

**Absent Leaders:  
Heroes and Villains in Otto Preminger's "Exodus" and Amos Gitai's *Kedma***

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Events in the Middle East have become more and more difficult to ignore. They are unquestionably vital, not only to our interests, but to our ideals. For this reason our understanding of the history of the region, and our vision of it, should be a major preoccupation. The problem is that, given the centrality of the region in contemporary geo-political relations, it is difficult to distinguish between historical facts and the ideological distortions of them. This is why a backward look at the film "Exodus" is both timely and important.

Produced and directed by Otto Preminger, « Exodus » was released in 1960, and had enormous success. In evaluating this success, we are helped by the release in 2002 of another film, « Kedma », directed by Amos Gitai.

These two films treat the same subject—the clandestine arrival of Jewish refugees in Palestine in 1947 in the midst of armed conflict. This was the eve of the partition of Palestine, proposed by the United Nations Organization but rejected by the non Jewish (or, rather, non-zionist) population and states of the entire eastern mediterranean region. Following the British announcement of their withdrawal from the protectorate established in 1920 by the mandate system of the treaty of Versailles, the stage was set for a defining event of the short, brutal twentieth century : the creation of the state of Israel and the population transfers and ethnic conflicts that accompanied it.

Comparison of the two films, both in terms of their genesis as artistic creations and as political statements, elucidates aspects of a complex process of ideological formation. Seen in terms of representations of leadership, the two films are extremely different. "Exodus" is a glorification of a certain type of leadership, at a certain level of decision-making. It works only at the level of strategic and tactical zionist command within Palestine immediately before, during and after the war for the creation of the state of Israel. The film is discrete relative to a higher level (higher in terms of power relations)—that of international diplomacy. Although decisions of the British military administration are implicitly criticized in the film, such criticism is not allowed to call into question Britain itself as an actor on the international stage. When either the British or the United-Statesians (and the French and Italians) are referred to, it is always as individuals, not representatives of overall national sentiments.

Representations of leadership, and this includes tacit representations of the absence of leadership and/or the absence of leaders, are important in the films both in relation to

their narrative content and to the ideological or perceptual effects intended by their directors.

In *Kedma*, representations of leadership are only implicit. Amos Gitaï was concerned to present an historical situation by depicting a single incident, the origins of which are not explained directly and, in the course of which, individuals are shown to be subordinate to developments over which they have no real control. The incident in question is the illegal arrival of a ship, “*Kedma*,” on the coast of Palestine.

There is an important qualification to make before any attempt to compare these films. The problem is that a discussion of the narrative content of Preminger's film “*Exodus*” would not be legitimate without speaking of *Exodus* the novel, written by Leon Uris. Not only were both film and novel tremendous commercial successes, but they were conceived of as the two axes of a single, mutually reinforcing project.\*

The idea for the book was suggested to Leon Uris by Dore Schary, a top executive at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). The motivation behind the project is described by Kathleen Christison. « The idea for the book » she says, « began with a prominent public-relations consultant who in the early 1950s decided that the United States was too apathetic about Israel's struggle for survival and recognition. » Uris received a contract from Doubleday and went to Israel and Cyprus where he carried out extensive research. The book was published in September, 1958. It was first re-printed in October the following year. By 1964, it had gone through 30 re-printings. This success was undoubtedly helped by the film's release in 1960, but not entirely, as Uris's novel was a book-of-the-month club selection in September, 1959 (which perhaps explains the first re-printing).

The film was to be made by MGM. But when the time came, the studio hesitated. The project was perhaps too political for the big producers. At this moment Otto Preminger bought the screen rights from MGM. He then produced and directed the film, featuring an all-star cast including Paul Newman, Eva Marie-Saint, Lee J. Cobb, Sal Mineo, Peter Lawford and other box-office draws of the moment. The film also benefited from a lavish production in “superpanavision 70” after having been filmed on location. The music was composed by Ernest Gold, for which he received an Academy Award for the best music score of 1960. The screenplay was written by Dalton Trumbo. In spite of its length—three and a half hours—the film was a tremendous popular and critical success.

It is noteworthy that the release of “*Exodus*” the film in 1960 indicates that its production began upon *Exodus* the book's publication. It is reasonable, therefore, to suppose a degree of coordination, in keeping with the origins of the project.

