Reading and Writing to Save Our Lives

By Wendy Zierler

Allow me for a moment to usher you in the classroom of “Reel Theology” and introduce you to Harold Crick, the protagonist of the film *Stranger Than Fiction*. Harold is an IRS agent, a rational, mathematical sort of fellow. One morning, while getting dressed for work, Harold starts hearing a voice that narrates his life and then predicts his imminent death. Harold yells at the voice, asking why he has to die imminently and when. He asks other people if they can hear the voice. Eventually, he lands in a psychiatrist’s office, where the following scene takes place.

*Show clip of Harold Crick in the psychiatrist’s office.*

“I’d have you speak to someone who knows about literature.” You can see why I’ve chosen this clip. This is a Literature Professor’s fantasy: the idea that knowing literature constitutes a matter of life and death. That lives depend on what we teach. That if someone called out in the middle of a flight: Is there a doctor on the plane??—I could answer yes!!! I am ready and waiting to provide services for anyone stricken with an interpretive emergency or a literary-critical quandary!

Harold goes to see a Literature professor—Dr. Jules Hilbert, played by Dustin Hoffman—who helps him determine whether he is the hero of a tragedy or a comedy, and to rule out that he is Frankenstein’s monster or a golem. He also helps Harold uncover the real-life narrator of his story—the novelist Karen Eiffel.

Which brings me to the second reason why I’ve chosen today to speak about a movie in the HUC chapel—a Will Ferrell movie no less. The writer who narrates
Harold’s life is woman writer, a feminine version of the metaphor of the divine author, familiar to us from the *Unetaneh tokef* prayer—the God who yearly inscribes and seals our lives in the book of life or the book of death. As such *Stranger than Fiction* affords an opportunity for feminist scholars to consider what happens when a longstanding masculine God metaphor is recast in feminine form.

One might hope, in a somewhat utopian feminist moment, that in rendering feminine the God-as-writer metaphor, the theological paradigm would be altered or improved in some fundamental way. **Wrong.** Turns out, this woman writer-as-God reinforces rather than undermines conventional, patriarchal stereotypes. She is miserable, narcissistic, obsessive, and removed from the world—a kind of caricature of the solitary hierarchical Creator God. Add to this the fact that she is in the throes of a ten-year writer’s block, suggesting impotence rather than authority. She lives by herself in a spare apartment and strives in vain to turn sentences around. She sleeps on a table, chain-smokes, and harbors a morbid fascination with death evident her tendency to kill off all of her protagonists. She demonstrates the strengths neither of the transcendent, authoritative God nor of a revised feminist model of interconnectedness and maternal care.

In her book *Models of God*, Feminist Christian theologian Sally McFague sketches out the implications of a theology based on God as artist as opposed to a theology based on God as parent: “An artist upon completion of a work makes a judgment whether it is good or bad; … But a child, the product of our bodies is not judged this way…Rather, it is the quality of the relationship between parents and child that is most important; we judge then, in categories of love, not art.”
Love NOT Art. Art NOT love. This is the opposition that seems at work at the beginning of *Stranger then Fiction*. By the end of the film, though, we are presented not with an opposition but with a combination: a model of art PLUS love.

Over the course of the film, both Karen Eiffel and Harold Crick move from a strict, detached practice of their professions to a life of love and empathy. In narrating Harold’s life and predicting his death, author Karen Eiffel provokes lonely, routine-bound, numerically obsessed IRS agent Harold to reconsider the quality of his life. At the same time Harold Crick precipitates change in Karen Eiffel when he comes to her apartment and pleads with her not to kill him off at the end of her novel just as she has finally figured out an aesthetically perfect way for him to die.

