

Focus on Film

Documentary

BAL EJ: THE HIDDEN JEWS OF ETHIOPIA

Tuesday, May 14, 2019 @ 4:00 p.m.

Director: Irene Orleansky, 2016 Israel, Ethiopia
Running time: 97 minutes, English

Irene Orleansky, a Russian-born Israeli musician and ethnomusicologist, visited Ethiopia studying and filming the group Bal Ej. This group of crypto-Jews split from the Beta Israel community in Godar, Ethiopia, in the 15th century and moved north. Their existence was quite similar to the Marranos (in Spanish history, Jews who converted to the Christian faith to escape persecution but who continued to practice Judaism), worshipping and living in secret to avoid persecution. The Bal-Ej tried to disguise themselves outwardly as Christians to keep from being abused. These Ethiopian Jews, deprived of their basic rights, such as ownership of land, became craftsmen or, in Amharic, *bal ej*.

Much of the worship behaviors and rituals of this group of hidden Jews resembles descriptions of Biblical practices. For example, ritual animal sacrifice is still practiced. Also, when preparing for Passover, iron cooking implements are purified by fire, but all ceramic pots and jars are shattered and then buried in the ground.

In the film, Ms. Orleansky begins by reading an account by a researcher who discovered

the group a hundred years ago. Then she successfully gains access to the northern communities of Bal Ej. Some synagogues are so far from the peoples' villages that it took her a day, even by car, to arrive and hours of hiking in the mountains to reach the Jewish synagogues. They were built far away from any city and intentionally inaccessible so that few could reach them and their secrecy would be safe. I thought that only very fit and/or very young folks would be able to attend services. What did the elderly do? Only recently, the youths of the Bal Ej have opened a synagogue in Addis Ababa and hold their services openly.

Orleansky's interviews with the people are very interesting and the film shows many of their religious rituals, some of which have been completely forgotten by the rest of the Jewish world. Also, she uses much of the indigenous music, which is quite lovely. All in all, this film is a tour to an area and a world that most of us will never visit. In this film, you can!

Reviewed by Anita Ehrenfried

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