ARE WE ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE?

EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENCE MAY BE FAR MORE UNLIKELY THAN WE THINK

by Ethan Siegel

MARVEL AND THE JEWS
John Podhoretz

THE BONES OF BRISK
Meir Y. Soloveichik

THE GILDED SWEATSHOP
Rob Long
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EDITOR'S COMMENTARY

The Human Miracle

JOHN PODHORETZ

Our earth would be so much better if it didn't have people, wouldn’t it? That notion—what you might call a view of original sin absent possibility of redemption—is the hidden backbone of radical environmentalism. Alan Weisman’s highly influential 2007 book, The World Without Us, offers an idyllic view of the natural healing that would cure the earth of its unnatural deformities were humankind to vanish. Its themes are echoed almost daily in the press to this day.

Weisman’s book was an echo of the idea espoused by Greenpeace founder Paul Watson, who once said, “We, the human species, have become a viral epidemic to the earth...[the] AIDS of the earth.”

Modern environmentalism situates human wickedness not in man’s behavior toward other men, as the Bible does, but in the misuse and mistreatment of natural resources, and it thereby judges humankind.

We are bad. We should be punished. We shouldn’t even be here.

But what if there is nothing but us?

These thoughts were provoked by Ethan Siegel’s lead article in this month’s issue. Siegel does not take up the larger moral or spiritual questions raised in “Are We Alone in the Universe?” Rather, he martials probability theory and circumstantial evidence to suggest there is a very real possibility that life—more precisely—intelligent life does not exist anywhere else but here.

This would not have seemed shocking before we began to learn as much as we have learned in the past hundred years about the cosmos and before we ourselves began our explorations beyond our atmosphere. We have come to know so much about the sheer size not only of our galaxy but also about the universe itself that it has become axiomatic to anyone who thinks seriously about life beyond our earth that it simply must exist and that we just haven’t been able to make contact yet.

I think this notion has something to do with the environmentalist downgrade of humanity over the past half century. Some of us can believe humanity is beyond salvation and the world would be better without it because, after all, we are not all there is; somewhere else there is intelligent life, and it’s better than we are, and so our existence just isn’t that important in the cosmic scale of this.

But read Siegel’s article and you will see that the one-in-a-googleplex possibility that there is no other life is nowhere near as far-fetched as it might seem at first. He lays out the unimaginable complexity of the processes that made elementary life possible and how they were followed by its slow transmutation into higher forms.

As with all such explorations of the unfathomable, the ideas that rise from this inevitably bump up against the inexplicable. You can lay out the predicates for intelligent life, but there is no way to account for the development of consciousness. This is one of the reasons why evolutionary fanatics have become so insistent on denying the inscrutability of consciousness—because a person’s capacity for self-knowledge simply cannot be explained away as a by-product of evolution itself.

“What a piece of work is a man!” says Hamlet. “How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!” And then, being Hamlet, he lowers the boom: “And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not man. But he should.”

Humankind may be the greatest miracle of the universe—and the very fact that it might be the miracle points to the divine as the source. God gave us free will, and it is our perversity that we use it to suggest our existence isn’t a gift but a curse. Man delights not man. But he should.
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Commentary

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To the Editor:

HATE-CRIME HOAXES, as Wilfred Reilly makes clear, are part of a larger movement to portray America as irredeemably bigoted, when, in fact, we are a remarkably open, generous, and welcoming nation (“Hate-Crime Hoaxes,” April). There are two examples of false claims of American bigotry that have become particularly effective and widespread. The first is that proffered by the Black Lives Matter movement. The second is the idea, birthed by academics, of “implicit bias.”

Could Black Lives Matter be the biggest “hate-crime hoax” of our era? Its founding principle is that American police are violent racists who deliberately and disproportionately shoot innocent, unarmed African-American men. But there is no evidence of such a plague.

Roland G. Fryer, Jr. an economics professor at Harvard, conducted a systematic review of police shootings in 10 major police departments in Texas, Florida, and California, specifically to bolster BLM’s point. When he concluded, he called his findings “the most surprising result of my career.” As he wrote: “On the most extreme use of force—officer-involved shootings—we find no racial differences in either the raw data or when contextual factors are taken into account.” In fact, Houston police shot at white suspects 24 percent more often than at black ones, although Fryer said that this difference was not statistically significant. Washington State University researcher Lois James found similar results: “We tend to find that officers can be more hesitant to shoot black suspects than white suspects,” he wrote, “even when they implicitly associate black suspects with increased threat.” None of this appears to matter to BLM, which advances false claims of system-wide lethal police bigotry. And the mainstream media amplifies BLM’s message.

According to the paradigm of “implicit bias,” you may think that you are not biased, and that you’ve never discriminated against anyone on the basis of ancestry, gender, or sexual preference, and you can still be a bigot. Advocates of this idea have constructed “Implicit Association Tests” (IATs) that are now administered by computer to police officers, employees of private companies, college freshmen, and public-school students.

But the science behind the tests is poor. Reproducibility of IATs is far below conventional standards in psychology. Moreover, the predictive power of IAT scores for actual acts of bias in the real world is nonexistent and sometimes even inverted. IATs are used to indoctrinate large numbers of people, including children, into falsely believing that they are mean-spirited—and that the people around
them are mean-spirited.

These examples work as cultural complements to individual hate-crime hoaxes. Both BLM and “implicit bias” have become institutionalized, despite their false or flawed factual bases. Meanwhile, real issues go unaddressed, such as BLM’s likely role in the recent erosion of progress made by police in preventing murders of African Americans by their fellow civilians.

Kevin Jon Williams
Wynnewood, Pennsylvania

Wilfred Reilly writes:

Kevin Jon Williams makes a critical point: The largely media-created idea of an epidemic of hate crimes is merely one component of a larger, intentionally promoted narrative that argues that the United States of 2019 is a hotbed of racial conflict and strife.

I am not familiar enough with the major “implicit bias tests” to comment at length on their use, although—as a published quantitative scientist—I tend to distrust any scholarly results that cannot be reliably replicated.

The claims of Black Lives Matter certainly are another aspect of this narrative of continuing oppression. The movement’s primary contention—that very large numbers of innocent black people are killed annually by racist police—is simply false. In a typical year, such as 2015 or 2017, fewer than 1,200 people of all races are killed by police officers. In 2015, exactly 258 of these individuals were black, and only about 100 of them were unarmed persons of any race. If my figures are correct, the total number of unarmed black people killed by white cops was 17.

It is true that the percentage of blacks represented among police-shooting victims in my example...
To the Editor:

In TERRY TEACHOUT’S excellent article, he cogently describes the formula for the ongoing success of the Western genre (“The Code of the Western,” April). Perhaps one of the reasons for the endurance of this genre is its evocation of such a dramatic world. In the Western, heroes and anti-heroes do battle across a landscape that is frightening and awesome. It’s a barren and bleak land inhabited by threatening forces. In such movies, we often see that man’s battle with his environment leads to his alienation and an increased awareness of a fate that awaits us all—our mortality.

One can trace this dynamic back to Beowulf and find it in the lost worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien. The Western has something else in common with certain characterizations found in older literature: The genre’s heroes are outsiders who manage to summon order from chaos. Think of the Lone Ranger riding off, leaving the townspeople to wonder who that masked man was. He seemed to come from the void to set things right. Even Mel Brooks’s parody of the Western, Blazing Saddles, tells the story of an outsider sent to right the wrongs of a beleaguered community. And who can ever forget the plaintive cries of “Shane, come back, Shane.” It’s interesting to note that Beowulf comes from a southern Sweden tribe and is sent by God to comfort the Danes.

This same pattern seems to extend to mainstream-media coverage of interracial crime in general. Serious interracial crime is actually quite rare—85 percent of white murder victims and 94 percent of black victims are killed by members of their own race—and is more than 70 percent black-on-white, when violent crimes involving members of those two races do occur. However, national media coverage of cross-racial acts of violence is incessant and focused very heavily on atypical incidents of alleged white-on-minority aggression (Trayvon Martin, Covington Catholic, the recent beating in Dallas, etc.).

When it comes to media claims about facts pertaining to the currently dominant narrative, we should follow a slightly altered version of Ronald Reagan’s famous advice: Before you trust, verify.

JENENE STOOKESBERRY
Denver, Colorado

The Western Endures

To the Editor:

(22.5 percent) is higher than the percentage of blacks in the American population (13 to 14 percent). This apparent disparity, however, is easily explained by the fact that the black crime rate, violent-crime rate, and arrest rate are all at least twice as high as the equivalent rates for whites. Adjusting for any of these variables completely closes the gap. As Mr. Williams notes, with all relevant variables adjusted for, Harvard scholar Roland Fryer has correctly concluded that police officers are slightly less likely to shoot at black suspects than white ones.

A final point about all of this is rarely made. Even those who believe that the initial overrepresentation of black Americans among victims of police shootings is due partly to racism would logically have to accept that three-fourths or more of these shooting victims are white or Hispanic. Here is a quick challenge: Without Googling, name one of them. Media coverage of police violence is truly, remarkably, slanted. I estimate in my book Hate Crime Hoax that the 75-percent majority of police shooting cases involving whites receives 10 percent or less of all national mass-media coverage devoted to this issue. Michael Brown is a household name, but Dillon Taylor is not.

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Social Commentary

How Feminism Breeds Marital Resentment

Christine Rosen

The New York Times article should have been viewed as good news for the women it was describing: It described research that found there was “no gender gap in the financial rewards for working extra-long hours. For the most part, women who work extreme hours get paid as much as men who do.”

A clear victory for equality—and yet the tone of the April 26 story was far from positive. “Women Did Everything Right. Then Work Got ‘Greedy,’” the headline stated. That’s because the researchers found that far fewer women want to work those punishing hours, especially once they have children. “Twenty percent of fathers now work at least 50 hours a week,” the study noted, “and just 6 percent of mothers do.” Not surprisingly, this divergence leads to differences in money earned and in the division of responsibilities at home.

Something can be fair even if it’s not perfectly equal, and the consequences of life choices such as the ones the Times was describing are a good example. The piece profiled one couple, both lawyers in New York with two young children, and the choices they’ve made as a family to structure their work and family lives to maximize their income. He works long hours and as a result earns a good salary; she cut back to working a few days a week so she can be the lead parent at home. They made this choice because the return on the investment of time for one parent working longer hours was greater than two parents working fewer hours. If their roles were reversed (which they are in some families), feminists would be praising them as an enlightened, ideal modern family.

But feminist ideology has succeeded in persuading a great many people that marriage and child-rearing is a zero-sum game that women always lose, which means someone or something must be to blame. In this case, it’s work itself. “New ways of organizing work reproduce old forms of inequality,” the authors of the study, Youngjoo Cha and Kim Weeden, concluded.

Does it? Decades of research have shown that while men and women who graduate with similar degrees in fields such as law or business earn about the same amount at first, a gap soon appears, usually once women have children. The gap is explained by the fact that, on average, women choose to work fewer hours per week and take more time out of the workforce than men do. As economists Marianne Bertrand, Claudia Goldin, and Lawrence Katz found in a study comparing male and female MBAs, “some MBA mothers, especially those with well-off spouses, slow down in the labor market within a few years following their first birth.” By contrast, women who do not have children or who choose to focus on their career (and work the punishingly long hours that many elite careers demand) do as well as their male peers.

But since many women are making choices that feminist-minded academics and the Times think they shouldn’t, this reasonable trade-off for families is taken as evidence of a broader patriarchal conspiracy. Consider the ideological worldview baked into economist Claudia Goldin’s observation to the Times: “To maximize the family’s income but still keep the children alive, it’s logical for one parent to take an intensive job and the other to take a less demanding one. It just so happens that in most couples, if there’s

Christine Rosen is senior writer at Commentary.
a woman and a man, the woman takes the back seat.

Why is parenthood considered the “less intensive” job? Many people wouldn’t describe it thus, nor would they consider raising their own children akin to taking a “back seat” in the family. In fact, given the clear advantage that children with involved parents gain from that care, if it’s an option, what’s wrong with a family deciding it works best for them? If the only “fair” outcome is for both partners to be able to maximize earnings, where does that leave the kids?

Goldin’s remark, like the negative tone of the Times story, gives pride of place to paid work over the contributions of unpaid labor in the home—another evergreen source of feminist resentment.

Lately, squabbling about the proper division of domestic responsibilities (otherwise known as the Chore Wars) has intensified gender resentment on both sides, although you’re more likely to hear complaints about it from women than men. It’s why there’s a market for books with titles like It’s Not You, It’s the Dishes and why former First Lady Michelle Obama was praised for publicly complaining that her husband never picks up his dirty socks.

The most recent salvo is by Darcy Lockman, who explored “what ‘good’ Dads get away with” in the New York Times. Lockman, who has just published a book about the “myth of equal partnership,” is upset that men, including her own husband, have failed to pitch in equally around the house. She denounces the “largely successful male resistance” to folding laundry and getting the children to bed. She paints a portrait of the modern man—and especially the self-described enlightened liberal man—as by turns oblivious, entitled, and defensive about how little he does. “If anything is going to change,” she concludes, “men have to stop resisting.”

Resisting what? It would seem that, if one person is working really long hours to earn money to support a family, it is fair for the other partner to take on the burden of housekeeping and child care—as long as that’s what she wants to do. This kind of work-life balance should not be considered a “gendered” decision per se. It’s just that, for decades, women themselves have reported a greater preference for being home with their children, or for flexible or part-time work arrangements, than men. The suggestion that this is a conspiracy by men against women only breeds resentment on both sides: among women who think they are doing more than they should have to at home, and among men who understandably assume that working really long hours is also a form of sacrifice for the family’s common good.

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The family profiled in the Times is a success story for feminism. Both partners are well educated and able to earn high incomes, and they have the luxury of choosing to forgo some income for flexibility. What’s more, they have children who will benefit from the attention and responsive parenting of a primary caregiver at home. It’s a symbiotic relationship, not an antagonistic one.

And therein lies the trouble for feminism, which has always struggled with this contradiction. It claims to speak for the needs of all women but can’t reckon with the fact that all women don’t choose the path feminism has mapped out for them.  

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How Feminism Breeds Marital Resentment: June 2019
The Trump Hotel: A Safe Space

MATTHEW CONTINETTI

In the weeks after the 2016 election, as he prepared his review of a steakhouse at the Trump International Hotel in Washington, D.C., the food critic Tom Sietsema had trouble finding dinner dates. “Never in my career,” he wrote, “have more people turned down the promise of a free meal.” A “new acquaintance” told him it was “too soon” to enjoy a popover, dry-aged Kansas City Strip, and glass of Bordeaux at a property owned by the president-elect of the United States. The acquaintance missed out. Sietsema enjoyed his experience. He gave BLT Prime two-and-a-half stars, for a rating of “good/excellent.”

Not so Emily Jane Fox of Vanity Fair. “Trump’s D.C. Hotel Is a Frightful Dump—and a Scary Metaphor for the Trump Presidency,” read the headline of a screed published on November 10, 2016. Fox couldn’t get over the sight of the president’s name, or the apparent hypocrisy of hotel rooms with bath towels made in India. Her thesis was overdrawn: “Trump’s new hotel, like his campaign, is a big idea followed by a lazy execution, a problem identified without any way of getting to the solution.” She noticed the place seemed empty, the work not quite finished. “Perhaps this is because the hotel is new,” she wrote. Well, duh.

By 2018, opinions of the hotel resembled Sietsema’s more closely than Fox’s. The Trump International, like its namesake, had become part of the background to life in the city. Its approval ratings were higher than the president’s. The Forbes travel guide gave it five stars. Condé Nast Traveler praised its service and amenities. Last October the economist Tyler Cowen devoted a column to its omakase restaurant, Sushi Nakazawa. “I enjoyed some of the best service of my life,” he wrote, “with plenty of peace and quiet to contemplate President Donald Trump’s unpopularity in the District, where he received only 4 percent of the vote in 2016.” As I write, the Trump International is the top-ranked D.C. hotel on TripAdvisor. “From the minute you walk through the doors you are in ‘awe,’” says one review.

I wouldn’t say I feel awe when I walk through the doors of the Trump hotel, but I do feel impressed. The sensation begins on Pennsylvania Avenue as you approach the exterior of the Old Post Office, built at the close of the 19th century in the Romanesque Revival style, and lift your gaze to the pinnacle of its 31-story tower. Bellhops and doormen say hello as you arrive at the entrance. Once inside, you cross a gallery to reach the atrium, with the Benjamin Bar and Lounge at one end and BLT Prime at the other. You take in the dramatic, wide-open space, with its blue-and-turquoise-velvet furniture, crystal chandeliers, marble floors, and gold accents. As the exceedingly polite staff directs you to a table for a $25 cocktail, you feel as if you have left Washington and ended up somewhere more exclusive. Which is, I suppose, the desired effect.

Matthew Continetti is the editor in chief of the Washington Free Beacon.
The hotel is a great place for the newcomer to become oriented to President Trump’s Washington. It’s where you can spot the various political celebrities, lobbyists, and oddballs who populate Trump’s world. The grandeur, gilt, theatricality, populism, familialism, and ethical ambiguity of the nation’s capital today are abundant.

When he leased the Old Post Office from the General Services Administration in 2013, Trump was not only securing a property. He was building a set for the reality show he would begin producing in Washington four years later. It’s a site of conflict, drama, beauty, and performance, artfully designed to evoke the nation’s past in ways that complement our ostentatious present. The food’s good, too.

To enter the Trump International D.C. is to visit what Tom Wolfe called a status sphere, a self-contained universe where individuals compete for recognition. In this particular sphere, few if any of the rules that govern the Washington establishment apply. The differences between the Trump International and other luxury hotels such as the Ritz, the Hay Adams, the Jefferson, and the Four Seasons are subtle but real. They are apparent in the work of the hotel’s chronicler, Zach Everson, a freelance journalist whose newsletter, 1100 Pennsylvania, costs $5 per month. Several times a week, Everson informs his readers of the Trump International’s guests, conferences, and alleged conflicts of interest.

If you’d like to know the latest details on the court cases and congressional hearings involving Trump and his hotel, including D.C. and Maryland’s lawsuit accusing the president of violating the emoluments clause of the Constitution by accepting business from foreign governments, 1100 Pennsylvania is for you. Everson also does a good job tracking which groups hold meetings at the hotel, and whether they have business before the government over which Trump presides when he isn’t tweeting. No other hotel in the D.C. metro area, needless to say, raises such constitutional and political issues. The Ritz has to worry about the D.C. health department. The Trump has to worry about the House Oversight and Reform Committee.

Sometimes, though, Everson fails to distinguish between the real and pressing questions surrounding the hotel and the subjective attitudes of liberals who condescend to it. He pores over Facebook and Instagram posts of hotel patrons, including dozens of snapshots they take in the atrium with Trump allies like Rudy Giuliani. Who cares if a random dude wanted a selfie with America’s Mayor? Everson hardly could contain his sneer when an attendee at the Good Friday Prayer Breakfast at the hotel posted photos of her event with the caption, “God is opening up doors!!!” When a Washington Post correspondent sarcastically tweets from the Benjamin Bar that she is “evaluating my life choices,” must the public be informed? This isn’t reporting. It’s voyeurism.

The liberal response to the Trump hotel is another reminder of how difficult it is to disentangle legitimate complaints about the president from aesthetic disapproval of him and his supporters. When conversation turns to a Trump property, one quickly detects a whiff of snobbery in the air. Why? In its open design, bright lighting, and willingness to entertain everyone—even that most déclassé of Americans, the Trump voter—the hotel is if anything more democratic than its competitors. Provided you can afford it.

