

# Ahed's Knee

Produced by Judith Lou Lévy; written and directed by Nadav Lapid; cinematography by Shai Goldman; production design by Pascale Consigny; editing by Nili Feller; sound by Aviv Aldema, Marina Kertesz, and Bruno Mercere; starring Avshalom Pollak, Nur Fibak, Yoram Honig, Lidor Ederi, Yonathan Kugler, Yehonathan Vilozni, and Naama Preis. Color, 109 min., Hebrew dialogue with English subtitles. A Kino Lorber release, [www.kinolorber.com](http://www.kinolorber.com).

In the opening credits of *Ahed's Knee*, the frenetic new feature from Israeli director Nadav Lapid, the logo of Israel's Ministry of Culture flashes across the screen. Such a production credit would ordinarily receive little notice from even the most attentive viewer, but the relationship between the arts and the state is the central preoccupation of Lapid's film. Indeed, the ministry in question is a character in the film—both the faceless, censorious bureaucrats and the radiant visage of Yahalom (Nur Fibak), a young female up-and-comer in the regional libraries division.

It is Yahalom, an undoubtedly well-meaning if insubstantial functionary, who will be forced to sustain to the brink of suicidal ideation the primal fury of the film's central character, Y. (we never learn his full name), a film director portrayed by Avshalom Pollak, a versatile Israeli actor hitherto unknown to English-speaking audiences. Yahalom has invited Y. to a depopulated town in southern Israel to present one of his works and answer audience questions. We never quite get an idea of what this film is about, but *Ahed's Knee* opens with the casting for Y.'s next project, which tells us more than enough about the reception he might expect from the salt-of-the-earth residents of Sapir. He is in the middle of casting for a film about Ahed Tamimi, a young Palestinian teenager in the occupied territories who made international headlines after hitting an Israeli soldier and subsequently being sentenced to eight months in prison. The film gets its title from a tweet sent by Bezalel Smotrich, a far-right member of Israel's parliament, who said that Tamimi "should have gotten a bullet, at least in the kneecap." *Ahed's Knee* follows the director's confrontation with Yahalom's request that he check off topics on a prepared list that he will address, none of which are remotely controversial or pose the slightest possibility of puncturing the cosseted psyche of the patriotic audience. Needless to say, topics not listed are not tolerated.

It will come as little surprise to those acquainted with Lapid's oeuvre over the last decade that his work is harshly critical of Israeli politics and the prevailing attitudes in society. He first garnered international attention with *Policeman* in 2011, a split-



Filmmaker Y. (Avshalom Pollak) takes a walk before his Q&A session in *Ahed's Knee*.

narrative feature following an elite unit in Israel's national police plotting a cover-up of the killing of an Arab family some years before (the plan: to have a terminal cancer-stricken member of the team, who is unlikely to be prosecuted, take full responsibility for the shooting); and a group of disaffected bourgeois Israeli youth looking to spark a socialist revolution with the kidnapping of three billionaire tycoons.

That second half of *Policeman* eerily presaged large-scale social justice protests in Israel in 2011. Unlike Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967), another daring act of cinematic clairvoyance, Lapid is less interested in the specific ideological undercurrents and dynamics of his group of radical twenty-somethings. Rather, he trains his focus on the futility of the struggle. One striking scene features the lone woman in the cell calling out to the assembling SWAT team via a megaphone that they, too, are oppressed members of the subaltern class. This sentiment is not just ignored but also actively mocked by the officers, before finally being squelched by the sound of gunfire and zip ties. On Tel Aviv's Rothschild Boulevard, the social justice protests also ultimately fizzled out, their avant-garde potential subsumed by a

political system designed to reward tribalism and stifle reform.

