JOURNEYS OF FAITH AND SURVIVAL:
AN EXAMINATION OF THREE JEWISH GRAPHIC NOVELS

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores journeys of faith and survival in three Jewish graphic novels: *A Contract with God* by Will Eisner, *The Rabbi’s Cat* by Joann Sfar, and *We Are On Our Own* by Miriam Katin. In each of these texts, the protagonists struggle with their faith and relationship with God, as they negotiate challenges as Jews living in largely unreceptive spaces. Along their journeys, the protagonists confront God in their own ways to try to make sense of the role that faith and Judaism plays in their lives. Drawing on basic principles of the relationship between Jew and God, as well as terms and concepts concerning the aesthetic construction of comics, this thesis probes into the nature of these journeys and the impact they have on the protagonists’ physical and spiritual survival.
CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. ii

CONTENTS ................................................................................................................................. iii

LIST OF FIGURES...................................................................................................................... v

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .............................................................................................................. vi

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Origins of Interest ............................................................................................................... 1
  1.2 Background to the Study .................................................................................................... 2
    1.2.1 The Jewish Experience ................................................................................................. 2
      a). Diaspora ......................................................................................................................... 3
      b). Jewish Diaspora and its Implications ............................................................................ 4
      c). “Jewish Identity” ........................................................................................................... 6
      d). Memory and Continuity ............................................................................................... 7
    1.2.2 The Graphic Novel ...................................................................................................... 7
      a). Searching for Definition ............................................................................................... 8
  1.3 Purpose and Questions for the Study ................................................................................. 11
  1.4 Selection Criteria .............................................................................................................. 12
  1.5 Selected Works .................................................................................................................. 13
  1.6 Significance of the Study .................................................................................................. 13
  1.7 Definition of Terms ......................................................................................................... 14
    1.7.1 Sequential Art ............................................................................................................ 14
    1.7.2 Comics ....................................................................................................................... 15
    1.7.3 Graphic Novel ........................................................................................................... 15
    1.7.4 Jewish Graphic Novel ............................................................................................... 15
    1.7.5 Diaspora .................................................................................................................... 15
    1.7.6 Jewish Diaspora ........................................................................................................ 15
  1.8 Preview of Upcoming Chapters ......................................................................................... 16

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ............................................................................................. 17
  2.1 The Graphic Novel ........................................................................................................... 17
    2.1.1 Origins ....................................................................................................................... 18
    2.1.2 The First Comic Books ............................................................................................... 20
    2.1.3 War, Superman, and Censorship .............................................................................. 22
    2.1.4 Underground Comics and New Paths ...................................................................... 23
  2.2 Jewish Voices .................................................................................................................... 25
    2.2.1 Recurring Topics and Themes ................................................................................... 27
      a). Traditional Versus Secular World .............................................................................. 31
      b). Oscillating Between Faith and Futility ...................................................................... 32
      c). Memory, the Oral Tradition, and Homecoming ........................................................ 32

CHAPTER 3: CRITICAL FRAMEWORK ......................................................................................... 35
  3.1 The Relationship Between Jew and God ......................................................................... 35
  3.2 Aesthetic Features ............................................................................................................ 41
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1 from A Contract with God, p. 23 ................................................................. 61
Figure 4.2 from A Contract with God, p. 52 ................................................................. 63
Figure 5.1 from The Rabbi’s Cat, p. 10 ........................................................................ 83
Figure 5.2 from The Rabbi’s Cat, p. 117 ....................................................................... 85
Figure 6.1 from We Are On Our Own, p. 5 ................................................................. 97
Figure 6.2 from We Are On Our Own, p. 22 ................................................................. 98
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“My people carried our little book in exile, from one exile to another, for two thousand years. We didn’t carry money. We had no treasures. We had the Book, which kept us alive for two thousand years. And out of this book emerged other books.” – Elie Wiesel

1.1 Origins of Interest

In an article published in *Contemporary Literature* Michael Rothberg (1994) addresses the difficulty which Holocaust survivors and their families face in attempting to reflect on their experiences. He addresses an “ultimately tragic and desperate inability to redeem their experience by working through, and representing to themselves” (p. 662). In 1972, a three-page comic strip appeared in *Funny Animals*, an underground comics publication. Created by the son of a Holocaust survivor, the comic strip recounts his father’s struggle to survive the death camps and to cope with the psychological aftermath. The son and artist, Art Spiegelman, would, by 1991, transform the strip into a two-volume graphic novel that would receive several awards, including a special Pulitzer Prize. It was the first time a “comic book” would rouse such acclaim.

While Rothberg refers to an “irony and angst about the decorum of representing destruction” (1994, p. 662), Spiegelman addresses this head on, creating *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (*Book I: My Father Bleeds History* and *Book II: And Here My Troubles Began* [1973-1991]) from within this very context. His text is so original because it functions on a variety of levels, simultaneously recounting his father’s story in the past while establishing a symbolic language to both represent and satirize the Nazi classification of human beings along racial terms. By spanning various genres, grappling with a multitude of themes, motifs, and literary/artistic devices, *Maus* demonstrated the medium’s ability to convey even the most horrific and at the same time delicate of stories with both agility and complexity. The comics medium offered a

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1 (Wiesel, E., & Heffner, R.D., 2001, p. 169)
new and different way to represent the un-representable. *Maus* would prepare the ground for a whole genre of Jewish graphic novels.

*Maus* was one among many graphic novels focusing on the Jewish experience: preliminary research revealed that Jewishness is featured in many comic books and graphic novels, that many of the founding comic artists are Jewish, and that they chose and are continuing to choose to feature the Jewish experience in their work. The graphic novel has experienced an upsurge in popularity over the past two decades. With this general rise, graphic novels featuring Jewish content have flourished – so much so, that one may venture to claim the emergence of an entirely new genre: the Jewish graphic novel.

1.2 Background to the Study

In the effort to gain a deeper understanding of the development of Jewish graphic novels and the types of stories being told through them, this background will examine various areas of research intended to inform this study.

1.2.1 The Jewish Experience

The drive to survive begets creativity. For over 2000 years marked by exile, dispersion, and migration, Jews have nonetheless survived as a distinct people with a rich tradition rooted in religious faith. Armed with a manual outlining the laws for living an ethical, dignified, and both humanly and spiritually invested life, Jews were expected to engage with the divine for both survival and self-development. For a virtually itinerant people, Jews were, nonetheless, not entirely dispossessed, as Torah study and intellectual pursuits became a sort of portable home. Ezrahi writes that: “The centrality of ‘the Book’ entails a wide culture of substitution for or imitation of the territorial dimension” (2000, p. 13). Some scholars have suggested that “the People of the Book” found a “portable temple” in the Book (Wettstein, 2002, p. 3). The collective Jewish journey has compelled Jews, both as individuals and as a people, to confront themselves and their God. Through a variety of media, Jews have wrestled with and expressed
the collective Jewish experience. Jewish graphic novels are both a product of and a vehicle for this experience.

a). Diaspora

It is impossible to consider the history and experience of the Jewish people without acknowledging the role played by diaspora. Diaspora as a concept has broad implications. It is intrinsically bound up with notions of home, culture, and identity. Physical space becomes linked not only to geography, but to culture, community, religion and spirituality, and therefore also, to the tenets of group and individual identity. The effects of diasporic experiences on peoples and individuals are varied, though often include feelings of angst and tension as the outcome of outer and inner dislocation.

Today, diaspora is often discussed within the field of cultural studies. As seen through this lens, it is a global phenomenon, one intimately related to and reflective of our contemporary condition, in which changes in centers of power due to political phenomena, financial distribution, and changes in media and technology, among other things, impact our notions of home, community, and identity. These changes demand the redrawing of borders and territories as well as the reconsideration of both individual and group identities shaped by the blurring of real and imagined boundaries, nurturing a kind of hybrid identity. In contrast to classical notions of diaspora, contemporary diaspora discourse is grounded not within the context of the “dark tones of grief and gloom” associated with national or religious movements that dream of “regeneration and return” (Weingrod & Levy, 2005, p. 3), but rather, in a hyperawareness of the impact of world-wide migrations on individual and collective identity.

Contemporary diaspora debate is typically launched within post-colonial and post-modern rhetoric. The concepts and theories of scholars like Ella Shohat, Julia Kristeva, Homi Bhabha, Michel Foucault, James Clifford, and Frederick Jameson, for example, have contributed to this critical discussion.
b). Jewish Diaspora and its Implications

Conceptions of the Jewish Diaspora (hereafter referred to as Diaspora) – considered to be the very first diaspora – stem from Jewish history as recorded in the Bible, and crop up throughout the Jewish experience thereafter. In the context of the Bible, exile and Diaspora imply an ancient yearning to reconnect with the ancient spiritual homeland. Beginning with the initial expulsions following the destruction of the First and later the Second Temples in Jerusalem, both anti-Semitism and voluntary migrations fueled the continual scattering of the Jewish people which would form the Diaspora. Exile and Diaspora are present in Judaism from its very inception. Robert Carroll (1997) writes:

The Hebrew Bible is the book of exile. It is constituted in and by narratives and discourses of expulsion, deportation and exile […] from the stories of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden to the moment when exiled Israel prepared to expel itself from Babylon to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, individuals, families, folk and the people of Judah (Jews) existed in situations of varying degrees of deportation awaiting possible return. (p. 64)

587 B.C.E. was marked by the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem. On the order of King Nebuchadnezzar, Jews were exiled to Babylon (Wettstein, 2002, p. 48). This event led to the initial dispersion of the Jewish people beyond the borders of their ancient homeland. Carroll posits that with the Babylonian exile, “Diasporic existence among alien peoples became then for the Jews (the erstwhile people of Judah) their natural, god-given environment” (1997, p. 65).

Many Jews however did return to Ancient Israel to rebuild the temple. In 70 C.E. during the First Jewish-Roman War, this Second Temple was also destroyed, however, and it was this event, combined with the defeat of leader Shimon Bar Kochba’s revolt against the Romans in 135 C.E. (Wettstein, 2002, p.48), which resulted in the scattering of the Jewish people that would
constitute the Diaspora. Following Bar Kochba’s defeat, most of the Jewish population of Judea was either brutally suppressed or decimated, and the religious center moved to Babylon. Jews would not return *en masse* until the turn of the 19th century with the first Zionist wave of immigration.

Once relocated in Babylon, religious and intellectual life flourished. Omer-Sherman (2002) states: “It has often been noted that the diasporic narrative imagination began with the Babylonian exile of 587 B.C.E., which generated a prayer service that replaced the materialism of the Temple sacrifices” (p. 5). He also asserts that “Torah replaced the terrain of Temple and study replaced sacrifice” (p. 5). Babylon became the creative center of Jewish life, the locus for the creation of numerous foundational Judaic texts.

Reflecting upon this event, some historians view exile and Diaspora in a positive light, viewing the blossoming creativity and innovation as an outcome of the inevitable mixing of diverse cultures. In this way, Babylon has been referred to as “a Site of Creativity” (Cohen, 1997, p. 4). It is the creative angst borne of exile, as well as the impulse to respond and self-define amidst intersecting cultures, which mobilizes and hones individual and collective will for both physical and spiritual survival.

This thesis considers the impact of the experience of Diaspora as a site of arrivals, departures, survival. Each character’s spiritual journey is perceived within this physical and psychological landscape.

Of the impact of Diaspora, Carroll (1997) writes:

Hurled into existence in foreign lands, the dispersed people found […] permanent alienation and, in ways quite difficult to discern, a hurling into existence of the people in the sense of coming to articulate and construct identity and story as given in and through the experience of diaspora. (p. 65)
This alienation is manifest in Jewish writing. Certain writers have characterized the exiled mind as "the homeless mind," focusing particularly on the experience of the Jews. Many attribute the phenomenon of conflicted identity as a result of the Diaspora experience; the effects of a self and perceived Jewish identity as caught between the paradoxes of "native-born" versus "refugee", and "newly-formed" versus "unsettlingly old" (Behlman, 2004, p. 67). Numerous Jewish scholars, some renowned and others less so, have focused on Diaspora, including Martin Buber, Amos Oz, Nico Israel, Sidra Ezrahi, Howard Wettstein, Ranen Omer-Sherman, and Etan Levine, to name but a few. Themes of survival, relationship to God and faith, and assimilation emerge repeatedly in their writing.

c). "Jewish Identity"

"Jewish identity" is not easily definable. Many Jews proudly profess to a Jewish identity, yet in the same breath admit to subscribing to no religious faith or observing no trace of a Halachic way of life (a life which follows in accordance to Jewish law, for example, keeping the Sabbath, keeping kosher, etc). Some define the Jewish people on ethnic terms, others in terms of faith, yet others define the Jewish people as a culture or even a civilization. Laurence Silberstein (2000) writes: “The customary discourse of Jewish identity posits certain attitudes, beliefs, or practices as constitutive of or essential to Jewish identity” (p. 1). Echoing this comment, Howard Wettstein (2002) sheds light on the complexity of defining fundamental tenets of Jewish identity, claiming:

One can find many pegs on which to hang one’s Jewish identity: consciousness of disasters; most notably the Shoah; a sense of solidarity with the state of Israel; minority status vis-à-vis Christianity; the political and cultural prophetic tradition of social justice; solidarity based upon shared language (Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino); finally, traditional Jewish religious identity. (p. 9)
Interestingly, "traditional Jewish religious identity," an identity based in the religion itself, is last on this list. If the essence of being Jewish consists (as it does for many [mostly non-Orthodox] Jews) of a variety of core elements in addition to religious faith, what happens to these elements during the course of the many dispersions and migrations? How does, or how should a "Jewish identity" cope or adapt? Etan Levine poignantly asks: "What demands has the diaspora made on Jewish loyalty and commitment?" (1983, p. VII).

d). Memory and Continuity

Remembering and retelling play essential roles in the continuity of any religious, cultural, or ethnic community. In the Jewish tradition, both hold elevated status. Murray Baumgarten (2002) writes that, for Jews, collective memory, including everything from "stories of grandparents to the biblical commandment to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy" is essential for survival. He adds that recollection "shapes the future not only in anticipation but as its informing structure" (p. 89). The act of bearing witness, remembering, and retelling, in a variety of ways that tap into the creative process, such as writing, aids in the transmission of a collective history.

The graphic novels examined here convey stories of faith and survival in the Diaspora; stories of Jews surviving in non-Jewish lands. This predicament presupposes a more figurative condition, one characterized by the moral anxieties stemming from remaining true to an individual and collective identity, while prevailing in unreceptive spaces. Along the way, each Jew confronts God in his/her often frustrated effort to survive. These journeys will be examined in this thesis.

1.2.2 The Graphic Novel

Graphic novels are often described as comics bound in a book format. They are often said to exhibit novel-like features: well-developed plots, characters, and substantial themes. They also often tell complex stories warranting artistic and literary criticism. Like regular novels, graphic
novels span the full range of literary genres and are capable, as demonstrated by Spiegelman, of treating subjects as horrific as the Holocaust or as whimsical as a teenage love story.

Nonetheless, for years, comics were branded as lowbrow, capable of treating only “unrefined”, indecent, or, at best, simplistic subjects and themes. They were associated with disposable trade magazines, graffiti, and junk literature. In essence, comics were born outside of the canons of serious work and were relegated to stay there, to be regarded as the “literary ugly.”

The past two decades, however, have witnessed a new receptiveness of the graphic novel as a legitimate and powerful storytelling medium at a time when this genre’s popularity is growing dramatically. The works of Will Eisner and Scott McCloud have been seminal to the elevation of this previously bastardized literary form. Semiotic analysis of sequential art has also helped to elevate the status of comics and graphic novels to one of merit.

One need not search far to ascertain a Jewish presence in the world of comics. Jews have played a defining role in the emergence, development, and diversification of an entire literary/artistic medium. Jews were influential during the well-known Golden Age of DC and Marvel tales of the 1930’s and 40’s in which the creators of nearly all the superhero characters and their stories were Jews (for example, Siegel and Shuster’s Superman, Lee and Kirby’s The Fantastic Four and The Incredible Hulk, Lee and Ditko’s Spiderman, Kane and Finger’s Batman, to name a few). In fact each period of comics history was substantially influenced by Jewish artists and writers who typically featured “Jewish” stories, at times subtlety and at other times explicitly, in their work. New graphic novels are being created on an ongoing basis, and the Jewish presence continues to prevail.

a). Searching for Definition

Alongside the rapid growth in the popularity of and receptiveness to the graphic novel, there is the desire, naturally, to locate and contextualize this medium historically and categorically. Will Eisner, known as “The Father of Comics,” was a comics creator and scholar
as well as a Jew who featured “Jewishness” at the heart of his work. Eisner coined the term *graphic novel* in 1978 but failed to provide a comprehensive definition. Recent attempts to define the graphic novel in a way that distinguishes it from other genres and addresses the unique particularities of the medium, yet also embraces its many variants, has proven to be challenging and perhaps even impossible. The initial challenge lies in pinning down the defining features of comics, which in itself produces no concrete results. Frustratingly, just as there are emblematic features associated with comics, there are likewise just as many exceptions. For example, there are comics without speech bubbles, comics without frames, and even wordless comics. Comic books *typically* make use of panels, but not always; they *can* make use of speech and thought bubbles, but do not necessarily need to. What, then, makes a comic a comic? How are they fundamentally different from, say, picturebooks?

In *Graphic Novels Now* Francisca Goldsmith (2005) refutes the claim that comic books and graphic novels are simply types of picturebooks. She argues that “they are not stories accompanied by illustrations that largely repeat the content of the written text” (p. 17). Although with this statement, Goldsmith erroneously implies that all illustrations in picture books function merely to mirror the written text\(^2\) she nonetheless aptly implies that picturebooks and comics are distinct media which operate differently.

In a similar vein, it proves difficult to differentiate the comic book from the graphic novel when each supposedly defining feature becomes negotiable. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the graphic novel as “a full-length (esp. science fiction or fantasy) story published as a book in comic-strip format” (*Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] online, 2007). While this definition is accurate in drawing attention to the fixed feature of length, the claim regarding book

\(^2\) Although not all picturebooks exploit the vast capabilities of the medium, many are indeed complex because of the diverse ways in which image and text interact. Research by children’s literature critics and visual discourse theorists like David Lewis, Perry Nodelman, and Maria Nikolajeva has successfully argued that high-quality picturebooks aim and succeed at functioning at various levels of meaning.
publication is problematic in that it excludes graphic novels published in installments. Many works published in sequential volumes, like Neil Gaiman’s Sandman series and Vittorio Giardino’s A Jew in Communist Prague, after all, are undoubtedly graphic novels though published in successive volumes. OED’s definition is similarly problematic in its emphasis on science fiction and fantasy, perpetuating a commonly-held myth that comics are somehow inherently bound to these genres. The graphic novel is a format, rather than a genre; science fiction and fantasy, for example, are merely two of many genres presented in the graphic novel format.

Interestingly, Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary definition for graphic novel was officially entered in 1978. the year that Eisner published his Contract with God. Webster’s definition, “a fictional story that is presented in comic-strip format and published as a book” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary online, 2007), is similarly unsatisfactory due to its claim exclusively to fictional writing. Graphic novels have in fact flourished in recent years with publications of various types of decidedly non-fiction works, particularly historical works and autobiographies. Satrapi’s Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood, Kubert’s Fax from Sarajevo: A Story of Survival, and Tardi’s The Bloody Streets of Paris are a few examples.

Paul Gravett (2005), author of Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life, claims, in reference to Marjane Satrapi’s renowned graphic novel Persepolis about a young girl growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution, that “the comics medium seems ideally suited to shedding light on the shadow of war and exposing the humanity, that is all but ignored or trivialized by much of the mass media” (p. 59).

Other definitions of the graphic novel have focused on the idea that they have beginnings, middles, and ends, in contrast to the “disposable” trade comic books, which were created as ongoing serials with no projected end in sight (Gravett, 2005, p.59). Though this statement may be viable in theory, it is easily contestable in contemporary critical discussion in which “texts”
and "narratives" challenge traditional notions of how a story should be constructed. The search for a precise definition of "graphic novel" is challenging and perhaps inevitably inconclusive.

Despite this resistance to definition, what can be said with certainty is that the graphic novel is a dynamic form which has risen in popularity in recent years largely due to its ability to attract new kinds of stories, specifically deeply personal ones and those recounting the experiences of particular cultural groups, told in pioneering ways. Somehow, this form is attracting previously marginalized stories. These stories present fascinating and disclosing narratives, often in the forms of testimonials, histories, and autobiographies.

Rather than proposing a definition for the graphic novel, a brief examination of its historical development proves a more productive pursuit. Chapter Two of this thesis provides an overview of the historical development of the graphic novel.

1.3 Purpose and Questions for the Study

This study will seek to explore the thematic character of the three selected Jewish graphic novels as well as the formal construction of each work and how each functions to communicate the identified themes. Through close examination of each text within the context of basic Jewish concepts about God, as well as within the context of the aesthetic features of each text, this thesis aims to glean insight into the nature of the three texts and possibly offer insight into the wider arena of Jewish graphic novels.

This study will examine three Jewish graphic novels: A Contract with God, The Rabbi's Cat, and We Are On Our Own, in light of various perspectives on Jewish faith and survival. The following questions will be investigated:

1. What is the nature of the relationship between the main character and God? How is this relationship linked to the main character's survival?

2. In what ways does the main character's Judaism survive? In other words, what is the impact of the character's struggle on his/her faith?
3. How does the multimodal character of the graphic novel serve to forward the overall story?

A brief Historical Context will precede each textual examination.

1.4 Selection Criteria

From an approximate 20 Jewish graphic novels, three were selected based on several selection criteria. The process of selecting primary texts was challenging as many of the stories met these criteria. The following criteria were used:

1. *Jewish creator.* Although there would be much value in examining works written by non-Jews about Jews, the delicate act of “representing the other” would unnecessarily complicate this study. Therefore, primary texts were chosen in part based on their creation by Jewish comics artists.³

2. *Cultural diversity.* Selection of primary texts was based in part on the desire to reflect Jewish cultural diversity. Effort was made to choose texts representing stories from different countries, if not different continents. Selection was thus based on the desire to reflect a variety of Jewish communities, representing both the Ashkenazic and Sephardic cultures.

3. *Twentieth century.* The works selected have been chosen in part to reflect various aspects of the Jewish experience of the 20th century.

4. *Demonstrated positive reception.* The works selected have been chosen in part on the basis of having been positively received by the general public readership as well as for having achieved critical acclaim from academics and critics.

