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Bryan Schwartz, February 6, 2008.

My baba was an intelligent and practical woman. Even though she came from the old world, she was attuned to the ways of the new. She came from a traditional family in Eastern Poland, at a time and place where girls would not be formally schooled in Judaica. But her father was known as a man learned in Jewish study. She immigrated to Canada at the dawn of the 1930s drought and depression. She was the only one of her family survived the Holocaust.

One day, late in the twentieth century, and late in her life, she was visiting me, her grown-up grandson, the law professor, in his slovenly bachelor apartment. Things were strewn about - clothes, books, even the change from my pockets. She always considered it dishonest not to state her thoughts. My leaving money about seemed to particularly incense her. The reason? I was tempting my cleaning lady to steal.

I figured she was just exhibiting an out-of-character touch of paranoia. Perhaps she was influenced by the distrust she had felt for her gentile neighbours in the old country? I knew my cleaning lady. I knew she would never steal a penny from me.

A few years later, while reading about Jewish tradition. I came upon a principle in Jewish law derived from the negative commandment in Leviticus 19:14 – “You shall not put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God. I am the Lord”. The principle is called “lifnei iver”. Lifnei iver means that you must be careful not to cause or tempt someone else to sin. This principle had traveled through the millennia from ancient sacred texts to continue to define the thoughts and trigger the emotions of a woman standing on a shag carpet in a high rise apartment in the middle of the northern Prairies of North America at the beginning of the Information Age.

You are Jewish teenagers in the 21st century. You go to a Jewish day school. It teaches you some Hebrew, and some Jewish history, but not that much about the ancient scriptures, including the Jewish Bible and the Talmud.

The community from which you come generally does not place a high value on knowledge of the ancient scriptures. Your parents want you to be Jewish; to know about your history and modern Israel, and to feel a part of the Jewish community of today. But they want you to be educated for success in the “real world.” When the school decided to become more “upscale” a few years, to compete with elite private schools in the city, they decided most to provide a program for “advanced placement”. This meant accelerated learning in the secular subjects. The school still does not offer a Talmud course.

While growing up I was not well educated in the ancient scriptures. I was taught little and badly at an evening school. As an adult, I took some summer courses at the Jewish Theological Seminary. I read further on my own. Thanks to sages of our own time, like Robert Alter, I have come to believe that those old texts are a treasure in their own right. While they often seem to

tell simple little tales or expound fussy rules about rituals, I have come to understand that they are supremely artful. In a few deceptively simple words the authors of Bible had a genius for compacting a world of thought, emotion and psychological insight. As much as and at the same time as it proposes answers, the Bible presents questions, anguish, and uncertainty. It is exquisitely attentive to nuance of language and narrative, indeed, these nuances convey much of its meaning.

Jews are often described as the People of the Book, but they are really the people of the sacred books – not just the bible, but the Talmud and commentaries. The religion is based on study of the ancient texts and living by their dictates. From ancient times, all male children, rich or poor, were expected to study them. In the Jewish community, the most respected men were not the most physically powerful or handsome or wealthy. The most respected men were the greatest scholars.

Jews would translate this love and respect for learning into the secular domain. Even the more assimilated Jews of the twentieth century came from families who valued education and intellectual success. Men and women who had few encounters with the ancient scriptures became outstanding scientists, novelists, film makers, chess champions, doctors, lawyers and academics.

The ideas in the ancient scriptures had more staying power than you might realize. They influenced not only the desire of Jews for intellectual attainment. They also impart much of the content of their thoughts: from what they saw in the world, to what their analysis and creative response gave back to it.

Think about Jews in my profession, the law. Jews in the twentieth century were champions of using law to help the alienated members of society - the poor, the oppressed, the disdained.¹ The People of the Book had themselves known persecution - largely because their commitment to the sacred books set them apart, gave them a distinct identity and both the desire and the obligation to maintain it at all costs. The ancient scriptures preach the overriding need for justice. “Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt²” Even powerful kings had prophets to instruct them, and to criticize or even denounce them when they broke the laws of ritual or righteous conduct.

Let me illustrate this by discussing the enduring influence of the sacred books in the ways in which Jews have created two modern art forms - the comic book and the graphic novel.

Comic books refer to the art form that arose to prominence in the 1930s, and acquired immense popularity with the emergence of titles like Superman³. Superman’s creators were two young Jewish men, Joe Schuster and Jerry Siegel. It is true that they incorporated influences from many cultural traditions.. Like many early comic book writers, they were influenced by the

¹ See Robert Burt, *Two Jewish Justices: Outcasts in the Promised Land*.

