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ביום ראשון 21.12.2003, בשעה 20:00 -- הכניסה חופשית

נושא ההרצה: "כנפיים ודמיון"

במלאת 100 שנים לטיסה החלוצית של האחים רייט (17.12.1903)

ההרצה תסקור את פריצת הדרך אל השחקים והכוכבים, הן במציאות והן על כנפי הדמיון של ספרות המדע הבדיוני

המרצה: דר' עמנואל לוטם -- עורך ומתרגם, והיה יו"ר האגודה הישראלית למדע בדיוני ופנטסיה

More information is available (in Hebrew) at the Society's site: <http://www.sf-f.org.il>**STORY by Daniel Kluger: MINYAN**

It was the eve of the "little Yom-Kippur", the little Day of Atonement, which always falls on a night of the new moon and which, unlike the regular Yom-Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, is kept only by the most pious Jews. Hirsh the cobbler did not count among the latter. Since the sunset he was sitting in the inn of Moishe the One-Eyed, also known as Cricket. Contemplatively, Hirsh was drinking himself into oblivion, alternating glasses of Cricket's famous vodka, whose renown spread from Yavoritz to the Polish border, with the equally famous egg pies baked by the innkeeper's wife Rivka.

"Time to go home, Hirshle," suggested Cricket, glancing at the night-blinded window. It was not the first time this evening he had dropped increasingly heavy hints to his faithful customer. "See, it's the deep of the night. I'm glad you like Rivka's pies but you live so far, in the suburbs..."

The innkeeper's behavior might have appeared rather surprising to an outside observer, uninitiated into the hidden currents of life in the *shtetl*. The cobbler never ran a debt, always paying his tab promptly, so that Moishe should have been deeply grateful for his current splurge, already resulting in a ruble-and-a-half bill, which might yet grow considerably through the night. The drunk Hirsh was even more morose than the sober Hirsh (not that many people had the chance to observe him in the latter state, excluding perhaps his wife Dvoira early in the morning). Thus, the innkeeper's concern did not stem from the fear of a possible scuffle. What it did stem from was a far greater fear occasioned by that

same Dvoira, who had last week promised in the presence of numerous witnesses that unless Cricket prevented her husband from boozing his earnings away, she, Dvoira, would teach him a lesson he would not forget. Dvoira was a virago, while Moishe, puny and timid by nature, had been taught by the exigencies of Jewish life to take every threat seriously. This was the reason for his half-hearted attempts to send the cobbler back home earlier than usual.

In response to his solicitude, Hirsh slammed a ten-kopeck coin on the table and demanded another glass of vodka and a couple of pies. Moishe's mind was torn by the tug-of-war between the desire to add the ten kopecks to the ruble and a half of the bill and the dread of Dvoira's retribution. Greed won. Cricket brought his order to the cobbler and with a sigh placed the vodka on the scrubbed oaken planks of the table. Hirsh tipped the glass and only then deigned to reply to the innkeeper's observation about the lateness of the hour.

"L-late?" his stammered but then regained a partial control of his tongue and proceeded in a more philosophical vein:

"If it's late, it must be dark. If it's not dark, it's not late". He illustrated his point with vague gestures of his large work-roughened hands. "See, either it's late", he turned his palms down, "or it's not." He turned them up. "And now? The moon is shining. It's as bright as daylight. And what does it mean? It means it is daylight". And having proven his point, he triumphantly stabbed at the innkeeper with a shaking finger.

Moishe stared dejectedly at the cobbler's broken fingernail, black with the accumulations of glue and dust. For some reason, he also peered out the window, into the impenetrable darkness.

"What moon?" he grumbled. "Your brain is pickled; day or night, it's all the same... It's the new moon tomorrow. But what do you care, you see the sun, and the moon, and the stars in the bottle".

Renouncing all responsibility, Moishe walked to the bar and started polishing the tables, turning his back on his last customer.