³ The examination of primary texts about Jews written by non-Jews (for example, Christophe Blain’s *Isaac the Pirate*) would undoubtedly offer insight into the complexity of the Jewish experience and Jewish identity-making, from the other end. However, it would also then be crucial to not only consider this factor in the study, but also to pay considerable attention to the possibility of misrepresentation, which would greatly alter the focus of this thesis.
1.5 Selected Works

1. *A Contract with God* (1978) by Will Eisner tells the story of Jewish tenement life in the Bronx during the Great Depression of the 1920’s. It is a collection of four short vignettes, each taking place in the same tenement. The first and namesake vignette tells the story of Frimme Hersh, an observant Jew who becomes an angry real estate tycoon after his beloved daughter dies. *A Contract with God*, as a collection of vignettes, is widely regarded as being the first modern graphic novel. Only the first and namesake vignette will be examined in this thesis.

2. *The Rabbi’s Cat* (2005) by Joann Sfar describes a rabbi living in Algeria in the 1930’s with his beloved daughter and their very astute cat. It is a compilation of three previously individually published volumes, originally published in French and translated into English.⁴

3. *We Are On Our Own* (2006) by Miriam Katin is a memoir of Jewish Hungarian woman and her toddler daughter who adopt secret identities in order to flee Nazi persecution. This work is Katin’s debut graphic novel.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Although there has been much recent interest in graphic novels, critical discussion to this point has merely acknowledged the medium’s embracing of narratives of personal and group histories, and that the Jewish prevalence is significant. To date, however, there has been very little examination of particular texts in light of their presentation and treatment of selected Jewish themes.

The scope of this study is at once wide and narrow. Jewish graphic novels are a very particular area of research, though examined in light of the Jewish faith, Diaspora, and aesthetic design, implications for this research and its significance are vast. It is hoped that this research will add to the existing knowledge base of Jewish studies, and will nourish existing discussion

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⁴ The continuing fourth and fifth volumes have recently been released in Europe but have yet to be translated into English.
surrounding the varieties of Jewish artistic and literary production. It aims to contribute to an understanding of the manner in which graphic novels are able to express the complexity and richness of the Jewish experience in new ways. Similarly, it is expected that this study will promote the referencing of graphic novels for the exploration of other histories and alternative narratives. It is hoped that this study will encourage other ethno-cultural groups to further embrace the graphic novel form to convey their experiences.

At a broader level, this study will also serve to further promote graphic novels as literature; as material to be mined for content and complexity of form. With the recent emergence of academic discussion surrounding the medium’s capabilities, it is hoped that this research will contribute to the promotion of graphic novels in the fields of literacy and education.

Education has increasingly focused on teaching students tools with which to make sense of the meanings coded in the messages found in society. In an ever more visual environment, students are encouraged to question, decipher, and appraise the words, pictures, and symbols in their surroundings. The graphic novel is a powerful medium capable of mobilizing alternate and critical ways of interpreting meaning-making. Comics scholar Charles Hatfield (2005) claims that “Among the popular traditions, none mix text and image more persistently, or diversely, than comics; they make an ideal laboratory for the sustained study of text/image relations […] the inherent plurality of comic art makes it apt for critical study” (p. XIII).

1.7 Definition of Terms

This section provides definitions of several terms referred to frequently in this study.

1.7.1 Sequential Art

*Sequential art* is the term often used by comics creators and critics when describing comics. The term was coined by comics master Will Eisner, though never explicitly defined. Scott McCloud, author of *Understanding Comics* expands on Eisner’s term, defining sequential art as “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey
information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer." Sequential art refers to a medium, rather than an object or product (as in a comic book) (1994, p. 5).

1.7.2 Comics

This term will be used on occasion in the context of this study. It should be understood as synonymous with sequential art.

1.7.3 Graphic Novel

The graphic novel is one manifestation of sequential art. It is a form which can take the shape of any variety of genres. Graphic novels are often likened to regular novels in several ways: both often deal with serious subject-matter, feature developed characters and themes, and exhibit a range of other literary qualities. The graphic novel has also been linked to the regular novel in reference to length and publication manner, specifically in contrast to comic books, which typically take the form of shorter ongoing serials (Gravett, 2005, p. 9). The graphic novel can be viewed as the most evolved manifestation of sequential art.

1.7.4 Jewish Graphic Novel

The Jewish graphic novel refers to one genre of the graphic novel which explicitly features Jewish characters, themes, and/or narratives.

1.7.5 Diaspora

Broadly defined, diaspora refers to the dispersion and resettlement of a national or ethnic population outside of its traditional homeland. This dispersion and resettlement connotes displacement from an original landscape. Contemporary diaspora studies contextualizes this phenomenon within modern globalization, and considers its implications on the individual and collective sense of home, community, and identity.

1.7.6 Jewish Diaspora

Referred to in this thesis simply as Diaspora, it refers to the particular experience of Jewish dispersals – due to expulsion or voluntary migration – and resettlement outside of the
land of Israel. It also refers to the geographical space outside of Israel in which communities of Jews live. For the close readings, Diaspora is viewed as a site of arrivals, departures, and confrontation. It is a space which places demands on the Jew and challenges him/her to confront God and the nature and role of faith and Jewish identity.

1.8 Preview of Upcoming Chapters

*Chapter Two: Literature Review,* contextualizes the history and development of comics, the emergence of the graphic novel, and the creation of the unique genre of the Jewish graphic novel.

*Chapter Three: Critical Framework,* defines the lens through which the close readings of the texts will be conducted. The chapter is divided into two sections. Section One identifies various elements of the relationship between Jew and God, according to a variety of Judaic scholars. Section Two identifies concepts with which to examine the selected texts from an aesthetic perspective, using the ideas of Will Eisner and Scott McCloud.

*Chapter 4: A Contract with God,* *Chapter 5: The Rabbi’s Cat,* and *Chapter 6: We Are On Our Own* each provide a close reading of the particular text in light of the identified research questions.

*Chapter 7: Conclusions* is divided into two sections. Section One offers conclusions in light of the identified research questions, as well as some final thoughts. Section Two offers recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The first section of this Literature Review provides a synthesis of existing research surrounding the development of comics, and leads into the eventual evolution and branching off of the graphic novel format. The second section concentrates on the phenomenon of Jewish graphic novels, aiming to address possible reasons for this unique phenomenon. It also intends to highlight some of the topics and themes common to these works. The second section of the Literature Review begins to address this gap in research.

As the selected texts are all accounts of Jewish life in the Diaspora, this thesis examines several Jewish graphic novels in light of their portrayals of this experience. These graphic novels are visceral texts, created by children of immigrants who tap into their personal family histories for narrative essence. These texts portray complex and multilayered stories which address the complexity of defining the nature of Jewish identity. 5

2.1 The Graphic Novel

Confining the development of the graphic novel to one path, one theory, is both unnatural and unprofitable. Like any cultural medium or production, the graphic novel was not born in a vacuum. It was conceived from, nourished in, and shaped by a combination of aesthetic, visual, and narrative motives and trends over time. To try to locate a single central reference point trivializes the uniquely multimodal character of this form.

The modern-day graphic novel rose significantly from the conscious need and desire to experiment with form, to push the limits of what kind of stories were being told, and to see how this could be done fusing words and images. The natural inclination toward a new and versatile

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5 This portion of the study is largely based in online sources. This is due to the fact that comics research and criticism, let alone research of academic merit, is limited and only now beginning to develop. Comics are also the impetus for followings and communities, and much of the information outside of academic publications tend to be open fan-based websites with discussion-boards, reviews, etc. Much of the research used is drawn from individuals’ perspectives posted on such websites and sometimes even from personal homepages. I acknowledge that this poses potential concerns regarding the veracity and integrity of the information, however, all efforts have been made to seek and use only the most reliable data. On another note, incorporation of internet data and alternate sources of information keeps the study appropriately savvy and edgy, like the graphic novel itself.
form, in terms of both structure and content, necessitated the exploration of alternative and often subversive perspectives.

2.1.1 Origins

In exploring the origins of the form, several competing narratives of comics history emerge. An examination of the evolution of the graphic novel can be approached in various ways, depending on which element of the form is to be examined. For example, one could survey the history of this form from the perspective of publishing, art history, or thematic content — the results would prove to be quite different.

Scholars who focus on the uniqueness of graphic novels as storytelling through pictures in sequence point to an origin theory in cave paintings. The sequenced images of Cro-Magnon man and the hieroglyphics of Ancient Egypt, for example, can be seen as two of the earliest instances of graphic storytelling used as a popular means for communicating thoughts and ideas (Tychinski, 2004, para. 1).

Another approach to understanding the form’s development is from a stylistic perspective. Some researchers view wood engravings as the impetus for and prototype to the graphic novel. This may be due to the fact that the typically black and white images of wood engraving prints, as well as their emphasis on perspective and composition, naturally tie in with the standard image of comics with their use of bold black line. It is widely held that the first graphic novels, in terms of a story told and developed through pictures, were those of Lynd Ward, the 1920’s American wood engraver, whose work featured stories told entirely through images. Although his images may not have resembled comics as we now know them, they were nonetheless narratives developed primarily through pictures. Six of Ward’s works are considered to be graphic novels (Rutgers University Library, 2008, para. 2).

Though Eisner is widely accredited for the invention of the graphic novel (and for coining the term itself), he was well aware that the concept dated much further back. Eisner in
fact quotes Ward as one of the artists who influenced him most (Quattro, para. 19). Ward’s narratives also exploited perspective and mood to the fullest in order to create a sense of menace and drama. These elements are evident in much of Eisner’s work.

Others connect the development of the graphic novel more directly to the emergence of caricature. Stan Tychinski (2004), in his article *A Brief History of the Graphic Novel*, argues that the impact of increased reading time for working and middle-class populations in the Industrial Age resulted in the emergence of humor in media publications (para. 2). According to Tychinski, humor was realized and exploited for its effectiveness in addressing political and social shortcomings, and became formalized in the form of cartoons and caricatures. Innovator, editor, and satirist, Benjamin Franklin, published *Poor Richard’s Almanac* between 1732 and 1758, which featured witty social commentary in the form of text and visuals. His famous cartoon “Join, or Die” depicting a severed snake, aimed to promote the America Revolution. This was the first cartoon to be published in an American newspaper. It is widely considered to be the first political cartoon (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, 2008, [timeline]).

Confirming Tynchinski’s claims, Francisca Goldsmith, in her book *Graphic Novels Now* (2005), argues that formalized expressions of satire, in the form of caricature, were the direct precursors of comics and graphic novels. She specifically refers to 16th century caricature and 17th century European painting, addressing painters like Goya and Hogarth, who employed caricature exhibited in the way of “fantastic features and exaggerated gestures” to depict satiric renderings of government activities (p. 5). Goldsmith discusses the influence of the rise of the caricature as a “formal satirical act,” explaining how this form of expression was a kind of act of subversion, supported by periodicals created specifically for its showcasing.

Whichever “origin theory” one chooses to ascribe to, it has become clear that the graphic novel is a modern hybrid literary and artistic form that was born with an inclination toward the rebellious. Not surprisingly, the emergence of caricature brought along with it censorship. In
1832, for example, a French caricaturist, Honore Daumier, was sentenced to prison for publishing a cartoon of King Louis-Philippe as Gargantua, a giant from a popular series of satirical novels written in the 16th century. Caricature was a tool for the people; one did not need to be formally educated nor culturally savvy in order to be able to understand the contexts and messages of these images because they were about the struggles of daily life. Goldsmith writes: “A visual lexicon was being built and organized that, instead of requiring formal art education of its readers, called for experience with events of the day and, just as importantly, recognition of recurring visual elements across multiple caricatures” (2005, p. 5). The emergence of the caricature and the activity surrounding it seemed to set the basis for a new kind of literacy that was both accessible and critical (p. 5).

Although it can be argued that the seeds of the graphic novel originate in the emergence of social commentary in its various forms, it is also important to recognize that these “theories of origin” do not need to be mutually exclusive. Each cultural, literary, and artistic innovation served as a link in the eventual birth of the graphic novel form.

2.1.2 The First Comic Books

With the establishment of caricature as a kind of social critique, humor and satire were further explored in the emergence of the very first comic books. In 1842, Swiss illustrator/cartoonist Rudolphe Topffer published Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck, a piece that featured 6 to 12 panels per page and totaled 40 pages long (Tychinski, 2004, para. 4). The pictures in this work carried relatively little narrative weight; the reader could easily understand the narrative through the words alone (Markstein, 2008, para. 4). Captions narrated the story under the panels, although Obadiah in fact contained no speech balloons. It was the first comic book published in America (lambiek.net, 2006, para. 3).

In Europe, Wilhelm Bush, a German poet and artist, had been publishing his caricatures in local newspapers. In 1865 he published his renowned comic Max and Moritz, a moralistic tale
about two prankster boys. Thirty years later, American comics artist Richard Outcault published *The Yellow Kid* in 1895, generally recognized as the first successful comic strip character. *The Yellow Kid* was the first work ever to use balloons to convey character dialogue. It became so popular that it actually increased newspaper sales (Tychinski, 2004, para. 4). With the appearance of *The Yellow Kid*, the caricature, or, cartoon, had evolved from a single panel to a multiple-panel arrangement: the comic strip (Goldsmith, 2005, p. 6).

The next major milestone in the development of the graphic novel would be the emergence of comic books in the 1920’s. These new formats were collections of bound sequences of related comic strips. The production of comic books involved groups of cartoonists hired by publishers to work together efficiently. These comic books were produced cheaply and sold serially, as production was centralized around financial profit. The comics of the 1920’s were therefore widely seen as trivial, disposable material. (Goldsmith, 2005, p 6).

Belgian comics artist Herge published *Adventures of Tintin*, about the escapades of a young travel reporter, in 1929. The series of comic strips were collected into albums and eventually made into a magazine, which quickly became popular in Europe. Gravett notes that Herge’s use of detailed reference material and picture archives was "a turning point [...] in the maturing of the medium as a whole" (2005, p. 152).

Comic books began to appear in the 1920’s and 30’s in the form of pulp magazines compiling previously published comic strips (American Comic Book History). With the onset of WWII, many cartoonists and publishers concentrated their efforts on patriotic themes. These themes were exhibited literally, through the creation of comic strips that illustrated military-related themes, like, for example, step-by-step instructions on how to load a gun (Goldsmith, 2005, p. 7).

However, patriotic themes were also tackled existentially, through the creation of superhero tales. With the rise of Nazism came public fear and anxiety in the face of this
burgeoning destruction. Comics responded by creating messiah-like figures, ultimately, humans with superhuman qualities, who were propelled by moral justice and determined to triumph over evil. Not surprisingly, these escapist stories were overwhelmingly Jewish creations. While it is also true that Jewish artists and writers were relegated to work in the field of comics because they were a "low" literary form, through comics, Jews were able to fantasize about a better life in which they overcame injustices and triumphed through hard work and moral strength.

Jewish American novelist, Michael Chabon, animates this dynamic era of comics history with his Pulitzer-winning *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. In this novel, Chabon describes the lives of his title characters – two Jewish boys living during WWII – who become part of the burgeoning Golden Age of comics with the creation of their "Escapist" superhero. Chabon discusses how the Golden Age was propelled by (particularly Jewish) immigrant fears and angst that were in turn manifest in the creation of myth: "There was something about the golem which tied in with Superman and the superhero figure, the messianic figure who would redeem the suffering and helplessness of the world" (Chabon, para. 19).

### 2.1.3 War, Superman, and Censorship

The first superhero landed on the scene in 1938, with the debut issue of DC Comics' *Action Comics* (Daniels, 1971, p. 10). Jerry Seigel and Joe Shuster's *Superman* marked the beginning of what is referred to as the Golden Age of comics – the launching site of many of the well-known comics creators (p. IX). With this era came innovation, high production, and productivity. *American Comic Book History Online* describes the Golden Age as:

- characterized by extremely large print runs (comic books being very popular as cheap entertainment during World War II); erratic quality of stories, art and print quality; and

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6 In Jewish myth and lore, the golem was a giant human-like automaton formed out of clay. He was created for the sole purpose of protecting the Jews of the medieval European ghettos from persecution.
by being a rare industry that provided jobs to an ethnic cross-section of Americans, albeit
often at low wages and in sweatshop working conditions. (para. 9)

The stories were escapist, action-oriented, and often detective-driven. For the public, appetite for
superhero comics grew specifically during World War II, because they were inexpensive, easy to
read, and cathartic in their characteristic championing of good over evil.

After the war, new genres were emerging in the comics industry and filling the waning
role of the superhero stories. In the late 1940’s and 50’s, Western, romance, satire, crime, and
horror comics thrived. Stories like Tales from the Crypt were extremely popular (Mannix, para.
4). In response to these new darker genres, however, the Comics Code Authority was created in
1954 in affiliation with Comics Magazine Association of America, reflecting public concern
over what was feared to be inappropriate material. Public paranoia was a direct result of the
publication of German psychiatrist Fredric Wertham’s book Seduction of the Innocent, which
attempted to detail the “dangerous” effects of comics on young minds. It essentially blamed
comics for juvenile delinquency. As a result of Wertham’s book, the comics industry was subject
to a censorship campaign, in which comics had to be “sanitized” in order to be more fitting for a
young audience (Mannix, para.13). Comics creators and publishers were stifled and struggled to
create new work while having to adhere to the CCA’s demands (para. 14). This piece of
legislation would deeply influence the next era of comics.

2.1.4 Underground Comics and New Paths

By the 1960’s comics were coming into their own again. However, with the prolonged
period of censorship and paranoia, oddly coupled with the burgeoning trend of creating
characters that were more human, a shift began to occur. The 1960’s underground comics
movement was a response to the repression that had stifled artistic license and merit. It sought to
foreground important non-mainstream artists who, under the given circumstances, opted to work
with small independent presses or to self-publish (Gravett, 2005, p. 22). The work these artists
created parodied the CCA, commented on mainstream pop culture, and experimented with new subject matter and styles. The movement produced gritty, often risqué work reflecting the characteristic issues of 1960's counterculture: sex, drugs, and religion, among other hot topics.

During this period, comics artist and magazine editor Harvey Kurtzman had been working on *Mad*, a comic book which parodied every trait of American life and popular culture, and “liberated comedy in comics and inspired a new generation of cartoonists to push the boundaries of satire” (lambiek.net, 2006, para. 2). In order to evade the constraints of the CCA, Kurtzman worked through the loopholes and cleverly altered *MAD's* format to magazine. After *MAD*, Kurtzman founded *Help!*, and it was in its pages, devoted to amateur talent, that many of the underground comics artists, like Robert Crumb, received their first break (para. 2). Eventually, Crumb produced *Zap Comix*, Art Spiegelman created *Raw*, and Spain Rodriguez crafted *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*—all of which experimented with satirical and subversive views on American culture.


Production differences accounted for one of the most significant differences between mainstream comics and the emerging underground comics movement. Whereas mainstream comics were created through a team effort with various individuals responsible for stages of the process, underground comics were typically the work of one individual. It would seem accurate to suggest that the vilification of comics by the CCA which ultimately triggered the emergence of the underground comics scene paved an entirely new path for comics. These new comics were infused with a certain honesty and integrity, both with regards to content and production processes. The underground comics artists played with the very form itself, exploring a variety of
approaches, and experimenting with an array of styles and techniques. Comics were no longer formulaic stories with recycled characters and themes, but were beginning, rather, to evolve into a versatile literary and artistic tool with which to explore and experiment. The impetus for these works was driven in large by social commentary (akin to caricatures of the 1800’s), fears and concerns of the day, as well as artists’ intimate reflections and confessions. There was a new kind of sincerity and authenticity to these works.

Hatfield observes that:

The singular genius of the underground comic books was the way they transformed an object that was jejune and mechanical in origin into a radically new kind of expressive object, a vehicle for the most personal and unguarded of revelations...underground comix conveyed an unprecedented sense of intimacy, rivaling the scandalizing disclosures of confessional poetry but shot through with fantasy, burlesque, and self-satire. (p. 7)

At a level of content, it was these activities – the critiquing of mainstream culture, the questioning and subverting of authority, the embracing of taboo topics, and the exploring of confessional and self-satire – which came to characterize these new comics. Similarly, it was the elements of an individual artist/writer (or partnership), as well as the experimentation with a multiplicity of styles (often together in the same work), which significantly helped pave the way for the emergence of the modern graphic novel.

2.2 Jewish Voices

"The comic book world is a kind of secular Jewish culture.” – Art Spiegelman

As stated in Chapter One, survival begets creativity, and thus the Jewish experience has wrought creativity in various forms. Eitan Levine (1983) writes in his book Diaspora: Exile and the Jewish Condition: “Jews managed to be beneficially involved in, but critically detached from,
the cultures in which they lived. This made possible remarkable outpourings of creativity and originality” (p. 76).

Throughout history and landscapes, Jews have contributed vastly to artistic, literary, and cultural production. Specifically, Jews have played a particularly prominent role in the world of comics. It has been argued that this unique involvement was born from circumstance, because Jewish illustrators and writers were not permitted to infiltrate more “respectable” fields; comics was one of the few fields open to Jewish artists and writers. As Jews became critically involved in the field in the 1930’s, the first stories they created were fantastical myths, – the superhero tales – which reflected the hopes and struggles of Jewish immigrants in America at the time. 


Other writers, Chabon, for example, have implied the existence of a potential link between the way comics work, and the Jewish tradition; the nature of the core values latent to Judaism which promote questioning, critical thinking, and self-examination, which also happen to be the very elements which comics are especially well-suited to exploring. According to Yiddish historian Max Weinreich, Talmudic interpretation is, after all, an emphatically open-ended process, “through which laws (dinim) and customs (minhogim) are continuously adapted and clarified anew in the light of the Torah” (Clifford, 2005, p. 548).

Expanding on this notion, in an intriguing article entitled *The Secret Untold Relationship of Biblical Midrash and Comic Retcon*, A. David Lewis (2002) argues for a possible link between the way comics handle the aspect of plot and character credibility and the method in which Midrash is enacted. He argues that both are executed in ways which deliberately allow for “reflecting on, reinterpreting, and sometimes reshaping the old” (p. 264), so as to account for possible contradictions or errors in character or narrative continuity (p. 266). Lewis argues that
both comics and Midrash, rather than undermining the credibility of narratives, in fact leave texts “open to further generations’ reflections” (p. 267).

