

REVIEWS

JEWIS AND THE SCIENCE FICTION PROBLEM

ARTHUR WASKOW

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE, a novel by Barry N. Malzberg. New York: Pocket Books, 1974. \$.95.

WANDERING STARS: AN ANTHOLOGY OF JEWISH FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, edited by Jack Dann. New York: Harper and Row, 1974. \$.95

What is Jewish science fiction? One of these books proclaims itself as such, coming on Jewishly throughout. The other book gives no indication of Jewish concern aside from its title and its epigraph—a quotation from the final passage of the Book of Jonah. Yet something about Malzberg's novel strikes me as more quintessentially Jewish than all but a few of the stories in the Dann anthology.

That "something," I think, is the sense that history matters, that the world changes, that there can be cataclysm within the human soul; that, finally, the Temple *can* be destroyed. The world, in other words, has the capacity for change, moving both toward good and toward evil, as in the legend that the Messiah is born on Tisha B'Av. The Jewish sense of change is not simply hopeful or fearful, but rather dialectical; it is also at the heart of things: "I Will Be What I Will Be."

Most of the "Jewish science fiction" in the Dann anthology, to the contrary, makes the statement that the more things change, the more Jews remain the same; while the more Jews change, the more things remain the same. This idea is strongest in the stories where you would least expect to find it—those that reach explicitly

into the future. There are tales that search the soul beyond all change. Two in particular, more fantasy than science fiction, are already well-known: I. B. Singer's "Jachid and Jachidah" and Bernard Malamud's "The Jewbird." If you can't locate them some other way, they are probably worth the price of the book.

But if we turn to the new stories, which are, presumably, the reason the book was put together (and the reason it was called "science fiction"), there is more to learn from than to be stirred by. William Tenn makes the "new" into the easy old, turning Tevye the Milchiger into Milchik the Venus TV-man to tell the story "On Venus, Have We Got a Rabbi." The story is funny, and its echoes of Sholom Aleichem are pleasant enough, but there is little else. From the real Tevye you get a sense of the real agony of the *shtetl* as it faces the breakup of its whole environment, and of itself. From Mr. Milchik on Venus you get a funny *Halachic* question about whether creatures called Bulbas who look like walking potatoes can be Jews—and, of course, a funny *Halachic* answer. But we are taught only that nothing changes; the question "Who is a Jew?" which has haunted Jews for years will still be the central question a thousand years hence.

The question is central to several other stories in this collection. Carol Carr tells how a Martian who looks like a cauliflower and performs menopausal rites in Kopchopee tradition can also be a rabbi. Robert Silverberg, in "The Dybbuk of Mazel Tov IV," shows us a mass conversion of the six-limbed, green-furred Kuni-varu. And Harlan Ellison struggles with the question of whether an intelligent butterfly can be counted in the *minyan*. What this shows is that now, in 5735, this issue of Who is a Jew is uppermost in the minds of these allegedly sensitive social antennae, the science fiction writers. This may be useful sociology about 5735, but it tells us little about 5835 or 6735 or, for that matter, about the deep recesses of the soul.

Arthur Waskow is Resident Fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. Active in a variety of Jewish causes, he is a member of the Fabrengen Community, and is the author of *THE BUSH IS BURNING!*

But what really bothers me is what is missing. Some of the Kabbalists held that the last possible date to which the Holy One would wait before sending the Messiah—even if we had done nothing to change the world and merit his earlier arrival—is the year 6000 of the creation of the world, the Great Shabbas when the Seventh Day begins, fulfilling the verse from the Psalms: "to You a thousand years are as a day." But not one of these writers expects the Messiah in the next 265 years—nor even in a thousand. *Not one?* What kind of collection of twelve Jews do we have here anyway?

Another note about these antennae-of-the-present: all of them imagine that Jewishness will be defined around its religious component; in all of these "Who is a Jew" stories, sheer ethnicity loses out and the creature in question is accepted because he/she/it is a religiously observant Jew. Moreover, the process of decision is also "religious" rather than ethnic or nationalist, because in most of the stories the decision is made more or less according to *Halachah*. It is also significant that for all these writers the Diaspora remains more permanent than the State of Israel. Not a single story takes place in an Israel of the future, and in no story is Israel even important. In some stories, in fact, Israel has been explicitly destroyed (by Aliens, not by Arabs), resulting in the Third Exile. It is, these writers seem to be saying, the myriad forms of religious Judaism that carry the Jewish people forward. Maybe, and sardonically, one might choose to see this as a major change from the present, for now identification with Israel is the only universal *mitzvah*, and no form of religious life, nor even

all the forms put together, commands the involvement of most Jews.

