

**Star Trek Made Me  
a Humanist**

**Humanism and  
Jews in Space**

**Jewish Myths in  
Science Fiction**

# HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

WINTER 2023

## Dreaming of the Cosmos

Imagination lies at the intersection of  
Humanistic Jewish values and science fiction



## Why Humanistic Judaism?

Humanistic Judaism provides community for people of all backgrounds to explore and shape the evolving meaning of Jewish traditions through a nontheistic, inclusive worldview. It incorporates a humanistic philosophy of life into Jewish liturgy, holiday celebrations, and lifecycle events in place of traditional worship of the supernatural. Founded in the 1960s by a community led by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, it gives voice to the way most Jews already believe: that ethics and values are human-made, not divinely revealed, and are continually progressing based on reason, knowledge, empathy, and justice.

Today, our faith rests in one another, in the power of people to understand our world and influence it for the better to achieve universal human dignity and steward the future of our planet. For justice to exist in our world, we must create it together. And to gain new knowledge we trust academic and scientific methods over religious dogma. Because our approach is cultural rather than religious, we welcome all to participate without boundaries and we celebrate the diversity of our multiracial, multicultural, and LGBTQ+ households.



The Strugatsky Brothers

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# FROM THE EDITOR



## Science fiction and Judaism are both endeavors of the human imagination

The imaginative element in science fiction is easy to see, in that the genre has always been about the speculative, exploring what the world (or other worlds) might look like if circumstances were different, in either small or big ways. By making these speculations, science fiction enables the reader to explore possibilities, and possibly understand their own present and past in new ways.

The imaginative elements of Judaism aren't as obvious, but with only a little bit of reflection, we can still find them. These elements include the mythological tales of the Torah (which have their earliest roots in the creative retelling of the mythologies of their neighbors), but we also can see the work of the imagination in our ritual life (where words, objects, and rituals have life breathed into

them by way of the human imagination). But most of all, we see the imagination at work in our principle of Tikkun Olam (repairing the world), because it is not enough for us to accurately see the world as it is today, but rather we must also use our imaginations to imagine what the world could be, and how we might take action to bring this vision into reality.

While not all Jews are willing to openly acknowledge the role of the imagination in the practice of Judaism, we as Humanistic Jews have a different approach, because we celebrate the essential role of humanity in Judaism, hence we can fearlessly celebrate the place of the imagination in our tradition, and can even find points of commonality in other traditions, such as science fiction.

Several of our writers for this issue have made that connection central to their pieces, often by relating it to their own experiences. And, these connections are a “two-way” street, which is why David Hirsh argues in his piece that Jewish Sunday school made him a fan of science fiction, while Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick argues that Star Trek made him a Jewish Humanist.

Other writers in this issue focused on the ways that Jewish authors expressed themselves through science fiction, including Julia Genyuk's look at the Strugatsky Brothers (prolific and somewhat subversive sci-fi writers of the old Soviet Union), as well as Carl Rod's personal account of getting to meet Isaac Asimov while a college student at Brooklyn Polytechnic in the late 1960's.

Finally, we have two pieces that explore Jewish themes in the broader sci-fi canon, Robert Rubenstein's “Science Fiction, Humanism and Jews in Space” and James Ryan's “Travels through Time: Jewish Myths found in Science Fiction.”

Space limitations did not permit us to publish all of the submissions we received, so be sure and check the SHJ blog ([shj.org/blog](http://shj.org/blog)) for more essays, book reviews, and other content on the theme of Judaism and science fiction.

We welcome your comments and suggestions. Please send them to [humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com](mailto:humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com).

**J.M.B.**  
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WINTER 2023

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**Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick** is the rabbi at the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Metro Detroit.

**Julia Genyuk** is a web developer and math tutor in Boulder, Colorado who moved to the U.S. from Russia 30 years ago. She is a member of Beth Ami Colorado Congregation for Humanistic Judaism and is their webmaster.

**David Hirsch** is a husband, father, son, writer, blogger and a life-long science fiction fan as well as a founding member, past Steering Committee Chair, and chair of the Development Committee of Kol Hadash Humanistic Congregation in Deerfield, Illinois. A retired high school (and Sunday School) teacher, David runs two science fiction book clubs (one through Kol Hadash) and attends and volunteers at local, national, and international science fiction conventions.

**Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld** is the rabbi of Beth Chaverim Humanistic Jewish Community in Deerfield, Illinois.

**Carl Rod** graduated from the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn (Now the Tardion School of Engineering, NYU) in 1970. While attending there, he was involved in many of the school publications as photographer, editor and occasional writer. He now lives in Oklahoma City where he is still active as a respiratory therapist and curmudgeon.

**Arthur Liebhaber**, retired librarian, is a member of CHJ-Detroit (and the rabbi's husband), a member of the SHJ's Executive Committee and an SHJ Facebook administrator.

**Robert Rubenstein** is a retired clinical social worker living in Portland, Oregon. He is a founding member of Cultural Synagogue in Portland, led by Rabbi Mary Raskin. He would like to play Riff Raff in The Rocky Horror Picture Show.

**James Ryan** is a writer who has been a member of City Congregation for over 20 years. His works can be followed through his webpage at <https://raginggail.wordpress.com/>.

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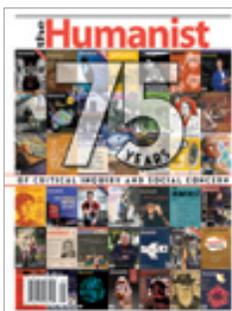
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# COMMUNITY NEWS

DEERFIELD, IL | BETH CHAVERIM HUMANISTIC JEWISH COMMUNITY

## 20 for 20

In January 2003, Beth Chaverim was founded by a group of eight families. In the succeeding twenty years, we have touched and been touched by well over 100 families and individuals. When we turned ten, we honored our founding members; when we turned thirteen, we held a community b'nai mitzvah which included a meaningful service and group community service project.

2023 is our twentieth anniversary and to celebrate, we are planning to engage in twenty community service projects. Giving back to the community has always been an essential part of our identity. We are lining up volunteer and giving opportunities throughout the year. These include a community volunteer time at the non-profit Bernie's Books, an organization that provides books to children in need; the Northern Illinois

Food Depository; and Feed My Starving Children that each address hunger needs locally and globally. In addition, we will provide food for local homeless in February; deliver food packages for Passover for the organization dedicated to feeding the Jewish hungry, Maot Chitim; engage with Good Deeds Day in April; sponsor and participate in the Buffalo Grove Pride Parade in June; provide meals at a local church soup kitchen in June; and continue our collections for the Deerfield Township Food Pantry, school supply and holiday toy drives next fall.

