

The Women's Balcony (2016)

Not Rated. Running time: 1 hour 36 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 1; Language 0; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds:

Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?

Ezekiel 34:2

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

Matthew 7:15

We see Etti (Evelin Hagoel) and Zion (Igal Naor), joined by various other women and their families carrying food through the streets of Jerusalem. They are on their way to their small Orthodox synagogue where their grandson's bar mitzvah is scheduled. However, before the lad can read from the elaborate Torah scroll, there is a loud noise, and the women's balcony caves in, with the elderly Rabbi Menasha's wife injured so badly that she lies in a coma at the hospital.

With the synagogue dangerously unstable and their enfeebled Rabbi (Abraham Celektar) in a state of shock, Etti and the men find a substitute room so far away that they cannot secure ten men required for a minyan to hold the service—that is, until young Rabbi David (Aviv Alush) comes along. He agrees to the men's plea to come and join them, but first hastens away and

quickly returns with more than enough students from the seminary that he teaches. As the days pass and Rabbi David volunteers to lead them on a temporary basis, all seems well. Zion and a friend frequently visit their elderly rabbi, but the old man still sits immobile, cut off from the world. Thus they are grateful for the ministrations of their temporary rabbi.

Rabbi David is slick in his approach to the men, as well as a pleasing preacher (for the men). They raise no objection when he tells them that a woman is filled with inner beauty that needs to be covered, and that they should buy scarves for their wives' heads. The women have not been accustomed to covering their heads, and Etti rejects Zion's "present" that he brings home. Another meek husband begs his grouchy wife to wear the head-scarf, claiming, "It'll help my income!" She fires back at him, "Try working. Maybe that'll help your income." None of these strong women agree to be their husband's doormat!

Rabbi David promises to arrange for the restoration of their old synagogue, but the result is not at all to the liking of the women. There is no spacious balcony as before, just a small shed-like addition being provided for the women. So cramped that it seems like an afterthought, the shed's window gives less than a satisfactory view of the service.

The women's vow to raise money for a balcony is opposed by Rabbi David. He has even suggested that God allowed the old balcony to fall because of the sins of the congregation, the implication being that they were not strict enough in their following the Torah. There might be a slight basis to the charge, with Etta breaking the Sabbath stricture when a boy turns off her electric coffee pot, and she secretly flips the switch back on. And her grandson confesses to her that he had not learned to read the Scripture assigned to him for his bar mitzvah, and thus had prayed for something to happen that would stop the service, saving him from embarrassment.

Clearly, in his eyes the balcony cave-in was his fault.

After some shrewd bargaining with a contractor, the women do raise money for their balcony and give it to the treasurer, but then Rabbi David insists that it should be used to purchase a replacement for the Torah scroll destroyed in the cave-in. The men have been so reluctant to challenge the authority of Rabbi David, that Etti and some of her friends leave their homes, rebelling against their men much as Lysistrata did in Aristophanes' famous play. They stage a public demonstration outside Rabbi David's seminary, an act that draws support from other women as well. The men may be cowed by Rabbi David, but Etti had early on been suspicious of him. Seeing her congregation split by the man's ultraconservative teaching, she asks him, "Is that what a rabbi is supposed to do? Enter a community of good people and fill them with fear?"

A subplot of the film, a growing romance between Yaffa (Yafit Asulin), Etti and Zion's niece, and Naphtali (Assaf Ben Shimon), Rabbi David's assistant, eventually leads to a resolution of the conflict, and the film concludes as it began, with a festive procession, this time one for a wedding.

This is a wonderful celebration of the importance of women, even in a religious tradition that most people think downplays their importance. We see love very much on display—love of husband and wife; of the people for their rabbi; love of a people for one another. It is love that is threatened by a leader's overly serious, indeed fanatical, emphasis upon rules.

On a lighter note, I also enjoyed how the filmmakers show that food is important to celebration. We first see the women carrying food to the bar mitzvah ceremony. There is a Passover meal and a Seder supper (one of the film's many eye-catching shots is an overhead shot of the latter!), and there is a supper to raise money for the balcony, but to which no one

comes—thus the non-eating of the food emphasizes the schism in the congregation. And there is the wedding feast at the end of the film. Also, it is a bowl of fruit salad that helps restore relations between Etti and Zion once again.

Director Emil Ben-Shimon and screenwriter Shlomit Nehama's delightful tale is not a summer comedy of little substance, but bids us look at a serious struggle from a different angle. The battle for the soul of this synagogue is akin to that reportedly being fought in Israel itself. Tension between the Jewish Orthodox leaders and both the secular and liberal Jewish believers continues to rise in regard to numerous religious laws that affect everyone. And it is a struggle that Christians too are going through in our own country and around the world. We certainly see this in the Catholic Church as the old conservative wing of cardinals and bishops resist the efforts of Pope Francis to allow compassion to matter as much as rules in their church. This is one comedy that people of all faiths should be seeing and discussing!

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the September issue of Visual Parables.