

THE WANDERING IMAGE:
CONVERTING THE WANDERING JEW

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
CHAPTER I: WANDERING JEW IMAGERY	
Introduction.....	1
Historical context.....	2
Origins.....	3
Function: the Wandering Jew as antisemitic iconic projection.....	7
Function: the Wandering Jew as other.....	9
Jewish precedents and precedence of wandering.....	11
Scriptural wanderings.....	12
Liturgical and rabbinic wanderings.....	13
Modern wanderings.....	17
Iconography of the Wandering Jew.....	22
The Romantic Wandering Jew: Doré’s paradigm “Q502.1”.....	33
The Nazi Wandering Jew: Asleep at the whip.....	38
CHAPTER II: IMAGES BY JEWISH ARTISTS.....	
Samuel Hirszenberg.....	45
Reuven Rubin.....	48
Marc Chagall.....	52
<i>Der Vandernder Yid</i> (film).....	56
Arthur Syzk.....	60
Adolph Gottlieb.....	65
Mordecai Moreh.....	69
Evgeny Abesgausz.....	73
Michael Sgan-Cohen.....	79
Samuel Bak.....	84
Zoya Cherkassky.....	88
CONCLUSION.....	92
REFERENCES.....	96

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Cover of <i>Kurtze Beschreibung und Erzehlung von einem Juden mit Namen Ahasverus</i> , (1602).....	6
2. Illustration from <i>Ashkenazi Haggadah</i> (ca.1450).....	16
3. Illustration from <i>Washington Haggadah</i> (1478).....	16
4. <i>The Wandering Jew</i> (1901), Alfred Nossig.....	19
5. Ivory Casket Panel (420-430 BCE).....	25
6. Photograph of patient (“Gottlieb M.”) from Henry Meige’s 1893 dissertation on the Wandering Jew in Saltpêtrière	27
7. Cheese label (n.d.).....	28
8. <i>Le Juif Errant</i> (1852), [attributed to] Gustave Doré.....	29
9. <i>Cain and Abel</i> , Gustave Doré	30
10. <i>Le Juif errant</i> (1820-1830), François Georquin.....	31
11. <i>Le Vrai Portrait du Juif errant</i> (before 1837).....	31
12. <i>The Wandering Jew</i> (2 of 12: <i>La Légende du Juif errant</i> , 1856), Gustave Doré... 35	35
13. <i>Der Ewige Jude</i> (1937).....	39
14. <i>The Wandering Jew</i> (1899), Samuel Hirszenberg.....	46
15. <i>Jésus et le juif</i> , or <i>la Rencontre</i> (1919), Reuven Rubin.....	49
16. <i>Le Juif Errant</i> (1923-25), Marc Chagall.....	53
17. <i>Over Vitebsk</i> (1914), Marc Chagall.....	53
18. <i>Jew with Stick</i> (1913), Marc Chagall.....	54
19. <i>La Révolution</i> (1937), Marc Chagall.....	54
20. Still from <i>Der Vandernder Yid</i> (1933).....	57

21. <i>Oh Ye Dry Bones</i> (1944), Arthur Szyk.....	60
22. <i>De Profundis</i> (1943), Arthur Szyk.....	61
23. <i>Drift</i> (1971), Adolph Gottlieb.....	67
24. <i>The Wandering Jew</i> (1968), Mordechai Moreh	70
25. <i>My Old Home</i> (1976), Evgeny Abesgauz.....	74
26. <i>The Wandering Jew</i> (1983), Michael Sgan-Cohen.....	79
27. <i>The Wanderer III</i> (1996), Samuel Bak.....	85
28. <i>The Wandering Jew</i> (2002), Zoya Cherkassky	88

CHAPTER I

WANDERING JEW IMAGERY

Introduction

The Wandering Jew is not Jewish. It is an ancient Christian legend: an antisemitic iconic projection that encodes and enforces difference using a vocabulary of attributes seen in sources ranging from medieval manuscripts to neo-Nazi blogs.¹ In 1899, Jewish artists begin to appropriate stereotypical Wandering Jew iconography and convert it. They create concrete, subversive responses to the antisemitic figurehead and invest an old image with new meanings.² The phenomenon of Jewish appropriation of Wandering Jew visual imagery emerges with the *fin de siècle* dialectical interplay of modern anti-Semitism, modern Zionism, and modern Jewish art.

This paper offers a critical reading of eleven visual images of the Wandering Jew created by Jewish artists. My readings consider the presentation, representation, and context of the Wandering Jew figure, based loosely on what Erwin Panofsky called

¹ I use the terms antisemitic and anti-Jewish frequently. Both are problematic. “Antisemitic” connotes racial discourse and “anti-Jewish” connotes religious discourse, and since Judaism is not a race, and Jewish identity is composed of far more components than religion, both terms are woefully inadequate if not downright dangerous. Even issues of hyphenation and capitalization are freighted. For the purposes of this paper, however, I employ both interchangeably—especially in reference to sources or contexts which feature one or the other—and I assume their meaning to be that which is negative toward Jews. For an introduction to this topic, see Nicholas de Lange, “The Origins of Anti-semitism: Ancient Evidence and Modern Interpretations,” in Sander L. Gilman, and Steven T. Katz, eds., *Anti-semitism in Times of Crisis* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 21-36.

² This is similar to the appropriation of visual stereotypes by artists of other marginalized groups. See, for example, the deliberate use of blackface collectibles in artworks designed to shock, educate, liberate, or redefine. Manthia Diawara, “The Blackface Stereotype” in David Levinthal, *Blackface* (Sante Fe: Arena Editions, 1999).

iconology: the comparative study of “images, stories, and allegories.”³ This undertaking explores social-historical influences while investigating each work as a document of its time and/or as a personal record of the artist.

In Chapter I, I briefly describe the origins and functions of the anti-Semitic Wandering Jew legend, and examine the icon’s ironic resonance with the traditions and political realities of Jewish wanderings. I also enumerate the attributes of the stereotypical Wandering Jew image and explore two paradigmatic examples. In Chapter II, I analyze selected Jewish responses to visual images of the antisemitic legend.⁴

Historical Context

Wandering Jew, figure in Christian legend condemned to wander by Jesus until his second coming for having rebuffed or struck him on his way to the crucifixion.⁵

This concise definition begins the *Encyclopedia Judaica* entry of the Wandering Jew. How telling that most of the sentence refers not to the figure himself, but to Jesus. The three masculine pronouns designate Jesus’ second coming, his reception of an insult (verbal or physical, depending on the version of the legend), and his path to crucifixion. Thus, more information is revealed about the curser and curse, than the cursed: an assessment in keeping with the fact that this is, after all, a Christian legend. Its presence as an entry in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* is primarily due to centuries of use defining the Jews, as a whole, as the eternal other. The legend qualifies as a matter of cultural literacy.

³ Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 32.

⁴ The Wandering Jew is usually defined as a legend rather than myth or folktale: a classification that seems to originate with Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1955-58). See Galit Hasan-Rokem and Alan Dundes: *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1986), 11.

⁵ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. “wandering jew,” 16:259.

The *Encyclopedia* entry continues:

The story has given rise to a variety of folktales and literature still flourishing into the twentieth century. Like the image of the Jew in popular conception, the personality of and tales about the Wandering Jew reflect the beliefs and tastes of the age in which he is described.

The centuries of literature are well documented, and the tradition is still flourishing into our own century, as, no doubt an updated edition of the *Encyclopedia* will soon attest.⁶ Folktales, broadsheets, poems, songs, films, operas, novels, plays, political writings, Nazi propaganda, eyewitness accounts, advertisements, and countless literary allusions attest to the fact that the Wandering Jew was a useful and flexible vehicle. Less documented is the Wandering Jew's long, complex career in visual images: wordless testimony to the facility with which it has been manipulated to serve a spectrum of means and ends.⁷

Origins

Although the offense and punishment in the legend are fictions of the early Church, the resulting corpus of literature and images victimizes an entire people. Jews, blamed as a whole (for the death of Jesus, and for the mocking of him as well), are punished as a whole; symbolized by a single, cursed figure. The curse is configured to inflict maximum distress for the maximum duration: the Wandering Jew is doomed to wander forever, or until the *Parousia*—the Christian messianic due date—whichever comes first.

⁶ The most comprehensive sources for literary treatments of the legend are George K. Anderson's still definitive 1965 work, *The Legend of the Wandering Jew* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1965), and Hasan-Rokem and Dundes, ed., *Wandering*. See also Edgar Knecht, *Le Mythe le Juif errant* (Grenoble : Universitaires de Grenoble, 1977).

⁷ For visual treatments, see Champfleury, *Histoire de l'Imagerie Populaire* (1869), 1-140, and Juliette Braillon-Philippe, ed., *Le Juif Errant: un Témoin du Temps* (Paris: Adam Biro, 2001): a glorious exhibition catalog from the Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme.

The earliest versions of the legend emphasize that the Jew, even if penitent or actually baptized, may not cut short the duration of his sentence.⁸

The exact origins of the legend are not clear, but the alleged offense and sentence are thought to be a conflation of parts of the Passion narrative in the New Testament gospels. The two prooftexts most often quoted refer to eternal life: “If I will that he remains until I come, what is that to you? (John 21.22f.); and “there are those standing here who shall not taste of death until they see the Son of Man coming with his kingdom” (Matt. 16:28). A second set refers to the striking of Jesus and a punishment: Jesus is physically struck by an unnamed officer (John 18:20-22), and Simon Peter cuts off the ear of Malchus, the high priest’s servant (John 18:8-10). These four texts are thought by George K. Anderson to be the respective bases for early legends of St. John, who roams the earth as a “true vicar” until Jesus’ return; and Malchus, who is punished for striking Jesus.⁹

The themes of immortality, striking Jesus, and punishment are key elements of the later Wandering Jew legend, which thrives in oral tradition for centuries, eventually evolving into written form in 1223 Bologne.¹⁰ In figurative form, the first surviving example may be endpaper illustrations for an 1140 tractate on the epistles of John, but the dating has been called into question.¹¹ The first verifiable visual images of the Wandering Jew appear shortly after the literary debut, in a Book of Hours and in

⁸ The foundational accounts of Roger of Wendover (1228) and Matthew Paris (1240) state that the Jew is baptized right after Jesus’ death, but is still doomed to wander the earth until Jesus’ return.

