

Final Paper

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Jewish Identity and Anti-Semitism in *The Golem's Mighty Swing*

Although originally created as a biblical creature to bring people closer to a divine power, the Golem has seen a rise in popularity in modern storytelling over the past few decades. It has always been portrayed as a strong and powerful creature that serves to protect and destroy, yet its identity generally shifts to fit the stereotypes of the time period. In James Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, the Golem character is introduced as a marketing plan to draw greater attendance to the baseball games of an all-Jewish team. The marketing executive focuses on stereotypes of Jews as non-athletic and believes that incorporating a Golem into their baseball games will draw a larger fanbase. After begrudgingly accepting the Golem plan, the team continues to travel around the world and frightens teams with their unusual player.

Throughout Sturm's book, he addresses many anti-Semitic tropes surrounding a Jewish common thinking of the time period, one of which is that Jews aren't athletic. Ori Z. Soltes' chapter on sports graphic novels in *Jews in the Gym: Judaism, Sports, and Athletics*, as well as Roxanne Harde's chapter on Jewish masculinities in *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*, additionally highlight Sturm's unique storytelling approach and emphasis on the masculinity of his Jewish baseball players. Throughout *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, Sturm uses the character of the Golem to highlight the anti-Semitism and stereotypical othering of the early 1900s, while also exploring the implications for identity and prejudice of being different from the majority culture. Sturm's novel addresses the differences in his Golem from the original story,

Jewish stereotypes through the masculine depiction of the players, relationships between multiple persecuted groups, and their experiences of anti-Semitism wandering to different towns.

The original Golem story begins with 16th century Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, who sought a way to protect his Jewish community from anti-Semitic attacks (Michaelson). Created out of dust and clay, the Golem is brought to life by a ritualistic use of the Hebrew word “emet,” meaning truth. Although Rabbi Loew’s plan did work for a period of time, the Golem eventually created a mind of its own and started destroying things it wasn’t supposed to. Rabbi Loew was forced to deactivate his Golem after it caused too much destruction (Michaelson).

Historically, Golems have been represented simply as unintelligent beings that follow orders. However, in modern storytelling, the Golem has transformed to a much more complex character, especially in graphic novels. One of the most notable uses of the Golem in modern comics is Marvel’s Golem. Marvel created two versions of the Golem for two different stories, yet both use the Jewish themes and identity of the Golem. The first Golem was part of Marvel’s 1974 series *Strange Tales*, which portrays the Golem as an ancient medieval character who is dug up from the ground to protect the archaeologists who find it. They eventually get themselves into trouble, and the Golem comes to the rescue to save them (Reingold). This Golem story has direct parallels to the original Golem story and maintains the Golem’s values of protection and dedication.

Marvel’s second Golem story was created three years later, and was even more closely related to the original. It follows a young boy, Jacob Goldstein, who creates a clay man to protect the Jews during World War II, but a freak accident leads Goldstein’s body to become one with the Golem’s. Goldstein becomes a superhero dedicated to protecting the Jews, and won’t fight in the war until his people are safe (Reingold). With both Marvel Golem stories, aspects of the

Golem's original Jewish identity are incorporated and highlighted to enhance its meaning within the story.

Sturm's Golem is perhaps the most closely related to the original in identity because it maintains the same physical features, although it is represented in his graphic novel by a costume that was used as a prop in the original German Golem movie (Sturm, 39). The marketing executive's idea for the Stars of David Jewish baseball team incorporating a Golem is based on using the costume for African-American first baseman Henry Bloom, the only non-Jew on the team (Sturm, 39). Bloom is already on a team of outsiders, since there are no other Jewish teams, but is singled out even further as the only African American, non-Jewish team member. In a very obviously racist effort to cast out Bloom even further, Victor Paige, the marketing executive, tries to convince the team that Bloom will enjoy his new role with the team, as "Negroes, after all, are born performers," (Sturm, 41).

While the Golem in Sturm's story is not created to protect the Jews but rather bring attention to their baseball games and ultimately bring the team more money from attendance, it very closely highlights the stereotypical othering of Jews and African-Americans during the early 1900s. "The team is an entire team of Golems to a frightened Middle America— or rather, a team of devils with horns and cloven hooves" (Soltes, 33). Sturm illustrates the thinking of fans throughout the States who come to the Star of Davids' baseball games not because they are interested in the team, but because they want to see what Jews playing baseball look like. It was an unheard concept to most of America during the time that the team traveled. In a dialogue scene between two fans, one fan sees the other and says "Hey, Hetty! Always knew you loved baseball!" Hetty replies by saying "I'm not here for baseball, but to see the Jews...thank you very much" (Sturm, 13).