Hirsh, meanwhile, had taken Moishe's last remark to heart. He even got up, walked unsteadily to the window and stood there for some time, regarding the opaque glass. Afterwards he turned to the innkeeper and wagged his finger at him again:

"Are you blind, Cricket?" he asked reproachfully. "It's shining!"

"What shining?" Moishe slapped his towel on the bar. He knew he should not contradict his customers but could never restrain himself. As a result, he was ruffled both by his fellow Yavoritzky Jews and by Ukrainians from the neighboring hamlet of Dolinovka. He pushed Hirsh away from the window.

"Where?" He fairly screamed. "Where is it shining? Show me!"

"There!" Hirsh screamed back. "What the hell? Can't you see it? There, by the old synagogue!"

The pairing of hell and the old synagogue paralyzed the superstitious innkeeper. When he eventually spoke, it was with absolute finality:

"Get out!" he said. "Now! Or I'll wake up Rivka and send her to fetch your Dvoira".

Hirsh was in the mood for an argument but the mention of Dvoira changed his mind. Banging the door, he walked out. Moishe, with some relief, locked up and went to bed.

"Hirshke, drunken fool!" he mumbled, undressing. "A man with half a brain won't walk alone at night. After midnight too. This is the time for... you know who. And how can I turn him out? Stronger than a horse, he is".

"A time for who?" unexpectedly asked Rivka who her husband presumed was fast asleep.

"You sleep," he commanded impatiently. "Unclean spirits, who else?" He pulled a thin blanket over himself but then kicked it aside; the night was incredibly stuffy. "A wise woman told me: one man is visible to demons, they will play a trick on him. If two people walk together, demons can see them but are powerless to do harm. Three

people have nothing to fear, they are invisible to spirits..."

"Who wants to see Hirshke?" retorted his wife contemptuously. "Even sober, he is no sight for sore eyes and when drunk... Sleep, nothing will happen to him..."

Meanwhile, the cobbler tramped down the wide beaten track leading from the inn to his house on the outskirts of the *shtetl*. He felt fine and even his giddiness added to his perfect mood. He was singing a long ballad about a poor Jew who left his crooked hovel to look for fortune elsewhere. The ballad was supposed to be mournful but in Hirsh's rendition it became a dance tune, punctuated by stomping of his sturdy boots:

"When he saw the Jewish king

"He started to dance and to sing".

Suddenly he stopped. At this point the track crossed a footpath leading to the mill in Dolinovka. A strange sensation flickered in Hirsh's drink-befuddled mind. He suddenly realized his bellowing failed to elicit any reaction from the dogs of the *shtetl*. Unlike his usual performances, this one went unaccompanied by growls, howls, and barks. Normally, it was enough for Hirsh to open his mouth and the dogs would start loudly protesting his musical talents, so that Dvoira knew about the approach of her lord and master long before he lumbered on the porch.

But now the darkened *shtetl* lay under the pall of tense silence. Sobered by surprise, Hirsh scratched his head, ruminating over the sloth of the Yavoritzky guards.

"Hey!" he cried. "Hey, lazybones!"

There was no response. Moreover, Hirsh noticed another peculiarity: his yell was not followed by echo. Rapidly losing the rosy glow of intoxication, he went on but without singing.

Suddenly he stopped once again. He just realized how deep and dense the darkness was, wrapping him like a suffocating fur coat. He looked around; no light glimmered in the blind windows of the surrounding houses. He glanced across the river: in the Ukrainian settlement of Dolinovka the lights were out as well. He lifted his face to the sky and realized the innkeeper had been right, there was no moon and no stars either, as the swollen clouds crawled low, almost rubbing their heavy bellies on the rooftops.

Muggy air insinuated itself into his throat, choking him, Hirsh started coughing. "What weather..." he whispered. The clouds seemed saturated with humid heat, pressing upon him like a soggy compress. Hirsh felt a stab of panic, drawing the stale air deep into his lungs, trying to discover the refreshing breeze that had cooled his

sweaty forehead when he had set out on his homeward journey. But the breeze had died down.

