

My friends, in light of the recent release of yet another Harry Potter movie, I have titled tonight’s talk “Harry Potter—or Herschel Potter?” I would like to give you one rabbi’s views on the Harry Potter series of novels, and see if we can find any Jewish values contained therein.

In order to follow the sermon tonight, you must have at least a basic understanding of who Harry Potter is. For those who may lack this information, here is a quick summary.

In the first book of the series, Harry Potter was a boy of about twelve years of age. He was an orphan being raised by his aunt and uncle, who were not very happy about having him in their home. Harry had lived with them and their son ever since his parents were killed in a accident when Harry was a baby.

Strange things happened to Harry at times, especially when he was very afraid or very angry. Once, when being chased by some other children, Harry found himself on the roof of

the school. Another time he visited a zoo and thought he heard a Brazilian snake tell him that he, the snake, had never been to Brazil. The glass on the snake’s cage disappeared and off he headed, trying to visit his country. Harry never knew why or how these things happened.

When he reached the age of twelve, he began to be contacted by what was to become his alma mater. The Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry, it turned out, was not an ordinary boy. He was a wizard, and no ordinary wizard at that. Harry’s parents had not been killed in a accident, they had been murdered by most powerful evil wizard in the world, one so terrible he was known to most as He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, or for short, You-Know-Who. His name is Lord Voldemort, known to his followers as the Dark Lord (according to the author of the books, the final T in his name is silent, but in the movies, it is incorrectly pronounced. Voldemort comes from three Latin words and means ‘flight from death.’) Voldemort killed Harry’s parents and tried to kill baby Harry too, but he survived. It was a miracle, a baby

surviving an attack from Voldemort. Harry was left with a scar shaped like a bolt of lightning, and became a legend in the “wizarding world,” a world which he had no idea existed, a world to which he had no idea that he belonged, but in that world, baby Harry Potter was regarded as the hero who would someday save the world from You-Know-Who.

Let’s begin a rabbi’s view of the Harry Potter books with the following passage of Torah:

When thou art come into the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you *any one* that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, *or* that useth divination, *or* an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a one that inquires of the dead. For all that do these things *are* an abomination unto the

LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee. Thou shalt be perfect with the LORD thy God.

This is the Torah’s well-known prohibition against magic. That raises the question of how a rabbi can be a fan of Harry Potter if the Torah forbids magic? How, for that matter, can I as a rabbi include magic among my hobbies?

The answer is simple. What I do is not magic, it is an illusion, an attempt at creating the impression that something magical has happened. What I do is not forbidden by the Torah, and Harry Potter books are not, nor are they in any way dangerous because they deal with magical topics. On the contrary, although I obviously cannot claim that the author of the series intentionally put Jewish values into the books, they are nevertheless books that do reflect values that Judaism holds as essential. Let’s look at some.

The first and most obvious is the struggle between good and evil. Judaism sees this struggle as something that happens on an individual level—everyone must struggle against the evil inclination and try to follow our good inclination. We also have an obligation to fight evil in the world. The Harry Potter books are about the struggle of good against evil in general, and also in some specific ways. Obviously there is Harry v. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but that is not all.

Harry’s main antagonist in the books is a thoroughly unpleasant boy named Draco Malfoy. His father is Lucious Malfoy (Lucious was also the name of a Roman emperor who fought against King Arthur. Lucious Malfoy is always fighting against a wizarding good-guy named Arthur—no coincidence!) Lucious Malfoy believes strongly in racial purity. In twentieth century Europe, Malfoy would have been a Nazi.

On the other hand, one of Harry’s friends, a girl named Hermione Grainger, is a would-be Moses. She is fighting

for freedom and equality for house elves, little creatures who can only be set free by their masters giving them clothes. However, most of the house elves fear freedom and do not seek it, frustrating Hermione in a way similar to the experience of Moses and the Israelites.

The power of names in the Harry Potter books is also something we find in Judaism. The changing of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah, or Jacob to Israel, are some familiar examples of the importance of names. Even the unpronounceable name of God has an opposite counterpart in Voldemort’s name being unmentionable. But even more than that, just as the name of the man who requires his entire country to be circumcised so that his son could marry the woman he raped is named Hamor (donkey) in the Torah, so does J. K. Rowling choose her names with an eye to their meanings, as I mentioned in the cases of Voldemort (flight from death) and Lucius Malfoy. There are many examples: a werewolf named Remus Lupin (Remus is a mythical boy who founded Rome and was raised by a wolf, Lupin in Latin), or the late headmaster

Albus Dumbledore with his long, white hair (albus is Latin for white), or Professor Minerva McGonagall (Minerva was the Roman goddess of wisdom. McGonagall comes from poet Sir William Topaz McGonagall (1825-1902), of Dundee, Scotland. He is considered to be a very bad poet indeed), J. K. Rowling understands the importance of names.

There is a lot more. The books deal with lashon hara (Rita Skeeter, for those who get the reference), Harry putting aside his chance for personal profit and glory in order to save someone whose life was in danger, and I’m sure we could continue to tease out many more good Jewish values and concepts from the Harry Potter stories. But I want to conclude with one more, my favorite one of all.

Harry Potter is Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and King David. All of them are unlikely leaders, reluctant heroes, underdogs, and unexpected chosen ones, who may chafe under their burdens, but accept their responsibilities with a passion. Abraham did not ask to be the one to bring

monotheism into the world, but once in the role, argued with God Himself about what he saw as the God of Justice being unjust. Joseph, cast into the pit and sold into slavery, rises to be the Prime Minister of Egypt. David, the young boy who slew you-know-who (this time I really mean that you know who he slew, Goliath), and Harry, who like Moses does not want the leadership role thrust upon him by God or by fate, but does not shirk from it.

What is this rabbi’s view of the Harry Potter series? It makes kids want to read, and it models good values for them. It allows an avenue to discuss things like good and evil with kids in a way that will excite and engage them. But I conclude with the following admonition. I have not yet read the last book released in the series. I would be happy to talk about Harry Potter, or even Herschel Potter—but please, don’t tell me what happens in the last book!