

SCIENCE FICTION, JEWISH STYLE

Nine men, the Holy Ark and one butterfly make a minyan

by Isidore Haiblum

NEW YORK

What is named Evisse, lives on a planet called Zsouchmuhn, is blue, has seven arms, twelve eyes, two noses, two antennae, is squat, round, with



caterpillar feet, and wears a yarmulke and tallis!

A Zsouchmuhn Jew, what else?

This particular Jew is the brain child of Harlan Ellison, who has won more science fiction awards than any other writer in the field. Evisse is the star attraction of a story titled *I'm Looking for Kadak* which first appeared in *Wandering Stars*, a Harper & Row anthology of Jewish fantasy and science fiction edited by Jack Dann.

Ellison's Jews are lusty, cranky and contentious. Their planet Zsouchmuhn is being moved ("by those gonifs from the Relocation Center") and all its inhabitants have to vacate. The ten last Jewish creatures are about to sit *shiva* for the planet when one of them, Snodle, drops dead. At Snodle's suggestion—on Zsouchmuhn, the dead

keep on noodging—Evisse hurries off to find the long-lost Kadak.

Kadak is a former Jew—a landsman of the creature Evisse—now an apostate and a butterfly. But can an apostate-butterfly be a Jew? You bet. As Ellison puts it, "... and then Reb Jeshua said, 'Now we will sit *shiva*. Nine men, the Holy Ark and one butterfly make a minyan.'"

But Kadak has been a butterfly for only ten years and scripture clearly states that all participants in a *minyan* have to be over 13! So Kadak isn't eligible, after all . . .

Jews like Evisse and Kadak are not the exception in recent science fiction—sci-fi for short. In Dann's bellwether compilation, four stories pose the question "What is a Jew?" In sci-fi, the question is a bit more complicated than might seem at first glance, for the *whats* under consideration are a peculiar bunch.

In Robert Silverberg's *The Dybbuk of Mazel Tov IV*, the Jew is a Kunivar—who turns out to be the mythological centaur—and whose tribe ultimately converts to Judaism.

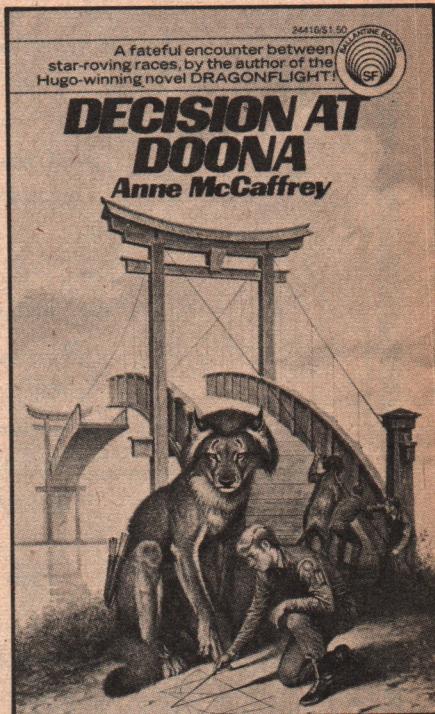
In William Tenn's *On Venus, Have We Got a Rabbi*, the story is told by Milchik the TV repairman, a sort of Tevye of Venus, and human enough. Problems are caused by the Bulbas who look like little brown pillows with tentacles. They are delegates from the fourth planet of the star Rigel who have arrived for the Interstellar Neo-Zionist Congress. A Committee Chairman of the Conference objects to the Bulbas: "Jews can be this, can be that. They can be a lot of things. But, first of all, they have to be human."

"You will kindly point out to us," the Bulbas say through the interpreter, "where it says and in which book that Jews have to be human. Name an authority, provide a quotation."

In Carol Carr's *Look, You Think*

You've Got Troubles, The narrator's only daughter has married a Martian who resembles a stalk of broccoli. This Martian, of course, is Jewish.