In short, it was a major operation which brilliantly succeeded. It has been estimated that in excess of 20 million people have read the novel, and that hundreds of millions have seen the film. Not only was this success a financial bonanza, but its political impact

has been equally considerable. There can be little doubt that “Exodus” the film has been one of the most important influences on US perceptions and understanding of the hostilities between the Israeli state and the Palestinian people. It is thusly illuminating to return to the message communicated by this film, in attempting to gauge its role in ideological formation.

“Exodus” is the story of the Exodus 1947, a ship purchased in the United States and used to transport 4,500 Jewish refugees to Palestine. In reality, the novel and film take great liberties with the original story. Intercepted by the British authorities in the port of Haifa, the real-life refugees were taken to the French port of Sète, where they were held, becoming the object of intense Zionist agitation and propaganda. Eventually they were transported to Germany and held temporarily in transit camps. Although this incident was used by Uris as the point of departure for his novel, the book is a work of fiction. Not only were the characters invented, but the events did not correspond to reality except in the most general way.

In Uris's narrative, an intercepted ship (not named “Exodus”) is intercepted on the high sea and taken to Cyprus where the passengers are put in camps. Representatives of the Haganah, the secret Jewish army in Palestine, arrive secretly in Cyprus in order to care for, educate and mobilize the refugees. The agent-in-chief is Ari Ben Canaan, played by Paul Newman. Ben Canaan is the son of Barak Ben Canaan, prominent leader of the Yishuv, the Jewish, Zionist community in Palestine.

Tricking the British with great intelligence and audacity, Ari Ben Canaan arranges for the arrival of a ship purchased in the United States, on which he places 600 Jewish refugee children—orphans from the Nazi extermination camps and elsewhere. Once the children are on the ship, Ben Canaan names the ship the “Exodus”, and runs up the Zionist flag. He then informs the British authorities that, if the ship is not allowed to depart for Palestine, it will be blown up with all aboard.

Before having organized this potential suicide bombing (of himself, the Haganah agents and the 600 children), Ben Canaan has met Kitty Fremont, an American nurse who has become fond of the children and, it must be said, of Ari Ben Canaan. This love interest is carefully intertwined with the major theme: the inexorable need and will of the Jewish people to occupy the soil of Palestine.

As it might be expected, the British give in. After some discussion between a clearly anti-semitic officer and those more troubled by the plight of the refugees, the ship is allowed to depart for Palestine. It arrives just before the vote of the United Nations Organization recommending the partition of Palestine between the Jewish and non-Jewish populations. As the partition is refused by the Palestinians and the neighbouring Arab states, war breaks out and the characters all join the ultimately successful effort

against what are described as over-whelming odds. Even Kitty and Major Sutherland, the British officer who tipped the balance in favour of releasing the “Exodus,” join the fight.

Sutherland’s participation, representing the defection of a British imperialist to the Zionist cause, is particularly symbolic. Why did Sutherland jeopardize his position and reputation, and then resign from the army? His humanitarianism was forged by the fact that he had seen the Nazi extermination camps when Germany was liberated and, more troubling, his mother was Jewish, although converted to the Church of England. Sutherland has a belated identity crisis which led him, too, to establish himself in the native Israel.

The other major characters in the film similarly represent the “return” of Jewish people to their “promised land.” For example, Karen, the young girl who Kitty would like to adopt and take to the United States, is a German Jew who was saved by placement in a Danish family during the war. Karen will elect to stay with her people, in spite of her affection for Kitty. Karen is also attached to Dov Landau, a fellow refugee, 17 year-old survivor of the Warsaw ghetto and death camps. Once in Palestine, Dov joins a Zionist terrorist organization (based on the Irgun) and, in the book and film (but not, of course, in reality), places a bomb in the wing of King David Hotel housing the British Command, causing considerable loss of life.

The role of human agency, leadership and the nature of decision-making, are a dimension of “Exodus” that is particularly revealing of the propagandistic intent of the film. Most noteworthy is the fact that all the major characters are presented as exceptional people, and all are Jewish, with the exception of Kitty. However, it is not as individuals that the protagonists of the film are important, but rather as representatives of the Jewish people.

In this respect, in its effort to portray Jewishness as a special human condition distinguishing Jews and Jewish culture from others, that “Exodus” is most didactic. Ari Ben Canaan is clearly a superior being, but he merely represents the Jewish people. They are, collectively, just as strong, resourceful and determined as Ari. This positive image is highlighted by the portrayal of other ethnic groupings present in the film. The British, for example, are seen, at best, as divided and, at their worst, as degenerate products of national decay and imperialistic racism.

