"THE REAL JEWS": DEFINING ISRAELI IDENTITY IN POLITICS AND CINEMA

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In 1933, a Zionist film crew produced a cornerstone Israeli film, Oded Hanoded, depicting a child's adventures in the Jezreel Valley at the forefront of Jewish civilization amidst Arab Bedouins. This film embodied the Zionist struggle for an ethno-religious homeland by presenting strong European-Jewish characters engaged in a life-and-death battle for survival against hostile land and backwards tribes. These sentiments dominated early 20th century settler politics and culminated in the successful creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Early immigrants to Israel between 1880-1940 came from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds within Europe; Zionists actively overcame those differences by creating a modern, secular society. Notably, through social institutions like the agricultural communities known as kibbutzim and the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, a particular national Israeli identity emerged. In the 1940s, Ashkenazim (European Jews), who comprised most of the Jewish settlers in the former mandate, largely accepted the vision and culture promulgated by Zionists. In 1950, however, Israel passed the Law of Return, offering any Jew in the world the promise of Israeli citizenship should they immigrate to the homeland. Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, called Mizrahim, along with post-Holocaust Ashkenazi refugees, responded by rapidly immigrating to Israel to flee persecution. Between 1950 and 1980, Israel's demographics transformed from a predominantly European Jewish nation to a multi-ethnic society, with a politically engaged Mizrahi population. Throughout the 20th century, the question of belonging in Israel, particularly for Mizrahim, was settled on both political and cultural fronts.

Israeli cinema grappled with these transformations, inviting the public to reflect on the evolving character of Israel. The prominence of Ashkenazim in positions of power created the vision of a fair-skinned, European Israel, which dominated popular cultural until the Six-Day War. Reflecting the political landscape, Israeli film projected European aesthetics in contrast to the surrounding Arab culture, which was dismissed as antiquated and backward. Mizrahim were treated and represented as products of their immutable Arab heritage and excluded from the Israeli identity until after 1967, when both heritages were joined together against the hostility of the Muslim Arab world. This unity, however, was short-lived. Israel's failures in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and the rise of Likud—a largely Mizrahi working-class party— to political hegemony produced a struggle to revive and display Mizrahi heritage as legitimate Jewish and Israeli culture. The 1980s embrace of individualism in economics and politics was mirrored on screen, where personal cinema displayed individual stories of Mizrahim and prompted discussion of a multicultural Israel, rather than a European 'Melting Pot'.

After the 1948 War of Independence, Israel held its first legislative election. In the one-hundred-and-twenty-member parliament, only two members were recorded as born in Arab countries; the rest were European Jews. This political majority gave Ashkenazim the power to formalize early Israeli identity through politics. The political rhetoric and policy from this era reveals that Israeli culture was assumed to be inherently European and superior to surrounding 'backwards' Arab nations. Prime

Minister David Ben-Gurion focused efforts on mass population growth through immigration and birth-rate to occupy and develop land and build a self-sufficient military force. Between 1948 and 1956, 450,000 Jews immigrated to Israel from Asia and Africa, overwhelming Israel's immediate housing resources. The government placed these refugees and voluntary immigrants in transit camps and shantytowns with minimal infrastructure. Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, who unabashedly argued for Ashkenazi superiority, justified the poor conditions of Mizrahi camps. He expressed his view of Mizrahi as least among the Jews in a meeting on immigration: "even the immigrant from North Africa, who looks like a savage, who has never read a book in his life, not even a religious one, and doesn't even know how to say his prayers, either wittingly or unwittingly has behind him a spiritual heritage of thousands of years." The Labor Government and elite Ashkenazim asserted an Israeli identity rooted in European sophistication and culture. Conversely, those in power encouraged Mizrahim to abandon Arab culture and assimilate into an Israeli identity rooted in European Zionism and Ashkenazi tradition.

