Ethiopian-Israelis ‘Live and Become’

The lively feature movie, “Live and Become,” may have come and gone in your area (or never been), but if you can catch it somehow, I’d recommend it. Although far from perfect, this French-Hebrew-Amharic international production captures a sweep of the Ethiopian-Jewish experience that has generally not been shown.

This story has a mythic quality. I don’t believe that this saga of an Ethiopian-Christian refugee boy, given away by his destitute mother to have a chance at a decent life in Israel as a Jew, should be taken as literally true. Undoubtedly, some teary-eyed viewers would disagree with me. Despite its flaws, my companion and I were riveted. So don’t be put off by my discussion of its shortcomings.

There are too many coincidences integral to the plot. And the central character experiences life in Israel with his kindly adopted family in too all-encompassing a way to be taken seriously on the ‘pshat’ (surface) level. It also ends too neatly.

His French-speaking Israeli parents describe themselves as being “of the left” and rally for peace as if on cue at the dawn of the Oslo period. A patriarch of this family has even helped found a kibbutz where he spends an idyllic summer. Still, his father argues bitterly with his adopted son when he decides to go to Paris to study medicine rather than immediately serve in the Israel Defense Forces upon completing high school. Returning as a doctor, the son is soon shown in combat during the second Intifada, as a medic. (Reality check: a military physician would likely serve behind the lines in a hospital or a medical aid station.)

And our Ethiopian hero, although living in a secular home, is conversant enough with traditional Judaism to win a public Torah commentary contest in an Orthodox setting. He also is pursued romantically by the flighty daughter of a bigoted right-wing Orthodox Jew who hates him.

But unlikely plot turns aside, it is a moving and absorbing story of culture conflict, accommodation and adjustment—especially when depicting the young child’s rough early days in Israel. Most of the characters are likeable and memorable. Israel’s efforts to incorporate Ethiopians into society is portrayed honestly as a melange of paternalism, good intentions, misunderstandings, bigotry and compassion.