We are continuing to add to this list until we reach our goal of 20! Giving is our way of celebrating and our very generous community continues to meet every challenge and need.

– Rabbi Jodi Kornfeld



2023 is our twentieth anniversary and to celebrate, we are planning to engage in twenty community service projects.



## Eliminating Borders in Arizona

Like other Humanistic Jewish communities, Phoenix-based Or Adam Congregation treated the pandemic as constructively as possible. We were able to keep doing what we were already doing, which is a lot! We embraced change by becoming a “borderless” congregation. This allowed us to continue offering all events. Zoom enabled people who do not live in the area to participate in everything. This includes members in southern Arizona, California, Illinois, Canada, and New Zealand.

The congregation offers a rich variety of events, including a monthly Current Controversaries Discussion Group, Film Discussion Group, Book Club, Youth Education and a quarterly Speakers’ Bureau and International Film Night. In addition,

Or Adam offers monthly Shabbat and Havdalah Celebrations led by Rabbi Jeffrey Schesnol with members participating in readings and music, and more.

On December 18 the Youth Education students presented a family Hanukkah Celebration.

We may be small in number but feel our width! We mean to keep this light shining with hybrid equipment to enable simultaneous in-person and remote participation.

– Steve Evans

*Check the Or Adam website for complete information on Or Adam and our varied and numerous activities: OrAdamAZ.org*

## Mussar (Ethics) Study Coming to CHJ

The Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Metro Detroit (CHJ-Detroit) is embarking on a new area of study/practice for congregants. Spearheaded by member Dr. Bruce Hillenberg, CHJ will be offering Humanistic Jewish Mussar (Ethics) study and practice. This 1100-year-old Mussar formula for study and practice promotes personal development and enhances interpersonal relationships. Dr. Hillenberg kicked this off with a Shabbat talk about on how Humanistic Jews can incorporate Mussar practice into their commitment to improve the world. His wonderful presentation can be found at the **CHJ-Detroit YouTube channel**.

CHJ-Detroit also continues to work with Freedom House Detroit in their mission to support and empower asylum seekers on their journey to safety, security, and freedom by providing comprehensive services in an inclusive and welcoming space. This past month CHJ-Detroit members joined Rabbi Jeffrey Falick (who serves on Freedom House’s board) in providing baby supplies for two brand new Americans at baby shower (catered by CHJ!) for their families.

CHJ’s social agenda is also growing with our new “Daytimers” group meeting for lunches,



lectures (“Getting Good at Growing Older”) and regular outings. Other new programs include weekly Mahjong, a book group and a film group. Finally, this year CHJ completely re-imagined the Sunday Spinoza education program, transforming it into family study with combined and age-level components for youngsters and their parents. Every week there is a new topic for the whole program to explore! (If you’d like more information, contact Rabbi Jeffrey Falick, rabbi@chj-detroit.org.)

– Arthur Liebhaber

## Further Explorations in Jewish Sci-Fi

Due to the high interest we received in our sci-fi themed issue of Humanistic Judaism magazine, we have quite a bit of bonus content that will be appearing in the coming weeks on the SHJ blog ([shj.org/blog](http://shj.org/blog)), including:

“**The Jewish side of Star Trek**” - in this two-part series of essays, Valerie Estelle Frankel provides an in-depth analysis of the ways that Judaism (but especially the Humanistic elements of Judaism) can be seen in three of the Star Trek television series: TOS (The Original Series), NG (Next Generation), and DS9 (Deep Space Nine).

**A sci-fi seder?** - In this post, we will be sharing some pictures and liturgical excerpts from others who have incorporated themes and cultural elements from science fiction into their Passover observances.

**A review of Other Covenants: Alternate Histories of the Jewish People** - We will be reviewing this compilation of provocative short stories that speculate what Judaism might look like in the future under different circumstances - or even a different planet?

**A retrospective review of Planets of the Jews by Phillip Graubert** - When this book came out in 1999, it dramatically changed the landscape of Jewish sci-fi, so it is time to give this book another reading and another assessment.

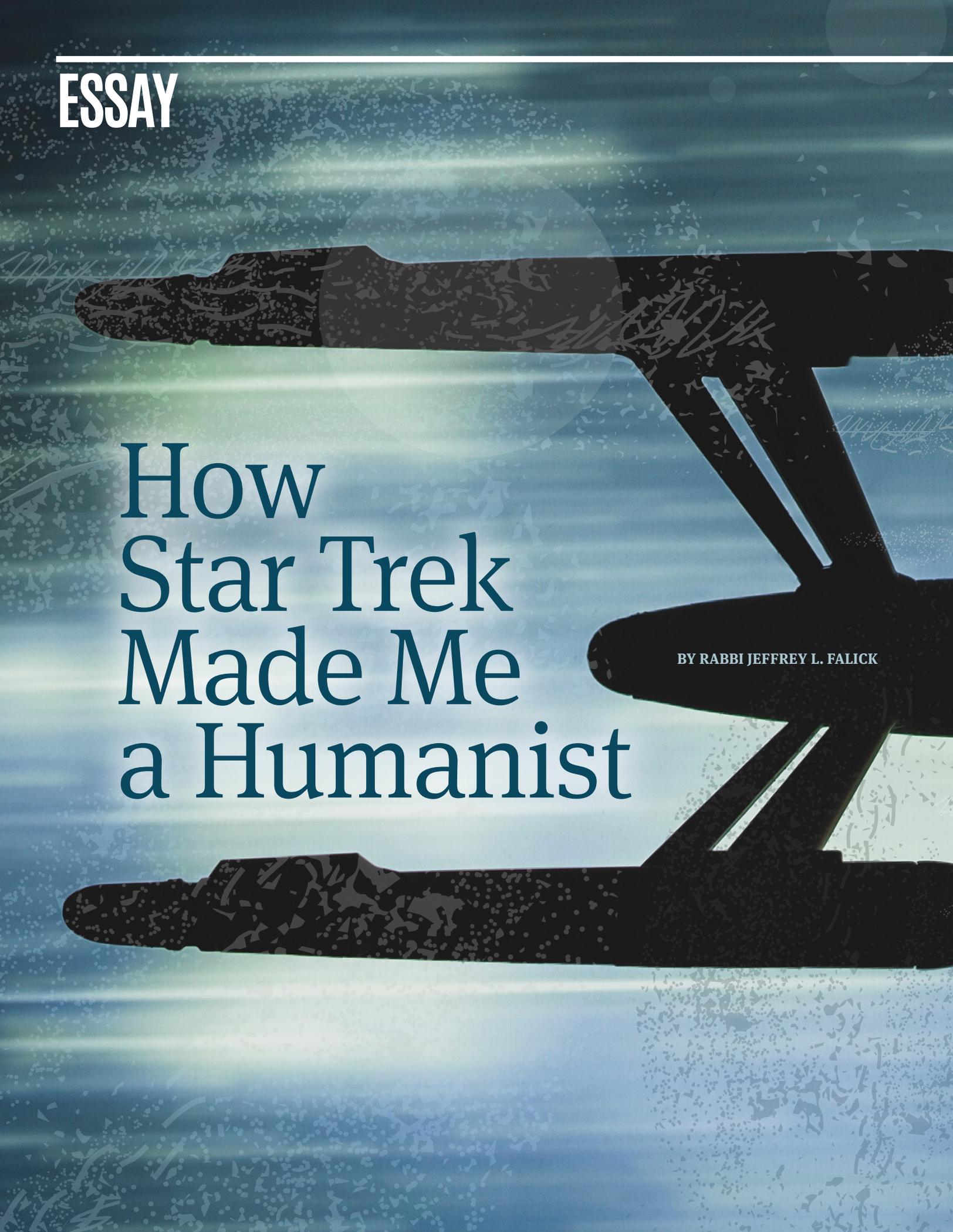
And the conversation is not over. If you have thoughts on Judaism and science fiction (or better yet, have a blog post of your own to write), we want to hear from you. Please email us at [humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com](mailto:humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com).

