REFORM JEDI-ISM – ITS GOOD FOR THE FORCE
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Temple Sholom
December 29, 2017

There is an article making its way around email and the internet over the last few days with the provocative title, "Reform Jediism: The Last Jedi, the story of a community that abandons its religion for an ephemeral universalist creed." The author is Liel Leibovitz, is an Israeli-American journalist, author, media critic and video game scholar (according to Wikipedia there is such a thing as video game scholar, maybe in my next life I'll have that job).

Leibovitz was born in Tel Aviv, immigrated to the United States in 1999, and earned a Ph.D. from Columbia University in 2007. His father was the famed Motorcycle Bandit, who robbed Israeli banks and then day after the robbery, if the stories are to be believed, his father walked back into the bank he just robbed and redeposited the stolen money.

Leibovitz the younger served in the IDF as an information officer and though his *yichus* and early writings are from the liberal left in Israel, his current affinity is for the hard right. His disdain for Reform Judaism is well documented by his own writings and his most recent article is no exception.

To paraphrase the comedian Rodney Dangerfield, in the Jewish world view of Liel Leibovitz, 'Reform Judaism gets no respect'.

Leibovitz writes, "The Force is everywhere and for everyone, no study or observance necessary." In addition: The ancient Jedi writings are "boring rubbish," and the resistance fighters, laughably, believe that "to be a Jedi you just have to feel like a Jedi."

Leibovitz argues that the resistance fighters and the version of Jediism they practice in "The Last Jedi" are the galactic version of Reform Jews, "a small community eager to trade in the old and onerous traditions for the glittery and airy creed of universalist kumbaya that, like so much sound and fury, signifies nothing." Reform Jews, he posits, are a ragtag bunch of bagel-loving anti-intellectuals who, with a soft-hearted moral stupidity, pretend at social justice but do little to advance it. Also, they're boring. (Jenny Singer, The Forward)

I am tempted to dismiss Mr Leibovitz' article as just another 'Attack of the Clones', just another assault on our modern approach to Jewish life and practice as the political power of Israeli Orthodoxy, which encourages them, continues unabated in the current Israeli government. However due to the viral (if not vile) nature of his article and the fact that Star Wars is in many ways the 'sacred cultural text' of my generation, the article needs a response. I'm defending torah – the torah of Star Wars.

First a little background on the movie and the whole Star Wars/The Force theology. I might geek out here for a moment so please bear with me. I want to thank my colleague Rabbi Esther Hugenholtz for some of these insights, I bow in deference to her nerd-ness.

In the original Star Wars, the ones I grew up on, becoming a Jedi was matter of heroism and calling. In more recent films, they introduced a genetic essentialist component through 'midi-chlorians'. All of a sudden you had to be Jedi-by-birth, of the Skywalker lineage. This forces each remaining Jedi to bring balance to the Force and restore justice to the universe, think of the biblical Joseph's responsibility to lead his people being that he is of the line of Abraham.

The conflict between The Force and the Dark Side in Star Wars is the struggle between determinism and free will, which is also a struggle in Judaism.

Determinism is the very thing Star Wars rejects, especially. 'The Last Jedi'. We are called to choose between good and evil, echoing Deut. 11:26. We are not by nature good or evil, light or dark side, the Jedi theology is that of torah, it is a matter of choice.

As Maimonides (11th century Rabbi) argues in 'Hilchot T'shuvah 2:4' ('Laws of Repentance'): 'If a person performs one mitzvah [good deed], he tips his balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and brings deliverance and salvation to himself and others. The entire premise of Star Wars is built on this foundation: of choice and redemption. 'The Last Jedi' reclaims this great philosophical legacy of the franchise.

Spoiler Alert here: What makes The Last Jedi, this most recent installment in the saga so compelling is the main character Rey's rejection or at least struggle with this essentialist narrative.

Rey, who is a very bright, gifted and skilled warrior, plucked out of servitude, slavery and obscurity to become the reluctant leader of the resistance (hashtag #Moses) holds onto and cherishes delusions of grandeur based on mysterious parentage. She reasons that she must be part of the Jedi lineage, how else could she explain her giftedness with the Force?

When Rey's nemesis, Kylo Ren, who has embraced the Dark Side and traces his ancestry to Han Solo, Princess Leia, Padme Amidala and Anakin reveals that Rey's own parentage is humble and without sacred lineage (she isn't 'born-Jedi'), she almost abandons her quest: what meaning is her life without her identity? Throughout the movie she realizes that it is not her identity but her values that matter. Look at Kylo Ren, he has all this great *yichus* and he went rogue, joining the Dark Side. She chooses the Jedi path on its own terms, it's not who your parents were it's who you are. She thus becomes Jedi-by-choice.

She seeks out Luke Skywalker, think of him as the old and weathered rebbe, he even sports a rabbinical beard, she begs him to be initiated into the Jedi religion. Skywalker idolizes books and disdains action. When she approaches he initially rejects her (can we say three times, as an

homage to that arcane Jewish practice of rejecting prospective converts). Skywalker's reason is telling and should be a warning about Jewish survival.

