
The “Waltz with Bashir” Two-Step

Hillel Halkin

ON JUNE 6, 1982, following the collapse of a year-long truce between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the Israeli army invaded a Lebanon torn by years of civil war. It did so after the PLO, which controlled most of the Lebanese south and had its headquarters in the western half of Beirut, had directed rocket and artillery fire at northern Israel. The PLO, for its part, was responding to an Israeli air strike on Beirut, carried out in retaliation for an attempted Palestinian assassination of the Israeli ambassador in London.

Yet the would-be assassins, members of a splinter terrorist group based in Baghdad, had acted without PLO approval and were merely a pretext for Israel to start a war that had long been in the planning. Spurred by Ariel Sharon, its defense minister, Menachem Begin’s Likud government had made no secret of its belief that a showdown with the PLO in Lebanon was inevitable; rumors had circulated widely of a military alliance with Lebanon’s Christians, whose main militia, the Falange, was led by a young and charismatic pro-Israeli politician named Bashir Gemayel. For months, the Israeli army had been preparing. In April, my reserve infantry battalion was taken to the Israeli buffer zone in southern Lebanon for

training in house-to-house combat and shown, from a hilltop, the PLO-dominated area to the north that would be our responsibility when war broke out. Large numbers of Israeli troops were similarly rehearsed.

My battalion did not take part in the lightning Israeli advance, in which the Israel Defense Forces, or IDF, quickly overran much of Lebanon up to the Beirut-Damascus highway and laid siege to the PLO in Beirut. We were part of the mop-up operation that followed. One soldier who did fight his way to Beirut was a 19-year-old draftee named Ari Folman. Folman’s unit was in the Lebanese capital in mid-August, when the siege ended with the capitulation of the PLO’s forces and their expulsion to Tunisia, and was still there in mid-September, when Bashir Gemayel, newly elected Lebanon’s president, was killed by a remote-controlled Syrian bomb. In the aftermath of his death, revenge-seeking Falangists, on an IDF-supported mission to flush out remaining PLO fighters from the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila, massacred close to a thousand of the camps’ inhabitants. Soon after, harshly criticized for its alleged role in the massacre, Israel withdrew from the Beirut area and the war was effectively over, though a contested Israeli military presence in the Lebanese south continued.

Twenty-five years later, Folman, now an Israeli film director, has made an animated movie about his Lebanese experience called *Waltz With Bashir*.

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A moderate success in Israel, it has done extraordinarily well abroad. It has won the British Independent Films Award for Best Foreign Film of 2008; the Los Angeles Film Critics Award and the National Society of Film Critics Award for Best Animated Film of 2008; the 2009 Golden Globes Award for Best Foreign Film; and the 2009 Directors Guild of America’s Outstanding Directional Achievement Award. And the best of the Best may be yet to come, for as I write, *Waltz With Bashir* is also an Oscar finalist in the Best Foreign Film category.

Waltz With Bashir is indeed superbly done. It is visually gripping from its opening scene, in which a frightening pack of cartoon dogs stampedes down Tel Aviv’s Rothschild Boulevard in the middle of the night, knocking over café tables, bringing cars to a screeching halt, and terrifying the few pedestrians. Snarling menacingly, the dogs come to a halt before the lit window of an apartment, whose occupant stands looking out at them. They are his nightmare that has awoken him—a dream, he reveals to a friend in the next scene, that recurs nightly. Always there are 26 dogs in it, the number he killed in Lebanon in 1982, when he was assigned to go at the head of his platoon upon entering villages on nighttime missions and shoot barking dogs with a silencer-equipped rifle.

The friend to whom this is revealed is Ari Folman. Made to realize by the conversation that he himself recalls practically nothing of his time in Lebanon, not even the night of the Sabra and Shatila massacre—his only “memory,” a hallucinatory vision of being washed up by the sea on the shores of Beirut, turns out to be a false one—Folman embarks on a cinematic quest for the forgotten past. He speaks to a psychologist he knows; looks up old army buddies who were with him in Lebanon, traveling all the way to Holland to find one of them; visits a specialist on post-traumatic stress disorder; talks to an officer whose men were within a few hundred meters of the refugee camps when the massacre took place; and interviews the Israeli journalist Ron Ben-Yishai, the first reporter to enter the camps the morning after.

