

# An interview with Nadav Lapid, director of *Ahed's Knee*: “One of the characteristics of sick societies ... is that they don't give you any good choices”

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We recently spoke to filmmaker Nadav Lapid, director of *Ahed's Knee*, on a video call. He was in Paris.

David Walsh: Could you explain the events that inspired the title of the film, and as well the events that inspired the central story of the film?

Nadav Lapid: As for the story, when I was editing my previous film *Synonyms* [2019] in April 2018 or so, I got a phone call from a bureaucrat of the [Israeli] Ministry of Culture. She was a very, very nice and gentle and enthusiastic and vivid young woman, who showed real interest in my previous movies, and invited me to screen and talk about one of my films, *The Kindergarten Teacher* [2014], in a small village in the desert.

So, everything was fine and then ... when our conversation had nearly ended, she mentioned this strange form that I should really sign, on which I had to detail the topics of my comments etc., etc. And I had to promise not to talk about anything else.

This was maybe the peak of a period of anxiety and even repression [in Israel]. It was a time when if people were talking about their future projects, they were starting to whisper and using three periods at the end of a sentence. So, you didn't have to be Einstein to understand the context.

So, I told her, OK, I understand that you're not a fan of political opinions, or something like that. Surprisingly, she immediately said something like “It's terrible what's going on in the last two years” and “They want to control everything, and I feel very ashamed. Would you sign the form, and you can also send it to me by fax?”

I hesitated a bit afterward. I called a friend who's a journalist and told her about the case. She asked me to find an excuse to call this young woman again and record her. I hesitated and decided not to do that. Instead, I signed the form and went to the screening in the desert. So, this was perhaps the genesis of the main story. Also, from the desert location I was sending short videos to my mother [Era Lapid], who was the editor of most of my movies and who was actually in agony from cancer at the time.

Several months later my mother died, and after another few months, I started writing the script, which was written in great urgency and very rapidly, as though in a single gesture, you know?

In perhaps two and a half weeks, or something like that, the script was fully written.

The title ... well, in the West Bank over many years there have been all sorts of incidents between the Tamimi family and Israeli soldiers. Ahed Tamimi, who was very young, became a kind of local legend some years ago. But the most famous incident happened in 2017 when, in front of the cameras, she slapped an Israeli soldier who had come to her village. She was thrown in prison for eight months.

The Tamimi story and all of this was a kind of meeting point between the concrete, the political, and, at the same time, the totally imagistic, legendary, artistic. I imagine that if Ahed Tamimi had lived in the 15th century, her confrontation with the armed soldier would have become the theme of many Renaissance paintings. I could imagine that painters like Leonardo and Raphael would have dedicated dozens and dozens of paintings to this moment. Because it's such a majestic moment.

It was, on the one hand, absolutely political and concrete and, on the other, it crossed the boundaries of the here and now and it became almost an aesthetic moment. This has to do with something about the movie in general. It's extremely concrete, it's the here and now. There is YouTube stuff, using real names, real people. On the other hand, the ending of the movie is a little bit like observing Earth from beneath the clouds, from the sky. There's something totally disconnected from the concrete and tries to go to human fate, the human conditions, to death, to life, etc.

DW: Speaking of the concrete for a second more, how did you and how do you view this woman from the ministry of culture? Obviously, there are many people like her. To what extent is she to blame for the situation?

NL: In a way, one might say that one of the characteristics of sick societies or societies in crisis is that they don't give you any good choices. All the choices are bad in a way. In the heart of the movie there is this meeting, which becomes a confrontation between one person who is aggressive and arrogant and lacks even a slight empathy for the other. In a way, someone who has maybe lost the human instinct inside him. I'm talking about the director. He proves in a way the well-known Hebrew proverb that says it's

easier to love the whole of humanity than to love one single human. But, basically, he is right. He's fighting for a good cause. Or at least he's in opposition.