Helena Frenkil Schlam, in her article “Contemporary Scribes: Jewish American Cartoonists,” examines the vital role that Jewish American cartoonists played in defining and shaping the growth of comics. She claims that “Jewish cartoonists in their depiction of modern life have in some ways become contemporary scribes in a distinctly American form of communication that combines both written and visual expression” (2001, para. 1). As the relationship between Jews and comics (and graphic novels) deepened, so too has it become a “Jewish” medium, tracing and reflecting the Jewish experience. In this way, comics and now also the graphic novel have become a forum for the telling of alternate voices and stories, in essence offering a hybridized medium for a hybridized people.

Similar to any other literary form, Jewish graphic novels have tackled a variety of genres, topics, themes, and artistic and literary styles. Not surprisingly, the array of work reflects the wider and more established varieties of “Jewish” texts. Certain topics and themes are recurrent in Jewish literature and this is extended to the varieties of Jewish graphic novels as well.

2.2.1 Recurring Topics and Themes

Jewish graphic novels encompass a wide array of topics. Some, including J.T. Waldman’s *Megillat Esther* (2006) and Kyle Baker’s *King David* (2002) focus on biblical events. Yet others aim not only to recount biblical events to render them more attractive for contemporary (and often younger) audiences through format and packaging, but also to challenge the very narratives themselves by bringing new exegesis. *Megillat Esther*, for example, reflects Waldman’s own midrash on the Esther Scroll. Containing the entire Hebrew text of the Esther Scroll, in addition to rabbinic endnotes, and an academic bibliography (Clanton, para. 11), this work is “not a modern adaptation of the biblical book of Esther […] but rather Waldman’s
own vision of Esther and the rabbinic interpretation thereof. As such, *Megillat Esther* represents not so much a reinterpreted Bible, but rather a visual midrash of Esther” (Clanton, para. 12).

Jewish graphic novels have looked not only to the Bible for inspiration but also to more recent moments in the Jewish experience. Events in Jewish history, particularly those of the 20th century, are featured in many Jewish graphic novels. Examination of the Holocaust occupies much of 20th century Jewish literature, and this is likewise reflected in the range of Jewish graphic novels.

As briefly discussed in Chapter One, the first treatment of the Holocaust through comics was Spiegelman’s *Maus* published in 1986. Interestingly, Spiegelman himself was a defining figure in the 1960’s and 70’s underground Comics movement. With *Maus*, Spiegelman conveys a complex and intensely affecting narrative through sophisticated use of metaphor and symbol which function on both literary and visual levels.

Since *Maus*, many Jewish graphic novelists have featured the Holocaust in their work. Some stories emerge in the form of personal testimonies and memoirs, where the creator employs the graphic novel format as a forum to examine, investigate, or bare witness to their own experiences. Katin’s *We Are On Our Own* (2006), Eisenstein’s *I Was A Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006), and Lemelman’s *Mendel’s Daughter* (2006) are examples of these accounts. In these texts, the creators negotiate the immediate and residual effects of the Holocaust on their past, present, and future lives. Other Holocaust narratives draw on pseudo-personal accounts, as in Joe Kubert’s *Yossel* (2003), or on well-researched accounts influenced by Holocaust survivor’s experiences, as with Pascal Croci’s *Auschwitz* (2004).

The stories encompassed by Jewish graphic novels also address Jewish immigrant life. The issues featured in these stories reflect the Jewish immigrant experiences of struggle, hope, failure, and success. These issues are addressed head-on, in works like Eisner’s *To the Heart of the Storm* (1991), and *A Contract with God* (1978), portraying the difficult lives of Eastern
European Jewish immigrants in America during the Depression. Eisner, himself the son of Jewish immigrants, draws on his own life experiences of tenement life in the New York Bronx of the 1930’s, and brilliantly captures the everyday lives of Jewish immigrants at that time.

Speaking of his *A Contract with God*, Eisner states:

> In this book I have attempted to create a narrative that deals with intimate themes.
> 
> In four stories, housed in a tenement, I undertook to draw on memory culled from my own experiences and that of my contemporaries. I have attempted to tell how it was in a corner of America that is still to be revisited. (readyourselfraw.com)

In addition to representations of the Holocaust and the Depression in America, Jewish graphic novelists have undertaken other historical moments. Ben Katchor’s *The Jew of New York* (1998) evokes the absurdity and chaos of New York City in the 1830’s, while Kubert’s *Jew Gangster* (2005) and Kleid’s *Brownsville* (2006) present real-life based stories about Jewish gang life, perpetuating Eisner’s legacy of depicting the struggles of New York Jewish immigrant life. Alternately, conveying Jewish communities outside of America, Sfar depicts the nuances of Jewish life in Algeria of the same time period, and Giardino with his *Jew in Communist Prague* recreates Jewish life under European totalitarian regimes, focusing on Czechoslovakia in the 1950’s.

But the toils and ambitions of Jewish life both in America and abroad were presented not only realistically through historically situated accounts, but also covertly and symbolically through the genre of the superhero. These fantastic tales conveyed the core predicament of Jews at that time (the 30’s and 40’s) by transforming individual characters’ experiences into collective symbols of Jewish immigrant struggles and determination, mythologizing the Jewish American experience of the first part of the 20th century. The impact of Jewish comics creators was clear.

In 1938, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster – both Jews – plunged forth with the very first superhero, *Superman*. Although the character was likely not intended to be explicitly Jewish, nor
was Superman necessarily meant to be a particularly Jewish story, it can be viewed as an allegory of Jewish struggle and aspiration, contextualized in history. Some writers, for example, have examined Superman within this context and have offered extremely convincing interpretations. Superman’s original name, after all, is “Kal-El”, Hebrew for “Vessel of God”, but this name is changed upon his arrival to Earth, after which he is raised Christian. Howard Jacobson (2005) provides solid argument for Superman’s “Jewishness”, claiming that Superman’s arrival, struggles, and achievement convey the Jewish immigration narrative in America.

Jacobson links Superman’s perpetual awareness and connectedness to a far-away home planet and his struggle to negotiate alien identity in a new land as being something fundamentally Jewish. He gives up his name and adopts a new identity, but is never fully at home in this strange land. Jacobson discusses Superman’s “homelessness”, “isolation”, and his “having to perpetuate himself endlessly in good deeds” (2005, para. 9). Like Moses, Superman’s parents, “Threatened with the destruction of their planet, […] pack him — ‘the last survivor of a great civilisation’ — into a tiny spacecraft. After hurtling through interstellar space, the rocket, barely bigger than a crib, lands in a field of corn” (para. 8).

Jacobson continues to claim that both Moses and Superman are “uncommon and set apart, as though for sacred purpose — their sense of belonging and not belonging, and the imprint they both bear of the kindness of strangers” (para. 9). In this way, Superman exhibits a certain core Jewishness, in his aptitude for migration and his instinct of remembering himself as a stranger. Superman’s experience on earth mirrors the Jewish experience of being different and wanting to remain so, but also of not wanting to stand out in a non-Jewish world. Jacobson states: “Where you come from is your life-and-death secret, it is what marks you as an outsider” (para. 11).
Born in an era of terror and fascism, Superman was Siegel and Shuster’s Jewish response to the struggle for good in a time of burgeoning evil. Superman would inspire an entire era of superhero stories that would dominate American comics.

While topics tackled in Jewish graphic novels are wide-ranging, their stories reflect several core themes of the Jewish experience, from which other sub-themes emerge. Each of the texts, in some way, is a story of survival in that each depicts the journey of outsiders in foreign spaces; the efforts to negotiate times, places, and societies which ultimately attempt to deny Jews of real individual or group dignity. The impact of anti-Semitism is both immediately defining yet also ubiquitous in its shaping of the collective Jewish psyche. This is reflected in the variety of Jewish stories told. In some cases, the core themes of isolation and persecution manifest in Holocaust testimonials, whereas in other stories these themes are addressed obliquely, through intimate musings on faith, as in The Rabbi’s Cat, A Contract with God, and even Harvey Pekar’s American Splendor (1976).

a). Traditional Versus Secular World

Amidst anti-Semitism and survival, various sub-themes and motifs emerge. Jews immigrating from the confines of shtetl life in Eastern Europe and communities in Arab countries, for example, were faced with the challenges of adapting quickly to the mentalities of secular urban life, embodied by places like New York and Paris. Confronting the demands of urban life brought clashes between Old and New World values. Striving to establish economic viability in the New World meant negotiating, altering, and for some, even surrendering relations to their Jewish sensibilities and identities. For these Jews, the essential instability of “home” was exacerbated.

Some of the stories portray characters desperately trying to cling to the Jewish way of life based in family and tradition, and in doing so, suffering emotional trauma, as depicted in many of Eisner’s works. Assimilation epitomizes the struggle of old versus new. The possible
weakening or loss of linkage to the Jewish faith, either through intentional distancing or through intermarriage, emerges as a source of anxiety complicating efforts to succeed in foreign and secular spaces. Some of the demons haunting the characters emerge in the form of guilt and nostalgia.

b). Oscillating Between Faith and Futility

Ultimately, the challenges these Jewish characters face lead them to question the nature of faith and the worth of any relationship with God. Hardships are often perceived by the characters as “trials” from God. Both *The Rabbi’s Cat* and *Contract with God* peak at points in the narratives when their once-faithful protagonists reveal their essential vulnerability and vent their frustration to a God whom they feel has not lived up to expectation. Characters confront and question God and engage in existential inquiry to varying degrees of intensity.

c). Memory, the Oral Tradition, and Homecoming

Many of the narratives focus on the essentiality of memory and the oral tradition. Mirroring the real-life journeys that many Jewish comics creators and graphic novelists themselves traveled throughout their careers, a common theme in Jewish graphic novels is a return to or a reawakening of Jewish identity, albeit the hardship along the way. Reknowned superhero cartoonist Joe Kubert’s relationship with his own Jewish roots, for example, increasingly deepened over the course of his life, and he would go on to create explicitly Jewish works, including *Yossel*, an intimate account of a boy surviving the Nazi concentration camps, inspired by what could have been, had Kubert’s own mother not been able to leave Poland. Later, Kubert would also create *The Jew Gangster*, about Jewish gangster life in Brooklyn during the Great Depression.

In effect, the characters – both the creators themselves and their narrated creations – experience a sort of homecoming in which they return to their Jewish identity, albeit with new perspective. Although they are outsiders living in foreign lands, the characters are
simultaneously at home, though only with and through the process of self-interrogation. This process is activated through the creation of graphic novels which support such explorative storytelling. This is exemplified in *Maus*, where layers of memory combine with a multiplicity of voices and narration to bring about reflexivity and self-discovery, not only for Spiegelman and his father, but also for the reader.

Similarly, Eisner, throughout his career, increasingly featured “Jewishness” in his work. The last twenty years of his life were spent creating works that specifically sought to investigate the image of the Jew in the eyes of non-Jews and the nature of Jewish identity.

The sheer presence of numerous Jewish graphic novels attests to a connection between the act of storytelling and the process of homecoming. Waldman, who was not a strongly identifying Jew, attributes a crucial catalyst of his eventual “homecoming” to the actual process of creating his *Megillat Esther*. He states: “*Megillat Esther* was conceived as a vehicle to help me get to know my religion and culture” (Clanton, para. 18). Similarly, Sfar continually examines his Jewish roots with his increasingly “Jewish” stories, drawing from his own Ashkenazi/Sephardic background to mine the richness of the varieties of Jewish culture and heritage.

In addressing the phenomenon of Jewish graphic novelists, Schlam (2001) aptly summarizes the breadth and impact of Jewish talent and the Jewish imagination:

Jews, coming from a strong literary tradition which nurtured both a comic and ironic view of the world, have been drawn to this fast-developing and uniquely American art form since the beginning of the twentieth century. At every point in the history of cartoon arts in America some Jewish cartoonists were able to contribute their talents and ability to innovate. They brought the sharpened perspective and the moral anxiety of the outsider to this artistic expression. (para. 1)
Jewish graphic novels are historically rooted in the genesis of comics and the graphic novel. With the Jewish presence already prominent at each point of the medium’s evolution, and with the shift of interest in the late 60’s to the struggles of everyday life reality as content, Jews found in the graphic novel a perfect form with which to explore personal and collective life narratives, both historical and psychological.
CHAPTER 3: CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter aims to present the critical framework through which the three selected graphic novels will be examined. The concepts and ideas identified for use are gleaned from two very separate fields of inquiry: basic Jewish theology, and the aesthetic construction of comics. As such, this chapter is divided into two sections. The first section examines elements of the relationship between Jew and God, while the second section identifies terms and concepts proposed by two important comics critics.

3.1 The Relationship Between Jew and God

Analogous to Helena Frenkil Schlam's idea that Jewish cartoonists bring their “moral anxiety” to their artistic expression, the particular Jewish journeys presented in the selected graphic novels are those of struggle with faith and how this struggle impacts physical and spiritual survival in the Diaspora. The main characters in each of the three works grapple with the moral anxieties confronting them as Jews trying to negotiate the demands and allures of non-Jewish environments, while retaining relationships with God.

In his preface to Diaspora: Exile and the Jewish Condition, Eitan Levine asks: “What demands has diaspora life made on Jewish loyalty and identity?” (1983, p. VII). In A Contract with God, The Rabbi’s Cat, and We Are On Our Own, the various demands of Diaspora life mobilize the main characters to question and challenge the nature of the Jewish God and the relationship they have with this God. Finding themselves in constant states of departure in the face of hostility, the characters question the nature and even the existence of such a seemingly ambivalent God.

The concept of a dynamic and even contrary relationship between Jew and God is no new theme in the territory of Jewish texts. In fact, this notion is reflected in the core texts of Judaism itself. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, author of A Code of Jewish Ethics, states that “From the inception of Judaism, questions are used to elicit important information and to challenge” (Musleah, 2006,
para. 4). Referring to the book of Genesis, Telushkin uses the particular example of God questioning Adam to illustrate how active inquiry is in fact a quintessential component of the Jewish tradition, one which Judaism explicitly promotes.

Milton Steinberg (1947), in his book *Basic Judaism*, states that:

Affirming God, Judaism permits considerable latitude as to conceptions of Him. It allows the individual to decide whether He is to be envisaged as transcendent or immanent, whether as an abstract principle of being as with Maimonides and the Kabbalistic mystics, or, what is more common, as supremely personal. (p. 39)

Similarly, Howard Greenstein, in his book *Judaism: An Eternal Covenant* (1983), states that “Judaism teaches that neither logical arguments nor personal experience can totally explain being or encompass the nature of God. The mind of the finite creature that is man cannot envisage even the dimensions of infinite reality much less its content” (p. 4). Louis Finkelstein (1960) adds that “Man is eternally obliged to discover fresh possibilities inherent in these ideals, to extend their applicability, and to be their recurrent expositor” (p. 1753). These statements emphasize the absence of one fixed or prescribed conception of the Jewish God. Understanding God’s nature is a challenge presented to each Jew to discover through his or her own dynamic analysis and communication.

Questioning and critical thinking become then essential tools in the goal of forging a meaningful relationship with God. Greenstein claims that “intellectual humility” (1983, p. 4) is a basic prerequisite in attempting to understand God. Greenstein however also acknowledges humankind’s analytical and intellectual capacity, by claiming that “the fact that we cannot know all truth does not condemn us seekers to concede failure from the outset’’ (1983, p. 4). Indeed, the long history of the Jews reflects faith in a God who has revealed a vast range of attributes and

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8 Maimonides was a Spanish Jewish philosopher during the Middle Ages. His *13 Principals of Faith* summarizes what he saw as the fundamental tenets of Judaism.
one who has been conceptualized in a wide variety of roles. Greenstein writes that “at every major turning point in Israel’s history, the Jewish people encountered God in a different context” (1983, p. 9).

The key to forging a meaningful relationship with God is rooted in personal and direct communication. In his ambitious book *The Jews: Their History, Culture and Religion*, Finkelstein states that “God’s uniqueness and transcendence, however, have not discouraged the Jew from the effort to understand him and cleave to his ways” (1960, p. 1749). Ironically, God’s complexity and non-prescribed-ness insist, to a certain degree, on personal and direct relationship. Author Isidore Epstein (1976) adequately summarizes:

> the whole Jewish religion revolves around the acceptance of the existence of a ‘personal’ God. By this is meant the affirmation that what controls our life is not a blind force of which we know little, or nothing, but a supreme Being which, although beyond our imagining, is yet possessed of intelligence, purpose, will, etc. (p. 136)

Not only is God personal in the sense of having “personality” (in so much as God is said to have certain characteristics) but God is also conceivable on a unique and personal basis by individual human beings. Steinberg clarifies that this is not to imply acceptance of any and all notions of God, as Judaism “sets standards to which God-ideas must conform if they are to pass muster” (1947, p. 39). However, he claims, “within these [standards] there is abundant room for free play and private preference” (p. 39). It is this notion of “free play” and “private preference” that continually emerges in the three selected texts.

The Jew-God relationship is also direct in that it is free of any kind of prescribed or necessary mediation. Steinberg claims that “Between God and man stands no one – not God-man, not angel, not advocate” (Steinberg, 1947, p. 57). Because of this, an individual is personally accountable to God. Steinberg poetically states: “Is he blind? He must learn to see for himself, since no one can see on his behalf. Is he lost? He must find his own way home […] In
short, each man must redeem his own soul” (p. 58). In the Jewish tradition, all standards rest on
the individual relationship one holds with God, which should ideally mirror the moral and ethical
standards of behavior applied to oneself. An individual’s “goodness” is perceived (by God) in
light of such moral and ethical conduct. The individual is urged to question his/her own moral
and ethical behavior for the purposes of self-improvement, and this is reflected in the promotion
of challenging God and engaging in a relationship characterized by active communication.

Through these dynamics, Jew and God are held mutually accountable to one another.
This reciprocated responsibility implies that a Jew is thus “judged” by his/her actions and the
way in which he/she lives everyday life, as opposed to any proclamation of faith or symbolic
gesture. Epstein states that “Faith was never regarded by Judaism as a consecrated act on which
salvation depends, and it is considered of value only so far as it leads to right action. Faith,
indeed, in Judaism is meaningless unless translated into right action.” In light of this, the
standards of performance rest on the individual: “Judaism thus fixes the centre of gravity for
faith in man himself. His firm faith in God makes him a man in whom there is trusting, whom
God, so to speak, trusts” (Epstein, 1976, p. 135).

Judaism at its core is a religion that encourages questioning on various levels. As a faith,
it presupposes an implicit duty to question God. Judaic scholar Emil Fackenheim states that:
“Judaism has been a questioning faith ever since Abraham called God to account in the matter of
Sodom and Gomorrah” (1987, p. 17). In this biblical event, Abraham objects to God’s decision
to destroy the two “immoral” cities in that it would destroy the innocent along with the guilty
(Greenstein, 1983, p. 7). He confronts God, arguing that the entire cities should be saved, if only
even for the few righteous people who may reside in them (p. 8). God then concedes that
Abraham’s argument is valid. 9

9 However, in the end, only one righteous person is found, Abraham’s nephew, Lot, who is forewarned to leave prior
to the cities’ destruction.
In this event, Abraham, a human being, confronts his creator directly. At the crux of this episode lies the lesson: an individual’s right to challenge God. According to Greenstein, through this event, God was encouraging Abraham to make Him accountable based on ethical standards. Greenstein confirms that the point of this story is “his [Abraham’s] acknowledged right to challenge God and hold Him personally accountable for the laws He has formulated” (1983, p. 8). Berkley, in his book Jews, echoes Greenstein’s claims, though from a slightly different perspective, referring to “Jewish assertiveness” which “can be traced back to the first Jew, Abraham, who dared even to challenge God” (Berkley, 1997, p. 28).10

Hardship forces people to reevaluate the role of God in their lives. Diaspora has presented the Jewish people with relentless challenges, one being the maintenance of faith in tenuous circumstances. Nico Israel, in his book Outlandish: Writing Between Exile and Diaspora (2002), focuses on the possible positive aspects of Diaspora, arguing that it has insisted on a strengthening of faith. He claims that the term Diaspora “accrued a positive resonance […] bespeaking a sense of tenacity, resistance, and preservation of faith during the worst of circumstances” (p. 2). Likewise, author Shmuel Eisenstadt (1992) states that:

above all, it sharpened the awareness of the meaning of exile and made the search for the understanding of this experience in terms of the covenant between God and the people of Israel a central one in Jewish collective self-definition and self-awareness. (p. 31)

Viewed in this way, the relationship between Jew and God is at once a matter of trust and mutual adherence to covenant, an agreement whereby both parties keep their promises.11 In the context of covenant, Newman also discusses how transgression, punishment, and revoking of the

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10 Berkley discusses this in the context of “unfavorable traits associated with Jews”, one of which is “pushiness”. He claims that this “Jewish” characteristic is conceptually rooted in biblical God-human communication, as exemplified in the Sodom and Gomorrah event.

11 Louis E. Newman, in his article “Covenant and Contract: A Framework for the Analysis of Jewish Ethics”, discusses the biblical roots of covenant, seeing it as the basis of the modern day contract- an agreement between two parties based on mutual trust.
contract may transpire (1991, p. 99). The characters in the three selected texts grapple with their trust in God and at times explore and act on the idea of violating this trust.

The relationship between Jew and God is lively, at times yielding comfort and inspiration, yet at other times frustration and despair. The selected texts present journeys within which characters’ navigations are inextricably intertwined with their struggles to survive, both physically and spiritually. In light of this, survival bears multiple implications. It assumes not only averting death and physical harm and attaining minimum economic viability, but also prevailing in spirit, maintaining some element of Jewish identity and retaining some element of faith in the Jewish God. Jakub Petuchowski (1984), in his article “‘Jewish Survival’ and Anti-Semitism” aptly distinguishes between the idea of surviving as people versus surviving as Jews. He insightfully claims that Jews today:

want to live, to survive- on the simple biological level, and also on the economic level.
And they want their children to live and to survive. This is natural, a human desire.
It has nothing to do with any specific Jewish loyalties and commitments. (p. 144)

Thus, in examining the main characters in A Contract With God, The Rabbi’s Cat, and We Are On Our Own, the research questions will also consider: What is the nature of their survival? Do they survive as Jews?

The three selected graphic novels, in their accounts of Jewish survival (both physical and spiritual) in the Diaspora, present main characters who navigate their journeys as they navigate their understanding of and faith in God. Analysis of A Contract with God, The Rabbi’s Cat, and We Are On Our Own will be conducted in the context of the preceding ideas on Jewish faith and survival.
3.2 Aesthetic Features

"The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit." — Will Eisner\textsuperscript{12}

In any text where images are present, story plays out not only through print but also through the pictures that interact with them. In graphic novels, the coexistence of image and text is exploited maximally to convey stories that function at a variety of levels. In light of this, the selected texts will be analyzed not only according to what may be mined from written narrative but also in terms of what may emerge from the images and from the interaction between images and printed text. The stories, therefore, will be considered as integrated aesthetic constructions.

Pictures can be just as powerful or more so than words in any one text. Picturebook scholar David Lewis (2001) notes that "to some extent all pictures will have decorative, narrative and interpretative potential" (p. 25). Readers often attribute written text to the story-making, though in fact, pictures often convey significant amounts of information and in ways that the written word simply cannot.

There is a growing body of literature and an increasing sophistication in the attempt to understand image/text dynamics (Lewis, D., 2001, p. 31). Researchers have tried to identify approaches through which to understand the various ways in which words and pictures communicate with each other. Not surprisingly, most of this research has focused on the picturebook form. Some have alluded to the idea of visual features acting as elements of larger systems at play, alluding to the possibility of types of "grammars" of design. Implied in these perspectives is the idea of "the combining of two distinct modes of representation into a composite [my italics] text" (p. XIV); seeing the picturebook page, for example, as an animate system composed of various interacting parts.

\textsuperscript{12} (Eisner, W., 1985, p. 6)
Lewis refers to this holistic perspective as "ecological", seeing the story page as an "ecosystem"; a complex network of parts and elements (words and pictures) which cross-inform, co-influence, and activate each other for meaning. Of the relationship between pictures and written texts, noted children's literature critic Perry Nodelman (1988) states: "Each [mode] speaks about matters on which the other is silent" (p. 221).

Critics like Lewis and Nodelman have offered substantial analysis on how picturebooks come to possess meaning. Considering the role of the reader, for example, they seem to invest much of their insight within a larger concept of vision (the physical act of seeing) versus visuality (the construction of vision), focusing on the idea that sophisticated texts aim for, and often demand, significant and active participation.

There is no one medium which exemplifies this more clearly than comics. Scholars have applied theories from various disciplines, including art history and semiotics, to examine aesthetic choices picturebook and comics creators make, examining features like style, color, page composition, and packaging in order to gain insight into the construction of meaning through the visual.

This study does not aim to investigate potential "grammatical" systems present in the texts. Rather, it will investigate aesthetic features in light of selected formal features of comic art. The work of esteemed comics creators/critics Will Eisner and Scott McCloud will guide this component of the study.

3.2.1 Will Eisner

Will Eisner was one of the most influential comics creators and critics of all time. His bold and tireless career as a practitioner and his pioneering of the modern graphic novel established a legacy that would inspire subsequent generations of artists. Eisner is praised not only for his artistic and literary craftsmanship but also for his efforts to initiate critical discussion surrounding the unique aesthetics of the medium. His book *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985)
refers to a “creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea” (p. 5). Eisner’s ground-breaking insights in this book have been widely lauded both by practitioners (who regularly pay tribute to his work13) and comics fans alike.

In *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner states that “traditionally, most practitioners with whom I worked and talked produced their art viscerally. Few ever had the time or the inclination to diagnose the form itself” (1985, p. 6). Eisner’s book responds to the need for some kind of comics metalanguage, by outlining, defining, and illustrating key features and terms involved in the construction and reading of comics.

Eisner’s insights revolve around the integrated act of reading comics. He states that “the format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills” (1985, p. 8). Several key concepts are examined below. The following sub-titles are borrowed from Eisner himself.

a). **Text Reads as an Image**

Eisner discusses the idea that text can be “treated ‘graphically’”. He refers to the “visual treatment of words as graphic art” (1985, p. 11). Literally, text becomes part of the image. His own work reflects this feature, depicting letters that read like pictures, conveying “mood”, providing “narrative bridge” as well as “the implication of sounds” (p.10).

b). **Images without Words**

Eisner explains how images without words, “wordless images”, “exploit imagery in the service of expression and narrative” (1985, p. 16). In the absence of dialogue, the reader is made to supply their own (p. 19). In these situations, gesture is often exaggerated to ensure clarity of meaning. Facial expressions are emphasized, and use of the close-up is common. According to

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13 In fact, the front cover of *Comics and Sequential Art* quotes British graphic novelist Neil Gaiman: “When I decided I wanted to write comics, I bought a copy of Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art*, and studied it. If I were starting out today, with all the books on comics and graphic novels out there, I’d still begin with this book.”
Eisner, while silent panels seem to imply a less developed form of narrative, they in fact “really require some sophistication on the part of the viewer” (p. 24).

c). Timing

Eisner states that “Time is illusory: we measure and perceive it through the memory of experience” (1985, p. 25). Viewed in this way, depiction of time naturally functions through representation of experience and actions. The panel becomes critical, in that it “defines the perimeters of time”, affecting rhythm and pacing, thereby also affecting the measurement of time. The number, size, and shape of panels all contribute to an element of time (p. 30).

Eisner also mentions that time in comics is often conveyed by breaking down familiar actions into sequences. For example, a drop of water falling can be broken down into a succession of panels to act as a sort of clock (1985, p. 30).

d). The Frame

Eisner refers to the “commonality of human experience and the phenomenon of our perception of it, which seems to consist of frames or episodes” (1985, p. 38). He posits that the frame (or, panel) is “a medium of control” in that it “contains” the reader’s view (p. 43).

The frame’s border is similarly important as it plays a role in determining time tense, space, sounds, and emotion. For example, “wavy” or “scalloped” panel borders typically suggest past time tense (Eisner, 1985, p. 44). Rippled edges and oblong shapes may imply uncertainty and impending danger (p. 60). The absence of a frame may imply the illusion of unlimited space (p. 45). Sometimes, the entire page comprises of one panel – a “metapanel” – which may serve narrative purposes, like setting the overall climate (p. 72), or gathering a “flow of action” and “holding” it in a single large open panel (p. 78).
3.2.2 Scott McCloud

Scott McCloud’s seminal work, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1994), illustrates how words and pictures combine to make a unique storytelling medium. He first discusses two key concepts: “the icon”, and “the gutter”.

a). The Icon

Loosely referring to the field of semiotics, McCloud discusses how icons are extremely powerful tools. He argues that when one sees, for example, a photograph or a realistic depiction of a face, he/she sees the face of someone else – anyone but themselves. The glistening eyes, wavy hair, and smile lines, for example, depict another, very specific person, with a specific character and life experience. When one sees an icon, however – a cartoon – he/she relates, because they absorb themselves into an open vessel. As McCloud states, “When you enter the world of the cartoon – you see yourself” (1994, p. 36). McCloud explains how as self-centered beings, people automatically fill an empty vessel with their own image. Therefore, whereas an image (photographed or drawn, painted, etc.) of a face with detailed features conveys and captures a particular person, a circle with lines for eyes, a nose, and a mouth can be *any* person. It is universal.

Because “icons demand our participation to make them work” (McCloud, 1994, p. 59), people “respond to cartoons as much or more than to realistic image” (p. 30). The icon is therefore a potent vehicle for identification. With this idea in mind, McCloud argues that abstraction in art can be viewed as a process of simplification; the act of “stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning’” (p. 30).

An artist’s style, therefore, can greatly affect the level and manner at which the reader responds or identifies with characters and their situations. If an artist’s style is more “cartoony” as opposed to realistic, for example, the character is more subjective, as it is open to whatever meaning and personal relevance the reader may endow it with. Summarizing this concept,
McCloud states that “through traditional realism, the comics artist can portray the world without, and through the cartoon, the world within” (1994, p. 41).

“The icon”, as a concept, rests in the larger idea of “closure”. McCloud explains closure as “the phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (1994, p. 63). More simply put, the human mind and imagination naturally fill in what is not shown; how and with what the gap is filled is heavily determined by the reader’s thoughts and imagination. Comics make explicit use of “closure”; one way is indeed through use of the icon. Although the reader’s eyes see a circle with a few lines, for example, he/she actually perceives a human face (p. 64).

b). The Gutter

Another type of closure occurs in comics when the reader is confronted with the space between panels: “the gutter”. One of the identifying features of comics is their use of panels in sequence. What is contained within these panels, and how they are contained and depicted in relation to each other, significantly constructs story. The “gutter”, however, plays a similarly vital role in construction of story, and is contingent, like the icon, upon reader participation. The power of this blank space lies in the idea of “closure”. The “non”-space between panels actually becomes filled with whatever the reader endows it with, in his or her attempt to connect one panel to the next. What the reader does not see is just as important as what he/she does see.

c). Line

McCloud also discusses the emotional potential of certain aesthetic features. He first discusses line, illustrating how this feature can be manipulated to render characters, objects, spaces, and actions with certain “feelings”.

McCloud asks: “Can emotions be made visible?” (1994, p. 118). This question is rhetorical, however, as he proceeds to show a succession of panels containing different types of lines and shapes, offering matching emotions for each one. Although McCloud addresses that emotional value is often contingent upon certain contextual elements of the larger story, as well
as the artist’s particular drawing style, and even the reader’s cultural orientation, he generally suggests:

- Bold diagonal lines convey anger (p. 118)
- Jagged repetitive patterns convey anxiety (p. 119)
- Curves and open lines convey joy (p. 118)

McCloud discusses that with the emergence of Expressionism, objectively-rendered external worlds (e.g. those captured by the Impressionists) made way for the subjectivity of unseen psychological worlds. He explains that “all lines carry with them an expressive potential” (1994, p. 124).

**d). Color**

McCloud also addresses the emotional potential of color (1994, p. 185). He states that “The differences between black-and-white and color comics are vast and profound, affecting every level of the reading experience”. He argues that with black and white, “Meaning transcends form”, in that “the ideas behind the art are communicated more directly” (p. 192).

Color, however, adds another layer of communication. With flat color, forms themselves become more significant. Because with flat color, the color is fixed and non-expressive, the focus shifts elsewhere – to the forms themselves. In effect, with flat color, “The world becomes a playground of shapes and space” (p. 192).

Lastly, with more expressive use of color in a way which embraces the palette’s range and incorporates tone and modeling, pictures can convey a depth and range of sensations and emotions (McCloud, 1994, p. 192)

Eisner’s and McCloud’s work will be used to glean insights into the aesthetic construction of the three graphic novels. Eisner’s discussion of aesthetic features like graphic

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14 McCloud describes flat color as objective, without the tone and depth possible through a more subjective palette. Flat color came to characterize the look of much of American comics with its fixed and bright colors.

15 McCloud gives the example of the “color-by-numbers” that children often do.
text, wordless images, timing, and panel, and McCloud's ideas on the icon, the gutter, line, and color, will be applied towards the aesthetic analysis of the three selected graphic novels. Of the features identified in this section, the most prevalent ones in each of the texts will be identified and explored.
CHAPTER 4: A CONTRACT WITH GOD

The first and titular story in a collection of four vignettes about Jewish immigrant life in the Bronx in the 1920's and 30's, A Contract with God tells the tale of Frimme Hersh, a Jewish boy who becomes orphaned during Russian pogroms in the late 1800s and becomes a "child of the childless" (Eisner, 2006, p. 15) in his little shtetl. Because he is generous and pious, the shtetl's elders pool their money together and send Hersh away to America for a better life. Along his way, Hersh writes up a contract with God before settling into a Hassidic community in the Bronx. When a baby girl mysteriously arrives at his doorstep several years later, Hersh takes her in and decides to raise her as his own. He delights in the joys of fatherhood, until, unexpectedly, his beloved daughter dies. Hersh is struck with a sense of betrayal, convinced that God has deeply betrayed him by violating the covenant contract. Hereafter, Hersh's life becomes a struggle between faith and futility. His existence becomes a battle not only to survive physically but also psychologically and spiritually.

4.1 Historical Context

The first Jews who came to America were Sephardim from Brazil who came to New York in the mid 1600's fleeing persecution under Portuguese rule (American Immigration Law Foundation, para. 3). However once they reached America they were faced with similar discrimination and denied full rights to participate in public society. In the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, waves of Jews immigrated to New York from Eastern Europe fleeing the pogroms of Russia and Poland (para. 8).

Eitan Levine (1983) states that:

upon arrival in America, especially during the major immigration periods from the 1880’s to the 1920’s, Jews discovered a multitude of minorities living in this country – Irishmen, Swedes, Italians, and so on. Moreover, there was no distinct,
homogeneous majority that they could see in their immediate environment. The
majority had of course, evacuated these areas when the immigrants arrived. (p. 193)

Levine continues:

Moreover, they discovered that there was more than enough prejudice to go
around, and that each minority group was detested by some other minority, which in turn,
was detested by another group. For once, the Jew was not singled out as an object of
scorn, but instead was one of many. This was a unique experience. (p. 193)

However, Levine also states that although this was a unique situation in which disparate
cultural groups shared close living quarters and faced similar predicaments, “what was less
unique about the American experience was that all of the minorities, to some extent, disliked
Jews” (1983, p. 193). Therefore, while it was difference that characterized the dynamics of
arrival, and while each ethnic group struggled to make their way, Jews were the lowest of the
low; the common enemy.

Until this time, most of the relatively small Jewish community in New York was
comprised of German Jews. However, after 1880, vast numbers of Jewish immigrants began
arriving in New York from Eastern Europe – mainly Russia, Poland, Romania, and parts of the
Austro-Hungarian Empire (Lower East Side Tenement Museum [LESTM], 2005, para. 1). The
New York LESTM website (2005) states that

Following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, Russia's five million Jews
faced a fierce campaign of government sponsored anti-Semitism. Pogroms,
mandatory army service, famine, cholera epidemics, and the general economic
stagnation of the countryside drove them from their small villages and into the
growing towns and cities of Germany, Russia, and Poland (then under the control of
Russia). (para. 2)
From there many Jews left Europe completely. Approximately one-third of Eastern Europe's Jewish population emigrated between 1881 and 1914. Ninety percent came to America (LESTM, 2005, para. 2). By 1916, approximately 28% of New York’s population was Jewish (para. 1).

Eisner writes from within this New York of the 1920’s and 30’s, marked by the sweat, toil, successes, failures, and hostilities of a reactive mixture of immigrant groups. The crash of the Stock Exchange in 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression hardened these peoples’ lives further, confronting them with “the never-ending struggle to prevail...or at least to survive” (Eisner, 2006, p. XIII). In his preface to his 2006 Contract with God trilogy, Eisner describes what he meant to convey with his use of the tenement – the kind of multiple dwelling in the New York slums – as a symbol of this visceral immigrant experience, saying that the tenement “always seemed to me a ‘ship afloat in concrete’”. He describes the “rooms strung together train-like” (p. XV). The inhabitants were “city employees or laborers and their turbulent families” mostly recent immigrants, “intent on their own survival” (p. XV). Eisner conveys the frantic essence of the Depression years, “…a time when life and living were more marginal and precarious, yet the reason for it all seemed as unattainable as ever” (p. XIX). Eisner’s fictional Dropsie Avenue, the street at which Hersh’s journey takes place, is meant to embody the essence of this era. Eisner likened Dropsie to the real Bronx streets: “Like its inhabitants, it has a turbulent existence but an unquenchable instinct for survival” (p. XIX).

In A Contract with God, the Diaspora is a place in which the Jew must flee from place to place, only to arrive in new spaces which present discrimination and alienation in different forms. Jews had arrived in New York after fleeing from Europe, the Old World defined by Yiddish and shtetl life. When they arrived in America they brought with them their recent memories of persecution as well as their protected Jewish culture and faith. They were noticeably different and regarded warily by other cultural groups. A Contract with God captures
this experience of Jewish migration and immigration, conveying, through the arduous journey of Frimme Hersh, the Jewish American experience in a landscape of immigration, alienation, and struggle.

4.2 Jew, God, and Survival

Eisner calls *A Contract with God* an examination of “man’s relationship with his God”, and of “man’s primal concern with survival.” He states: “We are told early on that God will either punish us or reward us, depending on our behavior, in accordance with a compact” (Eisner, 2006, p. XVI).

It is this Jew-God “compact” which lies at the heart of Hersh’s journey. His journey with God is tumultuous. He questions God’s existence, the mere existence of any relationship, and, the meaning and purpose of such a relationship.

*A Contract with God* begins at the point of Hersh’s rupture of faith – his daughter’s death – but Hersh’s history traces a pious and faithful Jew. The text reads: “Above all, Frimmehleh was helpful and kind” (Eisner, 2006, p. 15). Hersh is constantly praised for his goodness, and often told that he will be rewarded by God. The narrative informs of his religious observance which is depicted visually through his kipah (skullcap) and Hassidic attire. This is one example whereby the visuals supply the reader with information that is absent from the printed text. Life is harsh and imminently threatened, but faith seems to provide a certain stability.

His family survives the pogroms of the late 1800s, but soon after, his parents die, and Hersh is adopted by the community. Although Hersh’s acts of benevolence are not necessarily performed for the sake of reward, he nonetheless clearly lives by the belief that a Jew is judged by God according to the quality of his actions. The elders of the shtetl believe that “Frimmeleh” (Hersh) is favored by God, but for Hersh, “favored” seems to imply the designation to bear burden, rather than being “favored” with good fortune.
The elders of the community similarly “choose” Hersh to send away to America: “The next attack may wipe us out, so we have selected you to save, for we believe you are favored by God!” (Eisner, 2006, p. 17). Whether life in America offers an easier or more fruitful life for Hersh is debatable; indeed his life in America seems more of a curse than a blessing. Nonetheless, he is faithful, and along his journey to America with Reb (Rabbi) Lipshitz, Hersh begins contemplating God. As he branches outside the confines of shtetl life, his curiosity grows.

Hersh appeals to the Reb, asking him about God’s justness. He asks: “Rebbe...is God just?”, and, “If I am good, will God know it??” (Eisner, 2006, p. 17) Hersh takes comfort in his right to ask questions about God. Hersh and the Reb engage in dynamic discussion, and Hersh becomes convinced in his view of God as benevolent, just, and all-knowing.

Through his dialogue with the Reb, Hersh seeks direct communication with God. One night, alone in the forest, Hersh forms a contract with God. The contract, written on a tablet, accompanies Hersh to his new life in the Bronx Hassidic community, and he “faithfully and piously” holds to the contract’s terms. He settles into the community and becomes “a respected member of the synagogue” (Eisner, 2005, p. 19).

When a baby appears at his doorstep, Hersh sees no option but to adopt her. He raises her as his own daughter and experiences the great joy of fatherhood. When she suddenly dies, however, Hersh’s relationship with God changes. His anger with God ruptures his faith. As he walks home from his daughter’s funeral, text and image convey catastrophe. The text summons biblical imagery – the slummy buildings drenched in rain are “‘Like the ark of Noah’” (Eisner, 2006, p. 5), while the enormous drops are likened to angels’ tears: “Only the tears of ten thousand weeping angels could cause such a deluge!” (p. 6).
While the allusion to Noah\textsuperscript{16} and angels can be either life-affirming or fatalistic, Noah’s “favoredness” is likened to Hersh’s in that both are chosen to bear enormous burden. Similarly, angels are messengers of God – they can bring either good news or bad news. Regardless, the reference to Noah and angels establishes the likely existence of a supreme being. Nonetheless, the text makes clear that the loss of his daughter renders Hersh a bitter man.

Hersh challenges the fundamental basis of his relationship with God, the very covenant itself: “It should not have happened to Frimme Hersh because Frimme Hersh had a contract with God!” (Eisner, 206, p. 12). The text continues: “And a contract is a contract! It was, after all, a solemn agreement of many years” (p. 13). Hersh’s anger at God’s violation is explicit, as he rebukes God: “No! Not to me... you can’t do this...we have a contract!!” (p. 23). Hersh draws on logical argumentation, alluding to the Jewish people’s agreement (covenant) with God – the Ten Commandments based in the Torah – the “solemn agreement of many years” (p. 13).\textsuperscript{17} Hersh also challenges God’s responsibility and ethicality, posing a legitimate argument: “If God requires that men honor their agreements... then is not God, also, so obligated??” (p. 25).

Hersh’s communication with God takes on a personal nature. His hostility is funneled directly toward God and he approaches God one-on-one. After hearing of his daughter’s death, the text reads: “That night Frimme Hersh confronted GOD...” (Eisner, 2006, p. 24). The image shows Hersh alone on the other side of his apartment door with neighbors listening outside. In the confines of his private apartment space, he furiously blames God for violating their contract, and pleads with Him: “I ask you...were the terms not clearly written?” (p. 26). He is not able to fathom that other than the possibility of a technical error (e.g. a typo), there could be any rationale for breaking such a contract.

\textsuperscript{16} Noah was identified as righteous and as such delegated as a savior, however, the Bible also makes clear that Noah was righteous \textit{in his time}. This implication of \textit{relative} righteousness might imply a certain weakness of character.

\textsuperscript{17} Louis E. Newman, in an article titled “Covenant and Contract”, discusses how the Torah is the oldest form of contract, explaining the terms of what God expects from the people of Israel and what Israel may expect from God (Newman, 1991, p. 10).
Later in the story, when Hersh decides to return to some kind of divine connection, he appeals to the elders of the community for help in drawing up a new contract. But the elders take issue in becoming involved, seeing it as a potential interference in what is meant to be a strictly personal process. The elders address the essentiality of direct communication with God when they respond: “This is a private matter between you and God!” (Eisner, 2005, p. 45), and “What right have we to be a party to this…” (p. 46).

Similarly, at the end of the story, when Hersh dies, and Moishe, Hersh’s young heir, finds Hersh’s discarded covenant tablet, Moishe similarly establishes a very private moment with God. Moishe is alone in a dark street when he “enters into a contract with GOD” (Eisner, 2006, p. 61).

Hersh decides that he is under no obligation to uphold his end of the contract, since God has blatantly violated His. Hersh spits on the tablet and hurls it out the window. He still, however, observes Judaic law by sitting shivah. But on the seventh day, “…the sun rose in a clear sky and Frimme Hersh said the morning prayer…for the last time” (p. 30).

With this reference to a new beginning, Hersh sets out to become a secular man. He symbolically shaves his beard, purchases real estate with the synagogue’s bonds, and finds a non-Jewish mistress. The mistress is “a ‘shikseh’ from Scranton, Pa.” with whom he “took up a lifestyle he felt more appropriate to his new station” (Eisner, 2006, p. 38). Hersh’s “new station” is secular life.

