

## Present At The Creation, And Beyond

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Yehuda Avner, top aide to five Israeli leaders, stars in first part of film version of his monumental memoir, 'The Prime Ministers.'

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**Story Includes Video:**

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Yehuda Avner looks like a round-faced version of Fyvush Finkel and, like the actor, he has an avuncular, twinkly charm, sort of like a Yiddish leprechaun. So it comes as no surprise that his on-camera presence throughout "The Prime Ministers: The Pioneers," a new documentary here on opening on Oct. 18, is one of the film's greatest assets. Based on Avner's enormous memoir of his nearly half-century as an aide to Israel's leaders, the film, the first of two parts, is a frequently candid look at the inner workings of the Israeli government through war and crisis.

"The Pioneers" traces Avner's own involvement in the Jewish state from his teens as a Zionist youth activist in Manchester, England, through to Golda Meir's resignation as prime minister after the political fallout from the Yom Kippur War. Directed by Richard Trank, the film is a very conventional, even stolid recounting of events, enlivened principally by Avner's dry wit and great warmth.

Avner was present for some of the most important moments in Israeli history from the Six-Day War up to his retirement in 1995. He served as personal secretary and speechwriter to Menachem Begin, Yitzchak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Golda Meir and Levi Eshkol, and as Israeli ambassador to Australia and the United Kingdom. He kept souvenirs and made notes and, as a result, appears to have astonishingly total recall of conversations, gestures and intimate moments. And he is a delightful storyteller.

Some the film's best moments actually predate his government work. He wryly recalls his commander in the War of Independence desperately trying to protect the fingers of the violinist Leopold Mahler, a survivor of Auschwitz and grandson of Gustav Mahler, and a member of Avner's unit. Sent to gather information, Mahler rushed back to the unit to announce the declaration of independence. Asked what the name of the new Jewish nation would be, he

replied with a bit of befuddlement, “I didn’t think to ask.”

There are no ground-shaking revelations in the film, but the quiet moments that Avner recounts are often more compelling than a major scoop. He tells about Levi Eshkol’s visit to Lyndon Johnson’s ranch and the two leaders bonding over a newborn calf. He recounts his own visit to recently retired President Harry Truman, ringing the front doorbell in Independence, Mo., like any local visitor, and sitting at Truman’s piano, picking out the notes to “The Missouri Waltz.” Perhaps the most important achievement of the film is Avner’s heartfelt encomium to Eshkol as a war leader. Given the understandable prominence the American media bestowed on the charismatic Moshe Dayan, Eshkol’s role in the triumphs of 1967 is probably underappreciated here, but Avner’s testimony should go some way in righting the imbalance. He also offers a spirited defense of Meir’s stewardship of the 1973 conflict.

As a piece of filmmaking, “The Prime Ministers: The Pioneers” is competently crafted if unexceptional. The decision to have Avner’s conversations with the PMs voiced by big-name stars like Leonard Nimoy (Eshkol), Sandra Bullock (Meir) and Michael Douglas (Rabin) is a necessary evil given the film’s monologue-based narrative structure. Christoph Waltz is by far the best of the voice actors, giving Menachem Begin an understated toughness combined with an equally understated humor. Lee Holdridge’s score is frequently obtrusive and often cloying.

It will be interesting to see how the second film, scheduled for release next spring, handles the controversies of the past few decades. One suspects, given his devotion to Eshkol and Meir, that Avner’s heart at least tilts towards Labor, but he served under Begin readily and loyally, and extols him as a great leader in the book. How that will play out in the second film should be interesting to watch.

*“The Prime Ministers: The Pioneers,” directed by Richard Trank from a script by Trank and Rabbi Marvin Hier, opens Friday, Oct. 18 at the Quad Cinema (34 W. 13th St.). For information, call (212) 255-2243, or go to [www.quadcinema.com](http://www.quadcinema.com).*



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