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## **Innovation and Orthodox Comic Books: The Case of Mahrwood Press**

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How should we interpret the transnational economy of comic books produced and published by American Israelis in Israel that are distributed by American Jewish publishers in the United States? When such comic books earn *haskamot*—letters of approbation by religious authorities attesting to their religious merit and educational worthiness—and become religiously sanctioned Jewish books, what are the consequences for our understanding of American Jewish writing? Are Orthodox comic books a novel, albeit conservative form of Jewish oppositional culture? I asked these questions at the conclusion of an earlier essay on contemporary American Jewish comic books (Roth 17), hoping that others would see them as indicative of the issues describing and catalyzing a new area of American Jewish literary studies. In what follows I probe for answers: first, by establishing a critical and socio-historical context for reading Mahrwood Press's Orthodox comic books as innovative but understudied cultural productions; and second, by analyzing a number of examples to show how they convey a masculinist, Jewish ethos opposed to an individualist, secular modernity while admiring ingenuity that conserves tradition. Mahrwood Press provides an exemplary case study, because its founder's biography and publishing vision, the artists and writers he commissioned, and the stories he wrote and published spotlight how issues of cultural renewal and heterogeneity complicate our understanding of networks and the flow of information across spaces, places, and times. Mahrwood also reveals a provocative strand of the contemporary religious imaginary in US and American Jewish comic books.

What constitutes innovation in comics is always under debate, but one critical perspective currently ascendant in US literary studies has recreated a kind of lowbrow-highbrow divide within comic book scholarship, the undoing of which might open up fresh perspectives in American Jewish literary studies and on literary and cultural innovation in comic books. This divide has its roots in comics studies' deep ambivalence about the popularity of the superhero genre and the mass-produced material published by large houses such as Marvel and DC Comics. As Charles Hatfield points out, the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in 1986 and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* in 1993 started a slow shift in the field toward a "new formalism" (369-70) and consequently, an increasing focus among US academics within English departments on experimental and ostensibly more innovative alternative comics.<sup>1</sup> As with many new trends and fields that must legitimize their places within English departments, literary comic book scholarship was discovered by some as an inchoate field that needed rationalization and justification—or as Hillary Chute asserts, "The field hasn't yet grasped its object or properly posed its project" ("Comics" 452).

Chute has become the most vocal proponent within US English departments of such rationalization and of a specific understanding of comic book innovation.<sup>2</sup> She begins her short history of comics by electing to "not emphasize the development of the commercial comic book industry," instead formulating what is in essence a history of avant-garde, formal experimentation in the medium, her primary indicator of comic book innovation. In her timeline, comics begin as "both a mass-market product and one that influenced and was influenced by avant-garde practices, especially those of Dada and surrealism" (455), becoming fully realized as a medium only with the arrival of underground comics in the 1960s (456). For Chute, study of the graphic narrative "investigates the potential of the form at large" (457), especially in terms of

“ethical representations of history” (462) that in the exemplary work of Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, and Marjane Satrapi are always self-aware and self-reflexive in the best tradition of innovative modernist and postmodernist literary art.

Chute’s argument tacitly defines the graphic novel and the graphic narrative (though the latter is meant as a general descriptor of all comics) in opposition to staple-bound superhero comics and the products of the US commercial comic book industry, and both terms are therefore positioned as the authentically innovative, aesthetically mature version of comic books.<sup>3</sup> She thus reinscribes in comic books the socially constructed divide between “lowbrow” genre fiction and “highbrow” literary fiction. In a large and active field such as comics scholarship, one finds alternatives to Chute’s narrow understanding of comics innovation, and Derek Parker Royal’s special issue of *MELUS* on multi-ethnic graphic narratives shows that some literary scholars are aware that by “privileging ‘alternative’ graphic narratives” (Royal 14) as more literary, “we may be inadvertently marginalizing or ‘othering’ an entire community of writers, ethnic or otherwise, whose work resonates with multi-ethnic import” (16).

Nevertheless, the new formalist perspective and its attendant biases pervade the scholarship examining contemporary American Jewish comic books. Over the last decade a number of critics and journalists, postulating a special relationship between Jews/Jewishness and comics publishing, helped establish a recurrent narrative theme about Jews and comic books: Comics begin in the 1930s as adolescent American Jewish power fantasies, but have since grown up, thanks to the groundbreaking work of Spiegelman, Will Eisner, Aline Kominsky, and Ben Katchor, into a complex and sophisticated maturity (Roth 4-7). In this ethnic version of the medium’s self-realization, comic books’ formal innovations record a history of experimentation in American Jewish cultural and individual self-fashioning, from “childish” immigrant to

sophisticated American “adulthood,” and so provide yet another success story about American Jews that lends cultural legitimacy and social prestige to Jewish identity (Roth 7). As a result, the majority of scholarly work on comic books in Jewish studies tends to explore literary and cultural innovation primarily within alternative comics and graphic memoirs, with secondary attention paid to Golden Age superhero comics in regard to their ethnic, racial, and gender subtexts.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, aside from a few articles in Israeli and American Jewish newspapers and magazines, I have found no scholarship on comic books produced by independent Jewish publishers that feature stories for a specifically Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox juvenile readership.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps because these stories virtually disappear Jewish women as agents of Jewish learning and valorize an often-militant discourse of masculinity, they seem more regressive than innovative. But taking such Orthodox comic books seriously as innovative literary and cultural productions means acknowledging that like all “powerful deployments of the discourse of Jewishness,” to borrow Jonathan Freedman’s description of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tropes of Jewish immigrant identity, these comic books also combine “principles of remembering and forgetting, projection and erasure, to create new ideological and imaginative structures, amalgams that have done crucial cultural work” (9). This hybrid creative dynamic underscores the kind of innovation I discuss here: the inventive combinations of ideology, ethnicity, and form found within cultural productions that materialize busy intersections of various social and cultural networks. That these comic books have themselves been largely forgotten within recent public and scholarly discourses about Jews and comic books also testifies to Freedman’s point and what *new directions* means in American Jewish literary studies or, for that matter, in any branch of literary studies. Such directions only seem new because scholars

become so caught up in valorizing certain kinds of innovation that they fail to see other kinds—which may reflect disagreeable or even offensive ideas and values—implicit in a hybrid cultural production such as Orthodox comic books.

