

Focus on Film

The Unorthodox

Israel
Drama

Tuesday, May 7, 2019 @ 8:00 p.m.

Director: *Eliran Malka, 2018 Israel*

Running time: *92 minutes, Hebrew, Yiddish with English subtitles*

The political party Shas (whose name is an acronym for “Torah-Observant Sephardim”) has been a fixture in Israeli politics for decades, but few today remember that it burst on the scene in 1984 seemingly out of nowhere. *The Unorthodox* is a fictionalized account of how the party was formed out of the discontent of Israel’s Sephardic community. Many members, if not most, thought themselves as religiously observant as the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox, but the religious establishment that was run entirely by European Jews looked down on them and ignored their needs.

Because the film is a combination of fact and fiction, the names of the actual founders of the party have been changed, and some of the characters have combined. In the film, the impetus for the party comes from Yaacov Cohen, a Jerusalem printer whose daughter is expelled from her religious school because “she doesn’t fit in”—code for her Sephardic roots. Yaacov’s sister advises to get her reinstated by making a deal with the Ashkenazim, but Yaacov is fed up with begging for scraps, and decides to run for the city council.

He soon finds a kindred spirit in Yigal Vaknin, a firebrand ritual slaughterer with a short fuse. Yigal leads Yaacov to a third partner, Rabbi Shomo Dayan, who has been reduced to running his yeshiva from the back room of Yigal’s butcher shop. The rabbi is crucial to the enterprise as the three soon realize that they can only succeed by picking up a few key endorsements. The

film gives a humorous portrayal of their struggles to get respected rabbis on board, while at the same time fending off attacks from the Ashkenazi establishment. As history tells us, their efforts are met by a groundswell of support, leading to phenomenal electoral success.

Success, however, has its price. As the fledgling party gears up for national parliamentary elections, Ya’acov feels the need to bring in more prominent personalities, and turns to the smooth-talking Rabbi Toledano. The Sephardic rabbinic establishment soon takes control of the party and Yaacov sees his dream hijacked by a crew just as corrupt as the Ashkenazim he fought.

The movie concludes with Shas’ greatest electoral victory, the 17 Knesset seats it won in the 1999 elections. It omits, though, the 1999 conviction and imprisonment of party leader Aryeh Deri on corruption charges, as well as a number of other criminal convictions well known to the Israeli public. Even Israeli filmgoers for whom the Shas party is anathema have enthusiastically received Director Eliran Malka’s first feature film for its fond portrayal of the Sephardic community, its authentic look at places and spaces in 1980s Jerusalem, its sparkling characterizations and its intimate look at the revolution that shook the Israeli political system.

Reviewed by Sheldon Leemon

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