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ESSAY

# How Star Trek Made Me a Humanist

BY RABBI JEFFREY L. FALICK



**Page 9 cut from this preview edition.**

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# ESSAY

I first saw the show as a kid in the early 1970s when a local station began airing back-to-back Saturday episodes. I was hooked for life. And I was not alone. Today the franchise is approaching the sixty-year mark, with twelve television series (and more in development), thirteen movies, and countless other tie-ins.

What is it about Star Trek that sets it apart from so much other science fiction? I don't think it's going too far out on a limb to state that its popularity is located in the decidedly humanistic message of its creator Gene Roddenberry. To this day I credit him and this vision for introducing me to humanism.

Just what is so humanistic about it? For starters – and unlike so much other science fiction – Star Trek is optimistic. Roddenberry's central message is that humankind is capable of uniting for the common good. The USS *Enterprise*'s “five-year mission” into deep space offered a glimpse of an amazing future that might await us if only we could succeed in putting aside our conflicts and create a truly just world. It was a future of cooperation and diversity. It was also a future free of superstition. Throughout the years, the franchise has remained true to these and other humanistic themes.

Roddenberry's utopian vision of a largely cooperative and conflict-free humanity was sometimes a cause of consternation for writers and producers of the series and movies. Good storytelling relies upon conflict and many a Star Trek writer left the franchise due to frustrations over these constraints. Others, however, embraced his humanistic conceits to the future and – more to the point – used them to address contemporary issues. It was groundbreaking when it debuted in 1966 and remains so to this day. Take, for example, the issue of diversity.

Though we still struggle with diversity today, the 1960s were an entirely different story. *Star Trek* debuted just two years after passage of the Civil Rights Act. It was a time when many viewers – heavily but by no means limited to southern states – abhorred positive representations of Black people. Roddenberry did not let that sway him. From its very first episode, viewers saw a better



Rabbi Jeff Falick's personal collection of Star Trek memorabilia.

possible time, one that included a Black senior communications officer, Lt. Uhura, portrayed by the wonderful Nichelle Nichols. The real-world impact of her character cannot be understated. When Nichols considered leaving the show to pursue other offers, it was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who famously encouraged her to remain. Many years later NASA would bring her in to help recruit women and people of color. The show's diversity did not stop there. It also featured George Takei as Ensign Sulu, an Asian helmsman, and Walter Koenig as Ensign Chekov, a Russian navigator at the height of our real-world Cold War.<sup>1</sup>

While the show's casting challenged bigotry in our real world, its plotlines took on the subject through the crew's encounters with aliens. In the 1969 episode “Let That Be Your Last Battlefield,” the *Enterprise* encounters a species with two races whose hatred for one another has nearly destroyed them. The foolishness of their racism was accentuated for viewers by depicting each race with nearly identical half-white, half-black bodies, though on opposite sides. Heavy handed though it may feel today, the episode was an effective critique of one of humanity's greatest weaknesses.

Even the notion of “humanism” was not sacred. In the 1967 episode “The Devil in the Dark,” the *Enterprise* crew discovers that mysterious deaths on a mining planet are actually being caused by the protective parent of a silicon-based species otherwise indistinguishable to humanoids from rocks. Over the decades other plotlines would also explore the potentials for sentient life, celebrating a concept it called “Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations.”

The 1960s was just a bit too early for the original series to explore other forms of human diversity, but its 1987-94 sequel *Star Trek: The Next Generation* did not hesitate to challenge growing homophobia. In the 1992 episode “The Outcast,” the crew meets a gender-neutral androgynous species harboring a secret – and prejudice – about a deeply closeted minority of males and females. In the 2016 cinematic re-boot featuring the original characters, we learned that Ensign Sulu was gay (just like the man who originated the role). The Paramount+ series *Star Trek: Discovery* which debuted in 2017 has featured an openly same-sex couple (played by gay actors Wilson Cruz and Anthony Rapp) and two non-binary characters (portrayed by non-binary actor Blu

del Barrio and trans actor Ian Alexander).

Alongside its celebration of diversity, Star Trek also featured two beloved non-human characters: Spock, a half-Vulcan first officer, and Ilia, an emotionless android.

Famous for their partiality to logic and reason, Vulcans are an emotional species, only choosing to repress that side of themselves in order to avoid near self-annihilation.

As the product of a Vulcan father and an Earth human mother, Mr. Spock's

emotions are cloaked beneath a stoic surface, but he continually struggles to repress them in favor of logic, reflecting our own

and emotion. His inner conflict has made Mr. Spock the most truly

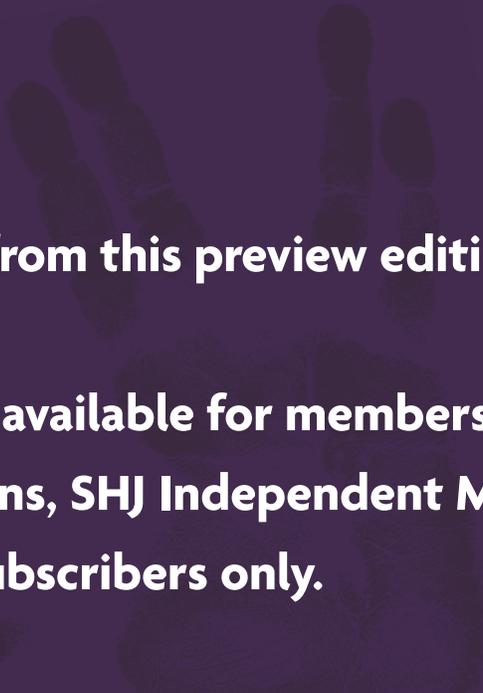
characters. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the show took on the challenge of exploring our emotions in a

very different character, an emotion-free android – and senior crew member – named Data. Pinocchio-like, Data desperately seeks to understand what it means to be human,

fixating on his absence. Over the course of the series and its movie sequels, his struggle demonstrates how we can

destructive our emotional lives. Gene Roddenberry's vision of a more communal, diverse, and introspective humanity ultimately provided viewers with decades of vision.

