



The Matrix – A Mystical Modern Midrash

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There is nothing more powerful than *experience* to bring home the veracity of abstract ideas. The next best thing to actual experience is the vicarious experience of watching a movie or hearing a story. It is the contention of this paper that the movie *The Matrix* offers not just some unspecific experience but one that might rightly be called “a spiritual experience.” It does so by providing a vehicle to understanding the Creator and His creation in a palpable way that only a powerful Midrash can.

Midrash as a Vehicle

Midrash is a creative device used to impart deep philosophical concepts through a medium that wins immediate attention by its apparent simplicity and entertaining quality. Midrashim are usually creative embellishments to stories or situations that are very familiar. The familiarity of the basic story outline provides a level of relative comfort conducive for the audience to “hear” the deeper message. In this way, the message is transmitted subtly but palpably. The objective is to convey an idea that might otherwise be difficult to understand or perhaps uncomfortable to accept. Sometimes, it may convey ideas which are already familiar, but brings the point home in a way that simply relearning the hard facts would never accomplish.

Midrashim work, as stated, because man is an “experiential” being – he learns best from experience. And though one can read a book of philosophy or hear a lecture on intellectual concepts, it is ultimately through experience that one internalizes the teachings.¹ Midrashim impart the most sublime of teachings that can really only be conveyed in their “experiential” form. The Rambam was so awed by their depth that he set for himself the task of explaining every Midrash. However, it wasn’t long into his project that he realized that often the only way to explain a Midrash is to tell another Midrash.

1. One simple example is the method employed for vocabulary improvement – after providing a definition of a word, it is then used in a story to bring it to life.

Movies as the modern medium for Midrash

For millennia man has been conveying messages through the telling of stories – sometimes the telling was verbal, sometimes it was written, and sometimes it was acted on stage. Today probably the most ubiquitous media for telling stories is electronic – whether it be TV, PC or the movie theater.

Great story tellers, directors, and producers are great not only for the theatrical or cinematic technique they employ but for the depth of meaning that they successfully convey. Indeed, all great stories have some message lying beneath their surface, waiting to be revealed, begging to be discovered. One media critic (quoted in R. M. Schuchardt, “What is the Matrix?”, *Taking the Red Pill*, p.13) explained that the power of *The Matrix* inheres in the fact that its creators² have struck on precisely the right formula to convey their message:

The Wachowskis seem to have asked themselves this question: How do you speak seriously to a culture reduced to the format of comic books and video games? Answer: You tell them a story from the only oracle they’ll listen to, a movie, and you tell them the story in the comic-book and video-game format that the culture has become so addicted to.

Religious themes in *The Matrix*

*The Matrix*³ has taken on a cult-like following because, I believe, of the profundity that it expresses in a most novel and captivating way. It does not necessarily teach us anything that we didn’t know before; however, it tells us what we are so unwilling to face, in a way that we simply can’t ignore it. And it does so in such a subtle yet powerful way that we can’t help but be moved by it.

The movie’s facets and depths have captured the imagination of philosophers and theologians from a myriad of religions which has translated into numerous articles written by Christians, Gnostics, Buddhists, and Jews. Of course, no one can claim that *The Matrix* is teaching their religion, for there are clearly many

2. The Wachowski brothers (Larry and Andy) wrote and directed *The Matrix* (1999).

3. The intention of this paper is to discuss the original movie and not the sequels, for it is my contention that the original movie provides a philosophically whole story.



different religious themes woven into the fabric of the film. Indeed the authors themselves admit to having employed various philosophies. When asked if “all the religious symbolism and doctrine throughout this movie [is] intentional or not?” They answered, “Most of it is intentional.”⁴

Jewish Themes in *The Matrix*

As Jews, however, we can garner great insights by exploring the Jewish themes that exist in *The Matrix*. This is not to imply that the Wachowskis intended any of these themes, nor is their intent really of interest. My objective is not to decode the messages of the authors, but rather to use their work as a powerful tool to understand essential teachings of Judaism. In this sense I am “reading in to the story” rather than “reading out of the story”. That being said, I do believe that it is wholly possible to legitimately and convincingly explain *The Matrix* from within the ambit of Jewish philosophy. In this vein, when the Wachowskis were asked: “Do you appreciate people dissecting your movie? ... does it annoy you a little, especially when the person may have it all wrong?” – they responded, “There’s not necessarily ever an ‘all wrong’. Because it’s about what a person gets out of the movie, what an individual gets out of the movie.”⁵

Before we begin to delve into the various themes and symbols through which *The Matrix* speaks, it is important to stress a word of caution relevant to all such endeavors: not to get too caught up in the movie’s façade. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan warned that “the ‘content’ of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat that the burglar throws to distract the watchdog of the mind.”⁶ Applying this specifically to *The Matrix*, one should be wary of seeing only the “content” of the kung-fu fighting and sci-fi effects and fail to perceive “the serious sermon going on all around”.⁷ Speaking in spiritual terms, R. Adin Steinsaltz explains that: “[The spiritual realm] is a dangerous place, and no man may find his way in it so long as he tries to grasp things as they appear to be. The greatest difficulty in comprehending esoteric wisdom is that its symbols are viewed as realities

4. <http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/cmp/larryandychat.html>

5. Ibid.

6. Quoted in R. M. Schuchardt, “What is the Matrix?”, *Taking the Red Pill* (Texas, 2003), p.10.

7. Ibid.

and the allegory is not perceived.”⁸

Introduction

The beginning of the movie has Neo’s computer “hacked” with the message:

WAKE UP, NEO.

This is a wake-up call to Neo as well as the audience to take note, to be aware, to be cognizant of the details, the subtleties, of everything that can help one see the truth through the anesthetizing distraction of the material world. That this is a fundamental message of the film is evinced by the movie’s closing song which shouts repeatedly, “WAKE UP, WAKE UP, WAKE UP ... what you reap is what you sow...” The song explicitly provides the audience with the reason to “wake up” – and this is nothing more and nothing less than the moral message that implores us to realize that one’s actions count.⁹

The call to wake up parallels the call of the shofar on Rosh HaShananah – calling all to wake up from their sleep of *ignore-ance* (self-imposed or not) as the Rambam (Hil. Teshuva 3:4) writes, “Awake, sleepers from your sleep! ... Remember your Creator! ... Peer into your souls...” So too the Zohar (Lech Lecha 77a) laments, “Woe to those that sleep with their eyes fast closed and do not know or consider how they will arise in the Day of Judgment.”

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8. R. A. Steinsaltz, *Beggars and Prayers*, (New York, 1979), p.71. Similarly R. A. Kaplan, “...the mind can be swallowed up in the kaleidoscope of symbolism, and not be able to emerge.” (Sefer Yetzirah (1:8), [Maine, 1997], p.67).
9. The metaphor of reaping what one sows – meaning that one’s actions have moral consequence – is used throughout the Bible. Some examples:
- “As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it” (Job 4:8).
 - “Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy” (Psalm 126:5).
 - “The wicked man earns deceptive wages, but he who sows righteousness reaps a sure reward” (Proverbs 11:18).
 - “He who sows wickedness reaps trouble, and the rod of his fury will be destroyed” (Proverbs 22:8).





The Matrix

When Neo meets Trinity for the first time, the following conversation takes place:¹⁰

Trinity: ... I was looking for an answer. It's the question that drives us, Neo. It's the question that brought you here. You know the question just as I did.

Neo: **What is the Matrix?**

Trinity: The answer is out there, Neo. It's looking for you. And it will find you, if you want it to.

