

Footnote

What could be drier than a story about the arcane investigations into ancient writings of the Talmud, those sacred books of Judaism compiled between 200-500 AD? Well, the new Israeli movie, "Footnote," has as its context the study of those texts, but it is, in fact, a fascinating human story, droll yet serious, of a thorny relationship between a father and son. The film was nominated in 2012 for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

The film describes a testy rivalry between a father and son, both professors of Talmudic Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The father is the wizened and withdrawn Eliezer Shkolnik (Shlomo Bar Aba), a dogged perfectionist who has lived his whole life in libraries culling through the most abstruse Talmudic arguments. A purist, he has published little, but feeds his ego through the "fame" of being cited in a footnote by another highly revered scholar. The son, Uriel Shkolnik (Lior Ashkenazi), is a gregarious bear of a man who loves public life and public accolades and who is well known for his provocative and popular treatises on Talmudic questions. The father is grudgingly proud of the son while dismissive of his "easy" work, while the son loves his father but cannot fathom his eccentric ways.

Their lives are turned upside down when Eliezer receives a phone call telling him he is to be awarded the Israel Prize for Jewish Studies, the most valuable honor for scholarship in the country and a capstone to a long career played out in obscurity (the actual Israel Prizes are the country's most prestigious and are given out in several categories of the arts and sciences).

Uriel is delighted to see his father's achievements ultimately recognized but then, in a mordant twist, he is called to appear before the academic committee, headed by Yehuda Grossman (Micah Lewesohn), to learn that there has been a hitch in granting Eliezer the award. Eventually, Uriel is forced to choose between the advancement of his own career and his father's. The tension mounts as the day of the award ceremony approaches.

This film, the brain child of writer/director Joseph Cedar ("Beaufort"), reflects a similar conflict he experienced in his own life, and he has given it rich resonance on the screen. He gets wonderful performances out of his very disparate leads, Bar Aba and Ashkenazi, who absolutely personify the thwarted scholar/drone and the ebullient academic star. Since we are being dipped into a world that most Americans know absolutely nothing about, Cedar's careful capturing of our interest in this father-son dilemma is most forceful and convincing. Through his characters, he makes what appears--to outsiders--as a musty, arcane topic come close to being a life-and-death matter.

In an interview about his film, Cedar himself responded as to why he would make a film about Talmudic researchers:

"Once I started hearing stories from within this department (of Talmudic studies), about mythological rivalries between scholars, stubbornness on an epic scale, eccentric professors who live with an academic mission that is bigger than life itself, even if its topic is radically esoteric, I fell in love with them all, and they became the center of this

story.

If you give it a chance, be prepared to get caught up in "Footnote."

(*"Footnote," is in Hebrew with English subtitles; it is rated "PG" and runs 105 min.*)

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