

The Secret of the Ma'abara

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Abstract

The 1964 film *Sallah Shabati*, directed by Ephraim Kishon, offers a satirical yet incisive portrayal of the immigrant experience in early Israeli statehood, focusing on Jews from Middle Eastern and North African countries—particularly Yemen, Morocco, and Syria—who were placed in transitional absorption camps known as *Ma'abarot*.

This article examines the symbolic and sociopolitical dimensions of the film, particularly in light of *Operation Magic Carpet* (1949–1950), which brought approximately 49,000 Yemenite Jews to Israel. The film becomes a vehicle for exploring the dissonance between the ideological dream of *aliyah* and the lived reality of poverty, marginalization, and cultural tension.

By analyzing key scenes and narrative strategies, I argue that *Sallah Shabati* not only critiques bureaucratic inefficiencies and Ashkenazi dominance, but also illuminates the enduring hope and resilience of Mizrahi immigrants. The “secret” of the *Ma'abara*, as revealed in the film, lies in the tension between disappointment and aspiration—a theme that continues to resonate in contemporary discussions of identity, belonging, and integration in Israeli society.

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