

2021-2022 Jewish Film Series

Leslie Fishbein's comments on *Ma'abarot*

Ma'abarot (2019) depicts the shameful use of Mizrahi Jewish immigration as a means of buttressing the strategic interest of the new state of Israel surrounded by hostile neighbors with scant attention to the security and welfare of the Mizrahi Jews who played such a critical role in upholding the security of the early Israeli state. The film makes evident the contempt that many of the Ashkenazi Jews in the political leadership of Israel expressed for the Mizrahi immigrants. The rescue of Mizrahi Jews buttressed Israeli strength as a fortress strength in a hostile region.

However, the Mizrahi presence revealed profound tensions underlying Israeli society, namely reflecting the hope that Israel would attract many Jewish immigrants from abroad, thereby enhancing the nation's population and numeric strength in a hostile region, but also creating cleavages in Israeli society itself as it lost its cultural cohesion as a largely European society and had to confront the challenges of multiculturalism as a result of the Mizrahi influx. Some Israelis in the film claim that the Mizrahis are uncultured and presumably therefore incapable of being incorporated into Israeli society, a claim that seems to echo Nazi contempt for Jewish history and culture.

The film also reveals a profound irony about the situation of the Mizrahi Jews stuck in the transit camps, essentially tent colonies with abysmal housing, water supply and sewage, in the years following World War II. Israeli society celebrates work as essential to a pioneer state. One of the most popular Israeli children's folk songs is "Zum gali," which includes the line "Hechalutz lema'an avodah," meaning "Pioneers all work as one." While those hostile to the new immigrants might deride them as lazy, all too often, as *Ma'abarot* indicates, there was no work available for the new immigrants to do, and they were frustrated by their inability to work.

Ma'abarot clearly represents an attempt to rewrite Israeli history to make it more inclusive. Is the film akin to the 1619 Project's attempt to rewrite American history by viewing it through a racial lens? What can we learn by reexamining the founding myths of our cultures?



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