

Pain and emptiness for some,

a sense of loss and deprivation for others. Amos

Gitai first went to meet the people of Wadi

Rushmia in 1981. He picked a Jewish family, an

Arab one and a mixed couple. Twenty years later, in 2001, none of

them is better-off. Some have died, others left. Those who stayed

live in ever-worsening conditions. The little valley is totally different

from the rest of Haifa, although it's right in the middle of the city. It

was forgotten for decades and then invaded by developers. The soul

of Wadi remains, but it's now broken and bitter. Time has destroyed

hope of a better life.

The valley was dug by the British, used as a gravel-pit when

the harbour was being built, then abandoned gradually to become a

shantytown. People started settling there for different reasons. The

Arabs who had been expelled in 1948, their houses destroyed, had no

choice. They were victims of the law of "absentee properties" which

stated that any person who stayed away from their house for at least

three days would no longer own the property. The state would take

over. Those who wanted to go back to their houses had to pay rent to

the state. Some simply started squatting in Wadi.

During the 1950s they were joined by Jewish immigrants

from North Africa and Eastern Europe. When the municipality of

Haifa began implementing its new town planning policies, the site

was excluded. Those who lived there were left behind. Life seemed to

go on without them. Each of them has a different story. These Arabs

and Jews have lived side by side in fragile harmony.

Amos Gitai found the valley by accident. At the time,

studying architecture, he used to take a different way back home every day. That's how he ended up discovering Wadi.

He shot the first part of the documentary film in 1981. He met Yusuf, whose house had been destroyed, and his wife Isha. He'd

*"You call this living? I'm not
alive here! I'm worse off... than a
mountain fox. I'm like a snake.*

A snake is probably better off.

Like a snake, I eat my heart and

I eat the earth. Is that living?

Damn this world!"

borrowed money from friends in order to build a shack. They had no running water, lived in basic conditions.

"I collect scrap: timber waste... scrap metal, blocks, building waste... That's all. What kind of job is that? You think I'd work in an office? I do the simplest jobs. What can I do? This is our job. For the Haifa municipality."

Ironically enough, he works for the very same municipality that tried to evict him in order to free more space for future residential areas. Yusuf's extended family left Haifa after the 1948 war. He has no idea where they might be: Iraq? Libya? Syria? Qatar? They might be anywhere for all he knows. He decided to stay but was evicted from his house before it was demolished. He has nothing left. His daily concern is to earn enough money for food and cigarettes.

He is friends with Myriam who is married to Skandar. Skandar is an Arab, she Jewish from Hungary. They had to face gossip and threats for years after they got together. They say that time has made things easier, that it was much worse in the 1960s. They live in a house that looks as if it might collapse anytime. Skandar is a fisherman but, he says, "the sea is sick." There is no work, no hope for any kind of improvement. "We're stuck with the sea. You earn nothing, so you just hope. Perhaps tomorrow, or the day after. Meanwhile, the wheel of time moves backwards."

Myriam is fond of gardening. She keeps talking of plants as if they were a means for her to understand the world and the absurdity of it all. Nonetheless, she is positive, believes that her own experience conveys hope for the country. Myriam has made a haven in the dryness of the valley where they live. She talks of love, understanding, sympathy, exudes a kind of unfailing wisdom. Thanks to her, Wadi looks like an oasis lost in space and time.

Then there is what can never be forgiven nor forgotten. The pain that will not go away. The sadness of never being home. Iso and Salo are two Jewish brothers from Roumania who came to Israel to seek a shelter, but they are somehow stuck in the past. They could not afford to have a decent house or apartment so they started squatting in Wadi. They fixed up a house, planted trees and, for a second, dreamed of peace and quiet. They went through hell but have found no rest. The municipality has plans that no one can prevent. If it has been decided that a house must be destroyed, then it will be.

"My brother bought this land from the development authority. He bought it for peanuts. Now they say: 'This is our land. It's not your land.' We've lived here for 30 years now! Now the police come and beat him up. His head was split open. Blood coming out

like water. They locked me up. They beat up my old lady. What do you think of that? An old lady! She's all swollen up, here! They took her and me to the Rothschild Hospital. I'd been beaten on the spine! Now the police come to beat us up here. We've lived here for 30 years now. We've never been in trouble with the police or the court. And yesterday, the police came here! Did they have to beat up my brother? He was a ship supervisor. And the police used CS gas on him! Is it right for the police to behave like that? Why? Did we kill anybody? Did we beat anyone? It was better when we lived with the Arabs. Now it's changed."

The two brothers have lived in Wadi for 30 years. They escaped the nightmare of camps in Russia. As they speak, they look more and more delirious, one finishing the other's sentences, repeating words over and over again. They never look at each other. They stare into space and chain-smoke. There is something disturbing about them. One has half his fingers missing. We will never know what happened to him. The trauma is there. The scars will not heal. The open wound keeps bleeding. One of the brothers tells his story. The sight of this old man sobbing is more than one can take.

"I have come from Russia, you know, I have come from Beshet (concentration camp). From there to Bukovina, and then Roumania. There they grabbed me because I was an engineer...to build two turbines on the ships Komemiyut and Atzma'ut..... The English captured the Komemiyut and the Atzma'ut and brought them to Cyprus. Then in Cyprus I was ill. Golda Meir brought me to Israel, in a Greek ship. And my mother too. Mama died here, later."

"And your Papa?"

"He died in Beshet concentration camp. I put him in the grave. In the Ukraine. There were a lot of Jews in the camps – Beshet, Budovka, Beilika...That was the end for the Jews. I don't know how I got out with my mother. It was in Siberia, I was there. I put my Papa in the earth. I received compensation from my working place. No German compensations! No German can repay me. I put my Papa in a grave so the dogs wouldn't eat him. I put my father outside. I saw the dogs coming to eat him. So I put my father in the earth. Take their money? They can never repay me. Bring me a cigarette, from the box there. Nobody can repay me for this. No one, even a German. I was an idealist for Israel, that's all. I could have gone to America, to my family. All my family is there. New York, Bronx, Brooklyn, New Jersey, I didn't want to stop here. I'm here, that's all. I'm here, I have principles you know. A man must have principles in life. I was beaten, you know. Bloody beatings. Beaten 24 times with a gun... With the gun! 'This

swine Jew, the slave with the teeth' Hitler with the Roumanian army, they caught me. 'The swine Jew, the slave with the teeth!' I'll never forget this. And here, the police came to beat us up."

Everything has become confused in his head. Only the beatings remain. The past and the present are intertwined. Memories become reality, the here and now keeps looking back. Bodies are worn, spirits broken; memories have anchored themselves in the present. They were brought to Israel, but they are part of a wider scheme. Arabs and Jews are suddenly alike when faced with the municipality.

In his film Amos Gitai hardly speaks. He neither butts in nor offers his opinion. The stories speak for themselves. There is no point in making further comments.

Ten years after the first film sequence, he goes back to Wadi. Things have changed. All is desolation and ruin. Living conditions have worsened, work has become scarcer, new immigrants from Russia have arrived. Yusuf has had a child with his new wife. The "brutal architecture policy" is still being carried out. The Roumanian brothers are dead. Myriam's hair has turned white and sadness has replaced the glow in her eyes. She has left Wadi out of fear of being hit by stones. Her house was demolished, so she decided to move away. Racial conflict eventually got the better of her relationship with Skandar:

"Skandar's son was making all kinds of trouble, coming between her and him. He told him, 'If you don't divorce her, we won't come here anymore, you'll never see us again.' His son had become a man. So Skandar said: 'We'll see...' Then the son came back: 'Make up your mind... It's either me and my sisters, or Myriam. You can't have both!' Skandar answered: 'No, I need you.' So he started beating Myriam. He beat her in the morning, at noon, at night. She got tired of it. So she ran away and left him. A week or two later, she was back: 'What's yours, you take, what's mine, I take.' They had chickens, ducks, a turkey... They divided everything. She took what was hers and left."

"Skandar returned to the sea. He started getting aches and pains, had many illnesses. Diabetes, asthma... He had illnesses I don't even know the name of! Then, one day, he dropped down dead. He was putting some new paint on his boat. He fell to the ground and passed away. His children came to see him. His daughter's an important doctor, she works at the hospital. She examined him and said: 'My father has gone.' That's how he died. They put him in the morgue, then buried him. That was the end of him. Myriam wept for

him. Because she loved him. What can I say? When a woman lives with a man for a few years, of course, she needs to cry for him a little.”

Myriam has become a sad and bitter woman. She exudes pain. The way things turned out has broken her spirit. Somewhere down the road, it ended up being his ‘race’ against hers.. Her sense of failure is huge. “It’s over now, the book is closed. It’s best not to remember.” She says she had plans after she left Skandar but was then too busy keeping her head above water. Although she no longer lives in Wadi, she keeps coming back to plant trees and do some gardening. But the passion is gone. She still uses plants as a metaphor for people. When she mentions plants that she grows in pots, she philosophically adds: “Of course they’re better off in the soil, but what can you do? It’s the same for people, they can’t always live where they want.”

The contrast between the woman she used to be and the one she has become is striking. She’s now a betrayed woman who disparages Arab mothers, claiming that they condition their sons not to commit themselves to non-Arab women. She does not say much; only bits, which makes her story all the more tragic for viewers who are left to imagine it for themselves. Ten years have gone by. Her personal experience has swept away the hope that Arabs and Jews can live together in harmony.

