

Who is Sallah Shabbati?

By: Rabbi Haim Ovadia

Rage?

Laughter?

Frustration?

How should I respond to the ideas and images conveyed in the almost cult Israeli movie Sallah Shabbati? I would like to believe that Ephraim Kishon uses his brilliant satirical talent to criticize the nascent of Israel for its mistreating of the new immigrants, corruption of public elect officials and the ossification of the Kibbutz ideology, but I cannot escape the thought that there was a better way to do it. Kishon criticizes the discrimination in Israeli society, but not because he believes that the Mizrahi immigrants are of equal talent and abilities but rather because Israel is supposed to be a state for all of its citizens and they should all have an equal opportunity. He is patronizing, like a father telling his son that he loves him despite of his shortcomings, just for being his son.

At certain points throughout the movie Sallah emerges as the Noble Savage who because of his simplicity and lack of acquaintance with democracy and modern society is able to point out the ailments of this society. In two cases the sharp, cynical voice of Kishon speaks through Sallah in his condemnation of the discrimination and European arrogance. The first is when he “finds” a lost dog but is rejected because the lost dog was a small white poodle while he brought in a gigantic black watchdog. When he realizes that he will not get the prize for the found dog, he tells the grieving owner: “It’s all because of the color, right? Black is not good but if it was white it would be OK.” The second comes when he is scolded by the Kibbutz secretary for selling his daughter. She urges him to “quickly forget your barbaric customs”. Sallah slowly turns to her and asks: why do you always want us to forget that which is not good for you, if it were the opposite, if my custom would be to give you money when my daughter gets married, what then? Would you ask me to forget my customs?”

But these two instances are outweighed by the overall negative picture of the Mizrahi immigrants, and that Kishon might have had a Eurocentric perspective is sustained by analyzing the gallery of characters in his numerous books. It is not surprising to see that the literary critics, lawyers, clerks and elected officials as well as the pioneers and wealthy tourists, are all Ashkenazi while the Mizrahi Jews are Janitors, maids, carpenters and drunkards. As a matter of fact the general character of the rude Israeli working class member is called Mr. Kadmon, wordplay on primitive and oriental. Not to mention that later in life he felt foreign in Israel and moved to Switzerland and that the greatest number of books he sold was in Germany.

The movie itself revolves around the difficulties Sallah and his family, as a typical immigrant family, are facing when they arrive to Israel. The plot is somewhat weak due to the fact that the material was first presented as short skits and later developed into a

script and a musical. The main story line is that of Sallah trying to make ends meet in the new country without having to work. He does so by getting paid to vote for several different parties, by stealing, cheating and eventually by trying to sell his daughter to the neighboring Kibbutz. All of his attempts fail but he manages to get the long awaited for apartment by protesting that he doesn't want it and that he'd rather stay at the Transition Camp. The side stories are of the Kibbutz members, Zigi and Bat Sheva falling in love, respectively, with the exotic daughter and son of Mr. Shabati, Habuba and Shimon. The message of the movie is that the government, kibbutz and Sochnut (Jewish Agency) are corrupt and that only a twisted logic can outwit the system.

With all the good intentions of Kishon, though, he caused an almost incorrigible damage to Mizrahi identity, and especially in America, where this movie was viewed almost as a documentary. For starters, Sallah's body language is exaggerated and grotesque, he can barely walk, his legs are crooked, he lacks balance and grace, and you can always hear his shoes clicking as he drags his feet. When he talks his whole face contorts in strange expressions and he sometimes uses sign language, he raises his voice and screams with no reason and he will not miss an opportunity to curse in Arabic an unsuspecting Ashkenazi.

The Mizrahi Jew, through Sallah, is described as an irresponsible family man. He doesn't know how many children he has, drags his youngest son dangling from his hands like a monkey, and has no idea why the old lady Julia is with them but finally concludes that she must be a relative. He yells at his pregnant wife that she must deliver a boy and his children tell the social worker that every time she is about to give birth they are all hiding for fear of his rage. The following dialog is typical:

Bat Sheva (Social worker): Did you have brothers and sisters?

Sallah Shabati: Yes, of course.

Bat Sheva: How many?

Sallah: It's hard to tell, there were many and some died.

Bat Sheva: But any way, how many?

Sallah: Anyway, a lot.

Bat Sheva: When did you get married?

