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Secret Identities: Graphic Literature and the Jewish-American Experience

In 1934, the comic book was born. Its father was one Maxwell Charles Gaines (né Ginsberg), a down-on-his-luck businessman whose previous career accomplishments included producing “painted neckties emblazoned with the anti-Prohibition proclamation ‘We Want Beer’” (Kaplan 2). Such things did not provide a sufficient income, and so a desperate Gaines moved himself and his family back in to his mother’s house in the Bronx. It was here, in a dusty attic, that Gaines came across some old newspaper comic strips and had his epiphany. Working with Eastern Color Printing, a “company that printed many of the Sunday newspaper comics sections in the Northeast” (Kaplan 2-3), Gaines began publishing pamphlet-sized collections of old comic strips to be sold to the public (this concept had been toyed with previously, but only as premiums or giveaways, not as an actual retail product). Thus, in February of 1934, *Famous Funnies # 1* became the first American retail comic book (Kaplan 3). The idea proved to be an enormous success – a particularly remarkable feat, considering that the country was in the midst of the Great Depression – and an industry was born.

Seeing that the concept was commercially viable, more and more publishers began getting in on the act, as children eagerly tore copies off the stands and parents welcomed the opportunity to provide them with inexpensive entertainment. The newborn comics industry would soon hit a wall, however, as old newspaper strips were a finite resource, and some required “astronomical royalties” be paid to the newspaper

syndicates (Kaplan 5). The solution was to call for artists to create original material for the comics, and a plethora of young, hungry, Depression-era creators were more than willing to respond.

These artists were disproportionately Jewish. The primary reason for this is the sad reality that, at the time, anti-Semitism was still a pervasive force in America. Al Jaffee, best known for his work with *MAD Magazine* (most notably his creation of the popular “fold-in” feature), explains it as such: “I think the factor that brought all the Jewish guys into (comic books) is that there was a tremendous amount of anti-Semitic bigotry as far as a lot of industries were concerned,” adding that:

In a lot of firms, there was an unwritten policy that no Jews need apply, and we knew about that when we went looking for work. I mean, you went in and you sat down with your portfolio and the message came through clearly, especially when you ran into very nice people who would say, ‘Look, your work looks pretty good and I wouldn’t mind bringing you in, but there’s a policy here. We don’t hire too many Jewish people.’ (qtd. in Kaplan 28)

Faced with such discrimination, one of the only options to which young Jewish artists could turn was comic books, a medium that was largely considered to be the lowest rung on the publishing ladder and thus was not blocked off to Jewish professionals¹.

“The comic book business did not discriminate,” claims Jaffee. “In fact, a lot of the comic book publishers were Jewish, so the opportunities for getting work (were there), because you got rid of that one big bugaboo!” (qtd. in Kaplan 29). Since the industry was essentially created by Jewish businessmen, many of the “bosses” were themselves Jewish, such as Will Eisner, a legendary comics creator himself and a prominent Jewish-

¹ “There were a lot of talented Jewish and other immigrants, and especially their American-raised children, in the city. Their ethnic origins kept them from many more ‘legitimate’ forms of creative expression, so, naturally, they were the source for much of the talent pool for the new comics industry” (Fingerhuth 24).

American who would later go on to create many timeless works², including what is generally thought of as the first graphic novel, *A Contract with God (and Other Tenement Stories)* in 1978. Eisner, along with partner Jerry Iger, formed the appropriately-named Eisner & Iger company, a group who would “package” comic material produced by its staff of artists (which included such luminaries as a young Jack Kirby and Bob Kane) and sell it to publishers (Evanier 40). As Jaffee suggests, since such comics industry companies were often headed by Jewish bosses, many of the obstacles facing young Jewish artists at the time were simply not there. Consequently, the comic book industry in its infancy came to be populated almost exclusively by Jewish creators, many of whom were the children of immigrants and thus first-generation Americans.

Though they may have been railroaded into making comics by the realities of the time, these Jewish creators seized the opportunity provided them by this fledgling medium to give voice to their experiences as Jewish-Americans. Here it should be noted that by and large these creators deny that they consciously placed any sort of elements of their heritage in their work. After all, at the time they were far more concerned about putting food on the table for their families than about expressing themselves through their art, and understandably so. However, art, by its very nature, must always derive to some extent from the artist’s own experiences, thoughts, and ideas. Art is not created in a vacuum but rather it is a product of the artist’s self, whether consciously or not. Therefore, the themes and concepts present in the comics created

² To give an idea of how legendary Eisner is regarded in the industry, the awards given each year for excellence in the field of comics are called the “Eisner Awards” in honor of him.

by Jewish-American artists must be of some significance to them, and it is in these that one can see the struggles with that identity that these men faced.

The superhero, the staple of the comic book nearly since its inception, is the very personification of struggling with one's identity, as most find that they must balance their crimefighting life with that of a civilian "alter-ego." The super-powered vigilante is a concept very closely tied with the Jewish legend of the golem, a creature made of clay that is magically brought to life by a rabbi. It is also significant to note that as time wore on and America's culture became more accepting, Jewish-American creators began telling stories that were explicitly Jewish, as if the chains society had placed on them in terms of what they could say in their art had finally been broken.

Thus, beginning in the 1930's, the stage was set for a generation of young Jewish-American artists to start a new storytelling tradition with a new medium. Although they were more or less forced into the comics industry by a racist job market, they would nonetheless tell their stories, even if it meant doing so in a veiled form, through the adventures of costumed crimefighters. Will Eisner, whose career spanned from the birth of comics to the modern age (and one of the creators whose later, non-superhero work, such as the aforementioned *A Contract with God*, would deal explicitly with the idea of Jewish-Americanism), summarizes the situation bluntly: "There were Jews in this medium because it was a crap medium," he explains. "And in a marketplace that still had racial overtones, it was an easy medium to get into." Economic realities aside, Eisner also theorizes on what made Jewish people particularly suited for a storytelling medium such as comics (which also explains why it became so successful): "You had a medium that was regarded as trash, that nobody really wanted to go into... and a group of people who... brought with them their 2,000-year history of storytelling... the

only way they communicated the technique of survival to each other was telling stories. They wrote the Bible" (qtd. in Fingerhuth 28).

