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With the release of the first installment of Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* film trilogy, diehard Middle Earth fans and movie-goers worldwide are reveling in the experience of entering J.R.R. Tolkien's fully realized world, despite the critical panning the movie has received. Ever curious if Hobbits are good for the Jews, writers have been examining the canon of Tolkien's work with Talmudic precision for Jewish connections – to clarify some mistaken or imprecise reporting we present or revisit some of the interesting Jewish connections in Tolkien's Middle Earth and in the stories behind it...

- Rumors that the wretched and tragic villain Gollum – around whom so much of the plots of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* turn – was based on the Jewish legend of the Golem have never been substantiated. *The Annotated Hobbit* claims the name Gollum comes from Old Norse gull, meaning gold, or in one inflection “something precious” or a ring. Tolkien himself claimed the name comes from the “horrible swallowing sound” in [Gollum's] throat.
- During World War II Tolkien and other Oxford professors would stand watch as air raid wardens. In January 1944 he related the following in a letter to his son (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 67):

I was [on air raid duty] in the small C33 room: very cold and damp. But an incident occurred which moved me and made the occasion memorable. My companion in misfortune was Cecil Roth (the learned Jew historian). I found him charming, full of gentleness (in every sense); and we sat up till after 12 talking. He lent me his watch as there were no going clocks in the place: – and nonetheless himself came and called me at 10 to 7: so that I could go to Communion! It seemed like a fleeting glimpse of an unfallen world. Actually I was awake, and just (as one does) discovering a number of reasons (other than tiredness and having no chance to shave or even wash), such as the desirability of getting home in good time to open up and un-black and all that, why I should not go. But the incursion of this gentle Jew, and his sombre glance at my rosary by my bed, settled it. I was down at St Aloysius at 7.15 just in time to go to Confession before Mass; and I came home just before the end of Mass.

- In a 1971 BBC interview (available on YouTube), Tolkien suggested that the race of dwarves who populate his mythology “of course are quite obviously – wouldn't you say that in many ways they remind you of the Jews?” Tolkien was by trade a linguist and philologist, and created languages for each of his fictional races. “Their words are Semitic, obviously, constructed to be Semitic,” he said of the Dwarvish tongue. Of course, the dwarves have a great love of gold, and some have drawn attention to a possible anti-Semitic sentiment here. “I do think of the ‘Dwarves’ like Jews,” he writes (*Letters*, p. 229), “at once native and

alien in their habitations, speaking the languages of the country, but with an accent due to their own private tongue.” In *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien’s collection of background legend to the world he created), chapter 2 tells of the creation of the Dwarves, which tells a founding myth not too removed from the story of *Akeidat Yitzhak* (Abraham’s binding of, and near slaughter, of Isaac), and the notion that while born first the race of Dwarves was superseded by the race of Elves (perhaps a hint to the status of Jews vis-à-vis God within the Christian worldview). The screenwriters of the new Hobbit film, highlighting the Dwarvish Diaspora, how they were exiled from the ancestral home and questing to return, put a speech in the mouth of “gentile” Bilbo Baggins worthy of Mickey Marcus and “Cast a Giant Shadow”. The scene doesn’t exist in the book, but the hobbit declares his loyalty to his companions and their nationalist hopes for return – Zionism Middle Earth style. The dwarves sorrowful song of longing to return to their homeland might have been lifted from a Middle Earth *Kinnot Tisha B’Av*.

- The publishers of the German translation of *The Hobbit* wanted Tolkien to affirm he was “of Aryan origin” before they would issue the work in 1938. Tolkien wrote an agitated reply to his British publishers complaining of the “lunatic laws” of the Third Reich, saying (*Letters*, pp. 37-38):

Personally I should be inclined to refuse to give any Bestätigung [confirmation] (although it happens that I can), and let a German translation go hang. In any case I should object strongly to any such declaration appearing in print. I do not regard the (probable) absence of all Jewish blood as necessarily honourable; and I have many Jewish friends, and should regret giving any colour to the notion that I subscribed to the wholly pernicious and unscientific race-doctrine.

In the draft of the letter to the German publisher, he declared:

I regret that I am not clear as to what you intend by arisch. I am not of Aryan extraction: that is Indo-iranian; as far as I am aware none of my ancestors spoke Flindustani, Persian, Gypsy, or any related dialects. But if I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of Jewish origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people....

I cannot, however, forbear to comment that if impertinent and irrelevant inquiries of this sort are to become the rule in matters of literature, then the time is not far distant when a German name will no longer be a source of pride.

In 1971 he explained the origins of his family name as (*Letters*, p. 410):

My name is Tolkien, anglicized from To(I)kiehn = tollkühn, and came from Saxony in the 18th century. It is not Jewish in origin, though I should consider it an honour if it were.

- The first translation of *The Hobbit* into Hebrew was undertaken in Egyptian captivity by four Israeli Air Force pilots held as prisoners of war following the War of Attrition in the early 1970s. In possession of an English copy of the book received via the Red Cross. “We were a group of about 20 prisoners,” recalled Rami Harpaz, “including many who

couldn't read English. So that they could also enjoy the book we decided to translate it to Hebrew." When they were released in 1973 after three years of captivity, they took seven notebooks with the draft of the translation, which was published with funding from the Israel Air Force.

- The Israeli Tolkien Society organizes activities, conferences, and research on Tolkien and his works in Israel. Their website has information in Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, English – and, of course, Elvish. *The Hobbit* was recently released in its third Hebrew translation, to coincide with the 75th anniversary of the original English publishing and with release of the film. But for lovers of *mama-loshen*, for the first time *The Hobbit* has been released in a Yiddish version (*Der Hobbit* translated by Barry Berish Goldstein – listen to the translator discuss why in the world he did this).