

WALK ON WATER

2004, 103 min

ABOUT THE MOVIE

When Eyal, a tough Israeli agent, is given the assignment to kill off an aging ex-Nazi, he never suspects that this one mission could change his life. His interactions with characters such as the young Germans Axel and Pia, and Rafik, a gay Palestinian, yield powerful insights into the qualities of manliness, the fabric of personal relationships and the nature of forgiveness.

USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

CINEMA Recurring themes in multiple movies made by a director

HISTORY Holocaust retribution; Second Intifada; responsibility of the individual as a theme in history

CULTURE Culture of the Mossad (Israeli intelligence agency); Israeli attitudes towards Germans; stereotypes of Israeli men

BEFORE THE MOVIE

VOCABULARY

Mossad The Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations, referred to as the Mossad (The Institute), is responsible for Israeli intelligence collection, counter-terrorism and covert operations, a role roughly equivalent to that of the United States CIA. One unique component of its function is facilitating *aliyah* where it is forbidden. Despite being largely powerless during World War II, the Mossad succeeded in bringing to Israel approximately 100,000 Jews (many of them Holocaust survivors and Jews driven out of Arab countries) in the period from its inception in 1938 to Israel's founding in 1948. More recently, the Mossad supported Operation Moses, which brought Ethiopian Jews to Israel in 1984, and the evacuation of Jews from war-torn Sarajevo to Israel in 1992. The Mossad also engages in targeted assassinations of terrorists.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Walk on Water was extremely successful internationally, making a total of \$7 million worldwide, the most of any Israeli movie. In the United States, it grossed \$142,000 in 29 theaters in one weekend (March 2005).¹⁴

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PLOT SUMMARY

Israeli Mossad agent Eyal is given a simple task to get his mind off his wife's recent suicide: track down and kill an aging ex-Nazi officer, Alfred Himmelman. In the guise of a tour guide, Eyal befriends his target's grandson Axel, who is in Israel visiting his sister Pia, who lives on a kibbutz. Eyal accompanies Axel to the Dead Sea, wines and dines with the siblings in Tel Aviv and escorts them to a nightclub recommended to the liberal Axel by a Palestinian waiter. Axel is gay, whereas Eyal thinks of himself as a macho Israeli man. Nevertheless, when Eyal travels to Berlin, believing the old man will resurface at his son's birthday party, he is uncertain whether he can go through with his assignment.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

HOW DO THE INTIFADA AND THE HOLOCAUST EACH CONNECT TO THE QUESTION OF AN INDIVIDUAL'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR SOCIETY AS A WHOLE?

“ **Axel:** You didn't have to do that.

Eyal: Why not?

Axel: It wasn't too much money for me. I feel so bad for those shopkeepers.

Eyal: Oh, the poor Palestinian shopkeepers. *(In Hebrew):* I forgot you Germans are so sensitive. Human misery always touched your hearts.

This movie adeptly ties together two somber historical periods widely separated geographically and chronologically: the Holocaust and the Second Intifada. Both periods have had lasting traumatic repercussions. In both cases, one of these consequences was a breakdown of trust between the adversaries involved—and the animosities have been perpetuated to this day by their descendants.

Two moral questions are involved in tying together these two periods. The first is retribution versus forgiveness. As a Mossad agent, it is part of Eyal's job to assassinate known terrorists, performing retribution with each assignment. But should the terrible crimes committed with the murder of six million Jews be avenged even sixty years later? As the child of Holocaust survivors, Eyal struggles with forgiveness of a Nazi perpetrator, now aged and dying, as well as of his children and grandchildren.

Second, to what extent can individuals be held responsible for the actions of the population as a whole? The Second Intifada was an unprecedented wave of Palestinian terrorist attacks targeted at Israeli civilians. Even though Eyal has no evidence whatsoever that the Palestinian waiter Rafik is a terrorist or in any way involved with terrorism, Eyal carries over his feelings towards the Palestinian terrorists with his icy reception of Rafik, treating him with great suspicion and refusing even to listen to him.

The Intifada had an enormous effect on day-to-day life in Israel. Eyal complains about the trivialities, the fact that cell phones never work after a suicide bombing because everyone simultaneously calls to make sure friends and family are safe, and that the radio only plays sad songs befitting of the mood of national mourning. But Eyal's attitude of annoyance belies grief and anger, which surfaces at such times as when he says to his boss, "I'm stuck with this pseudo-liberal who talks about suicide bombers' motives. I almost punched him." This movie examines the historical legacy of ethnic conflicts and the rigidity and lasting effects of the social prejudices they create.