Economic and social disparities developed between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi due to limited housing. The state housed Ashkenazi immigrants in growing urban centers and the homes of Palestinians who fled in 1948.   These areas gave Ashkenazim access to well-paying, white collar jobs. As Ashkenazim occupied former Palestine, the Israeli government launched development campaigns of unoccupied desert by relocating Mizrahim into transit camps, or moshavim; these collectives were significantly less

developed and funded than the Ashkenazi-majority kibbutzim. Social practices in moshavim tended to hold "more traditional and idiosyncratic values, as against communal upbringing in the kibbutz". Movashim did not have large preexisting economies with professional jobs, thus Mizrahim genrelly took labor jobs regardless of former work experience or education.

This political change trickled down into Israeli culture, most notably in cinema. After the War of Independence, Israeli film shifted away from the pre-1948 documentary genre and embraced fiction as a means of projecting a unique Israeli identity that stood out from the surrounding Arab culture. The victory of 1948, along with a realization that Israel's future would demand constant military force, launched an era of independent films depicting physically strong and independent Ashkenazim. Themes of war and military dominance over Arabs dominated the screen and created an Israeli image juxtaposed to Arabs in all characteristics. During early state-building, the Israeli government did not perceive great value in filmmaking despite their heavy investment in other areas of the arts as part of their socialized policy. However, the globally acclaimed 1960 American film *Exodus*, which was shot in Israel, transformed the state's understanding of cinema.

The Zionist epoch centers around Kitty, an American aid worker after the Holocaust, who falls in love with Haganah rebel Ari Ben Cannan. The film follows several characters' lives in the kibbutz and moshav, unraveling histories of physical and sexual abuse of Holocaust survivors by the Nazis and of kibbutz dwellers by Arabs. The

character's lives are impacted by the political events of the late 1940s, the prospects of statehood, and the British pursuit of Ari following the bombing of the King David Hotel. The film's main child character, a young Danish girl who survived the Holocaust, is murdered by a gang of Arabs on her way to join the army for the War of Independence.
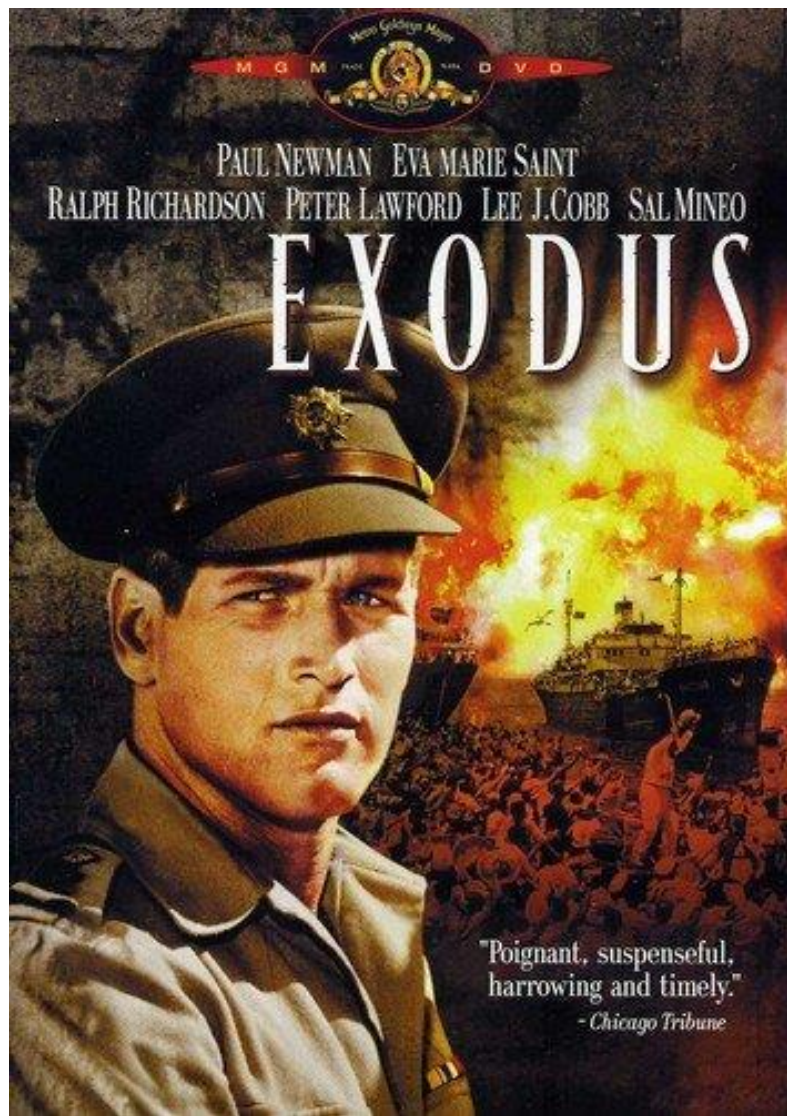

