Someplace on the damp streets of Centrifugal City, a lone figure makes his way past dimly lit subway entrances and nearly-closed bars to a solitary newsstand at 27th and Park—a place of no consequence except for the fact that he has frequented it for the past several, and very nondescript, decades of his life. Only this time, something is different.

“What’s this? Charley’s newsstand—gone! Could Charley have died so suddenly, and not even a word of warning? But what’s this—why, it looks like some kind of hole—an entrance of some sort . . .

The figure—one Mr. Leviton Gold—heads toward the strange opening. He can make out faint, ghostly images on the other side. Follow him as he stretches out first a hand, then an arm, and then, as the mystified often let their curiosity get the better of them, steps fully through the mysterious portal . . .
Let’s face it— everybody loves comics the way everybody loves Raymond. Though described many times over as the illegitimate siblings of “real” literature, still, in their many incarnations—from Sunday funnies to brooding, vengeance-driven graphic novels—comics appeal to a broad swath of humankind. Bright costumes, nonstop action and a fascination with super powers attract children. But how do we explain the enthusiastic endorsement of young and not-so-young adults, college-aged and beyond? Entertainment, perhaps. But surely one of the biggest reasons that comics are so passionately embraced, at least in American culture, is that they create worlds, universes even, that can point us to what is true, right and desirable. These worlds have been referred to as “mythologies.” More recently they have been labeled “meta-narratives.” Meta-narratives articulate our hopes, desires and fears and offer us coherence and meaning in a fragmented world.

Meta-narratives of this genre express the yearnings of the heart in pencil and ink and gauche and charcoal and misregistered colors and hand-lettered word balloons as seen, for instance, in the “Golden Age” of comic books in the 1930s and ’40s. Those productions reflected the wartime concerns of America and the desire to overcome evil with ink by featuring incredible heroes who initially fought domestic crime and, later, the Nazis. In the ’60s, the most creative of the “Silver Age” comics, especially the Marvel superheroes, took an introspective turn as the “enemy” became the hero’s own inner conflicts, mirroring the outer conflicts of society. Still later, these same comics Gen X-ed their way into darker and more brooding worlds, reflections of a black-glassed mirror.

On the other side of the portal, Mr. Leviton Gold finds himself far removed from anything he has ever known. Yet strangely, his surroundings feel as familiar as the stories of his great-grandfather Perel who’d brought his family to America from unpronounceable places, like importers bring over fine, exotic cigars. From among the ghost-like inhabitants of this strange, new world, one emerges and approaches him. “Good evening, Mr. Gold.”

“What is this place? Who are you? How do you know my name?”

“I am the avatar Jacob.” And as for this place, let us just say that it is not as far from home as you might think. But come, to see anything at all we have to climb to the higher levels.” He hesitated.

“I assume you did come to see the higher levels . . .”

Before Leviton can answer, Jacob sighs: “I’m afraid that we only have a couple of rope ladders to climb. They’re perfectly safe, I assure you. The angels have been using them for a long, long time, and they’re none the worse for wear. Come on,” he gestures, “you climb this strand and I’ll go up the other.”

The ladders Jacob offers are sturdy and intertwined like spiral staircases, allowing two people to climb nearly side-by-side. Jacob begins the ascent on one strand of the ladder, and Leviton Gold, as if in a dream, follows on the other. As they climb, platforms or stations come into view at various levels. The characters, or creatures—there are many of them, for this is a lively place—seem oblivious to one another’s existence. Beyond the stations the sky is black and bejeweled with stars. It strikes Leviton as he climbs, that it is as if he is in a glass-walled elevator in a department store, rising past housewares, socks, suits, gowns, bedding, binoculars, nightstands and goodness knows what else. He is startled to notice a Nazi storm trooper with a terrified look on his plump, rosy face, hotly pursued by a large, handsome, muscular figure in a green, gold and blue costume who is shouting, “I am the Eliminator! Now we’ll see who’s judenrein!” It is only one scene among many.
Arguably, the ethnic group most conspicuous in the genre of the superhero comic is the Jews. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the creators of Superman, were Jewish. There has been no shortage of imaginative suggestions as to how Superman and Jewishness relate.

Some say the character was a kind of super-Jew to battle Hitler, or that “Superman” was the Jewish counterpart of Nietzsche’s Übermensch, or “superman.” Daniel Schifrin, with the U.S. National Foundation for Jewish Culture, is quoted as having said in The Jerusalem Post: “The older I got the more I saw there was something profoundly Jewish about Superman, that he was one of us. . . . Like Clark Kent we’ve been Diaspora Jews for so long, being viewed as timid and bookish when underneath there are fierce Hebrew warriors doing God’s work.”

