

Our Final Century – Will the Human Race Survive the Twenty-First Century? By Martin Rees. Published by William Hutchinson, 2003.

In spite of its rather disturbing title, this book is much more than the answer to every pessimist's dream!

Martin Rees, a Cambridge professor and one of the world's greatest experts in cosmology and space science, takes the reader on a fascinating guided tour of the various ways in which the human race might fail to see the twenty second century. From Mutually Assured Destruction through nuclear holocaust to Bio-terrorism and Bio-errorism (mass casualties caused by the escape of an untreatable biological contaminant), Rees assesses each one's capacity to make this century our last, and although his extrapolation from known facts and statistics is compelling, it is not too disturbing.

He also turns his attention to asteroid strikes and natural catastrophes, as well as the potential for nanotechnology – specifically tiny robotic creations that became uncontrollable – to cause massive disruption at best and calamitous loss of life at worst. Here, the negative potential is enough to cause some loss of sleep.

Towards the end of the book Rees looks into the far future to the human potential for exploring deep space and perpetuating our species elsewhere if human life on the biosphere that is our planet becomes untenable. In some ways tangential this is nevertheless enthralling material.

There is much in this book for a variety of readers, not least those who seek to marry the teachings of an ancient faith with our growing knowledge of the world in which we live. For rabbis certainly there is material for several sermons!

Rees concludes this superb book with the following memorable and telling paragraph:

The first aquatic creatures crawled onto dry land in the Silesian era, more than 300 million years ago. They may have been unprepossessing brutes, but had they been clobbered, the evolution of land-based fauna would have been jeopardised. Likewise, the post-human potential is so immense that not even the most misanthropic amongst us would countenance its being foreclosed by human actions.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh