



Advocate

Description

Posted by [Larry Gleeson](#)

In the blistering new documentary premiering at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival, *Advocate*, Israeli attorney, Lea Tsemel defends Palestinians: from feminists to fundamentalists, from nonviolent demonstrators to armed militants. Politically and socially engaged filmmakers Rachel Lea Jones and Philippe Bellaïche assemble a comprehensive look into Tsemel's life work beginning with Tsemel as a firebrand law student who, after the 1967 war, fearlessly distributes flyers on campus warning her fellow Israelis to end the occupation or risk a vicious cycle of violence. In *Advocate*, Tsemel speaks truth to power before the term became popular and for all intents and purposes will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. She's spent a lifetime going against the grain of Israeli society, and is as much a product of it as she is an exception to it.

Utilizing archival footage, newsreels, still photographs and primary interviews panning twenty-five years, Jones and Bellaïche bring us into the present as they follows Tsemel's caseload in real time, including the high-profile trial of a 13-year-old boy — her youngest client to date — while also revisiting her landmark cases and reflecting on the political significance of her work and the personal price one pays for taking on the role of "devil's advocate." One thing is still eminently clear – interrogators still infuriate her, prosecutors still madden her, judges still frustrate her, verdicts still disappoint her — and clients still break her heart.

Directing duo Rachel Leah Jones and Philippe Bellaïche have assumed the privileged position of a fly on the wall of Tsemel's practice, where a year of documenting is like gathering a lifetime of evidence as the two push to bring to light and preserve a much-needed model of advocacy that balances justice and the system responsible for its administration. This evidentiary mission is a powerful testament to not only the wrongs of occupation but also to the faults of those who try to resist it, the failings of those who try to defend them, and the fundamental flaws of a legal system that purports to serve justice but in fact serves the powers that be.

As a Jewish-Israeli lawyer who has represented political prisoners for five decades, Tsemel, in her tireless quest for justice, pushes the praxis of a human rights defender to its limits. As far as most

Israelis are concerned, she defends the indefensible. As far as Palestinians are concerned, she's more than an attorney, she's an ally. to put it another way, she's the little boy calling the Emperor naked, i.e. naming the system's most fundamental fault – the occupier is judging the occupied – while at the same time she's the boy with his finger in the dam, doing her utmost to uphold the rule-of-law before the flood of injustice drowns us all. Her rebellious spirit and radical zeal prompted one military court judge to say: "If Lea Tsemel didn't exist, we'd have to invent her."

Advocate is an extraordinary film, highly engaging and deeply moving. With a fast runtime of 110 minutes it is highly recommended and required viewing for any cinephile engaged in social justice.

Category

1. #Sundance
2. Sundance Film Festival
3. television

Tags

1. Advocate
2. Lea Tsemel

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