Identity Crisis

Superheroes battle many different enemies in their periodically-published adventures, from rampaging monsters and hostile space aliens to muggers and bank robbers (and of course, one must not forget their supervillain foils as well). However, while the immediate villainous threat-of-the-day changes from story arc to story arc, the one persistent anxiety is one of identity. The concern that others will learn who they truly are dominates the speech balloons and thought bubbles of even the mightiest of superhuman crimefighters. For example, while it wasn't until roughly the late 40's that Superman's comics began to regularly feature cover text (often it was simply an action shot), once they did, the concern about his secret identity being revealed became a frequent topic that they displayed. 1946's *Action Comics* # 100 shows a detective proclaiming "I'm convinced that this fellow Clark Kent is Superman!" under text that reads "Superman's secret identity meets the acid test with 'The Sleuth that Never Failed!'" 1955's *Superman* # 98 shows the titular hero in his civilian guise watching a newsreel of his heroic alter-ego while sitting alongside love interest Lois Lane. "Great Scott!" he proclaims, "That action scene gives away my identity!" (Fig. 1). Similarly, 1956's issue # 103 portrays a mind-reader showing the hero a piece of paper, causing Superman (whose powers apparently do not include a super-vocabulary) to declare "Great Scott! The name you wrote – it is my secret identity!" The covers of issues 119, 123, and 142 contain this same crisis, each using the word "identity." Spider-Man, a later superhero, faced the same concerns, although since speech balloons on covers were

no longer in vogue, the crises were communicated via bold, eye-catching cover text: “Unmasked by (supervillain) Dr. Octopus!,” “Unmasked at last!,” and “Revealed – the face of (Spider-Man’s alter ego) Peter Parker!” declare the covers of *Spider-Man* issues 12, 87, and 106, respectively.



Fig. 1: The cover of *Superman* #98 (coverbrowser.com).

The publishers’ decision as to what to place on the cover of a comic book is a very deliberate one. “Before the eighties and the popularity of comic book specialty shops,” explains writer and comics historian Mark Evanier, “comics were sold primarily on newsstands. Among publishers, there was a wide-spread conviction that the cover sold the comic,” adding that some publishers were so convinced of this that they believed “you could put any old junk inside (...) if the cover was strong enough” (155). With this in mind, the idea that the conflict portrayed on the cover would so often

involve the issue of identity – and specifically the threat of one’s true self being revealed – speaks volumes as to how central that theme is to the superhero concept. Men who could lift cars with ease were terrified that the world at large would discover their true identity, which would put themselves and their loved ones in danger. Incidentally, in 2007 Marvel Comics did a Spider-Man story arc that illustrated this, in which the hero publically unmask and his worst fears are realized, with his wife terrorized by vengeful supervillains and his aunt shot by an assassin as a result of his identity becoming public knowledge.

The repeated instances of the words “identity” and “mask” on the covers of these comics speaks to two related but separate concepts. Emphasizing “identity” in the stories ,and particularly on the covers, ties the concept of identity in with marketability; as mentioned, the cover is designed to sell the comic. In the same way Jewish-American creators were learning that their own identities were not just a personal matter but a crucial component of their own marketability to potential employers and potential readers who may be put off by their true “ethnic” identity. Thus, identity becomes a dualistic concept, a constant struggle between how one views oneself and how one is viewed by others. The mask, then, is the veil that allows its wearer to control how he or she is perceived. The mask creates a whitewashing effect that allows its wearer to be judged by his or her actions, since anything that would invite pre-judgment is concealed. When a superhero puts on a mask, it allows him or her to act freely as it lessens the fear of repercussion, but the person under the mask is unchanged, retaining the same moral values that led their unmasked selves to wish to fight crime in the first place. Such is also the case with their creators, whose “masks” allow them to do things they would not otherwise be able to do.

Hence, the connection between the idea of having to conceal one's identity to fit into mainstream society and the reality in which the Jewish-American creators who established this trope lived is a fairly direct one. When Superman comes to Earth, he adopts the identity not of his real name, Kal-El, "which roughly means 'All that God is' in Hebrew" (Kaplan 15), but that of the very Gentile-sounding Clark Kent. Altering one's name to sound less "ethnic" was a common practice in those times, especially among Jewish-American immigrants justly concerned about the threat of anti-Semitism. It is unsurprising, then, that many of the most prolific comic professionals of that era did likewise. Jack Kirby, the man nicknamed "king of comics" for his incredible contributions to the field, which include creating or co-creating some of the most enduring superheroes of all time, such as Captain America, the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, Iron Man, and the X-Men, among countless others, was born Jacob Kurtzberg. Stan Lee, the most public face of comics and the writer who co-created all of the above (save for Captain America), as well as Spider-Man, Daredevil, Dr. Strange, and others, was born Stanley Martin Lieber. Bob Kane, co-creator of Batman, had the given name of Robert Kahn.

It is important to note here that some creators deny that they changed their names to avoid the stigmas facing Jewish people at the time. Stan Lee, for example, swears that because his dream at the time was to be a writer of more respected media than comic books, he simply wanted to save his real name for his "real" career: "When I entered the comics field in 1940," he explains in the foreword to Danny Fingeroth's *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero*, "comics were not held in high regard at the time – and that's putting it mildly. Not wanting my name to be sullied by them, I used the pen name of Stan Lee, saving Stanley Martin

Lieber for the great novel to come" (10). Regardless of their stated reasons, one would find it difficult to deny that having a less "ethnic" name in that era could only be beneficial, especially in the job market. Al Jaffee, born Abraham Jaffee, is very frank about this logic being the impetus for his name change: "the name Abraham (...) had a cooling effect on any organization that had a practice of not hiring Jews." So during his time in the army, Jaffee made the leap:

When I was in the Pentagon and saw plenty of anti-Semitism, I was lucky that none of it was overwhelmingly against me. But I saw other Jewish guys get beat up and stuff like that. And I met a Jewish fellow in the Pentagon one day and he said, 'Have you ever thought about changing your name? I just changed mine.' (...) So I thought about it and I said, 'You know, maybe Jaffee would look better as an Al Jaffee than an Abraham Jaffee,' and so on a whim I went over there, filled out a paper, and suddenly I was Al! I didn't even know whether to be Al Jaffee, Albert Jaffee, or Allan Jaffee – so I picked Allan Jaffee, but in the back of my mind I'm sort of sorry I did it now. But (back then), in the back of my mind was, 'Maybe I'd like to go back to some of those advertising agencies and Al Jaffee will look better than Abraham Jaffee,' because then they wouldn't outright say to you, 'Are you Jewish? We can't hire you!' (qtd. in Kaplan 30-31)

Jaffee's story was sadly a common one in those times, as whether or not one got hired to a job could sometimes mean the difference between whether or not one could feed one's family. The feeling that one's Jewish identity was something that had to be hidden in order for oneself and one's family to survive is reflected in the stories Jewish-American creators told in their comics, as heroes are constantly beset by anxiety that they will be "outed," so to speak.

The comics industry, since it began in the 30's, would soon become swept up by World War II, an event which not only helped the industry financially but also gave Jewish-American creators an opportunity to display their American-ism through their patriotism. While "from 1938 to 1941, comic books were certainly a growth industry,"

after America entered the war “sales skyrocketed” as “it suddenly became impossible for American comic-book publishers to ignore putting wartime themes into their work” (Kaplan 58). Comics were especially popular among soldiers, as “*The New York Times* reported that one of every four magazines shipped to troops overseas was a comic book,” including “at least 35,000 copies of Superman alone (...) each month” (Wright 31). The combination of patriotic themes in the titles, an improving wartime economy putting more disposable income in American pockets, and a generation of youth looking for cheap entertainment as they fought overseas meant that comic books saw unprecedented sales and popularity. “In early 1942 *Publishers Weekly* and *Business Week* both reported that some 15 million comic books were sold each month,” and “by December 1943, monthly comic book sales had climbed to 25 million copies.” Amazingly – considering that they cost about ten cents each – “retail sales of comic books in 1943 added up to nearly \$30 million” (Wright 31). The fact that the industry continued to boom during this period is especially remarkable since many of its most prominent creators, such as Jack Kirby, Will Eisner, and Superman co-creator Jerry Siegel, went off to serve their country in the military.