With his third feature, *Synonyms* (2019), Lapid brought the political element of his films even closer to the surface (a move a less forgiving critic might describe as "didactic"). It was also the start of his ongoing autobiographical phase. In this film, Yoav, a barely shrouded stand-in for the globally celebrated Lapid, has fled Israel for France, where he desperately tries—and invariably fails—to relieve the burden of Israeliness with the analeptic of cosmopolitanism represented by Paris, where Lapid once studied. Unlike the young revolutionaries in *Policeman*, Yoav harbors no faint hope of changing the country he deems "nasty, obscene, ignorant, idiotic, sordid, fetid, crude, abominable, odious, lamentable, repugnant, detestable, mean-spirited, mean-hearted." A similar thesaurus-like tirade is delivered by the main character in Lapid's most recent film, suggesting a profound fascination with this rebarbative image, one familiar to anyone who has listened to Israeli conservatives complain about their country's prominent artists and intellectuals who have stubbornly clung to their hopes for peace with the Palestinians, while most of the country's Jewish population has migrated rightward. In the end, flight proves as ineffectual as revolution. And after those fail, perhaps all that remains is impotent rage.

*Ahed's Knee* is very much a product of the clash between "old" and "new" Israel, and in particular the tumultuous tenure of former Culture Minister Miri Regev. Regev is a longtime right-wing Likud politician who often exploits the fault lines separating Ashkenazim, European Jews who made up the founding political and cultural elite of the state, and Mizrahim, Jews from Arab and Islamic countries who were often discriminated against and unjustly looked down upon following their arrival in Israel. Because the Ashkenazim were associated with the dominant Mapai (today's Labor Party), the right-wing opposition led by Menachem Begin was able to successfully parlay the resentments of Mizrahim into a



Y. (Avshalom Pollak) is shocked at the censorious government document librarian Yahalom (Nur Fibak) has asked him to sign before his postscreening discussion in *Ahed's Knee*.



**Fearing that the provocations of the guest filmmaker have destroyed her local reputation and government job, Yahalom (Nur Fibak) is driven to desperate straits in *Ahed's Knee*.**

stunning election victory in 1977. This was not only the start of a period of conservative hegemony in Israeli politics, but also an extant mythology on the Israeli left that “their” ethical and progressive country was stolen from them in that dark year.

The daughter of Moroccan and Spanish immigrants, Regev was appointed Minister of Culture and Sport after Likud won a snap election in 2015. She soon got to work scoring political points in clashing with the “old elites” of culture, a predominantly left leaning and Ashkenazi group. This campaign perhaps reached its most bizarre point when Regev celebrated the Academy Awards’ omission of *Foxtrot* (2017), an Israeli film that received plaudits at Venice, Toronto, and Telluride, from its list of nominees for Best Foreign Language Film. While Regev’s jingoistic objections most likely had little impact on the Academy’s decision, Israeli artists would soon face a much more serious threat from her office in the “Loyalty in Culture” bill. Although it never passed, and is unlikely to in the near future, the bill—which would have allowed the government to withhold public funds from cultural institutions for blatantly political reasons, including “desecrat[ing] state symbols”—speaks to a certain cultural populism that remains salient and impelled Lapid to action. *Ahed’s Knee* serves as both political critique and warning: the relative openness which enabled artists like Lapid to rise is under threat. The days in which a government logo may appear before a film such as the one you’re watching are numbered. Lurking throughout the film is a presentiment that many Jewish Israelis would welcome this new, intellectually impoverished country.

But while Lapid’s alter egos often embody the self-abnegating caricature of Israeli leftists presented by their nationalist opponents, he typically returns to a sober grappling with the left’s culpability in the baleful perpetuation of a half-century of occupation and increasing domestic illiberalism. In contrast to some of the cultural heroes of Liberal Zionism, especially the late novelist Amos Oz, Lapid has no patience for golden age fantasies of Israel before its right-wing turn. It was, after

all, governments under the socialist Mapai that carried out the Nakba and kept Arab citizens of Israel under military rule until 1966; the Labor Party, and famed peacenik Shimon Peres in particular, that turned the other way as settlers began colonizing the West Bank; and the mainstream center-left governments that, in the early years of the state, often plotted to censor and suppress critical voices in the arts.