² Exodus 22:21, King James Bible.

³ On the Jewish connection to superheroes, studies include Simcha Weinstein, *Up, Up and Oy Vey*; Jules Feiffer, *The Great Comic Book Heroes*; and, Danny Fingeroth , *Disguised As Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, And the Creation of the Superhero*.

“pulp” - popular crime stories of the day. Some argue that their influences included mythologies from other cultures, ranging from Robin Hood to Hercules.⁴ They were influenced by movies. The name of Superman’s civilian reporter alter ego, “Clark Kent”, came from the actors Clark Gable and Kent Taylor.⁵

However, they were also strongly guided by Jewish tradition. Some of the influence may have come from their direct reading of the ancient scriptures, or from stories they had heard about them. The ancient scriptures may have also influenced them through a more indirect route: by having shaped the popular culture of the Jewish people.

Superman comes from the planet Krypton - a place far away that had been destroyed, like Biblical Israel. His birth name was Kal-El – which sounds like the Hebrew for “vessel of God”⁶.

North American Jews like Siegel and Shuster were aware that their parents came from a distant civilization that was persecuted, and under physical threat. The culture of European Jews was based on admiration for scholars, be they religious or secular. The hallmark of Krypton is advanced scientific knowledge. Superman’s father is a pre-eminent scientist.

Superman’s parents save Superman as a baby by placing him in a small spaceship and sending him away from the doomed planet, just like Moses was rescued by his sister who placed him in a little basket in the Nile river to be carried downstream to a safer place. The planet Krypton is destroyed, but a small fragment survives, as the bottled city of Kandor. Just as traditional Jewish communities often survived, as distinct people, in little shtetls surrounded by much larger and more powerful populations. In the Bible, the Jewish people are depicted as being small in number and vulnerable; God says that he chose them because they were the least of all nations.

What kind of hero is Superman? He had physical strength, like Samson. Or like a Golem - a creature of clay that is transformed into a powerful living creature that can defend Jews from persecution.⁷

⁴ Les Daniels, *Superman, the Complete History*, quoted in Wikipedia article on Superman, at footnote 12.

⁵ Joe Shuster, interview, <http://web.archive.org/web/20030924212234/superman.ws/seventy/interview/?part=8>

⁶ It is not certain that Siegel or Schuster were even unconsciously making a connection with their ancestral language; see Danny Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, p. 45. From ancient times, the Jewish way of interpreting a text often involved attributing to the author an extraordinary level of knowledge and subtlety – at times, perhaps, far more than the author actually possessed. Whatever the provenance of the “El” names in the superman series, however, the Jewish influence is too pervasive to be dismissed as the imposition of the critic’s own imagination.

⁷ Michael Chabon’s novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, explores the comparison extensively.

Heroes can come in many kinds. Think of James Bond. He is loyal and physically powerful; a master of hand to hand combat and weaponry. He is a hedonist, a playboy. He uses his looks, charm and wit to seduce glamorous and exotic women. He has a license to kill, which he uses freely.

Superman, by contrast, is a model of moral virtue. He has special knowledge and powers, but he knows he must use them to benefit others, not for his own selfish aims. The early Superman, in the tradition of the prophets, fought for social justice. In the early chronicles, he champions causes such as mine safety, prison reform, due process of law and honest municipal government⁸.

Like the rabbinic ideal, and unlike the lunkish Samson, Superman has a “super-intellect” and cherishes knowledge. In his Fortress of Solitude, he has a scientific laboratory and an archive with all pieces of known information. His alter ego, Clark Kent, is a journalist.

He also has the utmost reverence for life, even for wrongdoers. He almost never kills the bad guy.⁹ Just as in the Talmud, we find the rabbis finding the most ingenious ways to make it practically impossible to impose capital punishment - and telling us that the saving of human life outweighs all other requirements.

Superman honors his father and his mother. In his Fortress of Solitude, there are statues of his birth parents, Jor-El and Lara-El, which he sculpted himself,¹⁰ and he remembers with gratitude the Kent’s, the simple farmers who adopted him when he landed on Earth.