Figure 1. Exodus film title cover

At the same time, another character is murdered, mutilated, and hung in a village by an ex-Nazi. The film concludes with the burial of the two martyrs and the survivors getting on a truck to enter battle. The film's stark imagery stirred sympathy for Israel and Jews in the hearts of Americans and demonstrated the power of cinema to garner international support for Israel while serving as a mythic origin story for the modern state. After Exodus succeeded in portraying Israelis as strong, moral characters, righteous in the face of savagery, the Israeli government invested in the domestic film industry as a tool for building the Israeli image at home and abroad.

The Commerce Ministry began funding film in the 1960s-70s as part of a campaign to finance the arts. Known as bourekas after a common Mediterranean dessert, this 1960s film genre address issues of ethnic misunderstanding and immigration through comedy and drama. Israeli bourekas engaged with questions of racial identity by depicting Mizrahi-Ashkenazi relations and ethnic tropes from an Ashkenazi view. Plots featured stereotypically flawed Mizrahi characters who often resolved their struggles with identity and socio-political structure by marrying into an established Ashkenazi family. When it came to casting these characters, Ashkenazi actors filled all major roles regardless of the character's race. Directors emphasized stereotypical Mizrahi characteristics, such as accents, religious piety, and dress, to create convincing Mizrahi characters. Ashkenazi and Mizrahi characters were always portrayed as distinct and separate, even beyond their aesthetics. Bourekas framed Mizrahi Jews as foreigners who struggled to understand Israel but could ultimately

assimilate and become Israeli—an identity derived from Ashkenazi culture. This vision of a Eurocentric Israel reflects the political sentiments of the era. Then Foreign Minister Golda Meir addressed arriving Soviet Jews as "the real Jews...a superior breed [who] will provide [Israel] with heroes." Political and economic preference for Ashkenazi intensified racial strife in social settings. In Tel Aviv, newly immigrated Ashkenazi filed complaints against "black" Mizrahi neighbors, prompting the separation of Mizrahi and Ashkenazi children in school and recreation. Mizrahi resistance to social hostilities resulted in neighborhood skirmishes which resulted in deaths of both races. Amid the strenuous racial divisions, the Israeli identity maintained one common experience: immigration.

Ephraim Kishon's 1964 film Sallah follows the story of Mizrahim Yemeni Jew Sallah Shabati and his family as they begin life in Israel. The film opens with a line of passengers deboarding a plane. The first to get off are Ashkenazi women in heels and western dress, who wave ostentatiously and disembark in regal fashion. Behind them emerge several dark-skinned Mizrahi children in traditional garb, carrying supplies and clothing without trunks. Sallah emerges last, behind his wife and eight children. His first words are "Praise Him who brought us to this Land", a quotation from the Pentateuch. Here, in just the first minute, four stereotypes of Mizrahi are depicted: poverty, large families, traditional dress, and religiosity. Sallah takes a headcount of his family and discovers one child is missing. He yells, then the screen turns to the luggage port of the plane as a little boy rides down inside a bag. This scene reinforces

