

The Corner of Hollywood and Sinai

Star Trek,
the Star Trekker Rebbe
and A Question of Destiny

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Despite the fact that I am an entertainment industry journalist (of sorts), my general policy is to avoid the juicy gossip which pervades the portfolios of my compatriots. I write about movies, not people. The following is somewhat of an exception – a brief detour – before I return to the film at hand. And it has a purpose. I promise.

When my father, Nishma's very own Rabbi Ben Hecht, first began his rabbinical career, his every sermon was marked by a very distinctive frame of reference. No, I'm not talking about his focus on religious tolerance or intellectual investigation. I speak of something else entirely. I speak of the Final Frontier, of Boldly Going, etc. My father was, quite bluntly, the Star Trekker Rebbe (originally he was the Star Trekkie Rebbe but the title was changed due to the protests of way too many people with way too much time on their hands and, giving them the benefit of the doubt, not enough Nishma reading material available with which to occupy themselves.)

I, being at first nonexistent and then too young during this era, did not get to experience firsthand the heyday of the Star Trekker Rebbe. However, the philosophical complexity of Star Trek did not ever really leave my father, his research or his Torah teaching (although it mellowed into the background as the years passed). And, I have, over the years, been audience to the stories. Ah, the stories – from so many different sources that, what I once took for my mother's literary talent to hyperbolize, I finally had to face as truth: there was a time when every single one of my father's sermons featured a Star Trek reference.

So, you can imagine my excitement when I heard tell of a new Star Trek movie. Raised to love the show and to love its thoughtfulness, I followed the many series that have cropped up during my youth. Yet, I often heard my father bemoan a loss – a unique trait of the original series and crew of characters – that had not been successfully replicated in any subsequent manifestation. But, this new movie was a return to the old days (if one can say that about a fictional future). Here would be Kirk and Spock, Bones and Scotty; the NCC-1701 Enterprise would once again fly across the screen. And I would be able to review it, thereby following in my father's footsteps of blending Torah and Trek. And, more importantly, I would be able to ask my father what he thought of it and, hopefully, see a glimpse of the Star Trekker Rebbe again.

Conclusion? No such luck. It is an extremely exciting movie and I highly recommend it. There is very little gratuitous anything (swear words just don't seem to exist in the Federation). The ideological underpinnings of the movie are impressive in both their development and leanings. In short, I found something to write about and was all prepared to fulfill my destiny as the daughter of the Star Trekker Rebbe. Then I spoke to the Star Trekker Rebbe. He liked the movie but, as I had dreaded, felt that it, too, lacked something of the original series – a philosophical potency was missing.

And that was when I realized something profound. Movies aren't as good as they used to be. I was startled by *Star Trek* because it was so much better than a lot of what I've seen lately. But, the more I thought of my father's reaction, the more I realized that *Star Trek* benefited from something that other movies today don't have – a rich and detailed past. This allowed *Star Trek*, in some ways, to cut corners without appearing as empty and disorganized as other modern films. That is nothing to be proud of.

Of course, having an established foundation did allow *Star Trek* the luxury of exploring an important theme: fate and destiny. And it did so well. If I had to pinpoint one philosophical concept that this film tackles beautifully and in a Star Trek-worthy manner, it would be the question of personal responsibility for one's own life's path. Each of the characters in the film face this question and must reconcile the details of their lives that seem to compel a

certain journey and the details of their personalities that afford them the capacity to challenge that entrenched route.

Ironically enough, fate has long been the basis of many works of performing art. Early Greek plays perpetuated the notion that one could not change one's destiny – i.e. if one was prophesied to kill one's father and marry one's mother, there was nothing one could do about it. Jewish thought directly challenges this idea. A crucial cornerstone of Jewish philosophy is the belief in free choice. God does not dictate our actions; our actions are ours to make. At the same time, we do have, woven into the fabric of Jewish history and spirituality, a strong sense of destiny. Moshe Rabbeinu was destined to lead the Jews out of Egypt; the Tribe of Judah was destined to produce the Davidic dynasty. The Tanach and Talmud are replete with examples of destiny worthy of a Greek tragedy.