So what goes on here? Is this a mock-



ery of Jews and their values? On the contrary: What we have here is a hoorah for Jews, sci-fi style.

But what is science fiction (and science fantasy)? Being in the trade, I just happen to have a few dozen scholarly definitions which I might use. But we'll settle for two.

Here is Miriam Allen de Ford's: "Science fiction deals with improbable possibilities, fantasy with plausible impossibilities."

And my definition?

"Mostly *bubba mayses*."

When it comes to spinning *bubba mayses*, the goles (or Diaspora) Jew is in an enviable position. For much of his history, he did not have to imagine what it was like to be a misunderstood alien being—he was one. While his Gentile neighbors lived and prospered

JUNE 15, 1975

A CALL FOR ACTION

RESOLUTION

Being aware of the importance of tourism as an expression of unity and of its vital role in the economy of Israel as represented by the presence of the Prime Minister of the State of Israel, His Excellency Yitzhak Rabin, and the Israel Minister of Tourism, His Excellency Moshe Kol,

We, as representatives of the American Jewish community assembled here at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York, this 6th Day of Tammuz, 5735 —June 15, 1975, do resolve that pilgrimage to Israel be established as a prime community objective,

And, whereas tourism to Israel is of incalculable importance in fostering broad areas of understanding between the people of the United States and Canada and the people of Israel,

And, whereas tourism to Israel is of major significance in the strengthening of bonds between the American Jewish community and the Jews of Israel;

We do hereby urge the immediate appointment of a communal leader in every congregation and synagogue and in every Jewish organization throughout this continent as a liaison officer with the Israel Ministry of Tourism. These officers to serve as the basis for the establishment of a nationwide network of tourism volunteers to work toward significantly increasing American travel to Israel.

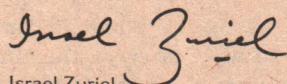
We call upon all national organizations to hold conventions in Israel regularly,

And, we further resolve to call upon every congregation and synagogue to revive the ancient tradition of "Aliya LaRegel" as a means of further encouraging pilgrimage to Israel.

It was June 15, 1975. American Jewish leaders, meeting at the invitation of Israel Ambassador Simha Dinitz, pledged to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Minister of Tourism Moshe Kol that they would actively encourage pilgrimage to Israel.

Now is the time to act.

This resolution, if implemented, could mark a turning point for American tourism to Israel. I have asked every synagogue, congregation and organization to select a leader to serve as a volunteer tourism officer. I urge you to support our efforts in every way possible.



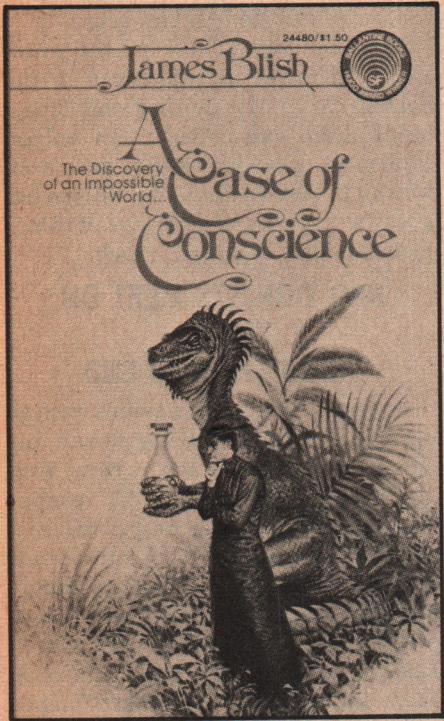
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in the workaday world, our Jewish hero was often restricted to winning his victories in the recesses of his mind. Whole platoons of Jewish moon-shooters—dreamers, schemers, lunatics and plain *schlemiels*—have plotted to change the world: Characters like Shabbatai Zevi who sought to convert the Sultan, and my cousin Irving who is inventing an automobile engine which runs on sand.

