



**Tzivi's Guide  
to the  
2009  
Chicago Festival  
of  
Israeli Cinema**

**SPECIAL FOR CHICAGO'S JUF NEWS  
By JAN LISA HUTTNER**

Top Pick Feature: SEVEN MINUTES IN HEAVEN  
From Left: Raymond Amsalem with Eldad Fribas

**This year's Festival runs:**

**Oct. 29 through Nov. 1 at AMC Loews 600 North (Chicago)  
Nov. 2 through Nov. 8 at the Wilmette Theatre (Wilmette)**

Link for schedule information & tickets:

<http://www.chicagofestivalofisraelicinema.org>

Link to read Tzivi's Guide on *JUF Online*:

<http://www.juf.org/news/arts.aspx?id=48674>

Kudos to the CFIC committee! Once again they have worked tirelessly to bring Metro Chicago a diverse and outstanding set of films, including features, documentaries, and television shows. There are 26 titles in all. Some shorts will be combined with others into a single screening, while one television mini-series will be divided into two separate screenings.

It gives me great pleasure to recommend every single film this year. Of course some are stronger than others, but absolutely every one of these films is well worth your time and effort, and most of them are far better than the typical fare in your local multiplex, so I strongly encourage you to attend as many as possible.

## **NEW THEMES**

The first time I wrote about the Ma'aleh Film School was in 2006, when the CFIC committee brought us a unique set of shorts with a distinctly religious flavor ([see http://www.films42.com/columns/cfic-06.asp](http://www.films42.com/columns/cfic-06.asp)). This year, fully eight of the 26 selections deal with Orthodox life in modern Israel (including both of the short features and all of the television episodes).

I called Hedva Goldschmidt in Jerusalem to learn more. Hedva is the founder of Go2Films. She specializes in distributing Israeli indies that explore social and multicultural themes. She used to head the Distribution Department at Ma'aleh, and she currently serves as a consultant to the Geshar Multicultural Film Fund. Many of the films on my recent "Highly Recommended" lists have come from Go2Films (something I am only aware of after I see them). Here's what she said:

“Twenty years ago, when Ma’aleh was founded, most mainstream features were set in Tel Aviv, but Ma’aleh started a revolution. In the search for authentic Jewish voices, Ma’aleh gave confidence; students now have a lot of confidence to deal with very, very complex, and delicate, and provocative issues. They show beautiful ‘kosher’ intimacy between ultra-Orthodox couples, and they give voices to peripheral groups in Israel. Now there is also Geshet, and Israeli filmmakers are writing their own stories—personal and authentic—showing the places they come from.”

“Geshet” is the Hebrew word for “bridge,” and the banner on their website is “A Shared Heritage—A Common Destiny.” Show me another country in this world that deals so publicly and forthrightly with internal culture clash!

### NEW STARS

Reymond Amsalem heads my Best Actress list this year for her performance as “Galia” in **SEVEN MINUTES IN HEAVEN**. We know her from supporting roles in JANEM, JANEM and THREE MOTHERS (both from 2006), but this is her first time on center stage. With her great acting range and hypnotic presence, Amsalem deserves world-wide recognition. Here’s hoping the right parts come her way.

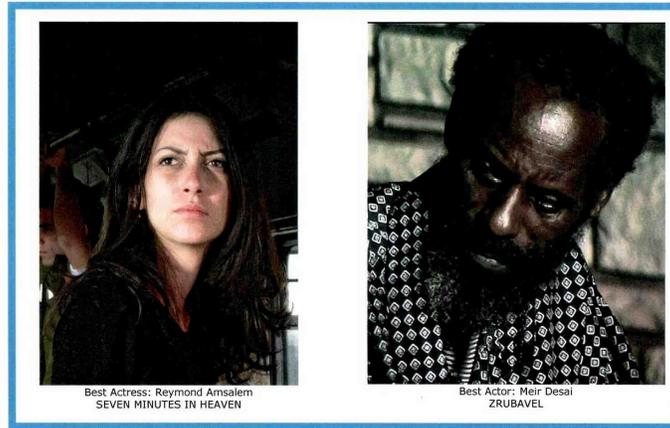
On the other hand, we are seeing Esther Rada on screen for the very first time. Cast as “Almaz” in **ZRUBAVEL**, she has some intensely dramatic scenes, but also sings several jazzy numbers. As **ZRUBAVEL** makes its way around the film festival circuit, this Ethiopian beauty will have a profound effect on the visual image of “a good Jewish girl.”