These comic books suggest that not all literary innovations and cultural renewal is to be found outside of fundamentalist religions. If, following Freedman, the overdetermined figure of the Jew is indeed metonymic for the hybridity and revisionism that provokes innovation in US literatures and cultures—“a tradition of dynamic innovation wrought in the encounter between Jewish and Gentile cultures that has the property of reanimating both” (22), but not only in liberal, secularist directions—then Mahrwood Press is an important site of struggle over what counts as innovation in comic books. Let us turn to the life and times of that press’s founder and principle writer, Eric Mahr, to consider how he embodies such Jewish-gentile cultural encounters and their reanimation.

### **Orthodoxy, Comics, and Cultural Exceptionalism**

On February 4, 2010, Eric Mahr died unexpectedly of a heart attack in Buffalo, New York. He was 54. The first public reports of his death were posted on the Internet within the comics Web community where he was known as the man who had “single-handedly established and maintained a comics-publishing niche for observant Jews,” according to Clifford Meth, a writer and editor who had worked with Mahr (“Quiet Passing”). Both the *Comics Reporter* and the *Buffalo News* ran obituaries.<sup>6</sup> A Buffalo native, he attended Buffalo State College and was president of the Buffalo chapter of the Jewish Defense League (JDL). He turned to Orthodox Judaism after studying at the Torah Center of Buffalo, was one of the pallbearers at JDL founder Rabbi Meir Kahane’s funeral in 1990, and in 1993 immigrated to Israel, settling in Neve Yaakov,

a disputed area of north Jerusalem. After losing his job at a telecommunications software firm in 2002, he was inspired by a trip to Granada, Spain, to create Mahrwood Press and publish “high-quality, hardcover graphic novels celebrating Jewish history and the lives of Hebrew heroes” (“Eric M. Mahr”). The obituary in the English-language edition of *Hamodia*, a prominent ultra-Orthodox daily newspaper that Mahr had worked with earlier in his comic book career, lauded Mahrwood Press as “a premier publisher of illustrated children’s books” and praised its founder primarily for his return to traditional Jewish observance and for his work as CEO from 2008 onward of Targum Press, an Orthodox English-language publisher that Mahr also managed (Gavant A26).<sup>7</sup> No other English-language Jewish newspapers or magazines in the US, the UK, or Israel took note of his passing.

Despite that lack of interest and *Hamodia*’s downplaying of the term *comic books*, Mahr deserves wider recognition in American Jewish literary history. The contrapuntal nature of his cultural affiliations reflect a number of significant trends and developments in post-World War II American Jewish life; most significantly, the sense of cultural exceptionalism that transformed American Jewish communities in the latter half of the twentieth century clearly informs Mahr’s writing and his publishing company.<sup>8</sup> Mahr’s attraction to the JDL, an organization committed to militant Jewish cultural exceptionalism and political self-assertion, mirrored the increase in ethnic pride among American Jewish baby boomers following the Civil Rights Movement and Israel’s 1967 Six-Day War. At its most extreme, this ethnic pride manifested in the perception that mainstream Jewish organizations and institutions were out of touch with ordinary American Jews and not doing enough to advocate and defend Jewish interests in the US, Israel, and the Soviet Union (Diner 340-45). For Mahr, though, whose father was shot and killed during a holdup outside his Buffalo drugstore in November of 1975,<sup>9</sup> the JDL may have tapped into a

deeper dissatisfaction over the safeguarding of Jews. Its founder, Rabbi Kahane, was a heroic figure to a small but growing number of American Jews for whom the lessons of the Holocaust and the Six-Day War provided a warrant for the unfettered exercise of Jewish military and political power—for the actualization of what Paul Breines calls “tough Jewish” fantasies about self-defense and self-determination (72-73).

Mahr’s turn toward Orthodoxy manifested, too, a dissatisfaction with the tired religiosity and diluted traditions of middle-class, mainstream American Judaism, as well as with the hyper-individualism and alienation of postwar US society, attitudes that helped fuel the rise of the *ba’al teshuva* (returnee to the faith) movement of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>10</sup> That movement itself reflected a resurgent and more confident Orthodoxy that was committed to maintaining Jewish religious and cultural exceptionalism without apology.<sup>11</sup> The Orthodox revival mirrored the general shift toward greater religiosity and conservatism in the United States, a shift that also benefited from the greater tolerance that grew out of multiculturalism; not only were Orthodox Jews the beneficiaries of this increased tolerance for vivid, material differences, but they could also now be “courted as honored consumers by producers, operators, and entrepreneurs of all sorts ready to accommodate their religious needs,” as Jeffrey S. Gurock observes (226).

Orthodox Judaism, whose adherents comprise around twelve percent of the American Jewish population (Heilman 2), is usually divided into two types: modern Orthodoxy, which espouses an accommodationist approach toward the non-Jewish societies and cultures in which Jews live, and ultra-Orthodoxy—also called *haredi* (trembling or fervent in devotion) and, by its adherents, “Torah true”—which spurns accommodation as a threat to Judaism and the future of Jewish life, and rejects the mores and secular learning of modernity, though not always its technologies (Heilman 2-5). The Torah Center of Buffalo, where Mahr studied with its founder Rabbi Yaacov

Haber, was an outreach organization affiliated with the Orthodox Union (OU), a right-leaning modern Orthodox organization considered centrist, between modern Orthodoxy and ultra-Orthodoxy. The OU, like other Orthodox organizations and institutions, promoted their punctilious Judaism to potential returnees as authentic Judaism and, as Mahr's immigration to Israel exemplifies, their commitment to religious Zionism and Orthodoxy's prioritizing of Israel as the Jewish spiritual homeland also yielded high levels of Orthodox and *ba'alei teshuva* immigrants who settled primarily in rural areas, the Territories, and Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, cultural influences flow up as well as down; returnees to Orthodoxy do not just disappear into the historical phenomenon. Judy Tydor Baumel-Schwartz reminds us that *ba'alei teshuva* "enrich their Orthodox communities with the knowledge and experience that they have brought with them from the secular and non-Jewish world" (23). Mahr brought a love of comics that had flowered during the Silver Age of comics (1956-1968), when superheroes returned to the fore in more visually sophisticated styles, with more complex personalities, and in ways that registered the social and political preoccupations and conflicts of the era. Specifically, as Bradford W. Wright asserts, Silver Age work reflected the nation's coming to terms with its superpower status and with a revised understanding of American cultural exceptionalism; its legacy was the invention of "reluctant superheroes who struggled with the confusion and ambivalent consequences of their own power" (180). These characters were "outsiders beset by the uncertainties of modern society" (225), a trope that had wide appeal to the mostly adolescent boys who purchased comic books and to a young man such as Mahr, buffeted by family tragedy. Mahr greatly enjoyed discussing "All-Things Super-Heroic" (Levy), and he was a devoted fan and correspondent of Neal Adams, a late Silver Age innovator at DC and Marvel, who created a