As he goes from interview to interview, Folman finds his memories gradually restored. They begin to return on his way back from Holland. He is being driven to the airport through a wintry Dutch countryside when faintly silhouetted palm trees appear against the snow-covered fields; then, abruptly, the landscape is Middle Eastern and an armored personnel carrier that he is in is barreling down a

road with guns blazing in all directions. From this point on, *Waltz With Bashir* moves back and forth between Folman’s reawakened memories and the accounts of his interviewees, proceeding through the summer of 1982 to its climax in the September massacre—Folman’s repression of which, it is implied, has been the cause of his amnesia.

THE ARMORED personnel carrier is drawn by *Waltz With Bashir*’s animators with an exacting realism; the flames belching from its machine guns are those of comic-book illustrations. It is this double aspect that gives the film much of its visual power. First shot on videotape, its interviews, supplemented by documentary footage taken from archives, were reframed as drawings with the help of computer imaging, while additional scenes were animated from scratch. Repeatedly, cartoon figures are superimposed on verisimilitudinous backgrounds, not so much blurring the boundary between the real and the imagined as disconcertingly demonstrating their ability to co-exist.

Having approached my first viewing of it with palpable resistance, I was more strongly affected by *Waltz With Bashir* than I had expected to be. As a rule, I dislike “serious” animated films, just as I dislike “serious” comic-book fiction. (I was one of the few critics to react negatively to Art Spiegelman’s iconic *Maus* when I reviewed it years ago in COMMENTARY.) A filmed face or body is far more expressive than one drawn by anyone but an extremely good artist, and no such artist could possibly produce the thousands of frames that form the basis of a feature-length animation. Inevitably, animation de-animates.

But *Waltz With Bashir* works so well precisely because its characters are meant to be inexpressive. While not amnesiac about Lebanon like Folman, almost all are equally affectless. In speaking of their experiences in the summer of 1982, each, although fully individuated by the hand that drew him, is frozen in a kind of numbness. Forced to talk about what they would rather not think of, Folman’s interviewees respond with fixed looks of discomfort, detachment, quizzicality, or (in the case of Ben-Yishai) tortured amusement. Had we been shown the original videotapes, these masks would have been imperfect, marred by the superfluous or contradictory detail. As it is, accompanied by the flat tones of the interviewees’ recorded voices, there is not a crack in them.

Of course, in a film about the post-traumatic nature of war memories, the original trauma needs to be shown. *Waltz With Bashir* does this by the con-

ventional means of flashbacks, scenes that shift rapidly from the interviewees' homes and workplaces to the battlefield. What is unusual about them is their use of animation to bring to life the terror and sometimes the exultation of war that conscious memory has blocked out.

For example: the section of the film that gives it its title comes from an interview with a man named Frankel, who fought at Folman's side. Now a powerfully built martial-arts teacher, Frankel recalls how he and Folman were part of a detachment pinned down on a main avenue of downtown Beirut by snipers firing rocket-propelled grenades from a high-rise building plastered with a huge billboard of Bashir Gemayel. This memory, in which he grabs a machine gun from the soldier lying in the gutter next to him and charges into the avenue, is recounted in a deadpan manner, his face as blank as if he were practicing karate moves—which is what he is doing when the interview begins.

Yet at the moment that Frankel grabs the machine gun, a heavy FN MAG 58 not easily wielded by a moving man strapped with ammunition, the animation shifts into high gear. It does not show Frankel sprinting across the avenue and looking for cover on its other side, concealed from the snipers, as it would make sense for him to do. Rather, halfway across it he stops and begins to gyrate wildly, spraying bullets in all directions while spinning like a top beneath Bashir Gemayel's imperatorial stare as though daring the snipers to hit him. Although I confess to not having noticed it, a musician friend tells me that the notes of a Chopin waltz can be distinctly heard at this point in the soundtrack.

