



Commentary: sf in Israel

by Aharon Sheer

Eli Eshed's article on sf in Israel, "A Survey of the State of sf in Israel in the Last Five Years" (*CyberCozen*, August-September 2001) stimulated me to a lot of activity, including translating the article into English, and reading some of Eli's recommended books. The following articles are a result of that activity.

1. Transliteration of Hebrew Names into English

Recently I translated Eli Eshed's Hebrew-language article on Hebrew Israeli sf and fantasy into English. I had the problem of how to write the Hebrew names of authors and publishers in English letters. I made many mistakes.

For example, I spelled the name of the publisher of "The Song of Tahira" as "Hargol", which reflects how it is pronounced in Hebrew. Subsequently they send me an email with a picture of the author, Amir Or, and at the end of their email spelled their company's name "XARGOL Books". I found their spelling so surprising (the publisher's name does not appear in English in Or's book) that I emailed them back and asked if there was some mistake. Should I change my spelling? They wrote back, "Yes, please change it to XARGOL Books. This is how we spell it in loazit [English letters]."

Or take the name of author Gail Hareven. She appears as a columnist in *The Jerusalem Report*. There they spell

her first name "Gayil". However, both the *Jerusalem Post* and Hareven's publisher (Keter) spell it "Gail". I followed the majority.

This business of transliteration is astounding. I found Etgar Keret's last name spelled Karet, Keret, Kerett, Kerrett, and Kereth, even in official publications such as his latest book ("Kerett"), or his website which is maintained by his brother ("Kerrett"). Each place spelled it differently. An email to the author revealed that he prefers the spelling "Keret".

Israelis are very cavalier about how their name is spelled in English -- the English spelling does not interest them. I try to persuade them that if you want to be found in databases you have to be consistent. Of course how their name is spelled in Hebrew is very important. They won't accept mistakes in that.

2. *The Duck's Attack* by Michael Omer (1999), 120 pg. –

מתקפת הברווז מאת מיכאל עומר

[In Hebrew.] In Eli Eshed's article on Hebrew sf, he wrote that this book is enjoyable and shows potential for the future. When I began reading this story, I immediately noticed a favorable aspect: It is not written in the first person. I also noticed that it is humorous; that is, it is intended to entertain the reader, and not to depress him. These are certainly positive things in my eyes (see my review of *The Way to Heaven* by Gail Hareven in the October 2001 *CyberCozen* to understand why).

On the other hand, in reading, one gets the feeling that the author's experience in life consists of high school, playing Dungeons and Dragons and other role-playing games, reading Terry Pratchett, and trying to get girls to have

sex with him. This is born out by the fact that the author was 20 years old when he wrote the book. However, since most of us share these experiences – even if we are somewhat older – we can still enjoy his writing.

The basic idea is that a giant duck has settled in the town of Night, and has been eating the inhabitants from time to time. The only way to get the duck to leave the townspeople alone is to tell it sad stories, which make the duck happy. If the duck doesn't like the story, it will eat someone. A group of townspeople are sent to look for a small community of religious fanatics who worship giant ducks, in hope that these worshippers can provide a way to persuade the duck to leave town. So a heterogeneous group of

young people, aided by people they encounter in their quest, travel in the direction of the town of East, from which they hope to get information to find the religious group. There's no great suspense in this, for we really couldn't care less if they succeed or not. There's no suspension of reality.

What we do have is a tale told by an entertainer who likes to tell stories. We, the readers, are sitting around the storyteller as he talks, and he surprises us with his varied and

3. *The Promised Land* by Barry Prigat (1999), 208 pages. הארץ המובטחת מאת ברי פריגט.

[In Hebrew]. Recommended by Eli Eshed. I liked it!

In 2020 the last Israeli-Arab war took place. Israel was wiped out, and most of the Jews were killed. One group, however, was pretty much allowed to survive: the Ultra-Orthodox Jews, who had mostly refused to take up arms against the Arabs. A ghetto was set up, the Ultra-Orthodox Jews moved in, and almost all contact with the outside world cut off. Three hundred years later, the residents of the ghetto never see the sky or the ground. They live in a huge underground city, which is growing and spreading all the time. The Arabs supply them with water and electricity, food and raw materials, and take away their garbage and sewage. In return the Jews do research for the Arabs. The Jews develop new technologies, and new medical techniques. When new diseases appear, the Jews develop the vaccines and drugs against them. And the Jews are left alone, to live their own life.