number of character-altering storylines and looks for Batman, Superman, the Green Lantern, and X-Men, and whose work Mahr followed and collected during the 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Mahr assiduously forged and maintained relationships with various comics artists and writers such as Adams, which was in keeping with the fan-centric economy of the comic book industry during the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s.<sup>14</sup> His relationship with Adams gained him entrée to a wider circle of fans and collaborators in the commercial comic book industry. This circle included Jon Bogdanove, Joe Rubinstein, Joe Kubert, Stan Lee, and Chuck Dixon, as well as Esteve Polls, who tapped into a further network of Spanish commercial comic book artists. Mahr also befriended three writers who, like him, straddled the comic book and Orthodox worlds: Meth, a comics writer who edited Mahrwood Press's *Balm in Gilead* (2007) (a charity publication to help Israeli children displaced by the second Lebanon war of 2006) and was associated with the Chabad-Lubavitch religious movement in the 1980s, but moved away from it out of disappointment with the power struggles following the death of the Lubavitcher Rebbe; Michael Netzer, born Michael Nasser, a protégé of Neal Adams who immigrated to Israel and converted to Judaism, and whose subsequent business/creative partner, Sofia Fedorov-Polonsky, became a regular colorist for Mahrwood Press; and Moshe Chaim Levy, a *ba'al teshuva* from Tucson, Arizona and a former deejay and freelance comic book artist who settled in Israel as a candle maker and poster artist, who collaborated with Mahr on *Journeys* (a serial adventure comic strip).<sup>15</sup>

These last three embody an especially evocative node in Mahr's social networks in which the commercial comic book industry and superhero mythology collide in tangible and provocative ways with Jewish religious ideas and practice. Mahr's life journey in the US and Israel allows us to see how such transnational combinations take shape and to consider the social, cultural and

psychological events motivating literary and aesthetic innovation: in this case, a dissatisfaction with the dominant social order of secular modernity and its apparent inability to protect the innocent; a sense of otherness combined with the feeling that Orthodoxy, and Judaism itself, confer great power and responsibility; a longing for community in which the individual is subordinate to the greater good of the collective, especially one whose tradition of storytelling invites active participation from its consumers; and an intense immersion in various streams of cultural exceptionalism, including that of the superhero genre. Mahr was thus primed to create Jewish comic book superheroes indicative of his own contrapuntal affiliations, superheroes from alternate universes who are guides for the perplexed and defenders of an exceptional faith.

### **Mahrwood's Superheroes of the Book**

Mahr did not invent Orthodox comics or Orthodox superheroes. There is a longstanding but marginalized canon of comics for young, Orthodox-identified Jewish readers: Torah Umesorah's *Best of Olomeinu Back Cover Stories* (*Series One: Part One*, 1970, and *Series Two: Part One*, 1971, both reprinted by Mahrwood Press), Leibel Estrin and Dovid Sears' independently published *Mendy and the Golem* (1981-1983, revived in 2003 by Matt Brandstein), Kubert's *The Adventures of Yaakov and Isaac* (1984, also republished by Mahrwood Press), Al Wiesner's self-published *Shaloman* (1988-2004), and Alan Oirich's *Jewish Hero Corps* (2003).<sup>16</sup> But Mahr is the first writer-publisher to create a long-form, self-contained comics story that combined the superhero genre with a specifically Jewish literary tradition and was intentionally aimed at an Orthodox and transnational Jewish audience.

Such stories were not the only works Mahr published following the incorporation of Mahrwood Press in January 2004. These included *A.N.T.S.*, a Jewish-themed children's picture book by R. and M. Watier; *The Quest for the Mysterious Cloth*, a comic book short story by B. Calev based on Talmudic parables; and *Junior Pirates: Beginnings*, a secular children's pirate adventure, which Mahr published in collaboration with Spanish comics artist Eduardo Alpuente (an inker for DC and Marvel), and which was written by Dixon, the primary writer for DC Comics' Batman franchise during the 1990s. Still, the way forward for Mahr as both a comics writer and publisher lay in Israel's ultra-Orthodox communities. In 2003 he began collaborating on a project with Moshe Chaim Gress (who publishes as Moshe Chaim Levy) in the hope of producing a professional-looking comic book that would be educationally useful for Orthodox Jews. As Mahr relates in his introductory essay for *Journeys: The Collected Stories*, the project stalled until Mahr learned that *Hamodia* was expanding its children's section and needed new material ("Publisher's Corner" n. pag.). As the newspaper of the Agudat Israel, one of the most powerful and important *haredi* political and cultural movements of the modern era, *Hamodia* offered Mahr a crucial inroad to Orthodox audiences in Israel, the UK, and the US via their Jerusalem-based Hebrew-language edition and the London- and Brooklyn-based English-language editions.

Additionally, *Hamodia* and other ultra-Orthodox daily newspapers in Israel had in the mid-1990s started publishing comic strips in their children's sections and supplements, and by 2004 this established convention already supported a variety of "heroes who fight an arsenal of evil-doers and win." Some of these featured the misadventures of young children, while others "were adventure stories about heroes with religious characteristics" (Rotem) or, more significantly, about the life and teachings of famous rabbis. This last type proved crucial for Mahr's work, as

did the international reach of Agudat Israel and its publications—in fact, the *Olomeinu* “Back Cover Stories” of the 1960s and 1970s, the first comic strips created specifically as educational material for a young Orthodox audience and with which Mahr was familiar,<sup>17</sup> featured such hagiographic stories and were published by Torah Umesorah, an affiliate organization of the Agudat Israel of America. Both *Olomeinu* and *Hamodia* had thus helped popularize in the US and Israel this contemporary children’s version of traditional rabbinic hagiography, a venerable and original genre of Orthodox Jewish writing (Hakak 219). *Hamodia* thereby provided the official Rabbinic sanction Mahr needed, granting his comics an educational function as well as providing models for his own work that pointed to a Jewish literary tradition with proven transnational appeal.