This piece of dialogue is particularly significant to start the journey, for one cannot begin a quest without desire. A true quest starts with a *quest*-ion. Judaism teaches that the path to knowledge is through question, as Hillel said, "A bashful person – that is afraid to ask questions¹¹– cannot learn" (Avot 2:6). This notion is typified by the Talmud which is all questions, and by the Pesah Seder which is designed to invite questions.

The question that drives Neo's quest is really the question of all questions: What is this world? It is this question that has motivated both physicist and philosopher from time immemorial. The physicist is intrigued by a sense of curiosity, the philosopher by a need for meaning. The physicist's question, "What is this world?", may be more accurately translated as, "How does this world work?" The philosopher's question, "What is this world?", is decidedly more profound, to the effect, "What is the meaning of man's existence in this world?" Neo's question "What is the Matrix?" is probably a combination of the two, both of which the movie answers. However, what is most important for us is how the movie addresses the meaning of our existence.

10. All the quotations from the movie were taken from an online transcript (<http://www.sabon.org/matrix/index.html>) copyrighted © 1999 The Wachowski Brothers & Warner Bros. Any bolding of text within the transcript is emphasis I added.

11. Meam Loez (Avot 2:6.) - similar to Rashi [*ibid.*].

Olam Hasheker

Neo meets Morpheus:

Morpheus: ...Let me tell you why you're here. You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain. But you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. That there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is but it's there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to me. Do you know what I'm talking about?

Neo: The Matrix?

Morpheus: Do you want to know what IT IS? The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us, even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

Working and paying taxes are examples of typical mundane activities that keep the masses in motion and, more importantly, distracted. Note that “church” is also used toward this goal – as indeed Marx said, “religion is the opiate of the masses.” Certainly this could be true if someone goes to “church” merely out of routine – like “going to work and paying taxes” – for anything done out of rote dulls the senses.¹² Indeed R. Shimon exhorts to avoid specifically this pitfall with regard to prayer. He states that on the one hand one must be diligent to perform his prayers at the designated times¹³, “Be punctilious in saying the Shema and prayers”; on the other hand he warns, “Don’t make your prayer a rote task” (Avot 2:18).¹⁴

Their conversation continues:

Neo: What truth?

12. See Meam Loez (Avot 6:2 - similar to Rashi [*ibid.*]) that doing the commandments out of habit is as unseemly as a gold ring in a pig’s nose.

13. Rashi (Avot 2:18); Meam Loez (Avot 2:18).

14. Also Berachot (4:4) – a fixed prayer is not a genuine supplication.

Morpheus: That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind.

This concept is in consonance with Jewish thought as stated in Pirke Avot (6:2) “ ‘The Tablets were God’s work, and the writing was God’s writing, *harut* (engraved) on the Tablets’ (Ex. 32:16) – Don’t read *harut* but rather *heirut* (freedom). No man is free unless he devotes himself to the Torah.”¹⁵ Indeed man is a slave to the bondage of earthly life; his only hope to break these bonds is through occupying himself in the study of the Truth – namely the Torah (*i.e.*, *Torat Emet*).¹⁶ But Pirke Avot does not say there is no bondage whatsoever. Rather, no matter what one does, one will be bound to a certain system.¹⁷ R. Nechuniah ben Hakana made clear that everyone has a yoke – either the yoke of Torah or the yoke of worldly occupation (Avot 3:6).¹⁸

Morpheus continues:

Morpheus: Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?

...

Morpheus: What is real. How do you define real? If you’re talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain.

The most powerful and fundamental metaphor that the movie offers is that of its namesake – the Matrix. *The Matrix* serves as an astounding analogy for the world we live in – a world of “natural law” and sensory perceptions, all maintained as a “construct” in which human life is contained. It is a world in which people

15. Also the Zohar (Mishpatim 113b) explains that only through the Torah is there freedom from death, evil, earthliness and subjugation by worldly kingdoms.

16. Zohar (Yitro 93b-94a) explains that the Torah reveals all hidden truths.

17. This is an idea brought out in Matrix II.

18. See also Zohar (Vayechi 242b).

“live out their lives”, often oblivious to the fact that there is another reality, a super-reality, a true existence. Judaism describes this world in terms not unlike those used by Morpheus. In the language of the sages, this world is “*Alma DeShikra*” - *Olam Hasheker* – the world of falsehood. It is called as such not because it does not exist, but because people are easily fooled into thinking that it is *all* that exists!

The “Real World”

In contrast to the *Olam Hasheker*, there is the *Olam HaEmet*, the world of truth. This generally refers to the ultimate world to come, wherein there is only truth. Clearly the “real world” of the movie is not the *Olam HaEmet*. The question of what exactly is the “real world” is a difficult one. On the one hand it is a world where there is drinking and eating, growth and learning, as well as doubt, death, and confusion. On the other hand, it is a place wherein people have a clear awareness of the truth, they do not indulge in the pleasures of the flesh,¹⁹ and are dedicated to saving humanity. It is a place separate from the Matrix, yet it exists in parallel to it. One can “travel” between the worlds, yet not easily.

Based on these diverse and varied aspects, I propose that this “real world” serves as a kind of multidimensional metaphor – it depicts a number of realities together and at once. The “real world” is both a representation of man in the physical world and in a spiritual dimension. It is a depiction of man in this physical world, yet at a higher level of consciousness, a level which sets him apart from his fellow humans who lack such an awareness. At the same time, it is also a depiction of man’s spiritual self, which exists in parallel to his physical being. Though this is a complex “overloading” of a metaphor, it can not only be substantiated, but also highly justified, as a means to convey the varying layers of the complex reality we live in – a reality that consists of both physical and spiritual, each with manifold levels. And indeed it is most telling that the Wachowskis explain that, “Reflections in general are a significant theme in the film. [They represent the] idea of **worlds within worlds.**”²⁰ Appropriately, the

19. That superficial physical pleasures are not to be had in the “real world”, note, for example, that Neo is offered a meeting with the blonde in the red dress in her virtual reality; similarly Cypher’s craving for steak that is only to be had in the Matrix.

20. <http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/cmp/larryandychat.html> (emphasis added).

most blatant use of this theme is when Neo touches the mirror just as he is about to exit the Matrix and enter the real world for the first time.

Higher Consciousness

Viewing the “real world” as a higher consciousness of man’s physical existence, the “real world” is a place where, after dramatically and traumatically leaving the state of being immersed (literally) in the grossly physical, man enters a new state wholly conscious of his higher being. In this state man grows and learns, though he may still entertain doubts and fears. This existence is depicted in the Torah by the people of Israel leaving the “fleshpots” of Egypt (i.e., gross physical existence) and entering the desert wherein they learn and grow, the final goal being Israel, that is – Zion.

- There are numerous indications of this theme in the movie: The movie introduces mankind as living a totally physical existence – on the mental/emotional level man is enslaved to satisfying his physical desires; and on the physical level his very body is sustained by other physical bodies. In order to exit this Egypt-like existence, the individual must make the choice himself – “take the red pill or take the blue pill.” The Jews in Egypt had to make precisely this same choice by sacrificing a lamb and smearing its blood on their doorposts as an indication of their decision to leave Egypt (perhaps this blood is symbolized by the “red” pill). And so the prophet says, “In your blood you shall live, in your blood you shall live” referring to the blood on the doorposts as well as the blood of *brit mila*, both representing the choice to leave Egypt.
- Following the manifest decision to leave, the actual exit from the Matrix is brought about by disconnecting cords and being dropped down a shoot of water – a process during which the subject is totally passive. The birthing imagery is blatant: passivity, umbilical cord(s), birth canal, awakening in a new reality. This is precisely the same imagery used in the narrative describing the Jews’ exodus from Egypt at the Red Sea. The crossing of the Red Sea was a miraculous event in which the sea split, like a birth canal, after which the people entered their new reality – the desert, or in the words of Morpheus: “the desert of the real”. The Jews were entirely passive, as God orchestrated their redemption (Ex. 14:13-14). Note also that just as the people were forced

across the Sea by the pursuing Egyptians (Ex. 14:9), so too is Neo thrown down the shoot by an attacking machine.