It’s only when Karen Eiffel meets Harold and sees what kind of person he has become, when she puts a living face on the creature of her pen, that she rediscovers rahamim, compassion, kindness and authorial love. This Woman Writer-as-God has to learn that it is not good, even for the godlike, to be alone. She has to care about the effect her writing has on the world. She has to be reminded, in the most profound sense, of the world-making and life-breaking power of words. As the speaker of the biblical book of Mishlel reflects: “Mavet vehayim beyad halashon: The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit. (Proverbs 18:21)

At the end of the film, this reformed woman writer offers a gorgeous meditation on the importance of writerly detail in life and in relationships:

“And we must remember that all these things, the nuances, the anomalies, the subtleties which we assume only accessorize our days, are in fact here for a much larger and nobler cause. They are here to save our lives.”
As writers, teachers, students of Torah alike, we need to believe that these things matter, but not in some detached aesthetic or scholarly sense. We need to believe that stories and texts and Torah are here to save our lives.

I’m sure you all recall the famous Talmudic aggadah from Tractate Menahot 29b, in which Moses ascends on high to receive the Torah and sees God busy tying crowns (“kosher ketarim”) to the letters of the Torah. Typically this phrase “kosher ketarim” is understood as calligraphic embellishment. A more literary way to interpret this image, however, would be to imagine God as an author in her study, busily revising and refining the Torah, adding extra little nuances and details to unify, intensify and deepen the work, to earn this literary work its crowns of praise.

Moses asks God: “Mi me’akev al yadekha?” What’s taking you so long to finish? Why all this seemingly superfluous attention to detail?” God explains to Moses that all of this is necessary because “at the end of many generations, a man named Akiva the son of Joseph will arise who will expound on every kotz, every jot or tip of text heaps and heaps of laws.” Moses then asks God if he can see this Akiva at which point Moses finds himself sitting eight rows back in Akiva’s Beit Midrash, completely incapable of following anything being taught.

Typically, this story is adduced to support the idea of an unfolding legal tradition that begins at Sinai but that continues to develop in every generation.

I’d like to suggest another interpretation of the story that builds on the lifesaving quality of writing and reading stories.

Recall, for a moment, what Moses says to God in Exodus 4:10, in response to God’s request that Moses speak to Pharaoh and demand that Israelites be set free: “Lo Ish
Devarim anokhi, gam mitmol gam mishilshom.” -- I’m not naturally talented with or interested in words, says in Moses. I’m not given to caring—not today, not yesterday, not the day before yesterday, about the “subtleties and nuances and anomalies” of writing and storytelling. According to my reading of this Talmudic story, only when Moses ascends on high and then time-travels to the future to Rabbi Akiva’s beit midrash does he learn about the interpretive possibilities inherent in every “keter” and “kotz”—every crown and thorn—of text. It is only when witnessing the work of Rabbi Akiva that Moses becomes an “ish devarim”—a writer, interpreter, preacher and teacher of Torah.

Imagine his shock when later in this same story Moses discovers that Rabbi Akiva’s reward for his Torah is to have his flesh weighed out in the Roman market—that his recompense for his interpretive attention to detail is not salvation but cruel martyrdom, a fate anticipated by the twin use of the words “keter” (crown) and “kotz” (thorn) to refer to the details God adds to the letters of the Torah. For Akiva, the Torah becomes a crown of thorns. Moses questions God as to how this could be, but God answers with nothing but angry silence.

According to NYU Professor Jeffrey Rubinstein, this story is so significant because it juxtaposes “two important theological questions: the expansion of Torah and the problem of theodicy… The greatest Torah scholar ever, perhaps even greater than Moses, suffers the cruelest death, and yet God gives no explanation. God takes great care for his Torah, meticulously adding crowns to each individual letter, but apparently cares less about those who dedicate their lives to it.”

In my view, the audacious brilliance of this story is that it depicts God honestly and demands, like the film Stranger than Fiction, that both we and God do better. What
good is a perfect, exquisitely embellished Torah, if the righteous people who uphold it are left to suffer so cruelly? What good is Karen Eiffel’s aesthetically perfect novel if it allows good people like Harold Crick to die for the sake of delivering a good ending?

The film also argues that what ultimately saves Harold Crick from his tragic fate is his **wrist watch**—that is to say, a renewed, qualitative appreciation of life stories as unfolding in Time.

