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We Are All Ozickians Now

Ari Hoffman

Philip Roth is dead, but Cynthia Ozick lives. The former's passing unleashed a pent-up torrent of praise, and a not-insignificant stream of criticism, much of it flowing from Roth's depiction of women. Remarkably little attention, however, has been paid to the truth that after Roth's passing, the greatest Jewish writer who still has access to pen, paper, or laptop is a demure woman in New Rochelle who has been writing the most extraordinary prose for a generation. It is long past time not just to celebrate Ozick, but to really read her. Perhaps the best reason to do so is that far more than Roth, her work has anticipated the current weather of Jewish life.

Never as famous as her elder peers Roth and Saul Bellow, she nevertheless is central to understanding American Jewry and its books. The audiences for which Roth wrote, antagonized, and played a part in defining are demographically exiting the stage. Jewish fiction, like Jews, will either become more overtly Jewish, or cease to be Jewish at all. Ozick is the kind of *altneu* writer whose style will outlast the vagaries of literary fashion. At a time when Jewish writers were enraptured by what Roth called the "American beserk," Ozick worried and wondered about the content of Jewishness; its books, theology, and art. Most of all, she puzzled over how to be Jewish, and write Jewishly, in English. These concerns once seemed remote, her own ideological cul de sac. Lengthening perspectives, however, have revealed her centrality. Any writer who wants to speak to where the Jews are now will have to sound like Ozick, no matter the literary sheepskin in which they choose to parade around.

It is an improbable development, to be sure. Ozick has always been a different, and to some degree difficult, kind of writer. Mostly that's because she takes religion seriously. For her, art is not a way to flee the synagogue, but to burrow more deeply into its nooks and crannies. While Ozick can write realist prose that rivals the greatest practitioners, her writing comes alive most when it meets ideas and magic. Her work is filled with golems and druids, rabbis and magicians. Her sentences are well acquainted with the spiritual. This writer who worries over semi colons and seraphim is of great use to our troubled moment. The first thing she offers is a robust roster of female characters: the conjuring would-be-mayor Ruth Puttermesser, the haunting Rosa from *The Shawl*, and perhaps most indelibly of all Ozick herself; the character who speaks her way into being in the essays, slashing, anxious, heretically pious.

Second, unlike Roth, the people who populate her books are rarely famous in their own worlds. She creates no Carnovsky, swaggering down the street to annoying acclaim, nor a Swede Lvov still vaulting through the dreams of middle-aged men from Newark. Her people are the little people: Edelshtein from "Envy," the rabbi from "The Pagan Rabbi." These are odd, sideways characters who vibrate with a particular frequency of Jewish intensity. As Edelshtein sputters about the newer crop of Jewish writers,

> Spawned in America, pogroms a rumor, *mamaloshen* a stranger, history a vacuum. Also many of them were still young, and had black eyes, black hair, and red beards. A

> few were blue-eyed, like the *cheder-yinglach* of his youth. Schoolboys. He was certain he did not envy them, but he read them like a sickness. They were reviewed and praised, and meanwhile they were considered Jews, and knew nothing.

Edelshtein's motives, and those of much of Ozick's brood, spring not from sex, but from syntax; conversations about Jewishness that are quick witted and thickly learned. It is a singular stroke of good fortune that our greatest prose stylist is also our most serious thinker, conjoining two traits that usually wander off in separate directions. This is a perilous kind of union, and risks violating the prohibition of *kilayim*, yoking together breeds of different species. Ideas can kill fiction, and fiction can enervate ideas. If the cadence is right, however, the two form a truth-telling armada well equipped to handle the hybrid threats of aesthetic philistinism and intellectual cant.

Style and thought map onto Ozick's twinned virtuosity in fiction and nonfiction. This too makes her contemporaneously indispensable. Hard times, and hard thinking, lie ahead for the Jews. At a time when Israel is a a divisive issue for American Jews ensuring that the community does not fracture, or that the break mends, requires both the ludic resources of fiction and the pungent pliability of the essay. The union also calls to mind older Jewish literary forms: the mixture of modes in the Bible, the extraction of law from narrative in *parshanut*, and the swirling hybrid that is the *Talmud*. The difference between Ozick and these other works is that she is profoundly troubled by this braiding together. Modernity presents new and interwoven dangers.

Ozick knows that the churn of modern life can wash away the moral and ethical distinctions that limn the boundaries of a well-shaped people and finely-hewed art. Her genius is everywhere one that rebels against the Tower of Babel. For her, salience adheres in difference. As she notes in a review of Martin Amis' Holocaust novel *The Zone of Interest*, "Characters in novels (unless those novels are meant to be allegories) are no one but themselves, not stand-ins or symbols of societies or populations. History is ineluctably bound to the authenticity of documents; but all things are permitted to fiction, however contradictory it may be of the known record."