In the Bible, we had master dreamer Joseph and liberator Moses. Then we had the Prophet Ezekiel who saw a wheel in the middle of the air—the first recorded sighting of a flying saucer! Contemporary versions of the Jewish visionary include Herzl who dreamed up a Jewish state, Freud who re-mapped our collective psyches and Einstein who turned the universe on its ear.



Science fiction is a Jewish genre—for what other form of writing rages so consistently against the confines of the possible and builds empires out of daydreams?

Yet for many years, Jewish authors kicked up their heels in sci-fi with few hints of their Jewishness ever creeping into their writing. While myths and folk tales from a vast array of nations were rolling and rocking in science fiction stories, Jewish themes were nowhere in sight.

Antisemitic editors? Self-hating Jewish writers?

Not quite. Isaac Asimov, in his introduction to *Wandering Stars*, writes about the early pulp days of sci-fi when "the stories dealt entirely with Americans of North European extraction who fought Homeric battles with pirates,

outer world monsters and evil wizards (to say nothing of Martian princesses in brassieres). What kind of a place was that for Jewish boys? Many of the Jewish pulp writers . . . used pen names as a matter of sound business sense. A

Science fiction excels in depicting not what will be but what may be—in short, the worlds of if: If such and such is the case, then this may happen.

My own view of the Jewish future teems with ifs.

Judaism will continue to prosper—of that I have no doubt. New commentaries will grace our religious literature; some in Yiddish. I believe Yiddish will be resurrected—if Hebrew could be turned into a living language, why not our rich, versatile glorious Yiddish, the repository of a thousand years of Jewish wisdom?

I think that new mutations of Judaism are about to appear. For instance, people like the Japanese may develop their own Judaism that few other Jews will want to recognize. Then, some Reform Jewish communities may split off and create distinct national forms of Judaism.

If peace comes to the Middle East will Arab culture roll over the state of Israel, driving Israeli parents up the wall as Jewish kids ape their Arab neighbors? The outcome? Few, I fear, on either side will applaud it—but a fine sci-fi theme it would make. I envision a twining of Arabic and a new Hebrew-Yiddish hybrid which purists of all shapes will instantly loathe. I might not care for it much myself, but I doubt that I will be around to voice any objections.

Many futurists see mass communications packing such a wallop that all peoples will sooner or later succumb to it and become mirror images of one another. It could be. But later is a long way off and may never get here at all. Along with Yiddish philosopher Chaim Zhitlovsky, I do not see that future in the cards; out of pride, plain cussedness and fear of boredom, man will resist this kind of leveling. And our worldwide Jewish nation will go its own way—as it always has—producing those outlandish characters and notions that have so astonished our planet.

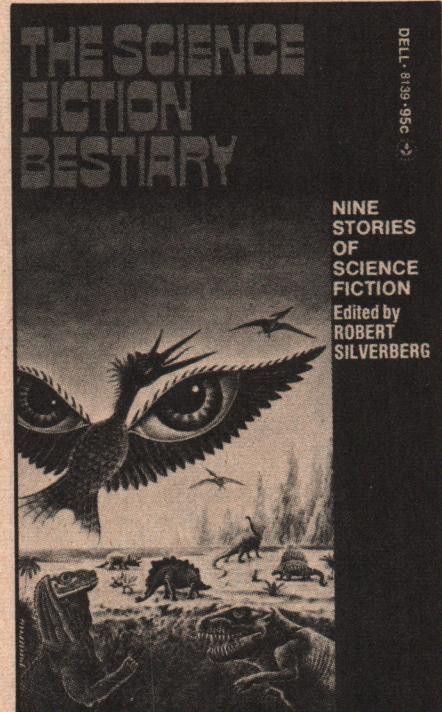
story entitled *War Gods of the Oyster Men of Deneb* didn't carry conviction if it was written by someone named Chaim Itzkowitz."

But why not? History from Abraham onward has a long and prestigious ros-

ter of Jewish heroes. Surely Samson, who did such a bang-up job on the Philistines, could have handled a couple of outer world monsters, and maybe even the Oyster Men of Deneb.