One writer compared Superman to the Jewish American immigrants:

Like them, he had arrived in America from a foreign world. His entire family—in fact his entire race—had been wiped out in a holocaust-like disaster. . . . Like German Jewish parents who sent their children on the kindertransports, or the baby Moses set adrift in the bull rushes [sic], Superman’s parents launched him to Earth in hopes that he would survive.

Others use more biblical analogies:

Superman’s original name on Krypton was Kal-El and his father’s was Jor-El. . . . One of the oldest Semitic appellatives of God is “el.” The designation has been widely used in ancient Israel.

Over the years, the Superman mythos grew to be like a sprawling suburb, inhabited by Bizarros, Legions of Super-Pups, the bottled city of Kandor, criminals exiled to the Phantom Zone, imps from the Fifth Dimension with unpronounceable names, and mysterious patterns of lifelong lovers, friends and enemies whose initials were “L. L.”

Indeed, the character of Superman appeared to morph as time passed, embodying first Jewishness, then the immigrant experience, and finally the settled American. Perhaps to reclaim the Jewishness from the general American-ness, specifically Jewish superheroes were born, or “became” Jewish in after-the-fact backstories (helped along by Jewish writers and editors).

Jewish superheroes abound, including the X-Men’s Kitty (Shadowcat) Pryde, Al (Atom Smasher) Rothstein, Vance (Justice) Astrovik, Rory (Ragman) Regan, Eric (Dr. Fate II) Strauss, Leonard (Doc) Samson, Sabra of the Israeli Super Agents, Seraph of the Global Guardians and dozens of other characters, major and minor.

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Sometimes the Jewish connection came about almost by accident:

A number of years ago Paul Levitz, DC’s executive vice president, was writing DC’s “Legion of Super-Heroes” series. Levitz, who is Jewish, says he was reviewing notes on the heroes when he noticed that Gim Allon was the real name of the Legionnaire nicknamed Colossal Boy.

Gim Allon reminded Levitz of Yigal Allon (a.k.a. Paicovitch), a member of the inner Cabinet that mapped out the Six Day War strategy. So Levitz began developing the character’s Jewish identity.

JEWISH ALTERNATE UNIVERSES

The Superman mythos points us to the ideals and aspirations we want for ourselves, or to the fears we have for humankind if we fail to live up to our ideals. It is an embodiment meta-narrative, and a good case can be made that it is a mirror of the American Jewish soul.

But alongside the narrative-mirrors, there is another kind of meta-narrative. Rather than being our creation that mirrors us, the explanatory meta-narratives claim to come from outside. They tell what is and postulate what ought to be. They are the New Year’s resolutions of our collective histories.

The Jewish people have had their own “worlds” to offer explanations of reality. Some have seen these worlds as useful pointers to ideals. Others have viewed them as real explanations. Subject to infinite variations, some of us have encountered, in the course of our Jewish journeys, “universes” like these:

The Kabbalistic Universe. In the Dr. Strange-like world of Kabbalah, man is responsible to reunite sparks of divine light with the divine source through carrying out mitzvot. This is known as tikkun ha-olam, the restoration of the world. When tikkun ha-olam is completed, Messianic redemption will come. In the cast of this universe, supporting characters include the Golem and mystical masters with a special holiness and connection to God.

The Traditional Orthodox Universe. In this universe populated by sages, scribes and countless yeshiva bochers, God appeared to various individuals, especially Moses, to whom he gave both the Oral and Written Torah. The great sages have interpreted both Torahs for us. The Messiah will someday come to redeem us from our enemies, regather Israel and rebuild the Temple. Till then, we must observe the mitzvot, for according to one well-known dictum, when all Israel observes one Sabbath together, then the Messiah will come.

The Secular Zionist Universe. This is the world of the post-Haskalah Jew, no longer “bound” by chains of tradition, yet always conscious that anti-Semitism is ready to crouch at the Jewish door. Centuries after the Exodus, the Maccabees valiantly strove against the enforced assimilation of Jewry; in the time of the Romans, the inhabitants of Masada fought to preserve our land and our people. Then came the long Exile, during which hope was never lost that Israel might regain the Land. At long last, Zionism became a movement and an ideology. Israel, blooming in the desert, rose from the ashes of the Holocaust like the phoenix. Her army was the best in the world and her kibbutzim attempted to model utopia. The Israeli was a real-life superhero, master of nature and humanity, the warrior Jew, the miracle-in-the-desert worker, the stubborn, the invincible.