At the beginning of *Stranger than Fiction*, Harold Crick adheres slavishly to his watch; he counts minutes and seconds and brush strokes when he brushes his teeth. He follows a set, unbreakable routine. Time as a quantity governs and deadens all aspects of his life. When God, the author, begins to narrate his life, however, his prior approach to time is radically disrupted. He takes time off work. He enters into a relationship. He experiences his life as a detailed story that unfolds preciousiously in minutes and hours and days.

The special maftir *haHodesh* that will be recited in synagogues this coming Shabbat, which includes the first mitzvah of the Torah, communicates a similar lesson. *Hahodesh hazeh yihyeh lakhem rosh hodashim*—this month shall be unto you the beginning of the months. *Shemot rabbah* 15:9 explains that “prior to Israel’s descent into Egypt, the Israelites counted time by years; but after they went down to Egypt and became enslaved there, God performed miracles for them and redeemed them; and only then did they begin to count the months, as it says “This month shall be unto you the beginning of months.”

According to this midrash, slavery deprives the slave of any control over the details of time. Each day and month is the same as the one before it and the one that comes after.
Therefore, the first mitzvah given to the Israelites when they are freed from slavery is to take control of their time, shape it into a story and endow it with meaning.

The rabbinic exemption of women from time-bound commandments communicates a similar message, insofar as it likens women to slaves incapable of defining and directing their own time. Jewish feminism insists, however, on setting women and all members of the community free.

To be free means directing time, as opposed to being directed by it.

According to the midrash from Shemot rabbah, God’s redemptive presence in our lives effects an awareness of time’s true significance and sacred potential. In the presence of God and real human relationships, one’s activity in time is transformed from slavish repetition and redundancy, to a story worth telling and celebrating.

My own 13 years and 9 months at HUC have been exactly this kind of time and story, marked by deep relationships, learning, and religious development. And for this I am unceasingly grateful.

With this in mind, I’d like to offer a number of thank you’s. First, to our President Aaron Panken, former Dean of HUC-JIR, who decided 15 years ago to fly me out all the way from Hong Kong to New York to interview for a position as a professor of modern Jewish literature and feminist studies, a moment in time that truly changed my life story. Second, to Dr. Panken’s predecessors, Dr. Norman Cohen, and Dr. David Ellenson, and to current Provost Michael Marmur, who have been unstinting sources of support and collegiality to me during my almost fourteen years at the College Institute.

I want to make special mention of my esteemed senior colleague Rabbi Dr. Eugene Borowitz, the emeritus holder of the Sigmund Falk chair, who approached me in
2001 with an invitation to teach a course with him, which became which Reel Theology, the subject of this talk and my current book project. Dr. Borowitz served on the committee that hired me at HUC-JIR and has been a devoted mentor to me from the beginning. I felt humbled to teach with him all those years and feel even more humbled now as I assume the Sigmund Falk chair.

I want to acknowledge this extraordinary institution, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, its founders and leaders past and present, its administration, faculty, staff and student body, who help me every day to see meaning and sacredness in all the details, nuances and anomalies of my teaching and writing life.

I want to acknowledge with love my son, Amichai, who traveled with me as a baby for my HUC interview in Feb 2000, and who turns 16 years old next week! And of course, my daughters Shara and Yona, and my husband Daniel, who help make every minute of my life a gorgeous, life-saving story. And my in-laws, siblings, rabbis, and friends who made the effort to be here with me today to celebrate this moment.

We all have our informing stories, that guide us in all that we do: my founding story is that of my parents, Marion and David Zierler, who gave up a life and business in Sarnia, Ontario Canada, and moved to Toronto so that they could send their kids to Jewish schools and so that my father could stop working on Shabbat. Everything that I am, as a scholar, teacher, Jew, and person is the result of the example they set and they values they modeled. I am so sorry that my mother’s recent hospitalization has prevented them from joining us today. This talk is dedicated, with thanks and love to my Mom and Dad. Many thanks to all of you for being here. May we all continue to read and write together to save our lives.