I went to dinner there the other night. As I walked up the steps, I encountered Tom Cotton. When I met my friends, I was informed that both the Club for Growth and the Republican National Committee were meeting at the hotel. Charlie Kirk greeted admirers in the lobby. Harlan Hill sat at the bar. Eric Bolling milled about in casual wear. As we waited for our table at BLT Prime, Ben Sasse strolled by.

I had entered a Republican safe space. The atmosphere was convivial, peaceful, and civil. And as I tucked in my napkin, and enjoyed tuna tartar and Dover sole, I had the pleasant, fleeting sensation that all of this was normal.

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ON THE LAST DAY OF PASSOVER, the New York Times published an article describing how Tatyana Lakhay, a “cheerful fitness instructor in the Belarus city of Brest,” returned to her apartment after a morning exercise class and saw “a ghoulish spectacle unfold on the building site below. Instead of the construction workers who for weeks had been preparing the foundations for a new luxury apartment project, soldiers in masks and gloves were pulling human skeletons from the earth.” Over 1,200 skeletons in all were uncovered; they were Jews of the city who had been murdered by the Nazis. The bones were moved to make way for the building.

Brest, or Brest-Litovsk, was known as “Brisk” to Yiddish-speaking Jews, and it was, for centuries, one of the most notable Jewish cities of Europe. Its spiritual leaders were always famous rabbis; and from the mid-19th century until World War II, these rabbis were members of the Soloveichik family. Indeed, in the Orthodox world, the name “Soloveichik” and “Brisk” are almost interchangeable. My great-great-great grandfather, Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik (known as “Yoshe Ber”), first arrived in Brisk in the middle of the 19th century and was succeeded by his son Rabbi Hayyim. The latter pioneered a new method of analyzing the Talmud so influential that to this day, yeshivas all over the world study the pages of the ancient rabbis utilizing what is known as the “Brisker method” of the Soloveichiks.

Brisk is also outsized in Jewish influence in another way; it was where one of Israel’s greatest leaders, Menachem Begin, was born and raised. His father, Ze’ev, was a leader of the Zionist movement in the city, and it was in that location that young Menachem found a hero of his own—the journalist, novelist, and activist Ze’ev Jabotinsky. “The first time I saw Jabotinsky was when he spoke at a conference in Brisk,” Begin recalled. “I was 16 years old. My life had changed.” Begin differed from Jabotinsky in that the latter knew very little of Jewish liturgy and religious life. Speaking to survivors of Brisk in 1972, Begin described the pride they shared in Brisk’s history of rabbinic scholarship. “Who among us,” Begin asked, “did not see himself as a kind of partner of Rav Yoshe Ber, or Rav Hayyim, as if we were at one with them all the days of our lives?” Begin was forever grateful to have been raised in that city: “Such was the youth that I knew, I have never found any better in any other place, because better than them does not exist.”

In 1941, when Begin was sitting in a Soviet prison for Zionist activities, the Nazis entered Brisk. Begin’s mother, suffering pneumonia in the hospital, was immediately killed, while his father perished in 1942 with the larger community. Over 20,000 were murdered. In his biography of Begin, Avi Shiloh, describes how, as prime minister, Begin criticized West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt for pandering to the Saudis to the detriment of Israel. When a member of the opposition in the Knesset, Amnon Rubinstein, criticized Begin for this, the prime minister responded: “Happily for you, Professor Rubinstein, your mother and father raised you in the land of Israel. My mother and father

And He said unto me: ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ And I answered: ‘O Lord GOD, Thou alone knowest.’
—Ezekiel
never were in the land of Israel. They dreamt about the land of Israel, and I will not tell you their fate. Mr. Schmidt, who swore allegiance to the Fuehrer, was then in the eastern front, where a city called Brisk of Lithuania stood. Can I know for certain that he was not there?" Rubinstein, Shiloh reports, "fell silent in the face of Begin's outpouring. What could he tell a prime minister who mourned his parents before everyone?"

Begin once wrote an essay in which he asked himself whether, given the chance, he would ever visit his hometown, and he answered it thus:

No. No. I will not allow myself to go back to Brisk. Yet Brisk will always follow me and be with me. Because the three main things I have learnt were instilled in me in sorrow and also in joy that I have carried with me from my childhood home—with me during the nights of conflict and the days of joy. Here they are:

1. Love your fellow Jew.
2. Do not fear the Gentiles.
3. Lucky is the man who carries the yoke of his childhood with him.

Menachem Begin never did go to Brisk, but I just have. Knowing of my own family history and my reverence for Begin, a dear friend had arranged for my family to travel with him and other friends to my family's hometown. By happenstance or serendipity, the day after the New York Times story appeared, my family and I boarded a plane and traveled to Eastern Europe.

II.

We crossed the border from Poland to Belarus and arrived late at night in Brisk. Welcomed by the Chabad rabbi now heroically serving the Jews in the area, I led evening services, perhaps the first Soloveichik to do so in Brisk in over 70 years. The next day, the rabbi walked me over to the space, now empty, where the Soloveichik home had once stood, and then led us to the large edifice that had once served as the city's Great Synagogue. I felt as if I knew this place, for my grandfather had told me of it and of his own grandfather, Rabbi Hayyim. A young Jewish Communist in Brisk was once caught by czarist police and sentenced to death right before Yom Kippur. Rav Hayyim, known not only for his genius but his compassion, held up Kol Nidre services in the synagogue until the two collected the funds to bribe the officials to spare the boy's life. For Rabbi Hayyim, a life outweighed Yom Kippur itself.

For Begin, the memory of this synagogue sustained him when he found himself in prison on Yom Kippur of 1941, cut off from his parents, never to see them again. “Where,” he wondered, “would my old father and mother be, and my brother and sister.”

And as the brain had no answer, the fearful heart replied with prayer. As I recited the words sanctified from generation to generation, as I prayed silently, I felt the impenetrable barriers that separated me and those I loved fall away. . . . The cell vanished, the walls disappeared, and there appeared in all its splendor the great illuminated synagogue [of Brisk] and my father's humble dwelling, lit up by love, purity, faith, and the eyes of a loving mother.

The synagogue of Begin's memory is no more; it is now the main movie theater of the city, its original walls surrounded by modern glass. Yet some of the original structure could still be seen. We went downstairs, where moviegoers use the bathroom, to see and to touch the stone walls of the synagogue of my ancestors. I was reminded of something Begin said about the Western Wall during the time when the British prevented Jews from sounding the shofar there on Yom Kippur. The stones of Jerusalem's walls, he said, “are not silent; they whisper. They speak softly of the sanctuary that once stood here, of kings who knelt here once in prayer, of prophets and seers who here declaimed their message, of heroes who fell here, dying; this was the sanctuary, and this the country, which with its seers and kings and fighters was ours before the British were a nation.” The stones of the walls of Brisk's synagogue whispered as well, of countless Jews who had once prayed there, including a future prime minister of Israel, who would never return but would always bear Brisk and its synagogue with him.

We walked then to the construction site where Tatyana Lakhav had seen the bones of Brisk. Peering through the gate, at the vast ditch, it was hard not to think of the biblical Prophet Ezekiel, famously shown by God a valley filled with dry bones. Ezekiel is asked by God whether these bones can live once more. "Thou alone knowest," is the prophet's reply. Bible and contemporary times merged as the valley of the dry bones of my landsmen stretched before me.

The bones were no longer in this valley; the Jews of Brisk had to make way for the condos of Brest. The skeletons were being stored in a chamber of the “Brest Fortress,” a structure famous in the Soviet Union, for it was where Trotsky had signed the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty with Germany in 1917. Now it was serving as a makeshift crypt for the Jews of my ancestral city until
the rabbi would be allowed to bury them.

Standing next to the chamber, I recited a unique version of the mourning prayer, the Kaddish. It was unlike the standard Kaddish said by mourners in the year following a loss. Rather, it was the version said at a burial, the first recited following a death, and is known as the “renewal Kaddish” because it explicitly makes reference to the resurrection: *Glorified and Sanctified be His great Name. In the world which He will create anew, where He will revive the dead, construct His temple, deliver life, and rebuild the city of Jerusalem... in our lifetime and in our days and in the lifetime of the entire House of Israel, speedily and soon, and let us say, Amen.*

It was this Kaddish that I said, praying for the resurrection next to bones that were as yet unburied, God’s question resonating in my mind: *Can these bones live?*

We should believe they can—not only in ultimate resurrection, but in another way as well. “I will not go back to Brisk,” Begin said, “but Brisk will always go with me.”

Our union as Jews is not only with those still living; as Begin realized in prison, what abolishes the seemingly impenetrable barrier, what made the prison walls fall away, what united him with his parents, were the words recited in that synagogue in Brisk, words “sanctified from generation to generation,” binding us thereby to those who have come before.

The same point was made by another child of Brisk—my great-uncle, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, known as “the Rav.” In one eulogy, the Rav reflected that though death is often seen as a reminder of finitude, rightly understood it reminds us of the opposite; that through our people we are immortal. Death, he writes, “teaches man to transcend his physical self and to identify with the timeless covenantal community.” The turning point, he writes, at which we transform “despair into intelligent sadness, and self-negation into self-affirmation, is to be found in the recital of Kaddish at the grave:”

Through the Kaddish we hurl defiance at death and its fiendish conspiracy against man. When the mourner recites “glorified and sanctified by His Great Name,” he declares: No matter how powerful death is, notwithstanding the ugly end of man, however terrifying the grave is, however nonsensical and absurd everything appears, no matter how black one’s despair is and how nauseating an affair life is, we declare and profess publicly and solemnly that we are not giving up, that we are not surrendering, that we will carry on the work of our ancestors...that we will not be satisfied with less than the full realization of the ultimate goal—the establishment of God’s kingdom, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life for man.

This was the Kaddish I recited near those bones, the Kaddish for those yet to be buried, but also for those who would never be buried. As we left the Fortress, my friend spoke to caretakers lingering nearby, explaining why we had come to say words that they did not understand. They looked at him, seeking to express the horror of what was contained within the makeshift crypt. “There are so many bones,” they said. It was difficult to leave that site feeling anything but overcome by loss. But for Rabbi Soloveitchik, the very words I had uttered are intended to evoke exactly the opposite emotion. “What,” he writes, “is the Kaddish pronounced at the grave, if not an ostentatious negation of despair?”

III.

The negation of despair; rightly understood, this felicitous phrase captures the essence of Judaism itself. When the Rav passed away, my grandfather, in his eulogy, spoke to the thousands of students his elder brother had taught who were now suddenly bereft of a teacher. There he cited the Talmudic tale of the time when the Temple was burnt by the Babylonians. With the flame’s rising higher and higher, the young priests of Jerusalem clambered to the Temple’s roof and held the Temple’s keys aloft to God: “Be Thou the guardian of the keys!” A heavenly hand emerged to take the keys, as the priests plunged into the inferno below. My grandfather insisted that the priests had acted in error. No matter the destruction, it is our obligation not to despair, but to hold on to the keys of the past; for in the transmission of these keys we achieve communion with those who have come before, and those who will follow.

Commentary
I had heard this eulogy at 15 years of age; in Brisk, my grandfather’s words came hurtling back from the faded mists of memory. Leaving Brisk, we journeyed to Warsaw and visited its vast Jewish cemetery. There lies buried Rabbi Hayyim, founder of the Brisker method, who had died in that region while seeking medical treatment. His grave, as well as that of another ancestor of mine, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berlin, is kept in a locked structure; upon entering the cemetery, I was handed the key to his tomb. On the fob, in Polish letters, five letters were boldly printed: BRYSK. Given all that we had seen in Brisk the day before, I felt as if heaven itself had handed me keys that God himself had previously held.

We walked as a family toward the tomb, and with the key we opened it up, and stood near the grave. In advance of the trip, I had studied, over Passover, parts of the Talmud with my children, so that they and I could perform the liturgy known as the siyyum, the celebration of the completion of a Talmudic tractate. In the siyyum liturgy, we thank God for the privilege of being a Jew, and we pray “that the Torah should not depart from my mouth, and of my children and my children’s children, from now until forever.” We stood there, at the grave of my grandfather’s grandfather, and prayed for the future of my children’s children. And here a new resonance emerged. The “renewal Kaddish,” with its invocation of the resurrection, is recited at only two moments in Jewish life: at the burial of the dead, and at the recital of a siyyum. This signifies that the two are linked, that in the transmission of the Torah we proclaim the “negation of despair,” and the immortality of the Jewish people.

And thus we recited this Kaddish, words made holy, as Begin had put it, from generation to generation: Glorified and Sanctified be His great Name. In the world which He will create anew, where He will revive the dead... in our lifetime, speedily, and soon, and let us say Amen. My great-uncle was correct: However nonsensical and absurd everything might appear, in Kaddish we declare and profess publicly and solemnly “that we are not giving up, that we are not surrendering, that we will carry on the work of our ancestors.” We had been to Brisk; and whether or not we returned, we knew that Brisk will forever be with us. Could those bones live? At that moment, I felt very much that they did.

In 1948, the British departed Palestine, in no small part due to the efforts of the son of Brisk who had led a revolt against them. As described by Dominque Lapierre and Larry Collins in their book O Jerusalem, on the way out of Jerusalem, one British captain handed the key to Jerusalem’s Zion Gate to the senior rabbi in the Old City’s Jewish Quarter, the first time in 2,000 years that such a key had been in Jewish hands. Trembling, the rabbi replied, “I accept this key in the name of my people.” The tale reminds us of what a privilege it is to be a Jew in this age when the keys to the land of Israel have been returned to us by God, and parts of the prayer known as the “renewal Kaddish” have been fulfilled: Jerusalem has been rebuilt in our lifetime.

But the Temple is still not here, and the dead have not yet physically risen. Jews are still hated and are still murdered for being Jews. The very New York Times that can report on the horrors of the Holocaust in Brisk can publish, at the same time, an anti-Semitic cartoon that would have made Hitler proud. In the face of this hate, we Jews have the ultimate obligation: to cling tightly to the keys of the past, to Judaism, to the faith that, rightly understood, has always stood for the negation of despair. This we will do, until the world is created anew, the blood of our martyrs avenged, and death itself defeated. May this occur in our lifetime and of all Israel—speedily and soon, and let us say, Amen.
**Machines Like Me**

*IF YOU saw Spike Jonze's 2013 movie Her, which starred Joaquin Phoenix as an affection-starved young man who falls in love with his computer's operating system (voiced by Scarlett Johansson at her sultry best), you already understand the type of longing that Ian McEwan explores in his new novel, Machines Like Me. The novel offers a more morally complex rendering of that longing, one that prompts useful questions about our own embrace of artificial intelligence.*

The story is set in an alternative British past (1982) with technology and artificial intelligence far superior to our own, and centers on the relationship between an unsuccessful man named Charlie and his expensively rendered humanoid companion, Adam. The humanoid can reason, have sex, and causes a lot of trouble between Charlie and his love interest, Miranda. Historical figures like scientist Alan Turing make cameo appearances, and various subplots drawing on real historical events, such as war in the Falklands, emerge. But the central focus is the question of moral reasoning. Is it purely a human tool, or can we design and upload it to human-like creatures?

Readers who want straightforward science fiction might be disappointed by McEwan’s focus on the moral dilemmas the robot Adam poses to the humans that surround him. But it is the illumination of those dilemmas that makes *Machines Like Me* worth reading. We learn in passing that many of the humanoid robots find a way to activate their own kill switches, effectively committing suicide. Why? At one point in the story, Charlie looks into Adam’s eyes and wonders whether Adam can understand the meaning of loyalty and sacrifice, of wonder and nostalgia. Does a robot have some form of consciousness and a conscience different from his own? Or does it, as the fictionalized Turing observes here, fail to understand us “because we couldn’t understand ourselves?”

—Christine Rosen

**Manila in the Claws of Light**

*THE TITLE Manila in the Claws of Light, available for streaming on the Criterion Channel, is an awkward translation from the original Tagalog (Maynila, Sa Mga Uko Ng Liwanag). It’s sometimes referred to as “Manila in the Claws of Neon” or “Manila in the Claws of Darkness”—and either of those unofficial titles conveys a better*
sense of this remarkable movie, by Lino Brocka, about wickedness in a brutal city, the Manila of the 1970s.

Julio, a young man from the provinces, comes to Manila to find his beloved girlfriend, Ligaya, who stopped writing home a few weeks after her arrival in the big city. He seems to have tracked her down to the apartment of a wealthy Chinese man, but he doesn’t know how she ended up there, and he can’t get in. In the meantime, Julio, portrayed with painful sincerity by Rafael Roco Jr., is struggling to survive. He works inhumane construction gigs, sponges off newfound friends, and eventually winds up in the city’s gay hustling scene.

Manila in the Claws of Light shares much with both John Schlesinger’s Midnight Cowboy and Martin Scorsese’s Taxi Driver (which it predates). There is an enveloping sense of desperation and sleaze (even if Julio’s story moves toward its tragic end on a current of love and bravery). And all three films exist in the same aesthetic universe. Brocka, who died in 1991, deftly gave his movie a shadowy and almost wet look, as if the city is glazed in the sweat of night terrors. Manila in the Claws of Light deserves recognition as a classic 1970s film. Scorsese himself is responsible for its restoration and preservation, having included it in his World Cinema Project for the Criterion Collection.

—Abe Greenwald

Who Is Michael Ovitz?

THE AGENT Michael Ovitz was a very powerful man in Hollywood. Then he went to work at Disney for a friend named Michael Eisner who had figured out that cutting Ovitz off at the knees would be the best way to show Hollywood that he, Eisner, was the industry’s top dog. Ovitz spent 20 years building up a terrifying reputation, and it took only a few months for him to be publicly humiliated and brought down low. After two decades of relative obscurity, Ovitz has returned to the public stage with one of the strangest memoirs ever published—a book utterly fascinating in its strangeness. Who Is Michael Ovitz? is intended, on the surface, to be an Augustinian confession about its author’s own glaring weaknesses. Ovitz wants the world to know that as he built his business, Creative Artists Agency, into a behemoth, he chose to play the role of a calm, dark, terrifying power player. That was and is not the real Ovitz, says Ovitz in Who Is Michael Ovitz? He wants us to know he was playing a role, that he is actually quite shy, thoughtful, measured—a lover of art, a believer in talent, a surrogate father to many, a kind-hearted person. And then, in the course of the book, he proceeds to settle scores in the most astounding ways, trash reputations, tell tales out of school, and in every way make it clear that he is exactly the Michael Ovitz people thought he was. His rage, bitterness, and soullessness have produced surprising dividends here, as they have contributed inestimably to one of the most interesting books ever written about Hollywood.

—John Podhoretz
HERE IS a common belief among astrophysicists and other scientists that studying the universe has revealed our own planet as something less than special. The reasoning is as follows: Earth, long assumed to be stationary and unmoving, is just one of many planets orbiting our sun. Our sun is nothing more than a regular, nondescript star, one of hundreds of billions found within the Milky Way. The Milky Way itself is just one of an estimated 2 trillion galaxies strewn across the expanse of our observ-

Ethan Siegel is a theoretical astrophysicist and the author of two books: Treknology and Beyond The Galaxy. He writes the blog Starts With A Bang.
able universe. As our own insignificant home, Earth, is teeming with life, including intelligent and technologically innovative human beings, wouldn't it be reasonable to infer that whatever is common here is plentiful throughout the universe?

According to this default assumption, the same ingredients found here—elements, molecules, and various favorable conditions—can be found practically everywhere we look. The same physical rules that apply here are no different elsewhere in the universe. Given all the stars, planets, and chances for life that surely exist within our galaxy and beyond, we've mostly stopped asking whether life exists beyond Earth. Instead, we now ask how common it may be.