The notion of masculine-looking Jewish athletes came as a surprise to baseball fans who watched the Stars of David play, as they were used to the stereotypes of Jewish culture being focused solely on studying and religious practices, with no emphasis on physical masculinity. “Because Jewish men were understood to come from a religious culture that stressed morality and literacy, they were seen as emasculated,” said professor Elise Martel in Harde’s chapter (67). With the challenging views of America at this time, the Star of David players were forced into a difficult position of defying stereotypes as Jews but also as Americans, since the post-war society brought focus on the strong physicality of men. “These ballplayers must negotiate between tradition and assimilation, between mainstream and the stereotyped other, between one culture that prizes physical aggressiveness and another that values intellect, as they establish their own types of Jewish American masculinity” (Harde, 67). As Sturm uses the Golem to represent the stereotypical notions of the time period, he also draws attention to the ways in which the Stars of David attacked such stereotypes. Harde’s chapter on Jewish masculinity expands on Sturm’s character choices, stating that Sturm’s unique portrayal of Jewish characters as masculine and athletic directly attacks the stereotypical notion of Jews not being involved in sports. “Therefore, while foregrounding the athleticism of a male body engaged in America’s favorite sport, Sturm also emphasizes Jewish identity, and he thereby constructs a Jewish American masculinity that revises most American stereotypes of the Jewish man” (Harde, 64). Sturm very consciously draws his Jewish baseball players with long beards yet masculine builds to address the intersection of both American and Jewish stereotypes.

Throughout his novel, he incorporates more ways that the Stars of David defy traditional stereotypes while playing baseball in different towns across America. Towards the middle sections, the Stars of David embark on a journey to a highly anticipated game against the Putnam

All-Americans and star pitcher Micky McFadden. Nobody thinks the Jews can even get a hit off the renowned pitcher, since they aren't as athletically talented as him. "Let's see them Jews handle McFaddens' fastball. He'll cut them down to size- give 'em another circumcision. Cut 'em good!" (Sturm,59). There is no confidence that the Stars of David can pull off the upset, let alone make contact with any of McFadden's pitches. However, one of their players notices a slight hesitation in his curveball windup, and notifies his teammate. After watching the pitch and setting up his timing according to the hesitation, the batter is able to make solid contact with the ball and drives in a runner with a long single. Perhaps based loosely on the Jewish biblical characters who represent strength and physicality, Sturm's characters draw similarities to that of the Maccabees and others. " And, of course, Judah the so-called Maccabee and his brothers used both intelligence and martial skills to achieve success against an opponent more numerous and better outfitted for battle..." (Soltes, 26). Sturm's showcase of the analytical and physical talent of the Stars of David in this chapter and throughout the book sets his characters apart.

The Golem additionally becomes a very important part of the story in this section of the novel, as he plays the role of the Rabbi Loew's original Golem in protecting the Jewish team from rabid fans after the game (Sturm, 95). As Soltes explains in his chapter, the view of the Golem from the marketing executive, Paige, was to create a messianic savior figure to help a struggling Jewish baseball team. He further pushes the stereotypical othering of the Jewish team onto the fans who come to watch by adding another element of othering to the team in the form of the Golem. "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 early twentieth century” (Soltes, 36). Paige is solely focused on the profits the Golem will bring him and the team, but Sturm’s chosen character of the Golem highlights the stereotypical need of a messianic savior for Jews of the time. As Soltes mentions, the Golem has two separate roles, depending on the views of the players and the fans. For the team, the Golem is thought to bring in more profit, but it also brings another opportunity to the fans to create an “other” on an already outcast team of Jewish baseball players, who they view as needing of messianic saving.

Along with the relationships between Jews and “the other” in the early 1900s, there was also significant othering of African-Americans, which led to a somewhat lopsided relationship between the two outsider groups. Sturm’s novel takes place in the 1920s, right between World War I and World War II, and although doesn’t mention much of the Jewish persecution by outsider hate groups, he does address the more immediate anti-Semitism. Both Jews and African-Americans were enduring their own hardships during this time, but the Jews historically became the more dominant group of the two, as they faced less segregation than the African-American groups. According to Oscar R. Williams Jr. of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), the pre-World War II attitudes of both groups were generally unfriendly towards each other. “Jews invariably reacted to Black people just as other southern white people reacted to Black people. During slavery, Jews were slave masters, slave traders, merchants, peddlers, and statemen,” (Williams Jr, 728). It was not until after World War II that they began to bridge their relationships and build mutual trust with each other (Williams Jr, 731).

However, Sturm uses his novel to create a narrative of togetherness between the two, brought together by baseball. Sturm's novel is loosely based on the House of David baseball team of 1903, who were a barnstorming team stemming from a Michigan religious colony (Harde, 68). Since this team was also made of outsiders, they also toured with other outsider teams. "The House of David and City of David teams toured with white and "outlaw" (meaning not segregated) teams, and affiliated for a time with the Negro Leagues, especially Satchel Paige's All Stars" (Harde, 68). Sturm conveys that there was a common thread during the early 1900s of outsider groups uniting to strengthen the unique identities of each other.