⁹ Anderson, *Legend*, 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹ The inks and tools used for the renderings leave room for doubt. The manuscript is *Lamentationes Hieremiae et saint Augustin, Tractatus in epistolam Iohannis*, Prüfening: 1140. For images, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, “La Genèse Médiévale de la Légende et de l’Iconographie du Juif Errant,” in Braillon-Phillipe, *Juif Errant*, 60-61. Also, Diane Wolfthal, “The Wandering Jew: Some Medieval and Renaissance Depictions,” in *Tribute to Lotte Brand Philip*, (New York: Abaris Books, 1985), 220-221.

Matthew Paris' *Chronica Majora*, both of 1240.¹² For the next three hundred years, the legend is "widely circulated...in chronicles, poems, tractates, pilgrim itineraries, and miracle plays...in Italy, Spain, France, and England."¹³ Then, in 1602, an illustrated German chapbook: *Kurtze Beschreibung und Erzehlung von einem Juden mit Namen Ahasverus* (A Brief Description and Narrative Regarding a Jew Named Ahasverus) (fig. 1) propelled the character to bestseller status.¹⁴

During Luther's Reformation, chapbooks were efficient disseminators of religious polemic. By 1602, they were even more efficient as disseminators of popular entertainments, such as ballads and fables.¹⁵ Rising literacy rates among a growing middle class (especially women) created a huge audience eager for inexpensive diversions, which chapbooks, as an early marketing marvel of journalism, manufacture, and distribution, could supply.¹⁶ The *Kurtze Beschreibung* underwent 86 different printings until the end of the eighteenth century—each one, by the way, bearing the Matthew 16:28 quotation on its title page.¹⁷ It also gave the Wandering Jew a new name: Ahasverus.¹⁸ Bestowed by the anonymous author for reasons known only to himself, it is still the most commonly used name for the Wandering Jew, despite the irony of it also

¹² Both of these images are linked to text about the Wandering Jew. See Wolfthal, "Wandering," 220-221.

¹³ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "wandering jew," 16:260.

¹⁴ Anderson, *Legend*, 42. Made possible by cheap printing methods after the Reformation, chapbooks consisted of a few bound pages illustrated by a crude woodcut. For the text in English, see *ibid.*, 45-47.

¹⁵ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "printing," 26:425. For the connection between the Reformation and Ahasverus, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, "The Wandering Jew: a Jewish Perspective," in *Proceeding of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: World Congress of Jewish Studies, 1986), 193-194.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Aaron Schaffer, "The Ahasver-Volksbuch of 1602," in Hasan-Rokem and Dundes, eds., *Wandering*, 28.

¹⁸ See Anderson, *Legend*, for earlier names.

being the name of a decidedly non-Jewish king in the book of Esther.¹⁹

Kurze Beschreibung vnd Erzählung von einem
Juden/mit Namen Ahasverus/
**Welcher bey der Creuzi-
gung Christi selbst persönlich gewesen / auch das
Crucifige über Christum hab helfen schreyen / vnd vmb Bar-
rabam bitten / hab auch nach der Creuzigung Christi nimmer gen Jerusalem
können kommen / auch sein Weib vnd Kinder nimmer gesehen/ vnd seithero im
Leben geblieben / vnd vor etlich Jahren gen Hamburg kommen/auch An-
no 1599. im December zu Danzig ankommen.**
**Es hat auch Paulus von Eitzen / der H. Schrifft
Doctor vnd Bischoff von Schleswig/beneben dem Rector der
Schulen zu Hamburg / mit ihme conferirt von den Orientalischen Landen/
was sich nach Christi zeit verlossen/hat er solchen guten bericht davon gegeben/
dass sie sich nicht genug darüber verwundern können.**



Matthaei am 16.
Wahrlich ich sage euch/ es stehen allhie etliche / die werden den Tod nicht
schmecken / biß daß sie des Menschen Sohn kommen sehen inn
sein Reich.

Gedruckt zu Baucken / bey Wolffgang
Suchnach/ Anno 1602.

fig.1

¹⁹ Several theories try to explain the choice. Eduard König (in Hasan-Rokem and Dundes, eds., *Wandering*, 46) speculates Ahasverus was a name familiar to non-Jews because of the highly visible holiday of Purim and its attendant plays. However, this does not explain why it was preferred over Mordecai or Haman. Anderson (*Legends*, 50) claims that in 1600 Purim plays were called “Ahasverus plays,” during which Jews cursed gentiles, which then transformed Ahasverus into a “cant name” for Jew. Hyam Maccoby (Hasan-Rokem and Dundes, eds., *Wandering*, 237-238) contends Ahasverus is an apt compromise for the legend’s cursed Jew who nonetheless serves Jesus: the name is not too Jewish, too Christian, too good or too bad. I favor the idea that non-Jews were aware of “Ahasverus plays,” that the biblical king’s willingness to remain married to a Jewess makes him Jewish by association, and that his display of foolish traits and laudable qualities harmonized with the initial crime and subsequent pious actions of the Wandering Jew.

Function: The Wandering Jew as Antisemitic Iconic Projection

From these beginnings bloomed a regrettably rich and pernicious body of interpretation and embellishment: rich in the variety of forms and pernicious in ultimate intent. The variety includes literary presentations of the figure cast in seemingly non-polemical light—the Wandering Jew as dignified, pathetic, abstemious, penitent, or as a tireless witness of Christian history. However, these qualities are still in the service of the legend’s original goal: anti-Jewish Church propaganda. The Wandering Jew gave indigenous populations a convenient other on which to focus: a common foe to classify and display negative examples of how not to look and how not to act.

The Wandering Jew functions as “a fully fledged personification of the Jewish people, incorporating the themes of participation in the crucifixion, condemnation to eternal suffering until Jesus’ second coming, and the bearing of witness to the truth of the Christian tradition.”²⁰ The “fully-fledged personification of the Jewish people” was, by definition, the personification of negative attributes projected *upon* the Jewish people. As such, it was hardly unique. The Wandering Jew is only one variation on the ancient theme of antisemitic iconic projections. Other examples from Christian legend include the “profanation of [Christian] images and of the host:” accounts of Jews desecrating icons and kidnapping or “murdering” the transubstantiated body of Christ as communion bread.²¹ Another is the still current medieval legend of ritual murder and blood libel: the accusation that Jews murder Christians (especially Christian children) in order to extract

²⁰ Anderson, *Legend*, 50.

²¹ Heinz Schreckenberg, *The Jews in Christian Art: an Illustrated History* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 264-273.

blood for ritual purposes (such as for Passover *matzah* and wine).²² Not last nor least is the *Judensau*, the “Jewish pig” with whom Jews were depicted suckling, cuddling, riding (backwards), or engaging in activities coprophagistic or scatological.²³ Lest it be misunderstood that by classifying these themes as legends they were harmless stories passed around hearth and home, each has been used repeatedly to accuse, persecute, torture, and murder Jews. The Blood Libel alone led to the murders of tens of thousands of Jews over a span of 700 years.²⁴

Antisemitic iconic projections were also found in scriptural typologies such as Cain and Judas, who personified the murderous nature of all Jews. Both are associated with Christian legends of their own, and also claim special importance in Wandering Jew iconography (to be discussed below).²⁵ So, too, does the popular medieval allegory of *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga*.²⁶ *Synagoga* (Judaism) was personified as a blind, slumping woman with a broken staff and or fallen Tablets, juxtaposed by the clear-eyed, upright, crowned and triumphant *Ecclesia* (the Church). The two figures flanked a cross or, if part of Crucifixion panels, Jesus’ body, where *Ecclesia* was always placed to his right, or

²² The two legends are “used almost interchangeably but there are several scholars who have sought to distinguish between ritual murder and blood libel, arguing that ritual murder refers to a sacrificial murder in general whereas the blood libel entails specific use of the blood of the victim.” Quotation from Alan Dundes, *The Blood Libel Legend: a Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 337. See also R. Po-chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). For images, see Schreckenberg, *Jews*, 273-291. The legends still circulate in contemporary anti-Jewish Arabic literature. See Robert Wistrich, *Antisemitism: the Longest Hatred* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 310-311.

²³ Schreckenberg classifies the *Judensau* as a legend, so I include it as such in this paper. For images, see Schreckenberg, *Jews*, 331-337. For more on Jews and pigs, see Claudine Fabre-Vassas, *The Singular Beast: Jews, Christians & the Pig* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

²⁴ Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 464.

²⁵ The murder of Abel prefigures the murder of Christ, with Cain as the “type” for Judas. See James Hall, *Hall’s Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, (London: James Murray, 1979), 56.

²⁶ For discussion and numerous images of *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga*, see Schreckenberg, *Jews*, 16-18. See also Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 48-50. Also, Hall, *Dictionary*, 86.

“good” side, leaving *Synagoga* on the cursed left. *Synagoga*’s legacy of blindness (via a veil, snake, scroll, or slipped crown), broken staff, posture, and sinister placement contributed to the armory of anti-Jewish iconography.

All of these projections shared a common function: to highlight theological contrasts (i.e. old vs. new, loser vs. winner) or, more virulently, to simply defame. They also shared a common vehicle. Not only were they popular images in the illustrations of books and broadsheets, they were also inscribed upon the very fabric of religious and social life: the walls and windows of church, chapel, and cathedral—yes, even the vile *Judensau*.²⁷ In stone reliefs, sculptures, stained glass, and paintings, the Church taught that the Jew is the everlasting, eternal other.

The Wandering Jew image takes its place later in this lineup: too late to play a role in church décor, but well in time to ride the wave of a printing revolution that put mechanically reproduced images in the hands of even illiterate masses, cheaply and quickly.

