

2001

An Odd Essay in Space.

“Mission Alpayim v’Echad.” A Mitzvah Mivtzah. Captain Shul looked around him at the Bridge of the ‘Millennium Hendl’. The Moment of Truth was nigh. The crew looked restless. He could understand that.

Four months they had been up here, now. Four solid months. But soon.....

It was all a long way from Dumfries, he thought. Born William Kirk (“Wee Kirk” to his friends), he had never admitted it to the rabbis on his Beit Din, but the main motive for his conversion to Judaism had been to join the Israeli Space Programme. Everyone had denied such a thing existed, of course, but that had just made him more determined. “Kirk” had not been considered acceptable as a name, so he had taken the comparative diminutive name “Shul” and, because of his limited height, was now known as “Shtiebl” throughout the Fleet. But he had achieved his ambition. So far.

It had been a tough trip since they had blasted off from Dimona. Funny, that - everyone had fallen for the cover story that there was a secret nuclear reactor there, no-one had seemed to notice the other installations, until suddenly - Whoosh! - the first Israeli Space Ship had blasted out of the Negev. A stirring moment. It looked, admittedly, more like a Sheitel than a Shuttle. But that was Design for you. And they were strong on design, those Tel Aviv specialists. Then came the painful Disengagement, as an automatic blade sliced round the vessel and the outer skin fell away, enabling the main Pod to accelerate. “Get your rockets off”, as they called it. Now they were well on their way, a mission to explore the furthest reaches of Space - to find a place where the Hand of Man had Never Set Foot, a place that would be Good for the Jews.

It was a bit like Columbus, he thought. Columbus (“Chaim” to his friends, “Christoforo” to the Goyim) had also headed into the Unknown, to find a haven for his fellow brethren. Not a heaven. But he, of course, thought Captain Shul bitterly, had not had to cope with the Coalition.

Oh, the Coalition. The Politics. It had been horrendous, and the mission, as it was, was barely on schedule. Even though the Mission had been Ultra-Super-Top-Secret, everyone had wanted to be in on this first Israeli flight. And it had taken months of behind-the-scenes bargaining to reach even the compromise that currently held. The Right Wing, of course, controlled the Starboard Wing. The Left Wing, as a balance, controlled the Port Wing. Shas had demanded the Flight Purser’s position for one of their men. United Torah had created a terrible fuss about “Avodah Zarah” and “Avodat Kochavim”, and their man had refused to serve as Navigator because of Isaiah’s prohibition on calculating by the stars. (Isa. 47:13). Even his landlady had wanted a place for her nephew - (“he’s so bright, a star pupil, he gets A’s at the school”) and the lad was now a Midshipman - not, of course, because he was his landlady’s nephew, but purely because he was the Mayor’s grandson. And most of the foreign Zionist interference had died down once they had re-read their faxes and realised a Space Ship and not a Space Shop was being constructed. They had eventually dealt with the Shabbat issue and whether the ship would have to stop regularly by getting both Chief Rabbis to agree that “the Heavens are the Heavens of the Lord”, and “A thousand years are like a day to You”, so that timing was less specific in an eternal framework. The artificial flavoured Nourishment Tubes came with three different hechshers for

different crew members.

So far only one member of the crew had withdrawn from the Coalition. That was one thing, at least, that he had been able to demand, as Commander of the Mission. Anyone who resigned would have to leave the ship and take one of the escape pods back to Earth. Only one had called his bluff. The rest of the crew had watched, awed and horrified, at what had happened. Crew discipline had been a lot tighter after that. There were times when a Captain needed to be able to use a screwdriver, for the greater good. And no-one had really missed the victim - there were, after all, enough Russians on board, and they had to learn that the time for Refusing was past.....