The most striking contrast to the collective solidarity, intellectual brilliance, and awesome courage of the Jews is, with the “Arabs.” In spite of their greater numbers, the culture and character of the Arabs show them to be clearly inferior. Ari, who is a “sabrah”—a Jewish person born in Palestine—and, as a consequence, understands the Arab character, knows that they are no match for determined Jews. “You turn 400 Arabs loose,” he says, and “they will run in 400 different directions.” This assessment of the

emotional and intellectual self-possession of the Arabs was made prior to the spectacular jail break at Acre prison. The very indiscipline of the Arabs would cover the escape of the determined Zionists.

The Arab leaders are equally incapable of effective action, as they are essentially self-interested and uncaring about their own people. In the end, it is this lack of tolerance and human sympathy in the non Jews that most distinguishes Jews and Arabs. In *Exodus* the novel, Arabs are constantly, explicitly, and exclusively, described as lazy and shiftless, dirty and deceitful. They have become dependant upon the Jews, and hate them for it. In “Exodus” the film, however, this characterization is not nearly as insisted upon, at least not in the dialogue. Still, way they are portrayed on the screen inspires fear and distrust.

The contrast between the ethnic stereotyping exhibited in “Exodus” and the portrayal of characters in Amos Gitai's *Kedma* could not be greater. In *Kedma*, there is no discussion of strategy or tactics, and thusly no invidious reflections upon one ethnic group's capacity in relation to another's. People simply find themselves in situations, and attempt to survive. This is how the survivors of the Judeocide perpetrated by the German government describe their experiences during the voyage, before the *Kedma* arrives. This is how all the characters—European Jews and Palestinians—react once the ship has disembarked its passengers. In *Kedma*, there are no leaders visible. Their existence can only be supposed. Their plans, strategies and justifications are unexplained. They remain in the background as part of a larger tragedy produced by forces over which “ordinary” people seemingly have little or no control.

Gitai's film expresses a lack of confidence in leadership and, in this way, *Kedma* can be understood as a reading (and viewing) of « Exodus. » There is, in fact, a remarkable parallel development of the two films. What is absent from Preminger's film—the moral misery, the existential despair, the doubts and confusion of the survivors of the Judeocide—is focused upon in Gitai's film. Conversely, what is absent from Gitai's film—the expression of Zionist ideals, aspirations and dogma, the glorifications of one ethnic group at the expense of others—is the very point of Preminger's.

This thematic inversion is particularly evident in reference to two aspect of the films: firstly, in the use of names and, secondly, in the dramatic monologues or soliloquies which end both films.

In “Exodus”, the use of names for symbolic purposes is immediately evident. “Exodus” refers to the biblical return of the Jews from slavery to the Holy Land—their god-given territory, a sacred site. This sacred site is necessary to Jewish religious observance and identity. Only here, it is explained in “Exodus,” can Jews be safe. Only here, it is asserted, can they throw-off invidious self-perceptions, imposed by anti-

semitism and assimilation pressures, and become the strong, self-reliant and confident people they really are.

This vision of Jewish identity propagated by Zionism is implicitly challenged in *Kedma*. Again, the title of the film is symbolically significant. “Kedma” means the “East” or “Orient”, or “going towards the East.” The people on the Kedma—Jewish refugees from Europe, speaking European languages and Yiddish—were arriving in another cultural world an alien one, in the East. The result would be more existential disorientation and another ethnically conflictual environment.

The difference in perspective manifest in the two films is found also in the names given to the protagonists. In *Kedma*, an example is given of the abrupt Hebrewization of names as the passengers arrived in the new land, thus highlighting the cultural transformation central to the Zionist project. In “*Exodus*,” there is much explicit discussion of this aspect of Zionism, and some of the names given to central characters reveal the heavy-handedness of its message.

It is, of course, a well-established convention to give evocative names to the protagonists of a literary or cinematographic work. Where would be, for example, Jack London's *The Iron Hell*, without his hero, Ernest Everhard? The answer is that the novel might be more impressive without such readily apparent propagandistic trappings. And the same is true for *Exodus*. Leon Uris's chief protagonist is Ari Ben Canaan, Hebrew for “Lion, son of Canaan.” This role model for Jewish people everywhere is thusly the direct heir of the ancient Canaanites, precursors of the Jewish community in the land of Palestine. This historical legacy and patrimony established, Paul Newman had only to play the strong fighter—ferocious, hard and wily—with his blond mane cut short, in the military style.

