

The Last King of Scotland:
Choosing the Right Leader; Being the Right Follower

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You have to bear in mind that Idi Amin was gone from the face of global politics by the time I was born; he had been relegated to that awkward limbo between front-page news and school-textbook history when I began learning about people like him. I knew of other leaders who had promised to lead their people to freedom but had taken a wrong turn at insanity (or idealism or corruption) and left their respective countries soaked in bloodshed. Great leaders, who fast become evil, punctuate each decade of the 20th century, the awful lot of a world desperate to climb out from under the darkness of 19th century imperialism. It has become so commonplace a debauchery that many people have lost all faith in leaders and leadership, expecting the eventual decent. And, yet, we still vote and cheer and pray; we still whisper that only a leader, the right leader, can fix things. We are not so different than those Ugandans who rejoiced when Idi Amin rose to power. We call them naïve but who knows better than us the sweet caress of a leader who promises to be different. Be better. Be loyal. Be our salvation.

As a film, alone, *The Last King of Scotland* is superb. Although, in this column, I try to focus on the more philosophical reasons for seeing a film, I have to admit that there is a side of me which compels me to encourage the viewing of this film simply for the art of cinema. It has been some time since I could, without any reservations, admit that a film is, as a film, something to see. *The Last King of Scotland* is. Forest Whitaker's portrayal of Idi Amin is Oscar-worthy, and for all the right reasons. He leads us deep into the heart of a man who would be king without once showing us the cards he keeps so very close to his chest; it is the best kind of acting – the actor fades away and the character takes center-stage. James McAvoy, as the young doctor who acts as representative of all who are desperate for Idi Amin to be the leader the world craves, marks the beat of the audiences'

emotions so well it is near impossible to know whether he is conductor or monitor. Yes, this film is, quite ironically, a piece of art worthy of the celluloid upon which it dances. But that is not why you should see it.

While, for many, *The Last King of Scotland* is a film about Idi Amin and 1970s Uganda, for me, it is a film about leadership and the followers who build leaders. It is about everyone, everywhere, in any era wherein all hope is wrapped up in the potential of one person. It is, quite essentially, about this very moment. And the next. And, for the Jewish people, it is about our cry, in the dark recesses of our past, for a king; our present-day and constant command to “create for yourself a *Rav*,” and our future, thick with the smoky promise of a certain son of David.

That’s why you should see it.

Jewish history has a strange relationship with leaders. We do not like to deify our leaders. We are fond of telling our children that anyone can grow up to be Moses. Yet, we still confirm, some of us daily, that we will never again see the birth of a prophet like Moses, that he was unique. Anyone could be *Moshiach* but, make no mistake, *Moshiach* will not be just anyone. Our national history began with the call of a leader and we watch it unfold before us in the direction of another leader. We grant the former the legacy of creating our nation and giving us the Torah; we grant the latter the honour of beckoning in a new age, one of peace and Truth. We even name the age after him. And, so, we wait. We pray. There will come a leader. It is a prayer etched in the face of every Ugandan in the 1970s, every German in the 1930s, every Russian in the 1910s. They were disappointed; we must wonder what makes our dream different. Are we, too, naïve?

God did not want to give us a king^[1]; He wanted us to follow our own voices and the voices of our prophets and teachers. But, the indulgent Father that He occasionally is, He gave us our King. In fact, we got a whole dynasty. However, inherent in the system is a powerful caveat. It is what separates David from Idi Amin; it is a constant reminder to us that – any leader we follow, any king we serve – he is a man and not a Saviour.

And, so, God commands all kings: do not acquire too much wealth; do not gather around yourself too many wives; and keep a Torah with you at all times, study from it constantly, internalize it. And, so, **Pirkei Avot** commands all Jews: *Aseh Lecha Rav*, make for yourself a *Rav*, – i.e. be an active participant in who you choose to follow, to learn from. And, so, we refer to the Messiah as *Moshiach ben David*, *Moshiach* the son of David; yes, he will save us but he is but a man, the son of a man, he is but the descendant of a king come to retake his throne.

The doctor, in *The Last King of Scotland*, makes the fatal mistake of ignoring his chosen leader's humanity. Every student, every subject, every follower, must respect the person who has earned his loyalty. It is the obligation of a follower to listen to his or her leader, to extend to a leader the proper fidelity that befits the awesome responsibility a leader has assumed. This is true and oftentimes too quickly forgotten in an era so quick to use satire to rebuke a leader who we feel has betrayed us. However, when invited to the inner circle, one cannot remain passive. There are no leaders without followers. Respect him, yes, trust him, yes, follow him, yes, but know that he works for God and you do not work for him. You work with him. If a king forgets, if a teacher forgets, it is the responsibility of a follower to remind his leader. We create our leaders through the very act of following them. Where they go is as far as we are willing to be taken. And, through it all, they never ascend to a different plane of existence. They are always mortal, great mortals, but still mortal.

