nor a sociologist. Oddly enough, artistic free speech has become the key symbol of this collapse.

In the script I wrote, the film director goes down a road I couldn't possibly take. He's willing to sacrifice the Libraries' deputy director to slow down the fast-moving fascist tank. Is he a hero? Or a villain? Is he bringing a disaster on a noble, young woman? On a much more honest, brave woman than he is? Or is he dealing with a cowardly woman, doing a rogue state's dirty work? In those dark days, isn't the divide between victims and offenders, the strong and the weak, those

higher up and those below, fading? Borders are blurred, we're all together on the same sinking ship.

Y., the director, is harsh, ruthless, arrogant, hostile, furious. Does his rage make sense politically? Or is it only about cruelty? Or is he only just terribly sad as he faces both the death of his mother – which he cannot avoid – and that of his country, which he may still keep from going under. But deep down he knows – he's not crazy and noble enough to pull it off.

Words in this film are a texture, a tune. They're a part and parcel of that world, just like the desert, the sun, loneliness, the feeling of void. They are significant, not only because of their meaning, but also because they're spoken. Words are like music growing louder and louder. What drives them forward is Y.'s despair, helplessness and sadness that make him go constantly forward without ever stopping – go ever faster and be ever louder. However, by the end of this crescendo, there's no room for redemption. Y.'s burning manifestos and frenzied speeches make sense and help keep him from falling down and crying.

DIRECTOR Q&A

Why did you pick the title *Ahed's Knee*?

It refers to Ahed Tamini, a Palestinian protesting student. She lives in a small village of the West Bank with her family. She was born and grew up under Israeli occupation. When a group of soldiers tried to raid her house, she slapped one of them, got arrested and was put in jail for nine months. It happened in 2018, she was 16. Her story caused quite a stir in Israel and in the Arab world. For the Palestinians, she became a heroine, for the Israelis, a terrorist. An Israeli Knesset member claimed on Twitter she should get shot in the kneecap to get her crippled. I was intent on opening the film with this – a knee which is a thing that has been hardly shown in films. It may not be the most beautiful body part, but it's a true combination of strength and fragility. I also liked the reference to Eric Rohmer's *Claire's Knee*. As I changed the name of Claire, I gave the film a specific time period – Ahed Tamini's. *Ahed's Knee* takes place in a different world from Claire's – in today's world. These days, they want to break Ahed's knees all over the world, so you need to go wherever needed and film them and enhance them.

Although we don't get to see her, the hero's mother plays a very important part.

My mother Era Lapid was a film editor. She's edited all of my films, including my feature films, my shorts, my medium-length films, except for *Ahed's Knee*. She passed from lung cancer after cutting *Synonyms*. As a child, I was very close to my mother. When I grew up, we worked so often together that our relationship developed into something else. I hired her to edit each new project. It's said you don't choose your parents, but I did.

Her cancer was diagnosed just as *Synonyms* began production. Her cancer was already at a late stage, it couldn't be treated, there was no hope. My mother and I spent a lot of time in the cutting room and in hospitals. Halfway through the editing process, I left for a few days to present *The Kindergarten Teacher* in Arava. I'd send her video messages from the desert. This was in April 2018. My mother passed in early June. From mid-July to early August, I wrote

Ahed's Knee. The writing took me about two weeks. *Synonyms'* writing had taken me over a year.

I'm stating the facts as for me it's the easiest way of speaking of the mother in the film, and maybe it's the most accurate way, too. *Ahed's Knee* existed somehow before I wrote it. It just needed to be told. I have trouble saying what the mother stands for in the film. I feel like she is like my mother was – a mother very close to the main character, her agonizing ideological, creative partner, in the film, she's the co-screenwriter (my father, who is a writer, co-wrote *Synonyms* with me). And Y.'s messages to her may be her only moments of tenderness.

How much is Arava a character in its own right?

We're all familiar with the cliché of the city-dweller getting to the country and finding out about how therapeutic nature can be for the soul. At the beginning, the main character, Y., hates everything he sees. He's at odds with all that surrounds him – the people, the landscapes, etc. And he seems insensitive most of the time when he talks about it all. The only moments when he seems affected are when he means to convey what he experiences and sees to his mother. In those moments he behaves differently. He films the miracle of being in the middle of the desert with gentleness, with kindness, with wonder, with curiosity. When this stops, he turns blind and hostile again. He remembers the old say, "In the end, it's the geography that wins." My mother used to say this as she meant that Israel had no future and she tried to encourage my brother and I to leave the country, although she never considered doing it herself.

What your hero has to say about Israel is very strong and abusive – he even speaks of abjection. Why did you go for such radical words?