A fact better remembered is that a good deal of Jewish mythology—especially the Yiddish variety—is decidedly anti-hero; humor, irony and satire take the place of muscle. Most non-biblical Jewish myths simply do not fit the demands of the genre. Brawny themes, such as the Warsaw Ghetto uprising or Israeli military derring-do have, until now at least, seemed too much a part of this world and hardly the type of escape reading that delights sci-fi fans.

Some literary critics, in their hunt for *yiches*, like nothing better than to trace sci-fi to Homer, Plato and the Greek



prose romancer Lucian of Samosata. (The lyrical fantasies dictated in Yiddish by Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav never appear on these lists—but should.) Modern sci-fi comes to us via Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and those garishly packaged pulp magazines of the 1920s and 30s. The term science fiction was coined by Hugo Gernsback, a pulp editor.

From the pulps onward, action, adventure and heroism dominate the genre. Deeds of valor bring forth hearty applause. Blood, both human (usually, but not always red) and alien (a stunning variety of hues) flows profusely. Weapons blast, burn and zap.

Sci-fi's great appeal is that it whiskers the reader out of his humdrum world to a world beyond time and space where

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SCIENCE FICTION Continued

life is amazing and gratifying. It has always catered to a young, well-educated audience—including a vast number of Jewish teenagers attracted by the freedom of space ships which took them beyond the confines of their own home-bound traditions.

FROM ZAP! TO ZETZ

But along with the rise of ethnic pride and ethnic studies, sci-fi has begun to open up to Jewish themes. Tales of distant planets, tentacled beings and incredible wonders will—naturally

Editor Jack Dann has included the following stories in his anthology, *Wandering Stars*, digging them out of old science fiction publications:

Trouble With Water by Horace L. Gold (1939) the earliest Jewish sci-fi story in Dann's collection. A folk tale about little people. And one of the funniest I've read.

Two stories by Avram Davidson, an Orthodox Jew, word has it: *The Golem* (1955) is a side-splitting visit to a retired Yiddish couple and *Goslin Day* (1970) is a Kabalist tale.

Gather Blue Roses, by Pamela Sargent, (1971) is a personal story beautifully rendered about being different, with ESP and Auschwitz overtones. A trailblazer. *Streets of Dreams, Feet of Clay*, a chapter from a 1968 Robert Sheckley novel which sees an automated city as a Jewish Mother. Very, very funny. Modesty keeps me from dwelling too long on my own creation, *The Tsaddik of the Seven Wonders*, published by Ballantine in 1971 and now, alas, out of print. Suffice it to say that the publisher dubbed it "The First Yiddish Science Fiction Novel Ever" on its cover—and a distinguished house like Ballantine wouldn't lie, would it? No doubt they meant Yiddish in English. The Tsaddik is a wonder-worker who moves back and forth through time assisted by his travel agent, the eight-inch-tall homunculus, Greenberg. Jewish history keeps appearing in various guises along with a number of knotty problems, which The Tsaddik solves in the best traditions of *Yiddishkeit*.

Some books that are not Jewish sci-fi but have Jewish elements:

A Canticle for Leibowitz (Bantam) by Walter M. Miller, Jr. An above-ground classic, Catholic in content featuring the convert Leibowitz.

Pebble in the Sky (Fawcett World) is Isaac Asimov's first novel—a sci-fi landmark.

The Wilk Are Among Us (Doubleday) by Isidore Haiblum. Billy Feldman and Mr. Label dash through this novel but the real hero is an octopus in disguise.

enough—always abound, but a new life is being breathed into them by writers drawing from the Talmud and East European Jewish traditions.

