

THE GRAPHIC NOVEL FROM DIASPORA TO DIASPORA: James Strum's *The Golem's Mighty Swing* and JT Waldman's *Megillat Esther* in the Tree of Contexts

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At first glance, James Strum's 2001 *The Golem's Mighty Swing* and JT Waldman's 2006 *Megillat Esther* would seem to have little in common aside from the fact that they are both graphic novels. Strum creates a story *ex nihilo*, a fiction based on a range of interlocked historical realities. Waldman takes on a story that already exists as an ambiguous part of the biblical canon. They are very visually different in style from each other. But both grow out of common issues.

Both partake of the graphic re-invention of the novel as a radical re-statement of Jewish artistic identity. The People of the Text can also be a People of the Image, as Jewish artists in Paris and New York have been making clear since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But that double identity can co-exist in one *frame*. While Jews have produced illuminated manuscripts for centuries,¹ both Strum and Waldman do more than this by making the image the equal of the text.

More than that, both further the larger questions of Jewish identity as a minority community within often hostile or at best tolerant majorities. Both authors deal with a Jewish "community" at risk that is saved by a methodology conceptually connected to messianic thinking. That thinking also asks questions with regard to divine-human interaction, especially *for* the purposes of salvation. Both Strum's and Waldman's saviors—in opposite ways—might be called "crypto-Jews." And in both cases, although this is not the norm in the Jewish tradition, the physicality of those saviors is emphasized, even as physicality alone does not drive the salvational course of either narrative.

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The novel as a genre has a varied, overlapping series of typological origins. In his classic study of the *Roman* novel, P.G. Walsh notes three overlapping Hellenistic sources: "there is first the ideal romance, flourishing from the first century B.C. if not earlier. This is a stylized artificial genre in which a highly moral love between boy and girl ultimately triumphs with divine aid over a series of bizarre obstacles set up by malevolent fortune... A second type of influential Greek fiction is the comic travelogue, which we see perfected by Lucian in the

¹ The purpose of the imagery has always been (as with non-Jewish illuminated manuscripts) to *bring to light* important points being made by the words of the text (in Latin: "light" = *lux*, which word is at the heart of both "illumination" and "illustration"). So, too, any number of twentieth-century Jewish artists have imbedded words literally or figuratively within their images. Thus Marc Chagall, for example, often offers what amount to Yiddish puns in his paintings. See Ori Z. Soltes, "Language, Art and Identity: Yiddish in Art from Chagall to Shalom of Safed," in Leonard J. Greenspoon, ed., *Yiddish Language and Culture Then and Now*, (Volume 9 in *Studies in Jewish Civilization*; Omaha: Creighton university Press, 1998).

second century A.D. This genre is inspired by weird and wonderful stories of poets, historians and travelers from the *Odyssey* to Strabo... The comic romance is the third Greek formative genre to be considered. It is obvious that there are close affinities here with the comic travel-story.”² Walsh’s reference to the *Odyssey* as an inspirational source for the second genre type reminds us of an obvious aspect of this discussion: that the emerging novel is written in prose form, as opposed to the poetic form of works like the *Odyssey*³ or of plays in the Greek and Roman tradition, with their prescriptions regarding metrical format.

Walsh’s primary focus, and the development of the novel in Western literature, leads from these Hellenistic Greek forebears to maturation in the hands of the Roman writers Petronius and Apuleius in the late first and mid-second centuries CE. Petronius’ *Satyricon*, presumably written ca 60–65 CE, and extant only in fragments, presents a pair of protagonists, joined at an early point by a third, moving through a series of somewhat farcical adventures toward a goal—in part, at least—for one of them, who might be called the “hero” of the tale, to regain the virility that he has somehow lost. Petronius’ work deliberately avoids the high linguistic ground: the *Satyricon* is directed to an audience relaxing with low-level sexual innuendo and generally scruffy entertainment so that it is studded with street Latin found nowhere else in works extant from the Classical period.

Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass* was written around 150 CE. Embedded within the narrative is a series of tales-within-the-tale-within-a-tale and sudden shifts from high-level, literary Latin to rough-and-ready street Latin—a subtle formal “pun” on literary works that shift between prose and poetic styles or poetic ones that shift between metrical schemes.

For the purposes of this essay, two observations might be made regarding these two Latin-language works. The first is that both of them serve in the long run for a particular *kind* of novel—the bathetic and picaresque novel—that reaches one of its high-water moments in Western literature with Cervantes’ early seventeenth-century *Don Quixote*—often referred to as the first truly and fully developed European novel. In it, the apparently delusional eponymous hero, a member of the lesser nobility, overfed on medieval romances, imagines himself a knight-errant engaged in quests that revolve around truth, nobility, purity and all of those chivalric qualities to which the real world around him gives mere lip service. Cervantes’ knight shares with his Roman literary forebears the travels of an unconventional “hero” through a maze of adventures, the casting of the

² P.G. Walsh, *The Roman Novel: The ‘Satyricon’ of Petronius and the ‘Metamorphoses’ of Apuleius*. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1970), 7–10. There are other works that discuss the genre of the novel more broadly, such as Milan Kundera’s 1988 *The Art of the Novel*, or in more specific subsets, such as Leslie Fielder’s 1959 *Life and Death in the American Novel*.

³ The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* set certain formal standards for western epic poetry, such as the fact that every line is contrived in dactylic hexameter. These standards will be either adhered to as an act of emulation or deliberately broken as an act of self-assertion in moving forward chronologically and even across language lines, from Virgil’s *Aeneid* to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* to Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered* to Nikos Kazantzakis’ *Sequel to the Odyssey*.

narrative in language that rises and falls between the gutter and the mountaintops, and a tight interweave between comedic and serious aspects.