The made-for-TV mini-series **A TOUCH AWAY** consists of eight episodes lasting over four hours. What ties it all together is a white-hot performance by Henry David as a young Russian immigrant named “Zorik.” Born David Heilovsky, he left Moscow at age 11 and also called himself Henri Hilovsky for a while, but the decision to call himself Henry David probably signifies that he’s now aiming for a well-earned international career.

In 2003, Shemi Zarhin cast Jonathan Rozen as Oshri Cohen’s older brother in BONJOUR MONSIEUR SHLOMI; in 2005, Steven Spielberg cast him as Ehud Barak in MUNICH; this year he plays a supporting role in LOST ISLANDS. But Rozen finally emerges from the background as “Shimon” in Pini Tavger’s award-winning student short **PINCHAS**. Here’s hoping we see him in lead roles in future.

### NEW FILMMAKERS

Obviously I see a lot of Israeli films every year and I like many of them a great deal, but even I have to admit that production values are rarely up to American multiplex standards. When I see a technically sophisticated Israeli film, it is cause for celebration, so kudos to Omni Givron, director of **SEVEN MINUTES IN HEAVEN**, for knocking my socks off with his very first film. Honorable mention goes to Shmuel Beru, also a first-time director, for **ZRUBAVEL**.



### TOP PICKS

My top pick in the Feature category this year is **SEVEN MINUTES IN HEAVEN**. Some critics have compared it to Christopher Nolan's 2000 breakthrough film **MEMENTO**, but it's really much closer in tone to Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 classic **VERTIGO**.

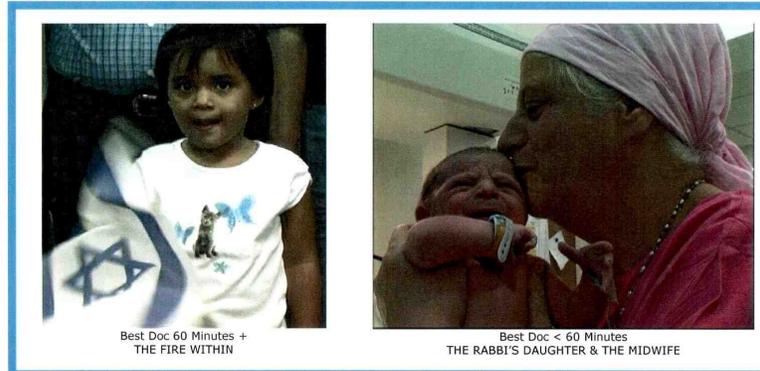
Reymond Amsalem plays "Galia," one of the few survivors of a catastrophic suicide bombing, and Givron surrounds her with excellent visual effects and sound design which keep us trapped inside her head, and locked into her point of view. As Galia struggles to regain her memory of the event, she flashes backwards in time only to find herself inexplicably gasping for breath, but when she tries to put it all behind her, she suddenly realizes she's walking down a street filled with ghosts. A fight with her lover upset their morning routine and caused them both to board the fateful bus. Was his death her fault? Who gave her the butterfly necklace and when?

Galia follows a twisted path to a convoluted conclusion, but once I knew the answers, I watched the whole film again, and I'm convinced it earns its ending. In many ways Galia is the female equivalent of "Liraz" (the solidier Oshri Cohen played in Joseph Cedar's Oscar-nominated film **BEAUFORT**), both of them living in a constant state of siege that most Americans only started to appreciate on 9/11.