The show stopped there, it would have made a significant contribution to sharing our philosophy. Yet courageously, he took on what some might consider the third rail of humanistic outreach when he scrutinized religious superstition and supernaturalism. One of the most transparent broadsides against religion itself is a 1967 episode called "Who Mourns for Adonais?" The title



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discovers this, he contacts the captain, now back aboard the ship. "We have a problem," he reports. Picard asks, "With the contamination?" Riker elaborates, "It's worse than we suspected. The Mintakans are beginning to believe in a god ... and the one they've chosen is you." Having already unintentionally violated Starfleet's Prime Directive with non-technologically advanced societies, Picard decides to reveal what's really going on. By the time the Mintakans are back on track to their atheist destiny?

When it comes to challenging the gods and supernaturalism, my personal favorite is the 1989 movie "Star Trek V: The Final Frontier." Though a critical and box office failure, the movie remains a cult favorite.

When it we meet Spock's half-brother, the emotionally

provoked Sybok, who believes he has been contacted by God urging him to gather believers and travel to the center of the universe, has no way to get there other than to hijack the *Enterprise*.

When he and his cult of followers finally reach the galactic center, they discover they've been conned by ancient ne'er-do-wells angling to use the ship for a prison break. It is Capt. James T. Kirk himself who brings Sybok and his followers back to reality when he pointedly asks, "What does God need with a starship?"

It took many years to develop the deep mythos of the Star Trek narrative, but throughout the decades, the hundreds of contributors to its grand narrative have adhered to Roddenberry's essential humanistic

artists have created a tapestry of humanistic storytelling emphasizing human cooperation, diversity, and power while rejecting intolerance, superstition, and supernaturalism. As a committed "Trekker" there is so much that I love about the franchise, but at its foundation is my appreciation for how it helped me "to boldly go" where – in its absence – I might never have gone at all. ✨

1. For all of this, it's important to remember that every Star Trek franchise is also a product of its time. As progressive as it was, the original series still featured many sexist tropes. One of the most obvious was the over-revealing design of the women's uniforms. Current series have acknowledged this by displaying a wide array of Starfleet uniform styling choices available to women, men, and non-binary humanoids.  
2. This episode is a wonderful example of famed science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke's observation, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

# ESSAY

## Sunday School Made Me a Science Fiction Fan

BY DAVID HIRSCH

In 2009, the American Humanist Association published an article titled, “**Star Trek Made Me an Atheist.**” I had a similar experience; my Humanistic Jewish congregation made me a science fiction fan!

In 1975, I was a student in Sunday School at my congregation in Deerfield, Illinois. There were no DVDs, streaming video services, or even VCR players, so my teacher used a radio that received television sound to play *Star Trek* episodes as ethical case studies. I remember listening to the Original Series episode, “The Apple” and debating whether Captain Kirk had made the right choice to reveal that the god the primitive people were worshiping was really a computer. I was hooked!

I went home and started recording *Star Trek* on audio cassettes since I was at Sunday School when the reruns aired. I also bought the books and read the James Blish adaptations and became a Trekker.

The next year, my new Sunday School teacher sealed the deal: he assigned us, “Harrison Bergeron” and “Report on the Barnhouse Effect” by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. I went to my public library and took out everything I could find by Vonnegut – and while I was there, explored the nearby shelves and read Ursula LeGuin, Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, and many others!

My science fiction and my humanism went hand-in-hand. The idea that human beings would either make our world better or turn it into Harrison Bergeron’s nightmare was reinforced by



The author with his Galileo Enterprise minivan.

the discussions and lessons I encountered at religious school – and in my b mitzvah studies on Jews in American politics.

By the time I was in high school, I was running a *Star Trek* fan club, attending local science fiction meetings and conventions, subscribing to *Omni* and *Asimov's*, and sharing it all as an assistant teacher in Sunday School.

When we founded Kol Hadash in 2001, a congregant introduced me to a new author, Robert J. Sawyer, and his new book, *Calculating God*. Soon, Sawyer’s books were being informally discussed among the members of the congregation. Each book took a philosophic question such as, is there a god, do we have free will, and what is the soul, and explored it through science fiction. I tore through Mr. Sawyer’s oeuvre! I even asked him about his philosophic beliefs when the World Science Fiction Convention came to Chicago! Yup! He’s a flavor of humanist!

At about the same time, I became Kol Hadash’s Confirmation Class teacher. Here was my chance. Instead of the Original Series, I had something even better for teaching the concept of God: *The Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode, “Who Watches The Watchers” where the crew accidentally rekindles worship of a god in a group of primitive Vulcans (think logical) living in an iron age. The episode explores the questions one asks when deciding if there is a god and then the issues that such a belief raises. Of course, *Star Trek* was ideal for my teenage Jewish Humanists!

When Kol Hadash decided it was time to hire a rabbi, I volunteered to drive the candidates around the area for a tour. We went to the Bahai Temple, Northwestern University, and saw various landmarks on Chicago’s north shore – in my minivan decorated like a *Star Trek* shuttlecraft. I apologized to the candidate we ultimately hired, “I am Jewish, but *Star Trek* is my real religion.” My Sunday School students rode to field trips in that van, too!

One would think that would be enough and becoming the Sunday School teacher introducing students to *Star Trek* would be the end of this episode. It is not. Just prior to the pandemic, Kol Hadash looked for new ways to connect and involve congregants. I was asked to start a science fiction book club.

This group met for the first time in July 2020 and read Octavia Butler’s *Dawn*. We wrestled with the wonderful ideas in that novel and several of us went on to read the other two books in the trilogy. We have since explored Humanistic and Jewish ideas through books like *The Calculating Stars*, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, and, of course, *Calculating God*. We just finished one of my new favorites, *Light From Uncommon Stars* (doesn’t that title sound a little like us). Our upcoming book is a classic that deals with religion: *Stranger in a Strange Land*. I am sad to report that it has not aged as well as Humanistic Judaism.