And on the opposite side there is this young woman who's ... I think you can only say good things about her. She's devoted to her vision, and so enthusiastic and thrilled to spread culture, not just any culture, but culture in which she believes. She has come from such a simple background, and she has made her way using her intelligence, using her curiosity. I can imagine that when other kids went to play in the sand, she was staying at home reading books. She has so much respect for art. Everything is extremely impressive, except for the fact that of course in order to do her job she needs to make this one simple contract with the devil.

She has to turn her eyes and to collaborate, or to be in the service of ... Oppressive regimes are also about people like her. You can say it's not OK, you should have acted differently, but, of course, it's always easy when you're not in her place. But it's clear that oppressive regimes are also based on figures like this.

DW: You used the word "urgency," and everyone says it's an angry film and so forth, which is true, but there are many angry films and there are many *bad* angry films. To bring together anger and social or psychological insight, anger and history, anger and poetry, that seems to me more difficult. In fact, neither the character nor the film is ever out of control, at least from the spectator's point of view. There is a careful artistic balance here. Am I correct in saying that?

NL: I think so. It's not interesting for me to do what Michael Moore does, or something like that. It wouldn't be interesting for me just to go in furiously with my camera. I think that there's something in the film that's in a way totally inside and totally outside at the same time. They say that there should always be the right distance, but I think that in a way this film is all the time at the wrong distance. It's extremely close, as if it digs inside the soul, as if there are no more barriers between the thoughts and what you do, what you think, what you meditate, what you feel. So, on the one hand, it's too deep inside the soul, the mind, and, on the other hand, as I said, it's observing from a distance.

I put all of this in a kind of historical or even philosophical and existential perspective. It's a little bit about the destiny of human beings who find themselves trapped in these endless desperate battles.

DW: I watched your short film *Why*, based on an image from Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Teorema* [1968]. After I watched *Ahed's Knee*, I thought of Pasolini. Not the style so much, but—and this is a compliment obviously—the combination of honesty, anger and poetry. Is there a tradition or are there traditions in art of filmmaking that are important to you?

NL: Pasolini is an extremely important director for me. I remember when I discovered cinema in Paris when I was here after my military service. Actually, one of the first movies that I saw without having a lot of cinematic knowledge was *Teorema*. I went there almost accidentally, and the movie was such a shock for me that what I remember is that about 50 minutes or an hour after the end of the movie, I found myself in a metro station somewhere in Paris, a place where I wasn't supposed to be, scratching the map of Paris from the wall. I was totally unconscious. I don't know

what happened to me in those 50 minutes. How did I get there?

I think in Pasolini there is this combination of someone who is a [Communist] Party member and a poet. Someone who's inside the politically concrete and is also an eternal outsider. Someone who's, on the one hand, fascinated by the here and now and, on the other hand, has this point of view of a poet or thinker who looks at Earth from Mars or something like that.

DW: There are obviously specifically Israeli and Middle Eastern issues in this film, but the denunciation and the outrage and the problems and the betrayal could take place anywhere. I think the film is also unusual because it articulates and reaches a deep disgust that is everywhere, that is in masses of people, whether they're in the United States, Israel, Russia, Ukraine or Egypt.

NL: I think politics for me is a window through which to observe human beings in their present state. When you talk about the human condition, there are eternal things and there is the here and now. Politics gives you a window into the here and now. For me it's interesting to talk about the here and now only if you remember all the time the permanent existence of the bigger things, life, death, love, despair, of the sense of life, the lack of the sense of life. I hope this gives something universal to the movie.

The second thing is that not all of us, but a lot of us live on this earth more or less with the same frustration, with the same feeling that things could have been different, could have been better, should have been different, should have been better, and with this feeling of the gap between what is said and what really exists. There is in this movie this thing about words. They want him to sign [and promise] that he will not use the words that he wants to use. They tell him, okay, you can only use the words from our bank of words. We can give you a collection of words, only use them. But in his monologue, he's using every possible word. In a way, he's challenging the situation by talking, by speaking, and this is something that we all know.



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