Superman’s romantic life reflects the Jewish tradition of opposing intermarriage. He loves Lois Lane, but he always keeps an emotional and physical distance. The exotic woman is desired, but there is anxiety about whether it is right to pursue her. He never does as Superman. He professes that he wants to win her love as Clark Kent, his nerdy alter ego, so he is sure that she loves him for his real self.¹¹

The ancient scriptures have varying views about intermarriage. Ezra, on the return from Babylon, orders all the men to divorce their idol-worshipping wives. On the other hand, Ruth is warmly praised in the Bible for her loyalty to her Jewish husband and her mother-in-law. The biblical attitude varies, it might be concluded that it sometimes allowed, even welcomed, intermarriage if the non-Jewish partner would convert. Ruth could become a daughter of Zion, but Lois could never become a daughter of Krypton. You can change religions, but not life form.

Let’s take a closer look at Clark Kent. He reflects the geek that young Jewish men in North America, at least back then, often felt themselves to be: intellectual, not physically prepossessing, lacking in confidence in the face of the “gentile” community. Young Jewish men

⁸ Michael L. Fleisher, *The Original Encyclopedia of Comic Books*, Volume III, pp. 402-403.

⁹ Fleisher, *supra*, p. 402.

¹⁰ Fleisher, p. 340.

¹¹ Fleischer, *supra*, p. 396.

like Shuster and Siegel might have still felt themselves possessed of special and secret powers in one sense; much as they may have wished to assimilate, perhaps they still felt themselves to be heirs to a Jewish tradition which was spiritually, intellectually and morally elevated, familiar with God, and expressed in a language and rituals that were essentially unknown or at least unfamiliar to the rest of the world.

Then let us focus on the medium in which Superman was brought to life: the comic book. Most of the space in a comic book is taken up by images. Writers have to be sparing in their use of words. The characters must speak directly, vividly, memorably, in short and punchy phrases. Sound familiar? It is just like the literary style of most of the Bible and almost all of the Talmud. Hebrew (like Aramaic, the other language of the sacred books) was a language particularly well suited to compact expression. A book of the Talmud, Pirke Avot, "Ethics of the Fathers", is filled with attempts to distill a world of thought into a few words. Think of Rabbi Hillel's: "In a land where there are no men, strive to be one."

The comic books explore ideas and emotion by storytelling, not abstract philosophical discussion. So does the Jewish Bible. So does the Talmud.

The comic books consist largely of dialogue. So does the Jewish Bible. So does the Talmud.

But what about the pictures in the comics? The Jewish Bible and the Talmud are silent or spare in their physical descriptions of people and places. They preach against attempts to portray God in any kind of visual detail. They vehemently denounce idolatry, an attempt to visually represent the Divine. Indeed, the visual arts are not an area in which the Jewish tradition is as rich as in literature or music.

But comics are not just any kind of art. They tended, at least in their "golden age", to be spare. In those days, comics (apart from the sometimes vividly multicolored cover) were often black and white and with relatively simple figures. This simplicity was not only due to the costs of reproduction. With many panels to produce in a single comic book, and tight timelines, an artist could not indulge in over-elaborate visual depiction.

Furthermore, simplicity has its own appeal. The reader of a comic did not want to spend a long time reviewing the minute details of a single panel; he wanted to be carried along in a rushing flow of narrative images.

In some ways, comic art can be the visual equivalent of the simplicity of language we find in the ancient scriptures. It calls upon the artist to compact much thought and information into the shape, juxtaposition and nuance of a few lines. A line can be heavy or thick, dark or light, varying in width or geometrically straight, waver in direction and thickness in a relaxed naturalistic way or appear more stiff and calculated. The modern-day cartoon strip Peanuts displayed this mastery of conveying thought and emotion, with simple - almost geometric - shapes and lines. Simple images, like simple words, can also create, even demand, more engagement on the part of the reader. With not all the details spelled out, or fed to the reader, there is opportunity for the reader of the comic to use his or her own imagination and insights to

interpret images as well as thoughts. The less there is the more there is left.

The restraint of the comic image, compared to say rich visual details you find in classical painting or in movies, would later make it an especially useful counterpoint in graphic novels - the adult form of comic books - for portraying the most somber of human subjects, the Holocaust. Even a realistic painting or actual photograph cannot do justice to the breadth and depth of the horror, the evil and suffering. An accurate movie would have to starve the actors before they performed.

However, in 1992, Art Spiegelman received a Pulitzer Prize Special Award for *Maus*, a graphic novel about the Holocaust. Using simple drawings, Spiegelman presented his father's recollections of the Holocaust. Jews were shown as mice, Nazis as cats. The artistic choice does not trivialize the events, but is a means to show them in a way that respects their gravity and invites the reader to use his own emotions and understanding to move from the text and pictures to horror they evoke.