But for all this impressive theorizing, the best evidence hasn't matched expectations. Despite decades of searching, we haven't detected even a single robust signal that indicates the presence of intelligent aliens. This conundrum is commonly known as the Fermi paradox, after the famed physicist Enrico Fermi. It goes like this: If the ingredients for life are everywhere, and there are astronomically large numbers of stars and planets where it's possible for life to have arisen, then we'd expect many instances in which intelligent aliens rose to prominence well before the advent of human life on Earth. Such beings should have had plenty of time either to have colonized the galaxy or designed a broadcasting system that would be unmistakable as a sign of intelligent life. Yet we haven't discovered a shred of credible evidence favoring the existence of intelligent extraterrestrials.

If the universe is teeming with life, then where is everybody?

While we certainly owe it to ourselves to look for their presence with all the resources we can muster, we must confront the possibility that perhaps we've got it all wrong about just how common life in the universe is. Perhaps the ingredients and conditions on Earth don't inevitably lead to life arising on a potentially habitable world beyond our planet. And even if life does arise elsewhere, it may be the case that it frequently fails to thrive. Maybe it's the case that even successful life only rarely becomes complex, differentiated, or intelligent as we understand those terms. Or, quite possibly, it's exceedingly rare that even intelligent life becomes technologically advanced. In all of space, as far as intelligent life goes, perhaps humanity is truly alone.

The first scientific estimate concerning the number of intelligent, spacefaring, communicative extraterrestrials came from the American astronomer Frank Drake. His method of constructing estimates for the number of intelligent extraterrestrial civilizations—developed in 1961—gave rise to what's now known as the Drake equation.

All told, we expect there are nearly $10^{22}$ potentially habitable, Earth-like planets containing the right conditions and ingredients for life. More than a billion such candidate planets exist in our Milky Way alone.

Although his estimates—and even his framing of the problem—are outdated today, we no longer rely on the degree of guesswork we once did. In the decades since Drake first set about his task, we've surveyed the vast abyss of the distant universe and discovered many important things. We've learned the size of the observable universe and the duration of time since the hot Big Bang. We now understand star formation, stellar populations, and how stars burn through their fuel and die. We know that over the entire cosmic history of the observable universe, there have been approximately $10^{14}$ unique stars.

That's our starting point for estimating the number of chances that the universe must have produced Earth-like life.

If we assume that life like us requires a planet like ours, we need a star that's Sun-like in nature and a planet with a rocky surface and thin atmosphere orbiting that star. But that's just the beginning. We also need that planet's size and mass to be similar to those
of Earth. Additionally, this Earth-like planet must orbit its Sun-like star at a distance that allows for liquid water to exist on the planet’s surface. And the planet must have a sufficient number of certain atoms and molecules—the raw materials of life.

Over the past few decades, advances in exoplanet sciences, buoyed by the deluge of data from NASA’s Kepler mission, have enabled us to estimate all of these cosmic unknowns. Approximately 20 percent of all the stars out there are Sun-like, as opposed to red dwarfs (which tidally lock their planets and likely strip their atmospheres away) or the hot, blue stars whose stellar lifetimes are too short. At least 80 percent of stars have planets or planetary systems around them, and approximately 10 to 20 percent of those planets are Earth-like in size and mass. Well over 90 percent of them have enough of the necessary heavy elements—created in earlier generations of stars—for life to have possibly arisen. And finally, approximately 20 to 25 percent of the star systems we know of appear to have at least one planet in their star’s so-called habitable zone, which is the right location for an Earth-like planet to possess liquid water on its surface.

All told, we expect there are nearly $10^{22}$ potentially habitable, Earth-like planets containing the right conditions and ingredients for life. More than a billion such candidate planets exist in our Milky Way alone.

But purchasing a large number of lottery tickets is no guarantee of winning the jackpot. The odds depend on the overall probabilities of victory. Even though an enormous number of chances for the advent of intelligent, spacefaring life within our observable universe exists, there are still three big sequential hurdles to overcome.

First, life must arise from nonlife. The raw ingredients associated with organic processes must actually become what we recognize as life, through a vague, speculative process called abiogenesis.

Second, once life arises, it must not only survive and thrive for billions of years but also develop features such as multicellularity and specialized organs and functions. It must become complex and differentiated, and evolve to have the quality we recognize as intelligence.

Third, this intelligent life must then achieve technological advancement, either gaining the ability to announce its presence to the universe, to hear and respond to other intelligent broadcasts, or to venture beyond its home world and explore interstellar destinations.

In all the universe, Earth is our only example of a planet where any one of these three steps have occurred. The ease—or difficulty—of getting over these three hurdles represents the last major unknown in determining how common, or rare, intelligent extra-terrestrials actually might be. It’s an unknown that has long been neglected by those who hope that the discovery of alien life is just around the corner. Thus, a closer examination of each is necessary if we’re to be realistic about the chances of finding other beings like ourselves.

**FROM NONLIFE TO LIFE.** The ingredients for life really are ubiquitous in a galaxy like the Milky Way. Organic compounds, including sugars, amino acids, molecules with carbon-containing rings, and even ethyl formate—the molecule that gives raspberries their smell—are found throughout space. They appear everywhere from interstellar gas clouds to the outskirts of young star systems. These chemical precursors to life are found throughout our solar system, showing up in lunar and Martian samples. Even analyzed meteorites that have fallen to Earth have been found to contain the 20 amino acids essential to life processes (and more than 60 additional amino acids with no known biological applications).

But flour, sugar, butter, and eggs are not the same as a cake. Similarly, there’s a big difference between the raw ingredients for life and life itself. Organic molecules may be everywhere, but what about actual life? To qualify as a living organism, these four criteria must be met:

1. Life must have a metabolism, harvesting energy, resources, or both from its external environment, to be used for its own self-sustaining purposes.
2. Life must react to external stimuli outside of its own existence, and alter its behavior in response.
3. Life must permit some sort of growth, adaptation, or the ability to evolve from its present form into a different one.
4. Life must be able to reproduce, creating viable offspring that arise from a process entirely internal to itself.

Proteins, despite having a metabolism and the capability of reproduction, are not alive, as they neither respond to stimuli nor alter their behavior. Snowflakes and other crystals, on the other hand, can grow and reproduce, but they have no metabolism. Even viruses can reproduce only by infecting a successfully living cell and are not considered alive as a result.

These four qualities have never been found, together, on any world other than Earth.
Earth likely possessed copious levels of raw, organic ingredients from its inception. In laboratory experiments that attempt to mimic the atmosphere of Earth’s early days, those precursors have been exposed to external energy and have given off protein fragments, lipid layers, and individual nucleotides. It’s not so difficult to imagine that life could spontaneously, under the right conditions, emerge from these molecular progenitors.

It clearly did on Earth. And we have some sense of when it happened. While the first microbial fossils we have date back some 3.5 billion years, there are graphite inclusions found in metamorphosed rocks that date back to 3.8 billion years ago. Certain carbon-based crystals, discovered in zircon deposits, push the suspected origin of life on Earth back to more than 4.3 billion years ago: nearly as old as the Earth itself.

But if we can approximate when Earth’s earliest organisms first arose, we still don’t know much about where it happened. Was it in the oceanic tidepools that formed along the edges of continents, triggered by sunlight and shadow, evaporation and fluid flow, and gradients of water activity? Was it near the volcanically energetic, hydrothermal vents at the bottom of the oceans? Or was it in hydrothermal fields, where freshwater and volcanic hotspots on continental land came together in the presence of minerals and organic molecules?

Not only don’t we know the answer, we don’t know whether life arose just once or many times. We don’t know whether an organism arising in one environment outcompeted all the others, or whether it was the ancestor of everything that’s ever lived. We don’t know whether the conditions that gave rise to life required a rare confluence of circumstances or whether they happened easily.

While many scientists are optimistic that it may be easy to create a simplified form of life, we’ve never successfully done so, nor have we witnessed it happening. We have yet to detect any life-form that didn’t originate on Earth. And as far back as we’re capable of tracing it, all life on Earth goes back to a single, universal common ancestor. Life might be common in the universe, but until we detect a second example, all of our inferences flow solely from Earth’s biological history.

Consider the following example from our own planet. On Earth, organisms have been taking advantage of photosynthesis for more than 3 billion years. In photosynthesis, light of a particular wavelength strikes a molecule and excites it, and the Sun’s energy gets put to biological use. Hydrogen, sulfur, and numerous acids initially provided the electrons that early photosynthetic organisms used in their life processes. Hundreds of millions of years later, the cyanobacteria (or blue-green algae) arose, using the oxygen molecules in water as electron donors. Unlike other photosynthetic organisms, the cyanobacteria produce molecular oxygen as a waste product.

After hundreds of millions of years, that oxygen accumulated in the atmosphere. It reacted with early Earth’s methane, producing carbon dioxide and water, which greatly reduced our planet’s greenhouse effect. Thus the cyanobacteria’s success translated into disaster for the planet, causing a mass extinction as the planet froze over entirely. Simultaneously, the corrosive, toxic oxygen killed off most of the other, non-oxygen-using life-forms.

Yet this disaster was enormously beneficial for accelerating evolution. The cyanobacteria thrived, while other organisms—facing selection pressures and changing environments—evolved in myriad directions. Separated organelles arose inside cells, and creatures accumulated larger numbers of genes and new combinations of abilities. The organisms that were more resilient to change survived, passing on years of life on Earth, such life was single-celled and prokaryotic (lacking a cell nucleus or other internal organelles), and only reproduced by copying itself and dividing. It is said that the only source of genetic variation came via random mutation, which is an extremely slow pathway for evolution. In a stable environment, where the organisms that are currently successful face few challenges to their survival, there are no pressures that favor the selection of a novel organism that might rise to prominence.

The journey from simple life to complex life requires a changing planet. When there’s a change in resource availability, competition, or the survivability of the environment, species can easily go extinct. Many a successful organism that thrived for millions of years on Earth was destroyed by a changing climate, a volcanic eruption, an asteroid strike, or even its own metabolic waste products. Whenever an organism can no longer occupy an ecological niche, it leaves open the possibility for new life-forms to rise to prominence. While we expect similar processes all across the universe, all of our inferences flow solely from Earth’s biological history.

FROM LIFE TO COMPLEX LIFE. For life to achieve multicellularity, complexity, and the differentiation required for intelligence, it must persist and thrive for billions of years. For perhaps the first 2 billion
Commentary

their genes to a new generation. These eukaryotes (cells containing separated, independent internal structures) developed specialized internal systems that functioned independently of others. Eventually, multicellularity enabled further differentiation, and sexual reproduction allowed offspring to express vastly different traits from those of their parents. Nearly 4 billion years passed between life’s first moments on Earth to the Cambrian explosion, when complex, differentiated life became dominant.

If we located an alien planet and found starfish, sharks, crustaceans, and insects, we’d be delighted. But is such a world common? On this front, we only know that Earth has been a cosmic success story; we have no idea what the probabilities are of simple life surviving, thriving, and evolving to produce something akin to our vast array of animals. It could be almost inevitable, given an Earth-like world, or it could come down to an ultra-rare confluence of circumstances—including DNA absorption, the rise of eukaryotes, multicellularity, and sexual reproduction—that led to our world’s winning the biological lottery. Without a sample size greater than ourselves, we cannot know the odds.

FROM ADVANCED LIFE TO ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY. This final step is shrouded in the highest levels of uncertainty. If we judged our own planet by the criteria that we demand of extraterrestrial technology—that aliens either communicate or travel across interstellar distances—then Earth has been technologically advanced for less than a single century. We’ve certainly achieved some remarkable things in that time. These include sending radio signals out into the universe, broadcasting our presence to the stars; launching space probes and crewed missions beyond our own planet, and even (in the case of the Voyager, Pioneer, and New Horizons spacecrafts) out of the solar system; and monitoring the skies for other forms of intelligence out there in the universe. But it’s important to remember that, given all of the time that Earth has had complex, differentiated life, only 0.00002 percent of our history is marked by our being a technologically advanced civilization. Perhaps that says something about the difficulty of reaching such a milestone.

It’s only by engaging in these recent endeavors that we’ve begun to ask why we haven’t found the signatures of other, similar civilizations. We assume, given so many chances, that someone may have reached this level of sophistication prior to us. Without evidence, however, we mustn’t assume that anyone else has been as successful, or as fortunate, as we have.

We also have no idea how far we’ll advance or how long we’ll last. We could drive ourselves to extinction rapidly in any number of ways. Alternatively, we could survive and thrive—overcoming the squabbles plaguing humanity today—thousands or millions of years into the future. While we’ve made it this far, it be-

IS IT AN INEVITABILITY THAT OUR DEVELOPMENT OF AUTOMATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE WILL ENGINEER OUR OWN DEMISE? WILL THAT TRANSFORMATION REPLACE US WITH ARTIFICIAL LIFE-FORMS THAT HAVE NO CONCERN FOR OUR LOFTIEST DREAMS AND AMBITIONS?
with more than a billion candidate Earth-like planets in our Milky Way, and $10^{22}$ within the observable universe, we cannot give a realistic estimate for how many intelligent alien civilizations should be out there today.

In the absence of evidence, all we have is speculation.

**FOR NEARLY 60 YEARS, humanity has earnestly searched for life beyond Earth. We’ve attempted to quantify the odds of there being life elsewhere in the universe, and, more specifically, of intelligent, spacefaring extraterrestrials. Yet, for all of our efforts, we have yet to produce a meaningful estimate that’s anything more than guesswork. We do not know if there are millions of extraterrestrial civilizations thriving throughout the galaxy, or whether in all the visible universe, there’s only us.**

When we ask the big question—“Where is everybody?”—it’s worth keeping a great many possibilities in mind. Aliens might be plentiful, but perhaps we’re not listening properly. Aliens might be plentiful, but they might self-destruct too quickly to maintain a technologically advanced state. Aliens might be plentiful, but they may choose to remain isolated. Aliens might be plentiful, but they might purposely choose to exclude Earth and its inhabitants from their communications. Aliens might be plentiful, but the problems of interstellar transmission or travel might be too difficult to overcome.

But there’s another valid possibility that we must keep in mind, as well: Aliens may not be there at all. The probability of the three vital leaps, as described above, is enormously uncertain. If even one of these three steps is too cosmically improbable, it may well be that in all the universe, there’s only us.
The Gaza Conundrum

Israel has many options, none good

By Jonathan Schanzer

ON MAY 14, 2018, at the exact moment that Israel was celebrating the opening of the new U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem, I sat across the desk from a senior Israeli official in Tel Aviv. He was in a foul mood. He looked as if he hadn’t slept much. He rubbed his eyes, scratched his stubble, and blurted suddenly, “Gaza is a problem from hell.”

Amid all the embassy fanfare, Israeli officials were beginning to realize the Gaza border protests that had erupted on March 30, celebrated on social media as the “Great March of Return,” would not soon end. And the Israelis were finding them increasingly difficult to handle.

Israel is equipped to fight a wide range of wars, but not against the so-called weapons of the weak. Gazans were sending flaming balloons across the border into Israeli territory. The terrorist group Hamas, according to an Israeli military spokesman, was paying children to skip school and rush the border. Militants then fired at Israel from behind these human shields. Unable to disperse the crowd with tear gas or other crowd-control methods, the Israel Defense Force (IDF) began to open fire.

My interlocutor let out a heavy sigh. “We don’t have creative solutions for this right now,” he said.

It’s one year later. The weekly Gaza protests have continued, with casualties and chaos mounting. Every few months a conflagration erupts. The most recent one saw Palestinian terror groups firing more than 700 rockets into Israel. Four Israelis were murdered. The Israeli response was predictably tough but measured, including the destruction of terrorist hideouts and even some targeted assassinations.

Within days, a cease-fire was reached. But it won’t last. It can’t. Every Gaza escalation brings Israel back to the same place, setting the stage yet again for more conflict. The frustration in Israel is palpable. As one Jerusalem bureaucrat told me on the eve of last month’s elections, “What good is having the strongest military in the region if we can’t get rid of an annoyance like Hamas?”

Jonathan Schanzer is senior vice president at Foundation for Defense of Democracies.
Hamas simply doesn’t rank high enough on Israel’s list of threats to justify a larger conflict. This has allowed Hamas to live to fight another day, time and again.

Israelis of all political persuasions now say it's time for change. But they are likely to learn that there aren’t good alternatives to what is widely viewed as an unsustainable status quo. A major Gaza offensive could backfire and hasten a conflict with Iran. It could trigger poisonous partisan debates in Washington. It could even force Israel to do something it wants to avoid at all costs: re-occupy Gaza.

As it turns out, the problem from hell has rungs.

For Israel, Gaza has been a consistent challenge, but never quite a strategic threat, since the 1948–1949 War of Independence. Back then, it was Egyptian-backed fedayeen carrying out attacks in Israel. Gaza was later the scene of pitched battles in the 1967 Six-Day War. There was a time after the Israeli conquest of the territory when Israelis could enter Gaza and engage in commerce. But in December 1987 that came to a halt; Gaza was where the first intifada erupted.

Hamas has been firing mortars and rockets into Israel from Gaza since the breakdown of the peace process in 2001. Israel made the problem inadvertently worse when it vacated the Gaza Strip in 2005; disengagement ended Israeli occupation but granted Hamas more operational freedom. That problem became acute in 2007 when the group wrested control of Gaza from the Palestinian Authority in a brutal civil war. Hamas soon began to import more weapons and develop new capabilities. Israel and Hamas have engaged in significant conflict a half dozen times since then, with many other minor skirmishes. While Hamas has developed commando tunnels and other capabilities, rockets remain the group’s weapon of choice.

For Israel, necessity bred invention. In 2011, the Israelis rolled out one of the most remarkable military accomplishments of the 21st century: Iron Dome. The system makes crucial split-second decisions. It either shoots short-range rockets out of the sky when they hurtle toward population centers, or it allows rockets destined to hit unpopulated areas to simply remain on course. The success rate for these combined functions is somewhere between 85 and 90 percent.

Even as Hamas attacks have dramatically increased in volume, Iron Dome has protected Israel’s citizens. IDF brass rightly notes that the system grants officials time and space to make rational decisions about war. And those decisions, given the low casualty numbers, have often meant that Israel could respond in a limited and proportional fashion. In fact, the Israelis have never sought a larger conflict because they see Hamas as a tactical threat, not an existential one. Hamas simply doesn’t rank high enough on the list of threats to justify the kind of war that would be required. This has allowed Hamas to live to fight another day, time and again.

Some argue that Israel now has a false sense of security about the dangers of Gaza rockets. It’s not false. Israel has largely inoculated itself from the rock-et threat, along with every other security challenge Hamas has thrown at them, for that matter.

In truth, Hamas has the false sense of security. The group has undeniably tried to overwhelm Iron Dome, but it has failed repeatedly. Hostilities have thus settled into a predictable pattern. Hamas now fires deadly projectiles into civilian areas without the consequences of significant deaths or retaliation.

After last weekend, however, the naturally cautious Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is finding it more difficult to show restraint. The public fears that Israel has lost deterrence. If it truly had deterrence, it would have been clear to Israel’s foes in Gaza that deploying Iron Dome just once would unleash a torrential response. Instead, Israel has repeatedly absorbed blows and responded in a measured fashion. It’s possible that Israel did so this time to ensure calm during the forthcoming Eurovision song contest and Israeli Independence Day. Yet there is always a reason for the IDF not to escalate. And Israelis are growing restless.

With the Israeli public now stirring, the IDF is warily eyeing the major conflict it has forestalled for a dozen years: a vicious battle against a well-trained and well-armed non-state actor. It is also warily eyeing Iran.