stereotypes of Mizrahi as loud, rambunctious, and disorganized. As the introductory credits appear, the background alternates between Sallah's disheveled family walking across the tarmac and a group of Ashkenazi travelers. Characteristics of each are emphasized and aspects of each group satirized. This image reflects the sociopolitical division between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi. Though both racial groups immigrated on the same plane, the experience did not produce a kinship between parties and they immediately dispersed once on Israeli soil. Even as they complete the same tasks, the Ashkenazi group stay together in the front of the plane and processing lines, leaving the Mizrahim behind. Next, the government sends the family to a kibbutz where Sallah struggles to assimilate into the commune practices. For the first half of the film, he drinks and plays backgammon, only socializing with his poor drunkard neighbor. He interrupts and undermines the communal meeting, interferes with a kibbutz forestry operation, and demands to be paid for his daughter's hand in marriage so that he can afford a new home elsewhere. Though the character is largely a mockery of Oriental backwardness, the film validates certain Mizrahi customs. When in deliberation with the parents of his daughter's soon-to-be fiancé, they denounce his request as a "barbaric custom" irreconcilable with their "progressive way of life". Sallah replies with an appeal to tradition: "Why do you want us to forget it? Suppose it is our custom to give you 1,000 pounds. You tell us to forget only what is not good for you…Barbaric or not, we pay a father because he raised his girl… What you sew in the kibbutz don't you want to reap?" Sallah's rebuttal emphasizes the hypocrisy of casting Mizrahi culture as un-

Israeli. He bridges the "barbaric" Mizrahi customs with basic human sentiments, which are expressed even within kibbutz life, thereby reconciling Oriental customs with life in modern Israel. The stereotypical yet redemptive portrayal of Mizrahim in Sallah exhibits several political challenges during this time.

Sallah also served as a platform for criticism of the socialist foundation of Zionism. Although many cultural traditions of Mizrahi immigrants were denounced as inferior by Ashkenazi leaders, they could not all be stricken from the Israeli identity. The kibbutz leadership in Sallah are portrayed as corrupt, lacking moral authority and depth. This reflected the Israeli political shift away from the Soviet Union prompted by the fall of the Mapai coalition, a democratic socialist political party which previously dominated Israeli politics until the 1960s. In 1963, Ben-Gurion stepped down after a series of disgraces; this softened the image of Ashkenazi superiority within the Israeli identity. Sallah, which was produced a year after the prime minister's resignation, demonstrated that certain aspects of Mizrahi culture could exist within the Israeli identity, though it was undergirded by European superiority.

Mizrahi characters in Israeli film were often presented as extremely religious to reflect the religiosity of Mizrahi population at large in the 1960s. In the 1966/1967 school year, 40.3 percent of Mizrahi children enrolled in State Religious schools, compared to 27 percent of all children nationally. The Mizrahi to Ashkenazi ratio in Religious Schools was +55 versus –24 percent in the secular State Schools. The Six-Day War reinvigorated eschatological politics, undergirding public policy with religious motivations. In 1968,

the government authorized the resettling of Jews in Hebron; these settlements bridged the gap between the ultra-orthodox, right who desired the Biblical lands of Judea Samaria and the Zionist nationalists, who envisioned Israeli expansion. The settlements roused religious pride, reconciling Israeli identity with a larger Jewish religious identity inclusive of Mizrahim who tended to be more religious. This created space, particularly as the Mapai political hold receded, for Mizrahi-religious coalitions to gain representation in the Knesset and take on political leadership.