Comic books allowed artists who were not extensively trained in classical art techniques to participate in the new art form. Many Jews did not have formal training in classic art technique. They also did not come from a tradition that valued the graphic arts, and often did not have enough money to go to art school. But many still had enough natural talent and determination that they were able to train themselves. Joel Shuster, the original artist of the Superman comic book, was known for both his crude technique and for the power of his drawings.

There was an economic side to the preeminence of Jews in the creation of the comic book. Some areas of similar endeavor, such as advertising, were blocked by anti-Semitic discrimination¹². The comic books, like motion pictures in their early days, were an arena in which almost anyone could participate. You didn't need to join an established firm, you could create your own, and you could access the public without being accepted by the powers-that-be.

Many other superheroes would follow Superman, many of them created by Jewish artists and writers. People like Bob Kane (born Robert Kahn), who helped to create Batman, or Stan Lee (born Stanley Martin Lieber) who was a guiding force behind Spiderman. These characters tended to share some of the characteristics of Superman - dual identities in which the "ordinary" character was intellectual, with a dark past with the tragic loss of their parents, that set them on a quest for justice, though with a reluctance to kill.

¹² Arie Kaplan, *A Brief History of Jews in Comic Books; How American Jews Created the Comic Book Industry*. Steve Berson maintains a blog on Jewish comics at <http://jewishcomics.blogspot.com/>. Berson's bibliography on the subject can be found at http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/literature/Overview_Jewish_American_Literature/Into_The_Literary_Mainstream/JewsComics.htm. For a bibliography of Jewish comic books and graphic novels, see <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/5756/JWISHC.HTM>

You can now think of comic books as an art form that parallels our own stages of life. First, there were picture books for children. Then there were comic books, mostly for adolescents. Finally, there was the adult graphic novel: a comic book in which a single story was expanded to fill the entire book, and the theme and presentations were aimed at an adult audience.

The adult comic book, the graphic novel, was pioneered by Will Eisner. He had started his career in the golden age of comics, and developed his own comic strip series, *The Spirit*. It was marked in many ways by his Jewish origins. One of them was its humor.

Unlike the standard adventure comic, *The Spirit* is replete with passages that are downright funny. In 20th century America, Jews would form the overwhelming majority of comedians. Twentieth century North American popular culture was dominated by unabashedly Jewish comedians, ranging from the Marx Brothers to Mel Brooks to Jerry Seinfeld. Jews worked their profession from vaudeville to the Jewish resorts in the Catskills to nightclubs to Hollywood movies. Beginning in the mid-20th century, *Mad* magazine would be a high-spirited home in the comic world for a Jewish kind of humor: satiric, intellectual, absurdist, and unabashedly inflected with Yiddishisms.

Is there any origin to modern Jewish humor in the ancient scriptures? This is a subject of some controversy¹³. Some argue that the Hebrew Bible has very little in it that is humorous. Others suggest that you can find some clever word play and satire. After God orders Cain to be a wanderer his whole life, Cain marries and settles down in a land called - Wander.¹⁴ A number of authors have found humor in the Talmud.

Modern Jewish humor, however, probably has more subtle links than its being directly inspired by the wit or comedy of the Bible or the Talmud. The ancient scriptures shaped the general character of the Jewish community: its intellectualism, its understanding of logical reasoning (and with that, a contrasting appreciation of the absurd), its attentiveness to linguistic subtlety. The sacred books also provided a portable sense of identity and set of moral and ritual instructions that maintain the existence of the Jewish community through its Diaspora. As one of the few surviving ancient cultures, and a minority in the Christian and Muslim world, the Jews were almost always and everywhere subjected to discrimination, animosity, economic restrictions and physical attack. Humor was a vehicle whereby Jews could find some emotional release from their own painful circumstances. A physically vulnerable people could use “words like arrows”¹⁵; they could puncture the pompous within their own community and the wicked without. If you could make them laugh maybe they would not be as inclined to hurt you.

¹³ See Hillel Halkin, “*Why Jews Laugh at Themselves*”, *Commentary Magazine*, Vol. 121, April 2006, No. 4, pp. 47-5.