- The mission of the people in the “real world” is to fight against evil, which uses man’s innate proclivity for physical satisfaction as a way to “enslave” him. Ultimately, the “real world” people want to reveal to humanity the truth and release them from the bondage of their physical desires, after which they will live in perfection, in Zion. This too is the goal of the people of Israel who leave Egypt. They are to reveal the truth to the world and proclaim it from their capital Zion – “For the Torah (Truth) comes forth from Zion” (Isaiah 2:3). Zion is the goal in the movie, as Tank relates, “If the war was over tomorrow, Zion is where the party would be.” So too in the Bible, “...and they will come to Zion with song and everlasting joy...” (Isaiah 35:10). In the movie, Zion is said to be “near the earth’s core”. In Judaism, Zion is believed to be the “center of the world”.²¹ In fact the Zohar (Teruma 222a) describes Zion as being the nucleus around which all the world was formed.
- The desert is the place where the people receive their mission and the teachings, in the form of the Torah, to carry out that mission.²² So too, does Neo get his mission and teachings, in the form of “training programs”.
- The desert is a place where battles with external enemies occur: the Jews are attacked by Amalek (Ex. 17: 8-16), the Zion crew is attacked by the machines.²³ Noteworthy is the fact that just as the Jews in the desert don’t initiate offensives against Amalek, neither does the Zion crew go after the machines.
- In the desert the Jews were fed a steady diet of Manna described as all the body needs.²⁴ So too do the people of the “real world” daily eat the same simple food described as the “Breakfast of champions. ... Everything the body needs.” And like in the desert, where this pure food led the rabble (*asafsuf*) to be fed-up with it and to lust for meat²⁵, so too in the “real world” of the movie does Cypher complain about the food and lust for “steak”.²⁶

21. Zohar (Vayehi 226a; Terumah 156b; Achrei Mot 65b); Tanchuma (Kedoshim 10).

22. See note 16.

23. Also note that just as the machines and the agents work in unison, so too do Amalek and the serpent (Zohar Ber. 29a), the serpent being the coy one that seduces man to succumb to his baser instincts.

24. Ex. 16; Yoma 75b; Torah Temimah (Ex. 16:14, n.21). Interestingly, the Zohar (Teruma 156b) notes that even in the upper, purely spiritual, realms the angels rejoice in the eating of Manna.

25. Ex. 16; Num. 11.

26. The Hafetz Hayim (Hatekufah Hagedola, p.20) explains that the manna tasted delicious only to those who contemplated their actions and gave thought to what they were eating.



The Matrix

The Rabble (Asafsuf)	Cypher
"...Our souls are dried away, there is nothing at all but this manna" (Num. 11:4-6).	I'm tired of ... eating the same G.-damn goop everyday.
"Who will feed us meat?" (Num. 11:4,13,18)	You know, I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss.

- The desert is a place where people express doubts about leaving Egypt and a desire to go back: "Why did we come out of Egypt?" (Num. 11:20; 14:4). Similarly Cypher expresses the same doubts and desires to go back to the Matrix: "Why, oh why didn't I take the blue pill?" The desert is a place where some question the very validity of the mission and even arise in mutiny,²⁷ like Korach, Datan and Aviram – and like Cypher. Compare the statements of Datan and Aviram to those of Cypher:



27. Num. 16.

Datan and Aviram	Cypher
<p>“Is it a small thing [Moshe] that you have brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, and do you also make yourself a prince over us? Moreover you have not brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards: will you also put out the eyes of these men?” (Num. 16:13-14).</p>	<p>Cypher: I'm tired, Trinity. I tired of this war. I'm tired of fighting. I'm tired of this ship, of being cold, eating the same G..-damn goop everyday. But most of all, I'm tired of that jack... and all of his bull... . Surprise a.... I bet you never saw this coming, did you? God, I wish I could be there, when they break ya. I wish I could walk in just when it happens. So right then, you'd know it was me.</p> <p>Trinity: You gave him Morpheus.</p> <p>Cypher: He lied to us, Trinity. He tricked us! If you'da told us the truth, we woulda told you to shove that red pill right up your a...</p> <p>Trinity: That's not true, Cypher, he set us free.</p> <p>Cypher: Free? You call this free? All I do is what he tells me to do. If I had to choose between that and the Matrix, I choose the Matrix.</p>

Thus, Morpheus' metaphor, “desert of the real”, expresses the idea of reaching a higher consciousness as a stepping-stone to ultimate perfection – something which one attains through striving, learning and building faith.

Spiritual Dimension

The “real world” can also be viewed as a spiritual reality, a parallel existence to the physical world.²⁸ Judaism refers to levels of perceptual realities – “worlds” – which are layered one above the other:²⁹

- *Atzilut* is the world of God’s influences, known as the Sefirot.
- *Beriyah* is the world of the Throne and the Forces.
- *Yetzirah* is the world of angels, or messengers.
- *Asiyah* is the physical world together with its spiritual aspect.

It is to the lowest perceptual world, the world of *Asiyah*, that the term *Olam Hasheker* is applied. This is the world of the Matrix. The “real world” can be viewed as an upper world, perhaps *Beriyah*. Thus the Matrix is the world of *Asiyah* wherein the soul – the real being – is clothed in the physical body. The real being actually exists in the upper realms and though not many have an awareness of their being in these worlds, some enlightened few do achieve being “unplugged”, as R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto “Ramchal” (Derech Hashem 3:2:4) explains:

The Highest Wisdom therefore decreed that the laws of nature [not be absolute, but] should be able to be suspended, even in this world. This would remove the physical limitations that separate and divorce man from the spiritual and its concepts. Man would thus be able to be released from his worldly bonds and rise to a state high above the physical. In such a state, he would be able to have contact and association with the spiritual and commune with it, even though he still exists with his spiritually opaque body in the physical world.

28. Zohar (Mishpatim 125a) – the act below affects the activity above. Zohar (Shmot 15a) – upper world parallels lower world. Derech Hashem 1:5 – “[2]...everything in the physical world has a counterpart among the transcendental forces. Every entity and process in the physical world is linked to these forces, following a system decreed by God’s wisdom. These forces are therefore the roots of all physical things, and everything in the physical world is a branch and result of these forces. The two are bound together like links in a chain.... [3] The main existence and true state of the physical universe thus emanate from these highest forces. Whatever exists in the physical world is a result of something that takes place among these forces...”

29. Aryeh Kaplan, n. 4:76, on Derech Hashem. Zohar (Terumah 126b-127a) talks of the upper world and lower world being linked, as well as the four-letter ineffable name “Y.K.V.K.” as being different levels of worlds.

The limitations of nature, however, cannot all be suspended. There are only certain particular limitations whose suspension the Highest Wisdom deemed advantageous for the overall aim of providence. Even such suspension, however, follows specific conditions and procedures, all determined with the utmost precision.