Israeli filmmakers have an ambivalent attitude toward our country, as a result of the saying, "We have a complex situation at home." This feeling of complexity, that I mentioned myself, has appeared to me over time as a kind of sluggishness, as an artistic, political cliché. It's a love and hate relationship with the country. We all get hooked on this. The thing is, whatever the film you want to make about Israel, the country will always be crazier and more extreme.

I meant to give myself over to the radical feelings about my country through words. I meant to draw a black square like the painter Mark Rothko. The storm of insults are spoken by a vulnerable face, by a machine-gun-shaped mouth, at a pace that necessarily turns the speech into a shrill cry, the words into a stutter, and the rhetorical victory into a collapse (at the end, my hero literally falls to his knees). It all makes for ambivalence, but it's not the clichéd "reality is always complex" or "there's always pros and cons". It's the ambivalence of the world of colors, of textures, of sounds that faces words and arguments, the ambivalence of existence facing thoughts, or the screenplay facing a camera.

How necessary did you think it was to show the hero's military past?

The flashback narrative about the military serves at the beginning as a strategy on the part of Y. He uses it as an analogy to tell the young civil servant about how dangerous it can be to get involved, and he deliberately coaxes her into talking openly about the system of oppression she's a part of. But he's obviously overwhelmed by his own words. Words pour out of his mouth just as he keeps saying, "I'll get straight to the point." Every time, he explains things in detail, he

tells at great length what could be said in a few words because deep down he wants to be understood, to explain what drives him, why he got to that point. As a filmmaker, I approach things in the same way in all my films – I focus on the feeling that there's always something missing that would make things clearer. It's impossible not to go for this detail, not to express it, and this detail leads you to the next. I'm obsessed with the idea of being always more accurate.

What would you say if you were to sum up the storyline?

The film's based on a simple, one-dimensional narrative – a man gets to an unknown land and upsets everything, including himself. It's almost the classic narrative of the western genre. *Ahed's Knee* is about a man who pushes beyond his own limits over the course of one day. He thinks himself as a monster or a superman, a devil or a prophet. But in the end, maybe he's neither one or the other – just someone experiencing a personal crisis in a society experiencing a collective crisis.

There's another artistic trope of yours – the sometimes very loud beat of the voice during the frantic monologues which you called the shrill cry. How do you pull off such specific scansion?

When I directed the actor during the scene where he gets into a verbal trance, I wanted him to reach a unique speech pattern. It was so key for me that I shot the scene lying down on the sand – as I remained off-camera, I'd press the actor's foot and shoe with my hand to give him the cue, to let him know when he should stress certain words, just as a suggestion, naturally. I wanted this beat to sink into the minds of those listening to the speech. I feel like it's the beat that subverts words, turns them from simple meaningful things into all kinds of other things, into sounds probably, into drumbeats, into hammer beats, into vibrations (therefore into non-words, too). That's eventually what brings down the whole monologue to a cry, to a confession of despair, of weakness (although delivering a radical, articulate speech is a triumphant response), to a prayer. It's a bit like some rap songs – a great source of inspiration for my films – where words, almost naked without being accompanied by musical instruments, are both all-powerful and nearly unintelligible.

During this memorable scene, is the hero a victim of his own intensity?

He definitely is! He says it all. He speaks just as much to Yahalom by his side as to the desert itself. And naturally, saying it all cannot happen without the power of the breath. Speaking out loud is also about exposing yourself to danger. Actually, danger is everywhere in the film. As he's frantic and about to burst, the main character spreads emotions, sensations, that I think are about movement. It's the synonym for hope. In my films, whether we're talking about *Policeman*, *The Kindergarten Teacher* or *Synonyms*, you have the notion of incredibly strong superheroes that are also, paradoxically enough, incredibly weak because they won't fit into society. *Ahed's Knee* bends this idea. The hero cannot turn down the young female civil servant, he cannot not take his kid sister's call – "*be kind*". He cannot not feel her hand on his cheek. He's a human being before anything else, both through his interest in other people and his obnoxious attitude at some points during the movie.

What's so special about *Ahed's Knee* is that there is no divide between the male and female genders. The filmmaker could be a woman and the young woman civil servant could be a man. Is the emancipation from gender-based norms about showing that what's most important is belonging to the human race?

Absolutely. In *Synonyms* and *Policeman*, the heroes' bodies were all about manliness. *Ahed's Knee* is not about manliness – it's an outdated notion in my opinion. Now I believe that the only thing that matters and exists to portray the main character is his eyes. However, I like filming the human body in its entirety, and in this film, I wanted to show body parts you rarely see like feet or toes. But contrary to my previous movies where I idealized the human body, in this project I film the body of a "bodiless" human being to some extent. He drags his body along, he puts up with it more than he inhabits it, it's something close to the void, to nothingness. His exposed presence, glued to the camera, stresses his absence.