Other “universes” could be mentioned: the mythos of the wandering, suffering Jews, the Chosen People whose chosenness is an eternal mystery; or the mythos of the American Immigrant Jewish Family, whose cast includes Bubbe, Zayde, the Evil Eye and the Doctor Who Makes House Calls, whose props include chicken soup and garlic, and whose locales range from European shtetls to American suburbs.

What characterizes many of these Jewish alternate universes is that people are responsible to bring some measure of final redemption, and that when the Redeemer comes, he will appear in the style of the warrior. Whether on a cosmic scale or on the intimate level of family life—man performing mitzvot, raising sparks, living as a kibbutznik, or making his Yiddishe Mamma proud—humanity becomes the pivot on which the final drama of redemption will swing.

“WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE!”

What happens when the universe that reflects what we want collides with a universe that explains what is? Do we choose the stories that happen to appeal to us, the way our bubbes picked a good chicken? Do we call a story our own simply because it is accepted by the community into which we’re born? Is there a story that is more than just a story but is (keinahora) somehow true?
Like a man either going mad or about to recover his sanity, Leviton Gold turns and continues his ascent, following the avatar called Jacob. Up through the swirling, spiraling, double-heliced ladder they climb, like acrobats dancing their way to either death or deliverance. Weird figures continue passing on either side—green horses, tormented poets, flying sparks and strange apparitions. The Evil Eye flies by, dressed in a tuxedo. Worlds meld and intersect, as though every imagination that ever entered the soul of Jewish men and women must make an appearance.

Five minutes or five hours may have passed, and now the sea of figures and apparitions is fading in the distance below, while overhead something like a glowing cloud grows closer. “Well,” says Jacob, “it looks like we are almost there.” As they near the cloud, Leviton Gold notices a man wearing a tallit hovering alongside them. He has evidently been the victim of some crime, for he looks beaten and bloody. “Leviton, Leviton,” the man in the tallit implores— “you are not far now. Soon you will see the heavens opened, and angels ascending and descending on Ben Adam!”

All at once the strands of the ladder feel different beneath Leviton Gold’s feet—not like rope, nor like rubber, but harder, like pavement that suddenly and surprisingly rises up under him as he finds himself enveloped, thickly, by the cloud.

“Nice day, Mr. Gold.”

“Charley! But—I—I just had the strangest experience. Why, your newsstand—it wasn’t here a moment ago! I thought—I thought perhaps you’d died. There was a strange door that I went through—and—I must be going mad—“

Charley smiled gently. “No, you’re not crazy, Mr. Gold. You were one of the ones.”

“What ones? What are you talking about, Charley?”

Charley looked around to be sure no one else was listening. Then: “Every few years, a customer comes along when the door to the ladder is open, see?”

“Do you mean to say that you know about where I’ve just been? Why, I can’t even tell how long I was there . . . !”

(continued on page 6)
“Mr. Gold.” Charley gazed steadily at Leviton, “I don’t just know about it. Let me tell you, I’ve been there and back many times. So have a lot of my customers. But some of them never came back. Herbie Fein, now he went there about twenty years ago, and he got off the ladder right at the Breaking of the Vessels. Wanted a closer look at the sparks. Stayed there the rest of his life. Mrs. Fein never knew what happened to him. But you,” Charley observed, “you came back. Maybe you learned something. That’s what they say, you’re supposed to learn something. You might not even know what it is, but they say it can take time.”

“The last thing that happened—the man at the top of the ladder—”

“Now that’s what bugs me,” said Charley. “You don’t know who that was, do you?”

“He said something about seeing heaven open and—”

“Yeah, yeah. That one. Did you get a good look at him?”

“I didn’t recognize him, if that’s what you mean. He was wearing a tallis, but I think he had been attacked, maybe in a pogrom—he was all black and blue, a bloody mess.”

“They never notice,” Charley mumbled to himself. Then to Leviton, “Yes, he was a bloody mess all right. Did you see where he was bleeding from?”

“I didn’t look that closely. He was talking to me, you know, and—”

Charley leaned in. “I’ll tell you where he was bleeding from. From his ankles, from his wrists—get it? From his side right here—you know who that was now? You don’t get wounds like that from Cossacks.” Charley spread out his arms, forming his body into the shape of a ‘T.”

“No—it—it couldn’t be. Not ‘Yeshu’—may his name be blotted out!”

“But you understand.”

“Gottenyu! He was at the top of the ladder? What was he doing there? And in that tallis...!”

“You didn’t get what he was saying either, did you? Here”—Charley reached behind a stack of papers, into a corner of the tiny newsstand—“an old customer gave me this years ago. He became, you know, a meshumad. But I kept the book. I’m always interested in different things. Look, there’s a page where it says what he told you on the ladder. Look, I underlined it right there. See for yourself.”

