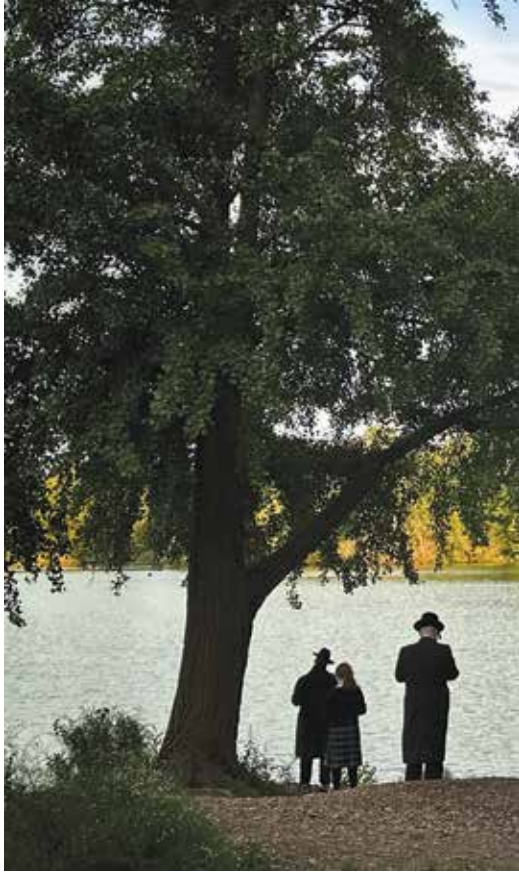
A dystopian novel grapples with AI and its implications for human and Jewish identity



THERE IS somewhat of a tradition of American rabbis writing novels. Among the most famous ones are Milton Steinberg, Chaim Potok, Herbert Tarr, Joseph Telushkin, and Mark D. Angel. The latest American rabbi to be part of this tradition is Phil M. Cohen, but in a very different contemporary style than rabbis of the past.

Rabbi Phil Cohen was ordained as a rabbi by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, and he holds a doctorate in Jewish thought from Brandeis University. He has held a variety of rabbinic positions in his career and currently serves as an interim rabbi in a congregation in Southern California. In addition – and particularly relevant to the writing of this novel – he has obtained a MFA in fiction writing via a unique writers' workshop at Spaulding University, where this book began to take shape several years ago in its initial drafts.

COURTESY OF BETH GAMBURG

Writer Phil M. Cohen

As we all know, most rabbis like to tell stories. But this rabbi loves to tell stories, which is why he has become an accomplished writer of contemporary fiction, in addition to being an inspiring rabbi/storyteller. Cohen has published many short stories, but *Nick Bones Underground* is his first full book (and apparently it is the first of a trilogy). The book, which was a finalist in the Jewish Book Council awards for Debut Novel, is an excellent and very Jewish and human book.

Having now read it a second time, I can safely say that it is a remarkable achievement. I would even say that it is a *tour de force*. It is, at the same time, a very serious book and a highly humorous one, which makes it so special. He has woven together a great cast of characters in this book who are memorable and unique.

First is the main character, Prof. Nick Friedman, a professor of religious studies (a bit reminiscent of the author himself, perhaps), who is very smart and witty. So much so that his nickname becomes Nick Bones. One of his areas of expertise is Hassidism, which becomes crucial to the plot of this novel. In this story, he becomes a private detective in order to investigate the disappearance of a very close childhood friend named Shmulie, a yeshiva *bocher* who becomes very rich from manufacturing and selling New Age drugs.

Friedman is the main protagonist in this story, but he is accompanied by a very important friend named Maggie, who is actually a computer program!

She knows everything about him and helps him out along the way. His life becomes increasingly impossible without her, and he clearly has become very dependent on her and also attached to her. In fact, in the epilogue, the author wonders aloud about this relationship:

I can imagine the screwball comedy that might spring to mind when considering an intimate relationship between a human being and an incorporeal AI being, between me and Maggie in particular, though she now preferred to be called Miriam [she converted to Judaism!]. The solutions that Miriam and I worked out to our inter-dimensional relationship carried their peculiarities, to be sure. With absolute certainly, I can say that our late-night talks about the world and our respective places in it, together and separately, what it meant to be human, what is meant to be a Jew, took on a unique depth of intimacy and metaphysical edification.

These questions – about what it means to be human and what it means to be a Jew – are at the heart of this novel. They are clearly of central interest to the author.

