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83% FRESH!

Aaron, a butcher and devout family man in Jerusalem's ultra-orthodox Jewish community, has his quiet existence interrupted one day when Erzi, a handsome, young Yeshiva student, happens on his shop. Intrigued by the young man, Aaron offers Erzi a job and over time becomes his friend and mentor.

The two men, working side by side, grow closer, and soon other feelings surface. As their forbidden desire for each other grows, Aaron begins to neglect his business and his family. But guilt, torment and pressure from the community lead him to make a radical decision.



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The New York Times

Passion and Identity Crisis in a Pious Community

February 5, 2010

By A. O. SCOTT



The New York Times
Critic's Pick

“Eyes Wide Open,” the quiet and confident feature debut of the Israeli director Haim Tabakman, explores the conflict between sexual desire and religious obligation. Set in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem, the film, written by Merav Doster, gives nearly equal weight to both sides in that struggle. It does not sensationalize lust or treat piety with condescension, but rather treats these two basic, often antithetical human impulses with respect and compassion. Faith can console as well as constrict, and sex can bring confusion along with intimacy and pleasure.

These are the complications that beset Aaron (Zohar Strauss), who runs a butcher shop he has inherited from his recently deceased father and who is proud to be recognized in his community as a tzaddik: a righteous man. Aaron’s life is circumscribed by work, prayer and family, and he takes his duties in all three areas seriously.

The first few scenes establish him as a kind, responsible and somewhat melancholy man, who makes his way each day, without complaint, from his shop to the synagogue to the apartment he shares with his wife, Rivka (Tinkerbel), and their four children.

This routine is disrupted when a young man named Ezri (Ran Danker) arrives in Aaron’s shop, looking for refuge in a downpour. It turns out that he also needs a job and a place to stay, and though he looks like someone who belongs in Aaron’s world, there is something odd, even threatening about him. Aaron’s charitable impulse is aroused — helping this lost soul will be a blessing — but so are other feelings. Perhaps he does not notice the spark of erotic interest that passes between him and this stranger or perhaps, at least at first, he regards it as a temptation to be conquered.

The idea that a chance to sin is also an opportunity to grow in virtue comes up in some of the religious discussions that occupy Aaron and the other men in the neighborhood. Their study sessions are occasions of warm, at times almost ecstatic intimacy, and the film takes note of the fine line, in a rigorously gender-segregated society, that separates the acceptable from the forbidden.

As Aaron and Ezri cross that boundary — at first hesitantly, and then more ardently — “Eyes Wide Open” also examines the ways an insular, highly religious social order enforces its rules and norms of behavior. “Modesty squads” of young men take it upon themselves to threaten and sometimes enact violence and ostracism on anyone who strays, and the specter of their vigilantism helps gentler authority figures, like the local rabbi, maintain control.

Aaron, a willing participant in this system, knows the danger he is courting, and finds himself caught in a terrible dilemma, an identity crisis with no easy resolution. He risks losing the only world he recognizes — secular Israel seems as far from his corner of Jerusalem as Antarctica — or else suppressing a vital part of himself.

“I feel alive now,” he says. “I was dead before.”

It is to Mr. Tabakman’s credit that this line is uttered without melodrama, and that his film’s critique of the moral inflexibility of ultra-Orthodoxy is not shrill or easy. And the three principal actors are remarkably adept at signaling nuances of longing, tenderness and uncertainty without betraying the fundamental reticence of their characters, who can barely speak about what is happening to them. While “Eyes Wide Open” does not examine Aaron’s universe of belief from within, it does represent an honest attempt, by and for outsiders, to understand the logic of a worldview defined by absolute obedience to God’s law.

And its scrupulous, humane sympathy gives this small, sorrowful film a glow of insight and a pulse of genuine, openhearted curiosity. It moves slowly and patiently through the ordeal of a single soul, illuminating in the process a cosmos of intense and hidden feeling.