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The House on Chelouche Street

The House on Chelouche Street (Moshe Mizrahi, dir. 1973) is a dramatic film directed by Moshe Mizrahi. It was released in 1973 and was nominated for an academy award in the category of best foreign language film. It includes such prolific Israel actors as Gila Almagor, Shaike Ophir and Joseph Shiloah. The film tells the story on an Egyptian Jewish family in Tel Aviv in the years immediately before the establishment of the State of Israel. It is both a coming of age film, about fifteen year old Sami who has lost his father and become the 'man' of his family, and the story of ethnic relations in late mandate Palestine.

The film is particularly well suited for use in the classroom. I use it both to reinforce ideas common in the literature on Middle Eastern Jewry and to complicate these ideas. The film presents us with an Egyptian Jewish family whose socio-economic position has fallen since migration to Palestine. In an early scene Sami's grandmother bemoans: "Look how low we've sunk...In Egypt we lived in palaces with servants and maids and here in Israel my daughter Clara is a maid cleaning other people's houses! You call this a life in Israel?" To help his family, Sami is forced to leave school and take a job at a factory, where he mans a drill. Throughout the film broken drills and other sexual metaphors speak to Sami's impotence, by extension suggesting a crisis of Mizrahi masculinity in Palestine.

At the same time the film represents Egyptian Jewry as modern and cosmopolitan. Though economically disadvantaged Sami is better educated than his Ashkenazi counterparts. His first encounter with his love interest, a 25 year old Sabra of Russian descent named Sonia, occurs when she follows him out of a library and discovers that he has stolen a book by Maxim Gorky. We soon learn that in addition to Hebrew, Sami speaks Ladino, Arabic, French, and a little bit of English, Italian, Greek, and Armenian. Moreover, Sami's relationship to Sonia and the other Russian characters in the film, his co-worker Max and stepfather-to-be Haim, reflects the film's emphasis on socio-economics and its rejection of the simplistic Ashkenazi/Mizrahi dichotomy. In particular, it distinguishes between ideological Eastern European Jews and capitalist oriented Western European Jews.

Finally the House on Chelouche Street is an excellent source for teaching the critical analysis of sources. For example, the overly romantic depiction of Jewish life in Egypt, and the film's Marxist tendency probably say more about the Mirzahi experience in the early 1970s, during the emergence of the Black Panthers in Israel, than they do about Egyptian Jewish life in Palestine in 1946/47.

Of course, in this short essay I cannot do justice to the complexity of representations in the film. Suffice it to say that the House on Chelouche Street is dramatically compelling

and full of teachable scenes. It is available for purchase on Amazon.com, though unfortunately only in PAL format. It may also be viewed via live stream on Netflix and is available in numerous university libraries.