The small band of people led by Morpheus represent the select (“chosen”) few³⁰ individuals who have risen above the façade and realize that there is a reality beyond, that there is more to existence than the deception rendered by the *Olam Hasheker*. Due to their awareness of the other worlds, they enter and exit the Matrix, as the Ramchal explained, “follow[ing] specific conditions and procedures, all determined with the utmost precision.” Here we are reminded of the Rabbis in the Talmud (as well as those that followed them throughout the ages)³¹ who could “leave” our world to see the truth on the other side.³² Some examples:

- The story³³ of the ten martyrs (*asarah harugei malchut*) tells of the Roman government decreeing death on the ten most prominent scholars of the time. Upon hearing the decree they responded with the following request: Give us time, three days, until we know if the matter has been decreed from the heights. If we are obliged and guilty, we will suffer the decree of him Who is full of mercy. All trembling and shaking, they cast their eyes on R. Yishmael the Kohen Gadol to mention the name [of God and] ascend to his Master to know if the decree had come from his Lord. R. Yishmael purified himself, tremblingly uttered the name [of God], ascended on high, and asked the man who wore white linens.
- The story³⁴ of the four that entered the heavenly garden (*pardes*) of which Rashi explains that they entered into heaven through use of the divine name.³⁵

30. Zohar (Terumah 126a) – God chose the Jews and they chose Him.

31. Zohar (Terumah 127b) – souls of living beings ascend and imbibe from the higher spiritual world.

32. Of course their physical bodies remained all the while in the lowest realm – a limitation not represented in *The Matrix*.

33. Midrash *Asarah Harugei Malchut* found in Machzor Yom Kippur (Musaf, “Eleh Ezkerah”). Though the martyring of the ten was done over a period of time, this does not invalidate the fact that R. Yishmael ascended on high to determine the decree.

34. Haggigah 14b.

35. Tosafot point out that they never left their physical existence, but rather it appeared to them as such. As mentioned before, this is a limitation not represented in the movie.

- The Zohar (Terumah 136a) discusses the ascending and descending of souls between the various worlds.
- Some have even held that prayer, in its perfected form, can elevate man to a level of prophecy wherein he is divorced from the physical.³⁶

On the opposite side of the spiritual spectrum are the various “negative forces”. The goal of the negative forces is to maintain man in his deprived state. The machines (and the agents) represent these evil forces. The Ramchal (Derech Hashem, 1:5:8) explains the concept of the various forces as follows:

... The purpose of the source of evil was to give rise to particular concepts, to the extent that the Highest Wisdom determined necessary so that both man and the world be in its desired state... This source of evil includes many different forces, from which all concepts of deficiency and evil originate. It can affect both body and soul, in all their various categories... When the evil forces gain power and authority, the force of good is weakened, and those forces that are the roots of all created things are damaged. This in turn weakens both the forces and their branches, [which are the physical things associated with them]. When these evil forces are subjugated...then good becomes strengthened. The roots of all created things are then rectified and are set in a good state so that both they and their branches are strengthened. Everything depends on the strengthening of these forces.

Olam HaAsiyah

As mentioned, this (our) world is referred to as the *Olam Hasheker* in the sense that, though it is not the only reality, it fools man into believing that it is. However, what man does within this world is very real. As such, the *Olam Hasheker* is also referred to by the Kabbalists as the *Olam HaAsiyah* – the world of action. Thus living, dying, saving people, helping others, and improving oneself – are all very real. Indeed, it is in this world that we affect the greatest change,³⁷ as Pirke Avot (4:22) teaches:

36. Rosh, Tur (Orech Hayim 98) in Aryeh Kaplan, *Jerusalem* (New York, 1984), p.40.

37. Though there is still change to be affected in the world to come – Derech Hashem (1:3:13).

“One moment of positive action in this world is greater than an eternity of action in the next world, and one moment of enjoyment in the next world is greater than all the pleasure attainable in this world.”

Thus, it is not enough to be aware of the super-reality; man must actualize himself in this world of action. The notion that actualization is what really affects change is noted by Morpheus as follows:

Morpheus: ... Neo, sooner or later you're going to realize, just as I did, there's a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.

That is why Neo – the Mashiach in training – had to go through actions, and as he did, grow in faith and strength. Recall that when Neo is fighting the agent toward the end of the movie, he undergoes a psychological transformation and takes on a new power to fight. This is evidenced when Trinity asks Morpheus why Neo isn't running from the agent, Morpheus answers, “He's beginning to believe.” This is something that couldn't be achieved through training videos and construct programs.

The Torah emphasizes this idea in many places, one of the more prominent being the story of the *Akedah* – the binding of Isaac. It was not enough that God *knew* that Avraham would do His will, or even that Avraham *believed* he would do it. He had to go all the way, until he was *actually* performing the ultimate sacrifice, that he could then be stopped.

Though the Matrix can be used for positive purposes, nevertheless the movie emphasizes the notion that the Matrix is like a rag to be discarded. Taking the “real world” to be a higher consciousness of our physical reality, then ultimately everyone must be “unplugged” from the misdirected lower existence. However, even taking the “real world” to be a metaphor for a higher spiritual realm, Judaism would concur that ultimately everyone must be “unplugged” from the current physical existence to enter a perfected existence. For though Judaism values this world as a place wherein man can perfect and elevate himself





spiritually, Judaism recognizes that ultimately this world is debased and must be destroyed:³⁸

[J]ustice decreed that neither man nor the world could ever attain perfection while in their degenerate state. Both man and the world were in their present form when they caused evil to increase, and therefore, both must go through a stage of destruction before perfection can be attained.

(Derech Hashem, 1:3:9).

Satan

Among the many forces in the world there are angels, messengers of God's will. One of those messengers is known by the name "Satan." In Christian thought, his is a power which can operate on its own against the will of God.³⁹ Judaism, however, holds the Satan to be a messenger solely under the will of God. And though there are discussions wherein the Satan challenges God, it is God who always has the final say on the devices of the Satan (e.g., as depicted in the book of Job).⁴⁰

One of the primary aspects of the Satan is his goal of blocking man from achieving Zion, thereby challenging him to earn perfection.⁴¹ The Zohar (Terumah 163a) describes the job of the Satan as the King's agent of temptation. In an effort to test the prince to ensure that he is worthy of the throne and will not succumb to forbidden pleasures, the King sends a harlot as His agent to tempt his son. Though his task is from on high, the Satan's goal is, nevertheless, the doom of man.⁴²

Agent Smith: Can you hear me, Morpheus? I'm going to be honest with you. I hate this place, this zoo, this prison, this reality, whatever you want to call it. I can't stand it any longer. It's the smell, if there

38. Though it is not entirely clear what levels of the world need to go through destruction, it seems reasonable that at least some of the upper levels created as part and parcel of man's existence in the lowest realm will also need "purification".

39. This is an idea brought out in Matrix III. (This idea is explained in the essay "A Cyberpunk Parable", p.27).

40. Zohar (Bo 32b-33b).

41. Ramchal, Derech Hashem (3:2:8) describes man's fight against evil.

42. "The Tempter...is not content until he has killed his victim" (Zohar [Terumah 163b]).

is such a thing. I feel saturated by it. I can taste your stink. And every time I do I feel I have somehow been infected by it. It's repulsive, isn't it? I must get out of here. I must get free and in this mind is the key, my key. **Once Zion is destroyed there is no need for me to be here, do you understand?**⁴³

The Zohar (Bo 33b) explains this precisely, "The Satan [is] the great accuser and [his] only desire is to destroy the world." The agents' goal is to take over the world by getting the "keys" to Zion – an obvious reference to Jerusalem, called Zion, and man's goal of perfection. The Satan's existence is defined by, and predicated on, his stopping man from achieving perfection.⁴⁴

The following dialogue provides an insightful summary of Satan, his powers and his role in creation.

Morpheus: No. It's another training program designed to teach you one thing. **If you are not one of us, you are one of them.**

Neo: What are they?

Morpheus: Sentient programs. They can move in and out of any software still hard wired to their system. That means that **anyone we haven't unplugged is potentially an agent.** Inside the Matrix, they are everyone and they are no one. **We have survived by hiding from them, by running from them. But they are the gatekeepers. They are guarding all the doors.** They are holding all the keys, which means that sooner or later, someone is going to have to fight them.