Is the body near the void but trying to fight?

It is. My character's body fights a lot – it fights ideas, others, even my story. In my previous films, there was always some kind of dichotomy between the body and the words – like a two-headed hero, a hero with two voices – the body sings its song and the mind claims something else. With *Ahed's Knee*, even when the hero is dancing, he stays motionless. His dance routine is just as confined to his moves as his mindset is. This speaks to his lack of faith in the ability to spread and pass on something to others. While *Synonyms* was about movement, constant mobility, it's the other way around with this film. *Ahed's Knee* is about immobility, almost about the impossibility of moving. The only movement goes from the outside to the inside, from the skin to the guts.

You shot the other characters' bodies differently, including Yahalom's. Why?

Unlike the hero, Yahalom "owns" a body. She's a civil servant serving evil. It's a known fact that fascist regimes are based on a lot of Yahaloms, on friendly civil servants that carry out their duties unflinchingly. At the same time, nothing's black and white because when she's on screen, you can feel her humanity, too. The beat of a sentence, a graceful smile, the color of a dress... This character conjured up great ambivalence, what she stands for and what she is, like when she's lying down on a couch and smiling – she's alive, you can't deny that. It's not a matter of opinion at that point, but of the truth of the moment. We all want her to be in the frame, to color all that surrounds her. The character of her kid sister is in the same vein – she's a kind of fairy.

Can you talk about the two main actors?

Avshalom Pollak is a choreographer. He hails from a great family of actors, and he became very popular thanks to a TV show when he was a young actor in a role that became almost iconic in Israel. Then he chose to quit, and he's been focusing on his dance company for the past twenty years. To me, Avshalom perfectly embodied two main values of the Y. character, both in his essence and existence. One is that he's an artist before anything else – I looked for a "watchful" actor, one that could consider directing a film. The other thing about him is his hostility, his contradiction. All you need is to put him in Arava and you create an immediate contrast. It's not just about the stranger, it's about the opponent. He carries a sense of belonging and aloofness in him, like a family member that always remains distant.

With my casting director, we realized that even though there are good Israeli actors in this age group, very few of them could have explored Y.'s truth thoroughly. It's no accident if we picked an actor who'd given up on acting. For him, it was a dramatic decision to return to a movie set, a place he left more than twenty years ago. But once it was mutually agreed on, it was a very natural process. More than with my previous films, I felt with Avshalom that I didn't have to explain much – he understands everything. Directing him to portray Y. was a bit like directing Avshalom in his own life. Everything about Y. was obvious to him. He has the same nuances as Y., the same gestures, he sings the same song. He didn't need any instructions.

On the other hand, Nur Fibak is a talented, ambitious young actress, making her debut in a feature film. This reversed dynamic between the two protagonists already spoke to the film's characters somehow.

Music is very impactful in your films. What do the dance routines and the pop, uplifting songs bring to this film?

I place musical pieces throughout my films that convey joy, rage, sexual tension... They help me feel like I'm building a monument! A big monument in the middle of a square! It's a very primitive, primal, frontal feeling building up in me and I cannot break away from it. It makes me happy – I think of a song and I smile. It's a matter of feeling that anything's possible – the righteous are the sinners, and the sinners are the righteous, good and evil get tangled up. To achieve this, I use the most popular, the most immediate, the most instinctive music. Going for popular music also has to do I think with the feeling that my movies, and this one more than others, may be regarded as odd or peculiar visually (even though my belief is that the oddity may make an artwork more personal and therefore more moving) but they deal with each human being and so are intended for all humans. In this sense, the popular music, the songs we all know, serve as a secret, universal language made up of associations and sensations for humans to communicate.

Your films are also about stories building through visual and sound details. In *Ahed'd Knee*, the rotten peppers, the homemade pastries, the description of the local wildlife, the number of people living in the desert, etc. all contribute to making up a practical/poetic inventory.

This has to do with the fact that we live in a "Googled" world. I look up "Arava" and I get a list of very different precisions. These details are a part and parcel of our world. We see the world through them. It also has to do with how simple the narrative and the hero's journey are. He comes. He's there. It's everyday life. He constantly refers to concrete moments, concrete things of everyday life.

Just as in real life, we feel like we can never know what will happen next in your film. Why's that?

I try to deal with each moment like a first act. Everything's untouched, everything remains to be discovered, and everything's final. Because on the surface the hero starts out believing he's untouchable. He won't speak to anyone. He's totally self-sufficient. He gets to this place with preconceived ideas about the people there. Nothing seems to change his mind and at the same

time he desperately needs others. He's not aware of it at all. He doesn't understand the notion that cuts through the whole film – "be kind."

