

## A Time of Tangled Transition in Israel, and in a Family

By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

Published: September 9, 2005

Set in 1981 during the early days of the Israeli settler movement, Joseph Cedar's film "[Campfire](#)" has come under fire from religious Jews for its portrayal of a group of early settlers on the West Bank as repressive, self-righteous hypocrites. As Mr. Cedar remarks dryly in the film's production notes, the early settler movement was peopled by "mostly middle-class citizens who used the political atmosphere of the time as an excuse to take advantage of what they considered a good real estate opportunity."



Film Movement

Moshe Ivgy as Yossi, a lonely 50-year-old, and Michaela Eshet as Rachel, the widow he courts, in "Campfire."

Applying for membership in a rural settlement that has yet to be built is Rachel Gerlik (Michaela Eshet), a lonely, 42-year-old widowed mother of two teenage girls. Acceptance of this fractured family into the community requires that Rachel remarry as quickly as possible. Both children are bitterly opposed to her joining the group.

Beyond casting a jaundiced eye at the community's oppressive communalism, "Campfire" neither endorses nor opposes the settler movement that since 1981 has become an incendiary issue in Israel. But that Mr. Cedar is an Orthodox Jew and former Israeli paratrooper stationed on the West Bank has added to the sting of betrayal felt by the religious conservatives who have boycotted his film.

Despite that hostility, "Campfire" has been warmly embraced by Israel's secular Jews. It won five Israeli Academy Awards, including best picture, director and screenplay, and was that country's Oscar nominee for best foreign film of 2005.

Its broader political implications within Israel notwithstanding, "Campfire" offers an outsider an intimate portrait of family members living in uncomfortably close proximity and straining against one another during a difficult period of transition. Rachel, a tough, attractive woman whose husband died of cancer a year earlier, is tugged this way and that by conflicting desires. She longs for the security and companionship of the community. But because her first marriage was unhappy, she is unwilling to settle for another husband who won't deliver the romantic fireworks the first one didn't provide.

The older daughter, Esti (Maya Maron), blames her father's rapid deterioration from his disease on what she sees as Rachel's neglect and enrages her mother by taking a soldier to the house for sex. The younger daughter, 15-year-old Tami (Hani Furstenberg), is shy but curious about boys; this curiosity precipitates the crisis at the center of the film.

The couple heading the acceptance committee - smug, portly Motkeh (Assi Dayan) and his cold, pragmatic wife, Shula (Edith Teperson) - are the kind of rigid, narrow-minded people you wouldn't want to tangle with on a co-op board. Shula arranges dates for Rachel with two possible candidates for a husband, but when Rachel balks at choosing either one, she loses patience. Neither Yossi (Moshe Ivgy), a kindly 50-year-old bus driver and sad sack who has never slept with a woman and who falls instantly in love with Rachel, nor Moshe (Yehoram Gaon), a plump, self-satisfied cantor, comes close to meeting her pyrotechnical standards.

A crisis erupts when Tami follows a boy on whom she has a crush to a raucous gathering at a holiday bonfire, where a pack of teenage boys are singing lewd songs. The bully of the gang grabs Tami, forces kisses on her, then coerces the other boys to do the same, promising to release her only if she will go further.

This ugly scene of peer pressure and molestation has instant repercussions. As word of the incident spreads, graffiti is sprayed on the outside of the Gerlik house, calling Tami a slut, and Rachel's ability to control her daughters is questioned by the acceptance committee. Motkeh urges Rachel to forget the incident and not report it to the police.

If "Campfire" is solidly acted, it is visually drab and has a haphazard narrative momentum. Even when it visits the site of the future settlement, the camera finds little beauty in the landscape. The movie finally comes apart in a cheery, saccharine finale that feels tacked on, the way a cheap mint consumed after an unpalatable meal is supposed to erase the bad taste with a jolt of sugar.

## **Campfire**

Written (in Hebrew, with English subtitles) and directed by Joseph Cedar; director of photography, Ofer Inov; edited by Einat Glaser-Zarhin; music by Ofer Shalchin; produced by David Mandil and Eyal Shiray; released by Film Movement. Running time: 96 minutes. This film is not rated.

