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The Secret Jewish History Of '2001: A Space Odyssey'

Nathan Abrams April 9, 2018 Image by Courtesy of Contemporary ...

6-8 minutes

Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece "[2001: A Space Odyssey](https://forward.com/culture/film-tv/398389/the-secret-jewish-history-of-2001-a-space-odyssey)" was released in April, 1968, which makes it fifty years old this year. It reinvented the science fiction genre but significantly was underpinned with Jewishness. "2001" was backed by MGM, a studio otherwise known as "Mayer's Gantze Mishpochah." It was perceived as a very Jewish firm abroad in contrast to Universal, Paramount, and Fox, whose names sounded more goyish.

While making the movie, Kubrick abandoned his clean-shaven, black suit, tie, and white-shirt New York intellectual fifties look in favor of scruffier one. It was then that he grew his distinctive beard as if obeying Leviticus 19:27: "Ye shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard." [Arthur C. Clarke](#), who co-wrote the screenplay, said Kubrick had "the aura of a Talmudic scholar" and the look of "a slightly cynical rabbi."

In designing the movie's supercomputer, [HAL](#), Kubrick consulted the modern descendants of kabbalists. Artificial intelligence expert Marvin Minsky (one hears an echo of his name hibernating Discovery crew member Dr. Kaminsky) claimed he was descended from Rabbi Judah Loew (1525–1609), the Maharal of Prague, the famous Kabbalist who created a golem. HAL was indeed a golem. Statistician and mathematical genius Irving John "Jack" Good not

only helped to crack the German Enigma codes during WW2, but his father, Moshe Oved, was also a Kabbalist.

Maybe it was for these reasons that Kubrick considered Jewish voices for HAL. He told Jeremy Bernstein that “maybe it [HAL] ought to sound like [Jackie Mason](#).” His lawyer Louis Blau suggested the Jewish actor [Walter Pidgeon](#), as well as [Jose Ferrer](#) who had played the Jewish lawyer, Lt. Barney Greenwald, in the film version of “The Caine Mutiny” (1954). Kubrick later recorded Jewish actor Martin Balsam but rejected him because his vocal quality was “too American and overly emotional.”

In making the film, Kubrick had to create, out of nothing, various technical processes and visual effects the likes of which had never been seen on screen before. This required great effort coupled with his typical meticulousness. A joke circulating among his crew went, “In six days God created the heavens, and the earth. On the seventh day, Stanley sent everything back for modifications.” A photo was pinned on the wall of the art department on which was scribbled, “OK guys, what do we do on day eight?”

And the opening of the film certainly mimics Genesis — albeit in 70mm. “2001” begins in darkness, as an extended black screen, lasting three minutes and 17 seconds, is punctuated only by the MGM logo. Ex nihilo, out of the void, the moon and sun become visible rising over the curve of the earth, transforming the cinema into bright sunlight. The screen’s formlessness and void form becomes recognizable objects: a desert landscape populated by apes.

The lead ape was played by mime artist [Dan Richter](#), whose father was the Jewish painter and cartoonist, [Mischa Richter](#). Appropriately, his character was called Moon-Watcher and what more obsessive moon watchers are there than Jewish calendar experts?

The apes' costumes, which were so lifelike that many didn't realize that they weren't real, were created by the Stuart Freeborn who had previously made the prosthetic hook nose for Alec Guinness' [Fagin](#) in "Oliver Twist" in 1948, a nose so grotesque many considered it anti-Semitic (including Freeborn himself). Earlier he'd transformed Peter Sellers in Dr. "Strangelove" (1964) before putting himself, literally, into [Yoda](#) for the "Star Wars" sequel "The Empire Strikes Back."

Kubrick may have deliberately misled his audiences into believing his film was simply an allegory for Homer's "Odyssey" albeit set in space. But the positioning of the word "space" between "a" and "odyssey" clearly signaled it wasn't a straightforward interpretation of Homer, that something was amiss. While elements were drawn from that text, they neither overshadowed nor obscured the film's Jewishness.

Watch closely, and you'll see that Kubrick mined Hebrew Scripture, liturgy, and history. Some examples include "The Dawn of Man" sequence that resembles the Genesis account of the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden "tree of knowledge," and their eyes were opened, that is they acquire knowledge. Clarke described the moment when Moon-Watcher "picks up the bone and studies it thoughtfully" as "foreshadowing Cain."

The monoliths have been described as wordless tablets of the Law. Where Kubrick did insert ten written commandments, it was in the intricate and intimidating instructions posted on the door of a "Zero Gravity Toilet" — a very Kubrickian joke. But the way in which the apes dance and scream around the monolith suggests the worship of the Golden Calf, reinforced by the overlay of Hungarian-Jewish composer Gyorgy Ligeti's unearthly and wordless heavenly choir of both Requiem and Lux Aeterna. And in choosing to situate the

monoliths vertically they resemble the pillars or standing stones that literally dotted the Bible's desert landscapes.

Part three of "2001" is called "Jupiter Mission: 18 Months Later." Eighteen in Hebrew is equivalent in numeric value to "life" (chai), referring to double the human period of gestation and birth. The silent prayer central to the Jewish daily service is also known as the "Shemonah Esrei" because it contains eighteen benedictions. 2001's silence renders it the quality of the Amidah or "standing" prayer.

"Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite," the fourth and final section, invokes the Kabbalistic concept of "ein-sof," the Hebrew for "without end" and/or "the infinite." Ein-sof is also typically used to describe the supreme entity or Godhead. And when Dave Bowman smashes his glass, even Clarke felt it referred to the tradition at Jewish weddings (although Kubrick strenuously denied this).

Let's leave the final word to Kubrick's brother-in-law and producer, Jan Harlan. "I told him [Kubrick] this was a very Jewish film, and I explained why I thought so. Judaism is a breakthrough in thinking; it is like the discovery of the fact that the earth is a globe circling the sun. It was the sun, mountains, animals and fantasy figures that represented God before. Now this God had no name, was eternal, the omnipotent creator of everything. What a breakthrough in thinking. Stanley liked my reasoning."

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