

Mr. Spock, not so out-of-this-world

By Erik Zygmunt

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It's much easier to explain our love in general for "Star Trek," which was futuristic not only in premise but also in practice. The show's multicultural crew - which included a powerful black woman, Lt. Uhura, at a time when our country was implementing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and a Russian, Ensign Chekov, at the height of the Cold War - suggested a belief that the prejudices and inequity that came to a head in the 1960s would and should end.

Leonard Nimoy, who played Spock, was himself born an Orthodox Jew by parents who emigrated from Iziaslav, a city then behind the Iron Curtain, now part of Ukraine. He retained the ability to speak and write Yiddish, his first language, throughout. Proud of his Jewish heritage, he was active in Holocaust remembrance. He told the Wexler Oral History Project of the Yiddish Book Center that the hand sign used as the Vulcan greeting was based on a gesture from Jewish practice with the hand in the shape of the Hebrew letter Shin, the first letter of the word "shaddai" (a name for God, often translated as God Almighty) and the word "shalom."

"People don't realize," Nimoy said, "that they're blessing each other with this sign."

By most accounts Nimoy was gracious to fans and appeared at Trekkie/Trekker events across the globe. He showed a gentle sense of humor in his cameo appearances and in a bit on "Saturday Night Live."

What was it about Spock - seemingly cold and calculating, apparently emotionless - that inspired such fandom?

Though well-loved, Spock seems an unlikely choice. While the young Captain Kirk's boyishly handsome features suggested confidence, swagger and a sense of fun, Spock's narrowed visage indicated something else - a mind in search of something.

"Star Trek" pundits-experts say that Spock's popularity stemmed from his coolness under pressure, his ability to handle any of the universe's infinite situations with calm and aplomb. That's part of it, but there was something else.

His rare displays of emotion were memorable. I haven't watched the reruns since I was 10, but can vividly remember the few times when Spock displayed feelings.

At the end of "Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan," Spock exposes himself to deadly radiation to repair the Enterprise's warp drive, allowing the ship and its crew to escape an imminent explosion. The scene has been playing on heavy rotation across the Internet since news broke that Nimoy died Feb. 27 at 83.

Kirk, desperate for his best friend, rushes to the engine room, where he sees a

crumpled and poisoned Spock, sealed in the radiation chamber. Spock hears Kirk calling his name, and struggles to his feet.

"I have been, and always shall be, your friend," the dying Spock tells Kirk through the wall of glass, the transparent barrier a metaphor for everything unsaid between the two over decades and parsecs.

On the surface, unemotional and coldly logical, not Hollywood's typical depiction of love, but didn't somebody once say something about exactly this kind of situation?

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13).

Spock's motto was "Live long and prosper," but there obviously was more to him than that.

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