Frankel is performing a death-defying and death-intoxicated dance, and his exaggeratedly revved-up movements are the animator's notion of what such a state must have felt like as opposed to its post-traumatic recollection.

Waltz With Bashir is constructed on an extended series of such oppositions. On the one hand, men at the onset of middle age matter-of-factly answer questions put to them, furrowing brows and scratching heads while conscientiously trying to give Folman the information he is looking for even though they would prefer to be talking about something else. On the other hand, accompanied by a pulsing score that ranges from heavy metal to classical (my friend also identified Bach and Schubert), there is the pow-wham-aargh of comic-book combat: tanks colorfully exploding, ships engulfed by flames, jet fighters streaking low

like flocks of monstrous geese, cars lifted sky-high by missiles slamming into them, a rocket grenade launched by a waiflike Palestinian boy that turns into a whirling black sun as its speeds toward the audience in the movie theater. (Seconds later the boy is dead on the ground, riddled with Israeli bullets.) These psychedelic, adrenalin-charged images, we are made to understand, are the Lebanon that lives on beneath the expressionless accounts that would deny its grip on them.

Folman's unit is on an alert for a suicide-bomb car when news reaches it of Bashir Gemayel's death. At once it is redeployed to Beirut's international airport, not far from Sabra and Shatila, where it encounters Falangists being mustered to enter the camps. (One stands sharpening a dagger, presumably intended for cutting throats.) Folman's memory of the night of the massacre is of firing mortar flares from a rooftop to illuminate the camps for the Falangists. It is the last of his recollections to surface, and when he discusses this with the psychologist, the latter connects it to his being a child of Holocaust survivors who associates Sabra and Shatila with the World War II murder of Jews. In his unconscious mind, his friend tells him, he has played the role of the Nazi executioner. And yet, he is told, not having known what was happening in the camps that night, he should not torment himself with guilt over it.

Were there those in the IDF who did know what was happening? The last part of *Waltz With Bashir* is concerned with this question, to which it gives no unequivocal answer. The evidence presented consists of three claims: that there were Israeli officers who warned in advance that the Falange might run amok in the camps and should not be let into them; that Israeli soldiers with a partial view of the camps reported to their superiors during the night that they were witnessing Falangist atrocities; and that Defense Minister Sharon, woken and informed in the early hours of the morning by a telephone call from Ben-Yishai that terrible things were going on, politely thanked him without evincing much interest.

It is with Ben-Yishai's account of entering the camps the next morning that *Waltz With Bashir* ends. The animation, however, ends before this, for the film's final moments are composed entirely of grainy documentary footage of murdered Palestinians, sprawled and lying in bloody heaps where shot by the Falangists. *This*, says the film, can no longer be animated; *this* is too horrible for the aestheticization of illustrators; *this* is the reality into which you, the audience, are asked to awake before

leaving the movie theater. All you have seen until now has been merely a bad dream by comparison.

BY THE TIME of the massacre, I had been out of Lebanon for two-and-a-half months, having been wounded at the end of June when a command car in which I was one of two MAG operators hit a PLO mine while on patrol. I was catapulted through the air and broke my foot when I landed, but my wounds, though at first I thought I had been blinded by the dust of the explosion in my eyes, were relatively minor; the other MAGist, who was sitting across from me, had the bottom of his leg blown off. There had been a lot of shooting. Afterward, no one seemed sure if we had been fired on by an ambush or were simply banging away at the empty darkness of the night.

I remember a great deal of blind shooting that summer, like that of Folman’s armored personnel carrier. My unit was bivouacked in a Shiite village in southern Lebanon, in the heart of what is now Hizballah country, and driving the mountain roads around it, we sometimes shot at everything that didn’t move—trees, rocks, bushes, hillsides—except houses. The idea was to prevent what was left of the enemy from concentrating on shooting at us, but on the whole it struck me as a colossal waste of ammunition.

