



# James' JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

2003, 87 min

## ABOUT THE MOVIE

In this tale of a modern-day pilgrimage to Israel gone awry, James, an African Christian, journeys from worship of a far-off, idealistic land to immersion in modern-day Israeli society. After being mistakenly imprisoned and just as mistakenly released, James finds himself as an illegal worker, performing low-wage labor cleaning houses. James has a unique perspective as an “outsider” who is suddenly confronted with concepts such as capitalism, with all its advantages and dangers. This movie also features the reappearance of Sallah (from the previous movie, *Sallah*) as an old man acting as James’ mentor, adding a creative element of cinematic continuity and also providing the opportunity for social commentary about the progress of Israeli society.

## USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

**CINEMA** “Outsiders” as vehicles for exploring and critiquing society

**HISTORY** Revival of the classic movie character Sallah for a cross-generational dialogue

**CULTURE** Societal consequences of the pragmatic capitalism practiced in modern Israeli society



## BEFORE THE MOVIE

### VOCABULARY

**Framer** Someone who lets others take advantage of him/her

**Kombina** Shady business deal

**Hafif** A half-done job

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**DID YOU KNOW?**

*Ironically, when the actors came from South Africa to perform in the film, one was arrested and held at Ben Gurion airport because he was assumed to be not a tourist but an illegal worker. He had to be bailed out.<sup>2</sup>*

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## PLOT SUMMARY

James is a young man slated to be the next pastor of Entshongweni, a small village in Africa. He is sent by the people of his village on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. His mission is to witness firsthand what the holy city is like, so that he can return home to report back all of the marvelous sights he has seen. However, when he arrives in Israel, the immigration official does not believe that he has come for religious reasons. Convinced that his true motive is to make money working in Israel, she puts him in prison to await the next flight back to Africa. Ironically, her actions do turn James into an illegal worker. With the help of a crooked immigration official, an Israeli man, Shimi, takes him out of prison to use him for low-wage work cleaning houses in Tel Aviv. Shimi manages many foreign workers “rescued” in the same way. In the process of working to pay back his bail money, James gets caught up in the materialism of Israeli society. Before long, it is unclear whether James will ever make it to Jerusalem to fulfill his pilgrimage.

# CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

## WHAT DOES A MOVIE MADE IN 2003 HAVE TO DO WITH A MOVIE MADE IN 1964?

James' relationship with Shimi's elderly father Sallah is not only special within the bounds of this film. According to director Ra'anana Alexandrowicz<sup>3</sup>, Sallah represents the continuation of the life of the main character in the movie *Sallah* (see pg. 4). Fifty years later, we find erstwhile immigrant Sallah teaching the ropes of Israeli society to the latest arrival, James.

In a throwback to the Sephardi-Ashkenazi tension in *Sallah*, Sallah is played by Arie Elias, a Jewish Iraqi immigrant who fought for many years to make his way in the primarily Ashkenazi world of theater. Elias won an Israeli Oscar for his portrayal of Sallah in *James' Journey* and was subsequently honored with a life-achievement award.

### A HERO'S JOURNEY

The traditional tales of cultures around the world generally follow a basic pattern, termed by scholar Joseph Campbell the monomyth. Examples include the religious stories of Moses, Jesus and Buddha, Greek mythology such as the tale of the Minotaur, and Homer's *Odyssey*. Latter-day storytellers have consciously adopted the model, including George Lucas in *Star Wars*. This movie, identified as a journey from its title, does, in fact, loosely reflect the model. There is a hero (James), who leaves home and enters uncharted territory. There, he comes across a "wise man" (Sallah), who instructs him about the ways of the new world he has entered and gives him advice for coping with it.

## AFTER THE MOVIE

### ACTIVITY

Here is the English translation of the lyrics to the movie's theme song (sung in Zulu).  
Read it and then discuss the questions that follow.