Interestingly, *Don Quixote* has important possible if well-concealed Jewish characters within its lengthy narrative. At one early point Don Quixote's peasant sidekick, Sancho Panza, proudly asserts that he is an Old Christian; Don Quixote, surprisingly, does not respond that he, too, is one—in fact responding that even if were not one, it would make no difference. The implication seems to be that as a *hidalgo*—a member of the lesser noble class—Don Quixote himself must undoubtedly have Jewish blood flowing through his veins, thereby rendering him less purely “Spanish” than the earthbound Sancho Panza is.⁴ The allusion is to the fact that, back in the fifteenth century, so many Jews, particularly those of the middle and upper middle classes, converted to Catholicism as life became increasingly socio-economically difficult at best and murderous at worst for Jews in Christian Spain.

Many of those *conversos* or *Nuevos Christianos* (“New Christians”) retained their Judaism in hiding for one or two (and in some cases many more) generations.⁵ Others embraced their new faith fully—and it is impossible to know, really, in looking backwards, how many of those referred to as “Jews” in Spain of the fifteenth century were openly practicing Jews, how many were crypto-Jews and how many were genuine New Christians still tainted in the eyes of the “Old Christians” with the stigma of their Jewish ancestry. *Conversos* might be Christian now, but not of *pure Christian blood*. Since so many of those who embraced conversion were of the middle and upper middle classes—as opposed to being of the peasant class—then anyone of the lesser nobility, falling into those classes, was still suspected of possessing impure, Jewish blood within his or her veins more than a century after the Expulsion of 1492.⁶ Hence Sancho Panza's and Don Quixote's exchange on the subject.

The second relevant observation is this: that in the period encompassed by Petronius and Apuleius and their works, Judaism was taking the final steps of defining itself as an edifice built on Hebrew-Israelite-Judaeian foundations—an edifice that is sibling to, but distinct from that of Christianity, but built on the same foundations. And during this same period, the edifice of Jewish literature was cementing *its* foundations—the Hebrew bible, canonized around 140 CE—and shaping the first few floors of rabbinic literature. Thus both its legalistic side (the *mishneh*, by the same time being written down and soon to be finally

⁴ Reference is also made to Sancho Panza in his “noble resolve...duly recorded by the author of the history, [as one] who must have been well bred and at the very least an Old Christian.” There has been considerable discussion, which falls outside the scope of this essay that Cervantes may have been of *converso* stock. For an elegant and eloquent summary, see Michael McGaha, “Is there a Hidden Jewish Meaning in Don Quixote?” in *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 24.1 (2004) 173–88.

⁵ To be more precise: for reasons beyond this discussion, unrelenting anti-Jewish rioting and pogroms between 1391 and 1415 forced tens of thousands of Jews (perhaps hundreds of thousands) to flee Spain and others to embrace forced conversion. That all such *Nuevos Christianos* were suspected of being secret Jews—Crypto-Jews—is clear from the label that came to be applied to them: *marrano*—“swine.”

⁶ There is a saying in Spain that survives to this day that “if you scratch a Spaniard, Jewish blood will spill from the wound,” that refers to this notion.

organized by Judah the Prince in the early third century; and the *gemara*, already in oral development by the second century) and the sometimes-phantasmagorical foci of its *aggadic*, *midrashic* side are in evolution. At this historical juncture it would seem that only the most assimilated of Jews, willing to step outside the circle of safely “Jewish” writing, would be exposed to the kind of Roman works that educated pagan Romans themselves only read as a diversion. Much less would Jews have been *writing* Petronian or Apuleian sorts of literature.⁷

By the time Cervantes was penning his *Quixote*, “Jewish” literature had expanded and diversified. Not only had the double style and focus of the *halachic-aggadic* rabbinic tradition continued to evolve further layers of commentary and commentaries on commentaries, but poetry that picks up where the biblical Psalms leave off—*piyyutim*—had proliferated. In fact in the very Spain in which Cervantes would write his masterwork, Jewish *paytanim* (the writers of *piyyutim*) had penned the first extensive array of such poems in the tenth through thirteenth centuries. Some of these writers were also authors of serious prose philosophical and theological works. Some were—or may have been—drawn to yet another side of Jewish literature, mystical literature, which was also reaching its classical zenith in Spain, culminating with Moses de Leon’s renowned *Zohar*, that appeared in 1305. This last work follows the *midrashic* tradition of digging beneath the surface of the biblical text (particularly the Torah), to unearth deeper meanings, but carries that tradition to a deconstructive extreme as it tears apart the Torah’s lines and even words to locate deeply hidden signifiers of the innermost God in God’s relationship to humanity, and shapes concepts inherited from the prior Jewish mystical tradition that articulate that relationship.⁸

Well before the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, both poetic and mystical Jewish literature and thought were shifting their geographic centers to other parts of Europe. By the time of Cervantes one finds *piyyutim* being shaped particularly in Italy and Palestine—in the latter locale, specifically in and around Safed. One finds later kabbalistic literature also growing, not by coincidence, out of the Safed community that, in the mid-sixteenth century, centered around the figure of Isaac Luria. A second center of late *kabbalah* is found in Prague, whose key figure was Rabbi Judah Loew (1525–1609), an older contemporary of Cervantes (1547–1616).

