

## Judaism and Star Wars sermon

25th December 2015

From childhood, two major forces shaped my life – Judaism and Star Wars. Both became integral to my life as I grew up. In my teenage years, I gave a sermon in my community about how similar the two are. Now, a little older, I'm giving a sermon about the similarities and differences, and what we can learn about Judaism through them. In this sermon, I'm not going to assume that anyone here has seen the new film, Episode VII, and there won't be any spoilers from me. However, I will refer to the other films – even the prequels, which as a serious fan you should know I'm not keen on – and will mention things that may be spoilers if you haven't seen them yet. I think thirty years is long enough to wait to share a spoiler, though.

George Lucas, the creator of Star Wars, openly said that in creating his movie, he took liberally from faith traditions and from long-standing narratives from all around the world. So, of course Star Wars isn't going to be the same as Judaism throughout, and we shouldn't expect that, but there are some similarities that are important, which we'll come to.

There are those online who suggest that even some of the names in Star Wars have a Jewish basis. Yes, it's true that Yoda, the greatest Jedi of all, uses grammatical structures that have roots in Yiddish sentence structure. Instead of saying, for example, "Are you expecting me to do that?" a Yiddish or Yoda sentence structure might be, "Expecting me to do that, are you?" Fans who know how Yoda speaks could easily hear him say words like that. One online commentator suggests that Yoda, being the most-knowledgeable Jedi, has a name derived from the Hebrew verb *yadah*, meaning 'to know.' Similarly, there is a suggestion that Obi-Wan Kenobi has a last name derived from the Hebrew *k'navi*, meaning "like a prophet," which might synchronize nicely with Obi-Wan's understanding of the Force and how it guides one's destiny. I don't much hold by these name similarities, though, because they're impossible to prove. That said, I will mention here that when our daughter was born, I did put in a request for the consideration of the name Sarah Leah, since Sarah in Hebrew means Princess. The request was denied.

So let's go beyond names and actually consider content. There are clear differences between Star Wars and Judaism. Judaism is an inherently theological endeavor, by which I mean one that involves a clear sense of revelation, however one might understand revelation. Star Wars has The Force, but at face value it seems very different to a Jewish theological position. In the prequels (puh puh puh!), we learn about midichlorians and the fact that you can quantifiably measure the Force. But

every Star Wars fan in the world hates that idea, so let's just focus on what Obi-Wan teaches us about the Force not long into the first film, *A New Hope*. If someone asked me to describe God using the words of Obi-Wan but changing the word 'Force' to the word 'God,' I would end up saying "God is an energy field who surrounds us and penetrates us and binds the galaxy together." While there is some similarity here to the pantheistic belief of Chasidism, which holds that God is in and of everything in the world, it's still really profoundly different to a Jewish position. Throughout the original trilogy, Luke Skywalker, whom we'll come to in a minute, is told to "Use the Force, Luke." We are told that The Force partially controls our actions and partially obeys our commands. Yoda later says of the Force that Life creates it. This is not the same as God, then. So the central mystical belief of Star Wars is really profoundly different to that of Judaism, which believes in God and revelation.

One of the core aspects of Judaism is that it's not about belief or experiencing God *per se* but, rather, about action, usually called *mitzvah*, meaning commandment. A Jedi is not commanded – they commit to the Jedi Code but, as we see in the films, they do break that code. Jedi have no possessions, but Judaism is adamant that we have possessions and that we use them for good. Judaism is also connected to the land of Israel where Star Wars has no real sense of place, since it is so involved with interplanetary travel. That said, in Star Wars lore there are, for example, Jedi temples. Nonetheless, these aren't in the films. So, there are clear differences between Judaism and Star Wars.

But there are also many similarities, and profound ones at that. We start with Luke Skywalker, whiny farm boy who ends up involved in the struggle against the evil Empire. Here comes the big spoiler, in case you haven't seen the first six films. Luke is very similar in some ways to Moses, who also becomes a farm boy – or shepherd to be more accurate – and who also whines when he is first given Divine responsibility. He is thrust into a role that he's unprepared for and thrust into greatness. And both characters share the motif of being hidden away from their parents and somehow having their birth be connected to the ultimate villain. Moses is placed in a basket to prevent him from being killed by Pharaoh but then grows up in Pharaoh's court. He rejects that life and the life of his evil adoptive father figure. Luke, similarly, is hidden away at birth and as he grows he learns – and here's the spoiler – that his father is the evil Darth Vader. Moses begs Pharaoh to let his people go and tries in vain to turn him to making a good decision. Luke does the same – once he acknowledges the truth about his father, he tries to turn him from the Dark Side of the Force to the Light. Moses does not succeed while Luke does, but even though the outcome of their struggle is different, the struggle itself is clearly very similar.