WANNSEE

Wannsee, the wealthy Berlin suburb where Axel and Pia's parents live, was the historical location of the infamous Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942. The purpose of this conference was to inform senior Nazi officials and senior governmental administrators of the plans for the "final solution to the Jewish question": systematic genocide. Though the conference was only 90 minutes in length, postwar writers viewed it as extremely significant as the moment when the leading German ministries became official accomplices in Hitler's heinous plan. The 2001 BBC/HBO film *Conspiracy* was scripted according to the exact timeframe and minutes of the original meeting. Today the villa where the conference took place is a museum.

HOLOCAUST RETRIBUTION

It is factually true that, after the war, the Mossad carried out operations to find and capture Nazi war criminals in hiding. Most famously, in 1960, a team of Mossad agents captured Adolf Eichmann, a former high-ranking Nazi SS officer responsible for mass deportations of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps in Eastern Europe. Eichmann was living under a false identity in Argentina, along with his wife and four sons, one of whom, Ricardo Francisco Eichmann, was born in Argentina in 1955. Eichmann was brought to trial at an Israeli court in Jerusalem and indicted on 15 criminal charges, including crimes against humanity, crimes against the Jewish people and membership in an outlawed organization. In his own defense, Eichmann insisted he was only "following orders." He was hanged in the only civil execution in the history of Israel, which has a general policy of not using the death penalty.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

WHAT THEMES IN THIS MOVIE RECUR IN THE DIRECTOR'S OTHER MOVIES?

Many movies directed by Eytan Fox explore the themes of homosexuality and of Israeli-Palestinian relationships.

Fox himself is openly gay. His partner of over 18 years, Gal Uchovsky, has been involved with the scriptwriting for many of Fox's films, including this movie. A writer and journalist, Uchovsky has been one of the most influential gay men in Israel as a vocal advocate for gay rights.

Fox's early films with homosexual undertones include his first short films *Time Off* (1990) and *Gotta Have Heart* (1997). In addition, Fox directed *Florentine* (1997-2000), the first Israeli TV show with gay main characters, which examined the life of young people in Tel Aviv before and after the Rabin assassination and won a TV drama award. *Yossi and Jager* (2002), Fox's breakthrough international hit, is the love story of two male officers in the IDF.

Fox credits his awareness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to his mother. When he was two, his family emigrated from New York City to Israel, where his mother became a community activist in Jerusalem's French Hill neighborhood and member of the Jerusalem Council. She died while Fox was making *Walk on Water*. After her death, Fox and his siblings visited Isawiya, an Arab village close to French Hill, and began a project to improve its living conditions in their mother's name.

In addition, Fox revealed to the French gay magazine *Têtu* that he fell in love with a Palestinian man during his military service at age 18, an experience which he describes as having a significant impact on him. (July-August 2007 issue, pg. 24). After *Walk on Water*, Fox returned to the theme of Israeli-Palestinian relations in *The Bubble* (2006), the story of a gay relationship between an Israeli and a Palestinian in Tel Aviv.

In 2006, Fox was the first to receive the Decade Award, given to a filmmaker whose work significantly contributed to Jewish cinema over at least ten years.

MOVIE TRIVIA

- The actress who plays Pia, Caroline Peters, revealed in an interview on Israeli TV that her actual grandfather was a Nazi.
- The hotel that the audience is led to believe is in Germany was clearly filmed in Israel, as on one camera shot mezuzot (religious items affixed to doorposts in Jewish homes/Israeli hotel rooms) can be seen up and down the hallway.

FOX ON ACTOR LIOR ASHKENAZI (EYAL)

"He's a superb actor and he became a very close friend," says Fox. He being a straight role model and me being a gay director made for our relationship [to be similar to the one in] the film..." People in Israel were like, 'What's going on here? Why are they so close? There must be something happening we don't know,' and we're like, 'No, no, we're just very close friends.'"¹⁵
Lior Ashkenazi also appears in Fox's latest movie The Bubble.

AFTER THE MOVIE

ACTIVITY

Discuss the movie's ending.

- **Pretend you are Axel.** Go around the room and have each person share whether, as Axel, he or she would have done what Axel did. Those who disagree should debate with each other as to what course of action would be most moral and most in Axel's character.
- **Pretend you are Eyal.** Now pretend you are Eyal, and repeat the above as Eyal.

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

UNIT THEME: Relationships

- 1 • Do the characters and their relationships seem realistic? To what extent and in what ways are the characters stock characters or stereotypes? Can you pinpoint specific moments when characters break out of their "stereotypical" roles?
- How do set characteristics such as nationality, sexual orientation and family background inform a person's relationships with the outside world? To what extent can beliefs based on this information change over time?

2 CINEMATIC THEME: Recurring Themes in Multiple Films by a Director

- What do you think was the director's overall message about homosexuality? About Israeli-Palestinian relations?
- If you were a director, would you want all your movies to share a common theme? Why or why not? If you were a director and had to pick one theme for your movies, what would it be?