Judah Loew was known for two things. His writings yielded an ever-escalating esotericism to the *esoteric* side of *kabbalah*. More astonishing, perhaps, he carried *practical kabbalah* to a new level by using its most abstruse formulae to create a creature to serve and protect the Jewish community of Prague. The

⁷ Let us not forget that, even works of obvious and straightforward moral or historical value, such as *Maccabees* or *The Wisdom of Ben Sirach* or *Judith* were being consigned by Jewish leadership to the category of “apocrypha”—books that should not only be excluded from the biblical canon, but be “hidden away” lest they dangerously deceive a Jewish reader who might mistake them for Divinely-inspired texts.

⁸ I am thinking most obviously of concepts such as *shekhinah* and *sephiroth*, each of which in different ways suggests the paradox of God’s simultaneous unbridgeable distance (transcendence) from and ineffable closeness (immanence) to humanity.

creature was called simply “Golem”—a Hebrew term extracted from Psalm 139:16 that means “unformed.” It was contrived by emulating the creation by God of the first human, *Adam*, from the red (*adom*) earth (*adamah*) itself, as described in *Genesis* 1. Rabbi Loew also shaped his creature out of earth, reciting the necessary formulae and then placing the ineffable name of God on a piece of paper in the Golem’s mouth to animate it.⁹

The Golem can be understood within the vague messianic terms found in Jewish literature and thought over the centuries:¹⁰ its strength makes it messianic to Prague’s Jews, localized and purely physical. But unlike Adam, it is soulless, and in the end, Rabbi Loew has to de-commission it (by removing the Name from its mouth) because only he knows how to control it, and uncontrolled, such a creature could wreak unintended havoc.¹¹

This is the story from which James Strum’s *The Golem’s Mighty Swing* derives its title and part of its content. Strum interweaves aspects of the shapeless story of the Golem with a number of historical, literary and mythological matters into his fictional account of a Jewish baseball team barnstorming across the belly of the United States in the 1920s. Among these matters is the shifting attitude toward physicality and toward violence as a response to a violent world that began to take shape with Jewish emancipation in the late eighteenth century. The facilitating moment of change for Jews was the emergence of the English Jewish boxer—Daniel “Battling” Mendoza, (1764–1836)—as a star. Mendoza won the British heavyweight boxing crown in 1791 and is regarded as the father of modern, technique-powered boxing that emphasized strategic thinking, defensive moves, side-stepping and other footwork.

The period of Mendoza and of Jewish Emancipation also corresponds to the emergence into great popularity of another form for the *novel*: the *epistolary* novel. While the form may be traced back to the thirteenth century,¹² it is in the eighteenth century that it really took flight in works by Samuel Richardson, in England; in Germany in Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774); and in France in Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes*, (1720), Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie, ou la nouvelle Heloise* (1761), and above all Pierre Choderlos de Laclos’ *Liaisons Dangereuses*, which was published in 1782. All of these followed the same format of an exchange of letters. In fact the first novel published in North

⁹ Or he inscribed it on his forehead, or he did this with the Hebrew word for “truth”—*emet*. There are different versions of the story that have trickled down through the last four centuries.

¹⁰ This vagueness—who will be the messiah? what exactly will the messiah be and do? will it be a particular individual at all, or a condition? how will that individual or condition be brought about? through whose actions?—contrasts dramatically with the Christian notion: the messiah has been here once before and is known therefore to be Jesus of Nazareth, who is God incarnate. The only Christian question is: “When will he return?”

¹¹ The Golem’s popular legacy reflects the dual, positive/negative potential inherent in its nature: a salvational symbol to Bohemian and Moravian Jews, it also served the non-Jewish community through the centuries as a kind of bogeyman, as a Christian mother might warn her children that, if they fail to perform some assigned task, “the Golem will get you!” See Byron L. Sherwin, *Mystical Theology and Social Dissent: The Life and Works of Judah Loew of Prague*, (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982).

¹² I am thinking of the *Roman de la Rose* of 1230, built around an exchange of letters between Abelard and Heloise.

America, in 1769, *The History of Emily Montague*, was written by Frances Brooke in epistolary form.

Physicality as a Mendoza-inspired Jewish desideratum broadened by the end of the following century toward the evolution of “muscular Judaism.” The idea—also connected to emergent Zionism—was to further overturn both the stereotype and the tradition of non-physicality that had defined Jews for most of the previous eighteen hundred years. Cognate with this idea, there emerged an array of Jewish sports individuals and teams in the early twentieth century extremely successful in athletic competitions that ranged from fencing to soccer.¹³

By the time of Mendoza and the evolving epistolary novel, the small but growing Jewish community was beginning to find its way within the nascent United States. Here Jews would have the opportunity to be reshaped as from the beginning they were involved in shaping the new United States. By the time of “muscular Judaism” and broader Jewish sports successes, *millions* of European Jews were braving the difficult journey from inland village to port city and across the ocean to America. Like all immigrants of every religious, ethnic and national background, Jews asked: how shall we *become* Americans?

One means of responding to that question was—in a manner that echoed the ethos of “muscular Judaism”—by joining the effusive American enthusiasm for sports. By the aftermath of World War I the ultimate goal was becoming participation and success in baseball, the “American Pastime,” whether playing in streetyard games or little league games or aspiring to big league games. The ultimate hero for American Jews, as the manic twenties eventually pushed into the Great Depression of the thirties, was Hank Greenberg, who starred in Major League Baseball from 1933 to 1947 (with time-out to serve in the armed forces during World War II). Other Jewish athletes in other sports were both successful and adulated, but none like Hammerin’ Hank: he was, for the Jewish community, Babe Ruth and Charles Lindbergh—and Daniel Mendoza—wrapped into one.

