

“Oi Vay!” and “Excelsior!”: Jewish Representation and Moral Lessons in Graphic Novels and Comics

With the recent passing of Stan Lee, co-creator of many of the most well-known superheroes and superhero teams for Marvel Comics, there has been an increased focus on the history and use of graphic novels and comics in the general culture. Examples of Jewish characters in these materials will be discussed, as well as how the Haredi and other religious groups in Israel and elsewhere utilize this medium to inculcate Jewish religious and moral lessons to their children. The benefits of collecting this genre, especially for adolescents, in Jewish school libraries will also be discussed.

The history of comics and graphic novels is replete with Jewish writers, illustrators and creators. One of the most famous examples is that of Superman, created by two young Jews from Ohio, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster. Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, and Al Weisner are just a few of the many Jewish creators who helped create and further both the format and genre of comic books and graphic novels. Many of the characters they created were specifically identified as being Jews, such as Ben Grimm aka The Thing of the Fantastic Four, the superhero Moon Knight from Marvel, Shadowcat aka Kitty Pryde from Marvel as well. Magneto from Marvel’s X-Men is a famous example, whose status as a survivor of the Holocaust generates his hatred of humanity and his defense of the mutant population. Some from the DC stable of characters include the modern Batwoman (Kate Kane) is a Jewish lesbian, Seraph, and Firestorm. While many of the Jewish characters are non-practicing, there is a scene in which Ben Grimm is shown celebrating his Bar Mitzvah, and Kitty Pryde wears a Star of David necklace in many scenes and is portrayed celebrating Hanukah. These serve to illustrate the Jewish presence

in mainstream comics and to highlight the diversity of the superhero teams, but also to celebrate Jewish identity and integrate it into the comic book storylines.

Al Weisner's Shaloman, created in 1985 with the first comic having been published in 1988, was his attempt to make a specifically Jewish version of Superman. Weisner felt that many of the Jewish superheroes were not characters to emulate or did not serve as positive models. Superman's ethnicity was never clearly mentioned in the comics aside from being Kryptonian, and due to having been raised in the Midwest, people assumed he was not Jewish. Shaloman's fictional biography has him having been created by three wise men out of a rock shaped like the Hebrew letter shin, using magical lightning to bring life to this inanimate object. Shaloman resides inside this rock until he is called to assist someone in trouble with the cry of "Oi Vay!" Like Superman, he has super strength, the ability to fly, and superior vision. Many of his adventures in the comic series involve specifically Jewish themes, such as saving a matzah factory whose inventory had been stolen to prevent Passover from taking place (vol.3:5), to assisting in the story of the Exodus from Egypt (vol.2:7) and other similar stories.

As reflected in the appearance of this Jewish Superman in the 1980s, the issue of cultural diversity and representation in comic books is very much a current topic of discussion in the wider American and general culture in this moment. Having comic publishers create and disseminate characters and stories that reflect the various groups present in society, especially as reflected by author/creators from that group is very much a concern of the major publishing houses such as Marvel and DC. Many of these stories have been re-imagined with new origin stories for the characters that are written by members of that group, such as the current run of Black Panther. Black Panther is a superhero from the fictional, technologically advanced African nation of Wakanda, being written by the African-American author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates. In contrast to many of the earlier stories involving minority characters, many of which were derogatory if not simply racist, the idea behind these new stories is that by having members of the ethnic group portrayed in the comic/graphic novel write or create it, ensures that a more nuanced, genuine portrayal of the character will be shown.

This is especially true for Jewish characters, superhero or not, as many of the portrayals of Jewish characters were not very kind, to say the least. Portraying Jews and Judaism in a

positive light, even if/when the characters themselves are non-practicing, is a vital element of ensuring the diversity of the comic book and graphic novel format. Therefore, there are Orthodox writers, creators, and artists both here in the US and in Israel working to enhance the portrayal of specifically Orthodox Jewish values through utilizing this format.

One great example is *Hereville: How Mirka Got Her Sword*, the first book of the *Hereville* series by Barry Deutsch. While himself not an Orthodox Jew, he studied deeply to ensure that he portrayed Orthodox Judaism both correctly and in a positive light. The characters speak Yiddish, the Sabbath is observed meticulously, and Mirka can debate Jewish theology with her mother when questioned. The story in this series revolves around Mirka gaining the ability to fight dragons, trolls and other threats and which she learns about through a secular book she keeps under her bed so as not be found out. Her adventures show that

“an Orthodox girl can be heroic and dream, just like a secular girl can...Mirka would be a heroine in any society, but the key remains that she remains loyal to Judaism and a belief in God. Deutsch has made Orthodoxy itself into something heroic, but rather something normal—this is simple Hereville, a normal place in the present time—which can be accepted just as being secular is accepted.” (Tabachnick 2014, p.221)

This lesson is the same one that other graphic novels and comics published in Israel and the United States that are written for Orthodox audiences attempt to inculcate. Recent publications in this sector include *HaGibor*, which is about Israeli eighth-grader Aryeh Rosen, published by Achdut Entertainment, out of New Jersey. The story chronicles his becoming a hero battling the forces of evil. Each issue is written in both English and Hebrew, to enable the reader to use it a resource to learn either language. Their website says that *HaGibor* is

“entertainment designed for a sophisticated kosher audience. All too often the concepts of ‘kosher’ and ‘entertainment’ pull against each other. If it’s entertaining, then it’s probably not too kosher – and if it’s too kosher, then the chances are it got there at the sacrifice of being entertaining...” (<https://achdutent.com/>, retrieved 6/4/19)

As with the graphic novels and comics published in Israel, each issue is reviewed by their rabbinical advisory team, so that each lesson imparts Torah-based lessons about what it means to have Ahavat Israel, pride in being Jewish, and following the halakhah correctly. According to a blog post written by Melody Barron, a staff member at the National Library in Israel, some of the Israeli publications in this vein include *A Yiddishe Kop 2x2*, *The Desert Diary*, both by Gadi Pollack, and *The Fearful Heroes*, a story centering on a group of Jews from Lublin who band together fight the Nazis, etc. These comic books and graphic novels portray their own

communities as being heroic both by having superheroes among them, as well as by having the characters adhere to the halakhah and Jewish values as they understand them. Showing that they have entertainment and/or educational options that are like what is available in the general secular culture is important, to help ensure that the children and adolescents have less incentives to leave the community or become less observant as a result of exposure to secular entertainment and values.

The value of collecting both secular and religious comics and graphic novels with Jewish characters and/or storylines in libraries, especially in schools and synagogues is that it allows children and adolescents (and adults as well) the opportunity to see reflections of themselves in these stories. Diversity is important and showing that Jews and Judaism have had and continue to have a great impact on the past, present and future of this medium can serve as a source of both pride and entertainment for those who enjoy this form of storytelling.