Hirsh tried to find the glow he had seen from the inn's window. "Did I dream?" he muttered, disconcerted. The glow had been quite bright, giving rise to his delusion of daylight. And it had been coming from the direction of the old synagogue.

That memory drove the last shreds of drunkenness out of his head. The old synagogue, or rather its ruins, had a bad reputation. The synagogue had been destroyed almost a century and half ago, at the time of Bogdan Chmelnitzky. The hetman's Cossacks had raged over the Ukraine like a whirlwind. Nor had they passed over Yavoritzky. The *shtetl* was burnt to the ground. The old rabbi Avraham ben-Elihu was nailed alive to the synagogue's door and eight old men, respectable members of the community, were hacked to death before his eyes. Only three days later, when the blood-drunk bands had left the wrecked hamlet, did the shocked survivors crawl out of the forests where they had been hiding, to remove the rabbi's body and bury it.

After that, Yavoritzky took a long time to recover. When household smoke rose once again from the chimneys, their number was surprisingly small: twenty-five to thirty. The *shtetl* was situated at the crossroads of two major trade routes but nevertheless attracted relatively few settlers. There were several reasons but the main one was the disquieting memory of that ancient bloodshed. The synagogue where Rabbi Ben-Elihu and the eight old men had been martyred was suffered to remain in ruins, and its mossy black walls slowly disintegrated into piles of rubble.

Now Hirsh was hurrying past the dim hunched-up outline of the synagogue. Suddenly he stopped. A faint glow was indeed seeping outward from the jagged holes of the broken windows. He had not been mistaken in his argument with Moishe.

He heard a low rustle, a giant sigh overhead, like a swish of enormous feathers in the stuffy air. A hot wind scratched his inflamed face, bringing no relief. He backed up. But returning was out of the questions; what if Moishe made good on his threat to fetch Dvoira? Hirsh stood still, unsure what to do. The foggy shroud covering the sky emitted a slight but perceptible hum, as if a swarm of huge bees was preparing to strike down.

Despite the impenetrable clouds, the road was now visible; the light coming from the ruins was getting stronger. Hirsh squinted into the glow.

It was twinkling like the reflection of a fire burning inside.

"Gypsies," he thought suddenly, remembering the recent talk of the town. "Sure, gypsies. Horse-thieves. Found a hideout in the ruins."

He repeated this conclusion several times, finding courage in its simple logic, and walked forward. Closer to the ruins, he grasped the rawhide-wrapped handle of a sharp triangular knife, a tool of his trade, which he always carried in his pocket. Hirsh was not afraid of horse-thieves. On the contrary, remembering stories of wild and colorful gypsy existence, he felt a sudden impulse to spy on this alien gaiety. He crept to a window and peeped inside.

There was no fire burning but the irregular space inside the synagogue's walls was undeniably better illuminated than the outside. Hirsh squinted and saw a vague dark mass in the middle of the space. As his eyes became adapted to the uncertain half-light, the mass fell apart into a group of people, sitting around some semblance of a stone table. The people did not look like gypsies at all. In fact, they were Jews; he could discern a *talith*, a prayer-shawl draped around the shoulders of each hunched bearded shape.

"Are they preparing for the morning prayer?" thought the dumbfounded Hirsh. The idea was ridiculous: nobody would gather to pray among the ruins. Moreover, Hirsh the *shtetl* cobbler, who knew by sight each inhabitant of the tiny Jewish hamlet, did not recognize any of these stern faces.

He looked around the roofless rubbish-strewn space with breached walls, searching for the source of the ghostly light. There was no fire, or even a candle. Somehow this was what frightened him most. Hirsh felt he had to run away as fast as he could but his feet seemed glued to the ground. In order to steady himself he put his hand on the moss-covered wall and shuddered, as a piercing chill snaked up his arm, reaching for the heart. But it did not diminish the sultriness of the air; on the contrary, suffocating heat and razor-sharp cold seemed to join forces in assaulting him.