Function: The Wandering Jew as Other

The Wandering Jew image fits a definition of stereotypes as “defense mechanisms by which we try to protect our own established beliefs and to come to terms with and to judge what is different or threatening.”²⁸ A stereotype contains a built-in paradox shared by the legend: it is “invariably bipolar: having an affirmative and negative aspect by which it may be put to service.” Although I stated above that the myth defines only

²⁷ For images of reliefs and a frieze from various cathedrals, see Schreckenberg, *Jews*, 332-333.

²⁸ Frank Felsenstein, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes: a Paradigm of Otherness in English Popular Culture, 1660-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 12.

negative attributes of Jews, the negativity is in the eye of the beholder. For example, when the Christian church employed the image to elicit “religious horror and exhortations to piety,” the image was put to supposedly positive use.²⁹ Such a use, however, assumes Jews exist solely as the “residue of God’s chosen people, permitted to survive as a token of his enduring love for the true Christian, of whose redemption their presence is covenantal.”³⁰ In effect, Jews must suffer on earth so that Christians may rejoice in heaven. This measure of the Jew is according to the “terms of the authority of the established faith,” not according to the terms of the measured.³¹

A parallel with stereotypes can also explain the longevity of the antisemitic Wandering Jew. Stereotypes “can assume the status of myth by appearing to articulate the indigenous values of the society that has created them...[making them] seem like biological fact...passed generation to generation.”³² The biological fact of Jewish wandering could have seemed self-evident to non-Jews of every generation and every location. Jews did, in fact, wander. So would any people denied civil and political equality, and required to comply with severe residence and employment restrictions. The fact of actual Jewish wanderings may appear to be a kernel of truth beneath the Wandering Jew legend. Add to this a resonance with a separate, Jewish archetype grounded in literature, scripture, history, and faith, and the line between truth and untruth becomes messier, still.

²⁹ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. “wandering jew,” 16:259.

³⁰ Felsenstein, *Anti-Semitic*, 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

³² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

Jewish Precedents and Precedence of Wandering

Although no character called a Wandering Jew exists in the rich repertoire of Jewish legend or myth, folklore abounds with beggars, peddlers, mystics, fools, tricksters, and other stock characters whose lives and livelihoods entail travel (usually necessitated by civil restrictions of some kind). None of these, however, are immortals or eternal. Not even the legend of the Ten Lost Tribes qualifies, because emphasis is on the miraculous survival of a people, not an individual. However, some *Aggadic* accounts of the Jewish messiah imply immortality, such as the story of the messiah born at the destruction of the Temple, destined to wait out eternity in Rome.³³ This particular story has at least one direct connection with Jewish appropriation of the Wandering Jew motif: a 1906 Yiddish play by David Pinsky based on the narrative and entitled *Der Ewige Jude*.³⁴

Far better known is the Biblical prophet Elijah, who is all the more potent a precedent because of his scriptural origins. Taken by God in a fiery chariot in 2 Kings 2:1-11, Elijah never properly dies, and his subsequent comings and goings continue in folk fiction, liturgy, and at holiday and life cycle events.³⁵

As a general concept, wandering does occupy a dominant place in Jewish thought. In Jewish myth and history, it is inextricably linked with exile, and exile, in the words of Arnold Eisen, author of the definitive chapter on the subject in *Contemporary Jewish*

³³ Lamentations Rabbah 1:16 and Yerushalmi Berakhot 2:4 are two versions of this story. The precise time and place of birth vary, as does the location for the waiting for redemption. Found in Judah Nadich, *The Legends of the Rabbis, vol.1* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994), 401.

³⁴ The play was later produced by HaBima, the Hebrew theatre company founded in Moscow in 1917. Benjamin Harshav, "The Role of Language in Modern Art: On Texts and Subtexts in Chagall's Paintings" in *Modernism/Modernity* 1.2 (1994):61.

³⁵ Folk fiction is still flavored with the rabbinic emphasis on Elijah's messianic aspects (he precedes the appearance of the messiah), but is dominated by tales involving social justice. Elijah rewards the hospitable poor and chastises the inhospitable rich. Liturgically, he is the subject of fiery *haftarot*, and is included in the *birchat ha-mazon* which are recited after every meal. He is also "invited" to every Passover seder and *brit milah* (ritual circumcision).

Religious Thought, is a theme that has dominated Jewish reflection “unbroken since Genesis.”³⁶ To these roots are added Rabbinical, liturgical, and historical ground, as will be shown below.

Scriptural Wanderings

“Among these nations you will find no repose.” (Deut.28:65)

Eisen argues that exile has two primary dimensions: the existential and the political, which continue to coexist in tension with each other. From the story of Adam and Eve, exile is established as a universal and existential alienation.³⁷ From Cain, exile becomes a political matter. Wandering enters the picture, implicitly in the first and explicitly in the second story, as a divine punishment. God said to Cain:

“...you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth.” Gen. 4:11-12 (JPS).

The fact that in Hebrew scripture, wandering starts off as a punishment makes the Christian Wandering Jew legend all the more insidious for its thematic similarity. Unlike the legend’s curse, however, these divine punishments are indisputably canonical and

³⁶ Arnold Eisen, “Exile,” from *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought: Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements, and Beliefs* (New York: Scribner) 219.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

most emphatically do not doom the Jewish people to perpetual cursedness.³⁸ Besides, judging by the positioning of these stories in the Torah, wandering as punishment originates *before* the founding of the Jewish people, which means it is universal rather than particular to the Jews.

With Abraham begins wandering as election; and with Moses, Judaism's paradigmatic wanderer, wandering is a punishment again: another political exile.³⁹ Such foundational wanderings, however parochial and apologetic, are nonetheless constitutive elements of Jewish identity. They necessarily figure into the collective consciousness of the Jewish artists examined in Chapter II of this paper.

Liturgical and Rabbinic Wanderings

Scriptural wanderings are embellished and codified in liturgical wanderings. The wanderings of the Israelites form the frame of the central text—the *haggadah*—to the central Jewish festival of *Pesach*. Their physical journeys were the most arduous during the Exodus, but the *haggadah* also focuses on the journey that led them to Egypt in the first place. The central *midrash* of the *haggadah* is called the Wandering Aramean, and according to *Mishnah Pesachim* 10:4, seder participants are required to expound upon it.⁴⁰ The *midrash* is based on Deut. 26:5-10 which begins with the words “*Arami oved*

³⁸ The wandering of Cain, so disastrous in Christian tradition as symbol of murderous Jews and a typological model for Judas, is considered by the Rabbis in a far more productive light. Because the punishment for murder is death, Cain's wandering is actually a merciful compromise, given in consideration of his genuine repentance. Nachmanides credits Cain as the first *teshuva* (repentant) and as such the model for turning to God for redemption. (See Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah*, (New York: Shilo Publishing, 1976) 1:9.

³⁹ Wandering is even encoded in the word for the nation he is credited as founding: *ivri* (Hebrew) comes from the verb *La'avor*, which means to pass through, to travel, to cross over: in short, to wander.

⁴⁰ *Mishnah Pesachim* 10:4, 116a2.

avi:" "my father was a wandering Aramean."⁴¹ The *pshat* identification of the Aramean is Jacob, who during the journey to reconcile with Esau had his defining moment in the struggle with the divine messenger. Here, wandering signifies self-realization: a positive act during which Jacob becomes Israel, earning the name by which his descendants will forever be known (the Children of Israel).

In the *haggadah*, the Rabbis, in a hermeneutical sleight of hand, invert the phrase to read as follows: "an Aramean [Laban] attempted to destroy my father [Jacob]." ⁴² In this forced and forceful reading (beset by grammatical difficulty), Laban is "worse than Pharaoh," for he tried to prevent Jacob's marriages and therefore to thwart the continuance of the Jewish people. The Rabbis play on the ambiguity of the word *oved*, which can encompass a range of meanings: wandering, fugitive, lost, perishing, or destroying. Both meanings, *drash* and *pshat*—wandering and potential destruction—underscore the situation in Egypt, which is the whole point of the *haggadah*, the seder, and the holiday: to remember "we were once slaves in Egypt" and to give thanks for our redemption.

Biblical scholar Robert Alter presents a middle ground between wandering and destruction. In his commentary on Deuteronomy, he translates the troublesome phrase as "My father was an Aramean about to perish," implying that the wandering undertaken by Jacob—in order to escape local famine—ensured that he and his descendants would not be destroyed: by hunger immediately, and by human enemies thereafter.⁴³ The themes of hunger and thanksgiving are key: this verse, excerpted in the *haggadah*, is harvested from the account in Deuteronomy of the presentation of the first fruits at the Temple.

⁴¹ Noam Zion and David Dishon, *A Different Night* (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman, 1997), 80-81.

⁴² Elie Wiesel, *A Passover Haggadah* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 42.

⁴³ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2004), 1004-5.

The Rabbinic attention to our verse is typical of the learned, circuitous exegesis in the *haggadah's* *Maggid* section. If a seder is conducted in its scripted entirety, and in its anticipated unscripted enlargements at the table, the *Maggid* draws out the evening into the wee hours. The Rabbis and their faithful disciples through the ages can be said to indulge in a linguistic wandering; one that seder participants are required to repeat and augment each year. How fitting that in interpreting a verse about wandering, they enact it.

The primary purpose of the “*Arami oved avi*” *midrash* is to emphasize the move from alien to citizen; from outsider to insider: a physical and metaphysical movement which is never-ending. The *act* of wandering is stressed, rather than the identity of a particular wanderer. The *re-enactment* is stressed, as well, since seder participants are instructed to not merely remember but to *feel* themselves as wanderers in Egypt.⁴⁴ Thus, a central precept of the most widely observed ritual, pedagogical event—the seder—is to re-enact alienation by way of the original, homegrown *arami oved*: a Wandering Jew.⁴⁵ It is a moment of explicit self-definition of the Jewish people, renewed yearly at the seder table.⁴⁶

In addition to textual interpretation, the “*Arami oved avi*” passage gives us early

⁴⁴ A visceral “you were there” quality elicits empathy with the oppressed, and increases the later dramatic distinction between slavery and freedom.

