

# Cornerstone



Written and directed by David Tauber  
Fiction | 23 minutes | 2013

## Summary

This is the story of a young man adapting to his studies during his first year in yeshiva. As protagonist, he is having difficulty finding his place in the yeshiva. However hard he tries, he cannot seem to use his abilities to the fullest, or feel like he belongs with the other students. As a result,

he undergoes a spiritual and emotional crisis, spends most of his time in bed, and decides to leave the yeshiva. After undergoing an inner change during a Purim party, he makes peace with his place in the yeshiva and feels able to go forward without leaving.

## Topics

- *Separateness and belonging* — conflicts created by the situation in which the protagonist struggles with a reality that is not suited to him.
- *Maturation and inner growth* — processes that take place in a young person's essence as he discovers his inner strengths.
- *Difficulties in acclimation* — a move to a new place sometimes involves feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- *Exclusive devotion to Torah study* — Torah study as a major value in life.
- *The yeshiva world* — the world of sanctity juxtaposed with the world of the mundane.



## Analysis of the Cinematic Content and Language

### The Film's Content

#### 1. The Characters

##### The Main Characters

The protagonist is a young man who, after graduating from high school, defers his army service in order to study Torah in a yeshiva. He has almost no friends in

the yeshiva, and he seems to have chosen a different path from that of his family and his childhood friends, most of whom have already enlisted.

His transition to the yeshiva and his attempt to fit himself into its world are hard for him. Contrary to his expectations of himself, he does not learn as well as the other students do or identify intellectually with the texts at hand. He does not feel like he belongs, he is unhappy, and he tries with all his might to connect. The protagonist is the soul trying to find its place in the world. Most of his dialogue does not take place with external figures; it takes place inside him, expressing the voices that come from inside him.

#### Supporting Characters

**The havruta (study partner)** - A study partner in a yeshiva is called a *havruta*. The concept comes from the method of learning in the yeshiva, in which the students learn in pairs. While the word "havruta" refers to the two study partners who read the text together, analyze it, and ponder it, the word has come to signify each individual in the pair. In this film the havruta, a young bearded man who seems to be an older student in the yeshiva, is also nameless. He appears to symbolize the unity in the yeshiva that comes from years of study. The communication between the study partners is dry and unemotional. Although the protagonist's study partner sees that he is suffering, he does not speak to him about his difficulties, nor does he share any anecdotes of what he himself experienced when he first arrived at the yeshiva. His advice consists of a single sentence: "You should talk to Rabbi Shraga." In the scene in which the protagonist packs his belongings after deciding to leave the yeshiva, the study partner allows him to speak and simply listens, evidently believing that the protagonist will reach his own conclusions.



**The Head of the Yeshiva** - The rabbi who heads the yeshiva first appears in the film as a middle aged, bearded man who peers out from among a long line of students who are standing in line in order to speak with him. The filmmaker has created this character as distant and unreachable. At first, the protagonist stands in line to speak with him, but leaves in the middle, giving up the possibility of doing so. During the Purim party at the end of the film, the protagonist tries in every way possible to get close to the rabbi and touch him. The change within the protagonist begins the moment that the touch takes place.

**The Teacher in the Yeshiva** - Like the communication between the protagonist and his study partner, the communication between the teacher and the students is dry. As the teacher discusses an issue, the protagonist, who is trying hard to follow the material being covered in the class and blend into the group of students, asks a question. The message hidden in the question is the protagonist's *cri de coeur* that it is the spirit of the matter that he does not understand, and not merely the technical detail. The teacher, who is oblivious to the protagonist's suffering, attends to the question but not to the person who asked it.

**The Rabbi Who Teaches an Online Class** - In the modern age, the Internet has become a major tool in responsa and classes in religious topics. The availability of teachers of Torah online enables every person to have a direct link to Jewish religious law and Jewish philosophy even if he or she does not belong to an organized community or study environment. The online rabbi, an upright and well-spoken man, speaks in clichés about the wonderful feeling that Torah study gives to yeshiva students. When the protagonist tries to engage the rabbi in dialogue, he receives a chilly and insensitive response. The impression that is created

is that nothing can help him — not people, and not even online classes.