Yiddish—or as Leo Rosten calls it, Yinglish—is in plentiful supply; any combination of Yiddish and English is kosher. For instance Ellison uses the feminine *meshiginah* for males rather than the masculine *mishiginer* because "that was the way it sounded when my mother called me it." Ellison offers a "Grammatical Guide and Glossary for Goyim" at the end of his story. Examples: *breckh*; *krenk*; *momzer*; *nafkeh*; *oysvarf*; *pisher*; *plotz*; *pupik*; *schlemiel*; *schlimazel*; *shikker*; *shikseh*; *shmoottz*; *varf* (to *breckh*); *zetz* . . .

Familiar? Sure. These are the words that still crack up audiences in the borscht belt. My mother and father hated them and called them vulgar. Professors of Jewish studies have been known to disown them. But Ellison has a way with them, and his love of things Jewish comes shining through.

NEO-ZIONISTS MEET ON VENUS; THIRD EXILE TO END

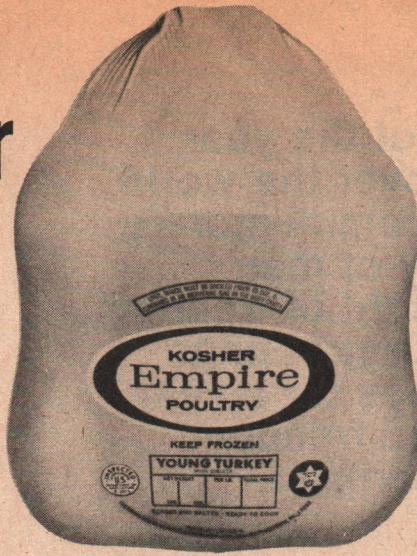
Author William Tenn comes from an older generation, having begun his career three decades ago at New York University. These days, he teaches English and writing under his real name, Philip Klass. If Ellison's words are those of Lenny Bruce or Buddy Hackett, Tenn is the field's Sam Levenson. In *On Venus, Have We Got a Rabbi*—published in both *Wandering Stars* and in Terry Carr's *Best Science Fiction of the Year* (by Ballantine)—we have warmth, humor, authenticity and a plethora of respectable types. Here are the parents from next door, with thick Yiddish accents and *shtetl* costumes. Only now they're on Venus living in burrows and the year is 2859.

Earth has been conquered by outer space alien beings, Israel is no longer a Jewish state and Jews are scattered all over the universe. The Neo-Zionists have called a conference. As Milchik the narrator tells us, the Neo-Zionists "feel we've had our rest. Time for another round. 'Let the Third Exile end in our lifetimes' . . . Who can argue? Except for the one small thing they overlooked: Israel and Jerusalem these days isn't even for human beings."

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The story is replete with learned references to Yochanan Ben Zakkai, Rambam, Spinoza, Moshe Dayan and Isaac Leib Peretz. The story poses the question: "What is a Space Age Jew?" Referring to the Bulbas—those aforementioned little brown Jewish pillows—a character asks: "How do they circumcise, do you suppose, Milchik? Where and *what* do they circumcise?"

"They cut off a very little bit from the tip of their shortest tentacle, Uncle Fleischchik," said my Aaron David, who just walked in."

Rabbi Smallman, the rabbi of Tenn's title, finds a solution to the Bulba problem. "Well, if there are alien goyim, why can't there be alien Jews? ... There are aliens who know what a pogrom tastes like, and who also know the sweetness of our Sabbath. Let's put it this way; there are Jews—and there are Jews. The Bulbas belong in the second group."