The only contact with the outside world is a complete secret to most of the ghetto dwellers. A small number of people learn Arabic, and meet with Arab traders inside the ghetto near the entrance. The Jews never go out, and never see the outside world. The Arabs never come in to the ghetto. But there are a very few Jews who have heard stories about the outside world.

What kind of life do these Jew have? First of all, total equality. Everyone gets a fixed budget on the central inventory computer. If you need something, you just ask for it. If you are within budget, you get it. The concept of money does not exist.

Travel is free, and is via slidewalks and elevators. Travel has to be fast, so there are different speed levels for the slidewalks. The ghetto has a million and a half residents, spread out over a large multi-level underground area,

humorous ideas. We listen, from time to time we laugh, and we wonder what he will think of next. Good for an evening.

In summary, this book is mainly for people who like quests, Dungeons and Dragons, fantasy, or Terry Pratchett. I hope it won't shock my readers to learn that I am not fond of any of these. However, if you like at least one of them, you will probably enjoy it. And some of it *is* funny.

which is growing all the time. Distances can be quite great.

Housing is free and equal. Besides studying Torah and praying, entertainment is provided by universal TV. The latest version of some biblical story is showing as a new series starting tonight. Of course everyone already knows the story. The fun is in the costumes and scenery -- how will this or that be portrayed?

The book's hero is a young medical student who – unlike almost all of his compatriots – is dissatisfied. He has read in the Bible about the sun, and moon and stars. He has read about the earth under your feet and trees and birds and rain. But he has never seen any of these things. When he asks his teachers, they fail to answer his questions. What is well known is that no one has tried to leave the ghetto for many years. Any one who goes outside will return dead. That's the way it's always been.

Well -- the hero manages to get out.

He discovers that there are other ghettos, quite different from his own. For example, there's the ghetto which I would call the "anti-religious" ghetto, which has no religious life of any kind. It's called "The Ramla Prison", and it is open to the sky. There's dirt there in plenty. Its residents work seven days a week, and have no Shabbat and no holidays. But what they do have is sex. Sex is free and easy for everyone. Everybody has sex, every day. Tomi Lapid's and Yossi Sarid's paradise. I really liked that part of the book. A wonderful satire.

I won't go into more details. The hero has a lot of surprises, and the reader does too. Recommended.

4. Hebrew Comics Review:

Profile 107 by Uri Fink and Koren Shadmi (1998), 71 pages.

[In Hebrew] Funny comics about super-heroes? I never thought I'd review a comic book in *CyberCozen*. This was recommended by Eli Eshed. When Eli lent this to me, I must admit I was skeptical. The cover shows this dull-looking, huge-muscled man holding an artificial hand in the air. It looks disgusting. But – you know what? – it's funny! Except for the last story by Koren Shadmi, which is repulsive anti-Semitic anti-Sepharadi garbage, it is light and humorous. True, there is a lot of killing, but what are superheroes without killing?

The basic idea is a parallel world in which various nations have developed superheroes.

One method of creating a superhero is the "Molotov Belt". This belt, which contains radioactive substances, was placed around the waist of Russian soldiers during the Second World War, and gave them super-powers for a few months, until they died from leukemia from the radiation. These deaths caused the Russians to abandon this technology. Recently some Russian scientists sold the technology to the Arab Muslim Hamas movement. The Hamas has plenty of volunteers who are willing to commit suicide. These are the evil villains in a couple of the stories.

An alternative method of producing super-heroes is to implant super-strong mechanical devices in place of various natural body parts. It seems that – according to this alternative history -- this was tried in Israel after the Second World War. It was done with soldiers who had been injured and lost parts of their bodies. Here Uri Fink has a lot of fun with the conflict between the strength of the biological components of the body and the

4. *Chocolate Egg* by Manuela Dviri (2000), 154 pages.

ביצה של שוקולד מאת מנואלה דבירי

[Hebrew] Recommended by Eli Eshed. This charming but curious book of imaginative short stories was written by a woman who lost her son in Lebanon. She became a fighter against the Israeli army's continued presence in South Lebanon, appearing in all the media as one of "The Four Mothers" who had lost soldier sons there and believed that Israel must pull out. The mothers' battle was successful, and the Israeli army left Lebanon.

Under the circumstances one might expect this book to be a bitter and painful book about suffering and sorrow (like Gail Hareven's *The Way to Heaven*, reviewed in the October *CyberCozen*), but it is not. It is true that the first

פרופיל 107 מאת אורי פינק וקורן שדמי

mechanical replacement parts. When the mechanical part lifts something very heavy, for example, the natural biological parts cannot stand the strain and are severely damaged. A genuine sf idea, which immediately calls to question the basic idea of *Robo-Cop*. Nice.