New immigrants from Russia have installed themselves in Wadi. Omar, a young Arab, lives with one of them, Yelena. They moved into a collapsing house but, as he says, Yelena likes it, so they will fix it up. This is one of the main themes running through the documentaries. Nothing gets built or rebuilt. It’s all about fixing things. The past has anchored itself in the present and it cannot be erased. It’s the basis of what’s to come. Omar grew up in the Wadi. He knows the stories of every house in the neighbourhood. Those who used to live there are gone, but their stories live on.

There’s a terrible sense of bitterness. The neighbourhood used to be lively and full of love. Now it’s an urban wasteland and has a dream-like character. Yusuf is the true story-teller here. “At night, you can hear all kinds of voices. The howling of dogs and wolves. People, goats... You just sit there and listen. What can I tell you? You just sit and listen. What do you think about? About life. That’s what you think about. About what you must do tomorrow, next year, next month... What else is there to think about?”

The end of the second part of Gitai’s film takes place in Tel Aviv airport. Hundreds of new immigrants are passing through there every week. They share the same sense of longing: ‘returning’

to Israel, being with their loved ones. A man keeps repeating that he still cannot believe he has become an Israeli. Most of those who arrive in Haifa come from Russia. It has developed a kind of hybrid culture over the years: Jews, Arabs, immigrants from all over the world trying to live side by side peacefully..

Ten years later, in 2001, Amos Gitai goes back to Wadi for the third time. The landscapes are the same but the atmosphere changed again. Yusuf has brought his two nieces and their children to live with him. They used to live in Nablus but the rest of their family have died. Yusuf is all they have. Although the living conditions are terrible, Yusuf points out that, at least, there is no fighting. They are protected from the rest of the country with its daily bloodshed and hatred.

Myriam is now an old woman. She lives by herself in a modern building above Wadi. Twenty years before she was in love, happy in her garden. Now, she sits on her bed and says that, if she wants to get some air, she needs to stick her head out of the window. She has cancer but she will not have surgery. The ten years, nonetheless, have gradually eased the resentment:

"There's something true about dreams. When my body feels bad, I always dream about Skandar. I tell him I feel bad. The body or soul looks for someone to help deal with the pain. Someone who can tell me that what's happening isn't good and that I must take care. That's the reason why I dream about Skandar whenever I have problems with my body."

She's all alone. She says that she used to be in heaven. She keeps talking about her dreams. Every time she goes to sleep, she is surrounded by the ones she loved. There is something poetic about her. The lights go out but the camera will not move away from Myriam's face. She was the living soul of Wadi and since she left, desolation has been spreading like the creepers she used to plant. It's all over now. The remaining characters seem to be living with their heads turned backwards. Arabs, Jews, everyone says that things used to be better. Yusuf is smoking a cigarette with an old Arab woman. She is from Yassur. Her whole family moved away from Haifa after 1948. They are scattered everywhere. The irony is that 1948 was a turning point: Jewish families were reunited while Arab families were scattered to the winds. She tells her story:

"Yassur is near Masmia and Kastina. Kibbutz Duran was next to us. In the summer of 1948 we left. They wanted us to stay. Really. The Jews told us: 'Stay, we will live together.' We left. They didn't drive us away from our land. One has to tell the truth. We left

on our own. They didn't attack us or anything. We were told to stay in our town, that no one would hurt us. But some people didn't want to stay. What's wrong with living together? We thought that they'd return after a few weeks. People decided for themselves. They didn't think they'd stay away for the rest of their lives."

Later, a young Bedouin starts telling the story of his family. They have been in Haifa for many generations. He says that there was no such thing as racism in the times of the Turks or the British. Jews, Arabs, all lived in peace and mutual respect. The phenomenon is recent. He speaks vehemently but conveys a message of peace:

"We want to live in Israel with the Jews, we're not racist. We lived with the Jews, we were born with the Jews, and we will stay with the Jewish people. We won't discriminate between Palestinian, Arab, Lebanese etc. We want a democracy like abroad, where people live without war... without discrimination."

They all live in the past because the present is hopeless. Time has left them waiting. The rest of the city has been developed around them, the bulldozers getting closer. Building is about taking control over the land. Those who have stayed know this is where it will all end. How could they afford to move away? And where would they go? They just sit around awaiting the end. Yusuf stands for the past, a past that will not yield to cranes. He goes to the mall at the end of the documentary: it feels like two worlds are meeting for the first time. The mall is crowded, the music loud. Yusuf in an elevator looks like an anachronism. He walks past the shops like a ghost. As he gets out, he feels dizzy. The two worlds are incompatible. Too much time has passed. Yusuf goes back home; he starts doing what he has done all his life: collecting scrap, wood, anything to help his family survive. This is what his life has been about, surviving.



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