Woody Allen’s schlubby cinematic alter-ego is the quintessential stereotype for Jewish angst — concerned about the meaning of life, he mopingly explores the boundaries of physical, emotional and intellectual love, all while failing miserably at the business of life. As director, Allen further plays with and reshapes cinéma vérité—that is, is the character on the screen really him, or is he playing a character on the screen?

_I Sleep But My Heart Is Awake_ can be seen as a feminist turn on this sad-sack image of meaningful seeking. The protagonist is a competent 40-year-old woman, living the modern dream and miserable, to boot. That is, her life has taken her along apace. She is mother, wife and professional, seemingly having it all and yet, mired in the hectic reality of “the second shift”—leaving one (paying) job during the day only to begin the next (unpaid and largely thankless) position of wife and mother. Her obligations weigh her down to the point of exhaustion. She loves her children, she loves her husband and her job, but much of it passes without notice as she drags herself from place to place. She no longer sleeps well. The children are loud and chaotic. Her husband complains that she is no fun. Suddenly, it seems, she finds herself at a point where she is troubled that it is all without meaning or purpose. She is, she says, closed to her own imagination about possibilities.

Thus begins the fits-and-starts process of her self-discovery. She is encouraged to try a form of mystical meditation, only to feel frustrated by her own lack—she discovers no great spiritual insights about herself and ends up feeling more than a little foolish. She seeks out mystics who speak of the silence of the heart but she is confounded; how can she find silence when she does not yet know how to accomplish that? As she is casting about, she experiences a personal moment of crisis which brings her question about meaning into stark relief. The anguish
on her face speaks volumes: what is the meaning of life when life itself unexpectedly pulls you up short?

As she sometimes tearfully, sometimes angrily weighs the choices before her, her predicament unwittingly creates that longed-for emotional space that previously eluded her. And in that space, it seems she locates the divine. Not God exactly, but an approximation of what it means to stop for a moment and simply be, to look at the little things and unexpectedly feel gratitude. Her father is anxious that she might become “religious,” a thing it seems to be avoided at all cost. Not so, she says with a smile. “A lot of magic came into my life,” she muses, as if stunned by the realization. Her relationships begin to make sense; she discovers joy once again. “Life,” she concludes, “has started to work for me instead of me working for life.”

Adi Arbel, the female protagonist, draws the audience in with her simple, straightforward manner and her raw and unguarded openness. At the same time, she also leaves the audience wondering: is she playing Adi Arbel on the screen or is this really her? Is this really her struggle and are these really her questions? Clearly, this is her family and her home, her father and her job. But are they too all playing their parts or is the docudrama of herself, a dramatic cinéma vérité slice of life? This is at one and the same time the magic and mystery of this film, distributed as a documentary but clearly something of an artistic representation at the same time.

Arbel turns the stereotypical Allenesque schlub on its head and provides a cinematic personality far more in line with the reality of women’s lives today. She encourages women to enter in as she plumbs the depths of alternatives that wives and mothers alone face every day. In the end, though, her journey, her choices are indeed her own. But in her so-called “magnificent insignificance” she discovers the knowledge of belief and the charm of a little hand that takes hold of hers once again. And in this, she redeems the existential search as one that finds meaning not in grandiose revelations, but in the sweetness of the everyday.

This gritty documentary opens with the director’s chance encounter with Sophia Ostritsky, 30-year-old former singer, songwriter, Moldavian immigrant and stone-cold addict. Actually, the meeting is not so accidental—Itach is consciously seeking prostitutes in order to document their experiences of life on the streets. In Sophia, he gets that and so much more. Her chosen profession, such as it is, is not so much chosen as a means to a grim end—it provides the ready cash necessary to support her active heroin addiction. Her bony arms and legs, bruised and pulpy from the search for a good vein, no longer suffice. Sophia now begins to use more delicate sites such as her stomach or groin. Thankfully, director Itach spares his audience the indelicacy of a close-up of this gruesome procedure, but little less of the dynamics of her shabby life remains out of his careful gaze.

She inhabits the dark underbelly of society, working at night in grungy, poorly lit streets around the Tel Aviv bus station. Sophia, although she feels that she does not contribute to society and therefore has little or no self-worth, actually exercises a degree of control over her circumstances, such as they are. She will only service older men and angrily sends packing those would-be patrons who fail to take the hint. We see her heated tears in the aftermath of a brutal encounter with a drunken client who abuses the agreed-upon boundaries of this particular form of commerce. Yet, she persists, because the draw of the beast will send her back into the streets the next night. Like any other addict, though, Sophia claims that the blame lies with others—they are the ones responsible for this precipitous fall into a vicious cycle of addiction and prostitution. and, keeping with the addictive profile, she saves her harshest vitriol for those closest to her.