He stood there shuddering, sweaty fingers slipping off the handle of the useless knife. His heartbeat was so loud in his ears he felt it must reach the congregation of strangers. They were sitting motionless around the table-like boulder, on whose top rested a Torah scroll with dog-eared margins.

Suddenly an icy current crawled on the cobbler's skin, as if a tiny rodent with needle-sharp claws scrambled down his feverish body. A

weak moan escaped through his clenched teeth and the congregation stirred.

The old man sitting at the head of the table painfully clambered to his feet. His skull-like face slowly turned and the sunken empty eyes fastened on the cobbler. He placed his hands flat on the table to support himself. The palms were pierced by the ragged holes of old wounds and caked with black blood.

The old man's expressionless gaze drew Hirsh with almost physical force. Without moving his head, the man said something unintelligible and the rest of them also turned around to look at the miserable cobbler. Nine gaunt faces framed in scraggly torn beards stared at him, their individual differences obliterated by the uniform seal of a ravenous and yet unfocused hunger. Hirsh tried to run away but his legs gave way. When he struggled to his feet, he found himself surrounded by the old men, sternly watching his abject fear. The man with the pierced hands addressed him in a slow disused voice:

"We have gathered for the morning prayer. But we are only nine. We don't have a minyan. Will you join us? With you we will make a ten, a minyan. We must pray today".

The dark gnarled hand stretched toward him, the cauterized edges of the wound brutally exposed. It seemed the wound spoke to him louder than the man's sunken gap-toothed mouth and the cobbler felt helpless to resist.

"Do you agree?" asked the voice thick with mortal dust and the cobbler nodded. For all that he realized he was in the presence of the martyred rabbi, he could feel no reverence, only dread and nausea combined in equal proportions to deprive him of his manhood. The glassy stare of the old man was like the corpse of a human look, heavy and flaccid.

The dead rabbi beckoned the cobbler to follow and walked toward the shapeless doorway of the synagogue. The shambling steps of the eight old men echoed behind Hirsh's back and an icy burning wind pushed him forward but without fluttering a single lock of his hair.

They entered the ruined synagogue and stood around the table, the ten of them now, the *minyan*. Cold hands wrapped Hirsh's shoulders in a prayer shawl and somebody placed phylacteries on his forehead and his left arm.

"Blessed You, Lord God of Israel..." the rabbi said in a toneless voice and Hirsh's dry lips repeated obediently: "Blessed You..."

As he followed the words of the prayer, the *talith* seemed to grow heavier with each passing moment, weighing him down, while the

phylacteries squeezed his arm and forehead like mechanical snakes. The rabbi said "Amen", the elders followed, Hirsh too whispered "Amen", and at the same moment the crow of a cock shattered the brittle night. As if they were painted on darkness, the figures of the nine old men shattered too, disintegrating into a vortex of kaleidoscope fragments, dead-fish eyes, stretched mouths, tufts of gray hair, all sucked into the rippling air and disappearing.

Hirsh tried to run but his legs gave way and he collapsed on the ground near the stone table. The hum he had been subliminally hearing since he had slammed the inn's door increased in volume, drowning the desperate beating of his heart. Lifting his eyes to the turbulent sky he finally realized what his senses had refused to accept till now. The quivering roiling surface blanketing the stars was not clouds. Twitching as if in impatience, giant black wings spread over him, so enormous that he felt like a gnat in the shadow of an eagle. The velvety black feathers rubbed against each other with a soft susurrus that swallowed up the normal sounds of the night. And suspended between the impossible sweep of its wings was the pale luminescent body of Samael, the angel of death, hovering over its tiny prey. A black fire veiled his countenance but its flickering occasionally revealed a blank pitiless owl's stare. The angel's bloodless fingers grasped a large triangular knife and a drop of poisonous bile trembled at its sharp point. Hirsh knew he should not open his mouth, for if he tastes this bile, his sojourn in this world would be over. But once again the fire-veil flickered, the angel's empty eyes met his, and a cry of terror tore open the cobbler's mouth. The deadly drop gracefully fell onto his tongue.