The allures of assimilated life and material gain envelop Hersh as he embraces both. In turning his back on faith and the burden of morality, he is lifted from them and begins to approach survival as any new immigrant in New York at the time. But in this, Hersh also begins to die as a Jew. His ethical behavior spirals downwards. As his faith declines, he becomes privy

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18 In Judaism, “shivah” refers to the obligatory seven-day mourning period.
to the demands of the surrounding secular world, which, while providing him with temporary relief, also begin to destroy him.

4.3 Impact of Struggle on Faith

Although Hersh tries to renounce his relationship with God, within this new life, he becomes callous. As his faith declines, so do his moral and ethical standards. Seeing God himself as unethical, Hersh’s own morality has no significant purpose. As a landlord, for example, Hersh shows no compassion for his needy tenants. Hersh is depicted as the stereotype of the crafty Jewish businessman, as the superintendent of Hersh’s properties conveys: “Ach... these Jews... yesterday a poor tenant, today the owner!... How do they do it??” (Eisner, 2006, p. 36).

The switch to the “easy” assimilated life proves not as simple as Hersh had expected. The demands of secular living nag him ceaselessly with dilemmas. His conscience harasses him and he is never able to escape “the “black hole” (Eisner, 2006, p. 36) that has formed inside him. Hersh’s “‘shikseh’”, as well-meaning (albeit ditsy) as she may be, embodies assimilation – the options that the secular world presents – and catalyses both Hersh’s turning away from God and his dismissal of Judaism. Hersh is not able to handle a truly committed relationship. His “shikseh” represents the ditsy broad, a caricature, and in this, the relationship is as far removed as possible from a real human connection. When the (unnamed) “shikseh” complains that their life together lacks excitement and luxury, she also touches at the core of Hersh’s distress with her complaint: “We don’t even go to no church…”, deepening the sting of this cutting comment by whimsically offering to convert: “Hey! Y’want I should become Jewish?” (p. 41) Hersh’s torment reaches its boiling point in this moment, as he is suddenly swept by anxiety over the possibility of his total assimilation.

This is the turning point in Hersh’s journey of faith. Hersh cannot seem to bear the weight of subverting his identity. He is tormented by his own anger and emptiness – as his “shikseh” insightfully calls it, his “black hole” – and is desperate for genuine human connection.
He thus returns to the place of his former self, the synagogue, where he calls on the elders and asks them to facilitate the writing of a new contract. Although the elders are at first troubled by his request, eventually they agree and present Hersh with the new contract (“to provide him with a guiding document – so that he might live in harmony with God… can we truly deny him this?” [Eisner, 2006, p. 49].)

However, Hersh approaches the “renewing of the contract” suspiciously. He treats the contract as a business agreement, scrutinizing every line and dot, ensuring that the procedure take place in the presence of witnesses. The text reads: “All that night Hersh sat reading the contract. Again and again… he studied every word with great care. It was bonafide without question!” (Eisner, 2006, p. 50) Finally, once the new contract is formed, Hersh actually threatens God, commanding him to abide by the terms: “This time you will not violate! This time, I have three witnesses!” (p. 52) He aims to control God; to force Him to adhere to an agreement that offers no loopholes whatsoever.

It can also be argued that Hersh’s intentions for creating a new contract with God stem from a genuine desire for purpose and meaning. He views reconnecting with God as offering the possibility of a new beginning. In fact, the first thing he mentions is the possibility of marriage and children: “… after all- I am not too old to marry” (Eisner, 2006, p. 51). Hersh craves real human connection, like that which he once shared with his beloved daughter. The possibility of a relationship with God enables him to envision a closeness to and love of humans. His story, thus, expounds the importance of both spiritual connectedness as well as investment in the real human world.

Although Hersh had supposedly “said his morning prayers for the last time” (Eisner, 2006, p. 30), Hersh ultimately returns to his faith. He is only able to temporarily subvert his connection with God; he never terminates it. He tries to disconnect and start a new life but in the end he cannot suppress his desire for a relationship with God. Tragically, however, during the
signing of the new contract, he is struck by a heart attack in the same moment, and dies. One of the lessons Hersh could not learn before his death is that it is impossible for something in life, let alone a relationship with God, to be “bonafide without question” (Eisner, 2006, p. 50).

Although Hersh dies, Hersh’s Judaism arguably lives on. He survives the brutal pogroms of his youth and the fact of his orphanhood, but it is life in America, the epitome of the secular world, which presents Hersh with inner turmoil. Hersh’s Judaism lives on through the young Moishe – a mirror image of Hersh’s childhood self who is similarly told that God will reward him – who finds the old discarded contract in an alley while fighting away anti-Semitic bullies. This tiny but powerful seed of faith, symbolized by Hersh’s original contract written on the tablet, is passed along to a new generation. Alone, at night, under the light of a streetlamp, Moishe studies the newly discovered tablet, and signs his name on the contract under Hersh’s name.

Hersh’s struggle to survive is inextricably linked to his relationship with God. Through his journeys he is confronted with dilemmas which force him to reconcile two worlds: that of Judaism and faith in God, with the secular world in which he is a minority. He begins as faithful, but starts questioning God once he leaves the Old World for America. This questioning allows him to foster his own conception of God, and in this way he exercises his right to question God. It is a questioning which strengthens his faith. With the sudden death of his daughter, however, his faith plummets and he is filled only with anger, dismay, and a stinging sense of betrayal. He challenges God personally and directly, chastising him with his innermost anguish, and then turns his back on God. He wills himself to walk away completely, to terminate the relationship, but he is ultimately unable to do this. While he is attracted by the allure of the secular world’s comforts, and feels anger, dismay, and betrayal toward God, Hersh can neither disconnect himself from his Judaism nor ignore his desire for some kind of connection with God.
4.4 Storytelling Through the Graphic Novel

Eisner’s dramatic approach breathes life into Hersh’s story. His signature style juxtaposes elements of historical realism with a cartoon-like element that raises this story into the realm of myth.

Eisner makes use of a variety of aesthetic features in *A Contract with God*. He is known for his “moody” writing, which he himself refers to as “texts reading as image”. His lettering – literally font type and size – are often conveyed as elements of the pictures themselves. Similarly, Eisner’s use of framing (paneling) to suggest and control space, time and tone build the themes of relationship with God, breaking of covenant, and eventual return. His bold inked lines are emotionally-charged, making for theatrical and expressive images which aptly describe Hersh’s anguished journey. Lastly, Eisner’s choice of dual tone coloring – dark sepia and off-white – capture Hersh’s severe condition, as well as a sense of history.

Eisner skillfully creates a menacing atmosphere, which foreshadows thematic and psychological events. For example, the first title page conveys a sense of dreariness, as a man traverses a sidewalk alone, hunched under raindrops that seem to grind him into the ground. Above him floats an impressive stone tablet. Behind appears the silhouette of an urban slum, like a beast lurking in the background. The next page presents the tenement buildings of the Bronx, relentlessly occupying the streets in a nightmare of rectangular structures. In the background the buildings and businesses of those with more money and comfort tease those less fortunate. It is clearly a different neighborhood. Like the title page, this page too is frameless, conveying a world of uncertainty and shadow. The dark sky presses at the edges of the page while buildings break through the side edges, creating a sense of endless slums.

The first words of *Contract* read: “All day the rain poured down on the Bronx without mercy” (Eisner, 2005, p. 4). This opening line appears in a block of text occupying nearly half of the page. The words themselves are dripping wet, cold and merciless, weighing heavily and
blending into the streaks of rain. "The sewers overflowed and the waters rose over the curbs of
the street" (p. 4). Below, a man, hunched over and dwarfed by the towering wet letters above,
sloshes through the street. This is the reader’s first encounter with Frimme Hersh, who is
walking back from his daughter’s funeral. The reader sees him as vulnerable and in a state of
ominous calm; a juxtaposition with and foreshadowing of the impending climactic confrontation
with God.

This climax occurs on page 23 [See Figure 4.1] and is the pivotal moment of the story. It
is at this moment that Hersh confronts God directly and for the first time demands God’s
accountability. Eisner makes brilliant use of the metapanel, capturing Hersh’s reaction to the
news of his daughter’s death, with one large panel that takes over the entire page. Hersh’s fury is
depicted as frozen and held in a theatrical moment of anguish. He bends forward, his tense body
thrusting upwards, hands clenched, holding a prayer book. His head angles backwards and all the
reader sees is a grotesque view up Hersh’s iconically-drawn nose and gaping mouth. Above his
face, between his two arms, the text reads: “NO! Not to me… You can’t do this… We have a
contract!!” (Eisner, 2006, p. 23). The printed text fuses with the image; the letters pour out of a
vanishing balloon outline. The entire scene is frameless and positioned in the center of the page,
anchored by aggressive vertical and diagonal lines that convey Hersh’s anger. Through the use of
icon, graphic text, and expressive line, this scene is “stripped down” to its “essential meaning”,
depicting Hersh’s anger at God for His breaking of covenant. Constructing this scene without a
frame suggests Hersh’s vulnerability. It also lends a certain intimacy to the scene, allowing the
reader to intrude without having to negotiate any kind of barrier. The reader’s view is not
contained, nor is Hersh’s fury.
After mourning, Hersh alters his physical appearance in a gesture that conveys his rejection of faith and God. However, it becomes apparent that this is more difficult than expected, as he is surrounded by reminders of his former life. His old dwelling at 55 Dropsie haunts him and he is compelled to gaze at it “At least once every week” (Eisner, 2006, p. 38). Hersh’s psychological distress climaxes on page 41, when his non-Jewish mistress offers to convert for him. She kindly embraces Hersh, smiling widely, but Hersh is brimming in conflict.
over his obligation toward his past pious life and the current secular moment. Eisner depicts this with his drawing of Hersh’s face via expressive lines that contort with agony.

The page, consisting of three separate panels, is framed by the textured bricks of a building – presumably Hersh’s home. The first panel shows the mistress’s offer and Hersh turning away in despair, while two separate panels are depicted below, one showing the mistress’s silhouette as she says: “Frim? Now, what did I say wrong?” and the other revealing Hersh alone in a room, against a dark background, hunched over in introspection, leaning against the panel’s edge while confronting his torment. Depicting Hersh alone in his own dark panel underscores his disconnect from God, which has left him isolated not only from God but from meaningful human contact. Eisner’s use of the silent panel (or “wordless image”) emphasizes the repressed volatility of Hersh’s psychological state, as he faces the choice between Judaism and assimilation.

On page 52 [See Figure 4.2], Hersh is shown threatening God, warning him not to violate the contract as he had done before. He claims that this time he would bring witnesses along, and attempts to intimidate God into abiding by the terms of the new contract. Hersh threatens Him: “This time,...”, but the heart attack prevents him from completing the sentence. Eisner breaks down the rapid progression of the attack into brief moments depicted in small sequences. Hersh is first framed in a narrow panel, chest clutched and face contorted. Three panels of the same size follow in sequence, overlapping each other, positioned at various angles, depicting one dramatic moment. Hersh grips the edge of a table, and the succession of panels is followed below by a realistically drawn picture of Hersh collapsed on the floor. Hersh lies near the bottom of the page, his body defining the edge of the frameless metapanel. Through Eisner’s manipulation of panels, one brief moment is extended and rendered a defining symbolic event. Eisner constructs this scene with great deliberation, employing various aesthetic features, including panel type, size, and shape, as well as graphic text (with the large aggressive font used when Hersh
commands God not to violate the contract), to render a final climactic moment in Hersh’s struggle with God.

[Figure 4.2 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is the image on page 52 of A Contract with God.]

The very last page shows Shloime Khreks, Hersh’s successor, and heir to the initial discarded contract. It is night and the street is dark though illuminated by a lamp that emits curiously beautiful and expansive rays of light. The boy’s face is hidden under his Hassidic hat, which is large and simply-drawn, immediately capturing the reader’s attention. His hat, consistently presented in previous pages in an iconic manner, becomes a symbol of Jewish continuity.
The scene is ominous, but also poetically conveys an extremely intimate moment wherein
the young Khreks communicates with God in the splendor of an urban slum. Khreks sits alone on
the stoop of 55 Dropsie – the last and lasting monument of faith – and signs his name under
Hersh’s on the old contract.
CHAPTER 5: THE RABBI’S CAT

Joann Sfar’s *The Rabbi’s Cat* tells the story of a widowed rabbi, his beloved daughter Zlabya (also the name of a Middle-Eastern honeycomb-like desert), and their feisty libidinous cat, living in Algeria’s Jewish quarter in the 1930’s. The story revolves around the vibrant relationships among them as they traverse territories of love, faith, and reason.

5.1 Historical Context

Jewish life in Algeria leads back to the first centuries of the Common Era (Bard, para. 1) Exiled from the land of Israel as a result of the Jewish-Roman wars, Jews settled in Algeria approximately 500 B.C.E, around the time of the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem. Another migration wave occurred in the 1300’s, when many Jews migrated from the Jewish epicenter in Spain to Algeria, due to deteriorated living conditions. Muslims and Christians later settled in Algeria.

Much of Algeria’s complex cultural, religious, and sociological character results from it having been a European colony. This wrought issues of mixed identities as well as divided national and political loyalties. The result was a complicated relationship to the country itself.

Prior to French invasion, Jews had been living in Algeria with *Dhimmi* status\(^\text{19}\) for centuries. This rendered Jews inferior to some degree, though, comparatively, this situation was decisively more tolerable than the conditions which non-Christians had to endure in Europe (Lewis, B., 1984, p. 62).

Algeria became a French colony in 1830. The term “pied noir” – the name given to French settlers in Algeria, referring to the black boots of the French colonialists – was coined around this time. Jews were eventually lumped along with this title, even though in origin they were different from the classic pied noirs (since Jews were native to Algeria and were neither

\(^{19}\) “*Dhimmi*” was a status given to Jews and Christians living under Muslim rule. It promised individual protection and freedom to practice their own religion in return for paying special taxes and recognizing Muslim supremacy.
European nor Christian). Nancy Wood (1998) discusses that Algerian Jews were indeed regarded as French before this Decree, or at least had the opportunity to be recognized as such:

In order to deal with the status of Algeria’s ‘indigenes’, that is to say Arabs, Berbers and Jews, the 1865 Senatus Consulte had created the category of French subjects, distinct from citizens, who could apply for citizenship if they were willing to give up their so-called statut personnel or personal status. This essentially entailed renouncing the authority of religious tribunals in matters such as marriage, divorce and inheritance, and agreeing to be subject to French civil law in these domains. (p. 172)

However, between 1865 and 1870, only a very small number of Algerian Jews applied for citizenship under these conditions (p. 172). Wood emphasizes a). the Cremieux Decree (1870), b). Vichy (1940), and c). the Algerian War of Independence (1962) as defining events affecting the experience and identity-making of Algerian Jewry (p. 171).

The Cremieux Decree of 1870 granted Algerian Jews French citizenship in 1870. Although with this piece of legislation Algerian Jews enjoyed more rights, some historians vehemently believe that this event “played a decisive role in the ‘dejudaisation’ of the Jews of Algeria” (Wood, 1998, p. 173). With this Decree, Jews became integrated into the pied noir segment of society. This greatly impacted the Jewish way of life. Ladino and Judeo-Arabic languages, for example, began to disappear and make way instead for French, Jewish schools began disappearing, resulting in neglected Jewish education, and Jews began to adopt a more European way of dress. In addition, with the Decree, Jews, regardless of the fact that they did not share the same geographical or ethnic background, became further regarded as part of the pied-noir segment of Algerian society. They were lumped categorically with the Europeans.

Ironically, however, the pieds-noirs, who were mainly Catholics, resented being associated with Jews. Both Muslims and Jews were despised by the French colonialists. Anti-
Semitism within the pied-noir community was extensive during the colonial period (1830-1962). The pied noirs' anti-Semitic sentiments manifested in pogroms against the Jews of Oran in the late 1890's (Wood, 1998, p. 173).

Later, in 1934, Muslims attacked the Jewish community of Constantine. Widespread support and collaboration with Nazi-led Vichy rule in WWII defined Algeria’s policy towards its Jewish population. Vichy France’s collaboration with the Nazis directly influenced Algerian Jews, and in 1940, the Vichy government’s ‘Statut des Juifs’, instated that Algerian Jews be deprived of their citizenship. Later, closer to the time of the establishment of the modern state of Israel, Jewish communities were attacked and many Jews fled Algeria to Israel and France (Bard, para. 3).

Philosopher Jacques Derrida, himself an Algerian Jew, discusses the complexity of Jewish Algerian identity, stating that Jews’ citizenship in Algeria was “‘precarious, recent, menaced’” (Wood, 1998, p. 169). Wood similarly describes the Jews’ complicated predicament: “Neither French, metropolitan, or Catholic on the one hand, nor Arab or Berber on the other, the place of Jews within colonial Algeria was inherently unstable, vulnerable to the forces of deracination and enculturation”20 (p. 171).

Sephardic Jews experienced Jewish journeys that were very different from the Jews of Ashkenazi descent. They experienced life as outsiders in different ways. While Ashkenazi Jews typically lived ghettoized and segregated lives, Sephardic Jews were often integrated, to varying degrees, into Muslim society. Nonetheless, this integration was often superficial. The response to this was a strong clinging to Jewish observance. Rayner, in his book, *The Jewish People*, notes that “the trauma of exile had marked the personality of the Sephardi refugees and sharpened their

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20 Wood addresses the strong presence of sentiments of longing, exile, and nostalgia for Algeria, captured, for example, by the music of legendary singer Enrico Macias, who fled his native Algeria with the outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence in 1961, with the accompanying attacks on Jews. Macias sings about the “complex relationship to his ‘pay perdu’” (Wood, 1998, p. 169).
sense of divine alienation, for which the only antidote was intensified piety and observance” (Goldberg & Rayner, 1987, p. 112).

The Algerian Jewish experience was colored by deep issues of identity and status, reflected in *The Rabbi’s Cat*, through the rabbi’s spiritual and philosophical journey.

5.2 Jew, God, and Survival

*The Rabbi’s Cat* is a layered text and one could choose to focus on any of the main characters’ experiences: the rabbi’s, his daughter Zlabya’s, or, their cat’s. Each character is dynamic in their quest for understanding of the world around them. However, because it is the rabbi, through his cat, whose experiences are most profoundly faith-centered, it is his journey that will be examined.

Reflecting Telushkin’s idea that in Judaism, “Questions are used to elicit important information and to challenge”, the rabbi in *The Rabbi’s Cat* ultimately nurtures a more meaningful relationship with God through questioning. This questioning spirit is credited to the cat, whose dynamic relationship with the rabbi acts as a catalyst to and model for the rabbi’s relationship with God. The rabbi’s understanding of God and faith evolves as his intellectually voracious cat challenges his assumptions and urges his master to question what he thinks he knows. The cat is in fact the ideal student, in that he instigates a productive dynamic with his master, with his tendency to “bite [his] master the way puppies do” (Sfar, 2005, p. 14). By way of his own words and actions, like the biblical Abraham, the cat models the individual’s right to challenge God and God’s actions.

The rabbi’s relationship with the cat is characterized by an underlying loyalty, paralleling the rabbi’s relationship with God. The cat questions, teases, and challenges the rabbi; the rabbi similarly challenges God, but ultimately they treat each other with love and respect. The cat states “if man resembles God because he knows how to talk, then I resemble man” (Sfar, 2005, p.12). In a sense, the cat strives to be more human, while the rabbi strives to be more God-like.
The rabbi and the cat’s relationship is a vibrant one defined by healthy disputation. As addressed in Chapter 3, Finkelstein states that “Man is eternally obligated to discover fresh possibilities inherent in these ideals, to extend their applicability, and to be recurrent expositor” (1960, p. 1753). In essence, the cat urges his master, the rabbi, to do just that. The rabbi is pious and faithful, displaying true Jewish values, like humility and hospitality. His Judaism, precipitated through his observance is his total way of life. His devotion to God permeates every aspect of his life, including his relationship with his daughter Zlabya. He is not an intellectual, but rather a humble believer.

But the cat inspires feistiness in him, introducing debate into the rabbi’s life, their relationship, and into the rabbi’s relationship with God. The cat is witty and cynical, yet desiring of love and affection, seeing the goodness in his master, the rabbi, and in the adored Zlabya. The cat probes and provokes the rabbi, never satisfied with dogmatic responses. One fuels the other’s thirst for knowledge and understanding.

At the very moment when the cat discovers that he can speak, he expresses his desire to learn. The rabbi, afraid that his cat will corrupt his daughter, is eager to teach his pet about Torah and Jewish law. According to the cat, as he explains to the reader: “He [the rabbi] wants me to study the Torah, and the Talmud – the Mishnah, and the Gemara. He wants to put me back on the straight and narrow” (Sfar, 2005, p. 9). Exercising Steinberg’s notion of “abundant room for free play” the cat indulges in unbridled learning. He immediately addresses the topic of Jewish rites of passage, like circumcision, and his master, the rabbi, is made to think on his feet and respond to his pet’s very legitimate questions, including one about why cats evade the circumcision commandment. When the cat adds that he is uncertain as to whether or not he is Jewish, he states: “The rabbi tells me that of course I’m Jewish since my masters are Jews” (Sfar, 2005, p. 10).
From this point onwards, the cat demands his right to be bar-mitzvahed: “I tell him that’s enough. That I want to have a Bar Mitzvah” (Sfar, 2005, p. 15). The rabbi responds that no sane rabbi will bar-mitzvah a cat, but the cat argues his way through, impressing both the rabbi and the rabbi’s rabbi with his substantial Judaic knowledge and confessing that he has actually always known how to read. The cat then summons the rabbi’s rabbi, informing him that he intends to convert to Judaism. In fiery play, the cat intimidates the rabbi’s rabbi both with his knowledge and wit, claiming that “God is a reassuring myth” and accusing the rabbi’s rabbi of being interested in God only because “he doesn’t have anyone to take care of him because he is old and his parents are dead” (p. 18).

The cat continues to debate with his master and finally the cat announces that he wants to study Kabbalah. When the rabbi responds that one has to be at least fifty years old for this kind of study, the cat reminds him that in cat years he is almost fifty, and, furthermore, that this age requisite is “just a trick of Talmud scholars to avoid competition from mystical doctrine.” When the rabbi asks his cat how he knows this, the cat responds “I read it” (Sfar, 2005, p. 22). Further exercising his right to challenge authority, the cat proceeds to aggravate religious assumptions, calling Adam and Eve “mere symbols”. The rabbi clarifies that Jewish teaching works only “by analogy”, and accuses the cat of being unable to understand this because his mind is “clouded by Western thought” (p. 24).