As mentioned, comics at the time became intensely patriotic. Not only was this what the public wanted (as evidenced by the skyrocketing sales), but it was encouraged by the government. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Office of War Information asked all forms of entertainment media to:

raise American morale, encourage public cooperation and participation in the war effort, identify the menace of the Axis powers, and inform audiences about the progressive war aims pursued by the United States and its allies, all in ways that cloaked propaganda within the context of good entertainment as much as possible. (Wright 35)

As such, characters such as Superman and Batman began to encourage readers to “give to the American Red Cross” or buy “war bonds and stamps” (Wright 34). The villains they fought also became more tied to current events, such as Captain Marvel’s new less-than-subtly-named foe Captain Nazi (Kaplan 59). “As comic writers,” says Stan Lee regarding the time, “we had to have villains in our stories. And once World War II started, the Nazis gave us the greatest villains in the world to fight against. It was a slam dunk” (qtd. in Kaplan 58). In addition to providing a perfect form of “evil” to pit against their figures of “good,” the war allowed Jewish-American creators to become more connected with the US as the “us versus them” mentality shifted in a way that placed them, for once, into the former category. The “other” became the enemy overseas more so than the ethnic minority next door (although plenty of anti-Semitism was still present in the States), and the comic creators displayed their patriotism by helping to fight the good fight, both on the fields of war and in the pages of their medium.

Of course, no one hero exemplified this new attitude in comics more so than Captain America. The red-, white-, and blue-clad hero burst on to the scene in March of 1941, the creation of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, both Jewish-Americans. Then publisher of Marvel Comics Martin Goodman made the bold decision to debut the hero in his very own title, whereas typically at that time new characters would first be featured in back-up stories in other books or in anthology titles before it was decided if they could carry their own title (Evanier 50). The cover of *Captain America # 1*, drawn by Kirby, remains one of the most famous images in comics, and was as clear a statement of purpose as one will ever see, as it featured the titular hero punching Adolf Hitler in the face (Fig. 2). It is also important to note that Captain America began his Nazi-punching ways about nine months before his namesake country, as “like many

patriotic superheroes of World War II, (he) declared war on the Axis months before the rest of the nation did” (Wright 33). Ostensibly to capitalize financially on anti-isolationist sentiment of the time, Jewish-American creators seized the opportunity to encourage the country to fight against the Nazi menace and thus express their patriotism in a public forum.

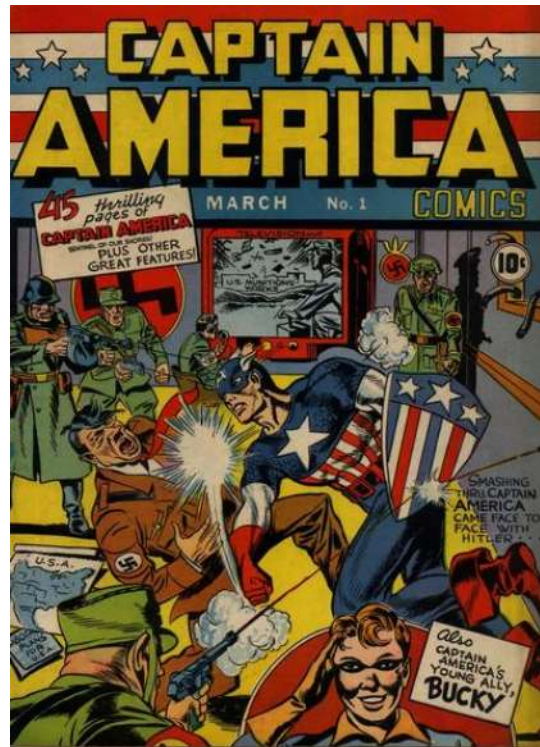


Fig. 2: The cover of *Captain America* # 1 (coverbrowser.com).

This did not mean, however, that they were not still subjected to anti-Semitic hatred from some of their fellow Americans. Nazi sympathizers did not take kindly to the new star-spangled hero, and they let Captain America’s creators know it:

“There were threatening phone calls and anti-Semitic hate mail. The threats were reported to the police, and everyone was puzzled that uniformed officers were so readily dispatched to patrol Goodman’s corridors. A few days later, Simon was startled when the receptionist announced that New York mayor Fiorello LaGuardia was on the phone, asking to speak to the editor of *Captain America*. ‘It was him, no doubt about it,’ Simon explained. ‘He said he loved the book and he said, ‘You

boys are doing a great job and the city of New York will make certain that no harm comes to you.'

Another time, Jack took a call. A voice on the other end said, 'There are three of us down here in the lobby. We want to see the guy who does this disgusting comic book and show him what real Nazis would do to his Captain America.' To the horror of others in the office, Kirby rolled up his sleeves and headed downstairs. The caller, however, were gone by the time he arrived. Years later, he told an interviewer, 'I once got a letter from a Nazi who told me to pick out any lamppost I wanted on Times Square, because when Hitler arrived, they'd hang me from it. It was typical of a genre of fans who have long since died out.'" (Evanier 55-56)

Kirby's classification of American Nazis who sent him death threats as a "genre of fans" reveals how common this sort of attitude was at the time. On the other hand, however, Jewish-American comic book creators were being called upon to help fight the war on the homefront – the war in the perceptions of the American public. Their creations had, in a relatively short time, become so ingrained in the fabric of American pop culture that they could be used to help champion the American cause. Illustrating this is the fact that a prominent politician, the mayor of New York, personally made sure to protect those responsible for *Captain America* (even devoting police officers to do so) and to commend them on "doing a great job" of spreading a patriotic message with their work.

While these Jewish-American creators – who were by and large either first- or second-generation Americans – were now engaging with their country in a more direct way than they previously could, one unfortunate caveat of this was that despite fighting against an anti-Semitic hate machine, the heroes they wrote and drew still had to be gentile. In fact, as many have pointed out, including Will Eisner, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Captain America is physically the image of the Nazi's Aryan ideal. "When you're sitting down to write about an American hero within an American culture," explains Eisner, "you begin to devise those characters or characteristics that

you regard as gentile” (qtd. in Kaplan 60). So while World War II gave Jewish-American comic creators a chance to express their Jewish identities in a way they could not before, some chains still bound them creatively, as they were still forced to place a mask on their work, expressing themselves through gentile characters.