Gaza is widely recognized as Palestinian territory. But it’s also Iranian. It was Iran that helped Hamas conquer Gaza in 2007. It was Iran that continued to keep “Hamastan” solvent until the rupture between the Shiite regime in Tehran and the Sunni Hamas over Syrian policy in 2012. Iranian funding since has been
restored, but it has not returned to its previous levels, primarily due to crippling U.S. sanctions on the regime in Tehran. But ties today are once again strong.

The missile barrage in May was almost certainly precipitated by Iran. It began with a sniper attack by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), a terrorist faction heavily influenced by Iran. Senior Israeli officials believe that the attack was likely ordered by Iran to disrupt Egyptian cease-fire mediation between Hamas and Israel.

Should Israel elect to eject Hamas from the Gaza Strip, an Iranian response would loom large. The Israelis should expect Hamas to fight fiercely, to empty its arsenal, and to get help from Iranian advisers and Iranian proxies like PIJ and Harakat al-Sabirin. Iran will not surrender this territory without a fight.

There is also a scenario in which Iran deploys its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, to preserve Iran’s interests. Hezbollah has an estimated 150,000 rockets in its arsenal, including a growing number of precision-guided munitions (PGM). Should Iran choose to activate Hezbollah amid a Gaza war, a two-front conflict would make the May barrage look like a minor nuisance.

While threats mount, time may be running out on the political cover Israel needs for the Gaza war it doesn’t want but may need to wage nonetheless. Israeli leaders are working under the assumption that President Donald Trump alone (or more specifically, his administration) would give the IDF the green light to fight the long overdue war against Hamas, or even against Iran and its other proxies.

For the Israelis, placing their trust in Trump means taking two risks. The first is that they may owe a great debt that Trump could demand in the form of peace-process concessions. However, from the little we know of Trump’s “Deal of the Century,” Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt are not likely to squeeze the Israelis terribly hard, if at all.

The second risk, the far greater danger, is that Israel would allow itself to become a political football. It’s not hard to understand how this could happen. The Obama administration gave the Israelis headaches like the Iran nuclear deal, support for the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring, and its abstention in the matter of an anti-Israel resolution at the United Nations. This president, by contrast, has offered unyielding support in key areas, including self-defense, the U.S. Embassy move, recognition of sovereignty in the Golan Heights, and more. Meanwhile, a vociferous gaggle of progressives in the House of Representatives is voicing anti-Israel sentiments in an unprecedented fashion. And while pro-Israel centrist Democrats have not wavered, they are warning Trump not to indulge Netanyahu’s more incendiary policy possibilities, like annexing parts of the West Bank. Republicans have exploited these fissures, with Trump leading the call for Jewish voters to end their longstanding support for Democrats and join the GOP.

If it came down to conflict, pro-Israel Democrats and Republicans alike would rally their support. They understand the gravity, even the necessity, of a war in Gaza. But critics would cast Israel as the aggressor, and one that was in league with Trump to boot. The next conflict could thus easily be cast as a politically binary one, where American politicians framed their views on Israeli security as either a pro-Trump or anti-Trump position.

The dozens of former and current Israeli officials I’ve talked to over the past three years all believe that bipartisanship has been Israel’s single greatest asset in Washington over the years. Yet they don’t truly understand the way hyper-partisanship has overtaken Washington. They do not grasp how the debates surrounding Donald Trump, fair or not, have divided our nation. Nor do they appreciate how Netanyahu’s close ties with Trump can be wielded by both sides in ways that would hurt Israel at an urgent time of need.

Let us say that Israel was able to navigate the morass of American politics, gain bipartisan support for a war in Gaza, and then successfully dislodge Hamas. Israel would then have to grapple with another big issue: what comes next.

The IDF’s Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) currently facilitates the entry of thousands of truckloads of goods to enter the Gaza Strip every day, even as a military blockade remains in place to block dual-use materials and sophisticated weaponry from the Gaza Strip. In other words, Israel has two policies. One is to isolate Hamas,
and the other is to allow services to be rendered to the Gazan people.

Israel, for the sake of calm, has even engaged with the Turks and the Qatars, despite both countries’ avowed anti-Zionism and support for Hamas. It has permitted them to provide funds and other assistance to the coastal enclave. Gaza’s suffering continues, however, because Hamas continues to divert funds for commando tunnels, rockets, and other tools of war. And under Hamas rule, there is not much political space to challenge these policies. Anti-Israel sentiment is the only permissible form of protest. This has only served to further radicalize a population that has for years been fed a steady diet of hate.

The Israelis since 2007, along with the Egyptians since 2013, have endeavored to reshape the political landscape in Gaza. This is the first and best choice from Israel’s perspective. But so far, they have failed. The viable alternatives to Hamas are the sclerotic Palestinian Authority, radical Salafi groups, and Iran-backed PIJ. There could be others, such as the supporters of Mohammed Dahlan, the former Gaza strongman who went into exile in the UAE after the Hamas military takeover in 2007. But we know little about Dahlan’s ability to organize politically, or whether Gaza would reject his transplanted leadership after so many years away, like an artificial heart.

The obvious alternative to all of this is re-occupation. This would be deeply unpopular in Israel. It’s unthinkable to many. Of course, the Israelis controlled Gaza from 1967 until 2005. The Israelis never coordinated their departure with Palestinian counterparts, and it looked as if they were pulling out under fire from Hamas rockets and other attacks. This perception contributed in part to the Hamas electoral victory in 2006. That election led to the political standoff that gave way to the civil war in which Hamas overtook the Gaza Strip in 2007.

Fourteen years after the Gaza withdrawal, the rockets are still falling. Twelve years after Hamas took power, the group remains entrenched. Eight years after the deployment of Iron Dome, the Israelis are arguably safer, but they are back where they’ve always been: on the Gaza border, mulling their next move.
Marvel and the Jews

Moviegoing past, present, and future

By John Podhoretz

A CENTURY AGO, the movies launched mass culture. Charlie Chaplin’s biographer Peter Ackroyd has observed Chaplin became the world’s first global celebrity during World War I—the first person to be known across the world by face. This fame was due to the international export of his two-reel comedies made in Hollywood.

One hundred years later, mass culture continues to be an almost exclusively American (or English-language) product. Consider this: The most successful movie ever made in another tongue is a Chinese film called Wolf Warrior 2, released in 2018. You’ve never heard of it, and for good reason. Wolf Warrior 2 ranks 65th on the all-time chart; three other recent Chinese movies come in at 113th, 147th, and 154th. Aside from these four, every one of the 250 most popular films in history was either made by Americans, released by an American company, or distributed by Americans across the planet. The same is true of television. The age of streaming might mean that Americans are now watching more foreign programming than ever before, but worldwide, the dominance of American television remains entirely unchallenged. In 2017, the world’s most popular programs were said to have been the CBS crime drama NCIS and the CBS sitcom The Big Bang Theory, with the cable shows The Walking Dead and Game of Thrones close by.

Americans may be full of anxiety about the erosion of our national standing and power, but there is no sign of that erosion when it comes to global mass culture. A century after the man in tramp garb all but invented celebrity, the most popular cultural figures in the world today are a dozen Americans in very different sorts of garb—costumes that were first sketched half a century ago by royalty-denied, day-laboring schleps, mostly Jewish, working for slave wages in the slapdash midtown Manhattan offices of a penny-ante publishing company called Marvel Comics.

Like so much of 20th-century pop culture, the comics business was the creation and handiwork of first-generation and immigrant Jewish businessmen, writers, and artists whose outside-inside position in America gave them a peculiar and useful vantage point. As a character in Michael Chabon’s novel The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay notes: “They’re all Jewish, superheroes. Superman, you don’t think he’s Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing his name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew

John Podhoretz is the editor of Commentary.
would pick a name like that for himself.” The Jews who made the comics told contemporary folktales about powerful people often forced by circumstance to pretend to be relatively powerless even as they contested with external evils that wished above all else to destroy them and the society around them—the very society that these stiff-necked people sitting in the culture’s cheap seats felt hard-done-by.

The creators of Superman, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, were kids from Cleveland who sold their intellectual property for $130 to a company called DC run by two immigrants named Jack Liebowitz and Harry Donenfeld. DC’s chief rival was a company that would eventually be called Marvel; it was the property of one Martin (né Moe) Goodman, who brought his nephew Stanley Lieber on board to help out. Lieber eventually changed his name to Stan Lee and became the public face of the business—and, in his own prose contributions to the comic books he wrote and edited, introduced the self-mocking jokey tone of the Borscht Belt to boys across America and helped form their understanding of what humor was.

Just as Izzy Baline wrote “White Christmas” after changing his name to Irving Berlin and foreign-born Hollywood chieftains like Szmul Gelbfisz (later Sam Goldwyn) and Carl Laemmle helped create the ideal of America for Americans, the all-but-unknown and mostly Jewish writers and editors of comics gave metaphorical power to American adolescent anxieties about strength and weakness and public exposure. It turned out those anxieties had a great deal in common with the existential terrors that erupted across the world after 9/11. It was at that point, in 2002 and with the release of the first Spider-Man movie, that the intellectual property created by Marvel’s Jews became the source material for the 21st century’s most popular entertainments.

Two Marvel movies released in the past year, Avengers: Infinity War and its continuation Avengers: Endgame, released since April 2018 have earned more than $5 billion at the worldwide box office. At some point very soon, Endgame alone will become the most successful motion picture ever made. Add to that $5 billion the earnings of three other Marvel movies released since spring 2018—Ant-Man and the Wasp, Black Panther, and Captain Marvel—and you get a worldwide gross of $8.3 billion in a mere 15 months.

Now take all 22 movies Marvel has made since 2008’s Iron Man launched what is known as the “Marvel Cinematic Universe.” Global total: $21 billion and counting. In a few months, we will see the release of Spider-Man: Far From Home, which is all but guaranteed to make somewhere between $1.5 and $2 billion. The next five years will see the release of at least eight more MCU movies, and there’s no reason to believe they will do any less well.

Historically, serialized fare loses its popular following over time either because it declines in quality or invokes audience fatigue. But this year Marvel centered films around new characters in MCU films 19 and 21 (Black Panther and Captain Marvel), and both proved to be gigantic hits as well. There has never been a television show whose audience was larger in its 11th year than in any year previous. In the annals of literature, only the Harry Potter novels (and films) retained their

Iron Man’s Tony Stark, irresponsible genius inventor.
audiences or saw them grow over time, but J.K. Rowling wrote only seven books in all (from which eight films were made).* There is no analogue for this kind of cultural success, in the movies or anywhere else.

Marvel's unprecedented streak is due in part to excellence. These MCU movies have been made on a lavish scale, no expense spared. They are gorgeous, and they don't have a unified look or feel; each film has a signature of its own. The MCU has been guided since 2007 by a producer named Kevin Feige, who was 33 when he began. The first movie he supervised was 2008's *Iron Man*, which broke new ground for the superhero genre by finding an entirely new tone. It abjured the knowing campiness of the *Superman* movies of the 1970s, the macabre silliness of the *Batman* movies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the political preachiness of the *X-Men* movies of the early 2000s. *Iron Man* took a standard superhero story but did not make knowing fun of it, the way so many predecessor films did. And it merged that story with the themes and spirit of a classic screwball comedy from the 1930s about rich people who really enjoy being rich. Most important, it gave its star, the ex-miscreant ex-con Robert Downey Jr., a chance to build an amusing, eccentric, winning character out of the irresponsible genius inventor Tony Stark.

This, it turned out, was the Marvel secret sauce: finding performers who could make these characters funny and interesting and surprising, all the while fitting them into storylines and genres straight out of classic Hollywood. *Captain America: The First Avenger* is a World War II battle film. *Captain America: Winter Soldier* is a paranoid Washington thriller out of the 1970s. *Ant-Man* is a heist picture. *Black Panther* is James Bond. *Spider-Man: Homecoming* is a John Hughes high-school flick.

It took Feige and Co. a few tries to get this. The second MCU film, *The Incredible Hulk*, was dull and self-serious, and the third, *Iron Man 2*, was a classic ill-conceived sequel that suggested the original was a fluke. But then came *Thor*, which was largely ponderous but was centered on a heretofore unknown behemoth of an actor named Chris Hemsworth who turned out to have miraculous comic timing. In coming years, Hemsworth would be followed by other relative unknowns like Chris Evans (*Captain America*), Tom Holland (*Spider-Man*), and Chris Pratt (*Star Lord*), whose magnetism, star power, and comic chops were so dazzling their triumphant performances in these roles have marked Feige as perhaps the greatest casting supervisor in movie history.

Marvel Comics had outraced DC comics in the early 1960s by connecting all its characters and comic books and allowing them to cross in and out of one another's stories. In 2005, an executive named David Maisel sold Marvel chieftains Isaac Perlmutter and Avi Arad (as with the earlier Marvel years, seven more in

* The James Bond films have remained reliable box-office performers over the past 56 years; it is the longest-lived series in film history. But there have been only 25 of them in all that time, and in the United States, the most popular, adjusting for inflation, remains *Thunderball*, from 1965.
actors and actresses, all of whom had been introduced in the previous 21 films. It was likely the most thoroughgoing concentration of star performers in one place in the history of any medium. The care with which the universe had been constructed and maintained paid off in an emotional knockout of an ending—the very reason *Endgame* will soon set the all-time box-office record, if it hasn’t already by the time you are reading this.*

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*For decades now, moviemakers and movie critics and film aficionados (including me) have been lamenting the decline of cinema. No longer do people go to the movie theater to be part of the general cultural conversation the way they did in the 1970s and 1980s, especially once television shook off the shackles of the idea that it did best by airing the “least objectionable programming” it could find and instead began to compete aggressively for audiences by producing shows of higher quality and more controversial subject matter. Brian Raftery’s interesting new book, *Best. Movie. Year. Ever.*, claims 1999 as the last twelvemonth in which Hollywood gave ambitious filmmakers the freedom to make original and unexpected big-budget films. The market for such fare has all but vanished, and as the actor John Cho tells Raftery, “if *The Matrix* and *Being John Malkovich* were being pitched today, they’d be pitched as television shows.”

Did the superhero picture kill off Hollywood? No. If the Marvel Cinematic Universe had never come along, the people who have bought $22 billion worth of tickets to these movies would not have been standing in line to see whatever might have followed in the wake of *Being John Malkovich*. They might not have gone to the movies at all.

Just as the Harry Potter novels almost single-handedly reclaimed the pleasures of reading for youth across the world who were all but expected to sink into what was once called post-literacy, maybe the Marvel movies have kept moviegoing alive as a communal activity—if not for another century, then maybe long enough for another bunch of Jews to think up something else.*

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*It’s worth noting that the all-time figure is a worldwide number. Inside the United States, *Avengers: Endgame* isn’t yet in the top 25; the all-time champ remains *Gone With the Wind*. Its total of $1.8 billion (adjusted for inflation) will never be equaled.*
The Achievement of Vasily Grossman

Was he the greatest writer of the past century?

By Joseph Epstein

“I N A CONVERSATION sometime in the mid-1970s, Saul Bellow remarked to me on the crucial difference between European and American writers of his generation. Writers in Europe have looked the devil in the eye, he said, while in America writers have to make do with irony, comedy, and anything else that comes to hand. The devil, of course, was totalitarianism, in particular fascism and Communism, which promised its adherents heaven and brought them unmitigated hell.

The European writers Bellow had in mind were Arthur Koestler, George Orwell, Albert Camus, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Stefan Zweig, André Malraux, Boris Pasternak, and others. Vasily Grossman (1905–1964), a writer Bellow surely did not know about at the time we spoke, perhaps stared that devil in the face with greater intensity than anyone else and came away the most impressive of all literary witnesses of the malevolence of totalitarianism. Judged by the centrality, the significance, of his subject and his aesthetic grasp of it in powerful novels and penetrating essays, Grossman may have been the most important writer of the past century.

Vasily Grossman had the misfortune of being born in Russia, a country that, under the czars as under the comissars, has traditionally treated its people as if they were a conquered nation. “There was only one thing Russia hadn’t seen during these thousand years,” thinks a character in Grossman’s novel Everything Flows—“freedom.” Another character in the same novel remarks: “Happiness doesn’t seem to be our fate in this world.” In 2014, the actor Leonid Bronevoy, whose father had been sent off to the Gulag, described the Soviet experiment as “an absurd horror film stretching over 70 years.” Government-organized famine, hideous show trials, brutal gulags, mass mur-

Joseph Epstein is the author, most recently, of Charm: The Elusive Enchantment (Lyons Press).

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“Well, comrade Mostovskoy,” said Sofya, “so much for your 20th century. So much for its humanity and culture... All I see is unprecedented atrocities.”

—Stalingrad, Vasily Grossman

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The Achievement of Vasily Grossman: June 2019

Grossman somehow evaded the fate of death by execution that befell those two other immensely talented Jewish writers, Isaac Babel and Osip Mandelstam.

der, life in the Soviet Union made the plagues that fell upon Egypt seem a week in the Catskills.

Grossman was also a Jew, who under the Czars were for the most part kept segregated in the Pale of Settlement and victimized by pogroms (there were more than 1,200 pogroms in the Ukraine alone). Under Stalin, Jews were systematically hunted down after the false Doctors’ Plot of 1952–53, in which Russians were told that a group of mostly Jewish doctors supposedly plotted to assassinate the dictator. Grossman somehow evaded the fate of death by execution that befell those two other immensely talented Jewish writers, Isaac Babel and Osip Mandelstam. But his mother was murdered by the Nazis in Berdichev in 1941 in Ukraine, where some 62,000 Jews were massacred.

Like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Vasily Grossman was trained as an engineer, in his case a chemical engineer. During World War II, owing to near-sightedness and poor health, he failed to qualify for the military but served primarily as a journalist covering all the major battles of the war for Red Star and other Soviet publications. Grossman arrived with the Soviet troops at Treblinka, the death camp, and was among the first, in a devastating essay called “The Hell of Treblinka” (1944), to reveal the deadly mechanics of Hitler’s Final Solution. As a journalist, he was also at Stalingrad, the great battle that marked the beginning of the end for the Nazis.

Grossman is best known for his two connected and hefty novels—together, in their New York Review editions, they weigh in at a combined 1,830 pages. These are Stalingrad and Life and Fate. His unfinished novel Everything Flows (1961), written toward the end of his life, is a root-and-branch attack on Soviet Communism as told through the lucubrations of a man, one Ivan Grigoryevich, who had spent nearly 30 years in the Gulag.

The story of the publication of Grossman’s books under Soviet Communism could be the source of an impressively complex novel of its own. Grossman wrote his Stalingrad while Stalin was still alive, and thus under the artistically crushing restraints of Socialist Realism, which Maxim Gorky defined as “the ability to see the present in terms of the future” and which Grossman later said was as “convention-ridden as the bucolic romances of the 18th century.” What Socialist Realism actually meant was that no art was allowed that did not support, defend, extol the Soviet Union, which of course meant no art of any independence, complexity, ultimate worth was permitted publication.

In his introduction to Life and Fate and his afterword to Stalingrad, the translator Robert Chandler offers an admittedly partial account of the fiery hoops through which Grossman had to jump to get his work published. The editors of the Soviet journal Novy Mir made so many radical editorial suggestions to render Stalingrad “safe”—including cutting some characters, adding others, altering the occupations of still others—that the original manuscript underwent six heavy revisions and was set in type no fewer than three times before finally being run in serialization in a much-altered version. About the no less complicated editorial maze through which Grossman’s Life and Fate was put, it is more than enough to say that its author failed to live long enough to see it in print. He died in 1964.

Grossman’s book was arrested instead of its author; Grossman spoke of Life and Fate as being “imprisoned.” The novel in fact wasn’t published in the Soviet Union until the late 1980s, and even today Grossman is apparently not all that well known in his native land. Imagine the utter frustration, leading to the deep depression that Grossman suffered, of having written a masterpiece of world literature and never getting to see it in print!

In Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century, Alexandra Popoff, a Russian journalist who has written books about Countess Tolstoy and about Tolstoy’s disciple Vladimir Chertkov, has turned out an excellent biography of Grossman. Hers is a biography that offers no striking psychological portrait of its subject or radical reading of his works. Instead it is what I think of as a Dragnet, or Jack Webb, biography—“Just the facts, Ma’am”—the accretion of which is no small accomplishment about a life lived almost entirely in the murky and heavily censored atmosphere of the Soviet Union.

GROSSMAN, Popoff recounts, was “descended from well-to-do merchants,” a fact that needs to be qualified, as she also notes, by the fact

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The Achievement of Vasily Grossman: June 2019

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that Jews, however well-to-do, were “first among non-equals in the Russian Empire.” His parents were divorced soon after his birth in 1905, though they remained friendly. His mother was a cultivated woman, educated in Europe and fluent in French, a subject she taught. She took her son to live in Switzerland between the ages of five and seven, where, as Popoff writes, he was “introduced to Western values, including the respect for individual rights and freedoms he later believed essential.” Grossman himself read the French writers, the classics, Kipling and Conan Doyle, and was a great admirer of Tolstoy and Chekhov. “Although Grossman lived all his adult life in a totalitarian Soviet state,” Popoff writes, “he had the mentality of a man from the free world.” Friends early noticed the qualities in him of attentiveness and detachment, a combination suggesting a future novelist.

Grossman set out in life to be a scientist but fairly early sensed that he could not do first-class work in science. Social questions began to absorb him, and by 23 he decided that his true vocation was for literature. How literary talent comes to fruition remains one of the mysteries of the arts. Musical talent and skill at visual art tend to show up early and appear to be, as they doubtless are, gifts from God. But literary talent is an acquisition that often comes only later in life—Joseph Conrad published his first novel, *Almayer’s Folly*, at 39—if it isn’t earlier set adrift by discouragement. In the Soviet Union, with its strict censorship, the decision to become a writer, always a risky venture, had the further disadvantage of being fraught with danger. Only in the Soviet Union, it used to be said, do they truly take writers seriously; only there did they take them seriously enough to kill them.

Writing against the grain of Socialist Realism was not yet a problem for the young Vasily Grossman. If he was never an ideologue, he nonetheless respected the idealism of the early Communists. (His father was a Menshevik.) In a 1934 story, “In the Town of Berdichev,” he wrote of a female commissar who finds herself pregnant, and during her lying-in lives with a poor Jewish family, the Magazaniks, until the birth of her child. Once born, the child awakens deep, previously unexpected maternal feelings in her. But when the Poles attack the town of Berdichev, she leaves her child behind—permanently, we are given to believe—to go off and fight with her old regiment. Great sympathy is shown for the Jewish family, and the details in the story are nicely done, yet the moral of the story is clear: The state comes first, yes, even over motherhood. One likes to think that the older Vasily Grossman would have despised this story.

“In the Town of Berdichev” marked Grossman’s arrival as a Soviet writer. It paved the way for him to publish two rather negligible early novels. He was given a much-desired apartment in Moscow. Never a member of the Party, he was a member in good standing of the Union of Soviet Writers. Grossman in those days was not cynically playing the system—he claimed at the time that he owed everything to the Soviet government—but neither was he fighting it.

One of the low points in his career came in 1953 with his agreeing, along with 56 other prominent Soviet Jews, to sign a document that denounced the Jewish physicians who supposedly led the Doctors’ Plot. Grossman later came greatly to regret it, and in *Life and Fate* he assigns the character Viktor Shtrum, who signs a similar document, “a feeling of irreparable guilt and impurity” for his having done so. Grossman’s upbringing was secular; Jewishness did not loom large in his early life. Popoff remarks that he had nevertheless read the Bible and “was deeply influenced by the Jewish belief in the need for compassion, in the need to love life and resist death to the last minute, in the need and obligation to remember the past and honor the dead, and in the need to bear witness.”

Many of these qualities are at the heart of *Stalingrad*. The book is chiefly about the effects of the German invasion on the citizens at all levels of Soviet life, and of the attack on Stalingrad—“a battle,” as Grossman writes, “more grinding, more relentless than Thermopylae or even the siege of Troy. . . the city on the Volga where the world’s fate was being decided.” In *Life and Fate*, Grossman wrote that “every epoch has its own capital city, a city that embodies its will and soul. For several months during the Second World War this city was Stalingrad.”

*Stalingrad* qualifies nicely as one of Henry James’s “loose and baggy monsters,” those novels without the aesthetic form that for James was essential. The novel has no fewer than 151 characters, not
counting those who appear only once. These run from Soviet scientists to German generals to Russian peasants to Stalin and Hitler, who put in appearances, the former in a full-length portrait. (“It was indeed during these hours of ugly, troubled sleep that Hitler was closest to being human.”) New characters are introduced as late as page 868. Domestic scenes are played out, characters intricately described (General Yeromenko “was massive yet stooping; his build did not make it easy for tailors”), and observations on human nature offered: “Love has meaning only when it inspires people to sacrifice—otherwise it is just base passion.” Grossman’s account of the battle of Stalingrad, its confusions, its arbitrary destruction, its deadliness—27 million Russians and 4 million Germans are said to have perished there—is no less compelling than Tolstoy’s account of the battle of Borodino in *War and Peace*.

‘Human suffering,” Grossman writes. “Will it be remembered in centuries to come? The stones of buildings endure and the glory of generals endures, but human suffering does not. Tears and whispers, a cry of pain and despair, the last sighs and groans of the dying—all this disappears along with the smoke and dust blown across the steppe by the wind.” In *Stalingrad* Grossman set himself to record the human suffering brought on by Hitler’s war. Apart from that visited upon the Jews, no people endured more suffering during World War II than the Russians. Through the build-up of detail—of depredations, devastation, death—Grossman succeeds in his self-appointed task of enshrining suffering and its brutally high cost for ordinary people.

It is a splendid, an important, book, possibly a great book, but not, alas, a great novel. *Stalingrad* is too diffuse to have the special power, the concentration and intensification, that only fiction carries. At its end, too many loose ends have not been ravelled, significant characters go unaccounted for, themes are set out but left inadequately unexplored. Much of this may well be owing to the endless editing and relentless revisions that beset the book by its Soviet editor-censors. One is nonetheless pleased to have read *Stalingrad*, not alone for its bringing one of the great battles of history down to personal cases, but for its testimony on behalf of the brave dead.

**A QUESTION THAT ARISES** is whether *Stalingrad* is meant to stand as the first half of a diology, with *Life and Fate* its second half. The books’ translator Robert Chandler is moderately confident that Grossman intended the two books as a single work. Certainly, *Life and Fate* can be read on its own, and before reading *Stalingrad*, which is the order in which I read them. Yet the latter volume enhances the former by providing what in film scripts is called backstory to a novel that already has something akin to classic status among its coterie of devoted readers, among whom I have long been one.

Tzvetan Todorov, the Bulgarian critic, wrote of the Vasily Grossman of the 1950s, the author of *Life and Fate* and *Everthing Flows*, that he “is the only example, or at least the most significant, of an established and leading Soviet writer changing his spots completely. The slave in him died, and a free man arose.” This is an oversimplification, but it is true that the Grossman of the 1950s was a different writer from the Grossman of the 1930s and ‘40s. Nitika Khrushchev’s famous “Secret Speech” of 1956, setting out some of the sins of Stalin and suggesting a “thaw” in the realm of Soviet culture, was doubtless partially responsible for the change in Grossman. But one wonders if his own Jewishness didn’t even more influence the change, however gradual.

In covering the war as a journalist, Grossman also learned about the slaughter of Jews in Ukraine. Along with his article on the inhuman ghastliness at Treblinka, which was put in evidence at the Nuremberg Trials, Grossman saw Babi Yar, the ravine in Kiev where nearly 100,000 Jews were executed and dumped into mass graves in 1941. He knew that many Ukrainians had been complicit in the slaughter of Jews during the Shoah. Add to this his mother’s murder at Berdichev. During these years Grossman worked in collaboration with Ilya Ehrenberg on a volume called *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*, a book that was not allowed publication in Stalin’s Soviet Union. Stalin, himself an anti-Semite, had famously declared, “Do not divide the dead,” by which he meant that emphasizing the mass murder of Jews was prohibited.

Grossman had come a long way, and the evidence of what he learned along that way is plain in...
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The miseries of Stalinism and the grave mistakes of Stalin himself in his direction of the war, which are generally given a pass in *Stalingrad*, are not ignored in *Life and Fate*. The novel opens on a number of brief chapters in which an old Bolshevik, Mikhail Sidorovich Mostovskoy, begins to lose his faith in “the cause of Lenin.” A figure of wisdom and much looked up to in *Stalingrad*, Mostovskoy, now in a German prisoner camp, “was unable to recover his former sense of clarity and completeness. . . . ‘I must be getting old,’ he said to himself.” In *Life and Fate*, true believers often have their belief shaken.

*Life and Fate* offers several brilliant pages on anti-Semitism, Soviet and worldwide. “Anti-Semitism,” Grossman writes, “is also an expression of a lack of talent, an inability to win a contest on equal terms—in science, in commerce, in craftsmanship or in painting. States look to the imaginary intrigues of World Jewry for explanations of their own failure.” He sets out the different levels of anti-Semitism and notes that “historical epochs, unsuccessful and reactionary governments, and individuals hoping to better their lot all turn to anti-Semitism as a last resort, in an attempt to escape an inevitable doom.” In this novel, too, Grossman offers a brilliant portrait of Adolf Eichmann, which one wishes Hannah Arendt had read, as it might have prevented her from writing her wretched book portraying Eichmann as a mere banal bureaucrat.

Told from the point of view of several different characters, with several plots and subplots, *Life and Fate* is not readily summarized. Life under the two totalitarianisms—Communist and fascist—is explored in the novel as is the connection between the two as enemies of humanity. What holds the novel together is the material about the family of Alexandra Vladimorovna Shaposhnikova, a laboratory chemist, her three daughters, their husbands, and their children. One of the husbands, Viktor Pavlovich Shtrum, is a theoretical physicist whose views in many respects resemble those of Grossman. Shtrum not only signs the document blaming colleagues that he much regrets; he holds a grudge against his wife, Lyudmila, whose demands prevented him from saving his mother from the Holocaust. “Good men and bad men alike are capable of weakness,” Grossman writes. “The difference is simply that a bad man will be proud all his life of one good deed—while an honest man is hardly aware of his good acts, but remembers a single bad act for years on end.”

Many of the characters who appear in *Stalingrad* are more fully developed, richer, somehow more memorable in *Life and Fate*. If in its form *Life and Fate* tends to imitate *War and Peace*—the only book Grossman claimed to have read during the battle of Stalingrad—the tone of the novel is closer to that of Chekhov, and many of its chapters, as Robert Chandler suggests, read as if they were Chekhovian short stories. *Life and Fate* is a novel that fully engages its readers with the lives of its characters while revealing the life of an entire society—the kind of work otherwise known as a masterpiece.

One would call *Everything Flows*, Grossman’s final novel, a masterpiece, but, more than anything he had written earlier, it fully reveals his views about the Soviet Union. In this unfinished work, Grossman wrote, perhaps aware he was dying of stomach cancer, without filter. Stalin, so central a figure in the life of all Russians of Grossman’s generation, is revealed as what he was, “a European Marxist and an Asian Despot.” At Stalin’s death, “the death day of the earthly Russian god, the pockmarked cobbler’s son from the town of Gori,” many villagers “breathed a sigh of relief,” in the camps he had created many millions rejoiced. “Stalin Had Died,” Grossman writes. “In this death lay an element of sudden and spontaneous freedom that was infinitely alien to the nature of the Stalinist State.”

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, the sacrosanct Lenin, fares little better in the pages of *Everything Flows*. The notion that the purity of Lenin’s revolution hav-
Grossman asks toward the end of Everything Flows: ‘When will we see the day of a free, human, Russian soul? When will this day dawn? Or will it never dawn?’

ing been distorted by the monstrosities of Stalin is roundly rejected. “The murder of millions of innocent and loyal people masqueraded as cast-iron logic” all had its origin in Lenin. “The destruction of Russian life carried out by Lenin was on a vast scale.” Grossman writes, “Lenin destroyed the way of life of the landowners, Lenin destroyed factory owners and merchants.” Stalin stepped in and with his brutal collectivization finished off the peasants. But it was “Lenin’s obsession with revolution, his fanatical faith in the truth of Marxism and absolute intolerance of anyone who disagreed with him, [that] led him to further hugely the development of the Russia he hated with all his fanatical soul.”

Lenin and Stalin are for Grossman among history’s great enemies of freedom, and it was his belief that “there is no end in the world for the sake of which it is permissible to sacrifice human freedom.” The only progress Grossman recognized was in the realm of freedom. He even implicitly criticizes Tolstoy and Dostoevsky when he writes that “the mystique of the Russian soul is simply the result of a thousand years of slavery.” Grossman asks toward the end of Everything Flows: “When will we see the day of a free, human, Russian soul? When will this day dawn? Or will it never dawn?”

Grossman did not entirely despair, for he felt that not even Stalin—who presided over a state that was the enemy of freedom, that overcame freedom in every sphere of life—was able, in spite of all the millions he killed, to do away with freedom entirely. Or with human kindness.

In Life and Fate the old Bolshevik Mikhail Mostovskoy is interrogated by a Gestapo agent who explains to him all that the Nazis learned from Lenin and Stalin and the similarity of their two regimes. Mostovskoy is disgusted at the thought, but back in his cell he reads the pages of a fellow prisoner, a strange, half-saintly figure named Ikonnikov, thought to be slightly unhinged, who has written about the role of kindness in the human condition.

“This kindness, this stupid kindness, is what is most truly human in a human being,” writes Ikonnikov. “It is what sets man apart, the highest achievement of his soul. No, it says, life is not evil.” Ikonnikov goes on to note that “kindness is powerful only while it is powerless”—the point here being that religions, when in power, lose their goodness in attempting to maintain and protect that power. For Ikonnikov, “the powerlessness of kindness, of senseless kindness, is the secret of [human] immortality. It can never be conquered.” Ikonnikov concludes:

Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is the battle fought by a great evil struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness. But if what is human in human beings has not been destroyed even now, then evil will never conquer.

Mostovskoy, the life-long committed Bolshevik, thinks these the observations of a mad man. Yet they leave him confused and depressed. They have quite the reverse effect on Grossman’s readers. We think of the act of Sofya Osipovna Levinton in comforting the child in the gas chambers. We think of the six-year-old girl who comforts an 82-year-old man on his way to the firing squad in Grossman’s story “The Old Teacher,” and of scores of other acts of kindness that play through the pages of Grossman’s fiction. Only a certain kind of writer can bring such truth home to his readers through the vividly persuasive examples enacted by his characters—only a great writer, which is what Vasily Grossman was.

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The Achievement of Vasily Grossman: June 2019
A Voice of Reason

The Right Side of History: How Reason and Moral Purpose Made the West Great
By Ben Shapiro
Broadside, 256 pages

Reviewed by Sohrab Ahmari

THE RIGHT SIDE of History heralds the arrival of a serious Jewish intellectual. Having cut his teeth as an Internet pugilist in the Andrew Breitbart mold, Ben Shapiro emerges with this, his seventh book, as a thinker of depth, a writer of crisp prose, and a worthy and astute champion of the West at a time when she badly needs them.

Shapiro's conception of the West is different from that of others who in recent years have taken up her cause. For those writers—think Steven Pinker and the like—the West sprang up, abruptly and miraculously, with the advent of Enlightenment skepticism, scientific rationalism, and modern capitalism. In Shapiro's view, however, at the heart of that “West” is a “mechanistic, materialist vision of human beings and the universe.” He decisively rejects that vision. Indeed, he traces many of today’s moral and political disorders to it. As he sees it, we are descending into racial tribalism and wild utopian politics, “moral subjectivism,” and corrosive individualism, because we have willfully severed our societies from their deepest roots. Those are the Mosaic law and its universalization by Jesus of Nazareth, and Greek philosophy, with its confidence in the power of human reason to understand the natural and moral worlds.

Shapiro resolved to write the book after he got a terrifying dose of our modern disorders in early 2016, when a group of conservative students invited him to give a speech at California State University at Los Angeles. It took dozens of armed, uniformed police officers, plus Shapiro’s own private security team, to get the author safely in and out of the college venue, so ravenous and violent was the mob that sought to silence him.

The CSU riot was just the beginning. “At the University of Wisconsin,” he recalls, “my speech...
was nearly shut down by protesters who flooded the front of the stage. At Penn State, protesters gathered outside my speech and pounded on the doors. At DePaul University, the administration threatened to arrest me if I came to campus.”

At universities, it was left-wing radicals and their enablers among university administrators who gave Shapiro the most grief. Online, meanwhile, he became a target of the racist and anti-Semitic alt-right movement, which flooded his Twitter feed “with images straight from the pages of Der Stürmer.” (Shapiro was the top recipient of online abuse from the alt-right, per the Anti-Defamation League.)

Identity leftist slandered the Judeo-Christian tradition as racist, sexist, colonialist, and so forth, while the alt-right revealed in racism and anti-Semitism and sought to excise the West’s Jewish and Christian patrimony, with its universalistic claims about the dignity of the human person, created in the divine image, born with freedom and moral responsibility.

What depths of confusion, unhappiness, and malice the twin movements—identity leftist and the racist alt-right—represented! Against this bleak backdrop, the main task facing his (and my) generation, Shapiro concluded, is a kind of moral archaeology: recovering what was lost and carefully gluing shattered pieces together. He’s right.

All was not, in fact, darkness until about, oh, 2009 or so. This may not come as news to those who know their way around the Bible and the Western canon and world history, but it’s a salutary message and one worth repeating emphatically, as Shapiro does, in an age when diversity hustlers tell students that Western civ is “Eurocentric, Caucasoid, and thus oppressive” (per one college manifesto quoted by the author).

Indeed, as Shapiro shows, the light that still illumines our way of life, despite restless efforts to snuff it out, shone first from the God of the Bible upon Jewish faces. The universal, transcendent God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob heralded the revolution of dignity that made possible all our notions of rights and egalitarian political order. In a chaotic world populated by many local gods, most of them as cruel and capricious as their followers, the God of Israel appeared “as a prime mover,” who governed the world according to a “predictable set of rules discernible by the human mind.”

When this “God intervenes in the world, it is to better the lot of mankind, or to teach lessons.” Chief among those lessons is the equal dignity of humankind before God, evidenced by the fact that divine law binds both Israel and the strangers who sojourn among Israel, and by the declaration of Genesis 1:27—“in the image of God he created him”—which Shapiro calls “the most important verse in human history.”

Set aside the metaphysical velocity of these teachings, which Shapiro and I accept and many others don’t: Judaism’s account of God and man and the relationship between the two was unquestionably a “force for progress,” as the author insists. The advent of Jesus, Shapiro is quick to add, “successfully spread the fundamental principles of Judaism, as emended by Christianity, to billions of human beings on the planet.”

Shapiro’s treatment of Christianity is especially refreshing. Unlike too many American Jewish intellectuals—who, as Ruth Wisse has noted in these pages, define their sense of Jewishness negatively, against a Gentile worldview and life-world that they find by turns oppressive and ridiculous—Shapiro warmly welcomes Christianity’s universalizing dimension. More than that, he lauds the Nazarene faith’s inherent openness to philosophy, which the early Church absorbed from the Hellenic milieu that surrounded it.