¹⁴ Simon Holoway, *The Hilarious Hebrew Bible*, <http://bab-el.blogspot.com/2006/08/hilarious-hebrew-bible.html>

¹⁵ See Shirley Kumove, “Words Like Arrows, A Collection of Yiddish Folk Sayings”, at p. xix: “A vort iz vi a fayl –beyate hob groyse ayl.”

What kind of humor? Jews are an intellectual people who recognize the paradoxes between high ideals and holy promises and the bitter realities of the human condition. They are natural absurdists. As people with a foot in two worlds, their own and that of the surrounding community, they have used the perspective to engage in the humor of social observation: to look at the absurdity of unquestioned customs and thought patterns, and see how from another perspective they could be seen as hilarious.

But let us return to Will Eisner, who would become the pioneer and a supreme artist of the graphic novel. In middle age, and finally with enough financial security to take a break from his comic book writing, he set out to create a graphic novel. He is responsible for the popularizing the term, although it is doubtful that he invented it. The Contract with God collection was a set of stories set in the tenements of New York where Eisner grew up. Most of the characters are Jewish, and they are depicted realistically - as individuated and flawed human beings. They each have their own connection with some the Jewish family, social circles in which they live, and some wrestle with quintessentially Jewish issues.

A Contract with God is a story of a man who wrestles with the idea of a covenant: a promise that in return for perfect obedience to the laws of God, including all of its demands for ritual and righteous conduct, he will be allowed to retain what he values most, the foundling daughter that he adopts. When the child dies, he is left in nihilistic despair. Eisner revealed in the introduction to the 2001 edition of the book that he had lost a daughter to leukemia.¹⁶ The idea of the covenant goes back to the book of Genesis, where God covenants with Abraham. The prophets would style their condemnation of Jewish behavior based on their alleged breach of their covenant with God. In medieval times, at least one Jewish rabbi, according to legend, put God on trial for failing to fulfill his end of the covenant.

Eisner worked during the second world war on another variant of the comic: the graphic instructional manual. Where the old Army literature might read, "All foreign matter should be removed from the surface of the flywheel and the rubber belt which it supports", Eisner's manual says, "Clean out the crud from the flywheel", and illustrates the point with a few cartoon panels¹⁷.

Eisner saw that the combination of succinct words and spare pictures could engage and inform many readers far more effectively than a long string of prose. Later in his life, Eisner would move to graphic non-fiction such as the Protocols of The Elders of Zion¹⁸. It is a well-researched explanation of the origins of this libel against the Jews, its exploitation through the ages, and its re-emergence in modern times.

Eisner also engaged in a kind of fiction that might be called a secular version of story-telling Midrash. The scholars of ancient times would often respond to a biblical story by telling another story that it triggered in their imaginations, and which is presented to supplement and

¹⁶ Biography of Will Eisner, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_Eisner

¹⁷ Biography, Will Eisner, <http://biography.jrank.org/pages/1925/Eisner-Will-1917-2005.html>

¹⁸ Will Eisner, *The Plot: The Secret Story of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*

explain the original text of scripture. In his retelling of the Fagin story from *Oliver Twist*¹⁹, Eisner takes the narrative of Charles Dickens as the primary text, and then imagines the “story behind the story”: one in which Fagin is a far more complex character, a man who had a good heart and good intentions, but who was trapped by the anti-Semitism of larger society and the discrimination by the established and well-to-do Sephardic Jews of England against the newly-arrived and lower class Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants to which he belonged.

From ancient times, Jews have engaged in the critical analysis of texts. The rabbinic tradition is filled with criticism of all kind: close reading of texts to determine precise meaning, attempts to compare and reconcile different and conflicting texts. The Talmud largely consists of taking a passage of oral law, and recording intricate and sometimes protracted debates about what it means and how it applies. There were debates over methodology; one rabbinic book, the Sifra, argued that written law of the Tanakh must take priority over the oral law recorded in the Talmud, otherwise there could be no stability or certainty.²⁰ As Jews often were literate in the culture of the surrounding community, they often applied critical approaches from the outside to traditional texts. Philo of Alexandria showed how an allegorical approach could be taken to the Jewish Bible, and how it could be viewed as illustrating a system of thought that was abstract and philosophical in the Hellenic style. In the Enlightenment, Spinoza was one of the first to take a scientific and historical approach to the study of biblical texts. He tried to explore the identities of whom he thought might be the authors of various parts of the Jewish Bible .

With the rise of the comic book and graphic novel, Jews have become not only authors and artists, but also historians and critics of the art form. Will Eisner would not only pioneer the graphic novel, but produce the first outstanding work that attempts to explain the techniques and impact of what he called “sequential art”.²¹ Joe Kubert, a highly successful comic book artist, and later the author of *Yossel*, April 19, 1943, a searing graphic novel about the Warsaw ghetto, has founded the only accredited school to teach sequential art.²²

Sequential art has been influenced by other art forms: not only by the sacred texts of Judaism and the mythologies of classical Greece and Rome, but also by the “pulp fiction” of the early twentieth century, by the newspaper cartoon strip, and by the movies. Comic book artists studied and emulated cinematic techniques such as close-ups. In turn, sequential art has influenced other art forms.

Comic books from the golden age have often been turned into movies and television series. *Mad Magazine* pioneered the absurdist parody of Hollywood movies, and eventually Jewish writers and producers would transport that sensibility to parodic movies like *Airport*,

¹⁹ Will Eisner, *Fagin the Jew*

²⁰ Donald Harmon Akesson, *Surpassing Wonder*, p. 349: “...Sifra was a prototype for a Talmud that was never written, one in which the Written Torah reigned over the Oral; or, in documentary terms, one in which the Tanakh controlled the Mishnah.”

²¹ Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*.

²² Kubert has also produced the “The Adventures of Yaakov and Yosef” comic strip and books for use in traditional Jewish education. They draw extensively on biblical and Talmudic material.

Spaceballs, and The Naked Gun.

Michael Chabon has been a wizard at moving among art forms. His Pulitzer Prize winning just-plain-novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, is based on comic books of the golden age, and on the biographies and memories of their Jewish creators. Kavalier and Clay create an imagined comic book series, *The Escapist*. After the successful release of the book, Chabon collaborated in the production of actual *Escapist* comic books.²³ He has also been involved with the development of a movie version of the original novel.²⁴

The French Jewish author, Joann Sfar, has produced *Klezmer*, a charming graphic novel. It uses sequential art to bring to life the Yiddish musical culture of the 19th century. It exhibits great ingenuity in representing sound with images. The disparate Jewish characters respect or rebel against the orthodox religious culture to which they belong. Sfar exhibits a comparable magic in *The Rabbi's Cat*, a story based on the North African Sephardic roots of his father's family. The cat not only begins to speak, but asks to learn Kabbalah and to be bar mitzvahed. He eventually becomes a trenchant critic of what he regards as religious illusions. .

Read the Jewish comics and graphic novels today, and you will not only see the subtle ancient influences. At some of their most moving points, you will also see a passage from the ancient texts. In Jamie Sturm's graphic novel, *The Golem and the Mighty Swing*, the manager of a travelling Jewish baseball team faced the threat of having his team murdered by the home town crowd. He asks God to allow his team to leave the town alive. He hears his father's voice in prayer. Then he hears a teammate reciting the Shma - "...and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and all your might" In Will Eisner's story "The Day I Became a Professional"²⁵, he recalls his first rejection by a publisher. Sitting in the room is sympathetic older man. He tells Eisner "There is an old Talmudic saying: "If you can't sell your wares in this city, go ye to another."

As a Jew, you have a remarkable opportunity. If you study the ancient scriptures of your

²³ Wikipedia entry on the *Escapist*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Escapist_\(character\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Escapist_(character))

²⁴ Harvey Pekar's *American Splendour* has been released in graphic novel, film and theater versions. One medium often refers to another; for example, the film refers to his cartoons and his performances on the David Letterman show. With the film "300", a Jewish director, Zach Snyder, has been an innovator in producing Hollywood films that echo the look and feel of graphic novels. The source graphic novel, also named '300', by Frank Miller has a Jewish flavour in many ways, although Miller himself is not Jewish. It tells the story of Leonides, the king of Sparta, and his martyrdom at the hands of Persian invaders. The word "laconic" is derived from Laconia, the region in which the Spartans dwelt, and refers to a highly compact form of verbal expression. When the Persians demand that the 300 lay down their weapons, Leonides replies, "Come and get them." He leads an army of free men against the slave army of Xerxes. Leonides will not accept the claim of Xerxes, or of any human being, to be a god. Like Israel of old and Israel of today, he musters a small but courageous people to oppose the overwhelming numbers of those who would destroy him. The film '300', is now the target of a parodic, 'Airport'-style movie, "Meet the Spartans" - written and directed by Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer.