Heroes with Feet of Clay

The golem is a magical creature made of clay from Jewish legend. As with most legends, there are countless variations of the tale. In earlier versions of the story, the golem is created to serve as a domestic servant; in a letter written in 1674 Christoph Arnold tells of the creation of a golem by Rabbi Elijah Baal Shem of Chelm (Goldsmith 17). Arnold explains that “although the (golem) itself cannot speak, it understands what is said to it and commanded; among the Polish Jews it does all kinds of housework, but it is not allowed to leave the house” (qtd. in Kieval 3). A common motif was that the golem would continue to grow in size and power until it became a threat to its creator, at which point it must be destroyed. In many golem tales, such as Arnold’s, the creature bears the word “emeth” (or “emet”; the Romanization varies), meaning “truth,” on its forehead. To destroy the golem, the first character of the word, *aleph*, must be erased. In Arnold’s version the golem’s creator, who can no longer reach to aleph to erase it, devises a trick in which he commands the golem to remove his boots, then erases the character when the creature bends down to obey. Now dead, the giant golem falls on Rabbi Elijah, killing him (Kieval 3). Other versions, such as that of Jacob Emden, “allow the rabbi to escape with only cuts and bruises” (Goldsmith 17).



Fig. 3: A statue of an interpretation of the golem, located in Prague (czechmeout.wordpress.com).

The word "golem" is derived from the one instance in the Hebrew Bible in which it is used; in Psalm 139:16, "which Psalm the Jewish tradition put into the mouth of Adam himself" (Scholem 161), Adam, as Jewish scholar Arnold Goldsmith explains, "praises the Creator, acknowledging how God secretly formed his body 'in the lowest parts of the earth,' from which came his 'unperfect substance' (that is, *golem*)" (16). While the word *golem* is never explicitly defined, Gershom Scholem, one of the most highly-regarded scholars of the Kabbalah, agrees that "here probably, and certainly in the later sources, 'golem' means the unformed, amorphous" (161). The word has also been adopted as an "affectionate insult" in Yiddish, meaning something equivalent to "dummy" or "ignorant person" (Goldsmith 16). Both meanings could be used to explain why the animated clay creature was given the name of "golem," since clay is the basic unformed matter of the earth and the golem is "ignorant" in that it can only do what it is told to do and lacks any cognitive faculties beyond that.

The most popular and more modern versions of the legend attribute the creation of the golem to a Rabbi living in 16th century Prague named Judah Loew. Often, Loew is referred to simply as “the Maharal,” which is “an acronym for the Hebrew *Moreinu ha-Rav Rabbi Liva*, (meaning) ‘Our teacher, the master Rabbi Loew’” (Goldsmith 21). One of the most well-known Rabbi Loew golem tales comes from Yudel Rosenberg’s text published in 1909 entitled *Nifla’ot Maharal im ha-Golem*, translated as *The Golem and the Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague*. This text is controversial in a number of ways, however. For one, Rosenberg presents the book as not being a work of fiction authored by himself but rather a first-hand account written by Rabbi Loew’s son-in-law, Rabbi Yitzchok Katz. In his preface Rosenberg contends that he found the text “in the great library of Metz” wherein it “had lain hidden for some three hundred years” (5). To that end, he even includes the “bill of sale” to document that he purchased the text from Rabbi Chaim Scharfstein of Metz. However, few scholars actually believe this to be true. In the introduction to his English translation of the book, Curt Leviant states that “there is no doubt that Yudel Rosenberg concocted this fiction within a fiction” (xviii) and Arnold Goldsmith compares it to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* “fifty-nine years earlier” in which the author also claims to have found, rather than written, his manuscript (38). While this false credibility may or may not have been intended to help sell books, Rosenberg’s version of the golem story had a greater purpose, as Goldsmith explains:

Obviously Rosenberg had hopes of recovering his expenses and perhaps making a profit, but he also had a more altruistic and noble objective which today’s readers might respect. Blood Libels against the Jews were becoming increasingly common in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe (...), and Rosenberg was trying to boost the morale of European Jewry with the tales of a miraculous redeemer... (39)

“Blood libel” was the anti-Semitic idea that Jewish people used the blood of Christians, particularly children, in their Passover rituals. The golem in Rosenberg’s tale is created mainly to fight against this horrible lie, as in the chapter entitled “For What Purposes the Maharal Used the Golem,” he writes that “most of all, Rabbi Loew used the golem to fight against the blood libel, which was quite widespread during this time, and from which false accusation the residents of Prague and its environs suffered a great many calamities” (44).³

Rosenberg’s radical shift in the golem’s purpose turned the creature from a dumb servant into a superhero figure. In his story, immediately after bringing the golem to life, the Maharal tells it: “Know that we created you out of the dust of the earth to guard the Jews from all harm and from all the ills and troubles they suffer at the hands of their enemies and oppressors” (36-37), after which he proclaims “I forbid members of my household to use the golem for domestic purposes” (37). This is a drastic change from earlier versions, in which the golem was created specifically for that reason. Now the golem was meant to fight for truth and justice, like the superheroes created by Jewish-American creators decades later.

In fact, many of the most common superhero motifs are present in Rosenberg’s golem story. Gadgets and gimmicks are a superhero staple, from Batman’s utility belt to Captain America’s shield to Spider-Man’s web-shooters. The golem, likewise, sometimes made use of “an amulet written on deerskin (...) which made him invisible” (44). Also, while he may not have had a “secret identity” per se, “every year, between Purim and the Intermediary Days of Passover, the golem was disguised in gentile garb each

³ “On account of that despicable accusation, the blood of many Jewish souls innocent of any blame was gratuitously spilled like water” (Rosenberg 14).

evening. No one could tell who he was, for he looked like a Christian porter and was girded with a rope belt just like the other porters" (44). Here is seen an earlier example of the "mask" that Jewish-American comic creators placed on their characters, hiding a Jewish identity beneath a gentile disguise to be more accepted by society. Another superhero convention is the hero patrolling the streets, looking for criminals to catch and turn over to the proper authorities. Rosenberg tells how the golem would "spend the night walking the streets of the city, especially those of the Jewish Quarter" (44) in order to catch people intending to throw the corpses of Christian children into Jewish houses, which is evidently something people would do in order to then accuse them of blood libel.⁴ If the golem were to find a culprit of this crime, "he was to seize that man along with his burden, bind them with his rope belt, and drag them off forcibly to the Town Hall, where sat the police chief, police officers, and other city guards, in order to have that man arrested and brought to judgment" (45). Just as Spider-Man ties up muggers and bank robbers with his webbing or Wonder Woman binds them with her lasso in order for them to be brought to justice, so too does the golem, using his "rope belt," another gadget.