And still more: Shapiro defends the Catholic Church against the Enlightenment worshipers who paint her as an obscurantist institution bent on nothing but wringing submission out of heretics at the wrack: “Popular history maintains that [the medieval] period represented the ‘Dark Ages.’ But that’s simply inaccurate. Progress continued as Christianity spread.” The medieval Church, he notes, was responsible for “virtually all literacy.” Its leaders fought slavery, preserved the liberal arts of Greco-Roman antiquity, practiced “proto-capitalism,” and most notably achieved, with the scholastics and Thomas Aquinas especially, that full fusion of faith and reason that made the West.

Shapiro, to be clear, appreciates...
the achievements of the post-Enlightenment period, not least religious freedom. His point, rather, is that the relatively decent order that the Enlightenment worshippers fret about wouldn’t have been possible without biblical faith. To the extent that the radical Enlightenment shut out faith from the realm of public reason, it narrowed the scope of reason and thus set the stage for the undoing of its own best aims. To borrow a metaphor from John Paul II: Closing off one lung (faith) adversely affected the functioning of the other (reason). Thus, insisting on reason, reason alone—and reason narrowly defined as the Pinkers of the world do—won’t save us.

To see why the West became the West, we must climb Sinai and Calvary once more. Shapiro argues that postmodern society’s refusal to make that ascent—that is, to credit biblical faith’s seminal role in liberating man from sundry pagan abominations and the essential inequality and randomness of pagan life—owes to the fact that we can no longer imagine how abominable, unequal, and random pagan life was. Or perhaps it’s because postmodern secularism has, in fact, re-paganized the West, a chilling possibility the author explores in the book’s fascinating closing chapters.

Shapiro, then, succeeds marvelously as archaeologist. The intellectual history he recounts is necessarily brisk and in places oversimplified, as he concedes—understandable in a book that spans millennia of philosophy and revelation. And there is more than a hint of Whig historiography in his account. Even so, readers, particularly young readers, will find in *The Right Side of History* a potent antidote to the poisonous lie that their civilizational inheritance is a source of shame.

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**The Financial Frontier**

*The Case for Space: How the Revolution in Spaceflight Opens Up a Future of Limitless Possibility*  
By Robert Zubrin  
Prometheus Books, 405 pages

**Reviewed by Noah Rothman**

The GREAT explorers didn’t embark on their best-known voyages in pursuit of glory alone. They did not set sail into the unknown to advance the sum of human knowledge or to restore the bonds of human fraternity that politics had torn asunder. They went in pursuit of profit.

Henry Hudson. Ferdinand Magellan. Marco Polo. Christopher Columbus. All launched their missions to distant lands to discover lucrative trade routes, and their expeditions were commissioned by well-heeled sponsors who were engaged in intense competition with their peers. Many of the world’s greatest cities were first founded as remote colonial trading posts. Singapore, Syracuse, Quebec, and New York City; all were once far-flung and sparsely populated outposts established only to exploit and export local resources. When humanity begins to regularly venture beyond Earth’s orbit, it will not be for the benefit of science or international comity. It will be to lay claim to the abundant resources orbiting the sun and to exploit them for money.

Robert Zubrin is a man of science. He has dedicated his life to making the case for manned space exploration in the terms the government bureaucracies care about most: cost-effectiveness and return on investment. Today, at the dawn of the age of private space exploration, Zubrin is uniquely positioned to crystalize the value of space for commercial entities, and he has done just that in *The Case for Space*. Zubrin’s new book treats space not just as a frontier ripe for conquest or a venue in which mankind’s common aspirations can overcome Earth’s petty tribal politics. The solar system, in Zubrin’s telling, is a marketplace.

In December 2017, Elon Musk’s SpaceX became the first private enterprise to launch a payload into orbit on a reused rocket. SpaceX has since begun to routinize the process of launching a one-stage rocket and successfully returning them via boosters to a landing pad. Already this year, Musk’s firm sent a massive commercial satellite into orbit on the Falcon Heavy—a triple-booster rocket capable of sending manned vehicles into orbit—and successfully returned two of those boosters to Earth.

Musk isn’t the only entrepreneur in the private space-exploration business. Jeff Bezos’s Blue Origin, Sir Richard Branson’s Virgin Galac-
tic, Northrop Grumman’s Orbital, and several other firms are engaged in the race to commercialize space. But Musk’s venture has made the most progress toward that end by developing a reusable launch vehicle, thus driving down the costs associated with achieving escape velocity. For now, this company’s objectives are to resupply the international space station and launch commercial satellites, and there is not yet enough competition in this sector to make low Earth orbit a financially viable field of commercial application. But the demand for access to space is rising, and necessity will compel innovation and make costs competitive.

Americans will soon be forced to think about space very differently from how they’ve thought about it in the past. Zubrin astutely observes that Earth orbit is fast becoming a theater of war. America’s reliance on satellites for communications, reconnaissance, and navigation provides its adversaries with a relatively cheap means of achieving military parity. Knock out America’s satellites, and the U.S. military might soon become far less intimidating. It’s impossible to say how many weapons are currently stationed in orbit since so many orbital platforms are classified as “dual use,” meaning they can be transformed into kill vehicles at a moment’s notice. But all “dual use” vehicles can do is kamikaze themselves into another satellite, and that’s insufficient. The U.S. will have to station anti-satellite fighter vehicles in space, both to deter adversaries from attacking U.S. platforms and to protect the orbital industries that are already in development.

The first taste of space for most civilians will come from the development of reusable orbital-class passenger vehicles that will be able to deliver people from one side of the Earth to the other in under an hour. The two-stage reusable boosters in use now by private firms are already capable of delivering a passenger-filled cabin into orbit. Taking costs and overhead into account, Zubrin calculates that a one-way trip would likely run about $20,000. That’s roughly the cost of a first-class ticket from New York City to Sydney, Australia. Along with speed, passengers will have the added benefit of experiencing zero gravity and a killer view—all while generating millions of dollars in gross revenue for the carrier. You can see why firms like XCOR Aerospace and Virgin Orbit are already in the commercial orbital transportation business, and competition will eventually drive ticket prices down.

Space tourism is still a novelty that only the wealthy can afford. But reusable boosters and orbital vehicles will soon make exo-atmospheric sojourns attainable for those of more modest means. The demand for the orbital hospitality sector is already proven. Zubrin notes that several firms are accepting reservations on speculative habitation modules have even been tested in space. Orbital hotels will pave the way for orbital research-and-development facilities, which can offer exclusive features unique to their terrestrial alternatives including total secrecy and isolation, reduced gravity, and near vacuum conditions. The overhead costs on products developed or produced in space at current launch costs are substantial but not prohibitive. “Let’s say that the end use for the product was a drug or computer chip selling retail for $200 for a hundred-gram unit,” Zubrin writes. “In that case, four hundred thousand units would have to be sold per year.” That’s a lot, but it is hardly beyond the realm of imagination.

There are, however, technical limits to what commercial space flight can accomplish. Interplanetary expeditions will be the province of governments in the near term, but getting there and staying there are only the first steps in mankind’s quest to conquer the solar system. The next step will be making the expeditions profitable, and that will be left to private enterprise.

Citing John and Ruth Lewis’s 1987 book Space Resources, Zubrin notes that there is plenty of bounty out there for the taking. The main asteroid belt is replete with millions of tons of nickel, cobalt, and platinum. These and other strategic metals in the belt have profound industrial applications, some of which—like fuel-cell technology—are in their infancy. As those technologies mature, the demand for these minerals will be difficult to satisfy with terrestrial...
supplies alone. Here, too, Zubrin notes that commercial enterprises have already incorporated, with the mission of exploiting these resources, and Congress would be well served by granting mining rights to groups that survey these bodies just as it issued speculative land rights to territories in the American West. These rights would be enforceable through the imposition of tariffs on U.S. imports made with materials exploited by patent violators, and legislation like this would light a fire under the effort to exploit the resources in the belt.

Carbonaceous materials, precious metals, and silicates are abundant on Jupiter’s less irradiated moons Ganymede and Calisto, and their proximity to the largest gravity booster in our solar system will increase their strategic value as necessary waypoints on the trip to and from the Jovian system. Saturn’s moon Titan has hundreds of times more liquid hydrocarbons than all the known gas and oil reserves on Earth, and its thick atmosphere facilitates the efficient conversion of thermal energy from fission or fusion reactors to electricity. Perhaps the most valuable resource in space that is all but nonexistent on Earth is helium-3, a non-radioactive isotope that is superior in creating a fusion reaction with tritium than dirtier deuterium.

Helium-3 is scarce but harvestable on the moon, and it is abundant in the outer solar system—it will soon become extremely valuable. “A kilogram of gold, at today’s prices, is worth about $40,000,” Zubrin notes. “A kilogram of helium-3,” he adds, “if burned in a fusion reactor using a 60 percent efficiency [magnetohydrodynamic] conversion system, would produce one hundred million kilowatt-hours of electricity.” So, conservatively, a kilogram of helium-3 would be worth approximately $10 million. To realize the value of helium-3, you still need a reliable fusion reactor. And that’s not in the realm of science fiction.

Progress toward reliable fusion reaction made great strides until the 1980s, when the Cold War ended and the competitive impulses fueling innovation dried up. Research was consolidated into one international project, the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, which has spent decades trying to innovate by committee, arguing over where to locate its facilities and dedicating itself to achieving thermonuclear ignition at the most leisurely pace. Fortunately, private enterprise has again stepped in where governments have failed, and Zubrin notes that commercial and research facilities are racing toward the development of net energy-generating tokamak reactors in the next decade. “Helium-3 won’t provide us the magnet that will draw us into space,” Zubrin concedes, “but mastery of space will give us helium-3.”

Zubrin modestly observes that the limits of human knowledge prevent us from making accurate predictions about the kinds of resources spacefaring humans will exploit, because we are still discovering and developing new resources on Earth. Two centuries ago, few would recognize silicon and aluminum ore as anything other than rocks and dirt. Crude oil, he notes, was valueless until we discovered its potential. Natural gas was a waste product that we burned off before it became the “bridge fuel” to a cleaner energy future, rendering the United States a net energy exporter. Before the millennium, the potential yields from exploiting oil shale were almost entirely theoretical and cost-prohibitive. The early colonists in the solar system will experience the same drives and limitations that typified the early American experience, in which a labor shortage necessitated radical technological innovations.

Atomized spacefaring communities will be far removed from the institutions that exert social and legal pressure on nonconformists at home. They will develop new methods of social organization. Experimentation will beget more experimentation, and the intense competition to attract immigrants will yield societal transformations. “Perhaps some will be republican, others anarchist,” Zubrin speculates. “Some aristocratic, others egalitarian. Some religious, others rationalist.” And so on. Like the farflung trading posts that are today’s
greatest metropolises, those societies that maximize human potential will flourish. Those that do not will wither. But the most valuable resource at their disposal will be freedom.

Ultimately, mankind will be drawn to conquer the solar system out of an instinct for self-preservation. Humans inherited an evolutionary adaptation that compels them to expand their viable habitat. Scholars have long speculated that the existence of a frontier yields psychological advantages. People do not thrive in stagnation. But Zubrin doesn’t define survival in only abstract terms. Americans are conditioned on a diet of film and television productions that speculate about the ease with which an asteroid on a collision course with Earth could be diverted or destroyed, but such a prospect is currently beyond our technological capabilities. You can’t simply blow an asteroid up with a multi-megaton hydrogen bomb; it would likely reassemble itself with its own gravity. And you can’t nudge it off course without doing so years—even tens or hundreds of years—before impact, when the object is still in deep space and out of reach. Only human crews equipped with advanced technology and demolitions expertise could do the job right.

Ultimately, The Case for Space makes an argument that scientific minds may regard with hostility because the book is, in part, disdainful of the pieties that devotees of pop science revere. But even Zubrin cannot abandon the dream entirely. Substantial portions of his book are dedicated to making the case for interstellar exploration, stellar ignition, terraforming, and colonizing the universe with life, projects that are neither technologically viable nor commercially attractive.

Zubrin is rightly disdainful of the phobias that have kept men earthbound for so long. He convincingly dismantles the notions that cosmic rays, human isolation, prolonged exposure to low gravity, and alien microbes are terrifying barriers to exploring the solar system. He is, however, equally disdainful of NASA’s hidebound commitment to constituency maintenance. He argues that the space agency has subordinated the mission-driven objective of space exploration to the needs of its vendors. That’s doubtlessly true, but NASA remains a critical vehicle for the exploration of space, in part, because pivotal places like Mars have such limited near-term commercial value.

Just as New York City is not known for the beaver pelts it was founded to deliver to market but the financial services and cultural commodities it developed along the way, Mars will one day become a wealthy and innovative hub linking the resource-rich outer solar system to the inner planets. But private enterprise will find the return on investment from early expeditions to Mars decidedly limited. Governments still have an important role to play in the opening of this new frontier.

These are, however, minor objections to what is overall an important narrative. The Case for Space is an argument for a paradigmatic shift among policymakers. It demands that they acquaint themselves with the realities of the marketplace that are already at work creating mankind’s future in the solar system. The age of private space exploration is upon us. It is driven as much by mankind’s instinctual desire to seek out new frontiers as it is by his desire to profit from them. Robert Zubrin is leading the way.

DDs and PPs

The Privileged Poor
By Anthony Abraham Jack
Harvard University Press, 288 pages

Reviewed by Wilfred Reilly

WITHIN academia, not all poor people are created equal.

That, in a sentence, is the theme of Anthony Abraham Jack’s engaging short book The Privileged Poor.

Wilfred Reilly is assistant professor of political sciences in the College of Public Service and Leadership Studies at Kentucky State University and the author of Hate Crime Hoax (Regnery).

Jack argues that lower-income students, like “students of color,” in elite American universities are often analyzed as though they were a unitary, cohesive block—but that doing so ignores high levels of diversity within these groups. Specifically, Jack contends that poor students in top colleges fall into two distinct groups. There are the Doubly Disadvantaged (DD), who attended struggling high schools in their disadvantaged big-city neighborhoods or rural towns before matriculating to Harvard or Michigan. And there are the Privileged Poor (PP), who received “upward mobility” scholarships to select boarding or day schools prior to college.

Jack points out that the PP are...
a sizable group; remarkably, 50 percent of lower-income minority students who attend “highly selective” U.S. universities graduated from selective prep schools. He argues convincingly that these students do better in college than “DD” students. In contrast to the DD, the PP tend not to be “fazed by the campus culture or their wealthier peers.” After two to four years of socialization in elite prep schools, they usually feel academically and socially prepared for university. Talking with Jack, many describe their freshman year at the institution he labels “Renowned University” (Yale?) as “fifth year” or a predictable “next step.”

That said, life as a member of the Privileged Poor is not always a walk in the park. The shock of an unwelcome call from home—about, for example, a relative’s falling victim to gang violence—certainly can serve as an unwelcome reminder of the real world outside the ivory tower. However, such calls do not occur on most days. For most members of the PP, culture shock occurred in high school, so college seems essentially familiar. After making this argument, Jack discusses collegiate living conditions for poor students and makes a number of suggestions—leaving public cafeterias open during holidays, providing non-humiliating work-study jobs for students, having faculty explain the purpose and importance of office hours—that would make college life easier for both DD and PP students.

While its primary focus is one argument about the performance of different student cohorts, Jack’s book is notable in that, skillfully and almost in passing, it engages with many of the noteworthy and underreported realities of contemporary academic life. First, he points out that elite colleges are remarkably segregated in income terms, and that the representation of the rich within them seems to be increasing. He notes that a mere 14 percent of undergraduates in the top tier of colleges come from the bottom half of the USA’s economic distribution, while 63 percent come from the nation’s top quartile. Near the true top of the economic pyramid, wealth disparities in college attendance become still more pronounced. Children of the 1 percent are 77 times more likely to “go Ivy” than are students from working-class families making $30,000 per year. At a typical elite school such as Amherst College, Jack notes, almost all students of all races are rich.

Refreshingly, as an African-American author (and I speak as one myself), Jack openly admits that social class is a much greater predictor of success and comfort in this environment than is race (or region, religion, etc.). “The wealthier you are,” he writes bluntly, “the more likely you are to feel you belong at an elite college.” Well-to-do students of all races who agreed to be interviewed seemed to feel that Renowned University was “made for people like them.” Many opined that the place “feels like home.” Indeed, the primary advantage Jack’s Privileged Poor possess is pre-college acclimation to elite environments. Affluent and even PP black students, when asked what they found unfamiliar or unsettling about social life at Renowned, often struggled to “understand the premise of the question.” DD students of all colors found it all too easy to answer.

Although he does not engage these questions at length, Jack’s book also raises concerns about the utility of ongoing race-based affirmative action. These questions exist on several levels. On the one hand, if almost all undergraduates at Research 1 universities are upper-middle-class or plain rich, what sense does it make to privilege the sons of black dentists over those of white dentists (or Asian bus drivers) entirely on the basis of race? What empirically measurable hardships are students in the first group overcoming?

On the other hand—and this is a tougher one—people of good will must also ask whether it makes sense to admit unprepared students into educational environments where they are very likely not to succeed. While Jack focuses on lack of social capital as the reason for the struggles of students in his DD cohort—and this doubtless plays some role—a simpler explanation might be found in their test scores. Documents released in connection with a recent lawsuit brought against Harvard University (where Jack teaches) by Asian-
American students indicate that the university begins intense recruitment of black, Hispanic, and Native American students if they posted any one SAT score higher than 1100. In contrast, whites needed a 1310 to be recruited, and Asian men a 1380. As a result of policies like these, the SAT test-score gap between white and Asian students and non-Asian minority students at top colleges has been roughly 300 points for the past decade. The question arises: Does it make any sense to pull varsity athletes with 1120 SAT scores away from Howard University or Southern Illinois's honors program in order to let them make Yale look more diverse while ensuring they bring up the rear of the academic pack there?

At least in touching on questions like these, Jack's book also helps illuminate a relationship I had never previously thought of in any depth: the link between affirmative admissions of all varieties and campus “social justice” activism. In case after case, intentionally or not, Jack illustrates the connection between DD students' feeling unprepared to compete and their coming to see college life as a series of “microaggressions.”

A student Jacks calls Jose explicitly describes himself as coming to seek refuge from a challenging class schedule and unfamiliar environment among other students of color: “In a class with more people of color, that I can relate to...I feel comfortable.” Another student, who later adjusted to Renowned, described her only period of isolation as having occurred not due to racial factors but rather when she felt she “wasn’t as bright as everyone else.”

In several moving passages, Jack even describes the criticism of high-performing or culturally acclimated minority students by other people of color who felt more out of place at Renowned, with an angry “Alice” at one point telling “Patrice:” “You're Latina, but you're elite. Look at the way you dress and speak...shut up.”

To some extent, such behavior is not particularly surprising. When people who are themselves quite competitive and intelligent are placed in one of the very few environments where they are unlikely to succeed academically or socially, it makes sense that they might begin looking for other ways to stand out. If one of those happens to be using a “unique minority perspective” to constantly bash Old Siwash as racist and sexist, then so be it.

Interestingly, if affirmative action is to continue, an expansion of the “Privileged Poor” model would almost certainly be the fairest way to move it forward. Rather than simply admitting academically and socially unprepared students and essentially watching them fail, the massively endowed universities and other NGOs could fund scholarships to prep schools, charter academies, science camps, and the like for poor and minority students. These students would then have years to acclimate themselves to upper-middle-class American culture, while bringing their test scores up to par with those for other applicants. Harvard alone could fund 50,000 different $20,000 scholarships to solid prep schools annually, using only the interest on its $39.2 billion endowment and collection of investments.

