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## The Ethiopian 'Spike Lee'

Jul. 2, 2009

LAURE WYBIER, THE JERUSALEM POST

Thirty years - officially - after the first Ethiopian Jews set foot on Israeli soil, the first Israeli film about the Ethiopian community of the Holy Land is being released in theaters on Thursday.

Filmmaker Shmuel Beru, who made aliya from Ethiopia at the age of eight, hopes to show Israeli audiences the richness of his community with *Zrubavel*, his first full-length feature film.

Even after three decades, all that most Israelis know about this population of more than 110,000 is what they read in newspaper reports: problems of integration, juvenile delinquency, domestic violence - or, more rarely, one successful Ethiopian immigrant who becomes a doctor, a pilot or a famous singer or actor. But what do we really know about the Ethiopian Jews of Israel - their values, their traditions, their language, their music, their food, their dreams, their problems and how they deal with them, their feelings?

These are the questions that Beru, 33, who started as an actor, wanted to answer by getting behind the camera.

In Tel-Aviv's Kerem Hateimanim neighborhood, a two-minute walk from Rehov Zrubavel, where he lives, Beru agreed to talk to *The Jerusalem Post* about this original project.

The idea came to him two years ago, he says. "I thought that in my community, there were a lot of stories to tell that others are not exposed to. So I decided to make a movie to relate them, thinking that if I don't do it, nobody will do it for me."

BERU PRESENTS a picture, sometimes happy, sometimes sad, of a group of residents in an entirely Ethiopian neighborhood. All the generations are represented, from the patriarch of the Zrubavel family - a colonel in Ethiopia, now a street sweeper in Israel - to his eight-year-old, Israeli-born grandson Yitzhak - alias "Spike Lee" - whose dream is to make movies.

Through the eyes of the latter, Beru - who arrived from Ethiopia via Sudan one year before Operation Moses in 1984 - tells the story of Yitzhak's aunt, Almaz, the "most beautiful girl in the neighborhood." A talented singer, Almaz wants to marry a distant cousin, despite her father's

injunction to respect the traditional rule of not marrying a relative within seven generations. Meanwhile, Almaz's brother Gili, pushed by his father, tries despite racism to enter a selective school to become an IAF pilot, as Yitzhak's parents fight over whether their son will enter a yeshiva or become a soccer player.

"My goal was to show that behind color and culture, there are human beings," says Beru. "I wanted to create an opportunity to see us [Israeli Ethiopians] in a different way than people are used to, to go further than what the news released about us, to make people realize that we are not different from others.

"'It doesn't matter where you come from, you are just a person' - this is the main point of my movie, and it is not only true for Ethiopians. *Zrubavel* tries to talk about integration in general, and its message can be applied to every other community."

Although he had never directed before, Beru was undeterred.

"My theory is, if you want to do it, just do it. I need a script? So I wrote a script. I need actors? So I found actors. I need money? Okay, I don't have money. I need to raise it. I presented my project to a few producers. I got only negative answers. So I invest my own money to direct a pilot. And I win the support of the Israel Film Fund and the Geshur Foundation. And I started."

DESPITE LIVING in Israel for 25 years, Beru says he still feels "different."

"I still feel I am not judged just as a person, but regarding my origins, my color," he explains. "People like to divide other people into groups. I don't know why, maybe it's easier for them to say, 'You, you are from outside, you are a foreigner, you just came to visit.' And this is what is exposed in the movie. This neighborhood [in the film] is like a ghetto, not connected to the other groups of society, to the rest of the world, and it affects its residents."

One of the issues Beru addresses in the movie is the gap between the older and younger generations in the community.

"For the youth, it's hard because they feel half-half - on the one hand, they want to be like Israelis, and on the other, they want to be like Ethiopians. And it is difficult for them to find a good balance, to mix. Especially when they have to face the reaction of their parents, themselves in a struggle to deal with a new culture and lifestyle very different from their old one," he says.

Beru also shows "a typical Israeli family" trying to contribute to their country.

"The father is very Zionist. [He] wants his son, Gili, to defend his country, even though he already lost another son in the army. He wants him to be a pilot and to be recognized as a part of society," he says.

Beru admits that the character of Yitzhak, the young filmmaker, could be a reflection of himself, although he hadn't planned it that way.

"Yitzhak is just a naïve little boy who wants to do a movie, very simple, with his handmade

camera," he explains, adding, "In this business, everyone wants to be Spike Lee and wants to be a voice for their own community."

Beru's next film project is a personal account of his own experiences coming to Israel.

"It will talk about my life, about my journey from Ethiopia to Israel via Sudan. I already have a script," he says. "Now I look for funds to start; it will be huge production."

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