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The Centaur in the Garden

by Moacyr Scliar; translated by Margaret Neves

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ESSAY BY JUDITH BOLTON-FASMAN

MOACYR SCLIAIR'S FABULIST NOVEL, *The Centaur in the Garden*, is an extended Midrash replete with biblical references and mystical allusions. The book is narrated by the droll Guedali Tartakovsky, a Jewish centaur whose Russian immigrant parents are the only Jews homesteading in Rio Grande de Sul, Brazil. The family arrives there under the sponsorship of a wealthy European Jew. But rather than settle into their new life, the Tartakovskys are more like the ten spies who come back from the Promised Land with reports of doom and gloom. They act like tourists – too tentative to assume ownership of the land and therefore setting themselves up as perennial outsiders.

The Tartakovskys encounter biblical calamities that include drought, flood, hail and insect plagues. Their closest neighbors are miles away. Yet this terrifying wilderness brings the family a measure of security when Guedali is born. After a difficult and shocking birth, the baby centaur can be easily secreted away in this new world. Eight days after his birth, Guedali's circumcision is lewd vaudeville rather than a solemn, holy entrance into the covenant. In the humorous, erotically charged scene, Guedali recounts that "the mohel draws near, and my father separates my hind feet. And there they are, face to face, the penis and the mohel, the huge penis and the little mohel, the small fascinated mohel."

As he matures, Guedali turns to Jewish texts to make sense of his origins. As he studies the Bible and Jewish history, he pointedly asks, Where are the centaurs? Was he

present at Sinai with all the other Jewish souls that have ever existed? What does it mean to be in the bosom of Abraham? Do centaurs drink the milk of Abraham's breast?

Despite his questions, the boy-horse takes his place among the Jewish people during a bar mitzvah ceremony in which the fringes of his tallit are "falling over [his] equine haunches." Guedali eventually breaks away from his insular, lonely life and gallops across the pampas. Early in his travels he happens upon a circus where he passes himself off as a man masquerading as a centaur. The circus scenes provide Scliar with an opportunity for sharp commentary on assimilation. Without being too heavy-handed, the author grapples with the notion of a Jew masquerading as a non-Jew throughout his novel.

After a harrowing sexual encounter, Guedali runs away from the circus and is once again the wandering Jewish centaur. On the pampas he meets another centaur, a non-Jewish female whom he saves from her abusive human master by killing the man. The grateful and liberated Tita brings him home to the ranch where she lives with the man's wife and his extensive harem. The women are delighted that Tita has, against all odds, found another centaur, and everyone agrees that the two must be immediately married in a church. When Guedali informs them that he is Jewish, the women are perplexed and fall back on familiar canards. "A Jew? That doesn't sound so good. The Jews killed Christ, the Jews are avaricious." One woman, though, comments that she once had a Jewish lover who was not so bad.

For the next five years, Tita and Guedali live together on the ranch in quiet, happy domesticity until Guedali reads about an operation that can render them fully human. Sponsored by their wealthy mistress, the two sail to a private clinic in Morocco where they undergo bloody, complicated operations that are pronounced

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successful. The only indication of their former centaurhood is their hooves which they conceal in custom-made boots. In shedding their centaur identity the two share a private converso experience. References to their former life are reduced to a touch or a signal. “She shifted her position slightly, and the toe of her boot touched my knee. It was like a message, a warning from the hooves and the horses’ legs: don’t forget us, we’re hidden, disguised but we’re still here.”

Tita converts to Judaism in order to marry Guedali. Soon after she becomes pregnant. Guedali, worried that Tita will give birth to another centaur, insists that she have the baby at home with only the mid-wife who delivered him to attend to her. When fully human twin boys are born, a much relieved Guedali plans his sons’ circumcision over Tita’s objections. The circumcisions are performed; the boys are publicly brought into the covenant and into the bosom of Abraham.