Thus, one can see how Jewish-American comic creators drew upon the legend of the golem in fashioning their superhero stories, which are, in some sense, modernized folktales. While it may not have been a conscious act, the similarities between the golem story, particularly Rosenberg's, and the superhero convention cannot be

⁴ Earlier in the text, a policeman catches someone attempting to do just that: "When (the policemen) saw what he had, they brought him to the chief of police, where he was vigorously interrogated. Only then did the man confess that he had brought the dead boy there in order to accuse Rabbi Bezalel of the blood libel" (12).

denied.⁵ Even in the process of introducing Rosenberg's tale, Curt Leviant cannot help but point out the connection, saying that "By adding the theme of the golem as rescuer, Rosenberg fused the anti-Semitism that pervaded Europe during his own time with that of the golem – not unlike Superman, the comic strip hero created in the late 1930's by two American Jews to protect the innocent and battle evil" (xxv). Frank Miller, creator of such critically-acclaimed pieces of graphic literature as *The Dark Knight Returns*, *300*, and *Sin City*, puts it plainly: "All of the major superheroes through the 1940s were created by the Jews (during a) time of persecution... Superman was a golem" (qtd. in Fingerioth 23). This concept was further cemented in the public consciousness by Michael Chabon's 2000 novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2001, and which explicitly draws the golem-superhero connection⁶.

Another parallel between the two lies in their critical reception. After explaining how Rosenberg's book came out amidst increasingly levels of violent attitude directed towards the Jewish community, evidenced by events such as "the notorious pogroms in Kishinev, Russia, in 1903 and 1905," which were "the bloodiest outbreak of government organized anti-Semitic violence in years", Curt Leviant comments that "a book like Rosenberg's, then, was just the escapist reading the Jews needed and wanted" (xxix-xxx). "Escapism" is a term frequently used when describing comic books, particularly

⁵ In his introduction to a golem legend, Jewish scholar Nathan Ausubel says that "Folk legends are not just accidental in their origin or fanciful fictions invented by the 'childlike masses.' They are a true record and mirror of the complicated historical and cultural experiences of a people." (qtd. in Koven 219)

⁶ Thanks in part to its public domain status, the golem has in recent decades become more and more a part of American pop culture, appearing in TV shows such as *Pokémon*, *The Simpsons*, and *The X-Files*, as well as in countless video games. In many of these cases, however, the golem figure is stripped of its religious significance.

those of the superhero genre. They are often seen as pure wish-fulfillment fantasy, as super-powered individuals solve problems with an ease normal people cannot but hope to achieve. Other reactions to Rosenberg's book make its connection to comics even more clear:

In his brief commentary following his English translation of Rosenberg's work, Joachim Neugroschel harshly calls the collection "a journalistic chronicle of adventures; primitive, schematic, and tendentious." Admitting that the pamphlet was an important influence on certain literary works that followed, he nevertheless sees it as "a striking example of Jewish pulp-writing for the masses... The one-dimensional pop quality of the writing, the intrusive journalism, the linear optimism contrast with more complex literary treatments of Jewish life in Eastern Europe." Where historians and literary critics tend to ignore "conventions of pop and pulp... such grade B Gothic is always widely disseminated, and captures a much greater segment of the popular imagination." (Goldsmith 40)

Not only was Rosenberg's golem tale printed in pamphlet form, like comics, but critical response to it, like Neugroschel's, read exactly like criticisms leveled against comic books: they are "primitive," "one-dimensional," "pulp-writing for the masses," yet nonetheless "widely disseminated" and "capture a much greater segment of the popular imagination." They contain a "linear optimism," again returning to the notion of the superhero's ability to solve problems easily and usually within twenty-two pages or so. Like Rosenberg's golem, they find criminals and make sure they are brought to justice, whereas real world issues are typically more complicated than that. Also, especially in the medium's early days, superheroes were often presented as perfect moral ideals, lacking the complications of real people. As the years passed, however, they would become more and more emotionally complex and realistic, and subsequently the Jewish-American issues reflected in comics would do likewise.

In March of 1938, Superman, the character who would become the world's most iconic superhero, made his debut in *Action Comics # 1*, which was cover-dated "June" (Kaplan 8). The creation of writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster, both the sons of Jewish immigrants, Superman is clearly a reflection of the men who made him. In a 1975 press release, Siegel explicitly states his inspiration, asking himself "What led me into creating Superman in the early thirties?" and then listing, among other things, "hearing and reading of the oppression and slaughter of helpless, oppressed Jews in Nazi Germany" (qtd. in Fingeroth 41)⁷. It is appropriate, then, that the hero's mantra was that he fought for "truth, justice, and the American way," expressing his creators' desire for social justice at a time when Jewish people desperately needed it, while also giving them a chance to attempt to assimilate through their creation's unabashed patriotism.

Perhaps the most apparent manner in which Superman is an expression of the Jewish-American experience lies in the fact that he, himself, is an immigrant, albeit one with a science-fiction twist. As the baby Kal-El, Superman is sent away from his dying home planet of Krypton by his parents. When his rocket ship lands in Smallville, a generic, fictional Midwest town, he is discovered and adopted by a simple farming couple, the Kents. When he is old enough, he moves to the big city of Metropolis, where he balances his civilian "Clark Kent" identity with his crimefighting "Superman" identity. As a literal alien, Superman finds he must make an effort to assimilate with the "normal" human population, "like other immigrants who may look enough like the dominant population to 'pass'" (Fingeroth 46). Also similar to Jewish immigrants of the time, going

⁷ The name "Superman" was derived from the term "übermensch," which was "coined in 1883 by the 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Ironically, "the term would later become associated with the Nazi notion of Aryan superiority," but at the time it had no such connotation (Kaplan 11).

back to his homeland was not an option. While his origin story was written pre-Holocaust, the fact remains that “the longing for a lost world that could not be returned to was (...) part and parcel of the exodus of the Jews from Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries,” because at that time, “Jews emigrated as much to escape persecution and discrimination as for economic opportunity” (Fingeroth 44). In addition to this, one could read a more religiously Jewish parallel in Superman’s origin, as it is strongly reminiscent of the story of Moses, one of the most important figures in Judaism. Like the biblical hero, who as a baby is condemned to death by the Pharaoh and “sent down the river by his mother in hopes he will survive,” Superman begins life as “a child, destined for greatness, snuck to safety by his parents to save him from inevitable doom” (Fingeroth 44-45). In these ways, Siegel and Shuster produced not only a wildly successful action-oriented comic book, which would quickly blossom into a full-fledged multimedia franchise, but also a covert message that immigrants can have a positive effect on society and can be just as American as anyone else.

Unfortunately, however, after the World War II boom in comic book sales, the popularity of the superhero faded dramatically. In the late 50’s, they began to recover, thanks to publisher DC’s updated reimaginings of characters such as The Flash and Green Lantern. Rival publisher Martin Goodman, whose company had gone by several names but would soon come to be called “Marvel Comics,” wanted to capitalize on the renewed interest in the genre, and tasked editor and writer (and, by no coincidence, Goodman’s relative) Stan Lee with producing a new line of superhero comics. As Danny Fingeroth observes, “With the re-imagining of the superhero by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Steve Ditko in the 1960s, Jewish anxieties and hopes were again placed on the metaphorical table, this time with slightly less veiling of the characters’

ethnic roots" (29), adding that their characters were "in many ways, more Jewish in tone and subtext than any superheroes that had come before" (91).