Greenberg arrived in messianic fashion—like the Golem, but with neither rabbinic intermediation nor dire counter-consequences—when he was most needed to uplift the spirits of a community less sure of its position by the 1930s than it had been a generation or two earlier. America had by then shown itself possessed of ethnocentric and other prejudices familiar from centuries of European history. From Leo Frank’s lynching in 1913 in Georgia to the Sacco and Vanzetti executions of 1927 (the year of the Babe’s 60 home runs and of Lindbergh’s solo flight across the Atlantic) the American people and legal system had demonstrated a distinct ability for injustice.

And as fascism grew in Europe, particularly that brand shaped by Adolph Hitler in Germany, the United States found itself host to a growing array of Nazi

¹³ There is a growing literature on this subject. The 1985 catalogue of an exhibition, *Jews in the World of Sports*, organized by Beth Hatfutoth: The Nahum Goldman Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, Tel Aviv, offers a concise introduction, but oddly excludes America from the discussion. One might also see Joseph Siegman’s *Jewish Sports Legends*. (Washington and London: Brassey’s Publishers, Second Edition, 1997) and Robert Slater’s oddly named (are they great Jews?) *Great Jews in Sports*. (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David, 1983).

sympathizers. The vast belly of America between the coasts, where Strum sets his tale, was marked by significant Judaeophobia, nowhere more intensely than in and around Detroit—the very city for whose *Tigers* Hank Greenberg played—where on the one hand, Henry Ford was stirring Judaeophobic poison in his *Dearborn Independent* and printing thousands of copies of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*,¹⁴ and distributing them to his workers; and on the other hand, the notorious Catholic priest Father Coughlin was spewing antisemitic venom every week from his radio pulpit. So Hammerin’ Hank had more than a baseball bat resting on his shoulders when he played.

By then, two other parallel developments relevant to this discussion were also taking shape for American Jewry. One was its movement toward prominence in the visual arts. In New York, an array of Jewish painters and sculptors, from Max Weber to Ben Shahn and Raphael Soyer, emerged between the time just before World War I and the era of the Great Depression. But a number of Christian American critics saw the work of New York artists—implicitly, Jewish artists—as questionably “American.”¹⁵ So the notion of an America of wide-open acceptance of religious and ethnic variation was challenged even on the level of the visual arts.

The other relevant development was the marriage between sports writing—particularly baseball writing—and the novel and short story that found its first serious exponent in Ring Lardner in the 1920s. The figure who most conspicuously stands on Lardner’s shoulders in American letters is Jewish novelist Bernard Malamud. His 1952 *The Natural* was the first full-scale novel not only focused on baseball, but offering an internal matrix of interlocking issues that include what is endemic to Judaism and Jewish thought: questions without answers, particularly the question of why inexplicable things happen as they do.¹⁶

A generation after Malamud’s *The Natural*, Philip Roth would play on the entire idea of what it means not only to write a novel but to write one definitive enough, in a distinctly American idiom, to be considered *the great American novel*.¹⁷ Tongue-in-cheek (or perhaps not) Roth entitled his 1973 work *The*

¹⁴ A spurious “record”—created in Tsarist Russia in the 1890s but with possible antecedents in France as far back as the eighteenth century—of “meetings” of a world-wide group of Jewish leaders intent on taking control of the world.

¹⁵ See Ori Z. Soltes, *Fixing the World: Jewish American painters in the Twentieth Century* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 33–4 and 14n.

¹⁶ Who shot the hero, Roy Hobbs, early on in the story, thereby short-circuiting his career and *why*? Did he strike out intentionally in the last scene and if so, *was* it for the money or some other reason? We can read and re-read the passages pertinent to these two key events again and again and not come up with a definitive answer. Within the Jewish tradition, if the beginning point of this is the tale of biblical Job, the latest, most intense chapter was written by the Holocaust’s swallowing up of over a million Jewish children. Where was God? Where were humans? Both Strum and Waldman create in a post-Holocaust world and one in which these questions have been raised by theologians since the early 1970s.

¹⁷ This discussion has layers of course: perhaps the Great American Novel was written—two or three times—in the nineteenth century, by Herman Melville (*Moby Dick*) or Mark Twain (*Huckleberry Finn* and/or *Tom Sawyer*) so that the question really being addressed is: what is the Great American Novel of the twentieth century, when the United States became the major power on the planet? There have been any number of pretenders to that designation, but that would

Great American Novel. Roth stands on *Malamud's* shoulders with regard to baseball-writing as quintessential American writing: the subject of *The Great American Novel* is actually a fictional baseball league—the Patriotic League—and the communist conspiracy to efface the recollection of its existence from history. So his novel chooses the grandest American sport, depicted during the World War II period when many of its best players were serving in the armed forces and thus AWOL from baseball, and interweaves it with the grandest twentieth-century American fear—the “red peril”—with which Jews in particular were suspected of being associated.¹⁸

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These varied issues—the novel in its bathetic and picaresque origins, marranism, messianism and the story of the Golem, the question of Jewish physicality, the matter of fitting into America in spite of American prejudices, the rise of Jewish American artists and authors in America—all resonate through Strum’s *The Golem’s Mighty Swing* that, as a novel, might be said to stand on Malamud’s and Roth’s shoulders. He takes on the all-American sport and interweaves the matter of the American struggle to define itself as open to diverse cultures, religions and also *races*—or as mired in prejudice and closed-mindedness—and places these issues in the setting of the 1920s. He thus places them in the decade in which America was rethinking its world-role after World War I; was rethinking its “nation of immigrants” role with the articulation of a refined quota system under the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924;¹⁹ and was exulting in Charles Lindberg’s conquest of the skies in the year in which Babe Ruth completed his one-man pushing of baseball into the ultimate sports spotlight by slamming those 60 home runs.