If this be the message of Jewish science fiction—that Torah and the galaxy-wide Jewish people will outlive and outweigh the particular form that Jewish life has taken in Israel and in the suburbs of America—it would be one of the great themes of the Jewish imagination. Certainly great Jewish science fiction (even great Prophecy, with the Lord's cooperation) could be written about it. But the reach of these writers is much lower. Their tone makes clear that they have written about the religious tradition because it is a richer source of humor than, say, the native Israelis. They regard the religious tradition as stuck at Now, or even at a century ago. In the final analysis, these efforts at science fiction are really an exercise in nostalgia for the *shtetl*. Perhaps at some unconscious level we are being told that Jewish renewal must come from a return to Jewish roots, but that question could be raised (and *has* been) very explicitly in contemporary Jewish writing.

I want to suggest some themes that might provide the basis for some authentically Jewish science fiction:

What will be the impact of the full involvement of women in Jewish religious life upon theology, practice, family, and community? For example, what would Jewry look like if the Song of Songs dominated Passover the way the Haggadah does now (or used to)?

What would be the impact on Judaism of the achievement by secular means of such Messianic promises as swords-into-plowshares? Would Judaism finally disintegrate, or move to a new spiritual level?

If the State of Israel were destroyed but the People of Israel survived, what new theologies, outlooks, holy days, forms of communal life, would emerge? Would the rabbinate become vestigial as the priesthood did?

What would happen to world Jewry if it took on the task of rising against the "arrogant empires" as the Zealots did against Rome—and succeeded? Or failed?



In short, what would the dialectic between Jewish roots and one or another really new world create?

Oh well. I have read only one story anywhere that deals well with such questions and does it within the forms of fiction so that it creates live people, and shivers the soul in the process. That is Hugh Nissenson's "Forcing the End," one of the tales in his *In the Reign of Peace*. It poses a latter-day Yochanan ben Zakkai sneaking his way out of a Jerusalem that is equipped with nuclear missiles and is surrounded by Soviet troops—sneaking his way off to Yavneh to start the rabbinical academy again. But this time he is murdered by right-wing Israel nationalists. Blackout. Shudder. The right question, certainly. A pity it is not in *Wandering Stars*.

Barry Malzberg's novel is a much eerier story than any of those in Dann's anthology. Somebody, about fifty years from now, is trying to stage a mass reenactment of the Kennedy assassination in Dallas. The cast is comprised of the inhabitants of great American cities which seem to have been walled off into huge concentration camps. The "director" of the play is a Ph.D. candidate, and his project is a fusion of drama with experimental history—a kind of controlled experiment intended to understand the assassins, the spectator society, and, most of all, the victim.

Interspersed with the director's efforts to make his cast perform the play correctly are flashbacks into the minds of Kennedy, King, Malcolm X and George Lincoln Rockwell just before

they are killed: literally, just before the moment of death. "The destruction of the temple" turns out to be a pun, as each of these murdered men was shot through the head. But Malzberg has in mind more than that; he treats the events of the mid-1960's as though they were the destruction of *our* Temple, the shattering of America's world-view, to be compulsively relived like Tisha B' Av. He hints that it is these murders, or at least the Kennedy murder, that led to the world of barbed-wire surrounding the cast. He gives you nightmares because he enters so fully into the consciousness of the dead, making the *reader*, not just the characters, experience Tisha B' Av.

Malzberg's epigraph reminds us that God sent Jonah to prophesy against Nineveh, "that great city," in order to save its "six-score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right and left hand—and also much cattle." Perhaps he hopes that his story can help bring America to repentance? It is all left unclear. But the book's very ambiguity and its underlying terror and compulsion to relive a previous terror to some deep purpose strike a Jewish chord, even though the author never elevates that Jewishness to a conscious level.

Our own tragedy lies in the split of consciousness that permits a book of explicitly Jewish science fiction to bubble up to triviality, while keeping Malzberg's Jewishness well-hidden, even as he plunges deep to the roots of his—and our—*n'shamah*. ★

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