⁴⁵ One contemporary, popular *haggadah* actually subtitled the *Arami oved avi* section *The Wandering Jew* (Zion, *Different*, 78). In an email exchange with the author, I learned this was a decision based on his preferred interpretation of *oved* as wandering, and on his intention to underscore the historical realities of Jewish wanderings, especially of the past two centuries. With the exception of a recent, online student *haggadah*, I have not yet found other examples of this particular appropriation. However, visual imagery of the Wandering Jew is used in several *haggadot*, especially those with Zionist emphasis, beginning with Joseph Budko’s 1916 version. See Haya Friedberg, “The Unwritten Message—Visual Commentary in Twentieth-Century Haggadah Illustration,” in *Journal of Jewish Art* 16 (1990-91): 157-171.

⁴⁶ A venerable Sephardic seder tradition accomplishes this even more vividly than traditional Ashkenazic *haggadot*. The leader dresses like a traveler with a pack, and walks around the table to elicit questions such as “where have you been?” and “where are you bound?” from guests. The exact dialogue varies, but in essence the traveler reports he has been a slave in Egypt but is now free and on his way to Jerusalem.

visual representations of Jewish wanderers.⁴⁷ See, for example, the mid fifteenth-century *Ashkenazi Haggadah* (fig.2) and the *Washington Haggadah* from 1478 (fig.3).⁴⁸ In both, linked to the phrase “Go and learn” which begins our passage, are striding figures caught in the act of going to learn. Each is shown in ¾ profile with the right leg in advance of the left, a staff in the right hand, and a pack slung over the right shoulder to hang on the left. He is, then, a wandering scholar: a sojourner in search of truth and knowledge.



fig.2



fig.3

Every seder ends with the phrase: “next year in Jerusalem,” even seders held within Jerusalem itself. This hopeful phrase expresses the ancient and continuous longing for a permanent homeland. Regardless of the idea of wandering as a celebrated, ritual event or scriptural commandment, wandering is a *reality* of two millennia of homelessness.

Religious myth, Rabbinic exegesis, liturgical justifications are all responses to the bottom, historical line: from 70 CE to 1948, Jews had no official home.

⁴⁷ In manuscript *haggadot* that include literal illustrations of the text, this is a common visual motif. See Bezalel Narkiss, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1969), 34. The motif appears to be the precedent for later use of Wandering Jew iconography in printed *haggadot*.

⁴⁸ See images in David Goldstein, ed. *The Ashkenazi Haggadah* (New York: Abradale Press, 1997), 12, f. 11b.

Modern Wanderings

Wandering may define the Jewish people, but the term “Wandering Jew” remains a separate, iconic projection with negative connotations. The actual wanderings of an exiled people merely add verisimilitude to projections of a cursed wanderer. Why, then, at the turn of the twentieth century, did Jewish artists begin creating works entitled “Wandering Jew”?

One word can answer: antisemitism. Throughout the revolutions, emancipations, and general nationalistic fervor of the nineteenth century, antisemitism crescendoed all over Europe. Jews, suspected of being a state within a state, were regarded with mounting suspicion. The very term antisemitism was coined in the 1870s, as was that decade’s German catchphrase: “Jews are our misfortune.” The reigning term was *Judenfrage*, which can be translated as the Jewish question or the Jewish problem. As a question, it was a *cause célèbre*, especially in France, Germany, and Russia, where it was answered by possible scenarios ranging from total assimilation to total annihilation. And as a problem, it was no problem to discuss, as it was eased into conversation, popular literature, and political discourse by the amenable figure known everywhere by his first name: Ahasverus, the Wandering Jew. All of Europe, it seems, was on a first-name basis with Ahasverus, who obligingly acted as a common target for any and all *Judenhass* (Jew hatred). He had a particularly “magnetic effect upon German-speaking writers,” and between 1890 and 1920 enjoyed an unprecedented burst of popularity and range of application.⁴⁹ He was as likely to turn up in a third-rate novella as in a satirical cartoon or political diatribe.

⁴⁹ Anderson, *Legend*, 290.

Fanning these flames and bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the infamous Dreyfuss affair in France. The case inspired supporters of one particular answer to the Jewish question: Zionism (another newly-coined term of the era).⁵⁰ Theodore Herzl was a journalist covering the occasion of Dreyfuss' public degradation ceremony (January 5, 1895), and was so affected by the unjust conviction and blatant hatred of the crowd (which was screaming "death to the Jews" as he left the building) that within six months he "had completed the draft of the book which was to set in motion modern Zionism, *Der Judenstaat*."⁵¹

Antisemitism, as a force, demands a response. According to Sander Gilman in *The Jew's Body*, any stigmatized group "must acknowledge the world in which they are geographically and culturally situated."⁵² In this case, pervasive, overt, and malicious antisemitism in the late nineteenth century was acknowledged—and combated—with modern Zionism. To realize, not merely envision, the goal of a Jewish nation, Zionist ideology needed strong rhetoric with symbols designed to gather and unite support from as many different sources as possible. Enter the Wandering Jew: already a successful tool in antisemitic service, and now adopted by Zionist ideology to do double duty as a symbol of national and cultural revival. For all Zionists (religious, secular, cultural, or political, regardless of nationality), wandering was a curse of its own—a unifying curse—and for many, could only end with the founding of a Jewish homeland. Adopting the Wandering Jew as a symbol was a direct response to stigmatization: a literal "capitulation to the power of the image."⁵³

⁵⁰ "The term Zionism was first used publicly by Nathan Birnbaum at a discussion meeting in Vienna on the eve of 23 January 1892." Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism: from the French Revolution to the Establishment of the State of Israel* (New York: Schocken, 2003), xxv.

⁵¹ Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 380.

⁵² Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*



fig.4

At the Fifth Zionist Congress in 1901, the image was, in effect, codified for official Zionist use. It was employed in text and picture, most notably by the artist Ephraim

Moses Lillien, who designed the Congressional souvenir postcard.⁵⁴ The concurrent issue of cultural Zionist journal *Ost und West* opened with a Wandering Jew poem faced by a photograph of Alfred Nossig's Wandering Jew statue (fig.4).⁵⁵ The figure transmitted ancient, authoritative religious overtones, a sense of urgency, autonomy, and action. It was a bridge between past and future, connecting a familiar image with a new political purpose. Various Wandering Jews made notable appearances in Yiddish literature as well, with or without Zionist overtones, such as in poetry by Abraham Goldfaden and Moritz Rappaport; David Pinsky's 1906 play *Der Ewige Jude*; and stories by Sholem Aleichem and Mendele Moykher Sforim. Mendele actually coined a popular Yiddish expression: "*kol Israel = eyn their*," which means: all [the children of] Israel = one sack, which summarized the movements of the Jewish people in one idiomatic synecdoche.⁵⁶

The 1901 Zionist Congress also marked the very first exhibition of Jewish art. Eleven avant-garde artists participated (the Jewish Eleven), and Martin Buber gave a lecture on Jewish art as a critical component of Jewish culture.⁵⁷ This was the first public flowering of the merging of "two new Jewish predilections: political engagement and creative secular art," which became the hard-to-define subfield of Jewish art.⁵⁸

Wandering Jew images presented a perfect pairing of these two predilections in a call to

⁵⁴ Gilya Gerda Schmidt, *The Art and Artists of the Fifth Zionist Congress, 1901* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 169.

⁵⁵ The poem was *Ewige Jude*, by Ben Israel (a pseudonym?). The text and accompanying photo may be viewed in facsimile online: <http://www.compactmemory.de/> (suche: "ewige jude").

⁵⁶ Harshav, "Role," 61.

⁵⁷ For a list of the eleven artists, see Schmidt, *Art and Artists*, 7. Buber's lecture is *Protokoll 1910*, 151-170.

⁵⁸ Quotation is from Richard I. Cohen, *Jewish Icons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 259. The terms Jewish art or Jewish artist are impossible to define to universal satisfaction, but for this paper I take a maximalist view: work by an artist who self-identifies as a Jew or who is considered Jewish by means of patrilineal or matrilineal descent is Jewish art.

arms, or if you will, to brushes and paint. Artists responded using material drawn not only from centuries of antisemitic iconography, but also from their own Jewish wandering traditions outlined above. The latter influences were too broad to condense into one projection that could meet the old Wandering Jew on equal iconographical footing, but Jewish wandering nonetheless informed all visual responses. The two strands of tradition—foreign (antisemitic) and native—are woven at will into powerful, multivalent, and at times paradoxical results. The overall result is one not to underestimate: Jewish appropriation of a legendary anti-Jewish image represents an epochal reversal of an ancient antisemitic theme.

Before I examine my own selection of eleven Jewish artists and their responses to the Wandering Jew, however, the specific iconographical details of the stereotype must be delineated.

Iconography of the Wandering Jew

“If the Wandering Jew were an action figure, with which accessories would s/he come?”
—Menachem D. Wecker, *Re-appropriating the Wandering Jew*

What does a Wandering Jew look like? A basic iconography exists, although it has not yet been formally documented as such. The question of categorization arises, for the attributes of an extra-Scriptural, antisemitic legend does not fit neatly into reference works of Classical, Christian, Jewish, or secular iconographies. The closest category within these would be Christian legends, although most art encyclopedias and dictionaries do not offer the subject.

Generally, the stereotypical Wandering Jew may be identified as possessing a 1) walking stick or staff, 2) beard with or without long hair, 3) head covering, 4) purse, 5) shoes or sandals, 6) distinctive clothing, 7) a physical mark, 8) distinctive bearing or posture, and 9) formal compositional themes.

These are elaborated upon in turn below, followed by a paragraph giving further identifying factors.