43. Though Judaism sees the role of the Satan as the servant of God, the dialogue at the beginning of the book of Job depicts a servant who takes initiative. Agent Smith's monologue here seems to be an embellishment of the idea that the Satan takes initiative to complete his mission – even to the point where he has a "desire" to succeed in dooming man.

44. The Vilna Gaon (Kol HaTor) explains the fight of Amalek and Satan over the gates of Jerusalem, "the keys to Zion" as follows: The war against Amalek is in every generation, and against ... Amalek of the heart, that is the evil inclination, and the spirit of Amalek – the adversary of Israel... This is Samael [Satan] and his hosts, whose main power is in the gates of Jerusalem when its lands are desolate... The strength and rulership of Amalek's spirit is in the gates of Jerusalem, as mentioned above, but only when there is destruction and desolation near the gates and in the unwallled areas of Jerusalem... This delays the connection between the Jerusalem of below with the Jerusalem of above..."



- Neo: Someone?
- Morpheus: I won't lie to you, Neo. Every single man or woman who has stood their ground, everyone who has fought an agent has died. But where they have failed, you will succeed.
- Neo: Why?
- Morpheus: I've seen an agent punch through a concrete wall. Men have emptied entire clips at them and hit nothing but air. Yet **their strength and their speed are still based in a world that is built on rules. Because of that, they will never be as strong or as fast as you can be.**
- Neo: What are you trying to tell me, that I can dodge bullets?
- Morpheus: No Neo. I'm trying to tell you that when you're ready, you won't have to.

From this it can be learned that:

- The Satan is an external enemy, yet he can also be internal in the form of the *yetzer hara*.⁴⁵ By succumbing to his temptations, the Satan takes over one's very being. The Zohar explains that "the spirit of impurity tempts the heart with allurements in order to take up its abode with him" (Terumah 128a), and also "he who proceeds toward the left [i.e., evil] becomes entangled in the left side, and is set upon [by the evil spirits]" (Ber. 47b).
- The Satan derives his power from the evil deeds of man.⁴⁶ This idea can be seen as allegoric, in the sense that the more man succumbs to the temptations of the Satan, the greater reign he has in the world. This is depicted by Morpheus' words "If you are not one of us, you are one of them," and "anyone we haven't unplugged is potentially an agent." However this notion of Satan deriving power from the evil deeds of man can also be taken literally. The movie depicts this concept most tangibly whereby the humans, who have (willingly or not) given into the sensory illusions of the Matrix, are used as

45. Nefesh HaHayim 1:6, note, s.v. *ve'ha'inyan*. The impurity of the serpent entered Adam and Eve upon their sin – Zohar (Ber. 52b).

46. Zohar (Terumah 163a-b). Nefesh HaHayim 2:7.

a power source for the negative forces.⁴⁷

- Satan is the gatekeeper – by rising to his challenges we overcome ourselves and move to higher planes of actualization.
- The war against the Satan cannot be won by head-on battles; rather, one overcomes “little by little”. Until that time when one has reached a level where he has overcome the power of the yetzer – the level of a *tzadik gamur* (see Tanya). Deriving a lesson from the story of Yosef and Potiphar’s wife, the Zohar (Vayeshev 190b) teaches that, by exerting effort, “the righteous shakes off the [evil prompter] and flees from him...”
- In the final analysis, the Satan is just an angel, and like all angels, confined to the rules and limitations of his task. Man, on the other hand, is free and capable of reaching heights greater than can angels.

Yetzer hara

The agents, as stated above, are the Satan who derives his power source from the evil deeds of man.⁴⁸ So too is this true in the Matrix, where they suck the life energy from humans. They do this by seducing man to indulge his *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). Once man succumbs to his sensual desires, he has basically relinquished control of his true self and is just a pawn in the Matrix.⁴⁹

Morpheus: The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy.⁵⁰ But when you're inside, you look around. What do you see? Businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters. The very minds of the people we are trying to save. But until we do, these people are still a part of that system, and that makes them our enemy.

47. The first movie, upon which my thesis is based, does not distinguish between the machines and the agents in their desire to subdue and exploit man. The later sequels develop the notion that the agents are really devices employed by the machines. I believe that it is possible to explain the machines as negative forces in upper realms, and the agents as negative forces in the lowest world. (How, in the 3rd film does Neo negotiate a deal with the machines against the agent(s) is an anomaly, or perhaps, novelty, introduced by the Wachowskis.)

48. See note 46.

49. Along these lines the Zohar (Terumah 141a) explains that even after death, the evil side has power over the bodies of those who partook of its pleasures; but for those who have no part in these pleasures, it has no power over them.

50. See further Ramchal, Derech Hashem (1:4:6).

You have to understand, most of these people are not ready to be unplugged. And many of them are so inert, so hopelessly dependent on the system that they will fight to protect it. **Were you listening to me Neo, or were you looking at the woman in the red dress?**

Neo: I was...

Physical temptation distracts man from seeing the truth – the stronger the temptation the greater the distraction. “Don’t go astray after your heart and after your eyes” (Num. 15), warns the Torah. Of all the areas that one might go astray, it is that of sexual temptation which is by far the most powerful.⁵¹ “When the *yetzer hara* overcomes a person it is by nothing other than sexuality” (Zohar Vay. 15b).⁵²

This notion is illustrated vividly in the Biblical narrative (Num. 25) describing the Moabite assault on the children of Israel. At the time of the attack, the Jews had already reached a higher consciousness afforded by their stay in the desert. Furthermore, they were at the very brink of realizing their goal, having already been victorious in numerous battles (Num. 20:1-3; 21:23-35). This time the attacker did not come equipped with sword and shield, but rather clothed, as it were, in a “red dress”, as it states, “and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moav” (Num. 25:1).⁵³

The movie espouses the ideal that the ultimate way to avoid being trapped by one’s *yetzer hara* is to relinquish earthly indulgences. In the movie, the crew of “redeemers” is seen eating some kind of simple mush, and the one individual who falls prey to the agent’s seduction, does so by way of the pleasure of a succulent steak. Judaism, though permitting man his pleasures within a framework, ultimately enjoins man to perfect himself to the point where he partakes of this world only to further his spiritual mission. So explains the Ramchal (Derech Hashem 1:4:7):

51. See also Rashi on Megilla 31a (s.v., *korin b’arayot*).

52. Similarly the Gemara states, “Through the form of a beautiful woman, many were destroyed” (Yevamot 63b).

53. That this attack was a premeditated assault, see Rashi (Num. 25:1).

Man's use of the world for his own needs, should also be circumscribed by the limits imposed by God's will and not include anything forbidden by God. It should be motivated by the need to best maintain his health and preserve his life, and not merely to satisfy his physical urges and superfluous desires.

The polar opposite of this ideal is depicted by Cypher in the following scene:

Agent Smith: Do we have a deal, Mr. Reagan.

Cypher: You know, I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss.

Agent Smith: Then we have a deal?

Cypher: I don't want to remember nothing. Nothing. You understand? And I want to be rich. You know, someone important, like an actor.

Cypher, as his name – zero – implies, is the paradigm of failure; he actually desires to forgo the truth in favor of indulging himself. Of him the Midrash (Ber. R. 34:10) states clearly, "The wicked are controlled by their heart [i.e., passions]... But the righteous have their heart under their control...." Agent Smith's simple arrangement for Cypher to reenter the *Olam Hashoker* echoes the Gemara's (Yoma 38b) dictum: "When one comes to defile himself, the door is opened for him."⁵⁴

The Ramchal (Derech Hashem 2:8:2) puts it as follows:

The opposite of the optimum world exists when man becomes overwhelmed by the pursuit of his physical desires, rejecting wisdom and furthering himself from it. [In such a world,] little if any attention is given to true devotion. **Truth is ignored** [emphasis added], wickedness is reinforced and prevails, and deception and error increase. It is a world of false values, where good qualities are eclipsed and evil ones prevail.