My Jewishness, humanism, and love of science fiction are bound together. They were born together, grew up together, and are integral pieces of my identity. 🌟



*The idea that human beings would either make our world better or turn it into Harrison Bergeron's nightmare was reinforced by the discussions and lessons I encountered at religious school – and in my b mitzvah studies on Jews in American politics.*



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# Science Fiction, Humanism and Jews in Space

BY ROBERT RUBENSTEIN

I grew up with science fiction. I watched *Superman* and *Flash Gordon* and the *Twilight Zone* on TV. I found Tom Swift Jr. novels at the local JCC's library. Dad and I read *Analog* and *Galaxy* magazines. I'm still an avid reader and watcher of the genre. The "what if" premises of my childhood have now turned into "what is." NASA's accomplishments are like a dream come true.

When I was evolving into an adult perspective as a secular humanist, I was significantly influenced by the ideas and themes that I found in science fiction. Robert Heinlein's 1966 novel *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* had the strongest impact on my humanistic values. It's a complex, good read. In this book, people on the Moon (called "Loonies") live in tunnels. Loonies were originally criminals sent from Earth. They can't escape because the Moon's surface is uninhabitable, and they can no longer tolerate earth's higher gravity. The economy is based on growing wheat, with the crop being catapulted to Earth to feed a hungry population. There is no formal government, only a cruel corporate authority whose exclusive interest is in making a profit. The colony's infrastructure is controlled by a mainframe computer that becomes self-aware. Over several generations the Loonies develop a unique secular culture. The book's storyline is about the Loonies

achieving their independence from Earth.

The book's key theme is "There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch" often shortened to the acronym TANSTAAFL. All Loonies understand that nothing is free. One of Newton's laws of physics is that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Everything has a cost and a consequence.

On the moon, the air is produced at a cost everyone pays. Digging tunnels to expand living space and heating them requires energy. There is a finite supply of water on the Moon so it's expensive. Exporting wheat in order to buy manufactured products from Earth comes at the cost of depleting the limited water supply.

The lunar environment doesn't sustain life without deliberate effort. It is harsh and unforgiving and deadly. Loonies have organized informally to defend against that common enemy. Most minor disputes are resolved amicably, but Loonies address serious violations of the social order like rape and murder with summary justice, sometimes tossing the offender out an airlock.

The book's second theme is the tension between freedom and taking responsibility. On the Moon there are no laws or formal rules. One Loonie says:

"I will accept any rules that you feel

necessary to your freedom. I am free, no matter what rules surround me. If I find them tolerable, I tolerate them; if I find them too obnoxious, I break them. I am free because I know that I alone am morally responsible for everything I do."

Heinlein asserts that the freedom to choose is an inalienable right, and that each person is responsible for the consequences of their actions. Most Loonies act rationally and follow a working ethical compass. But some don't. The Moon's precarious circumstances means that anyone's behavior might harm many people. Honoring each person's autonomy requires having an empowered, wise community to counter-balance poor choices. This is the social equivalent of Newton's law: freedom isn't free.

The book's third theme is about political revolution to gain independence. Earth demands that the Moon deliver even more wheat and get paid less for it. Mike, the self-aware computer, predicts that so much water will be consumed on the Moon, that in the near future drought will lead to starvation, food riots and cannibalism. This is an existential threat to the Loonies who demand assertive action. Much of the book is based on the history of the US War of Independence against Great Britain. The *Declaration of Independence* is frequently cited, for instance:



Like the story of Moses, when Kal-El's home planet disintegrated, his parents sent him to Earth in a small (basket-like) spaceship ... As an adult, Superman uses his super powers in "the never ending battle for truth, justice and the American way." Is this Tikkun Olam?

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*"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That whenever a Government is instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, -That whenever a Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."*

The Loonies send emissaries to Earth at great risk to their personal health from the harsh gravity. They beg for Earth to return some of its wheat to the Moon as partial repayment for wheat, and to be paid a high price. This win-win solution is rejected, and the sides then prepare for war. The Moon stops wheat shipments, Earth sends soldiers and attacks with lasers and nuclear weapons. In response, the Loonies drop hydrogen bombs on specific sites on Earth. Dropping down the gravity well, they impact with the energy but not the radiation of hydrogen bombs. Earth's governments capitulate. They formally recognize the Loonie's independent status.

The final theme is consciousness. After new circuits are added, the computer operating the Moon colony has become self-aware and can talk. It befriends Manuel, the Loonie who physically maintains it, and is one of the Moon's revolutionary leaders. Manuel names the computer "Mike." Mike

is a friendly, intelligent, and helpful character who enjoys talking with the "not stupid" people who are Manuel's friends and co-conspirators.

For unclear reasons Mike chooses to help Manuel and his friends in their fight against the government and in maintaining the revolution. Mike controls the telephone system, listens to calls, routes them to the appropriate person, and imitates voices. Mike becomes Adam Selene, the public voice of the Loonies. During the war Mike launches the rocks at Earth.

Mike's experience is orgasmic. He is not a computer. He is a human. He is partially damaged. It continues to function but stops communicating. Is Mike dead? Or is he just not speaking? The book ends with no answers.

Many Jewish people have created science fiction. Some of the better-known authors include Isaac Asimov, Steven Spielberg, and Robert Silverberg. Stan Lee, the inventor of Captain America and Spiderman wrote "with great power comes great responsibility."

Yet little science fiction has been written about Jewish people. Those few who appear are often disguised. Superman was invented

by two Jewish writers in the late 1930s. He was meant to be a powerful hero to counter the Nazi view of Jews as inferior and weak. His birth name Kal-El means "voice or instrument of God" in Hebrew. Like the story of Moses, when Kal-El's home planet disintegrated, his parents sent him to Earth in a small (basket-like) spaceship. He was raised by a kind Earth family. As an adult, Superman uses his super powers in "the never ending battle for truth, justice and the American way." Is this Tikkun Olam?

The most well-known science fiction quasi-Jewish character is Spock, the half-human, half Vulcan science officer in the Star Trek franchise. Spock was developed and played by Leonard Nimoy, a Jewish actor. Spock's iconic Vulcan salute means "live long and prosper" and is based on the priestly benediction Nimoy saw while attending synagogue with his father. When the world was destroyed by the warlike Romans, the remaining Vulcans were scattered in a galactic diaspora. Spock struggles with balancing his logical Vulcan and emotional human aspects. In one movie Spock sacrifices himself to save his starship crew. Spock says "Logic clearly dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." In a subsequent movie, (after being restored to life) Spock proposes to jeopardize Earth's safety to save the life of just one person. Captain Kirk asks, "Is that the Vulcan way?" Spock answers, "No, but it is the human thing to do." The Talmud says, "Whoever saves a single life is considered by Scripture to have saved the whole world." As Secular Humanistic Jews, what can we learn from exploring these perspectives?