For Guedali and Tita, life as humans gives them the confidence to make friends. After years of years of building a network of friends, they decide to join them in establishing a gated community, a place that they fantasize will be a cross between a kibbutz and a vacation colony. Scliar describes the one-story buildings as “horizontal condominiums.” Side by side, these railroad flat houses form their own Tower of Babel, where disparate voices harmonize while speaking Portuguese, Yiddish and ancient Hebrew.

In an autobiographical essay on his work, Scliar accounts for the multitude of voices he has encountered in his own life.

“Voices. Many voices. A confusion of voices. The Jewish voices in our little synagogue, and the *mulata* voices singing the *samba* during Carnival. The voices of my *chaverim* in the youth movement, and the voices of students protesting against dictatorship. The voices of our teachers in the Jewish school and the voice of the priest in the church where I had to go, a student in a Catholic school. The voices of Jewish actors of the Jewish theater, and the voices of the soccer fans. The voices of Jewish leaders in our community, and the voices of Brazilian politicians. The voices of the patients at Santa Casa, the poor people’s hospital and the voices of the elderly in the Jewish Home for the Aged. The voice of Yiddish and the voices of the gaucho dialect.”

In that same vein, Guedali the centaur and the Jew attempts to make sense of his dual existence. He fills in the missing gaps of his life with Midrash that is animated by myth and lore and tradition. By the end of *The Centaur in the Garden*, Guedali’s hooves split apart to reveal small delicate feet – feet with which he will take tentative steps further into the world. Yet the “wisdom that was in the marrow of his hooves is not lost in spite of the operation.” That wisdom – culled from answers to “the unknowable things of the universe,” animates Moacyr Scliar’s uniquely brilliant novel. **JR**

Judith Bolton-Fasman is a writer from the Boston area.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MOACYR SCLIAR

Like his centaur protagonist Guedali Tartakovsky, Moacyr Scliar was born and raised in Porto Alegre, the capital city of Rio Grande Do Sul which Scliar locates in “the deep south” of Brazil. Porto Alegre is still home to the sixty-six-year-old Scliar, who also works as a public health physician.

Scliar was inspired to write fiction as a young man after hearing his parents’ stories about life in Bessarabia, a region of Eastern Europe that is currently contained within Moldavia and Ukraine. In a recent e-mail exchange, Scliar noted that although he is not traditionally religious, he is “very connected to Jewish tradition – to the stories, mainly. We are a people of story-tellers, and I got that from my parents.” Scliar’s mother was his first mentor. A teacher in a Yiddish school, she introduced her son to literature and “applauded my first attempts to write.”

In *The Centaur in the Garden*, Scliar uses the metaphor of the centaur to evoke the dual existence of Brazilian Jewry. It’s an image that is also influenced by Latin American culture. “The gaucho,” Scliar explains, “is called the centaur of the pampas. Since cattle is raised in Rio Grande do Sul, the horse is present everywhere. On the other hand, the centaur is a symbol of the double identity, characteristic of Jews in a country like Brazil. At home, you speak Yiddish, eat gefilte fish, and celebrate Shabbat. But in the streets, you have soccer, samba, and Portuguese. After a while you feel like a centaur.”

Scliar also sees Latin America as a metaphor for the Promised Land. He notes that many Jews considered

places like Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay as “a kind of Promised Land where they could survive and still keep their Jewish traditions. Rio Grande do Sul was one of those places. Jews were so well received that they became what Alberto Guerchunoff, in Argentina, called “*Los gauchos Judíos*: Jews who wore the typical clothes of the region, sipped *mate*, and quickly became part of the human landscape.”

Scliar recently came back to international attention after Yann Martel won this year’s Booker Prize for his novel *The Life of Pi*. In Martel’s introduction to the book, he thanks Scliar for providing “the spark of life” that generated his own novel. The spark comes from Scliar’s short symbolic novel *Max and the Cats*. Some critics questioned whether Martel had actually plagiarized Scliar’s book, but Scliar is reticent on the subject and notes that Martel “told the press that he read a review of my book by John Updike (but Updike never wrote such a review). He liked the plot and decided to write a story about the subject. But my story refers to Nazism and also, in a metaphorical way, to the military dictatorship we had in Brazil at the time. Martel’s book is about religious faith.”