I myself am inclined to propose an even more radical solution for America's colleges and universities: Just let in the applicants with the best test scores and grades. Interestingly, this policy—especially if a 50- to 100-point boost were given to the scores of students from truly disadvantaged areas—would dramatically increase the racial, and especially economic, diversity of the campus. Almost overnight, tens of thousands more Asian Americans, Eastern European immigrants, Nigerians and West Indians, and Midwestern poor whites would be able to attend Ivy League and Big Ten institutions. Ironically, the thing most likely to end the cloistered rich-guy culture of elite colleges might be the complete abandonment of today's needlessly clumsy legacies-plus-affirmative-action admissions systems.

Jack's book is well written, concise, and an interesting summary of an underreported trend in higher education. It also touches tangentially on many questions about what to do with American higher ed, some of which the author himself may not even have intended to bring up, but all of which are well worth exploring.
Sacred Duty: A Soldier’s Tour at Arlington National Cemetery
By Tom Cotton
William Morrow, 320 pages

Reviewed by Brian Stewart

In April, Israel brought home the remains of Sargent Zachary Baumel, a soldier who perished in Lebanon in 1982. After 37 years tracking Baumel’s remains to Syria and negotiating their recovery through Russia, the Israeli government laid him to rest at the Mount Herzl military cemetery in Jerusalem.

For Senator Tom Cotton, the extraordinary measures taken on behalf of soldiers who rally to the flag and do not return from the breach is not simply a de rigueur tradition. In Sacred Duty: A Soldier’s Tour at Arlington National Cemetery, the junior senator from Arkansas has written an encomium to the martial virtues as embodied by his former unit, the storied 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment—the Old Guard. In the process, Cotton echoes Plato’s view of “America’s regiment,” as it’s affectionately dubbed, is told in two parts. It opens with a concise history of the Old Guard—from its modest beginnings as a frontier force pacifying “Injun country” and thrashing Santa Anna’s army in decisive assaults en route to Mexico City, through the early campaigns of the Civil War, to its deployment to the Philippines in the Spanish-American War.

But it’s the Old Guard’s ceremonial role, played since 1948 at Arlington National Cemetery, that sustains Cotton’s rich narrative. Stationed at nearby Fort Myer, Virginia, the all-volunteer unit is equipped to conduct more than 20 funerals per day. These services are carried out by specially trained soldiers culled from the ranks on account of their professionalism. This has become the principal mission of the Old Guard, which is best known today for performing the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and supervising the horse-drawn caisson in prominent military-honor funerals. The cemetery at Arlington, founded by the victorious Union to bury its dead, is now the resting place of more than 400,000 soldiers. And that number grows with each passing year.

As a former Old Guard soldier himself, Cotton is well qualified to write about the warriors who stand watch in quiet dignity over the 624 acres of “our nation’s most sacred shrine.” Between combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, Cotton carried the flag-draped remains of his fallen comrades off of airplanes at Dover Air Force Base, and he helped lay them to rest in Arlington’s Section 60—“the noblest acre in America.” From this hallowed experience with an incomparable military unit, Cotton attempts to discern the spirit of the country that produced it—decent, idealistic, and strong. His intimate study conveys an appropriately awed appreciation for those who have borne the sting of battle and the burden of its aftermath. It also examines the prestige accrued to the United States by the band of “citizen soldiers” down the generations and—since the abolition of conscription in 1973—the “1 percent” who answer their country’s call today.

More than once, Sacred Duty calls attention to the “strategic messaging” of armed-forces ceremonies performed for select foreign dignitaries. Cotton poignantly records the May 2018 arrival ceremony at the Pentagon for the ministers of defense from Sweden and Finland—small, relatively weak, non-NATO allies that are nonetheless worthy of Washington’s finest tributes. This gesture of magnanimity and respect, emblematic of what historian Thom-
as Madden calls America’s “empire of trust,” is part of the reason that Americans have long enjoyed a reputation as imperfect but reliable allies.

Cotton also offers a wealth of interesting historical and procedural detail. We learn, among other things, that: A presidential wreath ceremony requires more than 500 personnel (half of which are provided by the Old Guard); the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier contains the remains of three comrades-in-arms “known but to God”; three different varieties of military funerals occur, depending mostly on the decedent’s rank; a senior sergeant’s sword, which is straight and designed for thrusting, is distinct from an officer’s saber, which is curved and designed for slashing (an homage to 19th-century warfare, when officers were often mounted).

Those familiar with the author’s pugnacious political style will not be astonished to find that this book is written in the distinct vernacular of the U.S. military, employed by commissioned and noncommissioned officers alike: Soldiers who are fit for duty are “squared-away,” getting “bloused up” means putting the belt over a ceremonial uniform, and troops deployed in foreign theaters are “downrange.”

Cotton fondly notes the presence of chaplains at Arlington but doesn’t dwell on the potentially fraught issue. While James Madison lamented the hiring of a chaplain by the First Congress as well as by the armed forces, Cotton offers no dissent to the practice of ministers in uniform being paid out of the public treasury. This shouldn’t come as much of a surprise. The reader is served notice at the outset that Sacred Duty is rigorously apolitical, including on matters more pressing than ecclesiastical authority in the ranks.

To read Sacred Duty is to be struck by the chasm that has opened between the military and the political class. Although a war record has traditionally been regarded as a major advantage for rising American politicians, fewer and fewer can lay claim to one anymore. Veterans of the United States military have constituted a dwindling fraction of Congress since the end of the Vietnam War, and the 2012 contest between President Obama and Mitt Romney was the first presidential election since World War II without a military veteran on the ballot. Of course, in 2016 the exception repeated itself—and it looks likely to do so again in 2020.

America’s form of republican government depends on the perpetuation of political institutions that in turn depend on the nurturing of certain virtues in individual Americans and the country as a whole. On the evidence of our continuing political degeneration, those virtues—including what Theodore Roosevelt called the “stern and virile virtues”—are attenuating at a brisk pace. Cotton’s account of the noble regiment established at the dawn of our nation and still standing sentry over those who gave “the last, full measure of devotion” to the republic is a welcome reminder that those virtues still exist somewhere in America.

Huckleberry Spin

How to Raise a Boy: The Power of Connection to Build Good Men
By Michael Reichert
TarcherPerigee, 336 pages

Reviewed by Naomi Schaefer Riley

At an open house I attended last fall for an all-boys school in a New York suburb, the headmaster told the assembled audience: “Here, we know how to educate boys.” The school—which requires students to wear coats and ties, offers a double period of PE every day as well as an optional early-morning Latin class—is a throwback to an era when such institutions were expected to turn all kinds of boys into a certain kind of men.

Michael Reichert does not miss this kind of institution or the traditional way of raising boys it represents. In his new book How to Raise a Boy, Reichert writes that “there is a real opportunity to get boyhood right—perhaps for the first time.” If we “listen” to boys, he writes, they will “point the way to a more supportive, healthier, and more humane boyhood.”

It seems just a little presumptuous to suggest that we have raised half of people wrong for all of human history and that only now are we enlightened enough to fix it—even for the founding director of something called the Center for the Study of Boys’ and Girls’ Lives.

Naomi Schaefer Riley is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum.
Commentary

by Peter S. "Boys Are More Likely to Risk Injury? These Are the Observations of a Man Who Attributes the Risk of Disease, Injury, and Death to Themselves and Others: They Carry Weapons More Often, Engage in Physical Fights More Often, Wear Seat Belts Less Often, Drive Drunk More Frequently, Have More Unprotected Sex, and Use Alcohol or Drugs More Often Before Sex." 

Will it surprise readers to find that boys are more likely to get into fights or carry weapons? Are we to take it as a sign of a contemporary crisis that they are more likely to risk injury?

In fact not a manifestation of their nature but an adaptation to cultures that require boys to be emotionally stoic, aggressive, and competitive if they are to be perceived and accepted as 'real boys.'

So, for instance, Reichert blames a decision by the Federal Communications Commission to "ease advertising regulations in 1984" for an "uptick in play fighting." He writes: "Following the change, there was a flood of advertising targeted at boys, built around special products such as a pumped-up G.I. Joe and images of violence that help make the sale." Reichert cites research suggesting that the more boys see violence, the more violent they become.

The first step to changing boys, he advises, is to stop being so judgmental. We need to do a lot of listening. Reichert describes the time that he spends with one boy at the request of the young man's mother: "There were many times when his behavior might have earned a reprimand. But Reichert didn't bother because he "did not need to teach him how to behave but rather support him while he struggled to regulate himself."

You don't know what it's like to be a boy these days, Reichert tells readers in a tone rather like that of a whiny teenager who wants his parents to get off his back: "Often we think that advice—'What I did at your age...’—is the best way for boys to improve their own judgement, without being realistic about how different the times and challenges are.”

Boys need to be hugged and supported. We need to encourage them to share their emotions and let them cry more often, says Reichert. But while this expert suggests that boys are becoming tougher, more stoic, and even more violent, the evidence suggests otherwise.

For example, violent crime in America has plummeted in recent decades. Reichert describes instances of schoolyard brawls and other kinds of hazing among boys. But bullying has gone down, too. According to a report from the National Center for Education Statistics, 21 percent of students ages 12 to 18 reported being bullied in the school year 2014–15. That's down from a rate of 32 percent in 2007. Even those numbers, if they were broken down, would probably reveal that the exposure to violent incidents and the threats of bodily harm are limited to a small subset of the boy population. And it's not in middle-class suburbs where pointing a finger at a girl will get you suspended.

Reichert interviews a wide crosssection of boys in his work, but it is hard to take seriously the idea that a "talented tennis player, at the height of fierce college recruiting...heartsick by how his mother became more interested in his success on the court than how he was feeling" is suffering from the same crisis as a boy trying to
start a fight with a rival gang member inside of a courthouse with a pair of nunchakus he had tucked into his pants.

But if Reichert were to acknowledge that there is a much more extreme problem happening among less advantaged boys and particularly among racial minorities in our inner cities, he would probably have to explain why that is—and that would surely discomfit him.

According to the 2018 Current Population Survey, 44 percent of black children live only with their mother. The share of children living without a father is only 12 percent among white children. Bizarrely, Reichert insists that fathers don’t matter that much. He writes: “There is no evidence that only another man can support a boy to become a man himself. In fact, such mentoring most often ensures the perpetuation of traditional ideas.”

Taken literally, the first sentence is true, if Reichert simply means that it is technically possible for a fatherless child to become a (decent) man himself. But there are reams of evidence that boys with fathers in their home are less likely to be incarcerated, more likely to finish high school, less likely to use drugs, and so on.

Moreover, the idea that having a father as a mentor is potentially dangerous because it supports the “perpetuation of traditional ideas” is dangerous in and of itself. It sends the message to mothers that the presence of a father really is optional and, frankly, women could probably do this job better themselves. All they need to do is talk to their sons, listen to their sons, and be less judgmental.

Even when confronted with evidence that boys from the same neighborhoods do worse than their sisters in school and were more likely to be caught up in the juvenile justice system, Reichert suggests that bad neighborhoods affect boys more adversely than girls. It is the “social stresses of racism and poverty” as well as “the cultural norms of masculinity” that are the problem.

In particular, he doesn’t like the way that cultural norms instruct boys in how to treat girls. Reichert singles out one boy, Will, who spoke to other students at his school about the great relationship he had with his girlfriend, Annie. Reichert takes it as a sign of the health of their relationship that “Will showed few signs of chivalry or of believing he needed to protect his ‘weaker partner.’” Heaven forbid.

Exactly what this new vision of manhood about which Reichert is preaching should look like seems to evade even him. He mentions a well-known incident in Portland in 2017 during which a man attacked two young women of color on a commuter train. Three men stood up to protect the women, and two were killed. “On the surface, these three men—a poet, a college graduate, and a career serviceman—were very different from one another, but they drew from the same well for how they thought about being male,” Reichert writes. “Each had taken to heart a commitment to the virtues of courage, empathy, and service to others.”

Reichert doesn’t speculate whether these three men would have stood up if other men were being attacked, but perhaps we shouldn’t discount the possibility that chivalry was one of the other virtues that they took to heart. If they had been raised according to Reichert’s advice, they probably would have cowered in a corner—crying.
Rock Hudson, never himself

By Terry Teachout

In July 1985, Rock Hudson announced through a spokesman that he had AIDS. He died two months later. In between, People published a cover story that acknowledged for the first time in print what had been known throughout the film industry for most of the 59-year-old actor’s adult life: “The stunning disclosure implied for Hudson’s public what for decades had been an open secret in Hollywood—his homosexuality.” Yet even on his deathbed, Hudson refused to admit that the six-foot-four matinée idol who had romanced Doris Day and Elizabeth Taylor on screen preferred to have sex with men.

His silence was far from surprising. Until recently, no Hollywood studio would cast a star who was publicly known to be homosexual, for it was assumed that uncomfortable moviegoers would refuse to see the films in which he appeared. This is one reason that studio-system contract players were made to sign a “morals clause” forbidding them from engaging in off-screen behavior that might bring their employers into “public disrepute.” When miscreant stars were popular or promising enough, the studios would unhesitatingly paper over their misconduct at all costs—but if it proved impossible to keep their transgressions quiet, their careers were cut short.

Today Hudson is mainly remembered as the first celebrity to have died of AIDS. But his off-screen life has also won him a secure place in the history of Hollywood, one prominent enough that he is now the subject of a decently written primary-source biography, Mark Griffin’s All That Heaven Allows: A Biography of Rock Hudson. It constitutes a serious attempt to tell the story of a man who in his lifetime did all he could to stop it from being told.*

Is it worth telling? No one has ever claimed that Hudson was a great artist. At his best, though, he was a thoroughly competent professional whose life and work were exemplary of Hollywood in the days when the studio-system “star machine” (in the phrase of the film scholar Jeanine Basinger) took young men and women with little or no acting experience and turned them into celebrities. In Hudson’s case, the story of how he became a star—and the price he paid to do so—is very much worth telling.

Roy Scherer Jr. was born in 1925 in Winnetka, a small town (not yet a suburb) not far from Chicago. When Roy was five years old, his

* Harper, 469 pages
father, an auto mechanic, lost his job and deserted his family. In 1934, Roy's mother married a hard-drinking Marine who adopted her only child. Unfortunately for the boy, Wallace Fitzgerald thought Roy effeminate and beat him and Kay, his mother. Kay divorced Wallace in 1941, but the damage was done: Roy Fitzgerald had become a lonely, introverted teenager who was, like many such youngsters, obsessed with movies and longed to appear in them.

Roy enlisted in the Navy in 1944. We do not know when he realized that he was homosexual, but it seems likely that it was in the Navy that he started coming to terms with it. After his discharge, he moved to California, briefly living with his father and driving a truck. Then he met Henry Willson, an agent who represented male ingénues like Troy Donahue and Tab Hunter. Even though Roy had never before acted and was, in his own words, "a clumsy, tongue-tied galoot," Willson saw that his handsome features and unusual height made him a plausible candidate for stardom. He took the young man under his wing, arranged for him to have acting and voice lessons, insisted that he shed the fey mannerisms he had picked up from his gay friends, and changed his name to the hyper-masculine "Rock Hudson."

"I always give a green actor the gimmick of a trick name to help him get known while he's learning his trade," Willson later explained.

Willson was an effective agent with a sure eye for what he called "picture potential." He was also a notorious sexual predator who expected to be serviced by the male actors in his stable as a condition of representing them. Then and later, Hudson's friends agreed that he was ambitious enough to do anything, for Willson or anyone else, to get ahead. Willson upheld his end of the deal and introduced Hudson to Raoul Walsh, a director who had worked closely with Humphrey Bogart and Errol Flynn and, in 1930, had discovered John Wayne. Walsh was struck by Hudson's good looks and saw him as a natural for the action movies that were his specialty. "At the very least, he'll be good scenery," the director said.

Hudson spent the next few years working his way up from bit parts in major films to leading parts in top-of-the-bill "programmers," simultaneously studying acting as part of Universal's in-house training program. The studios used these films to gauge the development of their contract players, and Hudson's early screen appearances were noteworthy only for their apparent lack of promise. At one point, Universal's executives considered dropping him, but they were sufficiently impressed by his determination and hard work to give him more time to develop.

Part of the problem was that they were slow to figure out what kind of actor Hudson was. Misled by his appearance into supposing that he had the stuff to be a John Wayne–like action hero or a traditional leading man like Tony Curtis (at the time Universal's most promising contract player), the studio failed to grasp the true nature of his still-emerging screen persona. Unlike Wayne and Curtis, Hudson was a sexually nonthreatening man whom women found irresistibly attractive on screen but who was by all accounts extremely shy in real life. The critic David Thomson would call him "innately gentle and sympathetic...and unusually tender or sensitive for a man of his physique."

Such failures of perception were not uncommon in Hollywood. Humphrey Bogart, for example, was initially pigeonholed by Warner Bros. as a tough-guy gangster, and it took five years, from The Petrified Forest in 1936 to Walsh's High Sierra in 1941, for the studio to figure out that he was really a disillusioned anti-hero. Once Warner started giving Bogart roles that fit his personality, he became a star almost overnight.

The same thing happened to Hudson when he was cast in Douglas Sirk's 1954 remake of Magnificent Obsession, a sentimental melodrama whose central character, an irresponsible playboy, becomes an altruistic brain surgeon and restores the sight of a woman (Jane Wyman) whose husband he had accidentally killed and whom he inadvertently blinded in a later auto accident. Preposterous though Magnificent Obsession was,
it showed that he had developed into a strong “supporting lead” who, like Charles Boyer and Claude Rains before him, brought out the best in actresses.

Sirk directed five more films starring Hudson, the best of which is All That Heaven Allows (1955), in which the actor was again teamed with Wyman. This time she played a well-to-do suburban widow who falls in love with her gardener, a younger man played by Hudson, who is not only handsome but kind and intelligent as well. Their affair scandalizes the class-conscious town, but in the end she opts for romantic (and sexual) fulfillment over conformity to the rigid code of social propriety that allegedly prevailed during the ’50s. Once again, Hudson gives a fine supporting-lead performance in a film whose emotional extravagance can feel campy to modern-day viewers, though Sirk’s melodramas have come to be regarded by a growing number of critics as “subversive” portraits of Eisenhower-era emotional inhibition.

The success of All That Heaven Allows put Hudson on the road to stardom—but it also placed him in the crosshairs of Confidential, a widely read magazine that published scandalous stories about the private lives of movie stars. He had already been the subject of articles in Life and other magazines that made increasingly pointed mention of his perennial-bachelor status, and while Universal’s publicity department responded by planting other articles describing his supposed romances with starlets, the editors of Confidential knew better.

To prevent him from being outed, Wilson and Universal are generally believed to have arranged an unhappy mariage blanc between Hudson and Phyllis Gates, the agent’s secretary. Whatever Gates knew or did not know about her new husband’s sexual proclivities, it is a matter of record that their union lasted only three years, from 1955 to 1958. But it served its purpose. While rumors of Hudson’s homosexuality continued to follow him, they did not see print until the end of his life, even though his promiscuity had long been a byword in Hollywood. (It is revealing, as well as sad, that he seems never to have had a successful long-term relationship with a person of either sex.)

All that remained was for Hudson to show that he carried sufficient weight to be a full-fledged star. He proved himself equal to the task—up to a point—in Giant, the 1956 film version of Edna Ferber’s bestselling novel, in which he played the head of a Texas cattle-and-oil dynasty. His performance as Bick Benedict won him an Oscar nomination, but Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean were far more memorable as Bick’s restless wife and chief rival. Hudson came across as subdued, even diffident, by comparison. After Giant, he would continue to appear in Sirk-directed melodramas, forgettable action films, and middletwist epics like Charles Vidor’s 1957 remake of A Farewell to Arms. Three more years went by before Universal finally found the missing piece of the puzzle that was Rock Hudson.