How much is *Ahed's Knee* a film about kindness?

Y. goes off to war to save his country from becoming ugly. He goes off to war to save his mother from dying. He fights everybody, collides with humans and the landscape, people and sand. In his opinion, he's a prophet, he's a hater and he's abusive since he tells the crowd the truth they won't face. He belongs to nothing, he's always outside, aloof. He's the devil and the victim, and the artist watching all together. This request, the most basic of all, "be kind", makes Y. human again. But in doing so, he also admits to losing both battles – that of the death of democracy, and that of his mother's death. So, being kind is about redeeming himself, but it's also about his limits and his defeat.

How did you direct the film?

I'm very much involved in the shooting script process. It gives me pure joy. I believe that in heaven people sit down under a tree and write shooting scripts! For each shot, I write down a sentence that may conjure up feelings, or an intellectual thought. It comes with the technical, cold description of the shot, and sometimes even substitutes for it. When things get hectic on the set, these words help me remember the most crucial – and most easily overlooked – question: "why" do we have this moment, this movement? I then try to involve every participant in the shot, cast and crew members alike. I really trust them, I believe that if the boom operator feels and understands the initial words, his involvement will be passed on to his hand, to his boom etc. But there's nothing mystic about this, I'm not a mystic.

Is this purely instinctive?

Ahed's Knee is really about the instinctive perception of things, the subjectivity of the moment. There was no other way to film it than to fanatically follow the subjectivity of the moment – otherwise, it'd have been a lie, an altogether different film. I map out the shooting script, I think it over, and in the end, the day before each shooting day, after everything was debated countless times, I change a lot of things, because of the subjectivity of the moment, so that the filmmaking process is a celebration. I want film to be a celebration. It has to be beautiful. I can't settle for just developing a believable statement – it needs to be vibrant. All the time. Throughout the film. I want beauty to be vibrant, right through its bluntness.

The film's statement is radical, both ideologically and visually. How challenging was it to put it together in today's Israel?

What is most important about the film to me was the feeling of urgency. I knew from the outset that it'd be difficult and risky to put the film together in Israel. In a political climate of anxiety and of being exposed to censorship, submitting such a script to reading committees could have made things complicated for the film to get made. French producer Judith Lou Lévy understood that we had to move fast, straight ahead, without taking safety steps. We'd set ourselves a deadline for the shoot, even if we hadn't found all the funding by then. We shot the film in 18 days, in December 2019, although we had the shortest days of the year. Every morning, I felt

like I was rushing forward and hurrying up to do the scenes. We didn't have time to look around, take security measures and think of another option if the first one didn't work out.

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY

Nadav Lapid was born in Tel Aviv, Israel in 1975. He has directed three feature films, *Policeman* (Special Jury Prize at Locarno IFF in 2011), *The Kindergarten Teacher* (Selected Cannes' Critics week 2014, and which got a US remake in 2018), and *Synonyms* (Golden Bear and Fipresci award at the 2019 Berlinale). All his films are marked by stark oppositions — between law and order, poetry and materialism — and the combustible reaction when these two opposing sides collide. They have won dozens of film prizes internationally. A graduate from the University of Tel Aviv in philosophy and from Israel's prestigious Sam Spiegel Film & Television School, Lapid has emerged in just a few years as one of the most promising newcomers in international art cinema. He also published a collection of short stories, *Keep on Dancing*, translated in several languages. His latest feature film, *Ahed's Knee*, won the Jury Prize at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival.

DIRECTOR FILMOGRAPHY

AHED'S KNEE, feature film, 2021.
Cannes Festival, Winner: Jury Prize

THE STAR, short film, 2021.
Cannes Festival, Official Selection

SYNONYMS, feature film, 2019.
Berlin Film Festival, Winner: Golden Bear

FROM THE DIARY OF A WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHER, medium-length film, 2016.
Cannes Film Festival, Critics' Week

WHY?, short film, 2015.

THE KINDERGARTEN TEACHER, feature film, 2014.
Cannes Film Festival, Critics' Week

AMMUNITION HILL, short film, 2014.

POLICEMAN, feature film, 2011.
Locarno Film Festival, Winner: Jury Prize

ÉMILE'S GIRLFRIEND, medium-length film, 2007.

KVISH, short film, 2005.

PROTECT GVUL, short film, 2004.

CAST

AVSHALOM POLLAK - Y.

NUR FIBAK - Yahalom

YORAM HONIG - The driver-beekeeper

LIDOR EDERI - Narkis

YONATHAN KUGLER - Young Y

YEHONATHAN VILOZNI - The sergeant

NAAMA PREIS - The casting director