54. Similarly, "He who comes to defile himself is led further into defilement" (Zohar [Ber. 54a, Mishpatim 125b]).

To maintain humans under control, the false world of the Matrix provides a natural world with all its attendant pleasures. Though Marx held “religion is the opiate of the masses,” the Matrix makes clear that it is man’s own penchant for self-gratification that provides the ultimate opiate. Indeed, the Zohar (Vayehi 242a-b) elucidates the point that by pursuing the fulfillment of pleasures one becomes a slave not only to such pursuits, but becomes an actual slave ruled over by others.

The goal of Judaism is to channel man away from the illusory and focus him toward the truth, as the Ramchal (Derech Hashem 1:4:5-6) explains:

[5] ... The purpose of each commandment is either to allow man to earn and incorporate in himself a particular level of true excellence, or to remove an area of deficiency and darkness. This is accomplished through doing what the commandments require and avoiding what they forbid...
[6] Now the root purpose of the entire matter of religious service and worship is to have man constantly aware of his Creator. He is to realize that he was created for the sole purpose of being drawn close to his Creator, and hence he was put into this world only to overcome his *yetzer hara* [evil urge] and subjugate himself to his Creator through the power of the intellect. He must oppose his physical desire and tendencies, and direct all his activities toward attaining this goal, not deviating from it.

Or as the Mishna (Avot 5:1) explains, “Who is strong? He who overcomes his passions (*yetzer hara*).”

Laws of nature are rules, fabrications of the Creator

Morpheus: This is a sparring program, similar to the programmed reality of the Matrix. It has the same basic rules, rules like gravity. What you must learn is that these rules are no different than the rules of a computer system. Some of them can be bent. Others can be broken. Understand? Then hit me if you can....

Our world, like the Matrix, is a world created to provide an arena of experience for the mind, or more accurately – the soul. It is a world in which, if one realizes

that the “rules” are similar to those of a “computer program”, if one understands that the laws of nature are simply fabrications which hold together the warp and woof which makes the world, then one can rise above the laws. The Gemara (Taanit 25a) tells of this explicitly in the story of R. Chanina who was able to light a wick from vinegar instead of oil. Once he believed that everything in this world is dependent on God (i.e., the Programmer), that the “natural” is every bit as miraculous as the super-natural, then it is no more amazing that vinegar lights rather than oil.

Like the programmer who leaves a “backdoor” to provide otherwise impossible access to encrypted information, so too Creation can be said to have made provision for the righteous to perform seemingly impossible feats.

Morpheus: How did I beat you?

Neo: You're...you're too fast.

Morpheus: Do you believe that my being stronger or faster has anything to do with my muscles in this place? You think that's air you're breathing now?...Hmm...Again.

There are many instances wherein the laws of nature are “bent” by, or for, the righteous – for those individuals have an enhanced awareness of (spiritual) reality.⁵⁵ Some examples:

- Yaakov (Gen. 28:10) rolled a boulder so large that it could only be moved by all the local shepherds working together (Gen. 28:8 – see esp. Rashi) – to show you his great strength (Rashi 28:10). But of course this is strength which is outside the natural (especially considering Yaakov was a “man of the tent” and not a “man of the field”).
- Moshe did not eat or drink for 40 days and 40 nights (Deut. 9:9; 9:18).
- Aharon waved every new Levi, an estimated 22,000 men, from the age of 25 to 50 as part of the inauguration rite, all in one day (Num. [8:11,13,15]; see Rashi on Num. [8:11,20]).

55. There is a fine line between a miracle being performed *by* the individual versus *for* the individual. Yaakov’s clearing of an enormous boulder demonstrates his ability to “bend the rules”, as opposed to Sarah’s getting pregnant which illustrates the “rules being bent” for her. Both are supernatural phenomena referred to as “miracle”. Sometimes the source of the rule bending is not so clear: did Avraham endure the intense flames of the furnace by his own doing, or were the flames made ineffectual from on high? Either way, the rules were bent due to his being outside the physical norm.

- Shimshon exhibited extraordinary physical powers due to his Nazirite-hood which characterizes an extra-special level of heightened spiritual awareness (Judges ch. 13-16).
- David defeated Goliath (Samuel I ch. 17).
- Elisha poured oil continuously (Kings II ch. 4).
- The Hashmonaim conquered the Greeks – the few over the many, the weak over the strong, the righteous over the wicked (which explicitly connects heightened spirituality to extraordinary physical victory).
- Hannanya, Mishael, and Azaria (Daniel ch. 3) were unfazed after being put in a fiery furnace and Daniel came out of the lions' den unscathed (Daniel ch. 6). The Zohar (Mishpatim 125b) explains that they all “were delivered from their trials because they had not defiled themselves with forbidden food.” The Zohar goes on to explain that by eating according to the rules set down in the Torah they had achieved a spiritual level where they were untouchable.⁵⁶
- Avraham (Ber. R. 38:13) emerged unharmed after being put in a fiery furnace.
- Sara became pregnant at 90, something she found “laughable” since she didn't even have a womb (Yevamot 46b).
- The water of the well rose to meet Rivkah (Ber. R. 60:5), Yaakov (Zohar, Vayetze 152a), Moshe (*ibid.*), and the Jews in the desert (Ber. R. 60:5).
- The land “contracted” for Yaakov to return to pray in Jerusalem⁵⁷ as soon as he thought to do so (Hullin 91b; Sanhedrin 95b).
- The sea split upon Nachshon ben Aminadav's confident move into it (Sotah 36b).
- Yehoshua commanded the sun to stand still and God obliged (Joshua 10:13-14).
- The oil miracle of Hannukah.
- The wicked also have the power to bend the rules if so desired on high, as Sanheriv's ten-day journey to conquer Jerusalem was done in one (Sanhedrin 95a).

56. Iyun Yaakov (Nedarim 41a) explains that they were perfect *tzadikim*, and thus deserved the miracle.

57. See Maharsha (Hullin 91b, s.v. *makom shehitpalelu*).

Neo – the Mashiach

“The One” – the Mashiach – is the individual who recognizes the truth and reveals it to humanity bringing about a new (i.e., neo) world order in the “end of days.”⁵⁸ So explains Maimonides: “[The Messiah] will prepare the whole world to serve the Lord” (Laws of Kings 11:4). Indeed this is precisely how the movie ends:

Neo: I didn't come here to tell you how this is going to end. I came here to tell you how it's going to begin. I'm going to hang up this phone and then I'm going to show these people what you don't want them to see.

That Neo is the messianic savior of humanity is established throughout the film. Indications to this effect abound from the very beginning when the character Choi exclaims, “Hallelujah. You’re my savior, man. My own personal Jesus Christ.” “Christ” being from the Greek word meaning “anointed” – what is in Hebrew “Mashiach” or in English “Messiah”. And then of course there is his role of saving humanity, so wryly described by Cypher, “So you’re here to save the world”; as well as many references to Neo as “the One” (the name Neo being an anagram of One).⁵⁹

The first meeting of Neo and Trinity is most telling. It takes place in a Sadomasochist club – a rather strange, almost antithetical, rendezvous for the potential Mashiach. However this is precisely where Judaism teaches the roots of the Mashiach are to be found – in sordid environments wherein the Satan will be unlikely to discover and disrupt the Divine plan. This theme is seen in the union of Lot and his daughter who gave birth to Moav, progenitor of Ruth, great-grandmother of David,⁶⁰ and in the union of Yehuda and his widowed daughter-in-law Tamar

58. Daniel’s (Dan. 8:17) prophecy of Mashiach is for the “end of time.” See also Zohar (Achrei Mot 58a).

59. As for the movie’s depiction of Neo being resurrected, though Judaism does not espouse the notion of the Messiah being resurrected – it is interesting to note that the Ramchal (Derech Hashem 1:3:13) describes the stage of the resurrection of humanity exactly as the final scene depicts Neo coming back to life: “When the soul is recombined with the body after the resurrection, it will no longer be bound or restricted, and will enter the body with all its brilliance and strength. The body will experience a great enlightenment... The soul will immediately shine forth...”