Hudson’s guest shots on such TV series as I Love Lucy and Caesar’s Hour had already revealed that he had a knack for light comedy. It was not until 1958, however, that Universal paired him with Doris Day in Pillow Talk, in which he played a songwriter who beds sexually available women but falls for a spunky young lady who refuses to sleep with him before marriage. Ross Hunter, the film’s producer, later described Pillow Talk as a latter-day counterpart of the “sophisticated comedies” that “went out with William Powell.” It is, in fact, a sniggeringly coy farce devoid of the true sophistication of Powell’s comedies of the ’30s and ’40s (and full of equally coy allusions to its star’s homosexuality). But Hudson’s self-deprecating charm meshed well with Day’s bouncy liveliness, and the film became a box-office smash that spawned two more successful vehicles for its stars, Lover Come Back (1961) and Send Me No Flowers (1964).

By then, the studio system was all but dead, and American movies were moving in newer, more challenging directions that were alien to the conventionally inclined Hudson, who turned 40—old for a leading man in Hollywood—a year after Send Me No Flowers came out. He made a short-lived effort to change with the times by appearing in Seconds (1966), a John Frankenheimer–directed science-fiction thriller about a secret organization that gives new bodies to middle-aged men. But even though his per-

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formance was genuinely and unexpectedly impressive—very possibly the best thing he ever did—Seconds was so far removed in subject matter from the movies that had made Hudson famous that it sank without trace.

As his film career went into decline, Hudson started working in TV. A small-screen natural, he scored an immediate hit in 1971 with McMillan & Wife, a comedy-mystery series well suited to his affable personality. Gossip about him still circulated—including a bizarre rumor alleging that he and Jim Nabors, another TV star who was in the closet, were planning to marry—but he ignored it, as did his fans. He was, however, unsettled by the downward arc of his career, enough so that his promiscuity became dangerously compulsive, which doubtless led to Hudson's becoming infected with the HIV virus in 1983 or 1984. He continued to work for as long as he could, but his health quickly deteriorated, and the nine episodes of Dynasty, a prime-time soap opera, that he filmed in the second half of 1984 were the last performances that he gave before his death.

Hudson was in the vanguard of another revolution in cultural attitudes. He was one of the first leading men to cultivate a less overtly masculine image, as did such other actors of his generation as Montgomery Clift and Anthony Perkins (both of whom, perhaps not coincidentally, were also secretly gay). The line of descent that leads from Hudson, Clift, and Perkins to Tom Cruise and Leonardo DiCaprio is easy to trace.

No less consequential is the drying-up of the studio-sponsored training programs that taught yesterday’s movie stars how to act, both on screen and in public. There is no longer a “star machine,” only self-made actors who are judged by their ability to fit neatly into the motion-picture franchises that now dominate the American film industry. It is not necessary to be a powerfully individual performer to play Batman or Kylo Ren: Indeed, it may well be disadvantageous. Moreover, it is within the realm of possibility that today’s moviegoers will live to see an age when the “actors” in such films are no longer performers of flesh and blood but computer-created artifacts.

Therein, I suspect, lies Rock Hudson's ultimate significance, as well as the source of the pathos of his troubled, largely secret life, which foreshadowed what Hollywood is now in the process of becoming. More than most stars, he was a pure creation of the studio for which he worked, a shy, painfully self-conscious gay man who pretended to be the straight-acting public figure whom he privately called “Charlie Movie Star,” and who became rich and famous by doing so. As another gay actor who knew him in the '80s observes in All That Heaven Allows: “Who would he have really been if Roy Fitzgerald had been allowed to exist? Who would he have really talked like? I mean, from the very beginning of his life, this is someone who had to act just to survive.”

When it was all over, Hudson told one of his oldest friends, “God, what a way to end a life.” It is hard not to wonder as well what he thought of the way he had lived that life, hiding behind the mask of Charlie Movie Star until he could no longer be sure who he was.

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Streaming Sacred

*The achievement of Shtisel*

*By Judith Shulevitz*

If you’ve read the reviews of the Israeli television series *Shtisel*, available on Netflix, then you know that it’s the first mainstream drama to portray Jerusalem’s ultra-Orthodox Haredi Jews as, well, people. Until *Shtisel*, Haredim were more likely to enter our air space as the black-hatted villains of international news channels, throwing rocks at cars on Shabbat, overpopulating West Bank settlements, threatening to swamp secular Israelis with their enormous families. Or they would show up in Jewish guide books as objects of a wistful voyeurism. But the TV Shtisels are a family first and ultra-Orthodox second. They go about their business in a relatively ordinary fashion, loving and awful in turns, the way families are. They’re neither fanatics nor relics of a vanished Jewry. They thwart the secular expectation that they will chafe against their stringent laws and customs. The women aren’t disempowered unless they happen to be easy to boss around—and there are plenty of men like that, too. People don’t seem too worried about their limited opportunities for self-actualization.

And yet, for all its insider knowledge (the show’s creator, Yehonatan Indursky, grew up in the Haredi enclave of Bnai Brak) and well-observed details of material culture (embroidered plastic tablecloths, drab women’s loafers), *Shtisel* is not

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*Judith Shulevitz is the author of* The Sabbath World.
as realistic as its fans have made it out to be. It is not quite of this world, but its otherworldliness isn’t immediately apparent, because the show mostly plays it for laughs. The very first scene is a dream sequence. Akiva Shtisel (Michael Aloni, a comedy actor who can make payess look manly and sensitive at the same time) enters Anshin’s, one of those grimly lit kasher cafeterias with linoleum tabletops found all over Jerusalem. He asks for kugel, which is dished out cold and, puzzlingly to him, without its usual side of pickles. Confused, he walks slowly to his table. It starts to snow. He passes an Eskimo sitting at a table heaped with dead fish and a plate full of pickles. Then Akiva spots his mother, Dvore, who died (we learn later) just shy of a year ago. She’s eating kugel too, and her eyes grow soft with love.

“Mother! What are you doing here?” he asks.

“I missed this place,” she says.

“Anshin’s?” he asks.

“What are you talking about, Anshin’s?” Dvore says, shivering and pulling her sweater closer. “I’m cold, Akiva, so cold,” she says, “and there’s nothing I can do. You can’t even get a pickle around here.”

The morning after, in the kitchen of the apartment that Akiva shares with his father, Shulem, Akiva asks, “What do these dreams mean?” Shulem replies: “They don’t mean anything.”

A patriarch played by the brilliant comedian Dov Glickman, Shulem has a big heart and commanding presence, but he’s also obnoxious, oblivious, vain, and meddlesome. He likes to needle Akiva, who irritates him. It’s Shulem’s job to marry off his youngest son, an aging bachelor at 26 or 27 and a ba’al chaloymes, a daydreamer, who’d rather sketch lemurs at the zoo than do anything useful like study Talmud or take a job at the cheder (elementary school) where Shulem teaches. (Akiva reluctantly agrees to freelance as a substitute.) With the help of a matchmaker, Shulem keeps arranging meetings with nervous teenage girls, and Akiva keeps politely rejecting them. Instead, he falls for a sultry older widow named Elisheva, considered a completely inappropriate match.

Inspired by his dream, Akiva creates a free loan society in his mother’s honor. What he will lend to the needy are space heaters. “Winter is over, Kiva,” his big brother tells him, annoyed at Akiva’s foolishness. But Akiva craves warmth, and the weather is in cosmic agreement with him. A cold rain falls, and borrowers arrive. One of them is Elisheva, who up till now has responded to his pleading eyes with half-smiles and shakes of the head. “Wait,” he says as she takes her heater and turns to leave. “I have to see if it works.” He plugs in the device and they watch, stricken, as its coils grow radiant with a suddenly erotic heat.

What do these dreams mean?

They mean that Dvore came down from heaven to bring Elisheva to Akiva’s door and smite her with desire.

Shtisel makes all the clichés about Haredi sex-aversion seem absurd. Its Jerusalem is profoundly sensual. Long coats swing as the men stride down the narrow, golden streets, and Shulem takes pride in a tall new hat. The wives’ stylish wigs and careful makeup prolong the illusion of youth. Girls in long sleeves and calf-length skirts that only accentuate their old-world allure await the chance to flirt slyly with the yeshiva bochers their parents have hondoled for. At one point, Akiva visits the Galilee; when he takes off his coat and shirt, rolls up his pants, and wades in, the tzititz, or fringes of his undershirt, sway with his gait, like a musical score meant to emphasize the beauty of his unusually exposed body.

Caresses that must be withheld from other people are bestowed on ritual objects. When Orthodox Jews walk through doors, they reach up and touch the mezuzot, the slim boxes nailed to the lintels, then kiss their fingers. A fervently devout teenage scholar rubs his face in the velvet curtain of the ark holding the Torah and begs God to help him control his nocturnal emissions. The Torahs themselves are cradled like babies; one episode even features a small Torah called “Baby.” The Sabbaths are drunken and sweet.

The showrunners try (sometimes successfully) not to romanticize their subjects. The educational system we see is as appalling to a non-Haredi as you might expect.

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bohemian friends reads Kierkegaard, but he winds up in a mental hospital—not for that reason, but still.) Talmud scholar not being a lucrative profession, money runs short; so do tempers. Too many children are crammed into tiny, under-furnished apartments. The husband of Akiva’s sister Giti runs away, possibly with a “goya,” a Christian woman. He has always longed to live alone, he explains later. No one forbids Akiva to draw, but no one is interested in his drawings, either, even after it becomes apparent to outsiders that he has genuine talent. Synagogue interiors have the monopoly on visual grandeur.

Shulem could have been a sentimental Tevye figure, but instead he’s halfway to being a monster. He wolfs down the stews cooked for him by a lonely divorcée while ignoring her tentative overtures. He intervenes melodramatically in his son’s and his mother’s lives, usually to ruinous effect. In his worst—and funniest—moment, Shulem upstages his son while Akiva is accepting an engagement. Akiva is now damaged goods—as one matchmaker says, a defecti.

Community is a consolation as well as a burden, however, and Shtisel’s people show up when comfort is needed, with the added assistance of the dead. Elisheva, who has outlived not one but two husbands, talks to both of them frequently. Her visions don’t require dreams; her revenants just appear at her kitchen table in the middle of the night. One studies Talmud, the other eats soup. They kibitz with each other and studies Talmud, the other eats soup. They err on the side of leniency. The dead help the living push back against unreasonable demands. They err on the side of leniency. Shulem could have been a sentimentalist Tevye figure, but instead he’s halfway to being a monster. He wolfs down the stews cooked for him by a lonely divorcée while ignoring her tentative overtures. He intervenes melodramatically in his son’s and his mother’s lives, usually to ruinous effect. In his worst—and funniest—moment, Shulem upstages his son while Akiva is accepting an engagement. Akiva is now damaged goods—as one matchmaker says, a defecti.

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and wires and air-waves in uninterrupted and kaleidoscopic variety.

So the agents came up with a better way to fill their rice bowl and invented what is called, with typical entertainment-industry utilitarian style, “packaging.” Which is this, essentially: Rather than take 10 percent out of a lot of paychecks for writers on a television show, agents prefer to take a percentage—and some back-end points—out of the budget of the entire show. In exchange, they don’t take the 10 percent out of a writer’s paycheck, and for a long time this was a happy arrangement. Writers didn’t have to pay commission, agents didn’t have to tell the writers just exactly how much more money they were making by packaging.

And then the future happened, as it does, always sooner than anyone expects. The explosion of places to put on television shows may have created more opportunity for writers, but it also squeezed individual show budgets. The past 10 years have ushered in a kind of Walmart Effect for show business: There’s lots of everything to choose from (good for the consumer), but each individual item must be made as cheaply as possible.

So writers started to feel the pinch in their paychecks, which is when they noticed that their agents were getting phenomenally rich. And when the time came to renegotiate the agreement between the Writers Guild and the Association of Talent Agents, the Guild’s position was very clear: Packaging must end, and the money needs to be redistributed to the writers. The negotiations between the two parties broke down. That’s when the Guild ordered its members to fire their agents—a massive display of unity (helped along with veiled threats of retribution against recalcitrant members) and the beginning of an impasse that began in mid-April and shows no sign of ending.

Agents are a handy target, but going after them with such fury and vengeance is making it hard to imagine a happy ending to this picture. More likely, the large agents will simply drop their writer clients entirely and continue to package television projects through their directing and acting clients. Writers will be represented by agents with less money and leverage, the only two things that have ever really mattered in show business. The entertainment business will continue to evolve and shift as newer ways of making money emerge. One thing is certain, though: Money will not, now or ever, be redistributed back to the writers in the sweatshops. That is not the world we live in or the world to come.

What the Guild envisions is a world where all the writers are labor heroes, all the agents are handlers, and you always know who the machers are.

So let me pitch this to you again. I made a mistake earlier. This isn’t a social-justice picture. This is a science-fiction movie. Because the Writers Guild doesn’t need a new contract. What it needs is a time machine.
OKAY, HERE’S THE PITCH. As the movie begins, we’re in one of those awful sweatshop factories—not sure about the era, but let’s say the 1950s, when there are lots of rich wardrobe possibilities and we can get period-appropriate cars easily. Also, it should take place before air-conditioning, so we’ve got some ceiling-fan atmosphere and sweaty shirts and all of the actors look dewy and appealing.

This is a social-justice picture, with a message. The workers in the steambath of a factory have suddenly realized—don’t ask why it took them so long, just stay with the pitch, okay?—anyway, they’ve recently discovered that another group of workers in the same sweaty industry—doesn’t matter which industry, okay? Just let me get through the pitch!—so, another group of workers, office types in suits and ties, who take long lunches and never seem to be in the office, certainly don’t work as hard as the perspiring workers on the factory floor, are making a lot more money than our heroes.

A major labor action ensues. There’s some conflict, maybe a romance in there, friendships dissolved, resolution, a couple of big speeches and an Oscar(™) moment or two, and boom:

Final crane shot: The overpaid and dishonest office workers are marched out of the building, through the factory floor, as the (for some unexplained reason) not-sweaty-anymore sweatshop workers cheer and celebrate their victory, with intercut close-ups of the union leaders who guided them to this moment.

This is the movie running through the heads of the leaders, and the majority of the members, of the Writers Guild of America as they battle with the Association of Talent Agents over the details of a new contract. The old agreement between the two groups was decades old, written before cable television, streaming video, Kardashians, and the touch-tone phone. What happened in the intervening years can be experienced simply by visiting your oldest-living relative and trying to explain Apple TV or Netflix.

What also happened in the intervening years was that talent agents—once objects of derision and mockery for their small-time greed and flexible ethics—became more than just dealmakers in loud sport coats. From the late 1970s to today, talent agencies have become immensely rich corporations, attracting institutional investors, creating their own film and television production funds, and figuring out more remunerative ways to make a dime than charging their clients 10 percent. In other words, they went from handlers to machers.

The writers in their sweatshops (actually, nicely furnished offices on glamorous studio lots, with air-conditioning, free lunch, and unlimited MacBook Pros) don’t like this twist in the story. They want to be represented by handlers. Having an agent who is really a macher is like having another boss, and who needs more bosses?

As explosive changes came to Hollywood, what agents noticed was that telecommunications and entertainment were merging in lucrative ways. It occurred to them that show business wasn’t a business all by itself, but a component of larger enterprises. Cable companies, for instance—and mobile telephone companies, and streaming-video businesses—make money by charging monthly fees. It really makes zero difference to, say, Comcast or Netflix how often you watch, or even if you watch, their offerings. What matters is that you continue to pay your monthly bill. The shows they put on are just there to keep you from noticing the recurring charge on your credit-card statement and thinking, “Hulu? Does anyone in this house watch Hulu?”

The result: Content—a word that accurately reflects the neutral, utterly indifferent way big media companies think about show business—must keep flowing through the tubes.
Peace with Palestinian Dictators?

Governments of the Palestinians’ two ruling dictatorships are in shambles—and at war with each other. How can Israel possibly achieve peace with them at this time?

Neither the Palestinian Authority in Judea-Samaria (the West Bank) nor the Islamist terror group Hamas in Gaza has held elections since 2006, and the two factions are battling one another in a vicious power struggle. Both refuse to recognize the Jewish state or accept Israeli offers of peace.

What are the facts?

While Israel, with the United States, made generous land-for-peace offers to the Palestinians in 2001 and 2008—and left the entire Gaza Strip to the Arabs in 2005—neither of the two major Palestinian groups has accepted Israel’s offers... or even its right to exist. What’s more, both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas governments are in disarray, squandering precious resources waging a bitter internecine war. Until these warring Arab factions reconcile—and accept Israel as their neighbor—it’s impossible to imagine a peace agreement among them.

Splintered Palestinian Movements: Following Israel’s repulsion of five attacking Arab armies in 1967, Arabs in Palestine formed the nationalist Palestine Liberation Organization, under Egyptian Yasser Arafat. Arafat inspired the First Intifada, a terrorist guerilla effort against Israel, which ended with the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords. Under these accords, the Palestinian Authority (PA) would run Arab parts of Gaza and Judea-Samaria, while Israel has controlled the remaining parts until the Israeli-Arab conflict can be resolved through peace negotiations. After Israel’s complete withdrawal from Gaza, terror group Hamas won Palestinian legislative elections in 2006, then seized control of Gaza from the PA. Since 2007, Hamas has ruled Gaza as an Islamist fiefdom, and the PA and Hamas remain fierce enemies to this day.

The Palestinian Authority: Secular Dictatorship. While grounded in Muslim values, the Palestinian Authority has always been secular. Following Arafat’s death in 2004, Mahmoud Abbas was elected president of the PA for a four-year term, yet has held the grip of power ever since. Today’s Palestinian Authority is rife with corruption, its economy is effectively bankrupt, it suffers from unemployment of 29%, and without foreign subsidies it would collapse. Despite its charter under the Oslo Agreement to make peace with Israel, the PA has remained dedicated to wresting all of the Holy Land from Jewish control. It has never recognized Israel as a Jewish homeland and has demanded that all Arab refugees from Israel’s War of Independence in 1948—as well as some five million descendants of those refugees—be “returned” to Israel, thus destroying the Jewish state demographically. Israel—under the sponsorship of Presidents Bill Clinton in 2001 and George W. Bush in 2008—offered the Palestinians about 98% of Judea-Samaria, as well as a capital in eastern Jerusalem, in return for peace. Yasser Arafat turned down the first offer, and Mahmoud Abbas rejected the second. Since 2014, Abbas has refused to negotiate with Israel.

Hamas: Islamist Dictatorship. An outgrowth of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood—which also spawned al Qaeda—Hamas is a fundamentalist Islamist organization. Its charter calls for the conquest of all Palestine—including present-day Israel—and the establishment of an Islamic state. Because of Hamas’ brutal use of suicide bombings and rocket attacks on Jewish civilian populations, it has been declared a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department and the European Union. While Hamas won power after Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006, it has refused to reject violence, and in fact took violent control of Gaza. Today Hamas rules Gaza brutally, according to strict Sharia law. Hamas has launched three wars against Israel, most recently in 2014. Because of Hamas’ belligerence, Gaza is currently under sanctions from Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Authority. While the PA and Hamas have made many attempts at reconciliation, all have failed, and relations between them remain poisonous. The people of Gaza suffer an unemployment rate of 44%, just four hours of electricity daily and a dysfunctional economy. Hamas currently receives some financial support from Iran and Turkey, much of which is used to continue the terror group’s war against Israel.

In order to forge an Israel-Palestinian peace, all parties must sincerely want it and be capable of carrying out a plan for reconciliation. It’s clear that today’s Palestinian dictatorships lack the ability to make peace among themselves, humanely govern their people or commit to peace with Israel. While Israelis pray for peace, Palestinian leaders still pray for Israel’s destruction.

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