



ABOUT THE MOVIE

This movie is a classic social satire—a work of art intended to expose the foolish and the absurd in society using the weapon of wit. Through humorous interactions between exaggerated character types, kibbutzniks, Sephardi Jews, and wealthy American tourists alike are thoroughly satirized in this movie. On a deeper level, the film examines the social implications of the unprecedented numbers of predominantly Sephardi immigrants who flooded into Israel during the early days of its statehood. By following Sallah and his large family as they navigate through Israeli bureaucracy and adjust to their new lives in the Promised Land, the movie dramatizes the growing pains inherent in Israel's process of moving from an idealistic concept to a working reality—a process Israel still struggles with to this day.

USE THIS MOVIE TO EXPLORE

CINEMA Social satire in Israeli film

HISTORY Absorption process for new immigrants in the early days of Israel's Kibbutz movement

CULTURE Cultural differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews

BEFORE THE MOVIE

VOCABULARY

Ma'abara Temporary housing for new immigrants arriving in Israel

Olim (*sing. male oleh, sing. female olah*) Immigrants to Israel

Shikun Permanent housing complex

Shesh-besh Backgammon; a popular Israeli pastime

Sephardim Technically refers to ancestors of the Jews of Spain (expelled from Spain in 1492); now also used more broadly to refer to Jews of Arab ancestry.

Ashkenazim Jews with European ancestry

Kibbutz (*plural: kibbutzim*) Collective community where everyone lives, owns and works the land together

Kibbutznik One who lives on a kibbutz

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DID YOU KNOW?

Look out for Chaim Topol, the actor who plays the main character Sallah. Does he look familiar? This film launched his acting career, and later he went on to play Tevya in the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*.

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PLOT SUMMARY

Sallah Shabatti, a simple Jew from an Arab-speaking country, arrives in Israel with his wife and their seven children to start a new life in the Holy Land. The Shabatti family is placed immediately in temporary housing leaving much to be desired—cramped, inadequate shacks without heat, running water or sanitation. The authorities assure Sallah that soon he will be able to move to a new apartment. When no one has the slightest intention of carrying out this promise, Sallah decides to take matters into his own hands. But his determination is thwarted by the apathetic bureaucracy of the Housing Ministry, and by politicians who renege on their election promises. Desperate, Sallah tries to raise money by demanding a dowry for his daughter, who wishes to marry one of the young members of a nearby kibbutz. But the kibbutz angrily refuses. Finally, Sallah hits upon a successful plan of action: using reverse psychology, he organizes a demonstration in the *ma'abara* demanding the right to stay there permanently.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

WHAT IS THIS MOVIE SATIRIZING?

This 1964 film may be a comedy, but it is also a pointed social satire of what was a very painful social process for Israeli society. In Israel's very first decade of statehood, more than one million Jewish immigrants overwhelmed the 600,000 Jews living in Israel prior to its establishment. A majority of these new immigrants were from the Muslim countries surrounding Israel who were evicted when Israel was founded, their possessions confiscated. Others were Holocaust survivors. Mostly, they were homeless and destitute.

Large-scale immigration to Israel is, of course, ideologically desirable. But, speaking practically, the process of absorbing staggering numbers of impoverished people was not easy for Israel in the early 1950s.

Inevitably, there were logistical challenges—finding the new *olim* housing and work, for instance. The temporary camps set up near existing settlements soon became hotbeds of social problems. Crowded living conditions and rampant unemployment bred frustration, crime and disappointment, leading many immigrants to believe they had found less than the Promised Land. Some camps lasted between 5 to 20 years, and their negative effects had a profound and lasting influence on Israeli society that may still be felt today.

A further challenge was cultural. Most immigrants placed in the *ma'abarot* were Sephardim from Islamic countries in North Africa and the Middle East, whereas the vast majority of the rest of the population were Ashkenazim from Eastern Europe. The clash of cultures created misunderstandings, as seen in the movie when Sallah considers his request for a dowry for his daughter to be completely acceptable and commonplace, whereas the kibbutz believes that to pay money for a woman is old-fashioned and degrading to the woman. Combined with the cultural differences, social and economic gaps between the two groups created resentment and animosity, a dynamic which had a negative impact on the young state's social makeup.

THE KIBBUTZ MOVEMENT

In the early 1900s, the Jews set out to reclaim their ancestral Homeland, what was then Palestine. But they had a problem: the land was a malaria-infested swamp, and they were inexperienced as farmers. They overcame this and many other hardships through banding together in communities. These communities, which came to be known as kibbutzim, were founded on socialist ideals. All property was to belong to everyone collectively, and everyone would contribute to and take from the common treasury, in the Marxist expression, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." All decisions big and small concerning the common property were to be made at community meetings, forums where all members could express their opinions (as seen in the movie). Even children were to be treated communally and raised away from their parents in children's houses. Women were to perform the same roles as men, such as heavy labor and guard duty, with jobs assigned on a rotating basis. The combination of socialist principles with the Zionist desire to work and settle the land of Israel is known as "Labor Zionism."