**Parents and Friends** - Deciding to take a break, the protagonist spends the Sabbath with his modern Orthodox family. During the Sabbath meal, his mother and brothers are somewhat distant from him, though they call him "Sweetie" and "the young rabbi." Because this year he has decided to deviate from the conventional path of the national-religious movement — which advocates combining religious study with worldly involvement — and to study Torah exclusively, there is a clear expectation that he will excel in this field. His mother already calls him "rabbi" even though he is only a first-year student in the yeshiva. No real dialogue between the protagonist and his family takes place at the meal. They ask him to give a brief talk on a religious topic even though it seems that he would prefer to talk about his difficulties. Taking up the challenge unwillingly, he gives a fragmented, disorganized talk, and none of his listeners understands him. When at last he is certain that his father wants to ask him a question about what he said, his father surprises him by asking something that has nothing to do with the talk he has just given. This shows that he had not been listening at all to the words of his son, who feels mocked, misunderstood, and lonely among the members of his family.

The protagonist's difficulties intensify when he meets with his friends. There, too, he cannot create a dialogue, but only a fragmented connection. His friends joke among themselves, using soldiers' vocabulary and talking about concepts from the army that are foreign to him, and they ignore him. When one of them suddenly remembers that he is present and asks him how he is doing in the yeshiva, he does not call him by his name. Instead, he refers to the protagonist only as "rabbenu" ("our teacher"), and does not wait to hear his answer.

## 2. The Dramatic Conflict

The conflict in the film addresses the disparity between expectation and reality, between the utopian and the human. The protagonist grapples with his expectations of yeshiva study and his disappointment when these expectations are not met. This is an inner conflict that takes place within the protagonist's soul. He undergoes an inner crisis on discovering that the world of religious study and the yeshiva, to which he yearns to belong, is not right for him and does not make him happy, as he had expected. While it is not clear whether he is the only student in the yeshiva who feels this way, he is the only one who dares to admit it. Throughout the film, he tries to undergo an emotional process so that the texts that were written centuries ago by people for whom they were as important as life itself will reach him, and then he will feel that they belong to him and that he belongs to the books, his fellow students, and the yeshiva. It seems, then, that the dramatic conflict is the inner conflict of the protagonist.

## 3. The Structure of the Film

*Exposition* — The film opens with an excerpt from *Shmonah Kvatzim* (Eight Collections), a work by Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook, against the background of sounds of learning from the yeshiva study hall. "When fear of God first comes upon the general and individual person, it leads him to boredom and idleness. He loses his will and his essential selfhood." Rabbi Kook is speaking about the process that a person trying to reach reverence for God undergoes. At the first stage, he experiences a spiritual, emotional, and existential crisis, and only later is he able to gather his strength and return to himself. The excerpt states that those who persevere in the right path even when they suffer physical and spiritual torment are assured that in the

end, “the stone that the builders scorned will surely become the cornerstone” — that the very weakness and difficulty that the student perceived in himself will become his strength.

The first scene opens with a voiceover of the protagonist’s inner monologue. An image of a window looking out onto a pastoral scene gradually comes into focus. The lighting is weak, and slowly grows stronger giving the impressions of a sunrise. At first it looks as if the protagonist is awakening to a new day, but as the narration eventually reveals, the lighting is that of twilight, and that the protagonist waking after sleeping away the afternoon hours. The dissonance between the promising morning and the fall of evening and darkness reflect what is happening in the protagonist’s soul. He is in the midst of a time of study that is supposed to awaken strength and freshness within him, but he is actually in the midst of a time of darkness.

The Hebrew title of the film, *Ve-zar lo yavin zot* (literally, “A stranger will never understand this”), which appears after the opening image, is written at first in Rashi script and then replaced by ordinary Hebrew writing. The style of the writing hints at the yeshiva student’s unique conflict: those who are not part of the yeshiva’s inner world will never be able to understand it.

*The initiating incident* — The protagonist’s suffering stems from the fact that he cannot learn, that he enters the library and opens books, but the words in them feel meaningless to him. In the protagonist’s dreams or daydreams these books contain only blank pages. In the study hall, all the students around him are learning and are full of life, while he sits lost and lifeless. He is frustrated by the fact that he cannot manage to speak with anyone, and that nobody understands him. His *cri de coeur*, “I want to, but I am unable,” remains unexpressed. Realizing that his place is not in the yeshiva, he plans to leave.

*The turning point* — At the yeshiva’s Purim party, after the protagonist has already decided to leave the yeshiva and has returned only to pack his belongings, he sits outside the circle, emotionally and physically distant from the dancers, watching them as he sips his wine. The wine causes a softening of his inner boundaries and the hierarchical boundaries of the yeshiva.