1) A staff is standard equipment for any wayfarer or pilgrim, as it provides the support of a veritable third leg to ease a journey. For the Wandering Jew, however, any physical ease is offset by the staff’s punitive function. In essence, it represents the wood of the cross. Since one of the legend’s variants is that the Wandering Jew did not help Jesus

with the burden of the cross, the Jew is doomed to carry a piece of it in perpetuity.⁵⁹ As will be discussed in number seven below, the staff is also connected with the murderous reputation of Cain.

The broken reed or staff of *Synagoga*, the female figure symbolizing Judaism's defeat by Christianity plays a part here as well, especially considering she was sometimes depicted carrying such an object while walking away from the cross.⁶⁰ A broken reed signifies "something not to be trusted for support:" a connection derived from biblical references describing Egypt as a false political ally (such as in 2 Kings 18:21 and Ezekiel 29:6-7).⁶¹

A staff is also a tool of the lame and disfigured: a fitting attribute of the historical presentation of Jewish bodies as cramped and diseased (outward manifestations of a cramped and diseased soul).⁶²

2) With the staff, the beard and hair are the most recognizable and consistently employed attributes. Presence of a beard ranks as one of the first visual markers of Jewishness, stemming from a common association with goats and the devil.⁶³ Hair,

⁵⁹ I base this interpretation on the material, the upright form, and the mode of its transport. I also take into account similarities between reed (see following note) and rood (cross). A cross made of reeds is a visual attribute of John the Baptist, and is also pictured in Christian narrative and devotional scenes. (See Hall, *Dictionary*, 78.) The correspondence of staff to cross seems a logical fitting of punishment to crime. The 1602 chapbook *Ahasverus* is notably without a staff in the woodcut and text. However, *Wandering Jews* before this (including the suspected 1140 versions which have *Tau*-cross-shaped staffs (with transverse, flush top grip) and after (starting at least with a 1650 chapbook) are equipped with staffs (usually near to or in excess of the height of the wanderer himself, which again suggests a cross).

⁶⁰ The object varied, being an up-ended or broken battle standard, sceptre, reed, or spear, which was sometimes shown piercing a lamb or Christ's side to spill blood (which was then caught in a chalice held by *Ecclesia*). The reed, *per se*, also relates to the reed upon which vinegar was hoisted to Christ on the Cross, and the reed which the Roman soldiers placed in Jesus' hand as a mock sceptre, and as such is a member of the *arma Christ* (the instruments of the Passion).

⁶¹ Quotation from *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, 14th ed., 920.

⁶² For discussion of the inner and outer condition of Jewish bodies, see Sander L. Gilman, *The Visibility of the Jew in the Diaspora: Body Imagery and Its Cultural Context* (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1992). Conversely, the staff is a symbol of divinely-inspired power for Moses, and of divinely-inspired transformation for Jacob (whom after wrestling with the angel walks forever with a limp).

⁶³ See Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: the Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Anti-Semitism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 46-47.

whether on head or face, is usually exaggerated in length and volume, indicating great age as well as an identifiably Jewish uncleanliness and moral deficiency.

3) The head is often covered by a hat, whether it be a Phrygian cap, floppy brimmed hat, tri-corned hat, turban, or any style coded to denote Jewishness to the intended audience of its time.⁶⁴ A common one was the conical cap, or “Jew’s hat” (*pileum cornutum*) which was made compulsory for Jews in Germany from the time of the Fourth Lateran Council, and remained an obvious marker of a figure’s Jewishness for centuries of Christian art.⁶⁵ The absence of head covering is also significant since, in traditional Judaism, observant males must cover their heads at all times.⁶⁶ A Wandering Jew with a bare head can indicate an abandonment of Jewish tradition for the adoption of a Christian act of reverence (removing one’s head covering in a church or before superiors). It can also indicate the haste in which the Jew is condemned to travel, or illustrate a vulnerability to the elements, which might be designed to elicit a particular emotional response from viewers.

4) The purse recalls the thirty silver coins paid to the ultimate betrayer, Judas, who preceded by many centuries our Wandering Jew as a personification of all Jews.⁶⁷ Judas, like the Wandering Jew, is employed in visual images to provide moral symmetry, balancing evil with Jesus’ good. Even the earliest extant depiction of the crucifixion, an ivory panel ca. 420-430 (fig.5), gives Judas’ suicide—complete with fallen purse and

⁶⁴ All of these styles were inspired by antisemitic Psalter illustrations that link the mark of Cain—a horn in this case—with all Jews. “These hats vary in form but have one thing in common: a single point or hump which simultaneously covers and calls attention to the horn the Jew was believed to have.” Quoted from Ziva Amishai-Maisels, “Demonization of the “Other” in the Visual Arts,” in Robert Wistrich, *Demonizing the Other: Antisemitism, Racism, and Xenophobia* (The Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), 56.

⁶⁵ Amishai, *Demonization*, 55

⁶⁶ This is a custom rather than Biblical commandment.

⁶⁷ Proof-text for the coins is Matt. 26:14f.

spilled coins—equal space with Christ’s death on the cross.⁶⁸ The purse links the Jew to the betrayal and greed of Judas, as well as to the perennial antisemitic stereotype of the greedy, usurious Jew.

A money bag figures in written accounts of the legend. Some sources claim the Wandering Jew begs for money, but takes only enough to buy the bare minimum of bread, and gives the remainder to Christian poor. This indicates repentance, which nonetheless does not shorten his punishment. A French version gives the Wandering Jew an ever-replenished supply of five *sous*, a number which corresponds to the five wounds of Jesus at the Crucifixion.⁶⁹ Always having just enough money for subsistence allows the Jew to spend more time “witnessing” Christian truth.



fig.5

⁶⁸ Image from Richard Harris, *The Passion in Art* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 10. The balanced placement of the two deaths indicates that the crucifixion cannot be fully appreciated without the opportunity to blame. Blame, of course, is on Judas and all Jews.

⁶⁹ The stigmata in hands and feet plus the tear in Christ’s side made by the sword. Richard Cohen places the origin of the five *sous* with French *complaintes* (lyrical laments) after 1609. See Richard S. Levy, ed., *Antisemitism: a Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2005), s.v. “Wandering Jew,” 2:754.

The Wandering Jew's purse may be small and held in the hand, or larger and slung over the shoulder. The latter positioning resonates with the Jewish peddler figure: the antisemitic version and the Jewish folk-motif.⁷⁰ This double vector is a major iconographic overlap which helps make the Wandering Jew so readily translatable by Jewish artists.

5) Shoes would seem to be a requirement for anyone on a walking tour of the entire globe, but the Wandering Jew is sometimes seen barefoot. When thus, the extreme thickness of his soles are noted: the *Kurtze Beschreibung* account mentions two inches of hoary callus (a feat difficult to render in illustration). Wearing no shoes indicates humility and is also a way to distinguish the wearer from properly-shod figures nearby. Feet bare of shoes can also mean feet unable to fit into shoes, due to a universal Jewish anatomical defect. From the medieval association of Jewish feet with cloven hooves to nineteenth century scientific discourse on the Jewishness of flat, weak, and racially-determined feet, the foot has been a common focus of difference.⁷¹

When shod, the Wandering Jew's kit varies. Sandals are usually the lace-up-the-calf sort, harking back to images of biblical footwear, which would have been the mode when the Wandering Jew began his wanderings. Boots of all heights are also seen, as well as improbable slippers. Regardless of the type of footwear, he leaves behind footprints of

⁷⁰ The peddler or old-clothes man as stereotypical Jew developed during the second half of the eighteenth century, according to Alfred Rubens, *A Jewish Iconography* (London: Nonpareil, 1981), xi. See also Felsenstein, *Anti-Semitic*, 62. The peddler was a stock figure in Jewish folklore, as well. See, for example Nathan Ausubel, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore* (New York: Crown, 1948), xi.

⁷¹ For the devil and Jewish feet, see Gilman, *Jew's Body*, 39. For scientific discourse about Jewish feet, see *ibid.*, 38-59. For a pictorial pairing of the *foetor Judaicus* (the Jewish scent) and the idea of the primitive, uncivilized Jewish foot, see the final panel of Doré's 1856 *Le Juif Errant* series. The Jew is depicted removing his socks and shoes on Judgment Day, and the assorted, tiny goblins at his feet are swooning backwards holding their noses. For *foetor Judaicus*, see Trachtenberg, *Devil*, 47-50, and Jay Geller, "(G)nos(e)ology: The Cultural Construction of the Other," in *People of the Book: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 249-255.

disaster. Written references to calamities literally following his footsteps abound. Even in Eugene Sue's best-selling 1844-45 novel *Le Juif Errant*, where the eponymous character is presented in a fairly sympathetic light (though in an oddly minor role), cholera is spread by his footprints—which left the imprint of a cross—to become a world-wide epidemic.⁷²



fig.6

6) Clothing, like head coverings, serves to indicate Jewishness of the period. This may mean, for example, loose, biblical robes with or without a simple belt; pied garb with an apron; Jewish badges; or “oriental” dress indicating a connection to Turks and other eastern aliens.⁷³ In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, garments typical of incoming *Ostjuden* (Eastern European Jewish immigrants) were conspicuously Jewish.

⁷² His iron-soled shoes (a folk motif in themselves) were studded with seven nail-heads in a cruciform pattern. See Sue, *Wandering Jew*, 2, 80. The Wandering Jew's footsteps court profit rather than disaster in a 1924 Paris advertisement for crepe-soled shoes, which shows the figure from the back, grinning over his rounded shoulder whilst striding up a hill. The bottom of his right foot, grossly enlarged in perspective, is placed next to the caption: “*Ouf! Depuis 2000 ans...voici enfin.*” (See Braillon-Philippe, *Juif Errant*, 79). A century earlier, a pair of shoes reputed to have been worn by the Wandering Jew were displayed in a Berne museum. (See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. “wandering jew,” 16:259.)