In the first weeks of the war, the Shiites were friendly. Mostly poor farmers, they tried to take it in good spirits when we entered their villages, searched their homes for weapons or suspects, and occasionally made their menfolk sit for hours in the village square while they were interrogated one by one. Although after a while you could see them beginning to chafe, they despised the PLO, which had lorded it over them and abused them, and were glad to be rid of it. I had no doubt then, and have none today, that they genuinely regarded us as liberators until we overstayed our welcome.

This is not something you would know from *Waltz With Bashir*—nor is there any reason why you should, since Folman did not spend time in the Shiite south. But you would not know anything else about the war’s wider aspects, either. The film’s audience is never told why Israel invaded Lebanon in the first place. It is not informed whom the IDF is fighting or what it is doing in Beirut. (Although the word “Palestinian” occurs several times in the film, “PLO” does not.) It is given no explanation of why Bashir Gemayel was killed or by whom, let alone that the pro-Soviet Syrians were allied with the PLO and that their troops had clashed bloodily with an Israeli division earlier in the war. It is given

no clue that the Palestinian armed forces established themselves in Lebanon after being driven out of Jordan in 1970 when they tried overthrowing King Hussein; that this ignited a civil war in Lebanon in which massacres were committed by both Palestinians and Christians, more than 300 of whom were slaughtered in the coastal town of Damour in 1976; and that Israel was seeking to implement a grand geo-strategic plan designed to crush the PLO once and for all, bring the Christians to power, rescue Lebanon from Syrian domination, place it firmly in the pro-Western camp, and sign a peace treaty with it.

SINCE FOLMAN does not talk to his interviewees about these things, there is no saying how much they remember them, but it is inconceivable that they did not discuss them in the summer of 1982. Even units that saw intense combat spent most of their time sitting around and waiting while the war progressed in fits and starts, and while they waited they argued about it. In my own battalion, this started on the night of our call-up. We were still getting into our uniforms when someone expressed anger at being made part of “Sharon’s little war,” and someone else retorted that, although a “little war” like the 1978 Litani campaign would indeed be pointless, Sharon wanted a big war and *that* was worth fighting.

I agreed. The 1978 campaign, in which Israel seized a narrow strip of southern Lebanon up to the Litani River and established a pro-Israeli Christian militia in it, had done nothing to change the basic Lebanese equation; a repeat performance extending this buffer zone a bit further—the “40 kilometers” into Lebanon that Sharon officially declared to be the war’s objective when it broke out—would not have made much of a difference. But there was reason to suspect that Sharon was lying in order to conceal his grand plan, and I hoped he was. To deal the PLO a devastating blow, free Lebanon from the Syrians, and make peace: only something so ambitious could justify risking our lives for it.

Sharon was indeed lying and his big war was debated in the army in Lebanon that summer just as it was in Israel itself. Most of the reservists I was with were for it, though perfectly aware of its costs. Many of us knew men who were killed and wounded. In the war’s second or third week, glancing at a two-day-old newspaper, I learned of the death in action of an ex-next-door neighbor whose small daughter had played regularly with mine. Another time, my platoon was brought to a Palestinian

refugee camp outside of Tyre. All its males had been rounded up and were made to pass before a table at which sat an Israeli intelligence officer and a local informer, placed in a box with a slit he could peer through. Each man was asked a few questions, the officer and informer conferred briefly, and the man was either freed or marched off to detention. A large crowd of Palestinian women had gathered and was agitatedly looking on, and our job was to maintain a semblance of order. Several times the crowd surged forward with a high-pitched babble of voices and we had to fire in the air to hold it back.

A *selekstia!* It was the wrong, the unacceptable word, but I couldn't think of another one. Of course, the men singled out were not going to their deaths; they might be handled roughly, but they would live. It wasn't pleasant, though. In the front row of the women stood a quite beautiful Palestinian girl of about sixteen or seventeen with short, curly black hair and a checked keffiyah knotted around her neck. She was crying silently. A tall, handsome youngster was being led off. Her brother? Boyfriend? She unknotted her keffiyah and waved goodbye to him with it. He couldn't wave back because his hands were tied behind his back.