Herein lies the irony to this story. Sophia is not homeless nor is she without family support. In fact, she lives with her parents in a lovely and tidy apartment in Tel Aviv. These are the “others” who bear the brunt of her never-ending blame. That would be her father, Arkady, a painter, and especially her mother, Paulina. It is Paulina who in fact is the one who most evocatively and selflessly loves Sophia in this film. Her eyes convey her complete devotion to
this lost and angry daughter, betraying the full complexity and heartbreak of being an enabler to addiction. Both parents are fully aware that Sophia turns tricks in order to feed her habit. In one scene, Paulina even drives Sophia to meet her dealer, all the while suffering Sophia's name-calling and bellicose belligerence for driving too slow. "She calls me stupid and I love her," laments Paulina. “She like a little girl,” she continues apologetically, “She’s thirty but she acts like she’s five.”

Sophia is violently anti-social. Meetings with a psychologist friend of her mother’s who will help her step-down gradually from her addiction suffers Sophia’s screaming disdain. For her part, between bouts of getting high and coming off her high, Sophia claims, “I’ve always been an outsider and I don’t want to fit in.” But in truth, she does want to quit drugs and, one must assume, the demeaning work that is required to support this habit. Through images, it is revealed that she was once an up and coming singer, part of a Moldavian band—young and healthy but with a hint of that same anger lurking around the edges.

Paulina, clear-eyed in the aftermath of Sophia’s rage, compares her daughter to a broken vase—beautiful, valuable—but pieced back together by her mother until another outburst, another relapse, another annoyance. And then, Sophia, her lovely vase, falls off the shelf again. “But I love my broken vase,” sighs the mother.

Sophia eventually finds her way but as with all addiction, it is hard to say whether this is a happy ending or not. The ever-present draw of the white stuff is never very far away from one more annoyance, one more outburst, one more personal failure. Its lure hangs in the background, like Circe, calling to Sophia should life fail her once again. Yet, one person who most assuredly will not fail her is Paulina, this epitome of the enabling mother. We are privileged to see in her gaze one of the purest, most selfless looks of love ever captured on film.

In 2005, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced Israel’s disengagement from the settlements in Gaza. Twenty-two Israeli settlements in Gaza and four in northern Samaria were impacted by this evacuation announcement and included businesses as well as family homes. All must be moved, all must leave. This forced eviction delivers the historical geography as well as the metaphorical heart of this documentary of one family’s own economic as well as emotional disengagement.

Middle-aged Ronit Balaban runs her family’s sprawling hothouse business growing and exporting tropical plants. By her own admission, she is doing this because her husband suffered a disfiguring injury a few years prior and is unable to run the business. Yet clearly, Ronit possesses a singular determination and pluck, both of which come in mighty handy when the work of packing up and moving her business comes along. Disengagement is no small undertaking for a home, let alone an entire business and is most assuredly not for the faint of heart. She is responsible for the safe transit of thousands of plants, building new hothouses and basically reestablishing a working nursery. The enormity of the task is well-documented here, with Ronit’s fortitude and grit taking center. She does not go quietly into that good night, but go she does, complaining and organizing all the way. In this, she serves as a symbol of Israel itself—audacious, resourceful, indomitable but also perhaps a little cranky.

While Ronit and the inhabitants of Gaza are in the midst of protesting against this Herculean task (even while packing up countless boxes), Yaakov, her husband, has already experienced his own forceful disengagement. In fact, it is not that he is unable to run the business owing to any infirmity; no, of his own volition, he disengaged from life many years before. Due to a terror attack, Yaakov was left with lingering disabilities. His gate is slow, his posture stooped, but it’s his facial disfigurement which occasioned his disengagement. His mouth and jaw refuse to work the way they once did. Yaakov grows a substantial beard, possibly to hide his facial scars. The deformity, to uninformed eyes, appears not that great. A slight slackness to the
jaw, a reduced crispness to his pronunciation, perhaps yes, those might be acknowledged. But to Yaakov, the face in the mirror is unrecognizable. He cannot—he will not—make peace with this. Even if his face were restored, he laments, he would not be able to help Ronit. He withdraws, his lifeline to the world now reduced to Ronit and what he can glean from the television and radio.

And therein lies the heart of this disengagement. Because, as is revealed, it is Ronit who now takes on the burden of the second shift, leaving the business woman’s hat at the door and now taking on the domestic hat of wife, caregiver and conduit of life to her reclusive husband. He wants—he needs—to hear how the business is doing, what Ronit is doing to fight this, how she plans to make this all work. But why won’t she tell him? In truth, Ronit is physically and emotionally exhausted, especially since Yaakov is completely incapable of the most basic of tasks, including packing up their household. He is completely disabled psychologically, unable to offer her anything in terms of love or support, but asking all of this from her. He complains, “Some people are strong and some need encouragement.”

