

# Holy Land Confidential

Leaders of Israel's secret service open up, sort of, in *The Gatekeepers*.

By David Edelstein Published Jan 27, 2013



*The Gatekeepers*

(Photo: Courtesy of Avraham Shaom/Sony Pictures Classics)

**D**ror Moreh's documentary *The Gatekeepers* is shockingly lucid. It begins with the claim that the leaders of Israel's secretive and often ruthless intelligence agency, Shin Bet, have never spoken publicly about their work—until now. The question hangs: *Why* now? Do these men—there are six—aim to justify their

killing in the eyes of history? To remind the world of the innumerable threats to their country's existence? To affirm the necessity of a hard line against Palestinians who blow up civilian buses and lob missiles over borders? Actually, no. They are different kinds of men, but their conclusions are remarkably similar: that a series of repressive and/or opportunistic Israeli politicians have endangered—perhaps murdered—any chance of a lasting peace. That's right, folks, it's the spooks taking the long view. You know the Holy Land is an unholy mess when the professional paranoiacs with a license to kill come off like peaceniks.

*The Gatekeepers* doesn't play like agitprop. The storytelling is strong, the images stark. The camera roams among multiple monitors showing multiple satellite views while an ambient score works on your nerves. Moreh edits riot footage with a shiv. The Shin Bet leaders are vivid camera subjects, triangulating before your eyes: *What do I want to say? What may I say? What must I say?* For all their grievances, they have much to boast about. They were adroit. After Israel's decisive victory in 1967, they were charged with keeping tabs on a nebulous enemy in places like Nablus: They learned Arabic, studied their enemy village by village, tried to see the world through Palestinian eyes. They weren't tasked with long-term strategy, only tactics. Avraham Shalom, the oldest and—for many of us—scariest of the gatekeepers, said it was a kind of relief when Palestinian terrorists arose because it gave his agency a way to justify its existence. At first, he sounds the way you expect a spymaster to sound, like a creep: He squirms and blinks and gives half-answers to questions about a Palestinian bus hijacker taken alive and beaten to death by security forces. He says "Forget about morality" when you're dealing with terrorists. But not even he forgets entirely.

*The Gatekeepers* takes a sharp turn at the halfway mark, when Moreh gets to the right-wing religious extremists who blindsided Shin Bet with a plot to blow up the Dome of the Rock out of some looney belief in Armageddon and later opposed the Oslo Accords during Yitzhak Rabin's second term. You feel for the

poor *mieskeit* Carmi Gillon, who says he tried in vain to get Rabin to wear a bulletproof vest and had to resign when a punk nonentity named Yigal Amir changed the course of world history. The politicians—in bed with the religious right—let Jewish ringleaders go free and open the floodgates to illegal settlers. No one agrees about the size of bombs you drop on terrorist masterminds: a quarter-ton leaves them uninjured, a ton kills them plus innocent women and children. Is a long-term strategy—as opposed to tactics—even possible?

Ami Ayalon emerges the most thoughtful, though the others make sense too. Can you imagine an American hawk saying, as Avi Dichter does, “You can’t make peace with military means”? Can you imagine one quoting Carl von Clausewitz, as Ayalon does, to the effect of “Victory is the creation of a better political reality?” How about this, from Shalom: “We’ve become ... cruel”? Or (Ayalon again): “We win every battle but lose the war”? I think I know why the six Shin Bet leaders have put their faces and voices out there in defiance of precedent and perhaps even military sense. As a tactic it’s risky, but they’ve finally decided it’s time to stop leaving the strategy to the spineless and the crazy.

**B**ased on little but hearsay, I was set to dismiss Neil Barsky’s Ed Koch documentary *Koch* as a too-affectionate testimonial to a world-class narcissist—a mayor whose name might be attached to a major bridge but was known in his time for blowing up bridges between blacks and whites, gays and straights. But the film is a canny balancing act, making Koch’s arrogance so plain that you quickly move past it and concede that he accomplished remarkable things for a city that was broke and in chaos and with much of its housing stock in ruins. Time isn’t kind to men at once so exhibitionistic and empathy-challenged: By the end of the film, you want him to go out with a measure of dignity.