*The climax* — The yeshiva’s usual atmosphere is transformed during the Purim party. The intellectual world weakens, and the wine, the joy, and the dancing open the emotional world, enabling the creation of a new situation. The protagonist drinks wine, his suffering evident on his face, and remains wrapped in his own world. The moment he sees the rabbi at the center of the circle, he decides to break in. When he is already part of the circle, he tries desperately to grasp the rabbi and accidentally drops the wine bottle, which shatters. He feels a renewed connection once he breaks into the circle. He approaches the rabbi and speaks with him, and the rabbi answers, but he is not sure whom the answer is for. Now that the protagonist has relaxed, expressed his emotions, and even received legitimacy for them from the rabbi, he becomes part of the community. The students place their hands upon the rabbi’s arm, and the protagonist’s hand is there, too. He is part of the world that he wanted so much to belong to. As the scene progresses, the burned-out lighting becomes a white fade-out that leads the protagonist out of the separation that he had been in during the film.

*Resolution* — After the protagonist experiences inner chaos and tries to feel his way in the dark, the change takes place during the party, when everyone is drunk. When the usual structure of the yeshiva is undermined and becomes flexible, when the head of the yeshiva becomes close and almost reachable, when the wine takes effect, then the true desire emerges and the

religious study that the protagonist drew into himself breaks forth. He finally breaks into the circle that had been closed to him until then. He begins to feel something: an inner desire, an attraction and a craving for what the yeshiva world offers. The emotion that had been concealed within him is kindled, and from that moment he is no longer a stranger. He belongs in the circle, is wholly a part of it. At this stage, he can begin to learn, and very quickly he reaches the position of a long-time student who sits with a new student on the verge of crisis.

*Conclusion* — At the end of the film, the protagonist, who seems older and has a beard, is studying with a younger student. The younger man changes the text, and instead of reciting “The stone that the builders scorned will surely become the cornerstone,” as Rabbi Kook wrote, he reads: “The stone that the builders scorned has become the cornerstone,” as is written in Psalms. This may hint at the process that the protagonist has undergone, precisely as Rabbi Kook described, and his success in surviving the crisis and transforming despair into hope.

It appears that the protagonist has no name because he is actually the protagonist’s soul, and a soul, by its very nature, needs no external definitions such as a name or address.

## The Cinematic Language

### The Cinematic Genre and Language

This is a post-modern film, and as such it deals with the suffering of a person in the modern era. Post-modern cinema sees the order and logic that the modern view presumed to provide as a delusion. The post-modern



approach sees reality as chaotic, and so attempts to destroy the accepted order and create a new order that stems from subjective observation. Therefore, post-modern film has no interest in telling the story of what happened in reality, but instead reflects the protagonist's subjective point of view. It is through the protagonist that we experience both the story and the range of emotions that the protagonist feels.

### The Director's Choices

The filmmaker set himself a complex challenge. He brings the viewer into the world of the yeshiva, a world with a philosophical character and abstract content. Yeshiva study is an internal process that is conditional upon individual ethics and self-discipline. There are no examinations, nor is there external expression of the learning process. The change that the protagonist undergoes within the yeshiva is an abstract process. He experiences an emotional-spiritual crisis. The filmmaker attempts to give this abstract conflict an image and soundtrack. Using cinematic tools, he constructs a cinematic language that gives form to the story.

### The Soundtrack

*Voiceover* — The film focuses on the inner conflict taking place in the protagonist's soul. The drama, which takes place in a psychological dimension, is comprised of many voices, each of which transmits an argument, feeling, memory, or conclusion to the protagonist. In order to enable the viewer to understand what is going on in the protagonist's heart and mind, the filmmaker uses voiceover — the protagonist's inner speech. The voiceover sometimes serves as informative narration that explains concepts from the yeshiva world to viewers who are unfamiliar with them. In such cases, the narration, which is quite rapid, is accompanied by a rhythmic sound and by cynicism, so as to avoid being merely informative and to convey the feeling of the conflict.

### The Multiplicity of Effects and Layers of Sound

The soundtrack is filled with small elements that construct a world and create internal noise.

In the scene that shows the beginning of the crisis, for example, the soundtrack conveys a sense of emotional flooding. The noisy soundtrack is comprised of several sound channels mixed together: the lights in the library that are turned off one by one, the rustling leaves, the whistling wind, and the wistful Hassidic melody that accompanies the rabbi's speech. The mixing of soundtracks creates a strong sense of emotional flooding. The difficulties and crises in the protagonist's inner world cause a storm of emotions.

