

Commentary

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The Secret Jews of The Hobbit

From the Middle East to Middle Earth

by Meir Y. Soloveichik

IN 1938, THE OXFORD PROFESSOR J.R.R. TOLKIEN PUBLISHED A BESTSELLING book featuring wizards, elves, dwarves, kings, queens, and a curious creature for which the story is named: *The Hobbit*. The novel, which has sold more than 100 million copies since its publication, dramatically expanded the possibilities (and readership) of a genre that would come to be known as fantasy. Tolkien tells of a hobbit named Bilbo Baggins, whose utter indifference to adventure is upended by a visit from 13 hirsute dwarves and a wizard named Gandalf.

The dwarves explain to Bilbo that they once lived in a glorious kingdom inside a mighty mountain where the grandfather of their leader Thorin had reigned as king. There they had achieved renown for their talents with gold and jewels. One day, they tell Bilbo, a dragon attacked their mountain, stole their treasure, and left their kingdom in flames. The dwarves had to flee, dispersing throughout the kingdoms of “Middle Earth,” strangers in a strange land. Having left their homeland, they were forced to speak the languages of those among whom they lived, using their native tongue, “Khuzdul,” only among themselves. Yet they never stopped dreaming of their kingdom, never stopped mourning their mountain. They sought to hire this hobbit to help them reclaim what was once theirs. The dwarves introduce this tale with a song, an elegy for their long-lost land:



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Far over the misty mountains cold
To dungeons deep and caverns old
We must away ere break of day
To seek the pale enchanted gold...



The pines were roaring on the height,
The winds were moaning in the night.
The fire was red, it flaming spread;
The trees like torches blazed with light.

We have, then, a bunch of short, bearded beings exiled from their homeland, who have dreamed forever of returning. They are linked to a place they lost long ago, dwell in other realms throughout the earth, and yet are so profoundly connected to their own kingdom that it remains vivid to them while for others it is a fading memory. There is one tribe that offers a perfect real-world parallel to Tolkien's dwarves; there is only one nation that has remained existentially linked to the kingdom its people lost long ago even as it mingled among kings and queens and common folk of other lands throughout history: the Jews. In a reflection on Tolkien and the Jews, to which this essay is indebted, Rabbi Jeffrey Saks notes that the dwarves' "sorrowful song of longing to return to their homeland might have been lifted from a Middle Earth *Kinnot Tisha B'Av*"—a reference to the lamentations read by Jews when they mourn the destruction of Jerusalem.

The dwarves of Middle Earth, the central characters of one of the most beloved books of all time, are indeed based on the Jews. This was confirmed by Tolkien himself in a 1971 interview on the BBC: "The dwarves of course are quite obviously, [sic] couldn't you say that in many ways they remind you of the Jews?" he asked. "Their words are Semitic obviously, constructed to be Semitic." Similarly, in a letter to his daughter, Tolkien reflected, "I do think of the 'Dwarves' like Jews: at once native and alien in their habitations, speaking the languages of the country, but with an accent due to their own private tongue."

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To someone like me, who grew up loving *The Hobbit*, the discovery that Tolkien had based his dwarves on Jews was startling—and the cause of some concern. In reading the book to my son, after learning of its connection to the Jews, the

following passage stood out disturbingly:



The most that can be said for the dwarves is this: they intended to pay Bilbo really handsomely for his services; they had brought him to do a nasty job for them, and they did not mind the poor little fellow doing it if he would; but they would all have done their best to get him out of trouble, if he got into it There it is: dwarves are not heroes, but calculating folk with a great idea of the value of money; some are tricky and treacherous and pretty bad lots; some are not, but are decent enough people like Thorin and company, if you don't expect too much.

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Unsettling as the passage is, we would be wrong to use it to indict Tolkien for anti-Semitism. An excerpt from his professional correspondence offers a very different sense of the man's sympathies. In the late 1930s, a publishing company in Germany sought to create a German translation of *The Hobbit*. The Germans wrote Tolkien to inquire, among other things, whether he was Aryan. Tolkien drew on his linguistic expertise in composing a biting response:



I am not of Aryan extraction: that is Indo-Iranian; as far as I am aware none of my ancestors spoke Hindustani, Persian, Gypsy, or any related dialects. But if I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of Jewish origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people. My great-great-grandfather came to England in the 18th century from Germany: the main part of my descent is therefore purely English, and I am an English subject—which should be sufficient. I have been accustomed, nonetheless, to regard my German name with pride, and continued to do so throughout the period of the late regrettable war, in which I served in the English army. I cannot, however, forbear to comment that if impertinent irrelevant inquiries of this sort are to become the rule in matters of literature, then the time is not far distant when a German name will no longer be a source of pride.