And, given that Torah does not shy away from scientific discovery but, rather, works with our ever-evolving understanding of the physical universe, one must include in the notion of fate and destiny the question of psychological pre-dispositions. Judaism does not always think it possible to change one's nature, only what one does with that nature. The classic example is: if a man is particularly bloodthirsty, he should consider a career in ritual slaughter. The notion being that bloodthirstiness in itself does not have to be a bad character trait – whether a drive is good or bad depends upon for what that drive is used.

Thus, Jewish thought presents a complex and confusing tapestry of fate and choice, destiny and adaptation. And *Star Trek* offers a wonderful example of the many questions raised by this very dilemma. How much should we allow the psychological effects of personal tragedy or personality quirks to shape our lives? How much do we have a say? How much of destiny is up to us and how do our actions influence the lives of others and their respective destinies? How should we respond to the pull of destiny, to the taste of a calling? When do we take a risk and when do we put our fate in the hands of God?

Of course, *Star Trek* does not offer any conclusive answers. That would be cheating. We all have to solve the Kobayashi Maru for ourselves. Still, my father's reaction leaves me with

the nagging notion that *Star Trek* didn't answer the question because it, quite simply, didn't know the answer.

But maybe that's exactly what we need from movies today. Now is a time of easy answers. I wanted to double-check the spelling of "Kobayashi Maru" so I googled it. Not only did I find out the spelling but, thanks to Wikipedia, I now know the meaning of the words (they're Japanese for "little wooden ship") and the ways that different characters have solved the problem in various *Star Trek* novels. It used to be that when I wanted to confirm a pasuk, I'd have to find my Tanach but now I not only have the option to check a Concordance but I can probably find what I'm looking for online in any number of languages beyond Hebrew and English.

For so many of my generation, Wikipedia tells us what we need to know, Facebook and Twitter tell us what we don't, and Jon Stewart tells us what we need to believe. Interpreting the metaphors buried in a *Star Trek* episode would actually be slowing down for the instant-wireless-red-bull generation. I say: slow down. For so many reasons, I really liked *Star Trek*. It got me asking questions – important questions about my life and my goals. It reminded me that movies can be better than they have been – that they can aspire to something beyond the flicker of lights. It allowed me the nostalgia-infused chance to recall my father's *Star Trekker* Rebbe days and to appreciate the importance of finding Torah in unusual places and of surrounding myself with Torah-infused things. Most of all, however, it reminded me of *Star Trek*, of the original show and the ideas that each episode of that show tackled – head-on – every week. The movie reminded me that art can leap beyond the bounds of entertainment and complement our philosophical struggles and ideological yearnings. Complement but not replace.

Yes, my father used to quote *Star Trek* in every sermon but he quoted a lot of other stuff as well. Stuff like philosophy and current events, Tanach and Gemara, Rishonim and Achronim. He would quote it all. And then he would boldly go beyond – to a realm of new ideas and epiphanies.

Star Trek may have been lacking something but it also had something unique – a hint of an old idea made new again. The idea that life can be meaningful and fateful and entirely of our own design. The idea that we can, through hard work and dedication, through thoughtfulness and humility, achieve great things. Therefore, I recommend this movie despite its flaws. It is still worth learning from. It is still Star Trek.

Yet, in deference to the Star Trekker Rebbe, might I recommend a dose of the old series as well? And, bearing that in mind, I introduce a new segment in The Corner of Hollywood and Sinai: The Starfleet Yeshiva. Each article in the Starfleet Yeshiva will address the ideas in a particular episode. I welcome anyone (fan and foe alike) to submit an article. Who knows, maybe we can even entice the Star Trekker Rebbe, himself...

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