### Dialogue

The function of dialogue in the film is not only to convey information and advance the plot. The dialogue also hints at the protagonist's state and the relationship between him and his environment. There is no dialogue where it is supposed to be, and its absence brings the unusual situation, sense of loneliness, alienation, and suffering that the protagonist feels into sharper focus. The absence of dialogue and emotional expression seems to be typical of a yeshiva that seeks to strengthen its students' intellectual world, and sometimes this strengthening comes at the expense of their emotional world.

In the scene where the protagonist learns with his study partner, we can deduce from the dialogue that the partner has been in the yeshiva longer than the protagonist, and that he is familiar with the crises and the difficulties in acclimation that arise for first-year students. Yet none of this is expressed in the conversation, and everything comes down to a single sentence: "You should talk to Rabbi Shraga." Once the protagonist has failed in his attempt to speak with the rabbi, he cannot speak with his study partner either. When the protagonist packs his belongings after

deciding to leave the yeshiva, his study partner sits in the room. The protagonist tells him that he intends to leave and even asks him: "You understand me, right?" The study partner does not answer, and the protagonist continues to speak, perhaps to himself, perhaps to his study partner. He says that he is going to attend the Purim party, but only in order to hear the Book of Esther, and then he will say goodbye to his fellow students.

Neither is there dialogue between the protagonist and his family. At the Sabbath table, his mother asks him to give a brief talk on a religious subject. He obeys, but the members of his family do not understand it, and his idea is fragmented and unclear in any case. His mother says, "That was very... nice," and his father's reaction — asking him a question that has nothing to do with the subject of his talk — betrays his lack of interest. The lack of dialogue with his friends is worse. This scene is intentionally fragmented, and it is unclear who is sitting next to whom. We see a different character each time. In this scene, too, the protagonist does not manage to carry on a real conversation.

### Editing

The editing was done in a formalist manner common in post-modern cinema. Unlike the realist style, in which the filmmaker tries to hide the presence of the editing, in the formalist style he uses editing in an obvious manner, does not imitate time and chronology, and uses rapid and dynamic cuts to construct a superimposed rhythm. By using this style, he tries to show what is happening in the soul and the mind of the protagonist, whose thoughts are disorderly and jump from topic to topic. The pace of his thinking does not take place in reality, but only in his head. Thus, for example, when the protagonist tries to study in various places, the transitions are quick and sharp. In the Purim party, too, the editing of the scene builds an additional layer. Once the protagonist has drunk

wine, the pace of the dances slows considerably and the background music is no longer dance music, but comes from the protagonist's own inner world. The voiceover later in the scene explains that this is a scene in which he is remembering what happened rather than a scene taking place in the present, and so the editing reflects the memory of the situation rather than reality as it was.

This style of editing, which reflects what is going on internally and not necessarily what is happening in reality, enables a natural transition between a realistic scene and a dream scene. The protagonist watches online as a rabbi speaks about the experience of learning Torah. This is supposedly a realistic scene, but when the protagonist closes his eyes in the midst of watching, this marks a transition from reality to a dream state. In the dream, the protagonist is sitting with a down quilt in a large, empty hall where the rabbi is speaking, and a direct conversation takes place between them. The supposedly natural transition between the scenes is made possible by the cinematic style that moves between imagination and reality.

### Cinematography and Lighting

The lighting and cinematography also do not depict the actual lighting in the yeshiva, but rather subjective reality as the protagonist imagines or experiences it when the light closes in on him. When the protagonist realizes that he is in crisis, all the lights suddenly go out one by one until everything goes dark and he leaves the picture. It is clear that this is a depiction of his inner sense that his reality is being extinguished little by little. The use of extreme low or high camera angles; the shots of different lengths; the surrealistic, threatening lighting; the elongated shadows and limited color; and the books with empty pages — all these are evidence of the protagonist's mental state. He is in darkness, and his inner world has been shaken.

### Symbols

**The Library and the Books** - The scene showing the blank books, which symbolizes the crisis that the protagonist is undergoing, takes place at night, in the dark. The protagonist enters the empty library and opens book after book only to discover that all the pages are blank. The emptiness of the books symbolizes the emptiness of the text's meaning for him. He cannot connect to learning. Later on, once he emerges from the crisis following the rabbi's talk, he smiles with relief as he opens the books and finds them filled with letters and words. At the end of the film, the protagonist is surrounded once again by books that he is studying, and the scene is brightly lit.

**The Title of the Film** - The film's Hebrew title, *Ve-zar lo yavin zot*, is written at first in "Rashi" script (a special Hebrew script devised by the Medieval commentator Rashi) — a script that not everyone is familiar with — and is replaced later on by ordinary Hebrew script. Likewise, the conflict depicted in the film is something that not everyone can understand. It is a crisis experienced by a yeshiva student, and those who were not there will never understand it. The film attempts, in its own way, to explain the process.