The first of this wave of next-generation superheroes were the Fantastic Four, created by Lee and Kirby. The titular foursome's first issue debuted in November of 1961, and it quickly became apparent what made Lee's approach to the superhero radically different than what had come before. His characters were more realistic, with relatable human flaws, and they had far more emotional depth compared to previous work in the genre. For instance, when the Fantastic Four first discover their powers – the result of a space mission gone awry – they are "immediately at odds with each other" (Kaplan 95). Mr. Fantastic even discovers his stretching powers while in the act of restraining The Thing, who is enraged at having been turned into a freakish rock-like creature. In fact, while they do still make time to save the world on a regular basis, the characters fight with each other constantly, "regularly splitting up and getting back together" (97). They are not super people pretending to be "normal," they are a workaholic, a neglected wife, a self-absorbed womanizer, and a self-loathing depressive, respectively. Also notable is the fact that in the comic's world, they have no secret identities and are actually public figures, which brought its own share of problems. In the second issue, shape-shifting aliens called the Skrull impersonate the heroes and commit criminal acts, causing the public to turn against them. Similarly, in the seventh issue, aliens from "Planet X" come to Earth and use a "hostility ray" to cause people to riot against them.



Fig. 4: The cover of *Fantastic Four* #7 (coverbrowser.com).

The fact that themes relating to fear of negative public perception – the cover of issue #7 even features an angry mob crying “Down with the Fantastic Four!” (Fig. 4) – occur repeatedly and very early in the series’ run demonstrates their importance. These stories reflect the status of Jewish-Americans at the time; society at large had become more tolerant, allowing them to be somewhat more open about their heritage. However, as the stories show, there was still an understandable hesitancy to seem too Jewish or “ethnic,” because the spectre of anti-Semitism still loomed. 1963’s *Fantastic Four* #21 addresses this point in a way that truly exhibits how “the tenor of the times allowed for, if not a direct statement of Jewish themes and subjects in the *Fantastic Four*, then for at least a less disguised version of a Jewish-influenced sensibility to make its way into comics” (Fingerroth 96). In the story, a supervillain called the “Hate-Monger,”

wearing an outfit reminiscent of those of the Ku Klux Klan, used his power “to magnify whatever passing negative feelings someone had about another person or group into full-blown, violent hatred” (Fingerroth 98). After being defeated by the heroes, the Hate Monger is unmasked and revealed to be a clone of Adolf Hitler. Clearly, this is a story that addresses Jewish identity in a way that would not have been permitted in earlier times. While Hitler had been used as a villain in superhero comics before, those were during wartime and focused on his status as the leader of the enemy forces rather than specifically on his racist hate-mongering.

Also, since the villain (in this case, Hitler) wears a mask, this demonstrates another aspect of the mask motif: since it allows one to act more freely and be less restrained by society’s pre-judgments, the mask can actually reveals one’s true self (ironically enough, since it is commonly thought of as something that conceals). Mask-wearing heroes use their anonymity (or at least the nullified identity provided by the mask) to perform good deeds because they are good people at heart, while mask-wearing villains use it to perform evil or selfish acts with a lessened chance of being identified by the authorities and captured⁸. This is why bank robbers, for example, will wear ski masks when they commit their crimes. The mask provides its wearer with a certain power, and this power can be used for good or evil, as illustrated by the juxtaposition of mask-wearing heroes and villains in the comics. The Jewish-American creators used their “masks” to express themselves and engage their heritage, a positive end that aligns them with the intentions of the superheroes rather than their villains.

⁸ Interestingly, the first supervillain Spider-Man ever faces (appearing in *Spider-Man # 1*) is the Chameleon, a Soviet spy who lacks any real superpowers, but rather uses a seemingly endless supply of masks and disguises to commit his evil deeds.

Other Marvel characters created or co-created by Stan Lee in the 60's displayed anxieties that Jewish-Americans likely experienced around that time, but that were also universal enough to be relatable to any reader. The drama in issues of *Spider-Man*, especially in the character's early years in the 60's and 70's, comes not only from the kinetic action scenes but from watching mild-mannered Peter Parker try to hold together some semblance of a social life, only to have it inevitably fall apart due to his responsibilities as a hero. For example, when Peter strikes up a romance with Betty Brant⁹, a reporter at the *Daily Bugle*, the newspaper where he works as a freelance photographer, the readers hope that it works out while knowing that the relationship is doomed (Kaplan 101). Placing his heroic duties before his social engagements results in Parker being labeled as unreliable and uncaring, a charge he cannot defend himself against without revealing his secret identity, which is of course verboten. Danny Fingeroth even argues that the Woody Allen-esque Parker is the image of a *schlimazel* (100), a Yiddish term now adopted into English, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "a consistently unlucky, accident-prone person; a 'born loser.'" The very fact that one of the most popular comics of the time featured a flawed, teenaged superhero and focused on his social and romantic problems just as much as his crimefighting reveals the shifting of the Jewish-American experience at that time. With anti-Semitism less of a direct threat and society becoming more progressive, Jewish-Americans were less interested in a perfect, almost God-like figure coming to save them as they were about negotiating the complexities and problems of everyday life.

⁹ Writer Stan Lee had an affinity for alliterative names, believing them easier for him to remember.

Many of Stan Lee's other characters also possessed flaws that were far more relatable than, for example, Superman's weakness to the alien substance Kryptonite. Doctor Strange was an arrogant neurosurgeon who damages his hands in a car crash while driving drunk, thus ending his career and forcing him to turn to magic. The Hulk is nuclear scientist Bruce Banner, who must control his anger or else he turns into an uncontrollable monster and goes on a destructive rampage reminiscent of some versions of the golem tale. Daredevil is a lawyer by day and vigilante by night who also happens to be completely blind. Less ostracized by society, Jewish-American experiences was becoming broader, with a wider variety of problems and anxieties, and comics reflected this.

By this point, the comic industry began to open up somewhat, with people of other ethnicities working in it more and more.¹⁰ The majority, however, were still Jewish, and they were still putting pieces of their own identities into their characters. In one Stan Lee-plotted arc, Thor (a superhero version of the thunder god of Norse mythology), who lives a double life as Dr. Donald Blake, falls in love with a woman and wishes to marry her. When he asks his father – Odin, of course – for permission, he is denied, because “a god and a mortal are forbidden to marry” (Fingerth 106). Intermarriage, especially when it comes to first- or second-generation Jewish-Americans, is an important issue. Not only that, but it is one Lee dealt with personally, as in his autobiography, he describes his anxiety regarding his parents meeting his gentile wife: “Next came the biggest hurdle of all: I had to introduce my wife to my mother, who was a nice, rather old-fashioned Jewish lady. I was about to have Mom meet my new Episcopalian wife”

¹⁰ Spider-Man artist and co-creator Steve Ditko, for example, was not Jewish. He did, however, come from a family of Slavic immigrants (Fingerth 101).