And so I don't fault Ari Folman for his associations, though I do think that it was flagrantly irresponsible of him to have introduced them into *Waltz With Bashir* in the way he does. As vilely anti-Semitic as it is to compare Israel's actions to those of the Nazis, it is perfectly natural for Israelis to think of the Holocaust in certain situations, because they, unlike other peoples, still live in the Holocaust's shadow. It was this shadow that lay over Tel Aviv's Rabin Square—in those days Kikar Malkhei Yisra'el, Kings of Israel Square—when an estimated 400,000 people, the largest crowd ever to turn out for a political demonstration in Israel, gathered in protest a few days after the Sabra and Shatila massacre.

My foot freshly out of its cast, I was one of them. We all felt the same outrage, which was only compounded by Prime Minister Begin's foolishly scornful remark that "Christians kill Muslims and the world blames the Jews." Yes, Christians had killed Muslims, but they had done it on the Jews' watch and the Jews had their share of responsibility. The world, as far as I was concerned, could go to hell, but I could only tell it to do so if I kept strict accounts with myself.

THE EVENTS surrounding the Sabra and Shatila massacre are not entirely clear to this day. Unlike Israel, which conducted a formal judicial investigation whose conclusions forced Ariel Sharon

to resign from office, the Lebanese government, headed after Bashir Gemayel's death by his less pro-Israel brother Amin, never bothered to look into the affair, much less punish any of its perpetrators. Although the Israeli investigation turned up no evidence that the massacre was committed with IDF complicity, it did establish that the army should have known better than to let the Falangists into the camps, should have supervised them more closely once they were in them, and should have acted to get them out immediately as soon as the first atrocities were reported.

Why didn't it? There are better and more humdrum explanations than the conspiracy theories of a joint Israeli-Falangist plot to panic Lebanon's Palestinians into a mass flight to Syria similar to their flight from Palestine in 1948. It was, after all, the middle of the night. No one on the Israeli side was very sure of what was going on. No one was eager to wake his commanding officer at such an hour over what might turn out to be a minor matter. Israel had been waiting, frustrated, for months for the Christians to join the fray—this, too, was part of waltzing with Bashir—and now that they finally had done it, no one wanted to take them to task. And in any case, the Falangist command structure was weak; gaining control over Christian militiamen rampaging in the alleys of the camps would not have been easy. Rushing in unprepared Israeli troops to corral them while possibly getting caught in Christian-Palestinian crossfire could only have seemed like a potential nightmare. Better to wait a few hours until daylight, when the picture would become clearer . . .

This was negligence, perhaps uncondonable, but it was not, on Israel's part, a planned slaughter. Yet who, a quarter of a century later, bothers to make the distinction? Not *Waltz With Bashir*, which settles for a murky ambiguity. As elsewhere, the film explores one kind of amnesia while perpetuating another. Folman's personal memories of Lebanon in the summer of 1982, their loss symbolized by his imagined entry into Beirut from the Lethean waters of the sea, are recovered. The memories of the state of Israel are not.

It can be argued that this doesn't matter. Folman has told interviewers that *Waltz With Bashir* is an "antiwar" film. Why must it deal with anything that isn't necessary for it to make its point?

But to be "antiwar" in a general way is possible only for a sworn pacifist; otherwise, it makes no more sense than does being "pro-war" in a general way. Precisely because wars are never pleasant for the men who fight in them, much less for the civil-

ians who get in their way, it is possible, by ignoring their historical circumstances as does *Waltz With Bashir*, to make an antiwar statement about any war. Such a statement, however, no matter how emotionally powerful, must remain intellectually shallow.