⁷³ By badges I refer to symbols required by “host” countries to designate alien status to Jews, such as the circular fabric badges after 1215 and the later yellow stars of Nazi Germany. For details about badges, see Mellinkoff, *Outcasts*, 43-47. For connections of pied or parti-colored clothing with Jews and other aliens, see *ibid*, 41-43.

Just such clothing helped further the “scientific” diagnosis of Jewish wandering as a racial, pathological disorder at Charcot’s clinic at Salpêtrière during the 1890s.⁷⁴ The images documenting this episode are clinical photographs: an unusual medium in a survey of Wandering Jew images (fig.6).

7) A late addition to the Wandering Jew’s attributes is a physical mark on the forehead, which can be shaped like a cross.⁷⁵ The mark may also take the form of a shapeless blemish (fig.7) or a satanic horn, or merely be implied by a camouflaging band of cloth or the merging of thick eyebrows (Sue’s *Juif errant* was a ‘unibrow’).⁷⁶



fig.7

⁷⁴ See Henry Meige, “The Wandering Jew in the Clinic: a Study in Neurotic Pathology,” in Hasan-Rokem and Dundes, eds., *Wandering*, 190-194.

⁷⁵ The first literary reference to the Wandering Jew with a mark of Cain is Matthew Gregory Lewis’ 1796 novel *The Monk*. See Anderson, *Legend*, 179.

⁷⁶ (Unibrow is a slang term for a person whose eyebrows meet over the bridge of the nose.) See Sue, *The Wandering Jew*, 113: “his eyebrows, uniting in the midst, extended from one temple to the other, like a fatal mark on his forehead.” Not depicted in visual images here, the mark has also been interpreted, starting with Isidore of Seville (ca. 560-636), as the mark of circumcision. See Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 94.

Ruth Mellinkoff suggests this is “certainly the result of the conflation of ideas about the two figures” of Cain and the Wandering Jew, since both are punished by a Divine authority and doomed to wander.⁷⁷ The Early Church picks up the figure of Cain as a symbol for all Jews, as is stated earliest and most explicitly in an allegorical tract by Ambrose (ca.375 C.E.).⁷⁸



fig.8

The continuing link between Cain and the Christian Wandering Jew legend is made clear in an infamous caricature by French painter and illustrator Gustave Doré (1832-1883): *Le Juif Errant* (1852)(fig.8). The work was featured on the cover of *Journal pour Rire* during Doré’s tenure as staff caricaturist, and although its authorship has been called into question, it is generally attributed to him.⁷⁹ The figure sports a large, red mark of Cain on his forehead: an apotropaic mark shaped like the very object the

⁷⁷ Mellinkoff, *Mark*, 38-40.

⁷⁸ “[Ambrose] stated unequivocally that murderer Cain was the prototype of the Jews.” Mellinkoff, *Mark*, 92-93.

⁷⁹ Avraham Ronen casts doubt on the authorship of the caricature, stating that it is not signed by Doré, and that the first attestation of ownership (in 1921) does not name sources. See Avraham Ronen, “Kaulbach’s Wandering Jew: an Anti-Jewish Allegory and Two Jewish Responses,” *Assaph* B3 (1998), 257. As Anne Hélène Hoog points out, cover cartoons for *Journal pour Rire* were not always signed by the artists. She states the illustration was patterned on an earlier work by Doré’s employer Charles Philippon, for the composition *La Parodie du Juif errant*. See Brailion-Philippe, *Juif Errant*, 202.

Jew purportedly mocked. In the Bible, Cain's mark is one of punishment and protection, for though doomed to wander, he is protected from harm: "and the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest anyone who met him should kill him" (Gen. 4:15 JPS). In the Christian legend, the Wandering Jew is also protected, but only to ensure death does not provide an undeserved respite from eternal torture, and to ensure the proper unfolding of eschatological events leading to the Day of Judgment.

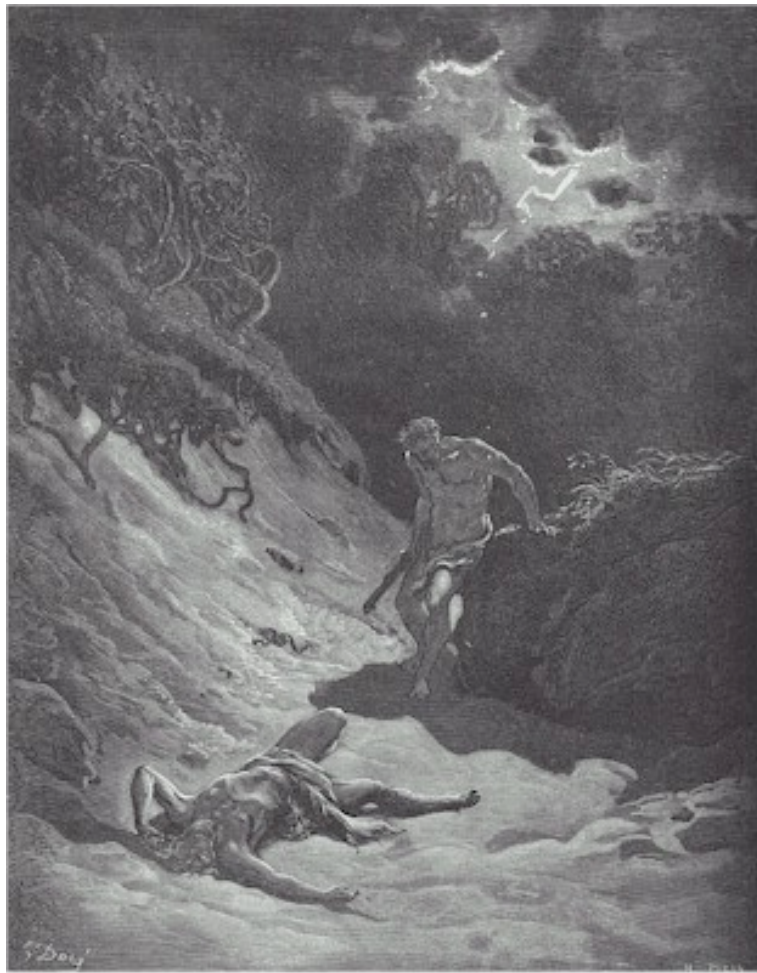


fig.9

Doré's *Cain and Abel* (fig.9) illustrates another link between Cain and the Wandering Jew. Although Genesis does not specify how Cain killed his brother, Doré's Cain grips a stout wooden stick. So, too, does Doré's Wandering Jew caricature, as indeed does each of his later, extraordinarily popular Wandering Jew engravings of 1856 (to be discussed

below). The Wandering Jew's staff resounds with echoes of Cain's weapon, just as the Wandering Jew, as personification of Christ-killing Jews, resounds with echoes of Cain.⁸⁰ In the words of Pope Innocent III, the instigator of the Fourth Lateran Council, "Jews, like the fratricide Cain, are doomed to wander about the earth as fugitives."⁸¹



fig.10



fig.11

8) Another attribute is the bodily aspect or bearing of the Wandering Jew. He is most often seen mid-stride, with either a purposeful or exhausted air. He sometimes points with an index finger in the direction of his next steps (fig.10). In the French emblematic narrative panels of the eighteenth century, he can point at the cross or Jesus, directing the viewer to the source of his crime and punishment, or with his back towards the latter, point in the opposite direction (fig.11).⁸² In depictions of the actual moment of his

⁸⁰ The staff is also connected with Cain's agricultural implements. Cain is often depicted carrying a scythe, hoe, or similar long-handled tool. By plying these tools Cain produced the sacrifice rejected by God.

⁸¹ Quotation from Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, 185-6. Pope Innocent's decrees created, in effect, medieval marks of Cain obligatory for all Jews (special clothing, hats, badges, etc.): marks which made Jews readily identifiable and more vulnerable to discrimination.

⁸² One episode from the multi-centered panels depicts the Wandering Jew in conversation with townsmen. French painter Gustave Courbet mimics this with *Rencontre ou Bonjour Monsieur Courbet* (1854), in which he places himself as the Wandering Jew greeting a gentleman with his servant and dog. See Brailion-Philippe, *Juif Errant*, 24. This connection was first noted by Linda Nochlin. See her "Gustave Courbet's *Meeting: A Portrait of the Artist as a Wandering Jew*," *Art Bulletin* 49 (1967), 209-222.

alleged crime, he can be seen pointing to spur Jesus onwards, denying him a moment's respite. During the consequent travels, the Wandering Jew is usually seen alone, shunned from society (and by animals, as well), or pausing from forward motion to answer questions of curious townsfolk. At all times he is standing up, whether erect or slouched, and never at rest.⁸³

9) Three formal themes are evident in the image corpus as a whole: the figure in motion, the figure still (or posing), and the figure with Jesus (in person or implied by a cross). Paradoxically, each image, ancient and modern, regardless of compositional details, contains in essence all three themes: the Jew must wander yet never make progress, so he is always in motion and always still; and the Jew must labor under the original divine curse, so he is always in the presence of Jesus.

Wandering Jew or Just Wandering?

10) Wandering is by no means an employment restricted solely to Jews. How, then, may the Wandering Jew be distinguished from other wanderers, wayfarers, refugees, travelers, and pilgrims? First, the wandering in question must be a punishment. In Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*—wherein seemingly all the world's tales, however foundational or flip, are tidied into numerically assigned categories—this theme merits a slot under subcategory Q502: “Wandering as a Punishment.”⁸⁴ Further clues (not enumerated in the necessarily laconic *Index*) may supply evidence required to meet the

⁸³ There are a very few exceptions to this, based perhaps on a variant of the legend which allows the figure to sit down for brief and rigidly regimented periods (only on the stump of an oak or hazel, only for as long as it takes to eat a crust of brown bread, etc.)