In the early days of Israel, kibbutzim were instrumental in the settlement, defense and agricultural development of the land as well as in defining the image of Israelis, both to Israelis themselves and abroad. A disproportionate number of Kibbutzniks became Israeli military leaders, intellectuals and politicians. Today, the kibbutz movement has declined due to many factors, including the rise of capitalism. However, there are still over 250 kibbutzim in Israel which contribute greatly to Israel's agricultural production, entrepreneurship and environmentalist movement.

CINEMATOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

HOW CAN CINEMA PUT SOCIAL SATIRE IN ACTION?

BOUREKAS

A light and airy puff pastry with a filling (traditionally cheese or potato).

In the early days of the State of Israel, anxiety and tension pervaded the military and political atmosphere. Not surprisingly, Israelis looked for an escape through entertainment. Israel developed its own genre of “escapist” films—films designed to create a mental diversion from the stresses of daily life. Known as bourekas, they were as light as the pastry for which they were named, dealing primarily with simplistic ethnic stereotypes in a comical way. *Sallah* is one example.

RECIPE FOR BOUREKAS¹

Perfect to serve at your next Israeli movie night!

Dough 1/2 lb. margarine, 1 tsp. salt, 3 cups self-rising, flour, warm water

Stuffing 1/2 cup cheese (feta), 1 cup cooked spinach, 3 egg yolks

Garnish 1 egg yolk, sesame seeds to cover

Dough Melt the margarine and mix with flour and salt. Add warm water until able to roll dough. Roll it and cut circles with a cup.

Stuffing Mix all the ingredients. Put one teaspoon of stuffing on each dough circle. Fold in half. On top, spread yolk and sprinkle sesame seeds. Place on a well-greased cookie tray and bake at 350° F until golden (approx. 15-20 min.). Serve hot.

BIOGRAPHY OF A SATIRIST

The director Ephraim Kishon (1924-2005), a grand master of Israeli satire, was a journalist, screenwriter and director who made a career laughing at the disorder inherent in Israeli society.

Kishon arrived in Israel when in his 20s, after surviving several concentration camps. As an immigrant to Israel from an orderly European country (he was born in Hungary), he could see the idiosyncrasies in how things were run in Israel in a way that sabras (native Israelis) never could. Kishon was awarded the Israel Prize for lifetime achievement in 2002. The judges' panel described him as “a light rescued from the fire of the Holocaust, who scaled the heights of satire in the world.” In his own words, Kishon wrote in his book *The Scapegoat concerning the Nazis*, “They made a mistake—they left one satirist alive.”

WHY WAS SALLAH ONE OF THE MOST COMMERCIALY SUCCESSFUL FILMS IN THE HISTORY OF ISRAELI CINEMA?

At the time of the movie's debut, many people were still living in *ma'abarot*. *Sallah* hit home as a social satire because it addressed what were viewed as highly relevant and contemporary social issues, including the chaotic absorption process which was still underway and the ideology of Labor Zionism as manifested in the kibbutzim. *Sallah* was the first film to satirize Labor Zionism.

Sallah won many artistic awards, including two Golden Globes for best film and best leading actor, first prize for script writing and acting in the 1964 San Francisco Film Festival, and a nomination for the Oscar in the Foreign Film category for that year.

AFTER THE MOVIE

ACTIVITY

Find scenes in the film which represent each of the following themes. What do these examples say about the message of the film overall?

- The arbitrary and inhuman nature of the absorption process
- Bureaucracy as heartless, dumb and impervious to the plight of individuals
- Election fraud
- The kibbutz movement as preaching its ideals without practicing them
- Fundraising fraud, raising money for Israel by taking advantage of the gullibility of rich American Jews
- The economic inequity between rich and poor in a socialist society
- The Ashkenazi prejudice against Sephardim

THINKING ABOUT THE MOVIE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1 UNIT THEME: Sephardim as “The Other”

- Did you identify with any of the characters? In what way? Which characters did you identify with more, the “insiders” in Israeli society (kibbutzniks, politicians, etc.) or the “outsiders” (Sallah, Sephardi immigrants)?
- What makes Sephardim the “others” in terms of their appearance, manner of speech, lifestyle, customs, family, attitude to gender, work ethic, religious beliefs?
- According to this movie, is integration of “the other” into society possible? Through what ways and to what extent?