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|---|---|
| 1 Let's sing of that tale that begins         | 9 It will keep him safe and can't lead him astray |
| 2 In a faraway village                        | 10 Soon he will see that holy city                |
| 3 The best young man was sent on a pilgrimage | 11 See it with his own eyes                       |
| 4 A long journey to Zion                      | 12 He'll come back and tell us                    |
| 5 Where the heart of the world is             | 13 About the place where our dream lies           |
| 6 To the Promised Land                        | 14 Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem                |
| 7 Beyond the seas                             | 15 You are our only destiny.                      |
| 8 Zion's light in his heart to guide his way  |   |

- Why do you think the movie begins and ends with this song? What is its function in setting up a framework for the movie? Describe the song's language and message and discuss how they compare and contrast with what we see of James' actual journey in the rest of the movie.
- What is the effect of the cartoon figures that look like they come from illuminated manuscripts which accompany the song? Why are they shown instead of actual scenes of Africa or Jerusalem?

- Why do people go on pilgrimages? What is the importance of seeing with your own eyes a place with which you have such an emotional and spiritual connection? Based on the rest of the movie, what are the risks involved with carrying out such a pilgrimage?
- Can James' journey properly be described as a pilgrimage? Why or why not?
- How can you interpret the fact that this song is sung even at the church which James attends while actually in Israel? Why would this be necessary when they are in reality so close to Jerusalem?

## THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

### 1 UNIT THEME: James as an “Outsider”

- In what ways does this movie show James to be “the other”? How does James' societal status affect his beliefs and actions?
- To what extent do you think a person's attitudes and priorities are a product of the surrounding society and his/her place in it?

### 2 CINEMATIC THEME: “Outsiders” as Vehicles for Exploring and Critiquing Society

- What do James' experiences in Israel tell the audience about Israeli society?
- Do you think James (an African Christian on pilgrimage to Israel) is a good choice as someone to explore and critique Israeli society? Why or why not?
- How would the movie have been different if it focused on Shimi's perspective instead of James'?

### 3 HISTORICAL THEME: Revival of Classic Movie Character Sallah for a Cross-Generational Dialogue

- If you have seen *Sallah*, compare and contrast Sallah in this movie to the original Sallah. Do you think it plausible that this is the same character?
- Why do you think the director chooses to recycle a classic character rather than make up a new one? What advantages does this give him? What limitations?
- **Activity:** Think about your favorite movies (could be American or Israeli). Pick a movie character that you would want to recycle into a new movie, which will take place when this character is older. How would s/he be different in this new movie? How would s/he be the same? What statement or message would you hope to make by using this character: about the character and about society as a whole?

### 4 CULTURAL THEME: Societal Consequences of the Pragmatic Capitalism Practiced in Modern Israel Society

- How is this movie a moral parable?
- What is the movie's message and societal implications?
- What values do you think society has taught you? Is there a time when you felt social pressures to conform? When have you felt like you were entering uncharted waters, guided only by your own internal compass?
- As the movie was shown in festivals abroad and sold in America, some Israelis criticized *James' Journey* for disseminating criticism of Israel at a time when world opinion of Israel was already quite negative. In response, director Alexandrowicz said, “When you begin to ask filmmakers to think in a PR-related way, you arrive very quickly at a very dangerous situation where you get filmmakers that behave like Soviet filmmakers used to be... So I completely reject the idea that as a filmmaker you have to think how your film will be perceived outside.”<sup>14</sup> Do you agree with the critics or with the director? Explain your viewpoint.

# QUOTE ANALYSIS

Discuss these quotes from the movie using the questions that follow.

“ **Immigration official:** (in English, to James) Why not go to work in America, Germany, France? (In Hebrew) We barely get by in this godforsaken place.

- What is ironic about this attitude from someone born and raised in Israel? What message does it send about Israelis and their view of their own country?

“ **James:** If I tell the people back home what this place is like, they won't believe me. They'll be mad at me.  
**Skomboze:** Why?  
**James:** It must be different in Jerusalem. I'm sure of it.

- What do you think James told his fellow villagers about the trip when he returned home—the truth or a more idealized version of his travels?