From there, the two continue to banter philosophically, each holding the other accountable to their viewpoints. The rabbi teaches: “Westerners want to resolve the world. Turn multiplicity into oneness. That’s a delusion.” His ever-wondrous cat responds: “But, master, doesn’t Judaism also try to turn multiplicity into oneness?” “Yes” the rabbi answers, “But not in the same way. Western thought works by thesis, antithesis, synthesis, while Judaism goes thesis, antithesis, antithesis, antithesis...” (Sfar, 2005, p. 25). The cat’s questions and requests are never-ending, and he is able to charm his master. “Why the Kabbalah?” the rabbi asks. When the
cat responds that he likes “starting at the end,” the rabbi replies: “No. With me, you learn things in order.” Ultimately, the cat respects his master by agreeing to conduct his learning in a manner which respects tradition (p. 22).

The cat and his master discuss an array of existential and theological issues. At one point, the cat tells his master that with carbon-14, science can prove that the world has existed for billions of years. Tinged by the cat’s feisty spirit, the rabbi retorts that: “maybe years only make sense if humans are there to count them” (Sfar, 2005, p. 23). Although both the rabbi and his cat hold strongly to their own beliefs, they excite each other and introduce one another to new ways of thinking. They are truly intellectual equals.

The cat questions authority and provokes his master to do the same. Beginning by identifying hypocrisy in the rabbi’s rabbi, the cat mocks the fraud that he sees around him. The cat is wary of the rabbi’s rabbi from the beginning, and is eager to point out his flaws: “I ask him to show me a picture of God. He tells me that God is a word. I say to the rabbi’s rabbi that if man resembles God because he knows how to talk, then I resemble man” (Sfar, 2005, p. 12). The cat intimidates the rabbi’s rabbi, playing on his fear: “I tell the rabbi’s rabbi that I am God, who has taken the appearance of a cat in order to test him […] I tell him that he was as dogmatic and obtuse with me as some Christians are with Jews” (p. 13). Later, when the rabbi’s rabbi throws both the cat and his master out, the cat cannot avoid speaking up, and says: “He’s your master and you love him and I just proved to you that he’s not all-knowing. You’re even realizing that, for all the deference you feel for him, this master is less intelligent than you are” (p. 19). The cat continues: “So you’re going to do all you can to make the old man look good. And the more foolishness he talks, the more you’ll call him ‘my master, my master, my master’; as if to convince yourself” (p. 19). In his own way, the cat teaches his master to choose his masters wisely.
In addition to debunking the rabbi’s rabbi, the cat also exposes some of the flaws he identifies in the rabbi’s “pious” students. As the rabbi teaches the cat about the malice of gossip, the cat responds: “But all the same, master, I have to tell you. Your disciple Pinchas is the worst....” The rabbi, in his goodness and naivety, says: “No. Don’t say a word.” (Sfar, 2005, p. 38). All the same, the cat has to make his stance clear: “I don’t really like young men. Especially when they’re passionate about religion. They wield it as an instrument of power. Scholarship allows them to speak at the table” (p. 30).

Despite their constant conflicts, however, the rabbi and his cat are unconditionally loyal to each other. When the rabbi’s rabbi accuses the cat of blasphemy, lying, and “usurp[ing] the name of God”, the rabbi comes to the cat’s defense, humbly addressing the importance of questioning in the Jewish tradition, asking his rabbi whether “a rabbi shouldn’t systematically accept contradiction from his students” and whether “that isn’t the very basis of Talmudic teaching” (Sfar, 2005, p. 14). The cat loves and respects the rabbi, and the rabbi, although never overtly admitting, equally adores his energetic friend.

When the rabbi receives notification that he must take a French dictation as part of an examination for the French rabbinate, the cat immediately sees it as his own responsibility to make sure that his master passes: “You’ve been the rabbi here for thirty years and these guys who’ve never set foot here want to decide who should be rabbi or not. And to lead prayer in Hebrew for Jews who speak Arabic, they want you to write in French. So I say they’re nuts. In any case, you don’t have a choice. Without me, you’ll fail” (Sfar, 2005, p. 60). The cat teaches the rabbi to read, and although the two aggravate each other to no end (the rabbi demands to read: “a monotheistic fable”, but the best that the cat can do is offer to read him a story that features kosher animals), the cat greatly motivates the rabbi. The cat gets nervous for his master as he finally takes the exam, and, in his characteristic skepticism, confesses: “I don’t care if it’s forbidden, I invoke the name of God” (p. 66). Despite their theological differences, the two
consistently defend each other: "The rabbi’s rabbi tells the rabbi that he doesn’t want to see me anymore and that I should be drowned" (p. 12). "The rabbi tells his rabbi that he won’t drown me because he loves me and I don’t like water" (p. 13). Such exchanges illustrate the underlying honesty and loyalty which characterize the rabbi and the cat’s relationship.

The relationship between the two mirrors the loyalty which, in theory, characterizes the relationship between a Jew and God. In the first chapter of *The Rabbi’s Cat*, the rabbi and the cat strangely dream the same dream (or nightmare) in which Zlabya dies, and the rabbi becomes so disillusioned that he becomes ambivalent towards Judaism. In this dream, the rabbi loses faith: "the rabbi rejects religion. He no longer wants anything to do with a God who took his only child from him. He no longer believes in him" (Sfar, 2005, p. 30). But the cat fights hard to ensure that his master retains faith. He explains the severity of the rabbi’s dwindling faith: "in my dream the rabbi no longer wants to study the Torah, or even to teach it. He renounces his master and dismisses his students [...] My master replies that I know as much as he does, and that he doesn’t know anything anyway. Enough with all this, he says" (p. 31). To motivate his master, the atheist cat takes it upon himself to fake faith: "While I, who never believed in God, have to pretend I do. To keep his spirits up. We have to believe in an adult’s God, I tell him, a veiled God who calls out to us by emptiness, by his absence." With his charisma and charm, the cat makes the rabbi believe that faith is essential: "We have to detect in reality the inner presence of God" (p. 30).

Later in the story, in Paris, the cat continues to exhibit loyalty to his master, forfeiting the chance to enjoy luxurious creature comforts: "what am I supposed to do? Should I stay in this house of Jews who are so elegant you’d swear they were French, with the beautiful rugs and the smell of fine cooking, or follow my master in the rain?" (Sfar, 2005, p. 107). Although the cat craves food and affection, he faithfully follows the rabbi in the rain, whereby the rabbi addresses the cat’s profound loyalty: "Heeey! You’re not afraid of getting wet, old friend" (p. 108). Even
the cat on occasion finds himself entertaining the idea of God’s existence, if it means that it
might help his master. During the rabbi’s French examination, the cat invokes God’s name and
dares Him to magically intervene on his master’s behalf.

The rabbi’s meandering faith is depicted on various occasions. Later in the story, he
meets with an Arab musician and the two engage in spiritual musing. The rabbi proposes: “You
know what, we should just live in a cave and mind our own business. I bring my books, you
bring your songs.” The Arab then replies: “No. One day Allah would reproach us for it. We’d
be like Jonah, who treated a tree as more important than people.” But the rabbi retorts: “So
what?” Through his lively relationship with his cat, the rabbi has developed an appetite for
intellectual debate and for entertaining alternative perspectives on faith and piety. Before
departing their separate ways, both the rabbi and the Arab musician return to God: “Then they
prayed, both of them. One facing Jerusalem, and the other Mecca” (Sfar, 2005, p. 87). It is
difficult to imagine the rabbi engaging in such an interfaith encounter had it not been for his
witty and worldly cat.

During this same encounter, as the rabbi (and his cat of course) visit the gravesite of his
ancestor, Messaoud Sfar, the rabbi’s cat, and the Arab musician’s donkey engage in a battle of
words over ancestral origins of the name “Sfar”. The cat claims that the name has Hebrew
origins yet the donkey claims that the name is undoubtedly Arabic (as the name of a great Sufi)
(p. 84). With this mini-excursion to his ancestor’s gravesite, the rabbi, in effect, searches for the
stability and comfort derived from tradition.

As mixing with assimilated Jewish environments becomes unavoidable, tradition plays a
progressively significant role in the rabbi’s spiritual journey. Despite his spiritual wavering, the
rabbi regularly prays, wears tefillin\(^\text{21}\), and observes the Sabbath. His efforts to maintain Jewish

\(^{21}\) Tefillin are the two black leather boxes containing scrolls inscribed with Biblical passages. Jews wear them
during morning prayer services.
continuity are also manifest in the speaking of Jewish languages, like Hebrew and Ladino, in addition to Arabic and “Algerian Pataouete” (Sfar, 2005, p. 70). The rabbi is protective of his Judaism and resists assimilated cosmopolitan life.

This is made clear when the rabbi travels to Paris, which epitomizes the secular, assimilated world. He treats the leaving of Algeria as a catastrophe, clearly wary of places outside of the traditional Jewish life in Algeria that he knows. In Paris, the rabbi becomes completely disoriented. He wears parkas and refers to his temporary departure as an “exodus”, protesting melodramatically: “Do you think this is making me happy, this exodus? Do you imagine I’m pleased to see my daughter’s husband take her to the land of Eskimos?” (Sfar, 2005, p. 104).

Once in Paris, the rabbi expects to simply find a long-lost singer nephew, Rebibo, who had moved to France years earlier. When the rabbi’s son-in-law-to-be responds that he does not know a Rebibo in Paris, and that “maybe he sings under another name”, the rabbi replies in his naivety: “What, Raymond Rebibo would renounce his ancestors’ name? Cut it out, will you?” (Sfar, 2005, p. 102). The rabbi becomes obsessed with finding Rebibo, recalling how he had sent many letters though received no responses: “All it takes is an anti-Semitic postman…” (p. 103).

The rabbi feels most uncomfortable by the Jews he encounters in Paris, who ascribe to different, and in his mind, less worthy customs. In the synagogue in Paris, for example, the cat recounts: “My master gets angry and says that he’s a rabbi and that where we come from, in Algeria, we’re smart enough to talk while praying and that if in Paris they only know how to do one thing at a time, M’ksina, he feels sorry for them.” At synagogue he turns to his future son-in-law and says: “I mean, listen to this silence. There’s an echo, you’d think you were in a church” (Sfar, 2005, p. 105). His defensiveness and critiquing of different forms of Jewish observance is an important element of his journey.
The rabbi becomes clearly spiritually disoriented in France. When he finally locates his singer nephew Rebibo, he is astonished to discover that he actually earns a living through street performances in which he imitates Arab singing, rather than by singing traditional Jewish liturgy, as the rabbi had assumed. When he confronts his nephew with his shock, Rebibo explains: “To be a Jew you have to fake a Polish accent, and to play a North African Jew is too complicated” (Sfar, 2005, p. 122). This discovery deeply troubles the rabbi.

When he defiantly leaves his daughter and future son-in-law’s Sabbath-defiling home, the rabbi and the cat head out in a rainstorm to the nearby synagogue. When they arrive, however, they find it locked. Although not permitted by Jewish law\(^\text{22}\), the two spend the night in a church to keep dry. Once in the church, however, the rabbi is terrified of the crucifixes, or, as the cat expresses: the “rabbi from Palestine dying on the cross” (Sfar, 2005, p. 111). The cat asks: “Is there a commandment that forbids us from entering a church?” The rabbi responds: “No. God is everywhere, and here it isn’t raining” (p. 110). By way of exposure to such new experiences, the rabbi’s confidence in his own discretion progressively deepens.

Sleeping in a church is not the rabbi’s gravest transgression. In his bewilderment, the rabbi intentionally violates God, requesting “the least kosher meal in the universe.” Defying every possible law of kosher, he orders “That thing made with pig’s blood”, “ham, some blood sausage, snails, seafood, and swordfish, which is a fish without scales, and oysters – and please check that they’re really alive. And a glass of milk with the hams. And a good wine named after a church or a Virgin Mary.” All the while, he tests to see if God will react: “Lord, you can see me, I’m about to break your commandments. Tell me not to do it […]Tell me that I’ve deprived myself of these foods for sixty years and that it served me some kind of purpose.” Finally, he pleads: “Tell me you’ll be sad if I break your Law” (Sfar, 2005, p. 116). In this way, the rabbi

\(^{22}\) Finkelstein informs that “a Jew may not enter a building dedicated to idol-worship even to protect himself from inclement weather” (Finkelstein, 1960, p. 1741).
confronts God directly, addressing him with his deepest and most personal frustrations. He probes deeper into God’s sense of justice, saying: “Tell me that when my wife died it was your will and it was part of your design....” Then, receiving no response, the rabbi assesses the situation from reverse, as if it is God who is testing him: “He says nothing....He’s testing me.”

Exercising his newly-honed critical thinking skills (thanks to the cat), the rabbi posits the idea: “Or he doesn’t exist. Or he belongs only to the sphere of being, which amounts to the same thing” (Sfar, 2005, p. 117). The cat narrates the resolution of this scene through his own eyes: “The rabbi eats and the world doesn’t fall apart.” The rabbi promises to God: “Tomorrow I’ll go back to fearing you.” Finally, he closes this scene with an ironic blessing: “Blessed are you, Lord our God, who allows us to transgress.” Ultimately, the rabbi’s visit to Paris changes him. He experiences a whole new world outside of his prescribed rabbi’s life in Algeria, and this propels him further into his personal journey of faith. Although this process of self-discovery is challenging, uncomfortable, and at times fearsome, it is nonetheless necessary. It also allows the rabbi to see that his beloved daughter’s soon-to-be father-in-law is not a sinner, but rather a skeptic with a view of the world different from his own.

Zlabya’s father-in-law-to-be confesses that he did everything in his power to raise his children like “Westerners”: “We never observed the holidays, never kept kosher, nothing,” proceeding to say that: “The Jews in our circle look more French than Victor Hugo without the beard. So can you tell me what got into my eldest son’s head to make him become a rabbi?” (Sfar, 2005, p. 139). He continues: “My parents made religion such a pain in the ass that I wanted to spare him [his son] that. And what does he do? He dives in headfirst!” In his opinion, one has to have been through “suffering”, “conditioning”, or “illiterate” to do something as absurd as chase after religion (Sfar, 2005, p. 139). The rabbi, clearly respectful of the man’s own life choices and experiences, responds that “maybe it’s the appeal of his maternal grandfather’s city”, or “childhood memories”, or maybe that he simply “enjoys reading Hebrew” (p. 138). The
rabbi exhibits a newly-acquired sense of comfort and acceptance in his own beliefs, while simultaneously showing respect for a completely secular Jew.

The rabbi then divulges that his own journey in becoming a rabbi, too, was a surprise to his secular family: “I’m talking about a time when Algerian Jews weren’t French yet. Over there, you had the French, the Arabs, the Berbers, and then us at the bottom of the heap. Well, even among us, who were looked down on by everyone else in Algeria, being a rabbi wasn’t popular. I remember my poor mother saying, ‘That’s no job for a Jew’” (Sfar, 2005, p. 139).

When Zlabya’s father-in-law-to-be informs the rabbi that he hasn’t “set foot in a synagogue for thirty years”, the rabbi responds: “That’s very good. That way you don’t disturb people during their prayers” (Sfar, 2005, p. 138). But he then continues to say: “But God has a place for you. Every Shabbat he looks at your empty chair in the synagogue, and he says, ‘Where is he, this one?’” (p. 137). The rabbi reaches out to this secular Jew whom just days before he had so dreaded to meet. The rabbi continues: “I don’t know any more than you do. I say my prayers, you don’t, what can I tell you? Questions, we all have them. I’m not intelligent enough to respond to your concerns” (p. 138).

Over the course of their discussion, the men discover that faith is a personal undertaking. Each individual must come to his or her own understanding through a process of questioning. The rabbi’s experience in Paris, despite its hardship, became extremely meaningful, and, once they return to Algeria, the cat even states that: “the rabbi was sad because he missed Paris” (Sfar, 2005, p. 142).

The story culminates in a very atypical Sabbath sermon back in Algeria. In the sermon, the rabbi abstractly draws on his recent adventures: “So, my friends, if we can be happy without respecting the Torah, why should we exhaust ourselves to apply all these precepts that make life so complicated? Well, the truth is, I don’t know” (Sfar, 2005, p. 142). His words surprise the congregants. However, he begins to recite the blessings for the Sabbath, glass of wine in hand,
chanting the retelling of the creation story. The final panel shows the rabbi reciting the Sabbath blessings, with the cat sitting cozily on a banister, watching protectively from above. It is the questioning that strengthens love and loyalty in relationships, whether between humans (or between humans and cats), or, between humans and God.

5.3 Impact of Struggle on Faith

Ultimately, the rabbi discovers a new way of interacting with his faith which embraces a more honest and natural approach. He gains a wider understanding of himself through the variety of people, places, and experiences he encounters. He sees that he can be at home with God wherever he is, and that this is not contingent upon geography. His long-anticipated discussion with his daughter’s father-in-law to-be, the rational, completely secular French Jew, reveals the rabbi’s subtle yet poignant transformation.

Sfar mentions in an interview that his cat represents the ideal yeshiva student, with his wit and insatiable curiosity. In an interview, Sfar discusses the head of the French rabbinate’s response to The Rabbi’s Cat:

[he] even sent my publisher a certificate proclaiming my rabbi to be an official rabbi of the French community. And he told me that my characters’ criticisms of religion are exactly what rabbis wait for a good pupil to do. (Camhi, para. 17)

Sfar continues with his own words:

In a yeshiva, if a pupil doesn't criticize the text, he's just bad. Because they say, the law is stronger than you. Your role is to fight against the law to make it even stronger. And I don't consider Judaism to be something fragile—for me it's not like a crystal glass. I can give it a hit, and it remains very strong. (Camhi, para. 17)

Echoing Sfar’s words, rather than trivialize the faith and tradition, questioning and debate ultimately strengthens the capacity for connecting with God.
This vitality is reflected through sexual motifs in the story, wherein sexuality is posited against spirituality. Sex and its relationship to faith and spirituality are frequently addressed. The cat is ever libidinous and tells of his escapades with other cats: “I go out every night. I have adventures. My mistress doesn’t know anything about this” (Sfar, 2005, p. 4). And later, in a moment of jealousy, as the cat listens outside of his mistress Zlabya’s bedroom door, he boasts: “What are you doing in there that I’m not allowed to see? Do you think you’ve invented something or what? I do it in the street” (p. 98). The cat and his sexual prowess are juxtaposed against the rabbi and his students, who are either naïve and dogmatic about sex or hypocritical. The cat does not let the God-fearing men off easily, questioning them and then snickering at their ignorance: “My master is miffed, and he explains that humans can transform their sexual urges into energy that they use to learn and to enlighten their souls. I’m sure that’s true on some days, but I’ll be on other days they still jack off. But I don’t dare say that to my master” (p. 41).

The rabbi’s rabbi refers to a strong relationship between desire, lust, and God, saying that the desire to be close to God is a “carnal desire” (Sfar, 2005, p. 17). The cat despises hypocrisy and focuses on one of the rabbi’s particularly hypocritical students: “There’s this one who is always ogling women on the sly, all sweatily. He passes them on the street, keeping his neck stiff. And once they’ve passed, he rolls his eyes and watches from under his arm” (p. 39). Later, this very same student preaches about modesty and femininity (to Zlabya and the rabbi’s other students’ annoyance): “with Jewish women who fall prey to these fashions worthy of the Amalekites, we should be pitiless.” He continues: “Other women have decided to show everything. But a Jewish woman guarantees the purity of her home. Her table is a temple and she is its architect. She must save herself for her husband” (p. 40). The cat recognizes sexuality as a natural and healthy element of life and denounces sexual repression.

In the end, sensuality complements spirituality, as both are a natural part of life. God does not wish humans to be deprived of pleasure. One must live and have faith in a benign
supreme being, but one must similarly invest in the real world and connect with people. The two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they coexist and compliment each other. It is Finkelstein’s idea of the Jew’s eternal obligation to “discover fresh possibilities” and to “be their recurrent expositor” (1960, p. 1753) that urges wonder and propels the human experience. Illustrating this point, the cat suddenly finds himself feeling affection for the same dogmatic hypocritical student when he observes him leaving a prostitute’s hovel. The cat sees that the student is human in his struggles between libido and faith: “As long as I thought him unyielding and virtuous, I hated him. Now that I know him to be two-faced and hypocritical, now that I’ve seen him struggle between his hormones and his beliefs, I love him.” He then proceeds to call him his “little perplexed soul” (Sfar, 2005, p. 46). Thus, both the cat and his master’s message is that life is inherently lustful. This lust for life permeates all. This idea is conveyed by the frequent depiction of the cat with his genitals exposed. The cat instigates and initiates the acceptance of “forbidden” elements of humanness – love, sex, anger, and other emotions. The rabbi’s life could not have been the same without wonderings and experimentation. His adventures are ultimately life- and faith-affirming.

5.4 Storytelling Through the Graphic Novel

Sfar’s artistic style is defined by a vibrant, youthful energy. His use of particular aesthetic features in The Rabbi’s Cat – panel, line, and icon – forward the themes of search, honesty, and transformation. His signature style conveys a vitality and candor which characterize the rabbi’s journey of faith. Nodelman points out that some picturebook artists (or, in this case, graphic novelists) “quote” other artists’ styles. Indeed Sfar seems to make visual references to French Jewish artist Marc Chagall, with his distinctive bright colors and exuberant dreamlike qualities.23

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23 In fact, in some of Sfar’s other works, animals, objects, and people hover in the air, overtly referencing Chagall’s work.
Panels play an important role in the story. At times, Sfar utilizes cinematic devices like camera angles, exploiting the close-up, for example, to render particularly important moments. During these instances, each shot or scene is comfortably contained; nothing pushes against the panel walls. Furthermore, Sfar rounds the edges and corners of his panels to underscore a nurturing atmosphere. Panels are remarkably regular in size, shape, and spacing, affecting the overall narrative rhythm, producing a story with a natural progressive flow. This stability, communicated through panel construction and arrangement, mirrors the linear and organic nature of the rabbi’s search.

*The Rabbi’s Cat* exploits color to create the external environment as well as the rabbi’s inner emotional world – both of which are vibrant and sensual. Much of the story’s warmth is conveyed through color. The prevalence of terracotta reds and earth tones communicate the warmth and intensity of Algeria. Sfar uses flat color, which, with its absence of depth, reveals pictures that are bold and childlike in their concreteness. The use of flat color also allows for a greater focus on lines and shapes.