Tolkien was clearly horrified by the Nazis' anti-Semitism and maintained a certain reverence for the Hebraic heritage of the Jewish people.

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y the 1940s, several years after the worldwide success of *The Hobbit*, all of Tolkien's fears about Germany had been realized. And as countries plunged into war, he began his epic sequel to the book: *The Lord of the Rings*. In that work, his affection for the Jewish people was more clearly on display. Even as the civilized world united to fight Nazism and Hitler, Tolkien composed a tale that described how the Wizard Gandalf brought together all the peoples of Middle Earth—elves, dwarves, men, hobbits, and others—to defeat the Dark Lord Sauron in his realm, known as Mordor.

Among the members of Gandalf's group (known as the "Fellowship of the Ring") are a dwarf named Gimli and an elf named Legolas. Dwarves and elves, Tolkien informs us, had never gotten along. When Gimli and Legolas first meet, each blames this historical ill will on the other's people. Gandalf, in turn, calls for a truce. "I beg you two, Legolas and Gimli, at least to be friends, and to help me," he says. "I need you both." Coaxed by Gandalf, the two ultimately become the best of

friends, fighting side by side and risking their lives to defeat the Dark Lord and his evil legions. This dwarf-elf alliance may well be a paradigm of a Jewish-Christian friendship. Interestingly, as Saks and others have noted, Tolkien's correspondence during World War II reveals that he himself fell into an unplanned interfaith friendship. Too old to serve in the war, he was asked at Oxford to serve on air-raid duty, keeping watch in order to alert denizens of the university town if there was a bombing and they needed to seek shelter. While on duty, he was paired with one of the most esteemed Jewish historians and Zionists then in Britain. Tolkien wrote:



I was in the small C33 room: very cold and damp. But an incident occurred which moved me and made the occasion memorable. My companion in misfortune was Cecil Roth (the learned Jew historian). I found him charming, full of gentleness (in every sense); and we sat up till after 12 talking. He lent me his watch as there were no going clocks in the place: —and nonetheless himself came and called me at 10 to 7: so that I could go to Communion! It seemed like a fleeting glimpse of an unfallen world. Actually I was awake, and just (as one does) discovering a number of reasons (other than tiredness and having no chance to shave or even wash), such as the desirability of getting home in good time to open up and un-black and all that, why I should not go. But the incursion of this gentle Jew, and his somber glance at my rosary by my bed, settled it. I was down at St Aloysius at 7.15 just in time to go to Confession before Mass.

So it seems Tolkien shaped the dwarves' traits and stories to reflect both his own experiences with Jews and their relation to events in the world more generally. Although in *The Hobbit* he may have indulged in the occasional ugly stereotype, in composing *The Lord of the Rings* he repented even of this. Thus, the books, the dwarves, and the fictional saga that forever changed the world of literature should inspire not anger but wonder.

We should marvel at the fact that an essentially Jewish tale spurred the very birth of modern fantasy, owing to an author who saw in the history of the Jewish people an



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incredible story. It is a reminder that Jews are indeed part of a wondrous tale, one that we are living today.

The living Jewish story and Tolkien's fictional saga came together in a remarkable union some 30 years after the publication of *The Hobbit*. The *Jerusalem Post* revealed how the first Hebrew translation of the book was

put forward by some unusual authors in an unusual circumstance: Israeli soldiers who were being held captive by Egypt during the War of Attrition. "We finished *The Hobbit* after four months," said captured pilot, Rami Harpaz, who worked on the translation in a Cairo prison yard with nine other prisoners. "Basically, we became two groups—those who translated and those who read the translation—and for this reason we decided not to translate the trilogy (the first two books plus *The Fellowship of the Ring*), as it was important to keep the group together as one unit." The translation, in fact, is not credited to any individual by name but to the group.