But it turns out that Israel's superheroes were not created by some technological feat. They were simply born that way! Nobody knows how they got that way, but from time to time such superheroes are just born. The problem is that the misuse of superheroes in past wars has led to the **San Francisco Convention**, an international agreement which prohibits all use of superheroes. In fact, the current function of many of the world's superheroes is to prevent other superheroes from using superpowers for any purpose whatsoever. One of the humorous tales is about the visit of a well-endowed American super-woman, "Liberty", who has come to Israel to verify that neither the Arabs nor the Israelis are violating the convention. The Israeli superhero who meets her can only think of one thing: Wow! How can I get her to go to bed with me? It seems that when he has sex with ordinary women, he's always afraid of hurting them badly, a restraint which he thinks he will not have to worry about with Miss Liberty. So along with a lot of fighting (the Arabs are not keeping the San Francisco Convention, but the Americans will never admit that), we have some sex....

Overall, *Profile 107* is very entertaining. If you don't mind a lot of typical super-hero violence, and some sex, and some anti-Semitism, if you enjoy macho humor, this is really quite good.

story is a moving description of the author's own personal disaster, and her continuing pain. Yet the author's solution to many of the troubles of the world, past, present, and future (one of the stories is called "2012" and takes place in 2012), is the Kabbalah, and a Kabbalistic approach to the world. If Koren Shadmi's story in *Profile 107* (reviewed above), is an insulting and contemptuous view of Sepharadi Kabbalistic rabbis, and their amulets, Manuela Dviri's stories' hero is "Hacham Eliezer", a Kabbalist rabbi in Tzfat, whose family has been advising Israeli prime ministers since the time of Ben Gurion, and giving amulets to all in need. Dviri even has a story about a future religion based on

the Kabbalah, which greatly improves life on earth.

Manuela Dviri is a non-Orthodox Jew who grew up in Catholic Italy. One of her stories is about the way the Italians treated the Jews during the Second World War ("the Jews deserve to die", the Italians said, "after all, they killed Jesus"). Having come to Israel as an adult, and married an Orthodox Israeli, she has an entirely un-Ashkenazi view of Judaism, rabbis, amulets, and the Kabbalah. Her gentle approach is so different from Koren Shadmi's that it is

hard to believe that both were written in Israel.

Dviri's short stories are best called fantasy rather than science fiction, even though some take place in the future. To some extent they are repetitive, and some deal harshly with the injustice and unrighteousness of the world, and propose truly unlikely solutions. One might even say that she recommends taking the law into your own hands. But over all, the atmosphere is optimistic. Try them and see what you think. I recommend it.



Film Review by Aharon Sheer: AI

I liked AI very much. The only thing that spoiled it for me was the ending. Spielberg couldn't resist jerking the tears.

The movie is based on sf/fantasy author Brian Aldiss's short story "Supertoys Last All Summer Long". The screen story was written by sf author Ian Watson, under the supervision of director Stanley Kubrick. Just before Kubrick died, he turned the movie over to Steven Spielberg, and Spielberg did an almost good job with it. Spielberg takes the credit for the final script.

For me, there is a basic scientific problem. The robots in "AI" run forever. As one of them says, "at the end of time, the robots are all that will be left". Where do these robots get their power? They don't eat, they don't plug into the house electric current at the end of the day. They never sleep, they just keep going. Even "Energizer" batteries (or is it "Duracell"?) can't do that.

Asimov, when he wrote his robot stories in the 1940s and 50s, expected that cold atomic fusion would soon supply unlimited energy. He had atomic powered pocket flashlights. He didn't expect his atomic power to be radioactive, or hot in any other way. And obviously it was small. So presumably his robots had a little fusion plant inside, and maybe they got fuel for it (hydrogen?) from the water faucet. But what excuse do we have when fusion plants today -- not yet economical -- are the size of a four story building?

My friend Dr. Steve Davis objected to another unlikely scientific feature. The little robot is seriously injured by eating some spinach. Robots are not supposed to eat. But later on he survives under water, and even frozen solid, for a *long time*, with no harm at all. How can he be both so easily damaged, and so resilient? My answer was that the little robot learned to keep its glottis closed.

Ignoring these little problems, this movie is dark and horrifying. Reminding me of

Tik Tok by John Sladek, we see robots being misused and abused by a society which uses them but hates them. Although the hero is a little boy, this is not a movie for little children. If they have any sense, they will be terrified.