Strum places them in a decade when, to repeat, Jews were also arriving as a force on the American visual art scene and on the American sports scene, while in one part of Europe—Germany, socio-economic and cultural *goldene medina* for many Jews over the previous few generations—a new art was being shaped. German Expressionist cinema developed in the 1920s, in which one of the most popular films, directed by Paul Wegener, played on the old Bohemian Jewish story of Rabbi Judah Loew and his creation: *Der Golem und Wie er in der Welt*

carry us beyond the point I wish to make here, concerning Roth’s thoughtful tongue buried in his cheek.

¹⁸ One might also mention in this discussion the 1996 novel, *The House of Moses All-Stars*, by Charley Rosen, a former basketball player and coach and the author of a number of works with a sports and particularly a basketball focus. Set in the Great Depression era of the 1930s, Rose’s narrative follows a Jewish basketball team as it barnstorms across America—in a refitted 1932 hearse. This America is, to its western edges, rife with anti-semitism, fears of the unknown personified by anyone who is different, and confusion about its (America’s) identity as a land of openness and a land of closed-mindedness. The most obvious exceptions to this for Rose’s team’s experience are African Americans and Native Americans.

¹⁹ The Johnson-Reed Act all but slammed the door on Eastern European and Southern European immigration to the United States—precisely at a time when fascist forces were on the rise and immigration from those parts of Europe most sought-after.

Kam (The Golem and How He Came into the World).²⁰ Meanwhile, the previously-mentioned rise of fascism was becoming embodied in a real-life Golem, Hitler—a shapeless destroyer presenting himself to Germany as a secular messiah.

Strum weaves all of these issues and more into his tale, in simple straightforward prose, narrated in the first-person and in an understated and effective drawing style that emphasizes rectilinearity (like the baseball diamond and its bases) [fig 1]. His barnstorming Jewish baseball team makes itself *stereotypically* Jewish by giving everyone a beard, even (with boot-polish) the sixteen-year-old younger brother of the manager-narrator. The team endures a range of complications that are mostly traceable to the anti-Semitism that they encounter in various ways, offering echoes of the experience of African American players during the same era playing games in the Negro league created because the American pastime would not allow Blacks into its mainstream until 1947. Thus he encompasses not only the question of the place of Jews as feared outsiders in the Middle America of that era, but the question of the relationship between the Jewish Americans in their struggle and the African Americans in theirs, and the question of whether that relationship offers team-camaraderie or competition.

Jews and blacks—one black, anyway—are on the same team that moves together through the hateful atmosphere of America. Strum's story reflects on the historical partnership of common interests that would carry through the 1960s, where it unraveled, in part because it was never an equal partnership, in part because the nature of the prejudices against both was never exactly the same. In Strum's tale there are subtle suggestions of that imbalance. The opening page offers a poster announcing the arrival of the team to Forest Grove, and along the bottom of the image are the words "Reserved Seating For Whites"—which category presumably could include Jews [fig 2]; on the other hand, when Henry Bell, the African American team-member competes, there is an entire section of the stands filled with African Americans who cheer him and who will lionize him after the game [fig 3], while the only interface with the locals possible for the Jewish players is getting stoned by children or beaten up by adults [fig 4].

As the *Stars of David* struggle to survive financially, the manager-narrator, Noah Strauss, reluctantly agrees to allow a promoter, Paige, to dress one of them up—their biggest, most powerful player—in the costume of the Golem from the Wegener movie. Paige claims to have brought the very costume worn in that role "all the way from Germany"—and the viewer will recognize that familiar film-still image in Strum's drawings [fig 5]. The idea is to stir up greater interest by playing even more profoundly on the fears of their small-town audiences than the mere fact that the team's members are Jewish. Strum accompanies Paige's quotations from newspaper headlines—"Crowds held in awe by the mythical Jewish Legend... The Golem has captivated New York"—with one frame showing

²⁰ The film came out in 1920 and was the third of Wegener's films playing on the Golem theme, in all of which he played the lead role, besides directing. It was based on the 1915 work by Gustav Meyrink that took the earlier legend and fleshed it out into a novel.

a mesmerized audience in a darkened theater and a second filled with the fierce creature raked by severe lighting and casting a giant shadow [fig 6].

Acceding to this proposal will turn serious entertainment defined by athletic skill into a form of circus-like entertainment, but Coach Strauss—the Zion Lion, former Boston Red Sox star—gives in out of desperation. The biggest, most powerful player happens to be the one non-Jew on the team: Henry Bell, former Negro League star, who has an array of tales to tell about baseball and America and his own experience as a member of a feared and despised minority. Henry has been a *crypto-Jew* of sorts—he has been offered to the public as “Hershl Bloom, (member of the lost tribe)” —who will now carry the complexity of his “hiddenness” further: a feared Negro playing a feared Jewish batter playing the feared mythic Golem, a dark version of its story alive in movie theaters from Germany to the United States at the very time when Hitler was planning and leading a failed *putsch* and then writing in *Mein Kampf* about how fearful as betrayers of Germany the Jews (all “descended” from the betrayer, Judas), are.