Leviton Gold took the small black book and began to read the cramped letters underlined in blue ink in an unsteady hand that betrayed age or trepidation or both—

“When Y’shua” (Leviton Gold actually pronounced it incorrectly as ‘Yeshu’ from habit) “saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, ‘Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.’

“How do you know me?” Nathanael asked.

“Y’shua answered, ‘I saw you while you were still under the fig-tree before Philip called you.’

“Then Nathanael declared, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.’

“Y’shua said, ‘You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig-tree. You shall see greater things than that.’

“Then He then added, ‘I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and
descending on the Son of Man.’

“Gottenyu!” Leviton Gold closed the book and handed it back to Charley.

“You see?” Charley said. “I don’t know, maybe you’ll learn something I didn’t.”

“Enough learning for one day,” Leviton Gold said. “I suppose I should be getting home now . . . and”—the words of Hillel came incongruously to mind—“and if not now, when?”

He walked home engrossed in recalling his mysterious experience. An old proverb nearly came to his mind, something about the unexpected, but he could not quite remember it. He kept seeing roiling clouds of sparks and laughing babushkas and earnest kibbutzniks and the bleeding “Yeshu,” yet strangely, all he could think about was where to get something to eat and a hot cup of coffee—and how good it would feel to go to sleep that night.

HOLY UNIVERSE, BATMAN!

And so life goes on. Over the years, some change the stories they once chose to believe, as the complexities of life refract into a spectrum of grays where once they saw only black and white. Others change their stories because they are young and restless, or old and restless, or because for them life is a garment industry, and faith is a fashion to be designed, marketed, worn and discarded, as it suits them. Others stick with their story, for as many reasons as there are Jews in the world.

Some look to the meta-narrative expressed in the Bible, by which they mean not only the “Old” but also what Leviton Gold held in his hands, the “New” Covenant, the book of the rabbi and more-than-a-rabbi called, in his native tongue, Y’shua. For that universe, too, has its meta-narrative, in which humanity primevally rebels against God (the “Fall”), a mutiny of the spirit that leads to a world cursed by sin, alienation and spiritual disease. In this universe God, seeking to restore the relationship with humankind, creates the nation of Israel to be a kind of mirror of His reality. From this nation—from our very loins, heart, soul—comes the “Anointed One,” called Moshiach or Messiah, who perhaps is the genesis of all superheroes, though at first sight he is no super-warrior. In a Twilight Zone twist, this hero undergoes radical death so that humanity might be won back to life. Those who look to this story find it is both true Explanation of the world and true Mirror of the soul.

There is a hymn often sung by Jews and Gentiles who embrace the meta-narrative of Y’shua. Every year, when the birth of the Messiah is recounted—the ultimate origin story—these words come wafting over the rooftops of neighborhoods like Leviton Gold’s:

Oh little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.

(continued on page 8)
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight!

Is it possible that, after all, Superman was born not in 1939 but in 6 B.C.E.? For those who close the door on such a possibility, is it not good to remember that in this strange, strange universe in which we live, the truth is sometimes odder than the phantoms with which we line our lives?

That, dear reader, is a question for another essay.

And when Leviton Gold went to sleep that night, according to the account later given by his daughter, though at first he was greatly perturbed upon his return from his most unusual journey, he claimed that he had never slept better in his entire life.

—Rich Robinson

Due to space limitations, this article has been edited and condensed. For the full version, go online to: http://www.jewsforjesus.org/comics, where you can also leave comments.

Endnotes

1. With apologies to Edwin Balmer and Philip Wylie, authors of the 1932 novel of the same name.
2. In the 1950s, comics were targeted as temptation-laden incentives to juvenile delinquency. That judgment proved to be quite shortsighted.
3. In his confusion, Leviton later recalled Jacob using the word “avatar,” though it is more likely that what he actually said was avoteycha, that is, “your ancestor.”
4. According to Bill Kramer, “Superman” (http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/source/biography/superman.html), Superman actually began in the mind of Siegel and Shuster as an evil being inspired by Nietzsche, but when Hitler came to power, they changed the character.
9. Ibid. A substantial listing of comics relating to Jews or Jewish concerns can be found at http://www.best.com/~blaklion/jew.html.
10. This enigmatic statement, puzzling to Leviton at the time, later became clear, as will be seen in due course.
11. Leviton actually read it in the Yiddish version (see sidebar).
13. Bethlehem is a composite of two Hebrew words, “beit” and “lechem” i.e., “House of Bread.”