The story’s themes are communicated in part through use of the icon. Since the cat is the harbinger of the rabbi’s spiritual and intellectual development, the story depicts numerous scenes in which the cat challenges the rabbi and holds him accountable to the ideas he preaches. On page 10 [See Figure 5.1], the cat narrates: “The rabbi tells me that of course I’m Jewish, since my masters are Jews [...] I tell him that I’m not circumcised [...] He tells me that they don’t circumcise cats [...] I tell him that if I am a Jewish cat, I want to be bar-mitzvahed.” Throughout these lively conversations, the rabbi and his cat are drawn simplistically; the rabbi’s face in close-up reveals little detail, only a few effortless dots and lines for features along with some suggested wrinkles, and the cat is depicted with huge circles for eyes and equally cartoon-like ears.
Because the characters are portrayed in an iconic manner, the reader "fills in" the blank spaces with his/her own imagination. The dots, lines, and circles become particular features which (according to the reader) support the rabbi and the cat's unique personalities. In addition, the rabbi's simple features underscore his humble personality, while, similarly, the cat's enormous eyes allude to his wide-eyed character and insatiable appetite for learning.

Sfar also uses font style to convey character and tone. By using a playful printing style for dialogue, versus the carefully-crafted cursive font for the cat's narration, the cat is rendered with the tone of a storyteller, conveying his literary sophistication.
Sfar’s use of line in *The Rabbi’s Cat* is highly expressive. This is epitomized in a climactic scene in Paris, during which the rabbi finds himself in situations he perceives are threatening to his way of life as an observant Jew. On page 106, the rabbi’s bewilderment and resistance toward the secular world come to a fore. His confusion is depicted through the use of strong diagonal lines. The energy and movement of these lines reflect the tenuousness of the rabbi’s psychological state and its projection into the external space around him, as he tries with all his might, to protect his faith and tradition.

Similarly, Sfar uses lines to reveal backgrounds and landscapes that are rich in shape, form, and texture. It is a sensual world full of things, places, and people waiting to be explored.

On page 111, the rabbi and his cat (still in Paris) find themselves taking shelter in a church. The rabbi is overcome by fear, terror and guilt. Sfar conveys these emotions with line and color. The rabbi is depicted in close-up, his face bright red and gasping. He is surrounded by patterns of bold lines which mirror his inner turmoil and engulf his face like a whirlwind.

Similarly, on page 117 [See Figure 5.2], as the rabbi orders “the least kosher meal in the universe”, the rabbi’s tension is depicted through a background composed mostly of vertical lines. His iconic features are adjusted to communicate his fear and hesitation as he explores opposing God.
Sfar’s use of selected aesthetic features, particularly panel, icon, color, and line, contribute to the rendering of the rabbi’s honest and lively journey. Panels are designed to convey a narrative rhythm that mirrors the rabbi’s organic journey of search and transformation. Sfar’s use of icon conveys a rabbi who learns to be open to the world around him but also to the reader’s subjective rendering of him. Color and line support the highly expressive and emotional character of the rabbi’s quest to understand faith.
CHAPTER 6: WE ARE ON OUR OWN

We Are On Our Own tells Miriam Katin’s story of escape and survival in Nazi-invaded Hungary. Esther with her toddler daughter Lisa (the author, Miriam Katin) conceal their identities and disguise themselves as a servant girl with an illegitimate daughter. The duo flees from Budapest through the Hungarian countryside.

During their escape, Esther and her daughter endure unspeakable experiences. Notwithstanding the emotional and psychological trauma, Esther’s resilience and determination to save her daughter prevails. While Lisa witnesses events beyond her comprehension, her mother tries her utmost to shelter her from the evil enshrouding them. Despite Esther’s desperate efforts, however, Lisa’s sense of faith and justice takes its own route.

6.1 Historical Context

The history of the Jews in Hungary dates back to the Roman Empire of the 9th century. Through immigration from Germanic and Slavic countries, the community steadily grew. As in the rest of Europe, Hungary placed restrictions on Jews. Enjoyment of civil rights was largely at the whim of the rulers at the time; life was easier or harder depending on which king happened to be in power.

During the 12th century, Jewish immigrants settled in Buda from German and Slavic countries, after which they were isolated into a separate quarter of the city, and were forced to identify themselves by wearing badges (Weiner, para. 4). Jews were accused of causing the Black Plague, and due to this, throughout the Middle Ages, Jews were expelled and permitted to return, several times. Fueled by hostility from the Church, anti-Semitism surfaced in waves, and manifested in numerous Blood Libel accusations.

On occasion, particular rulers – King Koloman, King Bela IV, and King Corvinus, for example, improved the situation for the Jews by granting certain legal rights and even welcoming Jewish immigration. During these periods, Jews held prominent roles in the
Hungarian economy and in society, but this sense of security and relative prosperity was not long lived. The nobility often counter-acted the efforts of the kings, with legislations and articles like “The Golden Bull” which prohibited Jews from holding certain jobs and receiving noble titles (Wiener, para. 4).

However, in 1867, Jews were granted full rights under Hungarian rule. Jews began to emerge as leaders and held important positions spanning all areas of society – agriculture, transport, communication, business, finance, and particularly the arts. By 1869, Jewish population in Hungary stood at 542,000 (Weiner, para. 13). Andrew Handler, scholar of Jewish Hungarian history, notes that from the mid-nineteenth century, Hungarian Jews had adopted the local languages of the country at the expense of Hebrew and Yiddish (Handler, 1982, p. XI).

By the time of the outbreak of WWI, Jews were well-integrated into Hungarian society. They “became active in all aspects of national culture, gained grudging recognition, established loyalty to their national state, and formed a community of enthusiastic patriots and indefatigable achievers.” Handler comments on the extent of Jewish involvement in Hungarian society: “indeed it is difficult to imagine modern Hungary without Jews” (Handler, 1982, p. XI).

Over 10,000 Hungarian Jews died fighting for Hungary in WWI (Weiner, para. 16). After the war, the communist regime held power briefly and Jews were critically involved, however this government was overtaken in 1919. Soon after, the “White Terror” brought the massacre of over 3,000 Jews. Anti-Jewish laws were passed and Zionist activity was forced to halt (Weiner, para. 22). This type of legislation continued into late 1930’s, restricting the number of Jews in particular professions, and soon, many Jews lost their sources of income, causing the Jewish community to be plunged into poverty (Weiner, para. 23).

Hungary joined the Axis powers during WWII, and soon after, the definition of Jew formally changed to be racially defined. Several massacres of Hungarian Jews took place between 1941 and 1943, with 63,000 Hungarian Jews already killed by the time Nazi forces
occupied Hungary in 1944 (Weiner, para. 32). Several members of Hungary’s government had resisted German pressure to deport its Jewish population, though this changed with the German occupation in March 1944.

In April 1944, Adolf Eichmann called for removal of 400,000 Hungarian Jews to ghettos. Deportation to Auschwitz began in May 1944. Up to 69,000 Jews remained in Budapest's central ghetto and 25,000 remained in the "protected ghetto" by the end of the war. Roughly 25,000 Jews emerged from hiding in Budapest, others were protected in Red Cross children's homes, and some indeed returned from labor camps, from the Soviet Union and from other areas. Of the original 825,000 Jews in Hungary before the Holocaust, 260,000 survived and 565,000 perished (Weiner, para. 38).

6.2 Jew, God, and Survival

We Are On Our Own is mostly set in the past, with occasional flashes to the present day. It is a story of two journeys: the journey of the author Miriam Katin, portrayed in the story as Lisa, and Miriam Katin’s mother, portrayed as Esther Levy. Esther and Lisa’s journeys often inform each other and intertwine thematically. Both tell of the struggle for faith.

6.2.1 Esther’s Journey

Esther initially does not question God. However, along her journey of escape, her faith begins to fluctuate. At the start of the story, while reading from the family Bible with toddler-aged Lisa, Esther recounts God’s creation of light and its goodness. The adjacent page reveals the singular phrase: “and then one day, God replaced the light with the darkness” (Katin, 2006, p. 5). The comfort and intimacy shown between mother and daughter reading the Bible on one page is juxtaposed with the statement of God’s arbitrary power on the next. Esther’s questioning begins in this moment, when she links God to separation and discrimination.

Along the way, Esther oscillates between accepting and mildly critiquing faith, though she tries to quell her questioning as much as possible because she understands the value of faith.
as a tool for survival. She knows that a faithful Lisa may likely increase their chances for survival. The child’s belief in the ultimate goodness of the world is an essential element for their survival, and therefore Esther protects Lisa from anything that threatens her faith. Esther is instructed by the blackmarketeer who sells her fake documents to be “smart”, “crafty”, and to “find a way to vanish” (Katin, 2006, p.19). Like Esther’s ability to be “smart” and “crafty”, she sees God as another survival tool. To save her daughter, Esther makes use of any and all tools that may help.

One of these tools is a figurine given to Esther by her loyal Christian housekeeper, Anna, who is traumatized by the fate of her beloved employer. “Please ma’am” Anna says, “take this. My St. Anthony. He will help you on your journey” (Katin, 2006, p. 23). Esther thanks Anna for her kindness and compassion, though she keeps her skepticism to herself: “So, now, a saint to look over a bastard...well. Whatever it will take.” Further along in their journey, Esther and Lisa are assisted in a snowstorm by a man who offers them a wagon ride. Lisa, hungry and tired from the grueling journey, tantrums, and Esther instinctively retrieves the Saint Anthony figurine and hands it to Lisa, who is immediately soothed. A thought balloon hovers over both of their heads, with the words: “Thank you St. Anthony”, however it is unclear as to whose thought this is: mother’s, daughter’s, or both. This “blurring” of authorship is one of the strengths of the graphic novel. In novels without images, thoughts are typically attributed to a single character, e.g.: “Thank you St. Anthony”, thought Esther. The graphic novel form, however, offers the reader a number of interpretations: Lisa presumably thanks St. Anthony for his Godly powers, while Esther is grateful for the figurine’s soothing effect which subdues the irritated wagon driver and ultimately keeps him from sending the duo away.

While Esther kindly accepts the St. Anthony figurine from her housekeeper, and while she allows herself to be “seduced” by the Nazi (as the old woman crosses herself and cries out to Jesus, Mary, and Magdalene), Esther resists compromising on the laws of kosher. When a
woman sitting next to them on the train from Budapest offers Lisa a pork sausage, Esther panics and informs the woman that her daughter is not hungry. Lisa, oblivious, takes the non-kosher snack anyway, but Esther is depicted as distraught and defeated. Esther is not an observant Jew, but she is undoubtedly protective of certain Jewish markers.

Esther and Lisa’s journey of escape and hiding is heavily laden with Christian symbol. In hiding, they sleep under the protection of crucifixes and are surrounded by crosses worn around people’s necks and hung on walls. Esther does what she needs to do to keep her daughter and herself alive, but as times passes, she finds herself grappling with how to negotiate physical survival while retaining some element of Jewish identity for herself and for her daughter.

Esther is “urged to question her moral and ethical behavior for the purposes of self-improvement” in that she is put through trials and tribulations which require her to confront and define her core values. She is intent upon her child’s survival beyond all else. Indeed, her experiences point to a certain “tenacity and resistance” discussed by Israel (in Chapter Three).

6.2.2 Lisa’s Journey

Although much of the story depicts Esther’s struggles, *We Are On Our Own* is in fact Lisa’s story. After all, Lisa is the story’s author, and it is her journey that is at the heart of this text. Esther struggles to keep Lisa faithful, though all the while, Lisa undergoes her own journey of understanding of God’s nature. Lisa questions God’s existence and benevolence in her own way from the very beginning. She, for example, interprets her mother’s reading: “God divided the light from the darkness” from Genesis as “God created the dark, then the light, then mother and me and then the others. And it was good” (Katin, 2006, p. 4). Evidently, she has already begun to form her own understanding of God, shaped by her private world with her mother.

Lisa’s journey of faith is initially activated by her mother’s burning of the family bible. When the two step out of the home they have lived in for years and into an unknown world intent on their destruction, Esther emphatically states: “And now with God’s help we are on our way.”
Desiring to understand what she has seen, Lisa says: “But you burned him! You burned God! I saw it!” Her mother responds that it is impossible to “burn God” and that “he will be with us everywhere” (Katin, 2006, p. 23).

Lisa’s journey of understanding God takes its own route. As a young child, having been taught the Bible by her beloved mother, she associates God with anyone or anything that exhibits “niceness”. She entertains the idea, for example, that the Nazi who wins her heart with chocolates is God.

Lisa’s conception of God is developed through two main metaphors: lightness and darkness, and dogs. She is first exposed to the idea of God through the concept of lightness and darkness in Genesis. In the beginning there was darkness, but then God creates light, and divides the light from the darkness. The next page features the text: “And then one day, God replaced the light with the darkness” (Katin, 2006, p. 5) – an amendment that either Esther or Lisa (or both) make to the original creation story. The darkness engulfs the light, foreshadowing both the catastrophic events to come, and Lisa’s life burdened by her inability to believe in God.

The metaphor of light versus darkness brilliantly fuses with that of dogs. Lisa first learns about death through dogs. In the very beginning, when Nazis seize all “Jewish dogs”, Esther tells her young daughter that their pet Rexy fell sick and suddenly died. Lisa, who was attached to their pet, protests that maybe if they pray hard their beloved dog will be returned to them (Katin, 2006, p. 15). Lisa connects death to prayer, and then connects prayer to God, wondering to herself: “Is there a doggie God in doggie heaven?” (p. 17).

Later in the story, while Lisa and her mother take refuge with a compassionate farmer and his mother in the countryside, Esther feeds Lisa’s excrement to an emaciated dog, and Lisa thinks to herself: “I am helping my bestest friend to eat. I am the God of my doggie” (Katin, 2006, p. 34). Later yet, as Esther and Lisa find themselves fleeing again for fear of being accused of killing a Russian, the soldiers shoot the dog, and when Esther and Lisa discover this dead dog
in the snow, Lisa asks herself: “Dead like Rexy dead? Like the soldier on the bed? They said that he was dead” (p. 68). Lisa then draws conclusions: “The darkness did not help and the light did not help. Doggie is dead on the pretty white snow.” Whether dogs die in light or in darkness, in sun or in snow, Lisa comes to understand that all dogs die somewhere, somehow. The narrator (the retrospective adult Miriam Katin) states: “And then, somehow she knew that God was not the light and God was not the darkness and not anybody at all. Maybe, God was not…” (p. 69). Lisa witnesses too much death to conclude that there is a God, and that God is “nice”. She arrives at the conclusion that God simply does not exist.

At the end of the story, when Lisa’s parents are reunited, her estranged father, Ka’roly, plainly states: “Oh please. How can you give thanks to a deadly sky”, asserting that the family’s survival had nothing to do with God, and that they will continue to survive: “The same way you have arrived here. On your own.” He continues: “We are on our own, Esther. That’s all there is” (Katin, 2006, p. 118). Lisa’s parents’ discussion prompts her to link events and reason in her own way, and she arrives at her own conclusions. As she looks on at her mother and father basking in their joy of reunification, she thinks to herself: “I prayed and I prayed and Rexy did not come back” (p. 119).

Lisa is shown in the final pages confused and angry, reciting a yet again modified version of Genesis: “First there was snow, then some bad soldiers came. It was cold there. So very cold” (Katin, 2006, p. 120). Lisa then crawls under the table and dramatizes war scenes with her toys, stabbing and crashing the objects with a mature expression of betrayal on her face. The final page reveals a dramatic metapanel, featuring Lisa, engulfed in her thought: “And what if mommy burned that God after all?” (p. 122).

6.3 Impact of Struggle on Faith

Chapter Three of this thesis quotes Greenstein: “Judaism teaches that neither logical arguments nor personal experience can totally explain being or encompass the nature of God.”
Indeed this is exactly what Lisa does. She questions logically and checks the existence of God against her own personal experience, and emerges with negative response. Her past experiences cast a shadow so vast that she is unable to believe. Her father’s proclamation: “We are on our own, Esther. That’s all there is” (Katin, 2006, p. 118) is eternally imprinted on Lisa’s mind. For her concrete child mind, Jew and God are clearly not accountable to one another; God simply does not exist. An atheistic seed is planted in her early childhood and seems to root itself deeper and deeper throughout her adult life.

Lisa’s experiences cast a long shadow on her life. Perhaps resonating to her Bible-reading with her mother in her early childhood, she latches on to the notion of separation, “otherness”, and links any kind of religious faith with these notions, as she later expresses to her husband. Lisa and her husband discuss the possibility of sending their toddler son to Hebrew school, but Lisa questions the purpose of sending their child to be with his “own kind”: “You mean to separate. Again. Us, them” (Katin, 2006, p. 84).

In this story, with each subsequent generation, religious faith and connection to Judaism diminish. Esther’s mother is shown in a photograph in the beginning of the story; she is clearly a more observant Jew than Esther herself, wearing a “Sabbath wig”. Glancing two generations ahead at the atheist adult Lisa, faith has drastically waned over a mere three generations. While Lisa’s mother does not concern herself with trying to understand God, she encourages faith in her daughter because she sees its value as a survival tool. Present-day Lisa (Miriam Katin), however, is strongly ambivalent, resigned, and even resentful, as a result of her childhood experiences. As she opens a bottle of wine with her husband in their present-day suburban home, she echoes the farmer’s words she remembers hearing as she and her mother fled Soviet bombing, so many years before: “God’s only truth is inside these [wine] barrels” (Katin, 2006, p. 50). As Lisa and her husband discuss sending their toddler son to Hebrew school, Lisa explains: “I prayed and I prayed and then, God, he turned out to be residing in a wine barrel” (p. 84).
Apparently, Lisa and her husband do decide to send their son to Hebrew school. When the child brings home a Bible to read, Lisa again finds herself troubled with the following words: “God created every living creature and saw that it was good.” Lisa’s son is keen to learn about such a formidable God: “Did he mom? Did God really make all those things in just six days?” (Katin, 2006, p. 101) Lisa finds herself questioning the information she feeds her son, feeling as though she is providing him with false information. As she struggles between destroying his childhood wonder and letting him believe that the world is blessed with the watchfulness of a benevolent God, the shadow of Lisa’s past extends to the present. She responds that “it was not exactly like that” and explains that Genesis is “sort of a story” (p. 103).

For Lisa, Judaism has value but this value is only cultural. She confides that she takes after her father, with his disregard for religious faith, but that she also adopts his deep respect for Judaism’s cultural permutations. In the afterward, she states: “Early in life I absorbed my father’s atheism at home and the secular education in school. My father, however, never denied being a Jew and held pride in the ethical and the literary nature of our background.” Katin expresses her disdain for having to define herself according to others’ definitions of “Jewish”: “Living in Hungary and in very secular Israel was no problem. In New York, however, I had to allow for a more conservative approach to Jewish lifestyle. You had to belong and show it” (Katin, 2006, p. 126). Although Katin clearly identifies as Jewish, she resents having to stand out and define herself in reference to others.

Although there is no explicit indication that the adult Lisa worries about how she will instill Judaism in her children without the element of faith in God, this question is inescapable. Is culture alone capable of transmitting Jewish continuity? Will her son one day experience landmark rituals in the Jewish life cycle? What will remain of Jewish identity by the time her toddler son becomes of age to contemplate faith himself?
Esther and Lisa survive but the transmittance of their Judaism remains overwhelmingly uncertain. Indeed, Katin herself reflects on her journey of faith and its impact on future generations: “Perhaps my only regret is that I could not give this kind of comfort, a comfort of faith in the ‘existence of God’, to my children. I was unable to lie” (Katin, 2006, p. 126).

Andrew Handler, in his book *Holocaust in Hungary: An Anthology of Jewish Response*, states: “A great deal has already been written about the Holocaust: its roots and evolution, the unfathomable brutality of its perpetrators, the often incredible experiences of its victims, and its manifold short- and long-range effects, both physical and psychological” (Handler, 1982, p. 1). He also states that the number and availability of personal accounts is limited, and that this “gradually depleting reservoir of posthumously published works and the survivors’ oral and written accounts […] greatly enhances the importance and relevance of the conventional sources of information” (p. X).

Essentially, there is great need for such testaments as Katin’s. Whether or not Katin transmits her contempt for religious faith to her children, the creation and publication of this memoir ensures a link in Jewish historical and cultural memory.

When present-day Esther telephones Lisa on a snowy day, saying that the scene outside her window reminds her of a particular day during their escape from the Nazis, Lisa (the present day Miriam Katin) responds that she does not remember. In this moment, the need for the story is made clear. As Handler says, “Through private writings, the bearers of the tattooed numbers that transformed humanity into statistical data come to life again” (Handler, 1982, p. X).

### 6.4 Storytelling Through the Graphic Novel

Katin exploits the properties of the graphic novel widely, employing several aesthetic features, in particular: color, panel, line, and gutter.

The majority of the story is depicted through sketchy graphite pencil. Katin employs a wide range of line styles to create an immediate, dynamic, and textured world.
The grainy black and white style resembles authentic cinematic footage, conveying a realistic historic quality. This world is solemn and severe. The black and white, however, is juxtaposed with the bright technicolor used for the present-day panels. Katin uses color not only to indicate shifts in time, but also to forward the theme of light versus darkness.

Several pages in particular exemplify this form/content symbiosis well. Page 5 [See Figure 6.1] features only one line of text: “And then one day, God replaced the light with the darkness” (Katin, 2006, p. 5). Along with this text, six identically-sized and shaped panels are depicted in two rows (three in each). Each of the six panels show identical window frames. However, while the first panel shows full view of an elegant European building against a pale blue sky, the next panel shows part of a red cloth intruding on the same view, and with each subsequent panel more and more of the same building is obscured, revealing a red and white flag with a black swastika. The Nazi flag eventually closes in on the entire view, obscuring it in blackness. Through such juxtaposing of symbols and color, Katin foreshadows the darkness ahead.