The parallels between the story we are reading/seeing and those told by Henry reflect the parallels between Jews and Blacks as objects of fear. The team is an entire team of Golems to a fearful Middle America—or rather, a team of devils, with horns and cloven hooves. More ironically, its star player is and is *not* one of them, but another form of Golem and so can serve, in costume, as *the Golem* [fig 7]. That is: for the team he can play the role of the local messianic figure who will offer salvation on the baseball field and in the bank; while for the fans, he can be a particular manifestation of “golem,” like his teammates are, a creature that does not possess a genuine, fully realized human *soul* and wreaks *havoc* among civilized, fully human folk. Both Jews and Africans (and Asians and Native Americans) fell into the not-fully-human category for white Christian Europeans in the nineteenth century and many of their early twentieth-century descendants in America.²¹

It certainly does not require a profound study of Freud to recognize the baseball bat as a phallic symbol, so this Golem plays both to stereotype with regard to his weapon of choice and to the most particular and perverse form of fear directed by white Middle American males to males of Henry’s race before, during and after the 1920s with respect to the sexual safety and sanctity of their women. Irony within irony: he who is stereotypically sexually over-endowed and uncontrollable with respect to that endowment plays disguised as a Jew on a Jewish team (he’s kind of an *anti-marrano*); the stereotypical view of Jewish males is that the circumcision experienced by them on the eighth day after birth has diminished their sexual endowment and enjoyment.

But the further irony is that, in the end, *the Golem’s mighty swing fails at the crucial moment*, falls short of the hype, when the team is up against a squad

²¹ I am thinking not only about colonialism and slavery, but of the words and works that served to de-Europeanize and thus de-humanize Jews, such as Wilhelm Marr’s apparent 1878-9 coinage of the term “Semite” to refer to Jews as a race, and the range of nineteenth-century writings discussed and summarized in Maurice Olender’s *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992).

with serious players, and his final hit is a trickle to the mound. (Note the continued punning Freudian implications of the terms “trickle” and “mound” in the last clause). Conversely, his mighty pitch, that beans an opposing player, provokes a pogrom-like riot that might have destroyed the Jewish players had he not (irony now further wraps around irony) stood by the entrance to the dugout intimidatingly, with his mighty bat and its threatening swing, as his teammates quietly and calmly intoned the *Sh'ma*. This is the most fundamental of Jewish prayers, affirming belief in God’s uniqueness and God’s Covenantal relationship with Israel—and the “last words” of choice for generations of Jewish martyrs.

But the Golem’s bat might not have saved these Jews in the long run; they still might have been destroyed by the angry crowd, had not God ultimately intervened with the sudden thunderstorm that rains out the game and drives the crowd home. The only image that fills an entire page of Strum’s novel is that of the water pouring down, accompanied by the text, “for thousands of years Jews have tried to die with the *Sh'ma* on their lips” [fig 8].

So God, not the Golem, is the savior, who intervenes with flooding water—as God had first “intervened” to destroy all the evil inhabitants of the world, while saving the righteous few, led by Noah (whose name is borne by Strum’s narrator/manager), in Genesis 6–9; as God had later intervened with flooding water to rescue the Israelites led by Moses along the dry bottom of the Sea of Reeds, while drowning the Egyptians, in Exodus 14; as God still later saved the Israelites led by Deborah and Barak, with a sudden downpour that transformed the hillside along which the Canaanite Sisera had held such a strategic advantage before the rains came, in Judges 4–5.

In the epilogue beyond the end of Strum’s tale of survival, when the *Stars of David* have long broken up, Noah finds himself at a game promoted by Paige that disgusts him because it has completely reduced the serious effort of baseball to a caricature. About to leave the ball-park-become-circus-ring, he stays, “curious to see how it all plays out.” And we might wonder: is “it” the tug-of-war that has developed in the last frame over a goat? [fig 9] Is “it” the particular game that Noah is watching? the extended joke to which the game has been reduced? *Jewish history*? *American history*? *American Jewish history*? Simply: *history*? And what role does God play in *any* of that *now*, in the era beyond Noah, Moses, Deborah and Barak? What role do we *humans* play, who have so often believed that our own creations could be our salvation and seen them turn into destructive golems—like the technology turned horrific in the Great War, and in the Holocaust and Hiroshima, between which historic events Strum’s story is sandwiched?

* * * * *

All of these questions connect Strum’s graphic novel to that by JT Waldman. For there is a story in the Jewish tradition in which no Golem but a human being, a conceptual descendant of Deborah, rescues a Judaeen community in danger of destruction at the hands of an angry crowd filling 127 states within a large empire. This is the story of Esther, who risks her life to save the Judaeans in the

fanciful Persia of Ahasuerus. Waldman retells this story in his graphic novel, *Megillat Esther*. He picks up where Strum leaves off, for his heroine expands the role of Strum's "hero." Where Strum's Golem saves barely a *minyan* of Jews whom he had endangered with his one wild pitch, Esther saves a far-flung community of Judaeans endangered by her uncle Mordecai's refusal to kow-tow to the villainous Haman.

Like Strum, but with different emphases, Waldman weaves his tale with other, parallel figures and events in the Jewish narrative. Esther is like Moses, redeeming her people by going before the ruler—in his case, as an Egyptian prince who is not really Egyptian but an outsider Israelite, to the Pharaoh; in her case, as a Persian queen who is not really Persian but an outsider Judaeans, to the Shah. Both squeeze success out of disaster, the one in the passage through the Sea of Reeds and the destruction by drowning of the Pharaoh (or his son) and the other through the counter-royal-declaration she achieves, that allows the Judaeans to defend themselves and to encompass the destruction of Haman and his sons. Both Esther and Moses are, like Strum's Henry Bell, crypto-Jews of sorts—but from the opposite perspective. Where Henry masquerades as a Jew and then as a Jewish Golem, Esther masquerades as a non-Judaeans Persian and Moses as a non-Israelite Egyptian.