My top pick in the Documentary category is **THE FIRE WITHIN**, a fascinating film about the Jewish community of Iquitos. Located near the headwaters of the Amazon River roughly equidistant from Lima (Peru), Manaus (Brazil), and Quito (Ecuador), Iquitos is more or less in the middle of nowhere, but yes, there is a genuinely Jewish community there. Who knew? Unlike the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico, who seek genetic evidence of relationships that have been buried for centuries, the Jews of Iquitos trace their names back to the headstones in their cemetery, remembering relatives only a few generations past. What to do when they decide to make aliyah?

My top pick in the Documentary Shorts category is **THE RABBI'S DAUGHTER & THE MIDWIFE** about two ultra-Orthodox women fighting poverty and despair in Israel's Haredi slums. Who knew there were Haredi slums? Adina Bar-Shalom (the rabbi's daughter) trains Haredi women to become credentialed social workers. Rachel Chalkowski (head nurse and legendary midwife at Shaare Zedek Medical Center of Jerusalem) is a witness to the hardships of Haredi women raising 10 or more children

while their husbands dedicate themselves solely to the study of Torah. To parrot what I said in my introduction: Show me any other country in this world where the religious community scrutinizes itself on camera with such brutal honesty.



### TOP PERFORMANCES

Reymond Amsalem heads my Best Actress list (for her performance as “Galia” in **SEVEN MINUTES IN HEAVEN**), closely followed by Ethel Kovenska (as “Pola” in **VALENTINA’S MOTHER**). However, her co-star Sylvia Drori (who plays “Valentina” in **VALENTINA’S MOTHER**) is hands-down my Top Pick in the Best Supporting Actress category. Based on a story by award-winning Israeli novelist Savyon Liebrecht, **VALENTINA’S MOTHER** is a heart-breaking film about a Holocaust survivor who thinks the young Polish woman working for her is a long-lost friend from childhood. Valentina is left alone to cope as best she can as Pola descends deeper and deeper into dementia, but it’s a credit to Drori that we’re never quite sure about Valentina’s motives. I also loved Hadar Galron in **BRURIAH**, although I think her screenplay needed a bit more work.

Meir Desai heads my Best Actor list for his charismatic performance as family patriarch “Getea” in **ZRUBAVEL**. Getea Zrubavel is an Ethiopian Tevye doing his best to stay strong as he steers his large family through troubled waters. Getea was a well-respected military man in Ethiopia, but in Israel he’s a dark-skinned immigrant who still speaks Amharic and must rely on his children for their Hebrew skills. But he carries himself with tremendous dignity, and provides his family with a strong moral anchor, always looking to the future even after tragic losses.



Jonathan Rozen is my Top Pick for Best Supporting Actor as “Shimon” in **PINCHAS**. “Pinchas” (Anthony Berman) is a Russian kid living with his single mother (Evgenya Dodina). The lonely little boy decides he wants to be religious, and to his mother’s dismay, Shimon, an upstairs neighbor, takes Pinchas under his wing. **PINCHAS** is only 30 minutes long, so Rozen doesn’t get much screen time, but he still manages to combine virility with great gentleness. Kudos to filmmaker Pini Tavger—casting Rozen against the always excellent Evgenya Dodina shows great instincts.

Eldad Fribas, who plays a paramedic named “Boaz” in **SEVEN MINUTES IN HEAVEN**, is also wonderful in his supporting role. With so many wars and so much time spent in the Reserves, it’s fascinating to me that Israeli directors continue to emphasize the menschlikeyt of Israeli men rather than their machismo. Henry David, Jonathan Rozen, Eldad Fribas, they all have the looks to be action heroes, but in this year’s films they’re all so much more.

Speaking of Henry David brings us back to **A TOUCH AWAY**. When I saw the four DVDs for this TV mini-series in my bag, I sighed, picked up the first one, and figured I would chip away over a few days. Wrong! I was totally riveted and ended up watching all eight episodes back-to-back until almost 2 a.m.! No wonder **A TOUCH AWAY** was an Israeli phenomenon!