The object of Ari's affections, however ambivalent they may be, is Kitty Fremont, played by Eva Marie Saint. Not only does the pairing of the earnest and ever-hard Ari, the “Lion,” and the compliant but faithful “Kitty” imply a classic gender relationship, but the coupling of this prickly Sabra and the cuddly American symbolizes the special relationship between the United States and native state of Israel that has come to be called the “fifty-first state” of the union.

The other major character, played by the baby-faced Sal Mineo, is “Dov Landau,” the 17-year-old survivor of the Warsaw ghetto and Auschwitz. This name evokes the dove of peace and the infancy indirectly evoked by the term “landau” (baby carriage?). The irony is that the angelic Dov, alights on Palestinian soil with the fury of a maddened bird of prey. He is the consummate terrorist—angry and bloodthirsty. Dov's conversion to Zionism as a collective project, as opposed to a vehicle for his personal vengeance, comes at the end of the story when peace has been (temporarily) achieved through unrelenting combat. Dov then leaves Israel for MIT (Massachusetts Institute of

Technology) where he will perfect the engineering skills learned building bombs in Warsaw and in Palestine. Peace means refining the technical capacity for the new nation's defence. In the meantime, Dov's fiancée, the soft and sweet Karen, has been cruelly murdered by the Arabs.

« Exodus » and « Kedma » differ most notably in the latter's avoidance of the kind of crude propaganda that Leon Uris and Otto Preminger so heavily developed. Rather than forcing his viewers to accept a vision of the birth of Israel founded upon characters, distortions and omissions from historical reality, Amos Gitaï chose to simply place characters that we see briefly in a specific situation which is the real focus of the film. Whereas Preminger symbolized the destiny of a people in the story of strong characters, Gitaï illustrated the tragedy of an historical conjuncture in which the historical actors were largely incidental. We see this aspect of Gitaï's thematic inversion of Preminger's film in the soliloquies delivered in both films.

At the very end of “Exodus,” Ari Ben Canaan delivers a speech at Karen's graveside, in which he justifies the Zionist project as the just and prophetic return of a people forced to err in a hostile world for 2000 years. The resistance encountered to this project, he explains, is only the result of evil, self-interested individuals (such as the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem) who are afraid of losing their privileges once the Arabs learn that Jewish settlement is in their interest. Ari concludes: “I swear that the day will come when Arab and Jew will live in Peace together.” The film then ends with a military convey receding into the distance, towards a new battle in the just cause.

In *Kedma*, there are two soliloquies, delivered not by strong and self-composed leaders, but by distraught, frightened people, caught in a web woven by the apprentice sorcerers in the background—the real architects of the situations in which destinies are sealed and lives are broken. The first speech is made by a middle-aged Polish Jew. Appalled by the new cycle of suffering he witnessed upon arrival in Palestine, he shouts that suffering, guilt and martyrdom have become essential to the Jewish character. Without it, he cries, the Jewish people “cannot exist.” This is their tragedy. The second expression of despair is made by an aged Palestinian peasant, pushed off his land, fleeing the combat. Disregarding the danger, he says: “we will stay here in spite of you. Like a wall, and we will fill the streets with demonstrations, generation after generation.”

How to reconcile the Holocaust (the fascist judeocide) and the *Nakba* (the Palestinian « disaster » of the Zionist ethnic cleansing)? Gitaï's « *Kedma* » places the contemporary dilemma within its historical and existential context. Preminger's “Exodus” did everything not to provide movie-goers with the elements necessary to informed understanding. This is the difference between, on the one hand, demagoguery and propaganda and, on the other hand, a call to reason and justice.

Representations of leadership in « Exodus » were carefully contrived to create support, in the United States and elsewhere for the State of Israel. It is for this reason that the machinations and tractations of the world leaders who created the situation are conspicuously absent from the story. In « Kedma, » on the contrary, the absence of leaders and any characterization of leadership is designed to have an entirely different effect: namely the evocation of the hatred and human suffering caused when people are instrumental in the service of political and ideological projects.