If there is no genre, nothing is permitted. But within constraint, freedom is found. Elsewhere, in a key essay entitled "The Rights of History and the Rights of the Imagination," Ozick draws the point even more sharply: "When the imposture remains within the confines of a book, we call it art. But when impersonation escapes the bounds of fiction and invades life, we call it hoax - or, sometimes, fraud." The language of medium shades into a kind of martial or cross-border resonance that suggests the stakes Ozick sees in these distinctions. The sharpness of the line invites speculation on the payoff that comes from smudging it and wondering about a more fluid choreography for the dance between life and letters. As Adam Kirsch observes, "nearly all of Ozick's best fiction is about writers and writing." This is not only because Ozick is a writer who thinks through writing. Fiction is not only "the nearest thing to life," in George Eliot's phrase. The writing of it happens *in* life, and it loots the materials of life, and reshapes lives. Blurred boundaries are part of the charm.

Ozick's troubling over borders now seems to be a prophetic anxiety. Just one Jewish example can stand in for a set of concerns that resonate globally. Michael Chabon's recent commencement speech at HUC was a clarion call that conflated metaphoric walls with literal

ones, and urged Jews to dispense with both. For Chabon, holiness is not *kedushah* but compound; his is a *musar* of mixture. He concluded his address with this rousing peroration: "The survival of Judaism was ensured not through standing pat, turning inward, or building walls but through adaptation, moving outward, opening our minds to the ideas, and our ears to the music, and our mouths to the languages, and our bellies to the kitchen-wisdom of the people living on the other side of whatever boundary line we chose, in our collective wisdom, to ignore." Ozick, whose work is full of well- spiced kitchen wisdom and many-tongued language, would not disagree with this voraciousness, but might remind us that the task is to eat, and not be consumed in turn.

Very well. "Knock down the walls" and "Abolish the checkpoints," as Chabon urges. But remember and do not forget that the capacity to create is only as valuable as the ability to preserve, which holds true for a nation, a country, or a writer. And the words that save must be as sharply bounded as black fire on white, and as fibrously knotted as the medley of flames that singe the line between secular and sacred, and show us our glimmering selves at the very tips of our haunted fingers.

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Rav Kook's Space Odyssey

Bezalel Naor

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the appearance of the classic film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a collaborative work by science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke and filmmaker Stanley Kubrick. The film traces the evolution of mankind "from ape to angel," starting with prehistoric hominids and ending with the Star Child, with much attention lavished on the intervening species we call *Homo sapiens*. The development of man is carefully monitored from outer space by vastly superior unseen aliens who from eon to eon accelerate the process of evolution through the intervention of a mysterious monolith. Indeed, the iconic black monolith is the motif that remains with most viewers of this cinematic wonder.

To this day, interpreters are divided as to whether *Space Odyssey* is optimistic or pessimistic in outlook. According to the latest filmography by Michael Benson, *Space Odyssey: Stanley Kubrick, Arthur C. Clarke, and the Making of a Masterpiece* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), the two collaborators brought to the project diametrically opposed perspectives. Kubrick, hot on the heels of his 1964 satire, *Dr. Strangelove* (a *noir* comedy concerning the nuclear arms race), had a rather dark vision of humanity. Clarke, on the other hand, was the eternal optimist. In Benson's words: "It was an idea both could get behind, Clarke with his innate optimism about human possibilities, and Kubrick with his deeply ingrained skepticism" (p. 3). The unlikely alliance between a Jewish boy from the Bronx and an English gentleman (later knighted by Queen Elizabeth II as Sir Arthur C. Clarke) "was the most consequential collaboration in either of their lives" (p. 13). The savage brutality of prehistoric man on the African savanna may be credited to Kubrick; the beatific, almost messianic, image of the Star Child at the film's conclusion was Clarke's contribution. As Benson put it, "The single most optimistic vision in [Kubrick's] entire body of work—*2001*'s Star Child—was Clarke's idea" (ibid.).

*

By all accounts, Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook (1865-1935) was a child of the cosmos. This is apparent to any student of his works. His famous *pensée, Shir Meruba* or *Fourfold Song* (the title was provided by his disciple the Nazirite), bespeaks the evolution of human consciousness in ever-widening circles from individualism to nationalism to humanism to a loving embrace of the universe as a whole. The *pensée* ends on this note:

The Song of the Soul,
the Song of the Nation,
the Song of Man,
and the Song of the World –
all combine…
(*Orot ha-Kodesh*, ed. Rabbi David Cohen, vol. 2, p. 445)

What is less known is that as a young man, Rav Kook actually composed a poem (in free verse), *"Sihat Malakhei ha-Sharet"* (The Conversation of the Angels), which, well before Kubrick, traces the trajectory of man from earthbound existence to future space travel. In 1968, when *Space Odyssey* took the "silver screen" by storm, travel beyond the earth's atmosphere was already a reality. NASA's Apollo program was well underway and, just a year later, on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin would be the first men to walk on the surface of the moon. But when Rav Kook composed his poem, space travel was truly visionary.