DYBBUK POSSESSES CENTAUR; KIBBUTZNIKS CONVERT PLANET

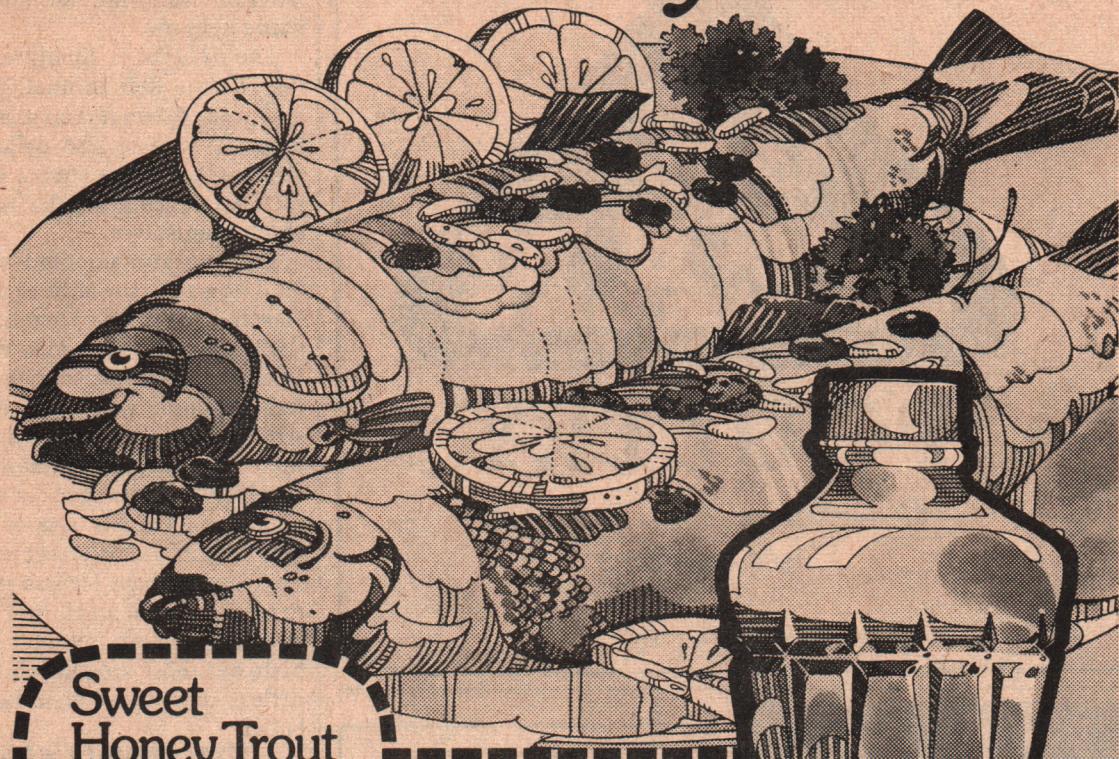
An exception to the Yiddish-accented science fiction tale is Robert Silverberg's *The Dybbuk of Mazel Tov IV*. The narration, delivered with stately Hebrew overtones, is dead serious. No jokes or *shtick* shake up its pages. "Israel has been destroyed. A handful of kibbutzniks and some Hasidim who ask to be taken along at the last minute, flee earth—and the Final Pogrom—in a space ship. They land on a planet which they call New Israel and sometimes Mazel Tov IV. The planet is already inhabited by centaur-like beings, called Kunivar."

Silverberg's kibbutznik narrator tells us: "The Hasidim had their settlement, we Israelis had ours, and the natives, the Kunivar, had the rest of the planet."

Then the *dybbuk* of a Jewish secularist takes possession of a native. "It happened more than forty years ago, in the first generation after the landing, on the ninth day of Tishri in the year 6302. I was working in the fields. The day was hot, and I worked swiftly, singing and humming. As I moved down the long rows of crackle-pods, tagging those that were ready to be gathered, a Kunivar appeared at the crest of the hill that overlooks our kibbutz. It seemed to be in some distress, for it came staggering

Continued

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SCIENCE FICTION *Continued*

and lurching down the hillside with extraordinary clumsiness tripping over its own four legs as if it barely knew how to manage them. When it was about a hundred meters from me, it cried out, 'Shimon! Help me, Shimon. In God's name help me!'

The *dybbuk* is finally exorcised by the Hasidic Reb Shmuel. The natives now want to convert en masse, but Reb Shmuel, who is also called the Baal Shem, is aghast at such a notion. The rationalist kibbutzniks take on the chore themselves.