ISRAEL'S 1982 war in Lebanon was not, as its domestic critics loudly observed, one of self-defense. There was no pressing need for it, and some of its major objectives were unrealistic. Lebanon's Christians were not nearly as strong or united as they had managed to convince Israeli leaders that they were, and Bashir Gemayel would in all likelihood have been as unable as his predecessors to rule the strife-torn country he became president of. Nor were his promises to Israel reliable. Bashir was an Arab politician subject to the exigencies and intrigues of Arab politics, and the Falange-Israeli alliance was one of convenience that he would have broken when it suited him, as did his brother Amin.

But neither was the 1982 war the simple failure that it is today remembered as having been by most Israelis, to say nothing of the rest of the world. This belief has been nourished by many things: the war's over 300 Israeli dead; its civilian casualties, at first greatly inflated by the media; the trauma of Sabra and Shatila; Amin Gemayel's reneging on his brother's commitments; Menachem Begin's post-war depression and resignation, widely attributed to his remorse at having let Ariel Sharon have his way; and above all, Israel's getting permanently bogged down in the Lebanese south, which led to Hizballah's rise as a resistance movement and a long guerrilla war that claimed hundreds more Israeli lives. By the time Israel finally and ignominiously withdrew from southern Lebanon in the year 2000, the summer of 1982 had come to seem the opening battle of a disastrous two-decade campaign.

But it need not have been that way. Had Israel acted wisely after the siege of Beirut was over and withdrawn from all of Lebanon then, leaving control of the south to friendly Christian and Shiite militias, the 1982 war would look different today. Though it still would not have achieved its objective of Christian hegemony in a Lebanon at peace with Israel, it would mainly be remembered for the decisive blow it dealt the PLO, which lost its military and territorial base on Israel's border and was driven into exile in North Africa. Ironically, the Israeli Left that opposed the war has better reason to appreciate its accomplishments than does the Right that supported it, since the PLO was so weakened that it was forced within a few years to abandon its

call for Israel's destruction, endorse a two-state solution to the conflict, and engage in the negotiations that led to the 1993 Oslo Agreement.

The “first Lebanese war,” as it is now called in the wake of the “second Lebanese war” of 2006, was thus neither futile nor unjustifiable. The PLO was a brutal enemy that deserved to be driven from Lebanese soil, for Lebanon's sake as well as for Israel's. Doing this was nothing to be ashamed of.

AND YET a sense of undeclared shame hovers over most of the interviews in *Waltz With Bashir*. It is there in the toneless voices, the baffled looks, the averted eyes that seem to share a secret too painful for words. And it is present in the post-traumatic stress disorder that, so the film encourages us to think, at least some of Folman's interviewees suffer from. Although acute war-related PTSD is largely a function of personality and intensity of combat, the syndrome's chronic form, it is widely recognized today, involves social factors, too, and occurs inversely to a veteran's ability to think positively of his military experience and take pride in it. Because many Israelis who fought in the summer of 1982 do feel such pride, Folman's interviewees are not representative. Nevertheless, wars that may ultimately leave their participants feeling that they have taken part in something purposeless or reprehensible have higher incidences of permanent traumatization, and this is true of the first Lebanese war as well.

In the end, everything is a matter of context. The trouble with *Waltz With Bashir* is that it has none. It is all images and no commentary. Or rather, the little commentary it provides, like that of the TV news, is entirely image-driven. Folman's film is a child of our times, which likes its visual bites, like its sound bites, to be compact. We do not have the patience for history.

My guess (readers of COMMENTARY will know if I am right by the time they read this) is that *Waltz With Bashir* will win its Oscar. What doubts I had were dispelled the other day by watching international TV coverage of the fighting in Gaza. Images, images. And how balanced they were. Here dead Palestinian children in Jabalya—and here a hole in the wall of a home in Sderot. *Waltz With Bashir* will win because it is a perfect opportunity to be similarly balanced. What terrible things Israel has done—and how wonderful it is to have souls sensitive enough to admit it. A country that knows its Chopin can't be all bad. My friend tells me it's Opus 64.