After defeat in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Israel experienced more dramatic political shifts away from the Labor Ashkenazi establishment, culminating in the election of Likud figurehead Menachem Begin as Prime Minister in 1977. This realignment stirred cultural questions over Israeli identity and the validity of Ben-Gurion's Mizug Galuyot (melting pot) vision for immigrant integration. Film of the 1980s and 90s, a genre dubbed personal cinema, "viewed itself as the polar opposite of commercial cinema" and established an "Israeli New Wave" which rejected the socially collectivistic ideals of previous genre and embodied a "spirit of new individualism". Israeli film scholar Ella Shohat interprets this as an allegoric mirror of contemporary politics, embodying the Likud resistance to Zionist-socialist values on screen. Personal cinema examines Mizrahi and Ashkenazi identity through individual experiences. According to Shohat, the ability to portray the personal experience of Mizrahim on screen, independent of assimilation schemes, marks a historical engagement with Arabness among Mizrahim and Palestinians in Israeli culture. This 'New Wave'

exploration of the individual paid particular attention to the Sabra, the "Jews born in Palestine toward the end of World War I through the 1920s and 1930s".   By the late 20th century, it had encompassed both Israeli-born children of recent immigrants and second or third genretion Israelis. Narratives like Beyond the Walls (1984) display Mizrahi characters, culture, and experiences in a way that challenged the Ashkenazi worldview.   Daniel Gutwein refers to this cultural phenomenon as post-Zionist multiculturalism.   This social multiculturalism, including the on-screen inclusion of Mizrahi sabra identity, according to Gutwein, is a manifestation of the "ideology of privatization" prominent in 1980s 'post-Zionist' economic policy.
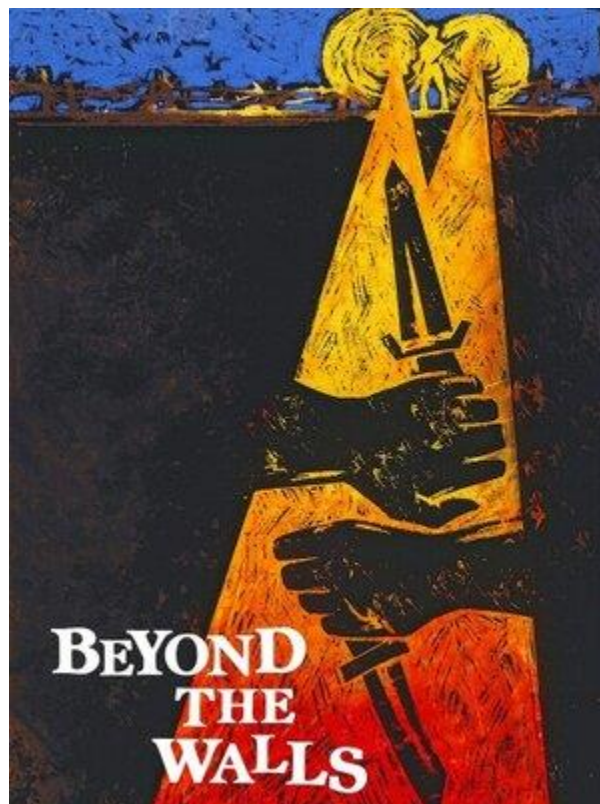

Figure 2. Beyond the Wall film title cover

Cinema played a central role in imagining a Jewish homeland for Zionists and settlers in the early 20th century. The creation of Israel in 1948 solidified Zionist sociopolitical precepts but was quickly upended by mass immigration from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Between 1950 and 1970, the interplay of politics and culture produced an Israeli identity initially centered in European culture, but pliable enough to incorporate Mizrahi culture over time. As Mizrahi presence in Israel was marginalized politically, their roles on screen were either muted or misconstrued to present the Oriental Jews as they were imagined by Ashkenazim. Non-Jewish Arabs were depicted as execrable hostiles, as seen in Exodus and implied in Sallah, which harmed the Mizrahi image further. After the Yom Kippur War in 1973, political tides shifted and the Mizrahi-religious coalition gained power through the Likud party. The political shift away from Ashkenazi Labor politics created room for differing Israeli identities to coexist, which enabled personal cinema to seriously interrogate questions of Mizrahi and Arab-Israeli identity.

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