3 HISTORICAL THEME: Responsibility of the Individual as a Theme in History

- Why do you think Wannsee was chosen as the location for Axel and Pia's family home?
- Do you think Eyal's experiences as a Mossad agent carrying out targeted assassinations have unduly impacted the decisiveness of his feelings towards Palestinians? Or is this simply intrinsic in his personality?
- Have you ever thought about, or actually practiced, boycotting German products (cars, visiting Germany, etc.) because of the Holocaust? Do you know if your parents or grandparents feel differently about this topic than you? If so, can you explain this generation gap?
- Do you (or have you observed anyone else) make assumptions about Israelis or Palestinians based on what is happening with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

4 CULTURAL THEME: Gender Roles in Israeli Society

- Describe the function of the women (Pia, Eyal's wife) in this movie. How are they different from their male counterparts?
- In what ways is Eyal a stereotypical Israeli man? Are there any preconceived stereotypes you have of Israeli men which Eyal does not embody? What messages does the movie send about "manliness," in Israel and also universally?
- Where does the theme of water appear in the movie? What is its significance?

QUOTE ANALYSIS

“ **Axel:** (tries to walk on the sea and falls in)

Eyal: (sarcastically) Bravo. You did it.

Axel: You don't understand. You can't just come to the Sea of Galilee and start walking on water. If you could, everybody would be doing it. You need to prepare yourself.

Eyal: And how would you do that? Please enlighten me.

Axel: Well, you need to completely purify yourself. Your heart needs to be like it's clean from the inside: no negativity, no bad thoughts.

Eyal: And then?

Axel: And then you can walk on water. I'm sure of it.

- Based on this scene, why is "Walk on Water" the title of this film? Does this explanation of what is required to walk on water relate in any way to what is required to build a relationship, as seen with the relationships in this film?

“ **Pia:** (to Axel in German) Sometimes it's difficult. People are very direct here. They just ask you, 'Was any of your family a Nazi?' It's interesting that when I say yes, they look at me with pity. But they stay friendly. Nobody's ever been unfriendly because of it.

Axel: If you accept yourself, others will accept you too.

Pia: And that's where you're wrong, little brother. You really are naïve.

- Compare Axel's suggestion here with his advice to Eyal about walking on water in the previous quote. How do you think his attitude relates to his position as a homosexual in a correct and polite German household? Do you think this approach is practicable, or is Pia right in calling her brother naïve?

“ **Eyal:** Menachem, let's be honest here. No one gives a damn anymore. He'll die by himself soon enough.

Menachem: I want to get him before G-d does.

- Do you think Menachem's attitude here is morally just? Do you think such an action would bring you closer to being able to "walk on water" or further away?

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

HOW DO CHARACTERS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS HELP THEM TO SEE THEMSELVES IN A NEW LIGHT?

The movie approaches the deep and painful subjects of the Holocaust and the Intifada through the fascinating angle of relationships between individuals who happen to be members of different groups involved. As an added contrast, the movie uses sexual orientation to explore masculinity and what it takes to be a man. Initially informed by historical, cultural and social biases beyond the characters' control, the chemistry between characters changes as they interact.

Eyal is a stereotypical Israeli man, sure of himself to a point of fault. Even facing the suicide of his wife, he stubbornly refuses to seek outside help and talk to a psychologist, despite his boss's express instructions to do so. When Axel asks whether it is true that Israeli men never talk about their feelings, Eyal answers, "I don't know. I really don't like to talk about it." His inability to access and assess his emotions is symbolized by his inability to cry, supposedly caused by a medical problem. His frequent use of eye-drops reminds the viewer of Eyal's condition and also connects with the theme of water, highlighted with the movie's title.

Eyal is the son of Holocaust survivors who also suppressed their emotions. Eyal relates, "That's how I grew up. No German products in the house, no traveling to Germany, never talking about it. When they [my parents] were alone and didn't think I was listening, they spoke German."

After Eyal's wife's death, it is another man, Axel, who gains access to Eyal's emotional side. This process is cemented in a humorous way when Eyal purchases for Axel a "Folk Dances of Israel" CD, an item strictly taboo to the macho Israeli man. Eyal bemoans to Axel, "Do you know how humiliating it was to walk into Tower Records and ask for this music? You should have seen the guy there, how he looked at me." Furthermore, despite Eyal's self-proclaimed homophobia, he steps up to defend Axel's gay friends in Berlin, a scene in which Eyal is at his most masculine.

Ultimately, it is on Axel's shoulder that Eyal cries, and the powerful ending of the movie speaks volumes about the true meaning of masculinity, which may have nothing to do with sexual orientation at all.

Over the course of the movie, Eyal develops the ability to see people as individuals and not merely as representatives of the larger movements and forces at work in the world. Gradually, he is even able to see himself this way.