

Movie discussion resource

The Other Son/The Son of the Other

Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.

Genre: Drama (French, English, Hebrew, Arabic)

Rating: M (scene of violence, brief language and drug use)

Length: 101 minutes

Starring: Emmanuelle Devos, Pascal Elbe, Jules Sitruk, Mehdi Dehbi, Arren Omari, Khalifa Natour

Screenplay: Noam Filoussi, Lorraine Levy (Director), Nathalie Saugeon



Brief synopsis

The story contemplates what if the son raised by a Jewish family was an Arab by birth? And what if a Palestinian family's adored youngest boy was Jewish? To heighten the irony, the birth switch happened when a Haifa clinic was evacuated during an Iraqi scud missile attack in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Joseph (Jules Sitruk), in his mandatory national service medical for the Israeli army, discovers that his blood group does not match either of his parents – his doctor mother Orith, and his colonel father, Alon. Palestinian Muslims, Leila and Said, on the West Bank, learn that their son Yacine (Mehdi Dehbi), recently returned from studying in Paris, actually belongs to Orith and Alon.

This film explores the question of identity – what it means to be a Jew or an Arab - in the politically charged context of Israel, and particularly the Gaza Strip.

Questions for discussion

Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

Shaping of identity

Joseph has been raised as an Israeli Jew. He strongly believes in his religion (he's one of his synagogues best pupils) and defends his country's stance in the conflict. When he learns that he should have been raised as a Palestinian Muslim, he questions his beliefs. Which side of the fence should he be on? Should there be a fence at all? Discuss what shapes identity, values, principles and prejudices, and religious and political views?

Love your enemy

The boys each grow up in an "enemy" family across the wall that divides Israel from the West Bank. While politics may have separated Palestinians and Israelis, families do have an opportunity to form personal relationships that transcend the divide. Thus Yacine and Joseph are able to form a growing bond and begin to understand each other, finding a peace that has escaped their respective countries and families. Discuss.

Different ways of coping

The two teenagers and their families are faced with the challenge of shifting religious identities, family connections, and political realities. They each experience stages of grief. The fathers are deeply in denial. Yacine's older brother Bilal responds with fury at the notion that he's grown up with a Jew. In contrast, the warm-hearted and pragmatic mothers seek reconciliation with their lost offspring, and arrange a meeting between the entangled families. All the females ignore the nature-nurture debate: Yacine and Joseph's little sisters immediately become friends. Do you think this portrayal of gender differences is realistic? Discuss.

The social and economic context

There is a stark difference between the living conditions for the Palestinians and the Israelis. We see the difficulties imposed by checkpoints; the ominously looming fence seems to function both as a physical barrier and as a metaphor for cultural and religious division. Yacine has to endure checkpoint searches just to visit the West Bank home of his parents, but with his new Israeli passport, he can work and play on the Tel Aviv beach denied to other West Bank Palestinians. Joseph experiences the claustrophobia of walking along the huge barbed wire-topped separation wall (covered with anti-Israeli graffiti). Lawrence Toppman observes: "The movie doesn't need to preach a "we're all equal" message. When we watch the boys bond with their new kin over food or music, then see the lines of Palestinians plodding through armed checkpoints to reach jobs or visit Israeli friends, we get the point: These two Semitic peoples are bound by traditions and genetics but divided by seemingly irresolvable politics'. Discuss.

Hospitality – sharing a meal together

(Henri Nouwen): "Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines." Discuss ways in which hospitality bridges the divide between these two entangled families.

Telling the bad news – the clinical response

The clinic director meets with both sets of parents to explain what happened, and in a very matter of fact way outlines how the records of the boys will be corrected and offers the empty suggestion that they find a way to 'get on with their lives'. What's your experience of doctors and others delivering difficult news?

The religious life

The rabbi, who has taught Joseph since he was a child, informs him in a legalistic way that he will now need to officially convert to the faith since he was born to a non-Jewish mother. Although he's been circumcised and Bar Mitzvah'd and a good student, now he's not considered Jewish unless he goes through a complicated conversion process. At one point he jokes, "I'll have to swap my kippur for a suicide bomb". What's the essential nature of religious life, and in what ways do rituals and practices aid religious life, and in what ways do they confound and clutter it?

Go back to where you came from

The TV series 'Go back to where you came from' sought to show what happens when people, hostile to the 'other', are placed in a situation where they have to walk in the shoes of the 'other', gaining understanding and compassion. Perceptively, in *The Star-Ledger* critic Stephen Whitty writes: "In the end, it seems, this is not a story about two families, and two lands. It's a story about one family and one world'. Discuss.

One family, one world/we and all strangers are one

Jesus says: "*I ask that they may all be one. As you, Father (Mother), are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.*"

We and all strangers, our most bitter enemies, are one. The cry of the most far-flung peoples rises in our hearts: the hope of our salvation rests in theirs. Our pain, our freedom, our beauty is all one thing. O One, may the light of your love dispel the illusion of our manyness, the great sadness of our separation. With the glory of our varied lives, in your love, O One, we are one'. (*Steve Garnaas-Holmes*) What is your response?

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