(qtd. in Fingerioth 107). Lee's frequent artist, Jack Kirby, also put parts of himself into his work, most notably Fantastic Four member The Thing, a.k.a. Benjamin Grimm. As reported by his assistant and later biographer Mark Evanier, Kirby once remarked, "If you'll notice the way The Thing talks and acts, you'll find that The Thing is really Jack Kirby," adding "He has my manners, he has my manner of speech, and he thinks the way I do" (122). Also like Kirby, The Thing was a member of a street gang in his youth; Kirby was in the Suffolk Street Gang as a kid (Evanier 22)¹¹. Kirby, a religious man, famously once drew a sketch of The Thing as a rabbi, wearing traditional Jewish garb, namely a prayer shawl and a yarmulke, while reading a prayer book next to a menorah (Fig. 5). The drawing was done as a lighthearted joke and never intended to be published, initially drawn in a store-bought Hannukah card sent to a fan in 1975 to reciprocate for one the Kirbys received from him (Evanier 212). However, it reveals that, at the very least, Kirby thought about his Jewish identity in relation to his characters. While The Thing's heritage was never identified during Kirby's lifetime, in 2002 writer Karl Kesel and artist Stuart Immonen "revealed" in *Fantastic Four #56* (Volume Three) that he was Jewish, likely as an homage to Kirby. The character's religious status is now an official part of Marvel canon.

¹¹ In 1983, late in his life, Kirby wrote and drew a rare explicitly autobiographical piece called "Street Code," about his days growing up in a gang. In another rare move, it was done only in pencil, with no inks or colors, highlighting its personal nature (Evanier 23).



Fig. 5: A sketch of The Thing by Jack Kirby (worldofagwu.livejournal.com).

One superhero team created by Lee and Kirby in the 60's, namely the X-Men, brought issues of intolerance and bigotry to the forefront through the use of intentionally less-than-subtle metaphors.¹² The premise of the title is that the team is made up of "mutants," people with a genetic mutation that manifests itself at puberty and gives the bearer superhuman traits, such as telepathy or wings. The public at large hates and fears mutants, calling them "muties" and "freaks," demanding they be registered, committing hate crimes against them, and even at times attempting to exterminate them altogether. The team is led by mutant telepath Prof. Charles Xavier, whose mission is to strive for acceptance by (and assimilation with) the human population. His counterpart is Magneto, a fellow mutant whose power, as one could probably surmise, is control over the force of magnetism. Magneto's philosophy is that mutants are the next step in evolution and that they should dominate humans. Despite its sci-fi trappings, at its core this conflict is one faced by any persecuted minority, relating to the question of to what degree one should try to fight for one's rights using peaceful means versus turning to more aggressive, confrontational tactics. The fact that the X-

¹² "The X-Men is the most direct metaphor for tolerance, racial and otherwise, ever to grace the pages of a comic book." (Fingerioth 113)

Men's creators were Jewish-Americans lends a certain significance to this concept, as the problems their people had been facing for decades now spilled on to the comics page in a much more explicit way than before. However, despite how much progress had been made by the 60's, these issues were still being presented through gentile figures, as the original team of X-Men was made up entirely of WASPs.

One of the threats the X-Men repeatedly faced carries a great significance when viewed in light of the aforementioned Jewish-American themes: the Sentinels. Giant, killer robots were by no means new in comics, but genocidal ones certainly were. The Sentinels were first introduced by Lee and Kirby in X-Men # 14 in 1965 (a three-issue arc ending in # 16), and have been a staple of the team's rogues gallery since. In the comic they are initially created by Bolivar Trask, a speaker, scientist, and anti-mutant crusader who believes them to be a threat to humanity and thus creates the monstrous Sentinels, programming them to exterminate mutants. Their second appearance occurs in X-Men #57-59 in 1969, written by Roy Thomas and penciled by Neal Adams, in which Bolivar's son, Larry Trask, recreates the Sentinels with the aid of a federal judge.¹³ While in neither story are the genocidal robots officially government-sanctioned, it is notable that with all the colorful supervillains to choose from, the Sentinel program is spearheaded by men in suits, some of whom are politicians.

In both arcs, the robots end up turning on their creator, evoking the early stories of the golem in which the creature would become a threat to the one who created it.

Also, both stories end with the creator realizing the error of his ways: Bolivar ends up

¹³ Judge Chalmers is the head of the "Federal Council on Mutant Activities," which is clearly a reference to Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). This draws a connection between racial hatred and McCarthyism. In X-Men #58, an unidentified TV commentator even calls the Sentinel program a "modern witch hunt," a term frequently used to describe HUAC.

sacrificing his life to destroy the robots, and Larry declares “I was wrong... to order even mutants killed!” The inclusion of the qualifier “even” shows that the younger Trask does not fully comprehend the evil of his ways, but immediately after making that statement, he discovers that unbeknownst to him, he himself is a mutant – showing how one’s identity can be masked even from oneself. Both of these 60’s Sentinel stories use the concept of genocide to present a morality tale with the lesson that blind hatred directed towards a certain group of people always ends badly.

X-Men sales slumped, however, and the series was soon canceled. It was relaunched in 1975, with the original team being joined by new, noticeably more ethnic mutants, such as the African Storm, the Russian Colossus, the Canadian Wolverine, and the German Nightcrawler. The title was handed over to writer Chris Claremont, who would bring the Jewish implications of the book’s subject matter to the forefront. “What Lee and Kirby had hinted at became explicit” (Fingeroth 121) in the hands of Claremont and various artists, such as Dave Cockrum and John Byrne, as they “took the seeds planted in the original flight of X-Men stories and brought out the implications inherent in the X-Men concept from the beginning” (Fingeroth 114). Claremont, who is half-Jewish and spent time living in Israel on a kibbutz (Fingeroth 121), introduced explicit discussions of Jewish themes into the comic, beginning in the early 80’s. One of his most notable decisions was to reveal that Magneto (born Max Eisenhardt) was a Holocaust survivor, having been in Auschwitz as a youth and even having been a member of the *Sonderkommando*, Auschwitz prisoners “forced by the Nazis to do much of the dirty work (removing bodies from gas chambers, etc.) at the death camps” (Fingeroth 127). Although “his ethnicity has never been definitively stated in the context of a comics story (...) evidence – including his relocation to Israel after the war – would

point to his being Jewish" (Fingerroth 117).¹⁴ Claremont claims he "was trying to figure out what made Magneto tick" (qtd. in Malcolm 144) and decided that being a Holocaust survivor would make his actions, if not justified, at least make sense on a certain level. Having witnessed the depths to which racial hatred can sink, Magneto fears that it will happen again, this time to mutants. In *The Uncanny X-Men* # 113, he says "I endured one death camp – in Auschwitz – I will not see another people fear what they do not understand and destroy what they fear" (Malcolm 149). Despite this fear, Magneto's attitude – that mutants are genetically superior to humans and thus evolution demands that humans be eliminated – is very similar to Nazi rhetoric, and that is one of the main reasons why he is a villain rather than a hero. The message, then, seems to be that while it is understandable to be angry about the Holocaust, one cannot let anger cloud one's judgment, especially to the point where one becomes as blind and hateful as the Nazis.