Mahr’s development of these models’ creative potential is evident in *Journeys*, the series he (now using his Hebrew given name, Aryeh) and Levy created that recounts the time-traveling adventures of the yeshiva students Mordy and Sender with their Uncle Ari. Both the story and imagery of the first adventure, “The Trouble with Bavel,” evoke H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895) (by way of George Pal’s 1960 film adaptation) with allusions to kabbalah and Talmudic folklore about ancient Israel. Uncle Ari, the inventor of the time machine, references *the Ari*, Hebrew for “lion,” the name given to Rabbi Isaac Luria, the famous sixteenth-century mystic of Safed who is considered the progenitor of modern kabbalah. The first trip Uncle Ari and his nephews take in their time machine is to the years just before the destruction of the First Temple in 3338/587 BCE, and the same rule applies in *Journeys* as in every time travel comic: the voyagers must make no change in the past lest it transform the present.

That comic book trope, however, has a clear educational function in regard to *Journeys*’ *hashkafa*, the traditional term for *perspective* that denotes a work’s Jewish historical and

philosophical worldview and also is employed as a subject category describing ideologically driven types of popular Jewish writing. On the one hand, Mordy and Sender learn the sort of details about First Temple Jerusalem that the comic book is meant to teach: that the geography of Jerusalem then was different, that back then one could physically feel the holiness of the Temple and the divine presence in Jerusalem, and that worship revolving around animal sacrifice followed different rules and an earlier version of the Jewish calendar. On the other hand, the importance of learning about such difference is reinforced as integral to a timeless understanding of Judaism and Jewish history, so that what seems different really remains the same. As Mordy and Sender witness the ancient Jerusalemites arguing about whether to fight the Babylonians or “practice justice and seek trust” (17) in God’s provenance, Uncle Ari reminds them, “Boys, when people are frightened they sometimes do not listen to what the Torah wants of us. It was the same **then** as it is **now**” (15). Despite befriending the young prophet Mishael, whom they wish to save, Mordy and Sender learn that they cannot change what God has already willed for the Jewish people, even if that means acceptance of such disasters as the destruction of the Temple. Sender, who most desires to be a warrior-hero, learns that real Jewish heroes are those scholar-students who remain “Torah true,” however the great scholars of their generation define it. Only in that way can Sender literally and symbolically fulfill the words of a follower of the prophet Jeremiah, that “Jews will always live in Yerushalayim” (35).

This emphasis on submitting one’s free will to God’s foreordained path for Jews and so embracing a true Jewish subjectivity and difference, a version of the superhero’s acceptance of his or her fated role and identity in human society, is an important trope in Mahrwood Press comic books. Such heroic discovery of and submission to Jewish difference—drawn as a distinctly masculine responsibility and rite of passage, which teaches young men to guard the

past by adopting a timeless, Torah-true worldview that enables religious and cultural renewal throughout history—finds fullest expression in *Shmuel HaNagid: Nagdila: A Tale of the Golden Age* and *Rabbeinu Shmuel HaNagid: A Tale of the Golden Age*, *Rambam: The Story of Rabbeinu Moshe Ben Maimon (Maimonides)*, and *Rashi hakadosh: A Light After the Dark Ages*. Each illustrates how Mahr, by appropriating earlier, hagiographic comic strips about rabbis from Orthodox publications for children, imbuing their protagonists with the complex emotional life of Silver Age superheroes and refiguring their stories within a graphic novel format, produced a powerful formula for Orthodox comic books that are both superhero stories and *hashkafa*.

*Nagdila*, written by Mahr—who for this project used his English name, Eric—and drawn by Esteve Polls, the Spanish comics artist (who is not Jewish), is a two-volume biography of Rabbi Shmuel ben Yosef HaLevi, the eleventh-century Hebrew poet, governor of Spanish Jewry, and Chief Vizier of Granada. The collaboration with Polls gives this graphic novel a far more professional appearance than the comic strip Mahr had produced with Levy. Polls’s facility with large, bird’s-eye-view panels of geography and massed armies emphasizes the story’s martial and political heroism, but his dexterity with shadow, facial expressions, and dramatic points of view consistently directs readers’ attention to the inner conflicts of Mahr’s characters. In the prologue, for example, Shmuel HaNagid, “the Prince,” is introduced to readers as a great and magnanimous general who is ambivalent about war, strict with his troops about the penalties they will incur for “striking men who had surrendered” (6), yet longing each day for “the sweetness of Torah and poem” (5). Mahr conveys those traits and shapes HaNagid’s character by employing, in this section and throughout both volumes of the story, passages from two of HaNagid’s three collections of poetry, *Ben Tehillim* and *Ben Mishlei* (some taken from Peter Cole’s 1996 translation of HaNagid’s poems). These function as snippets of internal monologue

that humanize this superhero. Simultaneously, Polls depicts HaNagid's alternation between the violence of military life and the quietude of religious learning by transitioning over two pages from densely populated, narrow panels that convey the crowded action of battle to panels that empty out in the last tier of the second page, ending with HaNagid and his son in a moody interior scene studying Torah inside a tent at night (see figure 1).

That tension between outside and inside is echoed throughout the graphic novel. HaNagid does not have a secret identity as such, but he balances between dual affiliations. HaNagid's origin story, which also doubles as the hagiographic recognition of his fated brilliance, depicts him as a refugee of the Arab sacking of Córdoba who arrives in Málaga and opens a pharmacy where he distinguishes himself in the study and teaching of Torah, a talent that renders him an excellent, multilingual letter writer. He is recognized by his fellow Jews as a natural leader and by the vizier of Málaga as a brilliant advisor. Hence the dramatic tension of Mahr's graphic novel derives from HaNagid's constant strategizing to maintain the political and military hegemony of his Berber masters, his secondary allegiance, while secretly keeping all the warring parties of Spain from destroying the Jews and their Torah scholarship, his primary allegiance. When seen in his role as advisor or general, HaNagid is drawn with colorful clarity in bright light. But in times of emotional turmoil—following the deaths of his father and brother and during the political debates regarding what course HaNagid should take to protect the Jews—he is drawn in deep shadow and often as the only figure within the panel, so that his doubts and his isolation as a leader are highlighted just as they would be in any superhero comic.