2 CINEMATIC THEME: Social Satire

- Immigrating to Israel is known as *aliyah*, meaning literally in Hebrew “ascending,” which implies that Israel is spiritually a “higher” place. (Moving away from Israel is known as *yerida*, “descent”). In what ways does this movie match and/or parody this ideal with the reality of immigrating to Israel?
- How does the film satirize the wealthy Americans? Kibbutzniks? The Sephardi immigrants themselves?
- What is it about Sallah that makes the politicians think he is a *ma’abara* leader? What does the election scene say about Sallah and the democratic process?
- According to a Hebrew saying, “*Tamid meqablim mah she’lo rotzim*” (“You always get what you don’t want”). Have you ever used reverse psychology? Do you think it is effective? Did you find Sallah’s use of this adage realistic?

3 HISTORICAL THEMES: Immigrant Absorption/Kibbutz Movement in the Early Days of Israel

- How is the tree-planting scene symbolic of the entire process of immigration?
- How does Sallah treat and view women? How does this differ from the kibbutzniks’ attitude? Give concrete examples.
- Why is the idea of paying a dowry so divisive between Sallah and the kibbutzniks? What added information do the arguments over dowry give us about the respective societies and the differences between them? How does the outcome of the monetary exchanges reflect Kishon’s own opinion on the issue?
- What did you think of the depiction of the kibbutz community? Would you want to live on a kibbutz? Why or why not? How would your life change if you went to live on a kibbutz?

4 CULTURAL THEME: Cultural Differences Between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews

- How does this movie portray the differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews?
- To which of the following do you think the depictions of the Sephardi and Ashkenazi characters contribute and why? a) The movie's comedic value b) Portraying the characters realistically c) Projecting demeaning attitudes towards these two groups of people
- What do you think is the attitude of the filmmaker to Sephardim, Ashkenazim and the differences between them?

QUOTE ANALYSIS

Read aloud and analyze the following quotes. What do they tell us about the differences in attitudes between the Sephardim and Ashkenazim?

“ **Immigration official:** How many children do you have?

Sallah: Six.

Official: It says here seven.

Sallah: All right then, seven.

Official: (referring to an old woman) Is this a relative of yours?

Sallah: Don't know. Maybe she's a relative. Why else would she have come with us all the way from outside Israel to here? A relative.

Official: Who understands you people?!

“ **Driver:** Big guy—a kibbutznik!

Sallah: But his trac...his vehicle is bigger.

Driver: It's not his, it belongs to the kibbutz.

Sallah: And who does the kibbutz belong to?

Driver: To the kibbutznikim, who else?

Sallah: So why isn't that his?

Driver: It's not his! ...Well, it's his, but it's not his.

Sallah: Mister, do you even hear what you're saying?

Driver: Sure! Look at 'em...living together, eating together, working together...all the property belongs to everyone.

Sallah: Really? To everyone? And our house is there too?

Driver: No no, it's a little further up.

Sallah: Baruch Hashem.

“ **Sallah:** Ziggy...that's an Ashkenazi name, isn't it?

Habuba: But Daddy, Mr. Goldstein is Ashkenazi.

Sallah: They're good for losing at *shesh-besh*, not for marrying!

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

SALLAH THE WISE? OR SALLAH THE FOOL?

Since this film belongs to the genre of light *bourekas*, simplistic characters may be expected. In literary terms, Sallah falls predictably into an age-old character type: the “wise fool” who manages to overturn the establishment to get his own way. He is the “little guy” who outsmarts “the system”—whether through wisdom or stupidity remains unclear.

Unfortunately, Sallah’s “foolish” side incorporates many negative and demeaning stereotypes of Sephardi Jews: he is illiterate and lazy, an alcoholic given to gambling who is patriarchal, coarse and primitive. Our uneasiness with the reliance on ethnic stereotypes only increases when we learn that the actor playing Sallah, Topol, was himself Ashkenazi, as was the writer of the story, Kishon, who, unlike his character, personally became very successful in his career soon after making *aliyah* in 1949. On the other hand, the film became so popular because viewers invariably identify with Sallah, who is perceived as a much better man than the educated, sophisticated and powerful representatives of the new state. The heartless bureaucrats, political crooks and insincere kibbutzniks who surround Sallah, act as a foil, or means of contrast, highlighting his fundamental, if clumsily executed, desire to do the right thing. Putting aside political correctness, Sallah’s image ultimately is endearing, despite, or perhaps because of, his many faults.

Regardless of your view on Sallah as a character, he does fulfill an important function as a roving hero, or “picaro” in literary terms. It is through the process of wandering through his environment that he manages to focus the viewer’s attention on a string of societal issues.

ACTIVITY

Divide into two teams: those who think Sallah is wise, and those who think Sallah is a fool. Hold a debate, making sure you use specific examples from the film to support your opinion.