Sallah: A long time ago.

Bat Sheva: How old were you?

Sallah: Very Little.

Sallah: But any way, how old?

Sallah: Any way, little, that's how we do it!

Sallah is not a great bread winner either, he is lazy, has no profession, and even when assigned to forestry, which was a way to keep the immigrants busy, he manages to do nothing and eventually get fired. Not only him, but other Mizrahi immigrants are not skilled or educated laborers either, the director assigns to a Moshe Haboosha (Iraqi) the profession of a shoemaker while Kalman Binstock is a high ranking official. As if not working was not enough, he takes his children's salaries in order to get drunk at the Maabara coffee shop, the Café where the Maabara residents spend most of their time. When the politicians look for the Maabara's strongman they ask someone in the street where is everybody? And he answers, where else, in the café. In one of the scenes, upon entering the Café with the camera zooms on Sallah in his pajamas, another stereotype-Iraqi pajamas. As a matter of fact the Iraqis never wore pajamas outside but their striped clothes were mistaken for such.

Sallah is drinking and playing the game he loves - Backgammon or Shesh-Besh. This game has such a central place in his life that the first thing he does at the Maabara is play the game, and when his daughter tries to tell him that she wants to marry Ziggy he claims that one cannot stop the game in the middle, and he even takes the board with him to the synagogue. He plays for money and usually cheats his innocent Ashkenazi neighbor Goldstein. To sum it up, for Sallah Shesh-Besh is more important than family, work, religion and ethics.

Sallah, when it pleases Kishon is a total ignoramus. He can barely write and cannot read at all. He doesn't know anything about cuckoo clocks, elections, faucets, machinery or modern furniture. His speech is primitive and slurred and most of his sentences follow the formula: This is... this is! For example: This is a big dog, this is; This is a good sausage, this is, etc. but his speech cannot be identified as is the case with his general character. Where is he from? Kishon created an amalgam of an all-mizrahi character, maybe to fend off critics. And indeed the Moroccans saw him as Iraqi and vice versa. Topol's rendition of his accent, praised by the media, is distorted because he mixes the letters het and hei, ayin and aleph. The dress code of the family is a mixture of Iraqi Moroccan, Kurdish and Tunisian elements, topped off by a vest a-la Tuvie the milkman, making Sallah no more than a miserable caricature of a man.

The greatest distortion of the movie, though, is the idea of the main plot that Sallah's daughter will be offered to whoever pays more. When Ziggy, the Kibbutz member she falls in love with, tries to protest, Sallah's daughter Habuba answers: this is our custom. It is sad and ridiculous to hear that, especially since the one community among which girls are still sold to the highest bidder is the ultra orthodox Ashkenazi society. It is hard to believe that this is how the Mizrahi Jews were viewed by the Ashkenazi establishment, and for many years I thought it was the product of ignorance. Only lately, especially after teaching a course on Jews of the Mediterranean at the American Jewish University did I realize that it was part of a PR campaign meant to keep the Mizrahi Jews at bay and raise

sympathy and funds abroad for the brave young state that has to absorb that lower quality human material.

I would love to have your comments and thought as well to see you at our next film event: My Fantasia, by Duki Dror, a movie that examines questions of identity in face of the enforced melting pot policy and alienation of Jews from Arab countries from their legacy.

A Few Excerpts from Anti-Sephardi Articles

What follows are excerpts from articles that I showed the audience at our screening of the film at critical moments of the movie. It helped convinced those skeptical of the scope of the discrimination.

I believe that we need to create an on-line Sephardic reader, containing original texts that highlight our unique legacy. They should be divided into thematic and chronological categories and remain as faithful as possible to the original texts.

Prof. Yohanan Peres, Sociologist, Tel Aviv University, 1994

Today Mizrahi music is played on the radio because of a vocal group that this is what they want to hear, it is only because of political pressure. But if you listen to “by request” shows, you will find out that there are no mizrahi songs there, and these are the most popular shows. In the future, when the radio will be fully commercial (and not government sponsored) the mizrahi music will disappear from the radio, because the audience’s taste will determine what we will hear...

Can you imagine where we would have been today had we allowed the existence of a wholesome, proud Mizrahi culture? I am not talking about folklore... but rather of culture as a way of life. If, God forbid, we would have encouraged a mizrahi lifestyle alongside an Ashkenazi lifestyle, where would we be today?