Skywalker has lived through the extermination of his entire race. Although he's conflicted, he's willing to let the world crumble as long as he can preserve his tradition, his books.

He doesn't represent the last bastion of a holy tradition that is, in Leibovitz's words, "accessible only to those orthodox souls who are committed to studying its secrets," a notion of historical Jewish practice so romantic as to be fantastical.

Rather, he represents the failure of his tradition to adapt. As "Star Wars" fan Aiden Pink, the Jewish Forward's deputy news editor, pointed out, the hyper-rigidity of the Jedi tradition allowed the Empire to rise and left the Jedi vulnerable to genocide.

Skywalker, desperately guarding a set of old Jedi texts but practicing none of their vaunted principles, resembles the Karaites of the past and Ultra Orthodoxy of today, both are Jewish sects that refused to adapt as Jewish thought evolved from strict biblical interpretation to include the tradition of Oral Torah and now reason and modernity.

In "The Last Jedi," Skywalker idolizes books and disdains action. Jedis and Reform Jews alike, Leibovitz writes, always "bungle" their well-intended plans because they do not have "a solid faith with specific rules and concrete decrees." This is evidenced, he says, by Yoda appearing in "The Last Jedi" only to set fire to the tree (read burning bush) that holds the last remaining copies of ancient Jedi texts, telling Skywalker to let go.

Leibovitz sees the scene through his particular anti-Reform, anti-progressive lens. He argues that Skywalker's [letting go] is a sin against the ancient sacred Jedi texts and ancient Jedi practices.

Leibovitz in his pejorative way frames the critical moment as *shanda*. He summarizes it this way, "To be a Jedi, according to Reb Skywalker, you only need to feel like a Jedi, because the old religion wasn't about the ethics of the fathers but about *tikkun olam*, which everyone can achieve just by being, you know, a good person. Toss in a few bagels, and you can say that Jediism, really, isn't a religion but a culture or something. Call it Reform Judaism." (end quote)

But that is not what Luke Skywalker is saying and that is not what Reform Judaism is selling.

Ultimately through his own evolution of thinking, Reb Skywalker opens up a sacred path to Jedi-sim for Rey. He comes to understand through the teachings of Reb Yoda that the Force is interwoven with all things. It is right there before her, *lo bashamayim he*, it is not in the heavens as verses from Nitzavim echo in the ear. Skywalker encouraging Rey to overcome her inner darkness, "I set before you life and death, choose life; use the Force."

This leads to the moral conflict at the center of “The Last Jedi” surrounding Rey’s attempt to redeem Ren from The Dark Side – but that is a sermon for another time.

The point that needs to made in response to Leibovitz’ article is that Luke and Reform Judaism are not rejecting the sacred texts, but rather pointing out that they are not the sole and separate property of the Jedi, anyone can access the Force.

Luke now understands and Leibovitz in his rigid defense of Orthodoxy fails to see; that the way the Jedi have kept their religion is not working - it is spawning deeper darkness.

The point of the whole movie, and what Leibovitz fails to realize in his clumsy comparison with Reform Judaism is that the force (here you can read Judaism) is not "owned" by "Reb Skywalker", the same way that our religion is not owned by a head priest, a single rabbi or a single movement. It is not static, locked away under glass never changing, but vibrant and alive.

Luke like many of the early reformers of Judaism realizes that the strictures of traditional Jediism are “apt to obstruct rather than to further modern spiritual elevation.” (As per the Pittsburgh platform of Reform Judaism, acknowledgement RabbiIlan Emanuel)

And still there is a note of caution, which Leibovitz ignores and all too often we must acknowledge so do Reform Jews. The Force or Judaism without instruction can go wrong, it can lead to the Dark Side. That’s why ultimately Rey takes the sacred books - because she understands a balance between tradition (get a teacher) and modernity (anyone can access the Force). Everyone needs a Yoda in their life, a teacher, a rabbi – to guide their free access to the Force.

“All denominations of Judaism have value, in part because, by definition, they create community. The best hope for maintaining the existence of the religion Leibovitz and I both hold dear is not inter-denominational carping over which version of fictional space magicians we each represent. It’s deciding how to create continuity in a rapidly assimilating religion without engaging in the kind of rigid thinking that denies equality and betrays any values beyond that of survival.” (Jenny Singer, The Forward)

“Reform Judaism, in its pursuit of creating a welcoming environment, may overlook some of what is precious within Jewish tradition, namely ritual obligation and intensive study. Orthodox Judaism may sometimes treat *halacha* too stringently at the expense of its intention, likewise alienating what is sacred within Jewish tradition. Rather than engage in a lightsaber battle to the death, the two denominations could learn something from each other and both survive.” (Jenny Singer, The Forward)

As Skywalker told Rey, “Reach out.” Rather than knock each other down, we must build each other up. Because the ways of a Jedi old or new are still our best hope (Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You're my only hope) to defeat The Dark Side.