The story is a Bnei Barak version of **ROMEO & JULIET**, with David as a Russian immigrant named “Zorik Mints” and Gaya Traub as an Orthodox woman named “Roha'le Berman.” But be honest: how much does Shakespeare really tell us about the four Capulet and Montague parents? Extended runtime gives director Ron Ninio and his writing team the luxury of fully developing the Berman and Mints families, so that their

story really does become a microcosm (parts of which were even filmed in Moscow). And the ending took me completely by surprise. I can honestly say that, even halfway in, I had no idea what to expect, but really, it's perfect.

## TZIVI'S "BEST OF FEST" LIST

Best New Feature Film: <b>SEVEN MINUTES IN HEAVEN</b>	
Best Actress in a Feature: <b>Reymond Amsalem—SEVEN MINUTES</b>	Best Actor in a Feature: <b>Meir Desai—ZRUBAVEL</b>
Best Supporting Actress: <b>Sylvia Drori—VALENTINA'S MOTHER</b>	Best Supporting Actor: <b>Jonathan Rozen—PINCHAS</b>
Best Documentary over 60 Minutes: <b>THE FIRE WITHIN</b>	Best Documentary under 60 Minutes: <b>RABBI'S DAUGHTER &amp; MIDWIFE</b>
Special Mention: <b>A TOUCH AWAY</b>	

And here is my personal ranking of 25 of the 26 films on this year's schedule (minus SNAPSHOTS, which was not available by press time):

### Narrative Features—Highly Recommended:

JERUSALEM SYNDROME  
SHIVAH  
SEVEN MINUTES IN HEAVEN  
VALENTINA'S MOTHER  
ZRUBAVEL

### Narrative Features—Recommended:

BRURIAH  
ELI & BEN  
FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS  
LOST ISLANDS  
MRS. MOSCOWITZ & THE CATS

### Documentaries over 60 Minutes—Highly Recommended:

THE FIRE WITHIN

### Documentaries over 60 Minutes—Recommended:

BLESSED IS THE MATCH  
HOLYLAND HARD BALL

### Documentaries under 60 Minutes—Highly Recommended:

THE GREEN DUMPSTER MYSTERY  
THE NAME MY MOTHER GAVE ME  
RABBI FIRER: A REASON TO QUESTION  
THE RABBI'S DAUGHTER & THE MIDWIFE  
THE WOMAN FROM SARAJEVO

### Documentaries under 60 Minutes—Recommended:

THE ISRAELI DOC CHALLENGE  
VOICES FROM EL SAYED  
THE WOMAN IN THE BUBBLE

### Short Features under 60 Minutes—Highly Recommended:

MELTDOWN  
PINCHAS

### TV Series—Highly Recommended:

A TOUCH AWAY

### TV Series—Recommended

SRUGIM

**Reminder:** Language is often the best clue you have to a character's full identity, so you must also listen carefully as you watch. Most often the characters speak Hebrew, of course, but some of the characters in this year's films also speak one or more of the following: Amharic, Arabic, French, German, Polish, Russian, Spanish, and Yiddish. Today's Israelis continue to live in a rich multicultural stew.

### © Jan Lisa Huttner (10/1/09)—Special for Chicago's *JUF News*



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Tziviah bat Yisroel v'Hudah (Jan Lisa Huttner) is the managing editor of *FILMS FOR TWO*®: *The Online Guide for Busy Couples* ([www.films42.com](http://www.films42.com)).

Jan writes a regular monthly column called "Tzivi's Spotlight" for Chicago's *JUF News*, & lectures on film all around Illinois & beyond. Her award-winning articles have also appeared in *All About Jewish Theatre*, the *Connecticut Jewish Ledger*, the *Forward*, *Jewish Film World*, & the *World Jewish Digest* in addition to numerous other non-Jewish publications & websites. Jan & her husband/partner Rich worship with KAM Isaiah Israel congregation in Hyde Park.

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