Hirsh's body was found next evening. His features were distorted by a death-grimace so horrible than even the seasoned members of the burial society shuddered and averted their eyes. The most surprising detail, however, was a piece of rough shroud canvass folded around his shoulders like a prayer-shawl. The local wise woman explained this was a sure sign the unfortunate cobbler had joined the *minyan* of the dead who would not let him go, for without him they would not be able to pray. She did not tell anything to Dvoira who, to everybody's surprise, genuinely grieved over the demise of her no-good spouse. But she warned the Jews of Yavoritzky to pour out all the water they kept in barrels, pails and other containers. Nobody knew in which one the angel of death rinsed his poisonous knife after he cut the cobbler's soul from his body.

Star Trek Book Reviews by Gary Roth

The Great Starship Race by Diane Carey (1993), 305 pages.

This is an impressive book, reminiscent of the style of the movie ***Star Trek 2 - The Wrath of Khan***. The opening scene bursts with a flurry of action aboard a Romulan ship, a number of years prior to the main subject of the novel. The Romulans encounter a simple, smiley, submissive race called Rey and attempt to conquer a few of them in space. However, the Rey's involuntary defensive mechanism drives all of the Romulan crew crazy, leading the vessel to destruction.

Eventually a Federation exploration befriends the Rey, and they decide to hold a Starship Race. All different kinds of ships enter the route to the secret Rey planet -- large, small, freighters, warships, human and alien, female vs. male commandeered, etc. Suddenly and unexpectedly a Romulan entry turns up, adding a major worry to Captain Kirk's *Enterprise* voyage. James Kirk begins the race, with its confusing

beacon markers (mis)guiding the way, with one eye on the unwelcome foreigners and one on the other competitors. Space turbulence gives enough cover for the Romulans to make their move -- they kidnap one of the Rey from a cargo ship and kill her aboard their Romulan ship.

The main story revolves around these killers and their desire to eradicate the entire Rey people, while the Starfleet members try to stop them. The Romulans attempt to capture the cargo ship and turn it into a gigantic bomb to be slammed into the Rey planet. When Kirk and company foil that plan, the Romulans go to plan B, which will not be revealed in this review! The matching of wits, reaching down deep for high-tech solutions to various crises, hand-to-hand combat, old-time nostalgic maritime terminology, and a number of other literary gems combine to make this book a winner -- grade A.

Star Trek: Windows on a Lost World by V.E. Mitchell (1993), pp. 275

This book started out with an excellent suspense buildup, and then proceeded to take the reader on a number of bizarre routes. The *Enterprise* transports a team of archaeologists to Careta IV to explore a civilization that died out thousands of years earlier. To everyone's surprise, a mysterious, ancient yet advanced alien technology confuses Starfleet's scanners and leads to the conclusion that some older civilization preceded the one that was to be investigated. Eventually an old artifact is uncovered with great difficulty, and in the process of testing it, Chekov and one of the scientists accidentally fall into it and disappear. Kirk and others decide to also go through the artifact's window in hopes of locating the lost crew members, but they also disappear.

Back on the starship, Spock finds out that the missing crew personnel have been transformed into alien bodies of the Khllict race. These barbarian carnivores are essentially large crabs with odd brains and no

vocal apparatus. They communicate via flashing various colors on the outside of their shells, and begin as young males that turn into elder females after mating. Since this Khllict race died out many millennia previously, Kirk and company find it difficult to locate food. Also, only Kirk manages to overcome his host body's inbred nature, and communicates with Spock on the planet by use of Morse code. The problem -- how to get the alien bodies transformed back into humans. Without giving away the ending, suffice it to say that the advanced alien technology makes resolution of the problem a daunting task.

Overall this novel was intellectually stimulating and not dull at any point. A number of moral and ethical issues surfaced, the story was believable, and the emphasis was on the mental instability of the Khllict minds, as well as their dominate-and-exterminate attitude. Grade B.

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