The narrator concludes his story: "But how can true faith be denied? The Hasidim offered no encouragement so the Kunivaru came to us; they learned Hebrew and we loaned them books, and Rabbi Shlomo gave them religious instruction, and in their own time and in their own way they entered Judaism. All this was years ago... I was a young man then, I know a good deal more now, and if I am no closer to God than I ever was, perhaps He has grown closer to me. I eat meat and butter at the same meal and plough my land on the Sabbath, but those are old habits that have little to do with belief or the absence of belief."

**JEWS REVOLT AGAINST
HOMOGENIZED WORLD**

In Isaac Asimov's 1959 story *Unto The Fourth Generation*, a totally assimilated Jew is sought out by the spirit of his Great Grandfather who comes to bless his descendant who will carry on the line. "'Merten,' he [the Great Grandfather] sighed, 'Samuel Merten. You have come.' The words sounded with an effect of double exposure, for under the English Merten heard the faint sign of a foreign tongue. Under the 'Samuel' was the unheard shadow of a 'Schmu-el.'"

In Geo. Effinger's satire *Paradise Lost*, we are given the following future: "There were five men who ran the world. They were called Representatives, though democratic elections had long ago been eliminated as 'too inaccurate.' There was a Representative of North America, one of South America, one each from Europe, Asia and Africa. They had all been in power for a long time, and they seemed to enjoy it. The citizens of their continental domains were glad of that. The last thing the overburdened people needed was a war.

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Naturally Jewish study is discouraged by this all-embracing future state, young adults who show traces of Jewish

identity are packed off to distant planets. Grandpa Zalman is one of the few who still recalls the "old Jewish ways." The cocky use of Yiddish words serves as a Jewish identity card. The hero recalls Grandpa Zalman and names his new planet after him. The story ends with the hero's and heroine's determination to be Jews and to raise their children as Jews.

But what kind of Jews will these be? Will their eyes light up at the sight of a Hebrew or Yiddish book? Will Zalman's grandson put on *tefillin*? Or observe the 612 other *mitzvot*?

Silverberg speculates on an answer. In *Schwartz Between the Galaxies*—a story appearing in *Stellar One* (published by Ballantine)—Schwartz, a future anthropologist, laments the passing of all ethnic diversity on earth. A character asks him about being Jewish: "You observe the dietary code? You understand the language of scripture?" "Not exactly," Schwartz admitted. "In fact I don't do anything that's specifically Jewish except think of myself as a Jew." Schwartz lectures his students, "crying out passionately for an end to the homogenization of Earth."

But it is too late, everyone is alike, the stars are out of reach and he can only daydream of assorted folk rites and cultures. Despite worldwide abundance, Schwartz' life, somehow, seems terribly empty.

JEWISH SCI-FI TO GIVE MORE NACHES

Jewish sci-fi has a peculiar habit of glancing anxiously over its shoulder. The stories are set in the far future, but the characters are all landlocked in yesteryear. The culture of the Jew-beyond-time-and-space consists of stray tidbits garnered from books, Sunday school, parents and grandparents. They are Jews because . . . well (shrug) . . . because they are Jews. And Orthodoxy is the obvious symbol of what being a Jew is all about.

In this, Jewish sci-fi writers have lots of company. When the average American Jew is asked to define his Jewishness, he will usually speak vaguely of religion, and only a distinct minority is concerned with ethnic roots and living Jewish culture. But, this, needless to say, is not a sci-fi problem but our problem.

Jewish sci-fi writers have only now taken their very first steps. They have scanned the issues, and each has chosen a theme according to his own background, Jewish education (or lack of it) and upbringing. They do not generally move as easily through Jewish history and customs, as, say, Isaac Bashevis Singer. But then they and their audience are different. When it comes to Jewish culture, the sci-fi reader must often be spoon-fed and editors still fret that the public will be put off by what they consider arcane references. All this will pass. Sci-fi itself is expanding, and Jewish sci-fi will expand with it, as writers turn to their own traditions, hunting for inspiration and that extra little bit of *naches*. □

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