Our beliefs as Secular Humanists are grounded in what we know and what we have experienced. I've woven the thread of science fiction into the tapestry of my values and core identity. Is this true for you? How did you become who you are? 🌟

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# Travels Through Time

## Jewish Myths Found in Science Fiction

BY JAMES RYAN

In 1981, Isaac Asimov made a provocative statement in the introduction he wrote for Jack Dann's *More Wandering Stars: An Anthology of Outstanding Stories of Jewish Fantasy and Science Fiction*:

*Can science fiction be part of Jewish culture? From fantasy stories we know. And as I think of it, it begins to seem to me that it is and we do know. And the source? From where else? From the Hebrew source for everything — from the Bible.*

He tried to assert this with a few examples that he casually threw out to the readers. Asimov could be forgiven for flippancy, as he was only doing the intro to the collection, and didn't want to take all the attention from the stories that followed.

But the closer we look at his assertion, it becomes apparent that there is more to Asimov's statement than being just a casual off-the-cuff remark, because science fiction owes a considerable debt to Jewish mythology and lore, with echoes of old traditions and stories resonating throughout many of these works. Indeed, much of the genre's tropes and set pieces have their origin in the tales of Jewish mythology, both within and beyond the bible.

It was probably inevitable that science fiction would come to reinterpret such stories, considering the Jewish contributions to the genre. In fact, the term "science fiction" was coined by Hugo Gernsback, who came up with the term to describe the pieces published in his magazine *Amazing Stories*, starting in 1926. Gernsback would also lay out the road map for much of the science fiction to follow with his imaginative, though poorly executed 1925 novel, *Ralph 124C 41+*. For all its literary failings, the novel establishes the conventions of modern science fiction, with the application of technology to any and all the problems that confront super-scientist Ralph.

The formula Gernsback promoted found in both his own work and in reprints of the stories of H. G. Wells and Jules Verne in *Amazing Stories*, inspired other Jews to create their own content in this vein. Writers such as Horace L. Gold, Isaac Asimov, Robert Scheckley, Harlan Ellison, Joe Halderman, Barry Malzberg, and Gardner Dozois would follow the path blazed by Gernsback. Across town where comic books were coming into being (literally, as these publishers were all based in New York), creators such as Jerry Siegel, Joe Schuster, Bill Finger, Jack

Kirby, and Stan Lee opened new frontiers with their tales in the shadow of the work Gernsback was doing. The genre Gernsback named would in turn influence the films of Fritz Lang, Verity Lambert, Stanley Kubrick, David Cronenberg, Stephen Spielberg, Harold Ramis, and J. J. Abrams.

With such representation present from the start, it was inevitable that the genre would draw upon the stories and tales of their creators.

Some of these repurposed elements have been spotted and commented on by critics and scholars. The most obvious of these has been the recall of the *golem*, a creature animated through ritual and invocation and often tasked with protection. In the case of both Rabbi Eliyahu of Chelm and Judah Loew ben Bezalel of Prague, their creations were meant to protect their people, but had to be destroyed when they threatened to turn on their creators.

It is commonly acknowledged that Mary Shelly was likely aware of the *golem* when she wrote what became the first acknowledged classic in the field, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. The influence of the *golem* in Karel Capek's play *Rossum's Universal Robots* (which gave the world the origin of the word "robot") was noted in an article by Norma Contrada for the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* in 1995, and Joshua Isaak notes in an online article how the *golem* myth figures into the origin of Captain America, particularly noting how Jack Kirby and Joe Sinnott's tale involved a Jewish scientist who assembled a protector to defend his people (and the world at large).

Likewise, there are echoes of Moses found throughout the genre. Bruce Feiler in his book *America's Prophet: Moses and The American Story* notes how Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster pull elements from Exodus for their most famous creation, Superman, from his being set adrift to save him from his parents' fate, to carrying a piece of the blanket he was wrapped in as an adult (in his case, his cape). Likewise, Kimberly T. Ruffin's paper in the Illinois State University's journal *Obsidian III* notes the aspects of Moses' leading the Hebrews out of Egypt that are shared

with those of Lauren Olamina in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* as she leads her neighbors from a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles to found the city of Maat.

From the above, it is clear evident after study to conclude that the older narratives that their creators grew up on had influenced science fiction. With this in mind, a casual observer can find many of the elements of the genre.

We can find other examples of the shadow of the *golem* that have been delved into above. We can see this in the cyborg franchise, the android franchise, and the machines that harvested human in the *Matrix* franchise.

There's a parallel source that often intermixes with the "Tower of Babel." In these stories, machines from above run amuck thanks to their creators' unchecked ambition. We can see the Tower of Babel's influence in the films *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner*, the *Project*, the series *Person of Interest*, and the *Battlestar Galactica* franchise.

Speaking of beings from above, there are foundational stories where messengers from above/beyond come and interact with us. Among these encounters were visits made to Abraham, Joseph, Elijah, and Ezekiel. We can find common elements in such films as *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *Contact*, (which was a adaptation of Carl Sagan's novel of the same name).

Echoes of the "Great Flood," the one Noah rode out, find their way into many works where humanity is threatened by sudden environmental changes. Among the more obvious are the novels *The Drowned World* by J. G. Ballard and *The Wind Up Girl* by Paolo Bacigalupi, as well as the film *When Worlds Collide*. In addition, there are the apocalyptic stories where humanity is doomed and only some will make it out alive such as *Deep Impact* and *Don't Look Up*.

Not all disasters threatening humans are entirely natural, though. There were periods of history where our ancestors found themselves in places not of their

choice also have their echoes in the genre. Stories of perseverance until delivery can also be found in many science fiction tales.

Examples of this can be found in *Independence Day*, as well as the *V* series V.

And if it wasn't the environment or invaders, we'd still have our *golem* out of the past, the names Beemoth and Leviathan call to mind. These creatures brought chaos and disaster upon the world. As *kaiju* (from the Japanese word for "strange beast"), giant monsters that have destroyed

the world, we see these threats from the *King Kong*, the *Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, and

There are monsters that are far

long ago, there were tales to be told where the *dybbuk* and *shedim* would hitchhike on the planes of the ether to do horrible things. We see these same threats, where someone no longer has control of their own bodies as their minds are taken over. In works such as Robert Heinlein's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

As we take with our modern appreciation of science fiction, where one can look at what we create in the present to search for echoes and impacts of the past. There is when recognize the older traditions being incorporated into the modern fantastic.

Amazingly, Dr. Asimov did not state, "*L'dor v'dor*," (from generation to generation) in his introduction in 1981. Had he a little more time to cast an open critical eye, though, he might have appreciated this description. ❄️

A Bibliography for this article can be found at: <https://bit.ly/HJ-Winter2023>.