Regarding the Aliyah from North Africa, Zalman Shazar, President of Israel (1951)

We are going to pay dearly, this is inconceivable... we are facing an immigration who never knew what is education.... They are not used to so much education so much learning... even if we assume that they will be able to graduate elementary schools, but what will be our level then, how will Israel look, will we still be a light to the nations? How can the State of Israel survive without an European and Anglo-Saxon reinforcement, our Jews! ... the actual role of Zionism is to bring the Jewry and not necessarily Mizrahi Jews into the cycle of Aliyah

Aryeh Gelblum, Haaretz, 1949

This is an immigration of a race until now unknown in Israel... we face people whose primitivism is at a record, their level of knowledge borders with absolute ignorance, and

more alarming is their incapability of absorbing any spiritual idea, generally they are only a little better than the level of the Arab, black and Berber natives of their countries of origin and definitely at a lower level than Palestinian Arabs, unlike the Yemenites they lack Jewish background, and they are totally controlled by the wild game of primitive instincts....

In the living quarters of the Africans you will find filth, gambling, drinking and prostitution, many of them are plagued with severe eye, skin and sexual diseases, without even mentioning stealing and mugging. There is nothing secure against this a-social element...

Above all these, there is another basic fact no less alarming and that is the lack of ability to adapt to life in Israel and primarily chronic laziness and rejection of work... The particular tragedy of this immigration is that unlike lower human material from Europe, their children have no hope either to raise their cultural level in the depth of their ethnic identity will take forever...

Did we consider how our state is going to look if this will be its population?

Giora Yoseftal, Minister of Immigration and Absorption (the man in charge of absorbing the Jews from Arab lands, after whom there is a street or a neighborhood named in every developing city):

This is an immigration wave with deteriorated moral values, with lower cultural level and poor ideological baggage that might degrade our young country into the abyss of a Levantine culture at the same low level of the neighboring nation”.

Abba Eban

One of our greatest fears is that the increase in immigration will force Israel to compare its cultural level to that of the neighboring world.

(This is in the same spirit of Hertzl’s vision: “To build in the Middle east a European defense wall against Asia”.)

In 1964, the Ministry of Education distributed the following pamphlet to teachers in rural areas (i.e. development towns:

To the first grade teacher,

Some of the first graders you have just welcomed attended kindergarten and some arrived directly from their parents’ house without any preparation. You know that the majority of these kids are immigrants who come from a primitive cultural environment...

Let us consider the obstacles:

Learning difficulties:

1. Immaturity for reading.
2. Lack of sufficient motivation towards reading.
3. Lack of ability to face failures.
4. Lack of basic education habits.
5. Lack of basic language terms, which serve as a foundation to acquire and expand knowledge and which are found in our text books.

Immaturity:

1. Incomplete physiological development in the areas of movement control, sight and hearing.
2. Inability to perceive a vertical image and transfer it to horizontal (copying from the board to the notebook).
3. Lack of coordination between eye and page...
4. Inability to visually distinguish between different shapes and sizes.
5. Inability to move from 3-D conception (a whole object) to 2-D.
6. Inability to acoustically distinguish between different or similar words.
7. Mental age lower than biological age.
8. Inability to understand or follow simple orders.
9. Inability to express thoughts in a clear, simple way.
10. Lack of experience with objects (pets, toys, utensils) that he will learn about, hear and read in school...

From Dr. Shlomo Horowitz History of the Jewish People (out of 638 pages, only 6 deal with Sepharadim and here is an excerpt):

While European Jewry underwent a process of raging revolutions and a new center began forming across the ocean, in the decaying Islamic countries of Asia and Africa – previously fortresses of Jewish culture – there lived Jewish congregations of approximately 800,000 people under the double yoke of Oriental tyranny and Islamic fanaticism, enclosed in their special ghettos and limited to few professions (usually vendors), frozen in their lifestyle and their spiritual slumber”

...The multitudes lived in degenerate poverty and ignorance, and those who lived far from the thoroughfare of modern history were at an even lower level and resembled their semi-barbaric Muslim neighbors in their lifestyles and cultural level...

...the overwhelming majority of the Jews was ignorant and swept – like its neighbors - by superstitions. The public life was totally frozen and there was no spark of any social movement.

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