The educational function of the story comes into sharp focus in the second volume, *Rabbeinu Shmuel HaNagid*. As HaNagid navigates the political intrigues of Granada, young readers learn that the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry—the era of Muslim, Jewish and Christian *convivencia*

(“coexistence”)—was in fact fraught with dangers precisely because of the close political and social interaction between these three competing faiths. As the Nagid observes about the power struggle that follows the death of the Emir of Granada, “Whoever we back, the opposing side will pour their wrath on us” (31). Though he prevails in that episode and protects the Jews against their enemies, the climax of the volume is the Jewish-Muslim debate he is forced into by the new Emir, his ostensible protector, in which the cost for losing is his own death. The Jewish apostate who argues on behalf of Islam challenges him to convert in order to save his life (because, according to the apostate, converting to save one’s life is required by the Torah), but HaNagid refuses. His successful defense of Judaism turns, in fact, on his willingness to die rather than convert because “The Torah says in time of persecution we surrender our lives for any commandment,” and “It is obvious that this is becoming a time of persecution” (49). The lesson here is that no matter how strong HaNagid’s loyalty to Muslim Granada may be, depending on such outsider loyalty, on *convivencia*, as a guarantee of security and religious freedom is a deadly mistake. Insider loyalty to Judaism must remain paramount. According to this rabbi, Jewish superheroes are the guardians of a collective Jewish identity that coexists with, but is separate from and must sometimes reject, the political and social mainstream, a coexistence mimicked by Orthodox comic books and this graphic novel.

*Rambam* promotes submission to Jewish collective identity and destiny too, while also developing a self-reflexive commentary on its status as a “simple” book. For *Rambam*, a fast-paced and neatly edited biography of Maimonides (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, the twelfth-century Talmudist, philosopher, and doctor), Mahr partnered with Rabbi Berel Wein and his US-based Destiny Foundation, which is dedicated to producing popular Jewish histories from an Orthodox perspective. This connection brought to the project Robert J. Avrech—the Orthodox-

affiliated screenwriter who wrote the mainstream films *Body Double* (1984) and *A Stranger among Us* (1992) (the latter about a murder in an Orthodox Jewish community)—as the primary writer, with Mahr credited for “additional story.” Whereas *Nagdila* had no *haskamah*, no letter of approbation, and *Rabbeinu Shmuel HaNagid* had a generic *haskamah* with no provenance, *Rambam* features a *haskamah* from Mahr’s former teacher at the Torah Center of Buffalo, Rabbi Yaacov Haber (see figure 2). Drawn by comics freelancers, *Rambam* is far more conventional in its visual style and comics paneling, yet that lack of experimentation works to the benefit of the narrative and its meta-commentary.

The book opens with an origin story/recognition scene in which Rambam as a child in Córdoba is characterized as unflinchingly curious about the natural world and is marked out by the greatest sage of the era as destined to lead his generation of Jews. “It is through your soul, Moshe Ben Maimon, that Torah will be preserved,” the sage tells Rambam from his deathbed, “It is through your efforts that Torah and holiness will be maintained” (4). Once again, the oppressors of the Jews are intolerant Muslims (here it is the Almohads of North Africa who conquered much of Spain in the twelfth century) who demand that Jews convert or go into exile. Rambam’s father chooses exile as the only viable choice for his son’s religious and intellectual future, and though the narrative acknowledges in a thin, horizontal panel at the bottom of the page that his father, who was his teacher, “also believed that science, astronomy and mathematics were important” (15), the comment both looks like and resonates as a footnote. Rambam’s heroism is in fact predicated on his education in Torah and his ability to clarify how Jews in times of persecution and exile can still remain Torah true. So when the narrative explains the origin of his commentary on the Mishnah, the compendium of Jewish oral law compiled in the third century, Rambam remarks, “To save the Torah, I must make the Talmud available to all

Jews” (16), and the final panel in that episode clarifies his heroic mission: “My writings will make things simpler and easier to understand for all Jews” (17).

Provocatively, these statements also legitimate comic books for Orthodox readers. Through the “simple” means of this visually conventional graphic novel, Rambam, the patriarchal superhero, can explain to people gathered in an outdoor market why Jews should “go to a place where [they] can keep [their] religion and the Torah without any coercion or fear” (24), to uneducated housewives why Jews “can’t just eat any food, only what the Torah tells [them] to” (40), and to his fellow rabbis why even the most accomplished Jewish scholars need a guide to “the Torah’s perspective” (59). The intense criticism and opposition by Rambam’s rabbinic contemporaries to his *Mishneh Torah*, his crowning achievement in which he “codified and made all of halacha [Jewish law] easy to understand” (60), becomes the source of Rambam’s superheroic doubts and emotional distress. The graphic novel ends with Rambam finding solace by throwing himself into his work as spiritual and physical healer of his people; he dies in Fostat, Egypt, of overwork on behalf of the Jewish collective—a superhero who sacrifices himself for the humans who do not completely understand him. The final two panels show his legacy and complete this trope of superheroic sacrifice in which the superhero does not really die; this concluding sequence first depicts a scene in a contemporary yeshiva of young men studying Rambam’s once controversial work “at all hours of the day and night,” followed by an image of the *Mishneh Torah* lying next to an open copy of *Sefer Hamitzvot* (Book of Commandments) beneath the caption “The man became a legend. The legend lives in his beloved, eternal Torah writings” (64).

*Rambam*’s validation of comics as simple but religiously sanctioned books is extended in *Rashi hakadosh*, the weakest of the three graphic novels. Written by Mahr and J. Cogan and

sporting a generic *haskamah*, the story of the life of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (the eleventh-century commentator on the Bible and the Talmud), the book is alternately rushed and disconnected. The illustration is poorly reproduced, with certain panels looking crudely drawn, and its color-coded dialogue boxes (beige for narration, blue for Rashi, purple for Elijah the Prophet, yellow for citations) come across as heavy-handed, seemingly designed for readers unfamiliar with comics narratives. The result is that the simplicity lauded in *Rambam* as an effective conveyor of *hashkafa* is here merely simplistic. Rashi appears less communitarian than authoritarian when he admonishes a wealthy man that “the community is more powerful than any individual” (26). When Rashi explains to Elijah that his “simple commentary” intends to “stay within the strict interpretation of the plain text . . . to understand the plain meaning and simplicity of Hashem’s word” (16), young readers are thereby given license to read this graphic novel, but they are also being warned about the dangers of using it to make any interpretation of their own about the religious issues that Rashi decided. Hence Rashi’s leniency regarding the laws of mourning and supervision of kosher meat is footnoted with the admonition that “all halachic questions must be referred to a competent posek [legal authority]” (36, 38).