²⁵ Part of Will Eisner, *Life, in Pictures*, a collection of autobiographical stories.

people, you will have a better understanding of all aspects of sequential art. And if you study sequential art, you will have a better understanding of the ancient scriptures of your people.

By “understanding sequential art”, I do not mean understanding only Jewish sequential art. Having studied sequential art produced by Jews or about Judaism, you will learn about the art from as a whole. You will get an appreciation of the distinctive challenge in coordinating words and images; of the way artists are able to play with structure, such as altering the size of panels or having characters reach outside of them; of how sequential art has developed conventions (“steam” lines emerging from a character’s head conveys the emotion of anger). You will be alert to how sequential art is influenced by other art forms by technological development, but the autobiography and cultural traditions of the author. If you want to study Japanese sequential art, you will have a set of critical questions and concepts that you can use as a starting point.

But this is not your only opportunity as a Jew. You can travel back through the history of sequential art, and see people like yourself creating it and depicted in it. You can identify with the characters, settings and creations. This opportunity to travel through time and an art from as a member of the family, rather than detached stranger, will enhance your interest in the adventure, increase your understanding of what you witness, and enhance its emotional impact.

More generally, your Jewish identity gives you extraordinary opportunities to enrich your education. You have the heritage of thousands of years of history in which your people have been involved in almost every area of human activity.

Do you want to study literature? The more you know about your own traditions, the more you will understand about the explosion of Jewish-authored literature in the twentieth century, from Marcel Proust to Philip Roth.

Do you want to study law? Study the Talmud, and you will have a huge head start on understanding not only modern Jewish law, but the law of Israel, and the law of the country in which you live.

You can do the same for chess, where most of the world champions are Jewish. You can study ancient Jewish musical traditions, and better appreciate everything from Mendelssohn, to Tin Pan Alley, to the Broadway musical, to the great movie composers like Alexander North to pioneering artists of popular music like Bob Dylan and Mark Knopfler.

You can explore the distinctively Jewish dimensions of just about anything -story telling, poetry, prayer, history, politics, military strategy, mysticism, chess, mathematical and physical sciences, economic and social sciences, music, art, film, theater, radio, television, fashion, even sports like boxing. You travel through centuries and millennia, in settings from the ancient Middle East to the Europe or Arab lands of the Middle Ages to the New World. *You can vicariously live and learn with a sense that you are studying the history of your own family and your people, rather than of distant strangers.*

And doing all that will not leave with you a narrowly parochial education. Instead, it will equip you to better understand and appreciate the general nature of whatever it is you are trying to

understand, and to understand how it has been influenced by other cultures and traditions - and how different cultures cooperate, borrow from each other or sometimes collide.

If Jewish schools want to be elite educational institutions, they do not have to copy and mimic other elite private schools. Often, we do not have the financial resources to offer all the special programs, or to divide classes into “accelerated” and “ordinary” or to offer all the special programs that the best private schools can offer. Furthermore, other schools can be highly selective in admissions. We want Jewish schools to welcome very every child whose parents want them to join in our tradition.

So let’s think more in terms of “enrichment”. The Jewish part of our school program does not have to be seen as a diversion, however needed, from the education of children in “secular” subjects. Children who are well-educated in Judaism will not only receive a tradition that is worth treasuring in its own right, but one that better equips them to be thoughtful, engaged and humane citizens of the world.

Too often, Jewish education is not only seen as somewhat irrelevant, but a burden upon our children. It was both for me. I had to go to evening Hebrew School after a full day of public school. I was taught badly by under-resourced schools and inadequately-trained teachers. I had no idea that our tradition had so much to offer to an inquiring mind and spirit - and that the study of it could sometimes be a lot of fun.

And let’s think in terms of “enjoyment” as well as “enrichment”. That’s one thing about sequential art. It can be fun. Most people like the combination of the visual and the textual. They like the fact that the words are concise, and that the images can swiftly produce a setting or description that saves a thousand words. Sequential art works, and the movies based upon them, are enjoyable adventure stories. That’s why they keep making Superman comics, Superman television shows and Superman movies.

I have mentioned the sequential art about the Holocaust. We should teach the history to our children, to all children, but let us not focus only on the horror of the human beings and culture that was lost. We owe it to them to remember the vitality and depth of that lost world. We owe it to ourselves and our children not to make the study of Judaism a descent only into sadness and loss. Let us teach Holocaust literature, but let us also teach Steve Sheinkin’s Adventures of Rabbi Harvey, the hilarious Talmud-totin’ rabbi of the West, and Joan Sfar’s stories of the klezmer-tootin’ vagabonds of the East.

