

**Newsweek**

Leaving Lebanon Behind

An Israeli director is honored for his unsparing new film.

By Joanna Chen

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March 12, 2007 issue - At the Berlin Film Festival last month, Joseph Cedar looked more like a bashful schoolboy than a director to rival Robert De Niro and Steven Soderbergh. So it was especially surprising when the Israeli filmmaker beat out those two veterans for the festival's best-director prize for his latest movie, "Beaufort," about the abrupt Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, after 18 years of occupation. Set in a concrete maze of bunkers and trenches atop a mountain outpost, the film follows a group of soldiers battling not so much the enemy as their own fears for survival. In a stroke of precipitous timing, the film—which opens in Israel this week and globally later this year—was completed just five weeks before the second Lebanon war broke out in July 2006, plunging Israel and its northern neighbor into a fresh round of fighting.

Cedar's award is one of the highest honors ever bestowed on an Israeli director. Until recently, film was not considered a high priority by the country's cultural establishment. But over the past five years, more funding has been allocated to the industry—and it's paying off. Last year a Palestinian-Israeli co-production, "Paradise Now," reaped a Golden Globe for its provocative presentation of suicide bombers; two other films, "Sweet Mud" and "The Bubble," received accolades at this year's Sundance and Berlin festivals. "Cedar comes from a new, more self-aware generation of Israeli filmmakers who are not afraid to expose their social concerns to the world and are being given a chance to show it," says film critic Nahman Ingber, the artistic director of the Rabinovich Foundation, which funds Israeli films. "He knows how to hold your soul when he tells a story."

Cedar's background certainly gives him plenty of fodder for his craft. His family emigrated from New York when he was a child, and he grew up in an Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem with five brothers and sisters. In his first two films, "Time of Favor" and "Campfire," Cedar explored this community, exposing the dark side of messianic beliefs and contrasting the high ideals of the group with the petty lives of its individual members. Before making the films, Cedar spent time cloistered in a yeshiva. While writing the screenplay for "Time of Favor," he lived for a year in a hard-core Jewish settlement on the West Bank. As a full-fledged member of the religious community, he was initially accepted by members of the remote settlement. But eventually they grew suspicious of his lack of conformity; among other things, he was a bachelor who held no job. "I was alone and I was asking questions all the time, speaking to people and trying to befriend people," says Cedar. "It turned me into a perfect secret-service agent."

By the time he left, he had made plenty of enemies. But he remains unapologetic. "There's a betrayal in every storyteller's psyche," he says. "You can't tell an honest story without being willing to let the story override your loyalties."

In "Beaufort," Cedar shatters the mirror of heroism that has been held up to soldiers for generations. Young troops, conditioned to obey, become sitting ducks for an enemy they cannot see. "Are you here by mistake or did you want to be here?" an exhausted soldier on late-night guard duty asks his comrade. "I wanted to be here and that's the mistake," comes his grim reply.

The lessons surrounding the futility of their mission extend far beyond the Israeli-Lebanese border. "It's a story of any mountain in any battle," says Cedar. "Soldiers died to capture it, died to protect it and then found out its insignificance." In the director's unvarnished world, the hero is the one with the survival instinct to stand up and make decisions for himself. The true act of bravery is to leave the post where others died, to take down the flag and descend the mountain—wherever that mountain may be.

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