60. See Zohar (Vayera 110b).

disguised as a roadside prostitute who then gave birth to Peretz, progenitor of David. The Zohar (Vayeshev 188b) designates specifically these two events as being seminal to eventuating the Mashiach: “There were two women from whom were built the seed of Yehudah and from whom descended King David, King Solomon, and the King Mashiach... [and they were] Tamar and Ruth...”

On this the Ramchal (Megillat Setarim) explains:

It is known to all who have been given understanding that the soul of David was clothed in the shell of Moav and that it was freed from Moav through Ruth. Concerning this, too, Scripture states, “Who could withdraw purity from impurity” (Job 14:3). These were the intentions of the inscrutable wisdom of the Creator in guiding His world to bring every act to its proper path. Every act of God travels through byways, often in complex, crooked ones.

Trinity – the Shechinah

The name “Trinity” is an epithet used to describe the Christian notion of God as being both outside of creation and within creation (as well as having the “son” in between).⁶¹ Though clearly Judaism rejects the Christian Trinity, taken in its most generalized sense the name can be seen to refer to the involved nature of God. The Zohar (Yitro 90a) describes a Jewish set of three divine manifestations: God the father; *Kenneset Yisrael* – the community of Israel in its perfected spiritual form; and the *Shechinah* – the feminine indwelling presence of God.

The character Trinity can be said to play all three.

When she first introduces herself to Neo she is *Kenneset Yisrael*, the perfected, elevated state of the community of Israel, as she explains that she too was once within the Matrix: **“I was looking for an answer. It’s the question that drives us, Neo. It’s the question that brought you here. You know the question just as I did.”**

61. See Paul Fontana, “Finding God in the Matrix”, *Taking the Red Pill* (Texas, 2003), p. 168.

Taking Trinity to be representative of God “Creator in heaven”, it is her love that gives the Mashiach life. The notion that the messiah is given life by God fits well with the prophecy of Daniel (Dan. 7:13), wherein it is God who brings about the final redeemer, “the son of man”.⁶² And his kingdom will be an everlasting one specifically because it is brought about by God and not by man (Dan. 2:44).

But primarily, Trinity plays the role of the *Shechinah*, the feminine representation of God’s indwelling presence. She is, of course, female; as duly noted by Neo in his first words to Trinity, “I thought you were a guy”, to which she responds, “most guys do.” This fits with the general perception of God as male.

And like the *Shechinah*, Trinity is committed to helping humanity by descending into man’s world.

Furthermore, the Zohar (Shmot 8a) describes a coupling of the Messiah with the *Shechinah*. It is the *Shechinah* who guides the Messiah to perceive the world in its fallen state and its need for redemption.⁶³ And this is indeed depicted in the relationship between Trinity and Neo, for it is she who brings him to Morpheus and the “real world” where he perceives the fallen world.

Another interesting point is the Zohar’s explanation (Mishpatim 125a) that both the power of good and the power of impurity (i.e., the serpent) try to attach to, and draw energy from, the *Shechinah*. This is depicted in the movie by Cypher’s attempts to connect with Trinity while her relationship with Neo is developing.

Violence

The movie, like our world, is filled with violence. The violence peaks at the climax of the movie – and its final battle. As preparation, the following dialogue takes place:

62. It is worthy of note that Neo’s name “in potential” is Anderson – which translates to “son of man.”

63. The Zohar (Shmot 8a-8b) explains that the bird (*Shechinah*) shows him (*Mashiach*) the “birds nest” – a place wherein the Mashiach sees effigies of the enemies of Israel, as well as the destroyed Temple and the saints who were killed. It is this image that inspires him to redeem the world through all out war against evil.

Tank: Okay. What do you need--besides a miracle?
 Neo: Guns. Lots of guns.

It is quite appropriate that there is a lot of violence and that Neo - the Mashiach – battles the agents,⁶⁴ for indeed Jewish tradition holds that the Mashiach will be a warrior who will wage God’s wars against evil in the world.⁶⁵ In an article entitled “Finding God in the Matrix” (Taking The Red Pill, p.161), Paul Fontana of the Harvard Divinity School writes:

In ancient Israelite tradition there was an expectation that a great military leader – probably from the Davidic line – would arise and restore Israel to its former glory while subjugating all of Israel’s enemies.⁶⁶ ... [T]he claim that Jesus was the Messiah was confusing because no one in ancient Israel expected a suffering spiritual king – Jesus did nothing to further the cause of a sovereign Israel. In many ways Neo is closer to the military messiah that Israel expected than to the soteriological⁶⁷ role that Jesus fulfilled.

Indeed this is the case. The Midrash relates that “If you see nations contending with one another, look for the foot of the Messiah” (Gen. R. 42:4). Similarly the Talmud states that “war is the beginning of redemption” (Megilla 17b). And the Bible is filled with prophecies of the final battle (Isaiah 66; Ezekiel 38; Zechariah 14; Daniel 2, 7). The Zohar (Shmot 7b-9b) is most explicit about the Messiah’s military task:

“(7b) The Messiah will reveal himself... and declare war against the world... (8b) And all the saints from above will arise and gird the Messiah with weapons of war... (8b) angels shall give him a robe of royal red that he may execute vengeance... (9b) the King Messiah will fight against all the world.”

64. And notice that he kills the agent – Satan – by getting under his skin and blowing him up with pure white light. (White light being the ultimate symbol of divine goodness: “In all Kabbalistic systems, light-symbolism is very commonly used with regard to Ein Sof [God]...” (G. Scholem, Kabbalah, p.90). “...the Lord will be to thee an everlasting light” (Isaiah 60:19). “[God who is] wrapped in light as a garment” (Psalms 104:2). “...in Thy light do we see light” (Psalms 36:10). See also Genesis Rabba 3:3, Zohar [Prologue 12a].

65. Rambam (Hil. Melachim 11:4).

66. Isaiah 9, 11, 42, 61.

67. Soteriology is the doctrine that salvation is made possible by a Messiah’s self-sacrifice.

Where is God

Given the strong religious themes running through the movie, one of the more compelling questions asked is: where is God? The answer is precisely the same as that given to the question when asked of our world. God is active in our world through His hidden hand, slowly guiding His creation to its halcyon fulfillment. God is in the miraculous triumphs of good over evil. But even more profoundly, God is apparent in the self-sacrifice of those who believe in Him as well as in the simple faith of all the people who strive to bring truth to humanity and perfection to the world.

Nowhere are these ideas more prominent than in the biblical book of Esther, wherein the believers are ultimately saved from annihilation, though God is not mentioned even once. Indeed the Talmud (Hullin 139b) connects the very name Esther to the word *hester* (hidden) indicating God's hidden nature in bringing about redemption.⁶⁸

The book of Esther reveals God's "hidden hand", which orchestrates coincidences and events that occur with such improbability that they can only be termed supernatural. The movie vividly portrays the miraculous –

Cypher: Don't hate me, Trinity. I'm just a messenger, and right now I'm going to prove it to you. If Morpheus was right, then there's no way I can pull this plug. I mean if Neo's the one, then **there'd have to be some kind of a miracle to stop me**. Right? I mean how can he be the one if he's dead?