Moacyr Scliar is eloquent about his dual existence as a writer and physician, a venerable combination in Jewish tradition that goes back to Maimonides. He sees profound connections between both his vocations and notes that “medicine has inspired my work. It is a way to know the human condition and, in the case of public health, the social reality as well.” **JR**

—J. B.-F.

EXCERPT FROM *THE CENTAUR IN THE GARDEN*

“At the age of thirteen – my birthday was coming up – I was to undergo the ceremony of the bar mitzvah.

Impossible, said my mother when my father brought up the subject. It’s not impossible at all, said my father. Didn’t I find a way to have him circumcised? So now we will have the bar mitzvah. But – said my mother, who was having difficulty breathing and beginning to feel an attack of nerves coming on – how can you take Guedali to a synagogue? Who said it has to be in a synagogue? asked my father. We’ll hold the ceremony right here at home. Just for the family. This sounded more reasonable, and my mother agreed. Deborah and Mina were excited about the idea. Bernardo didn’t say anything.

For weeks I studied with my father the passage from the Bible that I was to recite in Hebrew. Two days before the party, my mother, Deborah, and Mina began to prepare the typical sweets. Father ordered a new suit made, and the girls were running to the seamstress’s house every other minute.

The night before the party I couldn’t sleep, I was so excited. Early the next morning Deborah and Mina danced joyfully in. They blindfolded me: it has to be a surprise, they said. For over an hour I waited, hearing their whispering and the clinking of glass and silver. Finally they took off the blindfold.

Oh, it was a beautiful sight. The table was covered with a white cloth; there were bottles of wine, crystal goblets, and steaming platters of food – the traditional Jewish dishes. On my bed were presents: books, a record player and records (*Cavalleria Rusticana* wasn’t among them), reproductions of famous paintings, a typewriter. And a violin almost exactly like the one I had thrown in the river.

I embraced my family, crying, and they wept too, but they tried to contain their emotion: come on Guedali, we want to start the party. Father came in, bringing the clothes he had bought me for the occasion, a dark suit coat, white shirt, tie, a skullcap. I dressed and placed the ritual shawl the mohel had given me over my shoulders. Mama came in, wearing a party dress and a new hairdo. She hugged me hard, sobbing, and didn’t want to let go of me. You’ll wrinkle his new coat, said Papa. Bernard came in and greeted me sourly.


I read the passage from the Bible without a mistake, my voice firm, the fringe of the *talit* falling over my haunches and hindquarters, one front hoof pawing the ground – as it always did when I was nervous.

‘Now,’ said my father when I had finished, ‘You are truly a Jew.’” (PAGES 46-47) **JR**

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Midrash play out in Moacyr Scliar’s narrative?
2. At various points in the novel Guedali attempts to pray. He says, “It wasn’t exactly religion I was practicing, it was more a form of nostalgia. I was echoing my own childhood.” How does this comment reflect Scliar’s attitude toward Judaism?

3. The Tartakovskys' wealthy sponsor, Baron Hirsch, thought about buying the Wailing Wall from the Turks in order to dismantle it and reassemble it in Brazil. What is the meaning of such a scheme?
4. Once Guedali becomes a functioning human, how is he affected by fully assimilating into Brazilian society?
5. Is Guedali and Tita's operation really a success? If so, what are the implications of its success?
6. Despite Tita's reservations, why is Guedali so insistent that his sons be circumcised?
7. Contrast the pioneering spirit of Guedali's parents with that of the friends with whom he moves to the "horizontal condominium."
8. How would you characterize Moacyr Scliar's concept of Jewish identity?

9. Is the image of a centaur a successful metaphor for Diaspora Jewry? For something else?
10. At the end of the book Guedali still retains the wisdom that was in the marrow of his hooves. Scliar comments that such wisdom was culled from answers to "the unknowable things of the universe." What might some of those "things" be? 

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