The lesson of *The Last King of Scotland* is clear and pure. It is a warning of what can happen when we become blinded by charisma or hope. It is so easy to think that one person can change the world for us, that all we must do is step back and allow that person to be angelic. No one has such power. This does not mean that leaders are to be vilified and one should lose faith in the potential of a single man. Quite the contrary is true. Our history is testimony to this. Moses, David, too many great thinkers and rabbis to name, and, finally but not with finality, *Moshiach* (whoever he may be), have contributed their lives to lead our nation. They are our heroes and so they should be. But King David is not Idi Amin and this is not simply by the peculiar lot of personality. What stands between them is something far more definitive. What stands between them is God, and all of us

beside Him.

And, quite crucially, the distinction between King David and Idi Amin is the fact that King David put us in that place. For, it is not enough for the followers to remember that a leader is mortal; it is just as important for the leader to remember that he is mortal. Idi Amin also made the fatal mistake of forgetting his humanity. He thought he could remember if he simply remembered that he was once “one of the common folk” but that is not enough. It is not enough to tell yourself, or your followers, that you, too, are one of them. For one, this is a lie. A leader is, by definition, different; he has chosen to take upon himself a responsibility that he can never discard. David danced with the people, not because he wished to ignore the fact that he was king but, because he was king, as king. Leadership is not something to be worn and removed with the ease of a crown. That is the glory of a true leader. That is the truth of a glorious leader.

It is a confusing balance that must be struck. A leader must remember at all times that his purpose is bound up with his nation in that he is one of them and, simultaneously, unique – do not acquire too much wealth; a leader must remember at all times that he has a purpose beyond his own desires – do not surround yourself with too many wives; a leader must remember at all times that he, like his nation, serves God and that it is only in that service that he has achieved his particular role – carry the word of God with you wherever you go, learn from it constantly.

A leader must remember all this and a follower, what does he remember? He remembers that even followers must be participants. He remembers that the command is to create. And then, just as he is about to pull his leader down to walk beside him, just as a follower is about to think that there is no distinction between a follower and a leader, he recalls that he is to create for himself a Rav, not a comrade. For the world needs leaders and the Ugandans of the 1970s, the Germans of the 1930s and the Russians of the 1910s were not stupid to put their faith in a leader. One may argue that their stupidity was in who they allowed to be their leaders. I argue that their mistake was made before a name was even part of the equation. It was a mistake to *allow* anyone to become a leader. A leader is a choice on both sides of the deal. And no such choice should be abdicated, no matter how

desperate the times or how energized the candidate.

We, as a nation, got lucky many times over; God chose our leaders for us. Maybe we could afford to be a bit more passive then (although I will note that it was almost always in response to a national cry for a leader that God would select one; we did choose, at the very least, to ask for a leader and, bear in mind, to trust God's choice is a choice in and of itself). However, *The Last King of Scotland* is the perfect movie for where we stand now. Aseh Lecha Rav. Who we choose to follow is not a simple decision and it is never a one-time decision, either. We are a part of it at all times. And so, the blood shed by a leader is on the hands of his followers. As is the triumph of a leader also on the shoulders of his followers.

Some men are born to lead. It is a burden. It is an honour. It is a responsibility not to be taken lightly. Some men are born to follow. It is a burden. It is an honour. It is a responsibility not to be taken lightly. This is the message of *The Last King of Scotland*. It is not a new message for a nation that marks its history by the voices of its leaders but, in a time so filled with uncertainty, so far from the crown, and so violently leaderless, perhaps it is a message that we urgently need to hear anew. Perhaps we can watch the tale of a false messiah in the Africa of the last half of the 20th century and learn a little about what we are looking for in our own messiahs. Because, if we do not know what to look for then we will never know if we've found him. And one thing is certain – it will be tragic if he has to find us.

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Given that the Torah contains explicit references to the kingship and the laws pertaining to the kingship, it is not as simple a matter as it would seem. Whether or not kingship in general was a concession made by God is, in fact, a *machloket*, dispute, between **Nachmanides** and **Maimonides**. However, there is, within the tradition, support for the notion that is expressed here.