And indeed a miracle occurs as Tank rises from his near mortal wound to kill Cypher. And miracles occur again throughout the final battle scenes following Tank's question, "Okay. What do you need--**besides a miracle?**"

However, the most powerful teaching of the book of Esther is that in a world where God is not openly intervening in man's every step, God has in fact passed the responsibility for perfecting His creation, for bringing truth to the world,

68. See Etz Yosef (*loc. cit.*)

for redeeming mankind, to man himself. Yoram Hazony in his commentary to the book of Esther (The Dawn, p.247) puts it like this:

And herein lies the key to Esther. The most remarkable aspect of the book is not God's absence itself, but the fact that this absence does not induce defeat and despair. Quite the contrary, in fact: Mordechai and Esther prove that even in the grim new universe of the dispersion, the most fearsome evils may yet be challenged and beaten – so long as man himself is willing to take initiative to beat them.

That being said, Hazony does make clear that the strength to take bold initiatives derives from the faith that such actions are in accordance with, and toward the fulfillment of, God's own will; and that if man does his part, God will do His.⁶⁹ The Gemara (Megilla 15a) refers to this idea when it explains that at the moment Esther decided to dress in royalty and go to the king, she was clothed in the spirit of God Himself.

And so the true revelation of God is to be found in the acts of faith and initiative taken by those who perform those acts to bring about the divine will. This notion is most predominantly depicted throughout the movie by all of the protagonists – Morpheus, Trinity, Neo, and the crew – who risk life and limb for their missions to bring truth to humanity, and ultimately perfection to creation.

On Faith

- Oracle: I know. Poor Morpheus. Without him we're lost.
 Neo: What do you mean, without him?
 Oracle: Are you sure you want to hear this? Morpheus believes in you, Neo. And no one, not you, not even me can convince him otherwise. He believes it so blindly that he's going to sacrifice his life to save yours.

Here we are given the feeling that the level of commitment and blind faith of Morpheus is actually something negative. On the one hand, the Oracle certainly

69. See Y. Hazony, The Dawn, ch. 23, esp. pp. 255-263. Also the Zohar (Lech Lecha 77b) explains that help from above will come, but only in response to initiative from below.



makes it seem so; however the outcome in the movie makes us realize quite the opposite. It was indeed Morpheus' blind faith that drove him to pursue his beliefs to the point of self-sacrifice. Yet it was his faith which not only rallied the necessary support of those around him, but pushed him to act beyond the power of his own limitations. Ultimately it is his faith which brings about salvation – he saves Neo, for which Neo is forced to rise above himself and in turn save Morpheus; and in the end it is Morpheus' faith that waits till there is no more time to wait and influences Neo's resurrection through Trinity.

In the final analysis, the Oracle's every word is found to be true, especially "Poor Morpheus. Without him we're lost." Indeed, the Bible teaches that, "The righteous man *lives* by faith" (Habbakuk 2:4). But most significantly, explains the Baal Shem Tov, "Faith is all important. Many people love and fear God, but still, they accomplish nothing on high because they lack absolute faith."⁷⁰

On Dreamers, Mashiach ben Yosef, and Nebuchadrezzar

Morpheus is the name of the god of dreams in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. In the Bible there are two people who are the quintessential masters of dreams: Joseph and Daniel. Joseph is referred to explicitly as the master of dreams (Gen. 37:19). Both had significant dreams of their own⁷¹ and both were masters of interpreting the dreams of others.⁷² Both are referred to by the kings they serve as having the spirit of God in them,⁷³ and both preface their interpretations as being from God.⁷⁴

The association with Joseph is meaningful in that Jewish tradition holds that there are two Messiahs: one from the house of Yosef (Mashiach ben Yosef) and one from the house of David (Mashiach ben David).⁷⁵ Mashiach ben Yosef is to precede Mashiach ben David, fighting the initial battles and laying the

70. Maggid Devarav LeYaakov #188 quoted in *Meditation & Kabbalah*, (Maine, 1982), p.297.

71. Joseph: Gen. Ch. 37; Daniel: Daniel Ch. 7, 8.

72. Joseph: Gen. Chs. 40, 41; Daniel: Daniel Chs. 2, 4.

73. Joseph: Gen. 41:38; Daniel: Daniel 4:5, 5:14.

74. Joseph: Gen. 41:16; Daniel: Daniel 2:28.

75. Sukkah 52a.



groundwork for the ultimate redemption through Mashiach ben David.⁷⁶ Indeed this is precisely what Morpheus does.

The association to Daniel is also meaningful in that Daniel served in the court of Nebuchadnezzar,⁷⁷ the name of Morpheus' hovercraft in the movie. But most importantly he interpreted the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar, and so prophesied ultimate and eternal redemption through the Messiah⁷⁸ – just as Morpheus works toward the goal of saving humanity through “the One”. Also of note is that the Messiah is to return the people back to Jerusalem – the very place that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed.⁷⁹ In the movie it is made clear that it was man who destroyed the earth that they were now trying to save: “We don't know who struck first, us or them. But we know that it was us that scorched the sky.” And now Morpheus, as captain of the ship Nebuchadnezzar, drives toward saving the world (with Zion at its center) – just as Daniel, through his dream interpretation, “drove” the king Nebuchadnezzar toward his repair (i.e., he acknowledged God as true King).⁸⁰

Conclusion

The initial goal of mankind, according to Judaism, is to bring an awareness of the truth to humanity, to perfect the lower world (*l'takein olam*); in other words, to bring the concept of Zion down to “earth”, down to the world of *Asiyah*. The achievement of this might parallel the messianic era – and indeed this is depicted at the end of the movie when the messianic Neo explains to the Agent (Satan), “I'm going to show these people what you don't want them to see.” Ultimately however, the goal is to attain total spiritual awareness and perfection whereupon one “unplugs”, joining the Godhead for eternal spiritual bliss. The Ramchal (Derech Hashem 1:2:3) explains:

76. Maharsha (Sukkah 52a, s.v. *al mashiach*).

77. The Wachowskis themselves explain that “The Nebuchadnezzar is indeed a biblical reference, from the book of Daniel” (<http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/cmp/larryandychat.html>).

78. Daniel (2:44-45; 7:13-14).

79. Daniel actually prays and is answered that the Jews in his day return to Jerusalem by a “Mashiach” – an anointed leader not the ultimate eschatological redeemer (Daniel ch. 9).

80. Daniel (2:45; 4:34).

When [man] earns perfection, he is fit to become drawn close to his Creator by virtue of resembling Him. Besides this, however, through his earning of perfection he becomes drawn to Him continually – until, ultimately, his earning of perfection and his bonding to Him are all one condition.

In conclusion, our world is on the one hand a world of falsehood – an *Olam Hasheker*, ever trying to convince us that this is all there is. On the other hand it is a world of action – *Olam HaAssiyah*, where we can grow in faith and better ourselves and those around us – by actualizing our spiritual selves. Our world is the Matrix, a virtual reality with laws and rules like a computer program. We have been given the ultimate user’s guide – the Torah. All of its mitzvot, whether we have rational explanations for them or not, must be performed meticulously, if we are to operate in this reality to our fullest. Furthermore, it must be borne in mind that the Torah was given with an Oral Law that contains rules and regulations, no less fundamental to helping us further actualize our being.⁸¹ All of the Rabbinic rulings, legal safeguards, and customs are not the fleeting fancy of ancient men out of touch with “reality”, but rather the expression of their deep wisdom acquired through ages of experience with this “reality”. And finally, let us remember that everything that goes on this world is programmed and watched, all toward the goal of fulfilling Creation – reaching Zion.

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81. See Ramban (Lev. 19:2).