

“Dangerous Moves” starring Michel Piccoli, Alexandre Arbatt, Liv Ullmann, 1984, NR, 100 minutes

Major themes:

- Chess
- Rivalry
- Mind games
- Power
- Obsession
- Cheating
- Stress
- Politics

Major characters:

- Akiva & Henia Liebskind
- Pavius & Marina Fromm
- Felton
- Miller
- Tac-Tac
- Foldes
- Kerossian

Movie Nights for Thinkers and Seekers

Background info:

- This film won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1984. It was submitted by the Swiss government, resulting in the nation's first Oscar. Its original French title is "*La diagonale du fou*" ("*The Fool's Diagonal*," which refers to the chess piece called the bishop in English but the fool in French).
- Although this story is fictitious, the World Chess Championship is a real competition, held annually since 1886, to determine the World Champion in chess (of whom there have been only 20 individuals holding that title for 1 to 27 years, for an average of just over 7 years each).
- Many incidents from the real history of chess are keyed into the script.
- Akiva Liebskind was likely modeled after Polish Grandmaster Akiba Rubenstein (1880 – 1961), who started out studying to become a rabbi before devoting himself to chess. He had been scheduled to play in the World Chess Championship that was cancelled due to the outbreak of World War I, and was later plagued with mental illness.
- Pavius Fromm was likely named after Danish chess player Martin Severin From (1828 – 1895) (made famous for his opening "*From's Gambit*")
- Early in the film, Liebskind describes a move as "*Rook to G-10*". There is no G-10 on the chessboard; the numbers only go as high as 8. This error is in the subtitles only and was a mistranslation; the actual line ends with "*huit*," French for eight.
- "*He is threatening to smoke, and as an old player you must know that the threat is stronger than the execution*" is a quote from Russian-born Danish leading chess master Aron Nimzowitsch, who was annoyed by his opponents' smoking.
- In the final game, Pavius and Akiva play the "*French Defence / Paulsen Attack*."

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Scriptures:

Romans 12:2 (NLT) – *“Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.”*

Matthew 6:24 – 34 (The Message) – *“You can’t worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you’ll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can’t worship God and Money both. If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don’t fuss about what’s on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds. Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them. If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don’t you think he’ll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I’m trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God’s giving. People who don’t know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don’t worry about missing out. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.”*

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Discussion points:

1. Who acted as pawns in a power struggle in this film? Who are the pawns in power struggles in the world today?
2. Whom does cheating harm, and why?
3. How can we tell when an interest becomes an unhealthy obsession? How would you distinguish between *“mental health”* and *“mental illness”*?
4. *“Politics”* can be defined as the *“use of intrigue or strategy in obtaining any position of power or control.”* *“Intrigue”* is *“the use of underhand machinations or deceitful stratagems.”* A *“strategy”* is *“a plan, method, or series of maneuvers or stratagems for obtaining a specific goal or result.”* How can we discern whether the politics at play are good or bad? What can we do to protect ourselves from being unduly influenced?
5. Beyond the game of chess, what other kinds of games were being played in this film?
6. How does this film show that embracing an ideology (a collection of doctrines or beliefs shared by members of a group or society) affects actions and behaviors?