The recurring image of Rav Kook's overview of human history—written from the perspective of the angels above—is the dyad of "speck of dust" (*garger avak*) and "shining disk" (*adashah notzetzet*), i.e., earth and sun. It will take many "revolutions" (*sibbuvim*) of the speck of dust around the shining disk, many "changings of creatures" (*halifot yitzurim*), which is to say generations of man, in order to break free of the hold the dyad clamps on human consciousness. Progressing from the primitive state, "the creature" is subjected to a rude awakening when the Copernican Revolution reveals that its "home" (*ma'on*) is in motion around the sun. However, the supposed "lesson in humility" fails to unify mankind. Instead, as Rav Kook points out, in the several centuries that have passed since Copernicus published *De Revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*) in 1543, territorial disputes, fratricide, and warfare have been the order of the day.

Coming from Rav Kook, this stark realism is refreshing. Too often, his presentations have been stereotyped as Pollyannish. While yet he lived, he was on occasion ridiculed by his rabbinic contemporaries for being overly optimistic. The Ashkenazic Rabbi of Tiberias, Moshe Kliers, quipped: "Dots appear to him as lights." (The reference was to the title of Rav Kook's seminal work, *Orot*, or *Lights*, his messianic vision of the renascence of Israel.) Surprisingly, Rav Kook's narrative of the human race seems spot-on.

Though the road to intellectual maturity may be bumpy, eventually man will make it to the stars. Rav Kook is confident that the humbling discovery of how infinitesimally small we truly are will register with an unbelieving humanity. In the final stanza, the angels acknowledge, perhaps begrudgingly, that the "mighty among midgets," by dint of its intellect and imagination, and above all, its sheer willpower, shall one day overtake them.

Postscript: When I read Rav Kook's coinage, "mighty among midgets" (*abbir nanasim*), I was reminded of Rabbi Isaac Hutner's response to someone who argued that those who bitterly opposed his mentor Rav Kook in Jerusalem were *gedolim* (greats): *"Velkher gedolim? Zei zennen alle geven Lilliputen!"* "Which greats? They were all Lilliputians!" (The *Rosh Yeshiva* was well acquainted with Jonathan Swift's satire, *Gulliver's Travels*.)

Sihat Malakhei ha-Sharet
The Conversation of the Angels
by Rav Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook
Translated and Adapted by Bezalel Naor

A speck of dust
orbits a shining disk.
Some fragile creatures call it "Earth."
The disk they revere as "Sun."

As tiny as the speck is,
it is great
compared to its neighbor
circling it about.

Of the creatures there is one
possessing language and logic.
It named itself "Man,"
mighty among midgets.

It stands erect.
So does it walk,
moving parts of its body.
It calls them "Legs."

From the rays of the disk
enveloping the speck
there is light,
perceptible by a small circle,
aqueous and fleshly.
The creature calls it the "Eye."

This tiny creature
is full of powerful imagination,
as it rises up on its speck of dust
facing the shining disk.

The speck is great in its eyes
and to the disk it accords the glory of a god.
The creature is filled with
feelings of pride.

It measures the speck's orbit around the disk
to mark "Time"
sufficient to gauge
its habitation upon its speck.

The rays of the disk
also stream heat
that the creature and its neighbors on the speck
might live.

The duration of its life
amounts to so many orbits
of the speck
around the shining disk.

Life is in flux.
A creature dies.
And others replace it.
Wondrously, they are all of a single image.

This wonderful creature,
mighty among midgets,
has a conception, a thought
and a very mighty will.

Among the flock of this creature
the will differs much.
And so the conception.
What a wonder!

And in the fluctuation of these wondrous creatures
a conception settles in.
It continues to grow
and to expand its horizon.

After many orbits of
the speck around the disk,
the secret is known:
Man's manor is in motion!

The discovery is great.
A mystery has been divulged:
The entire speck
revolves around the shining disk.

The creature is so proud
of its wonderful discovery.
As if it created
worlds for eternity.

When these creatures meet
upon parts of the speck,

sometimes there breaks out an altercation,
a mighty disagreement.

They all come up with
the novel idea of fratricide.
They meet to plan
terminating life.

They quarrel over a piece of the speck.
Who should rule?
"Sovereignty" they call it.

After many orbits
and many changings of the creatures,
the conception grows,
the thought takes wing.

It appears from their movements
that they've begun to appreciate their petty value
and their pride in the speck-and-the-disk has been reduced.
It's but a few more orbits until their intelligence is sharpened.

When these puny creatures
will inherit the earth of "Truth,"
their spirit will soar
despite their humble abode.

They will recognize their true measure,
these tiny creatures.
Then they will truly grow in spirit.
When they will search for habitation
upon the terrain of "Truth."

"Truth is the living spring
to which we angels
accord honor."

With intelligence they will ascend
beyond the orbit of the speck,
beyond the compass of the disk.
In infinite expanses they will dwell.

Love will nestle in their midst,
strength of spirit from the Life of Worlds.
When they fully comprehend
how miniscule they are.

"These diminutive creatures

surpass us in knowledge and *élan*;
in mighty will,
full of unbounded expanses."

Eternal life shall start flowing in them.
Mighty horizons shall open for them.
From world to world they'll garner strength
and the spirit of the Living God will pulsate in them.

(*Otzerot ha-Rayah*, ed. Rabbi Moshe Zuriel, vol. 2 [Rishon le-Zion, 2002], pp. 575-577)

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