Sturm also shows that it wasn't easy living during this time period except for those who fit the standard, which was white and Christian. When the Stars of David start their tour at the beginning of the book, a poster can be seen on the first page encouraging fans to attend since they can remain segregated in their seating. The bottom part of the poster states "reserved seating for whites" (Sturm, 9). While watching an outsider group, the fans can still feel as though they are not compromising their own identities. "The large capitalized bottom line, noting that this will be a segregated venue, reassures the citizens of Forest Grove- or Anywhere, USA- that even if they come watch these menacing male others, they will not have to breach social codes or hierarchies. Sturm's poster thus introduces a disturbing narrative of American racism and intolerance alongside Jewish male self-fashioning" (Harde, 68). Ultimately, Sturm brings attention to the historically rigid relationship of Jews and African Americans during this time period, yet creates a new, united narrative for them in his novel by creating a strengthened relationship between the team's only non-Jewish, African-American player, and the rest of the Jewish players on the team.

Sturm perhaps draws parallels in his story to that of Major League Baseball (MLB) greats Jackie Robinson and Sandy Koufax. Playing two seasons together on the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1950s, the stories of a Jewish and African American player on the same team fit loosely with Sturm's portrayal in his novel. Both Koufax and Robinson welcomed each other and made spaces for their different life experiences. At his statue unveiling ceremony last year, Koufax made sure to mention his strong friendship with Robinson, who also has a statue right next to Koufax's. "Sixty-seven years ago, Jackie Robinson became my teammate and friend," Koufax said Saturday during the unveiling ceremony. "At that time, sharing the same space with him was absolutely unimaginable. It's one of the greatest honors of my life" (Stephen, 2022). Both players faced adversity, but appeared to be able to bond over their struggles. Robinson was not initially allowed to play in MLB because of his skin color, but fought his way to the top and became a legendary player for generations to come. Parts of the Golem can be found in Robinson's story as his incredible talent helped the Brooklyn Dodgers finally defeat the mighty New York Yankees to win Brooklyn's first and only World Series before moving to Los Angeles. Koufax was also able to represent Jewish masculinity and athleticism by pitching a perfect game, winning multiple World Series titles, and being considered one of the best pitchers of all time. He refused to pitch on major Jewish holidays, and instead of letting the team dictate his playing career, he stood up for himself and became a role model for Jews around the world. Both players endured hateful actions because their identities were different from the standard of the time, but came together on one team to prove that they are incredibly talented players that were not defined by society's views of them.

Another common thread throughout Sturm's novel is the idea of the "Wandering Jew." Sturm's Stars of David represent a team with no home, who travel to many different places

throughout the States looking for games. In some ways, baseball as a sport is a metaphor for a wandering people. There is no permanence of place as teams are constantly traveling to other venues to play different teams. “Drawing on Leonard Ellis’ analysis of social structures of U.S. sports, Rotundo notes that in baseball, ‘the two teams did not engage in direct combat, but rather took turns in an exercise at home-leaving and successful return [that] mirrored the daily journeys of men into the world and back again’ ” (Harde, 70).

The Jewish people have a long history of wandering, which is mentioned many different times in the Torah, such as the wandering of 40 years after their Passover exodus, and clearly represented in Sturm’s novel as well. The team’s manager, Noah Strauss, even describes his team as the “Bearded Wandering Wonders” (Sturm, 9). Since Israel was not founded until 1948, the Jewish people in the 1920s didn’t have one true home that united them. Therefore, they were continuously wandering through American culture and politics, trying to establish their own unique identities while having to conform to American norms. “Before the game of departure and return, then, Noah makes clear that his Stars of David are Wandering Jews, actively pursuing a quest that is outside middle-class American ideals,” (Harde, 70). The Stars of David set out to prove themselves through their differences. And rather than being cast out for these differences, Sturm brings forth the Wandering Jew perspective in a positive way that highlights the unity that their wandering brings them.

The Golem's Mighty Swing is a thorough exploration of many themes related to being a minority group that is different from the mainstream culture, and how that can lead to hurtful stereotypes and prejudice. Sturm does so in a graphic novel that builds and twists on the Jewish concept of a Golem (who in this case is African-American), combined with the setting of a Jewish baseball team that is the only one of its kind. The Stars of David wander from city to city,

experiencing what it is like to be different, and encountering preconceived and false ideas about Jews. However, Sturm also counters this narrative by depicting Jewish masculinity and aligning Jews and African Americans as marginalized people with a common experience of being "othered," even if the effects of prejudice haven't been the same for both. Sturm brings together the common stereotypes of Jews during the 1920s, while at the same time, highlights the ways that the Stars of David defied them.

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