Spielberg does not allow nakedness. When the professor (actor John Hurt), at the beginning of the film, requests a female-form robot to undress in front of a class of students, his intention is to show that she has no sense of shame. However, she is not shown undressed in the film. (Had Kubrick lived to make the film, we would certainly have seen her naked.) Similarly, there is a seduction scene in which a male lover-robot persuades a human woman to have sex with him, telling her that after she has had sex with someone like him, she will never again be satisfied by sex with a human male. Here too, we do not see them naked -- again cowardly Spielberg worried about losing his rating. Kubrick would not have been so squeamish.

The overall plot is based on the Pinocchio story. A little boy robot has been provided to a family whose natural child has been severely injured in an accident, and has been unconscious for a long time. The robot is imprinted with an unending love for his "mother". She is now his "mommy". The imprinting can never be removed. Will she love him back? As luck has it, the natural child regains consciousness and returns home -- with braces on his legs. Naturally the real boy picks on the robot boy, out of jealousy. And naturally the mother's love goes to her real son.

Well, the whole movie is about the robot boy's attempt to gain his "mother"'s love. Reading the Pinocchio story teaches the robot boy that he must become a real boy, like his "mother"'s real son. But how can he do that? Many things are well done. One is the portrayal of the "roboticism" of the robot boy. The little actor has created a boy with some human emotions, but with a lot of stiffness and

portrayed inability to understand what is happening. This robot, if he were a real child, would need psychological counseling -- or perhaps Prozac. The acting is excellent, both the boy's and his "mother"'s. We bleed for this child -- and for his "parents".

Throughout the movie, the child never cries. No matter what happens to him, he never cries. He may beg and plead. At one point he even pleads for his life. Only in the tear-jerking movie-spoiler, that Spielberg just had to stick in at the end, does the boy cry tears. Well -- he CAN'T cry. He doesn't have the tear mechanism. Otherwise he would have cried before, lots of

times. Why just at the end? Ok, Spielberg needed a sort of happy ending -- but why the tears? Stupid, stupid, stupid.

This is cold stylistically, but a visually impressive movie. There are some fabulous special effect scenes -- particularly the Flesh Market where old robots are destroyed as in a Roman circus. Most of the movie is beautifully done. We feel that Spielberg has mostly been very faithful to Kubrick's vision. While it is slow at times (Kubrick was often slow), it certainly maintains the viewers' interest. I liked it (ignore the tears).

Don't bring little children.

Unpaid Advertisement

Aharon Sheer (that 's me) is being put out to pasture by Motorola Communications, Tel Aviv. It seems they have a policy that when an employee reaches age 65, they kick him out. On January 1, 2002, I will be unemployed. So I am looking for a job. I might even be willing to work as a volunteer.

What do I do? Well, I write **computer programs**. My particular experience in the last years is writing **software close to the hardware**, in C or C++. Interrupt routines, drivers, software for burning/erasing flash, testing RAM, controlling digital input or output, analog input or output, charging a capacitor to drive a solenoid. That kind of stuff. I work with hardware engineers to develop and test the software (and the hardware), and often debug the software in assembler even when it 's written in C.

Ok, I 'm an old man! And the market for software engineers is pretty weak too. There are not a lot of jobs. And let 's face it, even if my prospective employer doesn 't have the cash to pay me a salary, he still has to provide me with a computer, and the necessary software, and a place to work. Which costs money.

See the bottom of this fanzine for address and telephone number, or call me at work at **03-565-8695** before January 1.

Short Book Review by Aharon Sheer

Promised Land by Connie Willis and Cynthia Felice (1997), 362 pages. This is a charming romance which takes place on the primitive agricultural planet Keramos. The heroine, Delana Milleflores, was sent away by her mother to school on a civilized planet when she was age five. Delana 's mother hated the place, but Delana, in order to collect her inheritance after her mother dies, is forced to come home. What she finds there infuriates her. Not only are all the people there dumb hicks, but Keramos ' crazy laws have her married (in name only) to local hick Tarleton Tanner, heir to the adjoining farm. The fictitious marriage is the only way she can collect on her inheritance, and in order to collect she will have to stay on backward Keramos for several months, until the circuit court comes on its planetary circuit for a short visit. In the meantime, she has no money! The writing is humorous, the characters are varied and unexpected in their behavior. Keramos ' flora and fauna, scenery and climate, are described fascinatingly. Will Delana end up falling in love with her fictitious husband? Is he worth falling in love with? This is not at all a typical Connie Willis book. It lacks Connie 's usual post-modern flavor in which the story starts in the middle and ends in the middle. Connie Willis ' books do not have happy endings. Will this book have a happy ending? Read it and see. I enjoyed it, but then I like anything that has Connie Willis ' name on it.

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