In the end, Rashi’s patriarchal superheroism in this volume is a more didactic version of HaNagid’s and Rambam’s. Like them he submits to and accepts the fate of Jewish difference, navigates with guile and constant suspicion the baleful non-Jewish political systems in which Jews must live, and situates collective Jewish identity as an alternate universe inside those systems. He also garners mythic stature, legitimate authority, and immortality through the sorts of innovations that make it easier for the “common man”—because the implied audience for all three stories is clearly male—and for those who return to Judaism to remain observant in times of persecution. The comic books Mahr published along with these three—*King for a Moment*

(beginning in 2006), *Of Heaven and Earth* (2008), *Mysteries of the Alef-Beis* (2008), and *Yibaneh Hamikdash* (2008), as well as reprints of Joe Kubert's *The Adventures of Yaakov and Isaac* (beginning in 2004) and the *Olomeinu* "Back Cover Stories"—all expand and deepen the *hashkafa* that his Jewish superheroes articulate. Even *Balm in Gilead*, for which he used his English given name, Eric, and which was mostly reprinted short stories by Jewish science fiction and fantasy writers, can be read as a gloss on the sources of Mahr's Jewish superheroes.

Thanks to these superheroes, at the time of Mahr's death, his press was the premier publisher of Orthodox comic books in English and Hebrew distributed in Israel and the US through bookstores and on the Internet and produced in partnership with various Orthodox organizations connecting Jerusalem with Los Angeles and Monsey, New York. The cover of *The Very Best of Olomeinu Back Pages, Volume 2* (2009) is perhaps the most telling visualization of Mahr's accomplishments as a writer and publisher. Two Orthodox boys with sidelocks and ritual fringes hanging out of their shirts are reading the very comic book on whose cover they appear, while a third points to the shop where it was purchased and where another group of boys enters beneath its sign, "Books & Comics" (see figure 3). That image of a cover within a cover receding in a never-ending chain expresses both an inventive refiguring of the Jewish bookstore and a curious sort of tunnel vision falling away from the outside world and disappearing into an imaginary horizon of text.

### **"Friction," *Hashkafa*, and the Religious Imagination**

The simultaneously innovative and retroverse nature of Mahrwood Press's comic books is an outcome of Eric Mahr's personal experiences and certain transnational socio-historical forces of his time. The social and cultural interconnections represented by his life and graphic novels, the

publishing company he founded, and the artists and writers he befriended and commissioned exemplify what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing calls “friction.” For Tsing, friction emphasizes the dynamism inherent in globally networked cultural production as people work in, with, and through large-scale political, social, and cultural movements. Friction is “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference,” a way to frame the grip of cross-cultural, long distance encounters and interactions made possible by global flows of “goods, ideas, money, and people,” but whose unpredictability “reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (4-5). From this critical perspective, Mahr’s life story and his publishing company are not simple prooftexts for the so-called “triumph of Orthodoxy,” or for a ravaging “Americanization” of literatures and cultures outside the US. On the contrary, they bear witness to the complexity and contingency of these phenomena, and consequently remind us to be wary of treating children’s comic books whose form or formulas are derived from commercial superhero comics as less innovative than adult-themed experimentalist graphic novels.

Consider Mahr’s yoking of rabbinic hagiography with aspects of the superhero genre, thus developing a new form of *hashkafa* suitable for children and religious outreach to non-Orthodox Jews. This sort of literary innovation underscores how contemporary ultra-Orthodoxy is “deeply implicated within . . . a modernity that they only appear to oppose,” as Jeremy Stolow points out (110). Discussing the transnational Agudat Israel in particular, Stolow observes that in order “to re-stitch its structures of rabbinocentric authority into the fabric of the modern Jewish imaginary” (120), ultra-Orthodoxy has made use of the cultural and capital networks of modern globalization to restore a traditional Jewish corporation opposed to modernity, thereby redrawing and expanding the corporation’s transnational boundaries, yet organizing and disciplining its

members using forms of governance and identity formation borrowed from the nation-state (129). Collective Jewish identity may be an alternate universe in Mahr's graphic novels, and Torah-true Jews may live in Spain, Egypt, France, Israel, and the US, but they always look to the Nagids, the princes, of each generation to lead them as a nation and to enforce the correct religious, political, and legal interpretations of the Torah. Though many might see that alternate universe as a homogenous fundamentalism, the variety of Orthodox organizations collaborating with Mahrwood Press testifies as well to the cultural heterogeneity of contemporary Orthodoxy. To Orthodox cultural producers such as Mahr, "the choice is not *either* modern *or* Haredi Orthodox; it may also be *both* modern *and* Haredi" (Heilman 69).

We therefore must be careful not to simplify the encounter between the superhero genre and other cultures. Yohai Hakak, writing about the changing depiction of Torah sages in ultra-Orthodox literature from perfect super humans to more foible-prone characters—a literary development that fomented heated debate (217)—ascribes the shift primarily to social and cultural changes within the *haredi* community in Israel. These changes strengthened internal criticism, undermined the perception of Torah sages as infallible, and opened the door to Western psychological discourse that promoted the desire "to reduce tensions between reality and personal aspirations, while viewing concealment and repression as negative" (234). In this light, Mahr's graphic novels are bearers of a conflicted, late twentieth-century version of American exceptionalism that proved useful at a particular historical juncture for portraying the human struggles of Jewish superheroes in a way that did not undermine their mythic status. They no doubt bear this exceptionalism courtesy of US capitalism and economic power, but they are also a hybridized product doing unexpected work in opposition to the cultural hegemony of their country of origin.

This hybridity suggests that Orthodox comic books can very well be employed as novel, conservative forms of Jewish oppositional culture. But more research is needed on their distribution and popularity and especially on how readers actually use them. Feldheim Publishers, the US distributors of Mahrwood Press books, informally reports selling between 2500 and 3200 copies each of the English-language editions of *Nagdila*, *Rabbeinu Shmuel HaNagid*, *Rambam*, and *Rashi hakadosh* in 2010.<sup>18</sup> Anecdotal information at the point of sale, however, complicates these numbers. At one Jewish bookstore I visited in midtown Manhattan, the clerk claimed that the Mahrwood Press comic books were good sellers, and though Orthodox parents understood comic books as “goyish,” not Jewish, they bought them as effective introductions to the saints and the lessons they taught. Yet the clerk at a Jewish bookstore on the Upper West Side declared that he had returned his entire stock of comic books because he could not sell a single one to Orthodox or non-Orthodox parents. In the meantime, both *Rambam* and *Rashi hakadosh* have been made into animated DVDs, the former featuring the voices of Leonard Nimoy and Armand Assante, diversifying the potential audience for these stories even further.