⁸⁴ Which, in turn may be found within the sublimely understated Q500: “Tedious Punishments.” See Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1955-58), 242.

unstated second criterion: that the wanderer in question must be a Jew.⁸⁵ Clues include the following: combinations of attributes above, the presence of a cross or Christ figure, use of Hebrew or pseudo-Hebrew lettering, and of course, the traditional repertoire of antisemitic physiognomy: skin (too pale, too dark, diseased), nose (too large, too hooked), eyes (furtive, averted, closed, demonic), lips (too full), hair (too hirsute, too dark, too red), beard (too long), head (misshapen), body (misshapen).⁸⁶ These specifics would qualify an unidentified wanderer for the further refinement of Q502.1: “The Wandering Jew,” defined by the *Index* as “ceaseless wandering with inability to die as punishment for blasphemy.”⁸⁷

The Romantic Wandering Jew: Doré’s Paradigm “Q502.1”

“Big arched eyebrows that never stop traveling, like a Jew’s—Wandering-Jew eyebrows.”
-Eudora Welty, *Powerhouse*

One particular set of images illustrates this general iconography to perfection. It can serve as a paradigm for all anti-Jewish Wandering Jew images, and will act as foil for my critical readings of versions by Jewish artists. The set is a series of twelve engravings by

⁸⁵ Not necessarily a male Jew. See Anderson, *Legends* for literary examples of the Wandering Jewess (up to 1965).

⁸⁶ Richard S. Levy, ed., *Antisemitism: a Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2005) s.v. “iconography, Christian,” 1:339-342. For general antisemitic assumptions about the Jewish body, see Wistrich, *Antisemitism*, 27. For the nose and skin in particular, see Sander L. Gilman, *The Visibility of the Jew in the Diaspora: Body Imagery and Its Cultural Context* (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1992).

⁸⁷ Thompson, *Motif-Index*, 242. Aside from the title of the category: Wandering Jew, the *Index* does not mention Jewishness. However, the purpose of the description (quoted in its entirety above) is to list the qualities of the punishment, rather than of the punished. One can infer from this that the punishment traditionally attributed to the Wandering Jew could conceivably be visited upon anyone, Jewish or not. In such cases, the tale would still merit inclusion in another category, as do the Ancient Mariner and Flying Dutchmen, for example.

Gustave Doré, who in 1856 illustrated Pierre DuPont's *La Légende du Juif Errant*: a poem based upon an 1831 set of "immensely popular" chansons by Pierre-Jean de Beranger.⁸⁸

I do not mean to suggest that Jewish artists, when appropriating the Wandering Jew images for their own purposes, did so by deliberately refuting a specific Doré print point by point, but I do suggest that the Doré versions, as a whole, entered and remained in the collective cultural consciousness as definitive representations of the anti-Jewish Wandering Jew. In 1965, George K. Anderson asserted that Doré's images had been "remembered by thousands of people during the last hundred years and have done much to make the popular image of the Wandering Jew what it is."⁸⁹ His pictures became the quintessential anti-Jewish Wandering Jew, summing up the legend in extraordinarily large (18" x 12") plates which, thanks to a printing innovation, cast the narrative action in tones which were as immediate and affecting as a painting.⁹⁰ His Wandering Jew set the standard for all subsequent renderings of the figure, so thoroughly and seductively did he document the stages of Ahasverus' career. From the initial meeting with Jesus on the road to Calvary to the final redemption, the tale unfolds in the manner of a cinematic storyboard, *avant la lettre*. Composed of "set pieces of anti-Jewish prejudice" easily transferable to humor magazines with wide circulations in France, England, and Germany, it was a veritable primer for Europe to learn and perpetuate the pictorial coding of Jewish otherness.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Anderson, *Legend*, 259-260. Beranger's work, in turn, was based upon the Brabantine ballad, "remembered as the most widely known of the traditional French *complaintes* of the Wandering Jew," and was later set to music by Charles Gounod. *Ibid.*, 207.

⁸⁹ Anderson, *Legend*, 259.

⁹⁰ The size of the plates "stretched the engravers to the utmost, and introduced a new tonal treatment of the block." Nigel Gosling, *Gustave Doré* (Newton Abbot : David & Charles, 1973), 72.

⁹¹ Richard S. Levy, ed., *Antisemitism*, s.v. "Doré," 1:186.



fig.12

Although each picture in the series does include the figure of Jesus in some manner (usually still carrying his cross, but as a ghostly reminder in the wild landscape), picture number two (fig.12) is the most emblematic.⁹² Jesus hangs on the cross in $\frac{3}{4}$ view, still bleeding, with his head turned towards the Wandering Jew, and his eyes concealed in the

⁹² It is also the most popular. A Google image search for “wandering jew” pulls up this picture more than any other, and it serves as the sole visual representation of Wandering Jew in the print version of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

shadow of the crown of thorns. The Jew walks in front and away from him, but with his head half turned back towards the cross. His eyes are averted, neither looking towards his next steps nor precisely at Jesus, as if he is unable to summon the resolve to fix his gaze at the curser or the curse (the endless road ahead). In his left hand is the ubiquitous staff, held parallel to the cross it echoes.⁹³ His balding pate is bare to the elements, and his long hair and exaggerated beard stream behind as he strides against wind and rain.

The text accompanying this picture suggests the Jew is already penitent and converted: “Too late he feels, by look, and deed, and word, How often he has crucified his Lord.”⁹⁴ However, his furtive aspect belies this assumption. His eyebrows, angled up toward his temples, indicate ill-will or guardedness and obscure his eyes in shadow. Two isolated strands of hair, similarly angled, mimic white horns, and link the figure with Cain in general, and with Doré’s own Cain (fig.9) whom he gave subtle, horn-like ringlets.⁹⁵ His right shoulder is hunched near his ear, deforming his posture and accentuating his greedy grip on the bag in the same hand.⁹⁶ Despite conversion to “his” Lord, this Jew persists in valuing his true master, that which he holds nearest his heart: cash. Judas overtones of greed and betrayal are explicit here, and create further contrast with the selfless sacrifice being made by Jesus. Jesus is higher than the Jew, but smaller

⁹³ The staff’s reflection on the watery ground is refracted at a slight angle, which creates the suggestion of brokenness (as in the broken reed).

⁹⁴ The English translation is by George Thornbury (Gosling, *Doré*, 72). This phrase implies acceptance of Jesus, but full conversion (full definition and means unknown) is not explicit until the final of the twelve panels.

⁹⁵ The figure also resembles Michelangelo’s famous horned Moses statue from St. Peter in Chains, Rome. Both sport voluminous beards and hold a burden with their right hands (in Moses’ case it is the “Tablets of the law,” secured far more nonchalantly than is the Wandering Jew’s money sack). The horns of Moses can have demonic and bestial connotations in Christian art, although their origin was supposedly due to Jerome’s mistranslation of the biblical text for the Vulgate. See Trachtenberg, *Devil*, 44.

⁹⁶ The bag, it has been suggested to me, could be his own hat. However, in two other panels from this series, the figure is seen with hat and bag simultaneously. I do find it curious that the figure wears a hat in three of the panels, and is hatless in the remaining nine. Also, he is wearing a head covering at the moment of his redemption on Judgment Day. If now a Christian, should not his head be uncovered as a sign of respect and awe on this occasion?

and to the side, giving center stage to the main character.

The Jew has cash, clothing, shoes, a walking support, and life. Compare this inventory with that of the figure he strides past. Jesus is crowned with thorns, clad in a loincloth, nailed to a cross, and, by this point in the Passion narrative, is presumably dead. As if the human drama was not ominous enough, Doré adds a dark, craggy backdrop bare of humanity. The menacing steeple and mountains offer no comfort from man or nature. The rain and wind lash out from the direction of the cross, as if adding to the punishment, suggestive of Gospel accounts of natural phenomena at the crucifixion.⁹⁷ Doré, heir to the artistic tradition of wild, romantic excess, excelled in communicating the “splendidly tumultuous” powers of nature and emotion.⁹⁸ These powers are calculated here and in Doré’s other religious work to elicit a response of fear and worship. His Wandering Jew is a teaching tool to inspire pity and piety for Jesus. Viewers are instructed to identify the Jew as a killer and mocker of Jesus, compare the Jew’s deserved suffering to the undeserved suffering of their Lord, and aspire to be better Christians by being better than the Jew.⁹⁹

Complicating this prescription is the effort which Doré puts into creating pity for the Jew, as well. His bare head, so noticeably without a covering, Phrygian or otherwise, and his venerable age indicate vulnerability against the outrageous misfortunes he must endure. Doré’s assignment was, after all, to illustrate a text designed to “render him [the Wandering Jew] more pathetic and sentimental.”¹⁰⁰ The pity elicited is not enough to

⁹⁷ Mysterious sudden darkness or eclipse (Matt. 27:45, Mark 15:33, Luke 23:44) and earthquake (Matt. 27:50, 54). *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, NRSV (New York: Oxford, 1991).

⁹⁸ Gosling, *Doré*, 71.

⁹⁹ See a similar message in Doré’s Bible illustration for the kiss of Judas. Judas has an exaggeratedly large, hooked nose, heavy brows, glittering eye, and crooked, leering posture: the embodiment of evil kissing the embodiment of good.

¹⁰⁰ Anderson, *Legend*, 208.

endanger the balance in favor of Jesus' suffering, but just enough to create a frisson of tension, the better to spin the drama throughout twelve panels towards a truly satisfying final meeting. Some suffering by the [now converted] Jew must be acknowledged in order to make his eventual "redemption" a just and happy ending.

The Nazi Wandering Jew: Asleep at the Whip

"The Jew is the demon behind the corruption of mankind, and these pictures prove it."
—from the film *Der ewige Jude*.

Jump ahead nearly 100 years to another anti-Jewish Wandering Jew, but this one from Nazi Germany. Where Doré's version portrayed sentimentality, pity, a shred of dignity, and reverence for Jesus, the Nazi version is simply a picture of evil.