With each panel identically measured and sequenced, Katin breaks down this motion into shorter subsequent moments to affect pacing, implying a surreal passage of time. In this way, an entire historical era, or, theme (light versus darkness), is conveyed, measured as, or likened to, a mere moment in time. In addition, the strongly diagonal positioning of the window frame in each panel indicates imminent mayhem.
Katin similarly calculates the size, shape and borders of her panels, ensuring that their appearance convey and deliver story content in themselves. Panels are sliced into identical smaller narrower ones to convey particular moments of tension or heightened thematic appeal. Panels also switch to large and elongated horizontal form to imply physical and psychological endurance. Characters break out of panel borders during times of particular violence. The graphic novel form allows for this type of metaphorical construction and development, as manifest in the various instances of visual blurring and border dissolving, which enable Katin, in this case, to extend, enrich, and interweave important motifs.
On page 22 [See Figure 6.2], Esther is shown sifting through her personal belongings, rummaging through letters from family members who had been deported, and burning any documents that might reveal her and her daughter's Jewish identity. Esther finally rips pages from the family Bible and feeds them into the burning fireplace. The entire scene is depicted in one metapanel that carries the reader's gaze in a clock-wise direction, culminating in flames that consume Hebrew letters. Bordering this image is a close-up view of Esther's hands tearing the Bible pages, as toddler Lisa looks on through a crack of light in a doorway that also serves as a blurry panel divider. This semi-detached smaller panel also designates a separate room in Esther and Lisa's home, as well as its own psychological space which is engulfed in desperation and terror. The result is a powerful image where a combination of symbolic gestures, actions, and moments are depicted simultaneously. Through skillful and calculated use of panel, Katin conveys motifs of witnessing, memory, and consumption to communicate the resonating theme of (Lisa's) consumption of faith.

[Figure 6.2 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is the image on page 22 of We Are On Our Own.]
Similarly, on page 42, Katin manipulates narrative rhythm and pacing by contrasting three square panels in a row at the top of the page, while four longer and narrower panels form a row in juxtaposition below. The page depicts a scene when the Nazi has come to “visit” Esther. He leads her into a private room of the kind farmer’s home after asking: “Is there a room where we can be alone?” (Katin, 2006, p. 41). The page shows little Lisa’s actions in that moment, as well as the old woman’s responses to the events implicitly unfolding on the other side of the wall. Lisa is shown indulging in the pretty chocolates the Nazi bribes her with, clearly oblivious to her mother’s fate in the room next door. She ponders the Nazi’s “niceness” and the possibility of him being “The chocolate God” (p. 42). In contrast, the farmer’s old mother is shown below, sitting with her cane, depicted in a succession of four near-identical narrow panels. Above her in each panel hangs a large crucifix. She makes the sign of the cross across her chest, and this motion is broken down into the four smaller ones, depicted in four separate panels. As she crosses, she cries: “Holy Jesus! Mary! And Magdalene!” (Katin, 2006, p. 42) The moment is prolonged through the sequencing of panels into smaller units of time highlighting the heightened tension and overall intensity of the scene. In one page, Lisa delights in contemplation over chocolate and God, the old woman is immersed in Christian imagery and begs Jesus for forgiveness, and Esther is being raped by a Nazi in the room next door.

This scene also contains an instance in which Katin exploits the gutter. Although the reader is not shown exactly what is happening between Esther and the Nazi behind the walls, in attempting to connect one panel to the next, the reader’s mind fills in what is not shown, leaving the severity and horror of the scene up to the reader’s imagination. In this way, what is not shown in fact becomes loaded with subjective images and meanings. In this example, the gutter is used to intensify Esther’s isolation by relegating her to horror the extent to which only the imagination could define.
In subsequent pages, the Nazi commandant is being repudiated by his wife, who declares: “You swine! I know where your Jew whore is hiding!” to which the Nazi commandant replies: “If you open your mouth about it, I’ll kill you!” (Katin, 2006, p. 46) Katin often employs lettering that is emotionally charged; the dialogue above is one example in which large explosive letters convey anger. The image is full of violence, with bold diagonal lines flying across the page.

Page 65 exploits the silent panel. This page depicts the dog that Lisa had grown attached to being shot outside in the snow by a Russian soldier. The lack of any text affords space for the blaring sound of the scene itself; the gunshot fired into the barren snowy field and the dog’s painful death. The silence also affects narrative rhythm, slowing the scene down, bringing it into focus by sequencing it into a succession of four smaller panels. The result is a wordless scene that is deafening. The witnessing of yet another dead dog is what ultimately brings Lisa to her realization that God is neither light nor darkness, but rather more likely not in existence at all. This discovery resonates with the sound of the fired gunshots.

Lastly, page 119 focuses on Lisa’s inner world, depicting her listening astutely to her parents’ dialogue just after they have been reunited. While Lisa’s father asserts that God does not exist, her mother begs him to stop. The first panel shows Lisa nestled between her parents on a sofa as she thinks to herself: “I prayed and I prayed. And Rexy did not come back” (Katin, 2006, p. 119). In the next panel, Lisa stands up, and in subsequent panels moves further away from her parents while gazing at them with disappointment, betrayal, and fear. The final panel shows her even more removed, standing silently next to a table before crawling under it and retreating into her own isolation, betrayed by her parents’ disclosure of a Godless world.

The end pages themselves are infused with the story’s overall tone and theme: an infinite expanse of storm, within which a mother and child are rendered in sketchy graphite silhouette near the bottom corner of the double-page spread, enduring in the abyss of snow, alone.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions to follow revisit the original three research questions and offer a summary and comparative analysis of the main insights gleaned in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. The final section considers areas for further research.

7.1 Historical Context

"Jews have lived among and interacted with dominant societies for three thousand years. In order to survive, Jews have had to simultaneously adopt and influence the ‘ideas and styles of the dominant cultures, while preserving their uniqueness and avoiding assimilation.’" -Marvin Maurer

The historical contexts to each of the three texts attest to a history of adversity and hardship, yet also survival and resilience. In Eisner’s A Contract with God, Hersh and his ancestors flee a pogrom-filled Europe, leaving behind the old culture; the observant Hassidic world that expounded the Yiddish language and adhered to tradition. Arriving in the new world at the cusp of the 20th century, Hersh’s story is set in the landscape of waves of immigration, with each group bringing with them their own preconceived notion of “the Jew”. Along with other immigrant groups, the struggle for economic viability was arduous. How to survive without adapting, how to adapt without integrating, and how to integrate without assimilating? Jews from the Old World of ghettoized Europe faced a new hybridized and secular world but with the support of their community, and armed with creativity, entrepreneurship, as well as anxiety over the costs of leaving one world and infiltrating a new one.

Algeria of the 1930’s presents Sfar’s Rabbi’s Cat in its context of the Jew as subaltern, living amidst Muslim culture and simultaneously under French political supremacy. Jews were restricted from fully participating in society and while co-existing at various points in history peacefully and integrating with the Arabs of Algeria, during French colonial rule, Jews were

24 (Maurer, 2004, p. 36)
categorically lumped with the European settlers though despised by them. Jews thus lived with minority status, from Dhimmi status under Muslim rule to despised minority group under the French colonialists. Nonetheless, the Jewish communities in Algeria at the time were strong and observant, and these communities felt pride for their country within which unique and vibrant traditions and customs flourished.

Similarly, Katin’s memoir displays a sense of pride and admiration for her country, Hungary. Indeed, Budapest in early 1944 was, in Katin’s eyes: “a city of lights, culture, and elegance” (Katin, 2006, p. 7). Despite its long history of Church-sponsored anti-Semitism, Hungary’s Jewish population played a significant role in Hungarian society, and prior to WWII, was quite integrated into society, residing mainly in the capital and in the other big cities, holding prominent positions spanning a wide array of professions and occupations. With Hitler’s rise to power and Hungary’s alignment with Germany, Jews in Hungary, as in the rest of Europe, became refugees fighting for their lives. Esther and Lisa’s story grows from this.

Each of the historiographies presents complex relationships between the characters and their country. Geography determined various cultural permutations as well as relationships to the other inhabitants of the area. The Jewish communities integrated into these societies in different ways and to varying degrees. Eisner and Sfar’s works address the transitioning and conflict between old versus new worlds, while Katin’s work centralizes around one Hungary which seems to have betrayed its Jewish population. As each of the three texts tells stories of Jewish life in Diaspora, each in some way attests to the efforts of Jews to integrate and co-exist among other peoples while retaining elements of Jewish identity and avoiding total assimilation.

Jacob Neusner states that “the felt history of the Jewish people is single, unitary, integrated: the experience of one people in many places and circumstances, not one of them barren of meaning and insight” (1983, p. 273). With this in mind, although each region reflects different permutations of the Jew’s life in exile, many similarities exist. Whether in America,
North Africa, or Europe, Jews had to fight for basic rights and even once they were acquired, they were never fully stable. In each of the texts, the Jew is however to some degree consistently an object of curiosity, to be examined, reformed, despised, barely tolerated, or, a combination thereof. The three texts also reflect the significance of the Jewish community; in Eisner this is the Hassidic movement and life revolving around the synagogue, in Sfar this is the observant world of Algeria, and in Katin, while religious community is emphasized less, community nonetheless seems to be defined on a more cultural basis. Each landscape presents the imminent threat of assimilation. Eitan Levine states that: “concern about exile is directly connected with concern about assimilation, since exile is a condition of partial assimilation in the gentile world” (p. 80). Living amidst other cultures, faiths, and individuals, many of whom were antagonistic to Jews, life was spiritually and often physically threatened. All three texts present worlds which confronted their characters with the question “What or where is home?” implying a certain physical transience which manifests somehow psychologically, albeit subconsciously.

7.2 Jew, God, and Survival

Each of the main characters struggle with God and faith, and this process is inextricably linked to their efforts to survive. A Contract with God presents Hersh who craves to connect to a supreme force and who forges a direct relationship with God. This relationship is mostly characterized by antagonism, betrayal, and oppressing moral anxiety. Hersh begins faithful, then starts to question God and faith. But when deep misfortune befalls him, his faith is ruptured. Hersh declines morally as he distances himself further from faith and God. Essentially, his response to feeling bitterly betrayed by God is to discard God, though he is never fully able to do so. Hersh “returns” to God ultimately, with a similar “contract” as he had initially forged, demanding God’s accountability, though this time Hersh is struck dead in the very same moment. Eisner’s story focuses on the notion that the Jew-God relationship involves mutual
accountability and direct, non-mediated communication. Hersh craves and needs faith for survival on various levels, both physically (for his economic viability) and spiritually.

Sfar’s rabbi nurtures his relationship with faith and God through his pet cat. Through the cat, the rabbi learns to question God and God’s nature, and in this, the rabbi becomes intellectually seeking in a way he had not at all been before. He applies the motivating dynamics he experiences from his relationship with his cat to the previously unruffled relationship he has with the divine. The rabbi’s world is opened to the vibrancy and dialogic nature of Judaism, and ultimately, through philosophy, logic, debate, and life experience, he grows on many levels. His faith is ultimately rendered richer and more robust, increasing his tenacity in his role as a community leader, and as a Jew living in “foreign” lands.

In Katin’s work, faith is initially transmitted generationally, though all the same, is ever-subject to questioning. Esther, who accepts and nurtures the tenets of Judaism, never seems to have a relationship with God at any given point. As the story progresses, she swings between being passively accepting of faith and mildly skeptical of the existence and purpose of God. She is born a Jew and she firmly accepts this, although she does not dedicate her family’s character to an observant way of life. She lives integrated with Hungarian society; her closest friend is a non-Jew. Ironically, it is outside forces that define her as Jewish, and render her and her daughter refugees. It is for Lisa’s sake that Esther upholds a concept of a benevolent God, not wanting to fracture her vulnerable child’s already threatened sense of faith and universal goodness. Essentially, Esther upholds some connection with faith and Godliness to increase chances of her family’s survival.

The three texts portray very different journeys of faith. Hersh and the rabbi actively seek to forge, nurture, and understand their relationships with God. When misfortune occurs, it is taken personally as a violation of the relationship, and faith is deeply tainted. All characters question the existence and nature of God to some degree, although this questioning reveals
characters with very different outlooks and attitudes toward faith and God. Hersh battles with God, the rabbi experiments playfully, and Lisa, after witnessing brutality and questioning in her own way, rejects God. Hersh’s and Lisa’s journeys are sparked by misfortune, while the rabbi’s is sparked by a positive force—the cat and his intellectual fervor. The rabbi and Esther are both accompanied by companions, or, in effect, catalysts for faith, while Hersh travels his journey of faith alone. Interestingly, motifs of sexuality and lust are present in all three texts, though symbolic of different ideas. In *Contract*, lust is associated with compromise, assimilation, and material gain, in *Rabbi’s Cat* with wonder and vitality, and in *We Are On Our Own* with sacrilege and profanity.

The three texts share numerous similarities. Eisner, Sfar, and Katin all present turbulent journeys of faith. Interestingly, all three stories focus on parent-daughter relationships, perhaps alluding to a motif of Jewish continuity through the female. Hersh, the rabbi, and Lisa all struggle with having to negotiate and protect their Jewish identities to varying degrees. The characters all try to understand faith and God through some mixture of reason, logic, intellect, and emotion, and all, at various points, challenge the idea of God’s supremacy. To varying extents, Hersh, the rabbi, and Esther each feel that they have been betrayed by God, and in all three texts, God is essentially silent (e.g. absent from dialogue), despite the fact that each character hears some variation of the recurring motto: “God is with you.” Hersh, the rabbi, and Lisa ultimately struggle with whether this statement is true or not.

### 7.3 Impact of Struggle on Faith

Ultimately, each character’s journey of faith affects them differently, though each story ends in question, to some degree. On the idea of ‘questioning’ as being innate to the Jewish mind, Berkley (1997) comments:

Jews today turn up almost everywhere and almost everywhere make their presence felt and their voices heard. If we are not part of a speaking program, then we are the ones
most likely to question the speakers afterward, and more often than not, our questions become speeches themselves, reflecting not so much a desire for information but simply a desire to speak our minds. (p. 28)

Revisiting and applying Petuchowski’s poignant discussion on the difference between merely surviving versus surviving as Jews, we might ask: Do the characters survive? Do they survive as Jews? Each of the three characters survives, physically, of course, but the more important question is whether they survive as Jews. This is a difficult question to answer.

With *Contract*, although Hersh is surprisingly killed by God’s hand in the very moment that he decides to “renew” the relationship, his “contract” (and perhaps his destiny too) is nonetheless ceremoniously rediscovered by the young Shloime Khreks. Khreks will apparently be heir to both an inherently flawed contract, a quarrelsome relationship with God, but also a certain permanence of faith and tradition. The entire package is transmitted to the boy – the next generation – in both its flaw and splendor.

Sfar’s rabbi travels outside his safe and familiar world and questions and confronts God in new ways. He traverses vast landscapes of internal and external assessment and emerges anew. His relationship with God and with the rest of his world becomes more honest and more vibrant. The process of questioning and experiencing first-hand strengthens his love and understanding of himself and thus of God as well, rendering his life as a Jew more meaningful. The rabbi’s journey perhaps reflects Sfar’s own personal views on the need for Judaism to adapt with the times, echoing the rabbi’s blessing of praise to a God who “allows us to transgress” (Sfar, 2005, p. 117). The rabbi’s Judaism indeed survives, though it is changed.

Esther emerges from her journey passively faithful, though this faith is loosely-anchored. Lisa, her daughter, however, is permanently affected by the experiences and by the skeptical views that she encounters. Her faith in God does not survive. Esther’s and Lisa’s journeys become integral parts of a larger familial metajourney of faith. Each individual seems to affect
the aptitude for faith for the next generation. The adult Lisa is atheist at the core, yet identifies deeply as a Jew. She exposes her own child to the Jewish faith and reads the Bible with him, while simultaneously questioning its worth and meaning.

There may be no concrete answer pertaining to any of the three texts. All three characters physically survive. As to their faith, however, and/or their relationships with God, it would be inaccurate to respond simply in the affirmative or negative. All three characters decisively identify as Jewish, although while Hersh struggles to forge a viable relationship with God, the rabbi tries hard to cling to his faith in God, and the third wholly rejects God’s existence. This leads us back to the enormous question which begs definition of “Jewish identity”.

7.4 Storytelling Through the Graphic Novel

All three texts reflect various formal/aesthetic decisions which help convey the nuances of each character’s particular journey with faith. *A Contract with God* reveals Eisner’s realistic yet bold and dramatic brushstroke style, which lends both an appropriate historic and emotional quality. Eisner uses his signature moody text among other aesthetic elements to convey an emotionally-loaded world which both defines and is defined by Hersh’s turbulent journey with God. Eisner’s use of borderless panels conveys Hersh’s vulnerability and uncertainty within God’s world. As well, Eisner’s significant use of both the metapanel and the silent panel to render scenes of particularly acute angst and isolation (despite God’s “bonafide contract”) attests to his deep understanding of the formal elements of the graphic novel. Aesthetic decisions are often made to convey Hersh’s psychological state, and outer landscapes are made to reflect these inner states.

*The Rabbi’s Cat* offers a more literal presentation of the rabbi’s journey. Sfar’s aesthetic decisions focus on rendering the atmosphere and physical setting of Algeria in the 1930’s, and the nuances of character, often conveyed iconically. Sfar concentrates on conveying the vibrant environment through color and the depiction of minute detail through expressive line. The
rabbi’s world is less tormented than Hersh’s or Esther’s, and Sfar’s drawing typically reflects this openness and freedom, with the exception of certain moments when the rabbi’s journey is more psychologically demanding. Sfar’s decision to keep panels consistently sized and shaped affects a sense of stability and balance in the pacing and rhythm, forging a symmetry between the story’s narrative flow and the rabbi’s natural and very human experiencing of life and God. The story is therefore visually and thematically aligned.

Katin’s choices regarding composition and overall design of both the panels and their contents expose Lisa’s inner world and enable the reader to trace her growth along her journey of faith and escape. Katin aptly uses color to imply transitions in time, enabling her to shift between worlds simply by switching to color from black and white. Katin depicts the motif of separation, opposites, and juxtaposition visually through this color switching and use of bold directional lines that divide spaces within the panels. Katin’s work is condensed in that both text and image deliver substantial and different information rendered conceptually rather than literally. In this way, her work is exceptionally sophisticated. Image and text are truly inseparable; tampering with either would render a very different and much less commanding story.

Eisner, Sfar, and Katin all choose to use the graphic novel as a platform from which to personally explore and gain further insight and understanding into their own Jewish heritage and identity, by examining, exploring, or bearing witness to their families’ histories.

7.5 Final thoughts

Just as these graphic novelists render the conflicted journeys and worlds of their characters through the words and images they choose, so do they, too, render their own processes of exploring their individual or collective psychological landscapes. Frey (2002) discusses the graphic novel as “a vector of memory”. He addresses this unique form as “a challenge to traditional historiography”, talking about “how artistic form and style impacts on the representation” (p. 258). He concludes by positing that “the particular hybrid form of the graphic
novel might offer a testing place to probe the limits of history and historiography” and that “the graphic novel is good to think with” (p. 259).

Similarly, Eisner expresses his own views on the fate of this form, claiming that its future “lies in the choice of worthwhile themes and the innovation of exposition” (Eisner, 1985, p. 141), and that this form will contribute “to the body of literature that concerns itself with the examination of human experience.” He continues: “as for the receptivity of the audience, this must (and will) change and become sympathetic as the product delivers more and becomes more relevant” (p. 142).

These comments are now at least twenty years old, and since then, Eisner’s projections have materialized. With such a vast array of graphic novels created by individuals dedicated to “examining of the human experience,” as typified by Eisner, Sfar, and Katin’s own work, for example, it is clear that Eisner’s hopes have been realized. Eitan Levine profoundly states: “Man is a compound of recollection and vision, memory and hope” (1983, p. 313). The growing treasury of graphic novelists, particularly Jewish ones, grapples with and simultaneously embraces this motto in the work they produce, reflecting the complex and purposeful process of storytelling. Levine continues to write that: “The Jewish people have always nurtured adaptability, flexibility, and creativity as necessary and valuable mechanisms for coping with states of exile (inner and outer)” (Levine, 1983, p. 64). In some way, perhaps The People of the Book have found a temporary home in the graphic novel.

7.6 Recommendations for Further Research

This thesis, as with many research projects, evolved fiercely along its way. My passion for Jewish heritage, my burgeoning excitement for a new storytelling form, my interest in the concept of states of exile and its effect on the human mind and creativity, along with my desire to link all three in one thesis, not surprisingly tempted me with endless hypotheses and questions. Needless to say, massive questions like “What exactly is meant by ‘the Jewish experience?’"
continually re-surfaced and demanded consideration. This project was ambitious in its scope and inevitably revealed an infinite possibility of branches to research. Exploring these alternate routes would undoubtedly have informed my overall process by enriching my work with a wider scope of understanding at a variety of levels. However, these routes would have extended beyond the scope of this thesis. Nonetheless, they are both relevant and worthwhile, and as such I have outlined them below:

- An examination of the relationship between sensuality/sexuality and faith/spirituality in the three texts. What role does sensuality/sexuality play in the three characters’ journeys?
- An examination of the parent-daughter motif in all three texts.
- An examination of the role of women in the three texts.
- An in-depth semiotic approach to analyzing the visual in the three texts.
- A comparison of two stories similar in theme and narrative elements, one presented in graphic novel form, the other in a more traditional storytelling form (e.g. a regular novel).
- A comparison of Jewish graphic novels from the Diaspora in light of Israeli Jewish graphic novels.
- Why is there such a Jewish presence in the world of comics and graphic novels? Examine the following possible reasons, and, investigate further possibilities: a.) pragmatics (Jews were “relegated” to lower class forms of literature because they were denied access to involvement in the creation of other ones), b.) the birth of myth, heroes, and fantasy during a time of struggle (e.g. 1930’s in America) c.) the possibility of something inherent in the Jewish way of thinking that meshes well with the medium d.) the concept of a marginalized medium for a
marginalized people; e.) a possible link between the hybridity of the graphic novel form and the hybridity of the Jewish experience.

- How can Jewish graphic novels be used to study the Jewish faith and Jewish heritage? How can Jewish graphic novels be used to encourage and nurture Jewish identity in Jewish youth today?

- An analysis/comparison of various Jewish graphic novels and their possible film adaptations.

- What constitutes a “Jewish” text?

- How is Diaspora presented in graphic novels as compared to other forms of literature?

- Given the age-old prevalence of themes of exile and Diaspora throughout Jewish scripture, text, and lore, is all Jewish literature somehow born in exile?

- On some level, can/should every “Jewish” text be considered a story of survival? How does/would this influence our perspective and understanding of “Jewish” texts?

- A more in-depth examination of Jewish graphic novels in light of a possible connection between Diaspora and the process of writing.

- Lewis states that “a picturebook’s ‘story’ is never to be found in the words alone nor in the pictures, but emerges out of their mutual interanimation” (Lewis, D., 2001, p. 36). It would be interesting to apply this concept to the graphic novel, and to compare the extent to which both the picturebook and the graphic novel reflect this word-picture dynamic.
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