Much clearer are the consequences of Orthodox rabbinic approval of these comic books’ religious merit and educational worthiness. Such approval of them as suitable for children, especially boys, underscores the longstanding educational function of comic books—whether as instructional tools for the US Army during World War II or as summer reading for today’s incoming college freshmen; it also illustrates that the contemporary desire and “concerted effort among comics professionals to reclaim child readers” (Hatfield 377) is already proceeding in diverse, culturally gendered ways that those professionals may not have anticipated. In the case of Mahrwood Press, the *haskamot* legitimize the use of comic books for *chinuch*, traditional

Jewish education (Abramowitz 17) and presume that the primary audience for these books attends Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox schools; the comics act as a kind of extracurricular reinforcement of ideas and lessons already encountered in their gender-segregated classes. Recognizing that these comics appear in Hebrew, English, Spanish, and French emphasizes the welter of educational and ideological collaborations opened up by the polylingualism of Orthodox comic books.<sup>19</sup>

Rabbinic approval consequently expands our understanding of American Jewish writing as including works of *hashkafa* in which conservation replaces interpretation as the acme of creative achievement. The current focus in critical studies of American Jewish comic books and graphic novels on works that refigure the meanings of memory and experience in order to make room for contemporary, unconventional literary and cultural practices or perspectives—that evidence what Geoffrey Hartman terms “involuntary or insubordinate midrash [biblical commentary]” (210)—is productive, often groundbreaking, and remains important. Yet Mahr’s graphic novels engage a different mode of writing just as capable of reinvigorating American Jewish literary and cultural production, albeit within a particular religious and ideological camp. The modern *hashkafa* of Orthodox comic books is also a refiguring of Jewish memory and Jewish experience, as *Nagdila*, *Rambam* and *Rashi hakadosh* illustrate. But their creative projections and erasures delimit and regulate in ways that take advantage of “the special connection between comics and children’s culture” (Hatfield 378), teaching young readers with a taste for unconventional reading to submit and not transgress, to absorb and not interpret, and to innovate only in order to conserve, as exemplified in the case of Mahrwood Press by the medium conveying the message.

Finally, the formulation in comic books of such modern *hashkafa* by writers and artists who are returnees to the faith and the legitimization of comics within ultra-Orthodox society by those who come from outside it (Rotem) reflect the significance and relevance of the religious imagination to future study of US and American Jewish comic books. These returnees help to contextualize the transnational economy of Mahrwood Press's comic books, for there are other comic book writers and artists who tap the religious imagination for inspiration and other comic books and graphic novels that express in innovative ways the contemporary worldwide resurgence of religiosity as the basis for cultural and social renewal.

Perhaps the best-known and longest-running example of this phenomenon is Jack T. Chick's evangelical Christian Chick tracts, which, like the Mahrwood Press comic books, are also published in multiple languages and distributed in the United States and abroad. Chick tracts are little 5"x 3", 22-page staple-bound booklets that Chick began self-publishing in the early 1960s that mean to shock readers into repentance through often lurid tales of sin, sermonizing, and conversion experiences. The most famous tract—one that roughly demonstrates their conventions—is *This Was Your Life!* Drawn by Chick in a cartoon-like style, it features a smug, pipe-smoking denizen of a prosperous middle-class suburb who is suddenly struck down by a sickle-wielding Death. The pastor above his grave proclaims, "*He was a **good** man!*" But at the bottom of this and other panels are quotations from the books of Luke, Hebrews, Isaiah, and others that function as a running commentary helping readers understand that deep down—as spatially figured in the graveside panel showing the pastor and mourners standing above the deceased who lies in his coffin underneath them—"we are all as an unclean thing." An angel then flies the protagonist-soul to his judgment before the Lord, where his life is projected as a celestial film for his, God's, and readers' review. Guilty of a plethora of sins including rejecting

Christ, he wonders, “Why didn’t someone warn me about all this?” Indicted by commentary from John, Mark, Matthew, and Revelation, he acknowledges his guilt, but it is too late; his name does not appear in the Book of Life and he is cast into “everlasting fire.” The book then offers an alternate storyline, “This Can Be Your Life!” in which readers witness another everyman repent, accept Christ as his savior, and do good deeds; upon his death, he is welcomed to Heaven by the words of Matthew 25:21, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant—enter thou into the joy of thy Lord!” The last panel is entirely a text box instructing readers on exactly how they can be similarly saved.

As with Mahr’s Orthodox comic books, the innovation of this Chick tract is similarly linked to its retroverse nature—in the way the story directs the reader’s gaze back over a fallen individual’s past and then inwards in search of the authentically good self mirrored in the Biblical texts. That narrative looking back and turning away from a sinful secular world and toward the rewards promised by religious texts is the foundation for a potent formula story about self-realization. It is why the tracts are recognized for “their artful blend of comics and religious narrative,” and specifically for the kind of immersive and persuasive reading experience that results from reader identification with more simply drawn character-protagonists like the one in *This Was Your Life!* (Orcutt 100-01). Their efficacy is attested to by comics artist/writers such as Daniel Clowes, best known for his critically acclaimed graphic novel *Ghost World* (1997), who admits that after one marathon reading of Chick tracts, “I’d never been absolutely convinced by a comic book before in my life, but I was sure that he was right and that I’d been crazy all along” (qtd. in Raeburn, *The Imp* 9-10). Part of their visual and rhetorical power, as Daniel Martin Varisco points out and as we have seen in Mahr’s work, is generated by borrowed superhero themes and tropes related to sensational battles between good and evil—God versus the Devil,

the hero's mission to save the world, and so on (223). But another part is generated by the tracts' material resemblance to a different comics genre. Chick tracts are the same size and format as the so-called "Tijuana bibles" produced from the 1920s through the 1960s, pornographic comics sometimes starring plagiarized characters from mainstream comic strips. Daniel K. Raeburn interprets this resemblance as proof that the tracts are, intentionally or unintentionally, "hardcore Protestant pornography," a toxic but compelling mixture of American religious and political fears, capitalist advertising, and militant masculine swagger—"pure sadomasochistic fantasy with an emphasis on the rhetorical foreplay leading up to the inevitable seduction and submission to Jesus Christ" (*Holy Book 7*).