All *three* stories are set outside *Eretz Yisrael*. Those of Moses and Esther are the only ones in the Hebrew Bible to be thusly set, and these two narratives divide the lion's share of the Jewish tradition of manuscript illumination and illustration between them. The one offers the *Haggadah*, a book of telling that puts the biblical story in an extra-biblical textual context; the other offers the *Megillat Esther* that puts the biblical story in a separate scroll outside the biblical text in which it is yet part of the canon.²² The same rabbinic tradition that struggled to find a place for the uplifting story of Judaeans redemption within the canon—because of its failure even to *mention* God or the land of Israel—also understood the story of Esther to be part of the larger story of exile and return, disaster and redemption that connects biblical to Jewish history. Waldman enhances this rabbinic tradition in his work.

Where Strum's vision is so very sober and straight-laced (this is a comment, not a criticism) as if to underscore that the "game" is not to be mistaken for merely a *game*—it is about the lives and identities of these people and the People that they represent in the struggle for acceptance; and the seriousness quotient of the drawing echoes the serious mien of the narrator and his frustration at efforts to turn the game into a circus act—Waldman's vision is inebriated, in a manner consonant with his subject. He tells his story with a swirling dynamism that encompasses the calligraphized text as part of an abstract pattern of images that are both lyrical and expressionistic [fig 10]. His style evokes the swirling lights and action of the circus and its atmosphere that are eschewed by Strum and his characters.

²² For a fuller discussion of the exclusion/inclusion of *Megillat Esther* from/in the Hebrew biblical canon and its illumination and related art, see Ori Z Soltes, "Images and the Book of Esther: From Manuscript Illumination to Midrash," in Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon, eds., *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2003).

Where a single poster-image offers a prelude to Strum's first-person narrative, in Waldman, a succession of prologue images leads into the text. These are like the introductory images in the illuminated Sarajevo *Haggadah*.²³ They lead us into the story of Esther by way of the story of Timna, the wannabe Israelite, rejected by the Israelites, according to the rabbis, without justification (as Waldman reminds us). She became the concubine of Esau's son, Eliphaz, the mother of Amalek—who stands out as a source of Israelite pain in the time of Moses and the wandering through the wilderness. She is also the ancestor of Haman, who will be the villain of the story we are entering.²⁴ The prologue is devoid of text until its very end, when the Talmudic tractate, *Sanhedrin*, is quoted to verbalize what we have just *seen* [fig 11].

So Waldman follows the tradition of rabbinic enhancement, but on his own terms. Once entered, the entire text of the *megillah* is there, in Hebrew, and most of it translated into English—but not all of it. There are places where Waldman deliberately wanders from literally translating to allow the words of his characters to articulate the *sense* of the Hebrew narration. Moreover, the involvement of the reader is intensified by Waldman's swaying interweave of passages *from* the story with passages *commenting* on the story that reinforce the notion that it is part of a larger narrative. So we step out of the text by seeing others reading and reacting to it, as in the interlude that comes after 10:1. There—after the words asserting that Esther's decree established the rituals of Purim and that it was written in the book—the biblical Ezekiel, spouting messianic prophecies, joins a contemporary congregation reading the Book of Esther and celebrating Purim [fig 12].

The viewer is drawn into the images by those that stare out at us (as Esther does, when she is declared beautiful in 2:15, and we see her from the perspective of the king who will shortly choose her) [fig 13]; and those with their backs to us (so that we stand with them, looking over their shoulders—as when Esther stands in the entryway to the royal throne room in 5:1). Sometimes we see—literally—into the heart of a protagonist, as most strikingly when Haman thinks about the King's question regarding “what should be done to the man whom the king desires to honor,” in 6:6 [fig 14].

From Timna in the prologue we move to the first part of the narrative that culminates with the king's decision to choose a successor to Queen Vashti with

²³ Arguably the most significant medieval illuminated manuscript in the Jewish tradition, created in early fourteenth-century northeastern Spain, which ended up—presumably due to the Expulsion of 1492 (or emigration earlier in the fifteenth century due to the complications for Jews throughout Christian Spain that set in after 1391)—in the then-Ottoman-controlled Balkans, where it emerged in Sarajevo in the nineteenth century. Where the *Haggadah* illuminates in color and offers a lead-in from Creation to the moment when the family is depicted coming home from the synagogue to open the *Haggadah* and begin the telling, Waldman's *Megillat Esther*, in comic-book-style black and white, begins with Timna as a lead-in to the story of Esther.

²⁴ There is the chronologically intermediating irony, as the rabbinic tradition understands history, that, had King Saul hearkened to God's command and destroyed all of the Amalekite descendants of those who had plagued his ancestors in the wilderness, Haman would never have been born to plague his own descendants. Saul was soon replaced by David as God's anointed—*mashiah* in Hebrew, and *christos* in Greek, the English versions of which words are, of course, “messiah” and “christ” respectively.

a beauty contest-by-force including every unattached young woman throughout the 127 states that he governs. Vashti has been removed from the court for reasons directly related to Strum's *Golem*: Persian males' fear of losing their position of sexual domination in the one case and of white, Christian American males in the other. Won't it be ironic that a fragile woman will successfully rescue the Jews of Persia where the mighty male "Golem" would have failed to rescue the *Stars of David* without divine intervention?

The woman chosen by the king as fairest of them all looks more like Bette Midler (and remarkably like Vashti) [fig 15] than like the latest Playboy centerfold, so Waldman plays with whatever conceptions and preconceptions shape the concept "beauty" in history and art history, in Persia then or America now—especially when he reminds us in his endnotes of the Talmudic tradition that she was 75 years old when she first stood before Ahasuerus!

