

Lebanon (2009)

Rated R. Our ratings: V -6; L -3; S/N-3. Running time: 1 hour 33 min.

*The city of chaos is broken down,
every house is shut up so that no one can enter.
There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine;
all joy has reached its eventide;
the gladness of the earth is banished.
Desolation is left in the city,
the gates are battered into ruins.
Isaiah 24:10-12*

It is June 1982, and the Israeli's, have invaded Lebanon and complain inside the hot to strike at their enemies confines of their tank harassing them. We first see a close up shot of a field of beautiful sunflowers, and then as the camera pans up, there is juxtaposed on this peaceful scene a massive tank. Savor this long shot of the countryside, because after this all you will be shown is the inside of the tank. Views of the outside world will be restricted by what those inside can see through a view scope, thus producing a claustrophobic feeling for the audience.

The word "motley" truly describes this crew consisting of citizen soldiers, none of whom have been involved in a firefight before: Commander Assi (Itay Tiran), loader Hertzal (Oshri Cohen), driver Yigal (Michael Moshonov) and gunner

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Shmulik (Yoav Donat). The subordinates argue over orders; the gunner hesitates when a car does not stop when the soldiers outside order it to, and this hesitancy leads to the death of one of those soldiers. The leader of the foot soldiers Jamil (Zohar Strauss) is furious with the crew. Many times he comes and enters and exits through the hatch, usually to harangue them about their un-soldierly conduct. Later, when another vehicle approaches, the gunner opens fire—and this time discovers that the occupants were innocent civilians.

The crewmembers are also horrified over the devastation wrought by Israeli fighter planes that had wasted the village the tank is ordered to enter. Bodies, almost all civilians, are strewn everywhere. In contrast to the blood and destruction the crew sees through their scope an icon of Mary and the child Jesus, which might remind Christians of a similarly savage attack on a village two millennia ago by Herod's soldiers.

Not since *The Hurt Locker* have I experienced such a suspenseful and harrowing film. The "walk in the park" that the crew had been told their mission in the village would be turns into a nightmare, with the tank being surrounded by enemies who have moved back into the village.

When one or the other takes a wrong turn in the darkened streets, the tank becomes separated from Jamil's squad and forced to decide whether or not to trust two so-called Christian militiamen sent to guide them to safety. Added to their complications is a Syrian soldier captured by the squad and deposited within the tanks for safekeeping. At this point I was reminded of my favorite Humphrey Bogart WW 2 movie *Sahara*, also about a tank crew separated from their army and forced to make its way through the North African desert, a Nazi and an Italian prisoner aboard.

Samuel Maoz wrote the script for this powerful antiwar film 25 years after his involvement in the war in Lebanon. His film

won the Golden Lion at the 2009 Venice Film Festival. He joins with Ari Folman, also a veteran of the war and the animator of *Waltz With Bashir*, in showing the insanity, futility, and terrible effects of war. Inside the tank someone has posted a sign that reads, "Man is steel. The tank is only iron." Mr. Maoz begs to differ, his film adroitly reminding us that "Man" is made of flesh and blood and soul, not steel. His frequent shots of the floor of the tank, a mixture of water, oil, urine, cigarette butts, shell casings, spilled food and soda cans are apt reminders of the atrocities outside, committed in the name of defending one's country.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. How does the opening shot of sunflowers and distant tank set us up well for what follows?
2. How are the crewmembers somewhat different from the way soldiers are depicted in most older war films?
3. What do the recurring shots of the icon of Mother and Child tell us about the villagers? Do you think that they were complicit in the attacks on Israel? How does the Hezbollah's tactics of using civilians as a shield make it difficult for the Israeli's to defend themselves?
4. Does the icon remind you of the terrible events recorded in Matthew concerning the "massacre of the innocents," as artists have labeled the story?

How did you feel as the film unfolded almost exclusively in close-up shots?

5. How has the insanity of war overtaken the so-called Christian militiaman as he talks with the Syrian prisoner? How did we see similar incidents among a few of our own soldiers in our Iraqi War? What hypocrisy is revealed in the talk about

phosphorous shells?

6. What do you surmise was the purpose of the filmmaker in making this film? Do you think he achieved it? Somewhere I read that every war movie is an anti-war movie. It might be true, in such cases as *The Hurt Locker* or *I The Three Kings*. But always—such as *The Green Berets* or the first *Rambo*? How can one decide which is which?