In a recent interview, I asked the author about the book's main message. His response related to the aforementioned questions:

"Part of the frame of the book is the rise of AI and the existential questions that AI poses. I'd say the religious/philosophical query of the book is the question as to the nature of being a person. What constitutes personhood, and how personhood is to be ascertained? Can an AI be a person, a religious person, or a Jew? Can a person lose her personhood?"

This novel contains many other quirky surrealistic characters, including a guy named Mingus, who thinks he is the prophet Ezekiel and has all kinds of prophecies about dry bones and wheels, reminiscent of the biblical prophet; and a guy named Menkies from the yeshiva where Nick Friedman grew up in Brooklyn, who becomes involved with a Hassidic group called the Shmeltzerites (who remind us of the Chabad

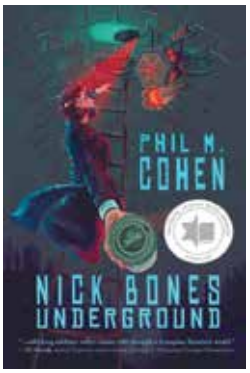
MAYE-E WONG/REUTERS

An Orthodox Jewish family pray by the lake in Prospect Park.

movement). This very unsavory character willy nilly helps Nick in his investigative search for his old friend, but the path is long and winding, filled with more strange and dystopic characters, whom the author brings into the story as it unfolds.

Speaking of dystopic, this novel is one big dystopia. It portrays a world heavily influenced by technology, and by a very fundamentalist approach to Judaism, which are both very disturbing and dangerous for Jews and for humanity. The setting for the story is "the great debacle." In the first chapter of the book, the author describes this as he rides his bike around Prospect Park in Brooklyn:

The park, like the world around it, teetered on the brink of the abyss. Economic collapse had devastated New York City, causing a shutdown of most city services, including the subway system, all but paralyzing the city. Much the same level of disruption rippled through the rest of the country. Recovery from what had been coined "The Great Debacle" became all the more difficult because of nefarious behavior by our computers. It was not quite an artificial intelligence revolt as much as machines running amok, unleashing chaos among the people who birthed them into this world. They no longer could be trusted to do what they were built for, a trait that felt eerily human.



COURTESY OF PHIL M. COHEN

The cover of Cohen's new novel.

In this dystopian New York City world, about half of the population lives underground, since the subways no longer work, in what the author called the "Velvet Underground." Much of the mysterious investigation which Friedman conducts takes place there, but he does go back and forth between the two worlds. One of the ironies that he discovers is that the people in the underground have developed a much more compassionate and functional social system than the people above ground, including universal healthcare. This is a major critique of America today.

Friedman meets up with the Smeltzerites, both underground and above ground. He finds this weird Hassidic sect to be very problematic, as does his AI partner Maggie, both of them reflecting the views of the narrator/author. In fact, their critique of the strange religious customs and transformations of this Hassidic group is one of the central themes of this book. In this narrative, Rabbi Dovid Schmeltzer came to Brooklyn before World War II with a small contingent of followers. He had a vision: "to establish programs and centers all over America and then the world that would save the people from assimilation." This sounds very familiar.

The story becomes more problematic when an old friend from yeshiva days, who joined this Hassidic movement, tells Friedman: "You're not going to believe this. They're starting to say the Rebbe is the Moshiach, the Messiah…I mean, so many of them it would blow your mind." When he hears this news, Prof. Friedman responds with a philosophical rant:

My studies had taught me never to be surprised by anything in the evolution of any religions…With incessant repetition and the passage of time, with the appearance of prophetic dreams and miracle stories, what seemed the height of stupidity becomes the rage among millions not terribly long after that inanity first flowed from the lips of the prophet of the new idea. People want to believe: the more preposterous, the better… False messianism has been one of the great pitfalls of the Jews, and there have been, oy, so many that one would think we'd have learned. But no: so attractive is the possibility of redemption, of apocalyptic deliverance from this ball of misery we call the world, that this phenomenon continued to visit itself upon us with astonishing regularity.

The narrator here is presumably espousing the views of the author here – as well as my own views, I might add. He is very critical of many messianic and other strange proclivities of this contemporary version of this historic Hassidic movement, which has strayed very far from normative Judaism, and in some respects is even closer to the theology of Christianity, especially with regard to the idea of the leader dying and coming back as the Messiah. Indeed, much of this book is a satire on the Chabad movement, which I found to be very funny and sad at the same time.

This thought-provoking humorous and serious book will capture your imagination and your intellect. But it will help if you have a good sense of humor as you read along. ■