How might Jews think of their own story in light of Tolkien's? The saga of the Jews is that of a miraculous people who longed to reclaim their land and proved themselves great warriors in doing so, thereby fulfilling the Jewish prayers to return to Jerusalem. The very same Jews who prayed with such feeling also pleaded to God with equal sincerity: "May you cause the shoot of David to flower and flourish." This prayer, of course, is an entreaty for the "return of the king," of the messianic descendant of David, the shepherd boy who millennia ago was suddenly singled out by Samuel to become an anointed king over Israel and ancestor of an eternal royal dynasty. It was this boy-king who defeated Israel's enemies and united the fragmented Jewish tribes into one. He made Jerusalem the eternal capital and designed a house of God that his son made into an eternal resting place for the divine. And it was this king whose reign ended and whose royal line was lost for thousands of years. But it was predicted that the Jewish link to the land would not be severed and that ultimately the Jews would return.

Genesis 49:10 says: “*Lo yasur shevet miyehudah, umechokek mibein raglav ad ki yavo shiloh velo yikhas amim*; The scepter shall not depart from Judah until Shiloh [the Messiah] shall come, and unto him the nations will gather.”

This is a story more fantastic than any fantasy Tolkien could have composed. And the most important difference between the Jews’ story and his is this: Ours is true. This story is still unfolding, and it is as amazing as the miracles of the Torah we commemorate. Indeed, to be a Jew is to be part of the most miraculous story that ever was. And yet all too often the Jews of modernity have abandoned their miraculous history and its implications for their own age.

In the *Jewish Review of Books*, Michael Weingrad notes that while modern Jews have played an outsized role in the science-fiction genre, they have composed few fantasy novels. “It is not only that Jews are ambivalent about a return to an imaginary feudal past,” he writes. “It is even more accurate to say that most Jews have been deeply and passionately invested in modernity, and that history, rather than otherworldliness, has been the very ground of the radical and transformative projects of the modern Jewish experience.” Jews today are often uncomfortable in the knowledge that they embody the miraculous intervention of the divine in history.

To be a Jew in this age, however, is not merely to be a member of modernity. Seen accurately, the circumstances of our time confirm the enduring odd-defying wonder of Jewish existence. The author Yossi Klein Halevi gets at this when he writes of living in Jerusalem:



I suddenly remember where I am. I feel myself, then, like one of those barefoot and wide-eyed Ethiopian immigrants, silently stepping off the plane at Ben-Gurion Airport into Zion. I recall, too, my father's wonder at the Wall, whose fragile and improbable endurance he saw as a metaphor for the Jewish people. Like him, I ask myself what it is about this strange little people that continually finds itself at the center of international attention, repeatedly on the front lines against totalitarian forces of evil—Nazism, Soviet Communism, now jihadism—all of which marked the Jews as their primary obstacle to achieving world domination. At those moments, I feel gratitude for having found my place in this story.

Note Halevi's description of the Jews as a "strange little people." According to the Bible, that is accurate. "Not because of your size did God love you," we are informed in Deuteronomy, "for ye are the smallest of the nations." We are, you might say, dwarfed by other peoples. And we are, until this day, chosen by God.

At the end of *The Hobbit*, the dwarves have returned to their mountain, the throne of the dwarf kingdom has been reestablished, and Gandalf tells Bilbo of the glory that now surrounds the miraculous mountaintop. Bilbo replies: "Then the prophecies of the old songs have turned out to be true, after a fashion!" Gandalf's response is worth quoting in its entirety.



"Of course!" said Gandalf. "And why should not they prove true? Surely you don't disbelieve the prophecies, because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself? You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit? You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!"

Tolkien was rather instructive here. For the story of the Jews is about a little people who today, and throughout time, have helped bring prophecy about. They, all too often, doubt it all the more, refusing to accept that to be a Jew means to be

a part of the most miraculous story that could ever be told, a story that is not yet over.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a poetic prophecy about a kingdom yet to be restored, and it reads as follows.



All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.

To which many believing Jews may instinctively say, *Amein: Kein yehi ratzon, bimheirah beyameinu*. Amen. So may we see it, speedily in our days.

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