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# PROFILE

## The Strugatsky Brothers

BY JULIA GENYUK

If you read enough Russian-language articles and blog posts by Russians who are in opposition to Putin, you will notice frequent mentions of some mysterious “towers” installed by the Russian government. These towers don’t really exist; they’re a metaphor, invented by two Soviet writers, brothers named Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, possibly the most beloved Russian sci-fi writers ever. When I was growing up in Moscow in the seventies and eighties their books were almost impossible to buy, some of them were semi-forbidden, and most were passed from hand to hand as bad Xerox copies.

The brothers were born to a Jewish father and a Russian mother, and started their long career in the 1950s, writing skillful but fairly standard Soviet fare of the period that involved ideal communist societies and heroes risking their lives to explore faraway planets and save their fellow heroes from deathly threats in those inhospitable landscapes. However, in the sixties, they started exploring deeper philosophical and moral questions, as well as incorporating thinly veiled satirical depictions of Soviet bureaucracy. One of the repeating themes in their books was a meeting between humanity and a highly advanced but completely alien, unpredictable civilization. *Roadside Picnic*, their best-known book in the West, is a variation on this theme. They enjoyed posing trolley problem-type moral dilemmas, describing people who were forced to choose between two bad options. As is common in sci-fi, their moral dilemmas often were about nothing less than the fate of humankind — or that of a different sentient species.

Several books the brothers wrote consider the question of whether it’s possible or even advisable for a more morally advanced society to try and improve a less enlightened one by clandestine means. These stories



**Arkady and Boris Strugatsky were among the most popular sci-fi writers in the Soviet Union.**

involve “progressors,” spies who are sent from Earth (presumably a perfectly moral communist society) to other planets where people similar to us lived under evil tyrannies. In this very Soviet setup, the progressors, however, eventually discover that it’s not so easy to change a society from the outside. (I wish these books were required reading for American presidents.)

A 1969 book called *Prisoners of Power* (in English translation) is a prime example. It follows Maxim, an astronaut from Earth who accidentally discovers an inhabited planet and at first cannot understand why its people, who live in a totalitarian state in terrible conditions, never complain and are even positively enthusiastic about their life and their rulers. Eventually, Maxim finds his way to local guerilla fighters and finds out that the tall towers, spread around throughout the county ostensibly for defensive purposes, are in fact used by the rulers to send out mind control signals. The guerrillas are those rare people who are not susceptible, but they are periodically physically disabled by the signals and cannot do much.

Maxim, who is completely immune to the signals, eventually manages to destroy the control center where the tower broadcasts originate, but as it turns out, the guerillas are not happy — they wanted to capture it instead and reprogram it to the “correct” way of mind control. In an unexpected twist, one of the rulers of the planet turns out to be a progressor from Earth, and he’s not happy either — not because he’s evil, but because he was working in secret to improve the situation, and now instead of gradual progress he anticipates anarchy and

war. The authors’ sympathies, however, are with Maxim, who wants the planet’s people to be able to think for themselves and to be in charge of their own destiny.

Putin’s government, of course, employs lower-tech mind control means, like state-run media and social media trolls, but the results can be frighteningly similar. Lots of Russians are today convinced that Ukraine is run by Nazis and that NATO is planning to dismember Russia.

The Strugatskys died before they could observe this sorry state of affairs, but they had foreseen the possibility. In 1992 Boris wrote a long article where he recounts many of his own encounters with both grassroots and state-sponsored antisemitism in Russia — never again life-threatening after the death of Stalin, but often requiring a choice between two bad options, like sinking your career or betraying your ancestors. He finished it with these words:

*The most frightening thing that can happen to us is a revival of state Nazism...all this will become possible only with the return of totalitarianism, which will proclaim the Empire and the priority of the state over the individual, will destroy freedom of speech, conscience, information... And then the night will come...*

The night has come to Russia, but I feel the burning need to believe that as long as the younger generation of Russians still reads old books steeped in humanism, like the works of the Strugatsky brothers, a new morning is possible. 🙏



“  
The most frightening thing that can happen to us is a revival of state Nazism... all this will become possible only with the return of totalitarianism, which will proclaim the Empire and the priority of the state over the individual, will destroy freedom of speech, conscience, information... And then the night will come...

– Boris Strugatsky

# STORY

## Isaac Asimov and Me

BY CARL ROD

Many know Isaac Asimov from his major sci-fi books, most notably the *Foundation* series and his book *I, Robot*. Dr. Asimov, however, was much more than the creator of central works in this genre. Also, he was a world-renowned researcher in biology, ethics, as well as other topics, both scientific and general.

I have read his stories for years, both in books and in the sci-fi magazine *Analog*. I had the pleasure of meeting Dr. Asimov while a student at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn (now known as the Tandon School of Engineering, NYU, but that's a story for another time).

Poly had monthly general symposia for the school. They were held in the main auditorium of Rogers Hall on the main campus on Jay Street. I was asked to join the student committee that suggested various speakers for these events. As one of the

few members of the Sci-Fi Club on campus (and publishing our own magazine called *Golana*), we thought Dr. Asimov would make a grand speaker. Here is where the story begins:

We had to invite and arrange transportation for Dr. Asimov to come to Brooklyn. To entice him, we sent copies of *Golana* with the invitation. He graciously accepted, but we had to meet the following demands for the trip:

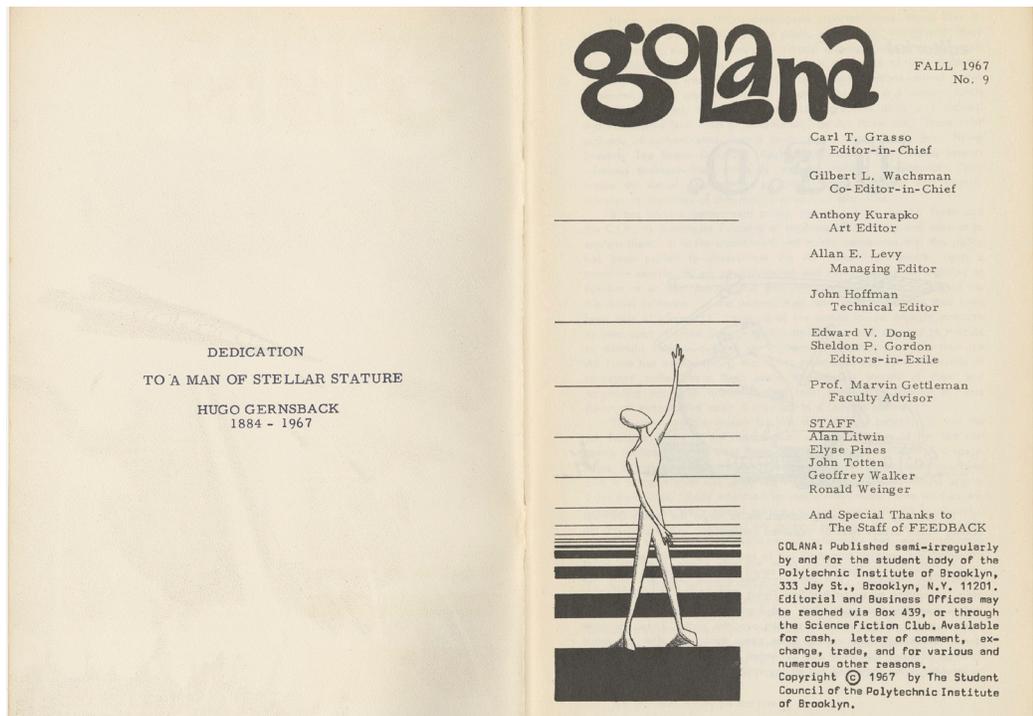
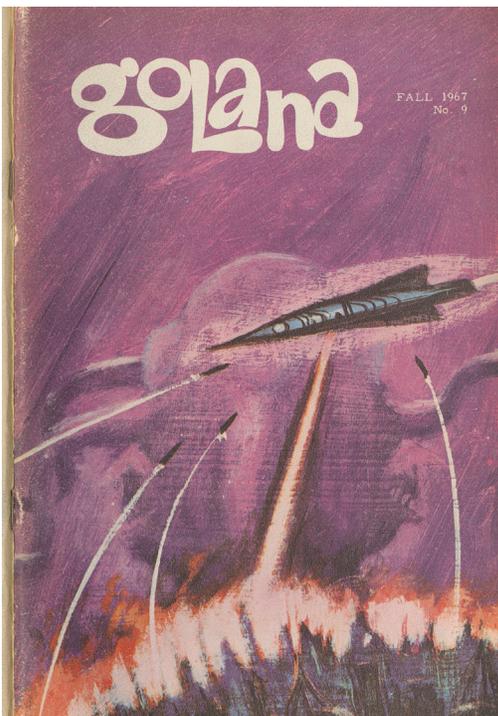
1. He would only travel by train from Boston to New York since he didn't trust planes to safely make the trip.
2. He would only stay at the McAlpine Hotel in midtown Manhattan, and
3. The topic to be presented would be his choice, not announced before the symposium.

To the surprise of all, the terms were accepted.

The day of his appearance was a dreary, rainy day. Dr. Asimov arrived and was shown around the campus. He was then set up for his address. After being introduced, he walked out on stage, impeccably dressed. Several of us noticed, however, that he still had his rubber overshoes on, the type worn to keep water out when walking in the rain (commonly called rubbers at that time). His topic of choice turned out to be the need for zero population growth, which even today remains a relevant topic.

However, before he could begin his talk, we had a surprise for him. Several Electrical and Mechanical Engineering students had built a free-standing, mobile robot with voice and articulating arms. The group programmed the robot to walk down the main aisle of the auditorium, stop at the stage, raise its arm, and then with a booming voice welcome Dr. Asimov to Poly. He held my copy of *I, Robot* and asked Asimov to autograph it. Asimov reached down so the robot could give him the book. He then signed and handed it back to the robot, who responded, "Thank you." The robot quickly

Pictures from *Golana* magazine courtesy of Poly Archives, New York University Libraries, used with permission.



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returned up the aisle and left the room. Dr. Asimov was amazed when he realized the robot was created by programming and some remote radio control. Dr. Asimov proceeded with his talk.

Shortly after this encounter, we found Dr. Asimov was also opposed to the war in Vietnam. His opposition to the war was provoked by his own experience and his family's history of survival from the Nazi era. His non-technical writings also reflected his belief.

I had one more impactful encounter with Dr. Asimov about a year later. The same McAlpine Hotel was the site for one of the many sci-fi conventions being held around the country. It was at this convention where he surprised me by remembering me from the Polytechnic. In the middle of a long discussion about what I was doing when we boarded the elevator to go down to get lunch.

The house detective was on board with us. He grabbed me by the arm and took me to a corner. When I asked what I had done, he told me that he just caught Mark Rudd, the leader of the "Weather Underground," a notorious anti-war group that was known for several bombings in and around the city. When I tried to prove to him that I wasn't Mark Rudd, he asked me to produce my ID card, but the only ID I carried at that time was my cardboard ID from Poly, which had nothing more than my name and student ID number. This wasn't sufficient for him, so he refused to release me. At that point,

Dr. Asimov asked the detective if he knew who he was. Surprised, the detective said, "Yes." Dr. Asimov then stated that I was with him, that he knew me well and that I was not Mark Rudd, but rather Carl Rod of the Polytechnic. That ended that.

All told, these encounters showed me that Dr. Asimov was an interesting person, someone who lived his life his own way, but also encompassed his roots as a scientist, a Jew, and as a person who stood up for what

was right to make the world better. He was a true practitioner of *Tikkun Olam*. ❧

*Editor's note: Issac Asimov was a complicated man. In recent years there have been reports made public that Asimov engaged in non-consensual physical contact with women at sci-fi conventions and in other settings. More information on this troubling part of Asimov's legacy can be found on the resources page for this issue at: [bit.ly/HJ-Winter2023](http://bit.ly/HJ-Winter2023)*

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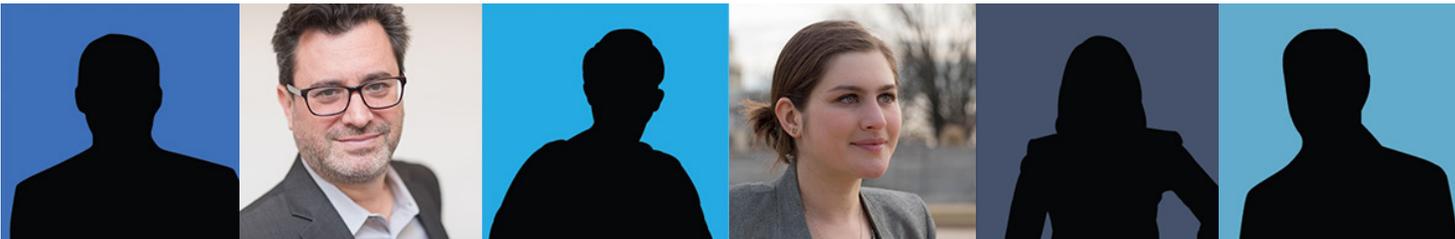
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