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# Inelegant Battle

*Elisheva Goldberg*

## **Beaufort**

A Film by Joseph Cedar

*Keshet Broadcasting, 2008, 125 minutes.*

**A**s I left the theater, a thought sizzled in my brain: the movie I had just seen represents a revolution in the way Zionists think about war.

*Beaufort* is, without a doubt, a movie for Israeli conversation. It is a film conceived, directed, and designed with an eye towards forcing Israelis to critically judge themselves and their government. The political dimension of this movie is only slightly overstated. Deaths of characters are not uncommon, and are often a bit too well foreshadowed and predictable. But the sharp sting of death and the throbbing ache of loss take their toll.

As the film begins, the first feeling is of abandonment, destitution. The concrete depiction of the Beaufort base in southern Lebanon creeps into the audience's consciousness in all its bland and tasteless glory. As the cameras pan the muddled sky, the blue-green hills, and the smoky concrete of the fortress, the audience digests the silence. The only sound is of an Israeli flag as it flaps loudly in the wind, soon joined by the sound of a helicopter landing. One soldier sits alone. Abruptly, a missile hits the fort, and there are more soldiers, running. All the chief themes of the film are present in this first scene. The soldiers wishing that they could abandon Beaufort, the Israeli flag struggling to find its proper place. The cloudy atmosphere and the soft, almost indiscernible music, represent an amorphous enemy and the hazy rationale behind the Second Lebanon War.

*Beaufort* is based on the novel *If There Is A Garden of Eden* by Ron Leshe. Joseph Cedar, who directed the film, took Leshe's ideas, ideas that have been simmering in the murky Israeli consciousness for years, and thrust

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them resolutely out of shadow and into light. He commented on the film:

There is an abrupt, definitive moment in every war when the mission, or purpose, for which soldiers gave their lives until that moment, ceases to exist. With Beaufort...it comes with an unforgettable, adrenaline-saturated moment, but also an image that crystallizes the inconceivable waste of human life.

It is this notion of wasted life that seems to have arrested Israelis' attention.

The film, set in the year 2000, tells the story a group of sweet and swarthy Israeli soldiers stationed at the Israeli base Beaufort in southern Lebanon. The film wastes no time in getting to its point. The third scene contains a startlingly witty conversation about the reason for holding the fort. Ziv, a special-unit bomb-defusing specialist, gets lost in the catacombs of Beaufort and ends up at a guard post at the far edge of the fort. He asks the guard where he is, to which the guard replies, with wonderful comedic timing, "Far, far. You can only get here by mistake...I wanted to come here - that was the mistake." Ziv asks the guard what he does at Beaufort, and he responds, "I guard the mountain - so it doesn't escape." It is only later that we hear Ziv's father's story. His father had been one of the soldiers who captured the fort in the First Lebanon War. Ziv retorts that "We don't need this mountain," and that the Army had initially taken Beaufort by accident during the First Lebanon War when the order to stop the bloody charge up the mountain had not been properly conveyed. The guard responds, "I bet your kids will be here." No one knows how the wrong order was given, or why it was not retracted. No one knows why soldiers remain in Beaufort. No one knows when they will be able to go home.

Ziv's death comes soon thereafter, and is paradigmatic of the movie. It is slow, gray, and tragic. He had been attempting to dismantle a land mine set by Hezbollah, the Lebanese terrorist group, and the bomb goes off as he bends down to diffuse it. Almost immediately after Ziv's death, the commanding officer of Beaufort, Liraz, is given an order to evacuate and destroy the fort,

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raising the question that follows the audience like a specter through the rest of the movie: did Ziv die in vain?

As the focus of the plot shifts to the execution of the order to destroy Beaufort, the audience gets some time to fully take in the scenery, which is, for the most part, foggy. Dark frosty colors camouflage the fort. Shades of grey and olive green color the soldiers' quarters. There is very little sunlight. There is no soundtrack, and the silence seems to bring with it all the questions of the movie. The lack of color and sound forces the viewer's focus onto the emotional development of the soldiers. There are no distractions from the morbidly desolate, dismal atmosphere of war and the honest side of valor.

Even in the livelier scenes, there is a depressing, damp drama to the movie. The progress of the characters is highlighted by the few moments of television they are allowed to watch. They watch Ziv's father, Amos, being interviewed after Ziv's death on an Israeli opinion channel. His father is a deeply devoted parent. In the interview, he declares that the mark of a good parent is one who educates his child not to run into the street when there are cars coming, to instill fear. He says that he feels he is a failed parent – he allowed his child to become a bomb-squad specialist, the equivalent to telling him it was okay to run into a street full of traffic. He says, "I didn't raise them to understand how important their lives are. I feel I have abandoned my child."

Liraz, the commanding officer and main character of *Beaufort*, can't be more than 24 years old. He seems to have an obsession with Beaufort and protecting the fort. Liraz is smart, dedicated and strong, and willing to live the life of a workhorse. When he was given the order to send all "non-essentials" down from the fort in order to begin its deconstruction he protests, "Everything is essential!"

But the message becomes clear: everything is not essential – Beaufort itself is not essential. It is only when meaningless death strikes the cursed fort again and again that Liraz realizes how impossible his war is to fight. 19 year-old Zitlawi is the second soldier to die. He's "that guy" everyone loves, the joker

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in the back of the classroom, always good for a pat on the back and a wisecrack. When a barrage of angry missiles strikes Beaufort, his post is the first hit. As missiles rain down once again a little later in the movie, and the fort turns into a flurry of activity, Oshri, the musician of the group, struggles painfully towards cover, where Liraz stands, frozen with fear. Oshri ultimately loses an arm, and the impact that the storm of carnage has on Liraz is profound.

All these deaths share a few common threads from Liraz's perspective. First, it was impossible to even prevent these deaths, to protect his men from the barrage of missiles. Second, these deaths should not have occurred in the first place. There was no rhyme or reason, there was no altruistic sacrifice, there was just cold pain and dark blood. War is not pretty, and when it is fought without clear purpose, it is downright ugly.

After watching *Beaufort*, the banter of the vegetable hawkers in the stalls of *Machane Yehuda* (Jerusalem's famous open-air market), the small talk of posh shoe-shoppers on the ultra-secular Dizengoff street of Tel Aviv, and the white-noise chatter of old friends in the hip American-style coffee shops of Emek Refaim Street in Jerusalem will never be the same.

Despite being an Israeli film, *Beaufort* is by no means exclusively meaningful to the Israeli public. At times it is a nerve-racking, edge-of-your-seat, nail-biter of a movie, and its lessons are sharp, yet neutral enough to apply to all wars, in all times. The screening I attended at Bryn Mawr College was so overcrowded with frenzied moviegoers excitedly trying to bargain their way into the overbooked theater that it felt like an adult version of an Israeli Disneyland. Beyond the Main Line, this movie was shown all over the world, and all over the world, it exceeded viewers' expectations - it was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 2008.

Indeed, it doesn't take much to get Israelis – or the whole world - talking, and this film is anything but subtle. As a story about the inelegance of war, *Beaufort* accomplishes a great deal. It asks some unsettling questions: what does it mean in Israel to “raise your children well?” Does it mean they should

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be such vigorous Zionists that they should run to where the battle is bloodiest and volunteer for the most perilous operations? Are all battles justifiable in war? Why can't we fight our enemy face to face? And the worst question of all: might our children be dying for nothing?

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