Is Luke's journey to the Force a coincidence? Obi-Wan Kenobi himself clearly says, "In my experience, there's no such thing as luck." Star Wars throughout talks of characters fulfilling their destiny – there is a sense that everything is pre-ordained. And yet the characters in Star Wars are given free will – when Yoda and Obi-Wan train Luke, they keep reminding him of the dangers of being lured to the Dark Side. They acknowledge that there is a choice. This is identical to the text from our tradition that says that "everything is foreseen and yet free will is granted (Avot 3:19)."

Moreover, if there is any sense of destiny, what is the final destiny? It's clear that both Judaism and Star Wars express the final destiny of humanity as liberation from oppression and evil. Indeed, in Episode VI, Return of the Jedi, Luke clearly fulfils a Messianic role while vanquishing evil, just as our tradition talks of a war between Gog and Magog before the Messiah can come.

Then we look at the Jedi themselves. In the first three films from the 1970s and 1980s, we see Jedi as being good, righteous individuals aiming to vanquish evil. Perhaps the one redeeming feature of the prequels was that they introduced much more depth into what it meant to be a Jedi. There is reference to a Jedi Code, which includes no attachments and no emotion, and the interesting thing about the Code is that it doesn't work. In fact, it ignores the important human emotions, such as love, that individuals need to feel. And because it fails, the galaxy falls into turmoil. Judaism spread the same message, just differently. Instead of seeing the dangers of not loving, Judaism simply teaches us the importance of love – loving God, loving creation and loving each other. The delivery may be completely different, but the underlying message of Judaism and Star Wars is clearly the same – love is an important part of human life.

Perhaps the most extraordinary similarity between Star Wars and Judaism is the dualised perception of the world. Torah and Rabbinic Judaism in particular talk in binary opposites – light and dark, day and night, holy and profane, kosher and unkosher, clean and impure, man and woman. Star Wars is based around the Light Side and the Dark Side of the Force doing battle. And it is a battle, just like in the Rabbinic notion of the two inclinations in humanity – the good inclination and the evil inclination. Both Judaism and Star Wars recognize, though, that the duality is nuanced and that in fact we need both sides for true existence. We need the darker side of ourselves to acknowledge the lighter side. While this dualised message is very similar, there is a subtle difference - Yoda teaches us that the Dark Side is not as strong but is more seductive while Rabbinic literature talks not just of the *yetzer hara*, the Evil Inclination, being seductive but also implies that it is stronger, not weaker, than the *yetzer hatov*, the Good Inclination. The key, though, is the

struggle. That struggle comes to a climax in *Return of the Jedi* when Luke has to choose between which side of the Force he wants to dedicate the rest of his life to. Star Wars and Judaism clearly chronicle the struggle with the differing aspects of the self.

Another similarity is in the perception of reality. At one point in *The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoda talks of this reality not being the full reality, and this mystical sense pervades the entire series of films. They're not about religion *per se* but, rather, about mysticism, about the connection with something greater than ourselves. They're about transcending the self and seeing beyond the physical. They're about the greater, mystical part of ourselves. This, to me, is why Star Wars is so appealing, especially as a Rabbi. Yes, there are similarities in the hero figure and that's not surprising because all great narratives carry similar themes. Yes, they both explore the concept of free will versus predetermination, and ask us to therefore consider what it means for us to act. Yes, they both talk of a dualism between light and dark in the world and, in particular, in ourselves. But more than anything else, they both ask us to transcend. They ask us to feel a connection with every other living being.

The most profound connection between Star Wars and Judaism isn't openly or deliberately theological but it can be read as profoundly theological or, at least, philosophical. It tells us that we get our energy from connection, that we can try to control our lives but we have to recognize that sometimes life controls us and that all we can do in those times is to learn to control our emotions and thus our responses. It's not a connection that talks about God but it is a connection that talks about being Godly, which in Jewish terms means fighting for what is right because we are all connected and what happens to one happens to all. *Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Bazeh* (Talmud: Sh'vuot 39a) – All Israel are responsible for each other, we learn. Just as all things are bound together by the Force in Star Wars. We are not separate. We are one. *Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad* (Deut. 6:4). God is one. One with all things, with all beings. While Star Wars may not talk in such theological terms, the implication of that core Jewish sentence is the same message as Star Wars – we are all One. Life is not solitary. There is power in our shared existence. We are more than just ourselves, we are more than our bodies. As Yoda says, “Luminous beings are we.”

So, it's very easy to get dragged down into daily nonsense. It's very easy to get caught up in petty struggles. Both Star Wars and Judaism teach us that there is a struggle to be fought but that it is a great struggle, a struggle to reunite us all, a struggle to overcome negativity, oppression and evil. We can be a shepherd in Midian or we can be a farm boy on Tatooine, both Star Wars and Judaism tell us

that we can't avoid our responsibility to engage in that struggle and that we will eventually become part of it whether we like it or not. That struggle is for redemption, personal and communal, and there is no greater struggle than that.

So, may God guide us in that struggle for personal and communal redemption, may God be with us in our connection with all things, and, of course, may the Force be with us, always.