Raeburn's analysis broods over these formal and ideological collaborations, and we see how they, like those in the Mahrwood Press comic books, complicate the meaning and uses of Chick's Protestant worldview. If anything, Raeburn makes clear that the difficulty in appraising the religious imagination in contemporary comic books is not, to quote Varisco, because the "fundamentalist rhetoric" in some of them "is the religion many of us love to hate" (227), but because their performances of religiosity, ethnicity, and gender serve such kaleidoscopic social, cultural, and political functions. In addition to Chick, and staking out very different territory within the contemporary religious imaginary, there is also Naif al-Mutawa's *The 99* (beginning in 2007), Barry Deutsch's *Hereville: How Mirka Got Her Sword* (2010), Buzz Dixon's *Serenity*, Shekhar Kapur's *Devi* (beginning in 2007), A. David Lewis's *The Lone and Level Sands* (2005), Osamu Tezuka's *Bhudda* (1972-1983), and G. Willow Wilson's *Cairo* (2007), to name just a very few.<sup>20</sup>

These titles and the quick comparison to the Chick tracts suggest that Orthodox comic books are simply a case in point about the need to examine not only what non-religious or non-

Orthodox artists and writers have to say about religion or Orthodoxy, but also what religiously observant or Orthodox cultural producers have to say in relation to secular culture. The transnational economy of Mahrwood Press's comic books is just one instance of the friction accompanying and describing the global networks of US comic book production, dissemination, and consumption. It illustrates the many unpredictable encounters fast changing the shape and meaning of graphic narratives, image/text, and mixed-media literatures—whatever the ultimate term will be for the innovative appearances, techniques, and collaborations of such future hybrid literary texts. Eric Mahr's life and work reminds us that comic books cannot be fully understood in all their fascinating but troubling diversity without including the religious imagination as a focus of scholarly investigation.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> I do not dispute Charles Hatfield's assessment that comics scholarship overall remained methodologically rich and diverse in its objects of study, incited and inspired by work indebted to European comics theory, reception and audience studies, and historical analyses (371-74)—so much so that the field and its history is now “difficult to map” (373). What I trace here, however, is a particular trend in comics scholarship in departments of English and American Jewish literary studies. See also Derek Parker Royal's analysis of this trend (14-16).

<sup>2</sup> Royal also points this out in his critique of Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven's introduction to their special issue of *MFS* on “Graphic Narrative” (15).

<sup>3</sup> Royal makes clear that the dispute over terminology, especially over *graphic novel*, uncovers how the field has been a site of struggle over generic and aesthetic distinctions as well as over

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what constitutes mainstream and margin, the literary and the non-literary (11-14). See also my essay (8).

<sup>4</sup> See Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman. Even the two essays that focus on Jewish ethnicity in Royal's *MELUS* special issue follow this pattern: see Menachem Feuer and Jennifer Glaser.

<sup>5</sup> See Jack Abramowitz, Lior Alperovitch, Ron Bousso, and Tamar Rotem.

<sup>6</sup> See "Eric Aryeh Mahr" and "Eric M. Mahr."

<sup>7</sup> The obituary uses the term *illustrated* three times to describe Mahrwood Press's books. *Comic book* appears twice, but in the first instance only to describe Mahr as an "avid comic book fan" and in the second instance to quote without attribution a truncated version of the Mahrwood Press mission statement "to produce the finest in Jewish comic books" (Gavant A26).

<sup>8</sup> I borrow the term *contrapuntal* from Samuel C. Heilman, who borrows it from Mary Douglas to describe the multiple cultural and institutional loyalties that modern Orthodox Jews embrace simultaneously and with "some modicum of autonomy in making and establishing those affiliations" that is an aspect of their accommodationist stance toward modernity (3).

<sup>9</sup> See Chaya Baila Gavant; Sanford Mahr, "Sanford"; and "17-Year-Old Murderer."

<sup>10</sup> See Judy Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (23) and Jeffrey S. Gurock (250-52). My calling Mahr a *ba'al teshuva* might seem odd to some, given his family's connections to Orthodoxy (see Sanford Mahr, "Sanford"). But this was during the late 1950s and early 1960s when there was a "wide Orthodox tent" in many American Jewish communities that made room for families who maintained only a nominal connection to Orthodoxy, either out of nostalgia or inertia (Gurock 5). Mahr's notable turn in his twenties to a very active and committed Orthodox lifestyle and his study of Judaism at an institute dedicated to Orthodox outreach strongly connect him to the

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larger patterns of the *ba'al teshuva* movement in the US, which refers not only to the “return” of the completely secular, but also of those from unobservant or laxly observant families that hovered at the margins of the Orthodox world (Gurock 11).

<sup>11</sup> See Hasia R. Diner (310-12), Gurock (226-55), and Heilman (6-12).

<sup>12</sup> See Uzi Rebhun and Chaim I. Waxman, who also note that by 1995 American Jewish immigrants to Israel made up about one and a half percent of the total Israeli Jewish population.

<sup>13</sup> See Michael Netzer.

<sup>14</sup> This was a volatile period of change and experimentation that saw the rise of creator’s rights, direct marketing, and fan-oriented product lines (Wright 260-62; McCloud 58-66). The focus on serving insiders within the social and creative communities of commercial comic book publishers and underground comix (*comix* differentiates the alternative from the mainstream) made the industry more conducive to the kinds of innovations that bloom in the hothouse environment of fan fiction. It was also indicative of how fan culture often manifests a type of exceptionalism—comics fans’ product allegiance and consequent sense of their own special status was so strong that, given the combination of their desirable eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old demographic and concomitant purchasing power, they managed to sway the industry to serve their needs above all others during the 1990s.

<sup>15</sup> See Clifford Meth, “Cliff Interviewed by JEWLIT” and “Cliff Interviewed by SBC”; Netzer, “About”; and “Moshe.”

<sup>16</sup> This is my construction of that canon; see my essay (16).

<sup>17</sup> See Mahr’s “Publisher’s Corner” in Rabbi Yaakov Fruchter (*Vol. 1*, 3).

<sup>18</sup> The sales breakdowns are as follows: *Nagdila*, 2500; *Rabbeinu Shmuel HaNagid*, 2500; *Rambam*, 3000; *Rashi hakadosh*, 3200 (Feldheim). Sanford Mahr asserts that sales for all of

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Mahrwood Press's comic books "were substantial" and that they continue to be sought after by libraries and schools around the world (Telephone).

<sup>19</sup> Though Mahr makes a point in the introduction to *Nagdila* that he "wanted English speakers and Spanish Speakers [sic] to be able to enjoy this story as well" (3), I was unable to locate any Spanish editions of the book. *Junior Pirates*, however, appeared in both Spanish and English editions, and *Rambam* and *Rashi hakadosh* are available in bi-lingual English-French editions.

<sup>20</sup> A. David Lewis provides a timely exploration of this subject matter in his and Christine Hoff Kraemer's critical collection, *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*.

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