Here we have a new art form, sequential art, in which we are lucky enough to have a predominant Jewish presence. Let’s find forty ways in which we can make in part of a Jewish education for children that enriches the life and soul. We have sequential art by Jews, about Jews, about Judaism, about Jewish history, and about the connection between Jews and sequential art.

As we do with sequential art, so let us do with other forms of art and literature that connect us with our ancient heritage and help us to explore our modern existence. That can mean more study in the schools of novels, popular music, history, journalism, political writing, military and strategic history, stand-up and situational comedy and theater.

Finally, let us think of more practical, modern and enjoyable spaces in which we can learn engage with Jewish knowledge and identity.

Sequential art has a place in our schools. And in our museums; a number in the United States have put on first-rate exhibits telling the story of the Jewish contribution to comics.²⁶ But let's think of other places. Jewish summer camps have a long history. There are even Hollywood comedies about them.

It is getting harder and harder to organize Jewish day schools. For many families, they can be too expensive, too far away or too much of a burden for a child already preoccupied with public school, sports programs, music lessons and so on. But summer camps can attract Jewish children from areas in which few are found, and they can be a place for Jewish learning that children can experience as pleasurable rather than as boring and burdensome. If we cannot provide a Jewish day school for every Jewish child in North America, maybe we can commit to provide a Jewish summer camp for every single one - and make them places of educational and spiritual growth as well as recreation. Sequential art can be part of the educational programs there, and Jewish-themed movies and popular music, along with some of the ancient texts that will help us to understand and appreciate what only seems at the surface to be so very new.

But what about faith? Is Judaism only to be an intellectual and cultural tradition, devoid of belief in a divine and carrying presence? It is not easy to be a Jew and to have faith. The Jewish Bible itself has profound moments of doubt and questioning. Read the book of Job, or Ecclesiastes. It is a religion that from the outset, insists on the invisibility and unknowability of God and his ways. Later, it would apply searching logical analysis to its sacred texts. How could a religion whose methods are so intellectual and rational not be on a collision course with the foundation of faith? And how can a faith based on a covenant with God endure after the Holocaust? Miriam Katin's Holocaust memoir, told in graphic novel form, bears the haunting title "We Are on Our Own."

Some will not find the consolation of faith. Even so, they might find in Judaism a spiritual home; a place where from ancient times to modern, they will find people with whom they feel a sense of kinship asking the same questions, experienced the same yearning, looking back upon a shared history. Others will emerge with a sense, despite all the questions and uncertainties, that there is an enduring power that both transcends and inhabits our own place and time in the world. My grandmother was almost ninety when she had to finally abandon her independence and enter a nursing home. She told me, "When I came to this place, I said to myself that God is everywhere, so he must be here too."

The story of comic books and graphic novels tells us that whether our modern authors are

²⁶ On exhibits in the United States, see Ward Jenkins, *The Golden Age of Comics at the Bremen*, <http://wardomatic.blogspot.com/2004/11/golden-age-comics-at-bremen.html>. On European exhibits, see Paul Gravett, *From Superman To The Rabbi's Cat* http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/115_jewish_comics/115_jewish_comics.htm

doubting or faithful, it is possible after all these centuries to continue the creation of a distinctively Jewish literature. The Jewish Bible does not end with the five books of Moses. It goes on to include the stories of the prophets, collections of psalms, parables and proverbs, docudrama histories, prayers and poetry. After that, in the centuries ahead, sages wrote down the Talmud and the commentaries on them, the Zohar, and other works of mysticism. There would be additions to the prayer book, new codifications of the law as technology and civilization evolved. In the modern age there have been novels, memoirs, symphonies, film scripts and scores, and histories that are intimately connected with the Jewish past. To survive as a people, we must not only to look back at the ancient scriptures, but ahead to what an enduring community can still say to itself and to humanity as a whole.

The last century saw the worst catastrophe that the Jewish people experienced since ancient times - and also the time of many of their greatest accomplishments. Let us find a way to survive in the next millennium as a people who know themselves, find a depth in their past, and find an excitement and joy in renewing their place and contribution to the world.

That's what my grandmother would have wanted. That is I would want for my own grandchildren when one day they arrive in this world as inheritors of an old tradition and citizens of a new world.