(after Sallah makes money playing shesh-besh by exploiting James' throwing talent)

“ **James:** You're a very bad man, Mr. Sallah.  
**Sallah:** Things here aren't like in your village stories. Here, we prey on each other.

- Why do you think an elderly man like Sallah would spend his time cheating his friends out of their money playing board games? Does it say more about his personality or his place in life and society?

“ **Sallah:** A *frayer* is someone who lets you get the better of him. It's someone who doesn't grab what's right under his nose.  
**James:** But Our Lord said, "Whoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."  
**Sallah:** (holding out his two arms like they are nailed to a cross) And how did he wind up? A *frayer*.

- What is the fundamental conflict between Christian philosophy and Israeli pragmatism? How would a Christian respond to Sallah's offensive suggestion?

“ **Shimi:** Jerusalem isn't going anywhere. It's been there for 3,000 years.

- What is the significance of the fact that James repeats this exact statement later in the movie?

“ **Shimi:** You don't make money by working. You have to think, not work. You should make the money, and other people should do the work.

- What do you think Sallah was referring to when he said this? Is James' practical implementation of these words faithful to the original intention?

“ **James:** Your house is nice, but a million dollars is a lot of money. If you don't take it, you are a *frayer*.  
**Sallah:** On the contrary, Reverend. If I take it, I'm a *frayer*. If I sign, I'll never see my son again.

- a) Do you think James would have given Sallah the same advice at the beginning of the movie? b) Why does Sallah apply the term *frayer* to the outcome of never seeing his son again? Do you think this application of the term is consistent with its use in other places in the movie? Why or why not?

“ **Shimi:** This is James, my best worker. I can trust him with my eyes closed.

**Racheli:** He’s just like part of the family.

- Do you think Shimi and Racheli are sincere in this sentiment? In what ways has James become “part of the family”? In what ways does he remain an “outsider”?

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

### WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE RE-INTRODUCTION OF SALLAH?

Through the introduction of multiple generations, the movie is able to illustrate transitions in Israeli society while calling attention to tensions in the gap between Sallah’s generation and that of the present day. Society has progressed from Sallah’s emotional attachment to the land to Shimi’s preoccupation with personal prosperity—how much money he could gain by selling that land. As the outsider, James is caught in the middle, with Shimi and Sallah each giving him contradictory orders to assert authority. James’ perspective as an outsider magnifies the pathos of Shimi’s plan to put Sallah in a home for the elderly, since this concept does not exist in Africa.

“James is for me a metaphor for the Zionist dream. He comes with this beautiful, spiritual, ideal dream and while trying to make it come true in the real world, not only he changes but the dream changes.”

DIRECTOR Ra’anana  
Alexandrowicz in  
an interview<sup>5</sup>

### WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF JAMES’ EXPERIENCES IN ISRAELI SOCIETY?

James is more than just a character. He is used as a device to expose the director’s views concerning what is lost in moving from an idealistic dream to a reality. When Israel was transformed from a socialist model to a capitalist system, the process created a prosperous economy and a higher standard of living, but it inevitably brought about other, negative consequences, such as corruption and a proliferation of illegal workers.

At the beginning of the movie, Sallah says of James, “He’s a real Zionist. Like in the good old days.” James’ initial spirituality and idealism acts as a foil (means of highlighting through contrast) to a society where even people are viewed materialistically—as seen when James is wrongfully imprisoned and just as wrongfully released due to calculating assessments of his potential worth as a low-wage worker. The fact that even a righteous man like James is fascinated with and sucked into this mentality demonstrates the potency of this fatal allure and is meant to be representative of what happened to the greater society.

But if James’ human frailties can be broadly extrapolated, then his journey can also be considered metaphoric for all human quests great and small.

“I think each of us has his or her Jerusalem toward which we aspire to reach. Whether we reach it, or even remember where we were headed, is another issue.”

“DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT” FROM  
DIRECTOR Ra’anana Alexandrowicz<sup>6</sup>