**Day and Night** - At the beginning of the film, the light in the window intensifies, and there is a sense that dawn is about to break. But then it becomes clear that the sun has already set and the darkness is returning. Throughout the film, night symbolizes suffering, suffocation, and a sense that there is no way out of the crisis, while morning brings a fresh energy of vitality and action. In the scene where the protagonist is packing his belongings, the darkening window is seen once again, while in the concluding scene, as the protagonist learns with a new student, the sun's rays bathe the study hall in light.



## Methodology

### Description of the Topics and Expanded Discussion

#### Separateness and Belonging

By deciding to study in a yeshiva, the protagonist has chosen a path that differs from the home and society where he grew up. After announcing that he has chosen a path that is different from the one expected of him, he discovers that he is unable to enter the world of the yeshiva on the one hand, while on the other he feels that he no longer belongs with the friends from his past. This situation, in which a person no longer belongs to his previous world but has not yet integrated into his new world, causes a strong sense of separateness and lack of belonging. Such experiences are common during various times of transition in life, particularly among young people, new immigrants, people who choose to adopt a religiously observant lifestyle as adults, people who grew up religiously observant, or anyone who opts for a different identity and path to the one with which they were raised.

#### The Yeshiva World: A World of Sanctity

The ethos of the yeshiva is that, in order to enter the world of Torah-learning, the student must give up all concern with the material world, sharpen his inner focus, and search for the truth and inner morality. His agreement to distance himself from the mundane world and cleave to the world of sanctity includes giving up Western, secular, and academic world views, and sometimes financial stability as well. But the pleasure, inner wholeness, and emotional

and spiritual self-fulfillment make up for it, causing the student to cleave to the world of learning and holiness.

### Difficulties in Acclimation

Often, when a person removes himself from one reality in order to enter another, he or she experiences a crisis or series of crises until there is full adjustment to the new environment. These process is sometimes inevitable, such as in the transition from one school to another from early crises occur in many areas of life, such as in the transition from childhood to adolescence, or in the transition to a new job or new place of residence. During this period, the person often feels that they belong neither in the previous place nor in the new place, and a sense of separateness, alienation and loneliness often accompanies the process.

### Maturity and Inner Growth

What kinds of inner strength does a person need to blaze a trail for himself that is different from the one that his parents or society designated for him? From where can a person draw the energy for renewed growth? How can a person discover the energy and the will contained with herself? How can she overcome difficulties and obstacles?

### Exclusive Devotion to Torah Study

Torah study as a value; choosing a spiritual life over a material one for a certain length of time or for one's entire lifetime, even when this often involves giving up other values such as family, military service, and livelihood.

### Suggested Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Although the film depicts a unique world, what makes a person who is unfamiliar with that world identify with the protagonist?
2. How can we integrate into a new place without disconnecting from our identity and ourselves?
3. How can an inner connection be awakened or stimulated?
4. Should the rabbis of our generation be above the laity, or approachable?
5. What added value does the crisis of transition to a new place provide?

### Concepts for Teaching

Crisis, the yeshiva curriculum, spiritual growth, Torah study as occupation, connection between the sacred and the mundane, maturity, formalism, post-modernism.

### Link to Jewish Source

Great learning or great action? By Rachel Keren, Amudim, Sivan 5771: [http://www.kdati.org.il/cgi-webaxy/sal/sal.pl?lang=he&ID=812319&kdati&act=show&dbid=pages&dataid=pages\\_891040\\_kdati\\_info\\_amudim\\_5771\\_749\\_05.htm](http://www.kdati.org.il/cgi-webaxy/sal/sal.pl?lang=he&ID=812319&kdati&act=show&dbid=pages&dataid=pages_891040_kdati_info_amudim_5771_749_05.htm)

### Further Reading

Sources for enrichment about topics that overlap the ones we have addressed:

Exclusive devotion to Torah study: A battle in the study hall on the Midreshet website:

<http://midreshet.org.il/pageview.aspx?id=1731>

### Other Films on the Topic

*Ponevezh Time*, Yehonatan Indursky, Israel, 2012.

*The Chosen* (based on the novel by Chaim Potok), Jeremy Kagan, U.S.A., 1982.

*Shababnikim* (television series), Eliran Malka and Danny Paran, Israel, 2017–2018.

### Ma'aleh Films on the Topic

*Cracks*, Erez Hadad, 2008.

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of Film and Television  
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2018