This issue—of interpreting beauty, which offers a centerpoint both for the biblical story and for Waldman's churned-up swirls of imagery—is the analogue of interpreting God and what constitutes the most beauteous path to God. And so Waldman's interludes all revolve around the relationship between God and ourselves and how that relationship flounders and rights itself. The first turns on who best understands that relationship, from the House of Saul (physically king-like, "head and shoulders above the people") and the House of David (small and "ruddy" but fast and smart)—a contest of *spiritual* beauty, "*Mashiah* for a Day"—which encompasses matters of the family tree begun with Abraham and Sara and the descendants of their descendants, Judaism and Christianity, both of which believe that they have the true franchise on Covenantal correctness and beauty.

Another interlude follows to the story of Joseph—who, like Esther, is an outsider in a strange land in which he achieves power through his beauty, both physical and spiritual; and who brings the Israelites to the Egypt from which Moses will, Esther-like, redeem them. It connects to Judah, whose story in Genesis 38 runs parallel to that of Joseph in Genesis 39, which parallel is played on in the interlude—Haman's wife is at home reading a comic-book "version" of these parallel tales—that comes just after Haman's humiliation in 6:12 [fig 16].

Interludes are thus essential, and not mere *interludes*. They encompass a passage from Deuteronomy 31:18—visually shaped by Waldman as a tear drop—which passage is a link between two contexts. The first is to an undefined future. The line "...and I will surely hide My face in that day because of all the evil which they have done in that they turned to other gods" is quoted (from God through Moses to the Israelites, in Moses' valedictory speech to them before he dies) as part of the prophecy regarding how, in the future, the Israelites and their descendants "will forsake Me and break My Covenant which I have made with them."

The second "context" is the figure of Esther within that future, who, in hiding her Judaeon identity until the moment when she must reveal that identity in order to save her people and herself could be said to have come perilously close to forsaking God. In Esther' story the name of God is never mentioned; and the

very name “Esther” is built from the same Hebrew root as “I will hide” (*astheer*). That is: who she truly *is* remains hidden (even when, as Waldman plays with the Talmudic play on Esther 2:18, the king asks her outright what her heritage is) until the salvational *moment*—when both her crypto-Judaeanism and her hidden heroism are revealed—just as God remains hidden throughout the narrative. But God’s hand might be said to be active, albeit in hiding, through the actions of Mordecai and Esther.

These actions turn upside down at the outset of Chapter Six. Waldman physically flips the novel at the middle point of the narrative’s conceptual flip. We are between the moment when Esther, rising to Mordecai’s challenge, has gone before Ahasuerus and, having “found favor in his eyes” invites him—and Haman—to dinner; and the moment when, unable to sleep well after too much food and drink, Ahasuerus decides to have some passages from his annals read to him. He is thus reminded of Mordecai’s act of having saved his life and decides to reward him—in a manner suggested by an unwitting Haman, who ends up thereby shaping his own humiliation.

Waldman flips the text and its images—the images and their text—so that the reader is turned topsy-turvy, as if inebriated, who must read English thereafter from right to left, page by page and frame by frame. He thus plays on a rabbinic tradition that enjoins the celebrant to consume enough wine on this festive holiday to help continue the storyline in which everything is turned upside down; in which the oppressed and downtrodden emerge victorious over their oppressors; in which, in the hyper-textual world of *gematria* that Golem-maker Judah Loew espoused, one cannot distinguish the phrase “blessed is Mordecai” from “cursed is Haman.”²⁵ Waldman turns the phrase “reversal of fortune,” which is endemic to the novel throughout its history, and which is, after all, endemic to the story of Esther, Mordecai and Haman, into a literal reversal of the book which the reader reads, so that we share “reversal” with the characters within the book.

We are the descendants to whom Mordecai “speaks peace” at the end of the biblical *Megillat Esther*—having achieved the sort of success that Joseph in Egypt had, in becoming “second only to King Ahasuerus.” *We* are the descendants shown as ghost figures responding to the narrative at the end of Waldman’s *Megillat Esther* [fig 17], brought out of hiding, *illuminated* by Waldman in his dynamic graphics.

In the end of the epilogue in Strum’s story the narrator sits back down in the stands to see how it all turns out and we ask what “it” is. The epilogue of Waldman’s narrative overtly expands “it” by leading directly out into the vast seas of diasporic Jewish history. There the “turning out” includes the narrative of

²⁵ *Gematria* is that aspect of (particularly mystical) Jewish literature in which, by recognizing a numerical value for every Hebrew letter, esoteric relationships between words and phrases that are not apparent on the surface are ferreted out from underneath the words. Thus the two Purim phrases, so opposite in meaning—how drunk would one need to be not to be able to distinguish them?—both add up to the same number in *gematria* (the number is 502): so even on this day actually one should not be *that* drunk, because one is enjoined to be able not to distinguish two phrases that are actually *identical* to each other.

Esther and Mordecai and the question of how to be a Jew in the diasporic world; of how to assert oneself as a Jew and at the same time as part of the majority Christian or other society of which one wants to be a part—whether in Judah Loew’s Prague, Germany in its Golden Age, or the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. Or in the twenty-first century. How do we “pass” without passing beyond the border of the Jewish self? The real and the imagined—by Philip Roth or James Strum or anyone else—meet in Waldman’s Persian Empire of twenty-five centuries ago and the America of yesterday and today. Both Strum and Waldman have added new branches to the double tree of the history of the novel and the history of the Jews as a people of books, images, and balancing-act diasporic experiences and questions with and without answers.