In *Ahed’s Knee*, this struggle assumes metaphorical realization in a story Y. slowly reveals to Yahalom about his time in the army (all Israeli citizens, except for Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews, are obligated to perform national service when they reach adulthood). Without expending too much text on a summary, it is essentially an account of a hazing of two new recruits by an “asshole sergeant” and the rest of the unit based near Israel’s border with Syria. Y. first strongly implies that he was one of the two victims, albeit the one who is on to the trick and not the other, who is scared witless. Yahalom tries to insist that he must have been the scared soldier, after which Y. divulges the truth: he was, in fact, the asshole sergeant in the story. In the final minutes of the film that proceed from this moment, it is clear that this essential character trait has not changed, even if the cause served is now a righteous one.

Aesthetically, *Ahed’s Knee* shares some similarities with *Policeman*, *Synonyms*, and *The Kindergarten Teacher* (2014), in its bold choreography and chaotic camera movements around Y. But it is otherwise almost entirely new for a Lapid feature (he is also the director of several shorts, which I have not yet had the opportunity to watch). One can rest assured knowing Netflix will not scoop up a remake of *Ahed’s Knee* starring Maggie Gyllenhaal and set in Staten Island. It doggedly resists universalism and cannot even pass for conventional. Lacking prior knowledge of the politics and archetypes with which the director engages, the film can feel almost experimental and even inscrutable. Lapid’s obsession with seemingly inexplicable dance sequences contributes to this effect, though in *Ahed’s Knee* they serve a more coherent thematic

purpose in garishly illustrating the carefree attitude of the average Israeli Jew in the face of the injustices committed by the state. The film also depicts two sexually charged dance scenes involving Israeli soldiers, both male and female, with deafening pop music in the background. Even the symbols of war and state sanctioned violence, they seem to suggest, have become mere fetish items in a society now largely protected from the consequences of its government’s actions.

In a brief Q&A over Zoom following the film’s American premiere at the New York Film Festival on September 27, 2021, Lapid confessed to having written the script in fewer than three weeks. It is a visceral and angry work, unafraid to brandish that most alienating yet internally pleasing of emotions—contempt. He was shockingly candid about the film’s origins in a personal encounter with a Culture Minister apparatchik in 2018, the same year in which Ahed Tamimi was arrested and the “Loyalty in Culture” bill was introduced. In the press notes distributed by Kino Lorber, the director is perhaps too transparent about this backstory, including a reference to his mother, a film editor who worked on all his films except for this one (she passed away of lung cancer, from which Y.’s mother is also dying). It provides valuable and interesting context, and a critic should certainly not discourage such vulnerability from male directors, but *Ahed’s Knee* would contribute little without its social and political commentary about the current state of Israel.

I have been careful throughout this review to refer to Israeli Jews, and not simply Israelis, when describing Lapid’s characters, audience, and objects of derision. If the divide between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim remains wide, that between Jews as a whole and the country’s Palestinian citizens, not to mention their compatriots living under military occupation, is much more so. Besides the archival footage of Tamimi and her family members, Palestinians remain unseen and spoken for by Israeli Jews in *Ahed’s Knee*. Lapid seems aware of this—in one comic scene he depicts a Jewish actress a bit too eager to be cast as Tamimi in Y.’s new film—but no amount of righteous rage on behalf of the Palestinians will likely mollify growing international calls for a cultural boycott of Israel including, presumably, its film industry. Besides, Lapid has clearly forsworn the possibility of escape. All of his works have a profoundly morose quality, which has now arguably reached its apotheosis. Can one descend any further into anger and despair than Y. without collapsing from stress and exhaustion? There may be nowhere else from here to go but up. The choice to represent Yahalom as attractive and kind, ambivalent when not saddened about enforcing the ministry’s edicts, perhaps leaves the proverbial door slightly ajar for a redemptive future for Israel.—Abe Silberstein