---



**CAMPFIRE**  
**Joseph Cedar, 2004**

Our rating: ★★★★★

*Settle down*

The winner of multiple 2004 Israeli Oscars, including best film, Joseph Cedar's follow-up to his terrorist drama *TIME OF FAVOR* (2000) is a startling change of pace. Set in the early '80s, it's a sensitive, slow-moving account of one newly fatherless family's attempt to redefine itself. It has been a year since 42-year-old Rachel Gerlik (Michaela Eshet) lost her husband, and while she never actually loved him, she's having trouble finding her place as a modern Israeli widow. She even tells her daughters, 16-year-old Tami (Hani Furstenberg, who looks startlingly like a young Liv Ullmann) and her older sister, Esti (Maya Maron, the captivating star of Nir Bergman's *BROKEN WINGS*), to say that their father has just stepped out when strangers call looking for the head of the household. Rachel's solution is to pull up stakes and move to one of the new Israeli settlements planned for the West Bank territories, but she must first pass muster with the settlement's acceptance committee, headed by fussy Motke (Assi Dayan) and his bossy wife, Shula (Idit Teperson). Esti is disgusted by Rachel kowtowing and amazed when she agrees to a blind date with Yossi (Moshe Ivgy), the depressed bus driver Shula has been trying to marry off for years. But after dinner at a desolate Chinese restaurant, Rachel is charmed by Yossi's candor and agrees to a second date. Esti, meanwhile, uses this new development to sneak her soldier boyfriend into the apartment; when Rachel finds out, Esti accuses her of putting herself before her daughters — a sentiment Tami seconds. Younger and shyer than Esti, Tami has her eye on Rafi (Oshri Cohen), and agrees to spend part of her youth group's *Lag b'Omer* holiday bonfire celebration with Rafi and his crude friends at their private campfire in the nearby woods. But the naive Tami falls victim to a humiliating sexual assault that unexpectedly imperils Rachel's chances with the snobbish founding committee. For the first time since her husband's death, Rachel must choose between her desires and those of her daughters. Setting aside the usual geopolitical arguments surrounding the Israeli presence on the West Bank, Cedar concentrates instead on the psychological, nonideological concerns that drove so many Israelis to move to the desert. Rachel, who genuinely wants to strengthen her homeland

and, by extension, her fragile sense of self, is dismayed to find that some of her future neighbors are elitists whose only interest is escaping big-city riffraff. Released as the settlements on the Gaza Strip were being dismantled, Cedar's film offers a refreshing new perspective of them and a sly critique of their origins. — *Ken Fox*

---



**CAMPFIRE (UNRATED) \*\*\*1/2**

## **Fresh take on touchy situation**

BY MARTA BARBER

[mbarber@herald.com](mailto:mbarber@herald.com)

Set in Israel in 1981, during the establishment of settlements in occupied territories, Joseph Cedar's *Campfire* drew its own fireworks for its peek at the ugly side of this controversial program. The 2004 film won five Israeli Academy Awards -- as well as incendiary commentaries from settlers who saw the film as treason from its Orthodox Jew and former paratrooper director. It's a story about sexism and inequalities, and were it not for its hokey ending, the film would've gained even more international recognition. (It won Special Mention at the Berlin film festival and the FIPRESCI at the Chicago film festival.)

Rachel, an attractive 42-year-old, has applied to move into a founding-group settlement to be opened in the West Bank. Her status as a widow and the mother of two teenage daughters presents a problem for the committee, which sees a woman alone -- and a single mother, at that -- as a somewhat undesirable addition. "It's Noah's Ark," complains Rachel, to no avail.

As suggested by a close friend, Rachel considers remarrying. But acceptance into the settlement is not her only problem. Both of her daughters are opposed to moving, with Esti, the older, saying she'll run away. Tamy is nave, so when she's invited to join a group of boys at a campfire, she accepts, much against her friend's admonitions. The campfire turns ugly for Tamy; worse still, graffiti appears on her house walls calling Tamy names.

The campfire, which is held on a religious holiday, serves as a metaphor for the gender discrimination theme that runs through the film. As the fire rages around her, Tamy just stands there while being touched by the boys. If she runs away, will she ever be accepted by her peers?

While never judging the decision to settle, Cedar points a finger at the pettiness of the ultra-right Zionist movement who saw the establishment of the settlements as a great real-estate opportunity. Assi Dayan plays the perfect Motkeh, the head of the committee that keeps giving Rachel reasons why she can't be accepted. Cedar has fun with the character of Moshe Weinstock, a reputed cantor who asks Rachel for marriage.

In the end, Rachel must decide not only between Moshe and Yossi, a 50-year-old bachelor who's never been with a woman, but also whether activism and the settlement are right for her.

*Campfire* looks a bit drab, perhaps to show the dullness of Zionist life in the 1980s. But this doesn't take away from the poignancy of the film.

In Hebrew with English subtitles. Some violence. Running time: 96 minutes. In Miami-Dade: Cosford Cinema.