Shul checked his Space Log. "Lieutenant Levine?" "Yes Sir!" Levine was lying face down on the floor of the Bridge, muttering to himself. That had been another hard-fought compromise. Four separate groups had demanded the right to pray in four different directions. It had been hell in the Mess. The Captain had summoned them to the bottom deck. "Jerusalem", he informed them, pointing dramatically "is down there!" They had agreed - eventually - that Shas could use the bottom deck, other Haredim the Centre Deck, Modern Orthodox the Poop and Chabad the top deck. The Progressives had agreed to compromise, as usual, and had their own little facility in the paint locker, for which they had to pay rent to the Mess Funds. Oh boy. It was tough, commanding Jews.

"Levine, where are we?" Levine grunted, "Isaiah 55, verse 9, I'm davvening" and went back to his devotions. Shul sighed and spoke to his wristband electronic Tanach. "Isaiah 55:9?". "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts", responded the electronic voice. "Levine, that's no good. This is an order. It looks dark on the screen, I need a course."

Levine glanced up once more. "Isaiah 60, verses 2 and 19", he snarled, and went back to his horizontal shockelling. Shul snarled in turn at his wristband, which promptly came up with "For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples..... The sun shall no more be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night."

A fat lot of good. Shul took the control stick himself, and waved it until a supernova came into view; at Warp 2 he steered the ship towards the glowing ball of gas. "Lieutenant Levine, Isaiah 60, chapter 1!" he called out. Levine rose with a jerk, and rushed to his post - gasped as he saw the nova almost filling the screen; With a few quick button-taps he reversed the ship and steered it clear. "Why did you do that, sir?" he asked - if asking was the right word. "I needed your attention", replied Shul, a trifle smugly. "And two can play Quotations. "Arise, shine, for your light has come." And now set me a course for the Davidic Constellation. Full speed."

"Yes, Sir", said Levine. "It will take at least three and a half hours, Sir. It's a long way. Psalm 104, verse 2. "who hast stretched forth the heavens like a tent." Sir."

The crew didn't realise it, of course - at least, he hoped so, despite the Engineer's brother-in-law working in the Treasury - but there was a significance to the timing of this mission. If the Peace Process kept breaking down, and if the loonies who had not reacted in January 2000 were to react in January 2001 - thus ending for another thousand years the arguments about when a Millennium actually started - well, things could get hot in the "Yerushalayim shel matah". And so the best brains in the country had been searching for ways to reach a "Yerushalayim shel malah". Mindful of the dreadful precedent of the Tower of Babel, an idea for a double-deck land built on a

series of towers and pillars had soon been dropped - besides, both the Israelis and the Palestinians would have wanted to be on the upper deck. America wanted to get out of the Middle East Peace Process with at least some dignity left, and had reluctantly realised this meant "Paying for a Piece of Jerusalem" as well as Praying for the Peace of the rest, and so a bit of help from NASA had been surreptitiously provided, and now..... and now, as Commodore Goldberg had told him, "We can circumcise the universe on our own. Maybe this is time for a Milah-ennium Mission."

But the timing was vital. The announcement of a new Jewish Galaxy would have to be made just in time to forestall any messianic madness down below.

He settled back in the Captain's Chair. It was not long before the fabled constellation came within screen distance. Fourteen Stars of David, of different sizes, orbiting a medium-sized sun. If the conditions were right, it would be perfect. One planet for almost each political party. Each with a different length of Shabbat.

Musing to himself, he woke with a start as the shapely - no, saftig - Lieutenant Bronstein on the Communications Desk beeped him. "Captain Shul, Comms. here - we detect Life signs, Sir." "More", he leaned forward. "Just bringing it on screen now, Sir", she replied, and a second later the screen filled with an image of such horror that..... well, no training had prepared any of the crew for this sight. The Being started malevolently at him. "Vot you vont?" it grunted.

"This is Captain Shul of the 'Millennium Hendl'. We come in peace. We seek only to explore."

"Tough", leered the Creature. Stubble covered all that was not covered by dark glasses and a checkered scarf. "Too Late. Ve are here first. This system is now a part of United Palestine! And always has been!"

It was, thought Shul, going to be a long Millennium.....

October 2000

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Berlin. .