Yaakov is literally sucking the life out of Ronit. Or is it the move from Gaza, the government’s disengagement with the people that is doing it? What provides her life with meaning—her long-term marriage to Yaakov or this business which gives her purpose? Both? Neither?

“Disengagement took my life away,” she states flatly, “The disengagement doesn’t end…” carrying with it all the many and varied intended meanings. Yet, gradually, slowly, after the move, Yaakov begins ever-so-timidly to come out of his forced exile. He walks the new nursery, he prunes a few plants, crankily complaining about the poor level of care. Gingerly leaving his self-imposed hothouse, one might ask a question: did the disengagement actually do some good? Can disengagement have an expiration date after which it no longer shapes one’s existence? One might hope as Yaakov, quoting Scarlett O’Hara, early on quips, “Tomorrow is another day.”

Any sentient being who followed the news cycle in late 2004 is acquainted with the name of U.S. Army Specialist Pvt. Lynndie England. If not her name, then one will be familiar with the famous photographic image of a small woman in military greens, cigarette dangling from her mouth, holding up a rope which was around the neck of a naked Muslim prisoner at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison. This image sent shockwaves across America, scandalizing heretofore unexamined domestic sensibilities. On May 9, 2004, *The Guardian*’s US edition entitled an article on England, “A New Monster in Chief,” calling her “a bit-player who came to symbolize a wider horror story.”

At some point in one’s conscious being, the phrase “man’s inhumanity to man” has come to mind when reflecting upon scenes such as this, where normally decent human beings inexplicably morph into something bestial when drafted into superior authoritarian roles. However, the interplay of gender adds another grim dimension to that phrase since it’s clear that “man’s inhumanity” is not limited to the male gender; we find that women, too, can be reduced to cruel cyphers of society’s most brutish instincts as well.

“To See if I’m Smiling” documents this with a cold, unwavering gaze. In 2000, women were given the right to serve in any role in the Israel Defense Forces, “equal to the right of a man.” This is especially true in Gaza, where the fierceness of the action demands an alert and ready presence. In light of that, director Yarom interviews several young veterans of the IDF, including Meytal, a medic, Rotem, an observer, Ihbar, an operations sergeant and Dana, an education officer, among others. They speak for themselves, seemingly unprompted. Each tells her own story in her own words; in her own way, each expresses what this experience has meant for her.

Their reasons for joining are laudatory. The common thread is each wanted to be useful, wanted to help, wanted to feel a part of project of reclaiming *Eretz Israel*. But very quickly, they realize that amidst the fighting, the struggle is also to try, as much as is possible, to stay human in...
horrifically inhumane circumstances. But it’s a fool’s task. Says one, “Here, everything falls apart.” One service woman doubts her ability to identify Palestinian stone-throwers who just moments before were seeking to bash in her head. This becomes a personal interior Inquisition: can she truly say for certain that this young kid was the one who did it, even though she saw him, knowing that if she IDs him, he will face certain physical tortures? Or, should she just pick any kid, since each Palestinian stone thrower represents a threat to Israel? Does it really matter which kid did it? It is the desensitizing, demoralizing nature of the unnaturalness of war, sighs another, which creates on the one hand hesitation and leads, on the other, to unspeakable disregard for life save for those of your comrades in arms.

Each young woman tells a similar story of gradual disengagement from the self they once knew, the values that previously informed their being, and a deliberate, willful deadening to the brutality and bloodshed around them. Fear plays a large role here—the ever-present reality of an unexpected and largely unpredictable attack reduces all emotions to the raw dread and pervasive anxiety of life in service. Some laugh without mirth to recount these episodes; others are reduced to silences pregnant with meaning. In this, they demonstrate how individual yet how necessarily universal is this emotional numbing—but for all of them, this existential void exacts a fearsome toll. Through their testimony, one sees what perhaps they have not fully yet: that despite their belief in the rightness of their cause, they no longer have the ability to fully reintegrate back into the selves they were prior to service. Their eyes tell a story; they are as fearsomely disabled as any soldier missing a limb.

These Israeli women—all young, fresh-faced and bursting with potential—carry within them an unexpressed attitude of resistance to the darkness within. “Who wants to deal with the evil inside them?” asks one, half-laughing, half-crying with the realization. Like the biblical Pilate, each in her own way is metaphorically powerless to wash this blood off their hands, whether it was there due to their own doing or not. In the end, the film demonstrates that the indecency of war is not a gender-specific matter. For these women, the blackness of their past lies not simply in the disabling power of guilt. No, the power of this documentary resides in its
damning assessment of the memory of violence in which these women participated, a recollection which these young women are incapable of forgetting.