One of the most famous X-Men stories is the two-issue "Days of Future Past" story arc in 1981's X-Men # 141 and 142, by Claremont and Byrne. This story takes place in a dystopian future in which the Sentinels have taken over the U.S. and the few mutants that have not been killed are forced into concentration camps. Also, as the omniscient narrator explains, people are forced to wear markers to indicate their status:

In North America, in the year 2013, there are three classes of people: "H" for baseline human – clean of mutant genes, allowed to breed. "A" for anomalous human – a normal person possessing mutant genetic potential... forbidden to breed. "M" for mutant. The bottom of the heap, made pariahs and outcasts by the mutant control act of 1988. Hunted down and – with a few rare exceptions – killed without mercy.

¹⁴ Interestingly, in the 2000 film, the ambiguity is removed and Magneto is definitively stated to be Jewish.

Not only is this reminiscent of the indicators the Nazis forced people to wear, it also brings up the issue of eugenics. The “state of affairs (...) clearly draws on Holocaust metaphors and imagery” (Fingerroth 126). The storyline centers around X-Man Katherine “Kitty” Pryde¹⁵ going back in time to try to prevent her nightmarish world from occurring by stopping the assassination of anti-mutant presidential candidate Senator Robert Kelly by a group of angry mutants. Kelly is a proponent of the Mutant Registration Act, which comics scholar Cheryl Alexander Malcolm likens to the Nazi’s Nuremberg Laws (144). In the comic, mutant defender Dr. Moira McTaggart even comments “Registration of mutants today, gas chambers tomorrow,” further cementing the Holocaust parallels. After the X-Men save Senator Kelly, one of them (Storm) tells him “Mutants, like people, are both good and bad. You would do well to remember that, Senator, before you seek to condemn us all,” echoing what is essentially the core message of the X-Men comic, that one should never pre-judge any race or group of people. This storyline lies in stark contrast to earlier stories in that it is explicitly Jewish. By the 80’s, times had changed enough to the point where such issues no longer had to be coded and could be discussed openly.

Of Maus and Men

As the superhero genre evolved over the years to more explicitly address Jewish themes, comic creators began to tackle such concepts in other genres of graphic literature as well. The work of Will Eisner provides some of the most prominent examples

¹⁵ It is worth noting that, of all the characters who could have filled this role – including many who were more popular, such as Wolverine – Claremont chose Pryde, “an observant Jew who celebrates Hannukkah, wards off a vampire with the Magen David around her neck, and lights the traditional Yartzeit candle a year after the death of her boyfriend, Colossus” (Malcolm 155).

of this. Eisner, born in Brooklyn in 1917 to Jewish immigrants (Dauber 23), worked with superhero material early in his career – most notably his noir-inspired creation *The Spirit* – but later became more interested in dealing with more autobiographical material. His graphic novel *A Contract with God (and Other Tenement Stories)* was published in 1978 and is a collection of four stories that each take place in the same Jewish neighborhood in New York¹⁶. The titular story in particular deals deeply with Jewish themes, as it tells of a devoutly Jewish man, Frimme Hersh, questioning his faith after the death of his daughter. Scholar Jeremy Dauber writes that “In telling this story (...) Eisner is also creating a metaphor of American Jewish existence and of the question of violating tradition as well as of maintaining it, speaking to his own experiences while providing an ethnic-national narrative” (29).

The transition from expressing himself through the mask of the superhero figure to presenting explicitly Jewish characters and themes was a difficult one for Eisner, as he explains that *A Contract with God* was “very, very hard to do, because all my early years I was hiding behind a guy with a mask. I always did speak candidly about my opinions on life, but never about *me*” (qtd. in Dauber 26). The gradual removal of the Jewish-American comic creator’s “mask” in that era allowed for such material to begin to be generated. Eisner would follow these themes for the rest of his career, as two of his last works demonstrate: 2003’s *Fagin the Jew*, a retelling of *Oliver Twist* that focuses on the character of Fagin, addresses the issue of anti-Semitic stereotypes, even ending with a “debate (...) between Fagin and his creator, Charles Dickens, in which the former takes the latter to task for his role in generating anti-Semitic sentiment through

¹⁶ Eisner “uses *A Contract with God* to tell stories of the immigrant and first-generation American Jewish urban experience, particularly in the tenements of the Bronx” (Dauber 28).

reliance on stereotype" (Dauber 35). 2005's *The Plot: The Secret History of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (published posthumously after Eisner's death in late 2004) is a graphic novel meant to expose the truth behind the forged *Protocols*, "one of the most infamous pieces of propaganda in the history of anti-Semitic prejudice" (Dauber 36). Will Eisner is one of the most legendary figures in comics, and it is significant that when society became tolerant enough in his lifetime to allow him to create essentially whatever he wished, he decided to work almost exclusively with Jewish issues.

Of course, when discussing the issue of comics and the Jewish-American experience, one would be remiss in not touching upon Art Spiegelman's famous, Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus*, published in two parts in 1986 and 1991, respectively (although parts of it had appeared previously in Spiegelman's comic anthology magazine *RAW*). *Maus* tells the story of Spiegelman's father, a Holocaust survivor, by using various animals to visually depict different groups of people. Jewish people are mice, Nazis are cats, Polish people are pigs, and so on. In the story, whenever someone is trying to pass for another group, they are depicted as wearing a mask; so, for example, a Jewish person pretending to be Polish would be portrayed as a mouse wearing a pig mask. On the back inside cover, above the "About the author" information, Spiegelman drew a self-portrait rather than using a photograph, but what is notable about this drawing is that he depicts himself as a human wearing a mouse mask (Fig. 6). Here, the mask of the comic creator, which for so long had been used to conceal their Jewish-American identity in order to allow them to express themselves in the public sphere, is now a mask that displays that very identity.



Fig. 6: An Art Spiegelman self-portrait on the back inside cover of *Maus* (latimesblog.latimes.com).

Maus is a phenomenal work that deserves all the praise it receives, and its prominence – including being a part of many schools’ curricula – makes it the foremost thought in many people’s minds when the issue of Jewish identity and graphic literature is brought up. However, as an analysis of earlier works in the field reveals, comic creators have been using the medium to express Jewish-American themes practically since its inception. In particular, the figure of the superhero has been used in various ways as an expression not only of Jewish concepts but of the experiences faced by their creators, whose families had by and large recently immigrated from Eastern Europe to a brand new world that, at the time, often made them feel like strange visitors from another planet. *Maus* is the culmination of several decades’ of Jewish-American creators using the medium of graphic literature to give themselves a voice when no one else would.

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