The infamous *Der ewige Jude* (fig.13) poster advertised the 1937 Munich exhibition of the same name, which displayed "scientific" proof of the inherent inferiority of Jews. In 1940, a pseudo-documentary was created in response to the traveling exhibit, and became one of the most notorious propaganda films ever made.¹⁰¹ I include the poster here because of its enduring popularity: with or without the film, the image remains a favorite of neo-Nazi websites and organizations that sponsor studies of antisemitic art.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ The title is also *Der ewige Jude*. "It is to this day considered such dangerous propaganda that it is banned in Germany except under tightly controlled circumstances. Legally distributed in the United States, it is marketed by neo-Nazi groups as "the best documentary ever made on Jews.'" Quoted from Stig Hornshøj-Møller, "The Eternal Jew," (online resource: <http://www.holocaust-history.org/der-ewige-jude/>).

¹⁰² A Google search for "der ewige Jude" yielded "about 50,000 hits," and an image search of the same yielded "about 220 hits." In the latter search, twenty images appeared on one screen, and of these, 13 were of the poster. Searched on 11/08/05.



fig.13

Der ewige Jude is the German version of the English words Wandering Jew and the French *le Juif Errant*. Although the German adjective *wandernd* could have been used to describe the legend, *ewige* triumphed as the harsher term. *Ewige*, eternal, puts a different spin on the curse; shifting the emphasis from the act of wandering to the fact of eternity: the Jew can *never* be redeemed.¹⁰³ Other interpretations are that the Jews as a people are a “living corpse, a specter,” having mysteriously survived since ancient times; and

¹⁰³ Redemption is not possible in any form: assimilation, conversion, intermarriage, or political emancipation, which means a Jew remains a Jew for eternity regardless of outward appearance, changes of allegiance, family tree, or nationality.

because of this eternal nature, they can never be completely eradicated.¹⁰⁴

The figure incorporates a catalogue of stereotypical Jewish attributes: facial features, beard, physique, money, and a distinctively Jewish garment such as those on display in the exhibition.¹⁰⁵ He is indulging in the most stereotypical of Jewish activities: usury.¹⁰⁶ The Jew is so at home with this type of non-work he is able to do it in his sleep, or at least with closed eyes and a lazy shrug. In each hand is a symbol of the Jew's power over Germany. The weight of his deformed body leans towards the money in his open right hand, held out towards the viewer.¹⁰⁷ A limp, knotted whip is in his left hand, beneath a map pinned under his sloping shoulder.¹⁰⁸ The map—a die-cut puzzle piece emblazoned with a red sickle and hammer—is the Soviet Union, which represents the double threat of

¹⁰⁴ Quotation from Adolf L. Leschnitzer, "The Wandering Jew: the Alienation of the Jewish Image in Christian Consciousness," in Hasan-Rokem and Dundes, eds., *Wandering*, 229. The German *ewige Jude* was used to represent this "living death" of Jewry as an "ancient problem...of the Jews' essential character, be that essence understood to derive from their national, religious, racial, or psychological character." See Susan E. Shapiro, "The Uncanny Jew: A Brief History of an Image," in *Textures and Meaning: Thirty Years of Judaic Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst*, ed. L. Ehrlich et al (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2004).

¹⁰⁵ For a photograph of similar garment being admired by Nazi officials at the exhibition, see <http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/holocaust/h-eternal.htm>.

¹⁰⁶ The later film emphasizes the Jewish predilection for trade as a type of non-work, and contrasts footage of Jewish rag sellers (including children) with German men at "productive" manual labor. Usury, however, remains the quintessential stereotype for Jewish employment.

¹⁰⁷ Even without the purse, a hand containing money can refer to the payment of Judas. See Hall, *Dictionary*, 144. Note that the money is held under the raised right shoulder, similar to the bearing of Doré's Jew in fig.12. Wikipedia, the notoriously unreliable yet comprehensive encyclopedic website, claims that the money and whip in this poster represent the German idiom *Sukerbrodt und Peitsche*, which literally means sugar-bread and whip, but is akin to the English "carrot and stick." The idea of reward and punishment can fit the image, but I have not found this link in a reputable source. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Semitic>.

¹⁰⁸ The whip is an exaggerated fantasy of the original broken reed, shown here as the antithesis of an erect support and as the replacement for the wanderer's staff. The whip is foremost a weapon, and like the reed is part of the *arma Christi* as the scourge of Jesus. It is also an attribute for Envy: one of the seven deadly sins. See James Hall, *Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols in Eastern and Western Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 96. Note the hand placement on the whip. Had the Jew been actively wielding the whip, he would be holding the handle's end away from his thumb. This could imply the Jew is so powerful (due to his world-wide web of conspiracy, which is also detailed in the exhibit) he need not actually ply the weapon to achieve effects. The position of the hand and the flaccid whip also suggest a post-masturbatory grip. The whip handle is even circumcised, as its trimmed, slightly concave tip might suggest to the Aryan imagination. Since Jewish men were assumed to be sexual deviants, the reference to an "unnatural" sexual practice is probably intentional.

allegedly Jewish-inspired Communism and the source of unwelcome *Ostjuden*.¹⁰⁹ Nazis feared Communism, which was inextricably linked to Jews.

The Jew emerges from a striking yellow background.¹¹⁰ He is reduced to black and white, a stark, colorless threat. Three words anchor the bottom of the picture, *Der ewige Jude* in the color of blood and, by implication, the infamous Blood Libel. Blood is a theme of the exhibition and film, both of which depict the ritual slaughter of animals in graphic, manipulated detail in an attempt to prove the inhumanity of Jewish dietary law. The blood-red words label the Jew in a font that deliberately mimics sacred Hebrew calligraphy: the ‘D’ is identical to a *mem sofit* (ד), the ‘W’ a *shin* (ש), the ‘J’ a *khaf sofit* (ך), the ‘U’ a *tet* (ט). Other letters are inversions of the calligraphic font: the ‘e’ and ‘r’ are backwards *pey* (פ) and *dalet* (ד), and the ‘i’ and ‘g’ imitate *zayin* (ז) and *samech* (ס).¹¹¹ This transposition of authentic Jewish lettering in the service of antisemitism is a perfect parallel to the transposition of authentic Jewish life into the grotesque and evil caricature in the exhibition and film. Traditional dress, home life, rituals, holidays, and employment are all manipulated to seem sub-human, parasitic, dangerous, and evil.

As a final insult, note the tiny trademark symbol in the lower right corner. The

¹⁰⁹ The imagined menace of Judeo-Bolshevism was a symptom of an older German/Slavic opposition wherein each side dehumanized the other. The threat to Germany was compounded by the real or imagined Jewishness of Communist leaders (like Trotsky and Marx), and by vague suspicions of eastern racial inferiority and general Communist godlessness.

¹¹⁰ Yellow is the color of Avarice and Lust, two of the most commonly depicted seven deadly sins, and the color most often worn by Judas and *Synagoga* in medieval art. Mellinkoff, *Outcasts*, 38, 49. Yellow is also the color of the *Jude* badges which were introduced at various times over occupied German territories. The first official suggestion was made November 12, 1938 by Reinhard Heydrich, with the first recorded use occurring in Poland during October 1939. The first order for Jews within Germany was made in September, 1941. (Encyclopedia Judaica, s.v. “badge,” 4:71, and Marilyn J. Harran, ed., *Holocaust Chronicle* (Lincolnwood Ill.: Publications International, 2000), 143.) Although these dates are after the production of this poster, the yellow, six-pointed star was already in use as a Jewish marker. In 1933, for example, it was painted on the windows of German Jewish business during the Nazi’s first nationwide, planned action. Harran, ed., *Holocaust*, 54.

¹¹¹ From medieval manuscripts to the present day Hebrew and pseudo-Hebrew lettering are “used as stigmatic identification.” Quoted from Mellinkoff, *Outcasts*, 43.

coincidental resemblance to a *hecksher*, a symbol used by Rabbinic authorities to certify the *kashrut* of a food product, is unmistakable to a modern viewer.¹¹² (A “KD” would mean kosher-dairy in English.) It is as if the poster has been judged kosher and fit for consumption. Given the pride of place—or rather, shame of place—which ritual slaughter takes in the exhibition and film, a reference to *kashrut* would be a brilliantly ironic fillip.¹¹³

I selected this Nazi poster and the 1856 Doré (fig.12) example as model anti-Jewish Wandering Jew images precisely because of their respective notoriety and popularity. They are so well-known that they are in danger of no longer being “seen.” Repetitive exposure may inoculate viewers against the very details which contain the most meaning. Most people, for example, might not immediately read the Doré as an inherently anti-Jewish picture. The anti-Jewishness of the Nazi poster, though more obvious than the Doré, is intensified when the mimetic font is taken into account, and the nature of the exhibition it advertises is made apparent. These two images deserve close examination also, especially to discover why they have been so “usable” to so many people for so long. They serve here as reference points to Jewish responses in Chapter II of this paper.

¹¹² My reflection here is limited to an anachronistic irony, but I am still searching for a definitive history of *kashrut* symbols to determine what kind were used in 1938 Germany. In America, the Union of Orthodox Congregation of America (owner of the familiar O-U symbol), began its supervision and certification services in 1924. The current German *hecksher* in Hamburg is composed of Hebrew and English letters, but I do not know when this symbol was first employed.

¹¹³ A persistent antisemitic urban legend is the perception that *heckshers* are symbols indicating that the manufacturers of the products in question have paid the “Jewish secret tax:” monies that underwrite the Jewish goal of world-domination. See this ludicrous fiction in Jan Harold Brunvald, *Urban Legends* (Santa Barbara : ABC-CLIO, 2001), 222-223.

CHAPTER II

IMAGES BY JEWISH ARTISTS

Below are eleven works by Jewish artists, in chronological order by decade. Most are by lesser-known artists (lesser-known in popular culture, not Jewish art history circles) who need closer attention within my thematic framework.¹¹⁴ My critical readings search for meaning through three phases of interpretation: pre-iconographical description (enumeration of objects), iconographical description (relationship between objects within a theme), and iconographical interpretation (deeper meaning, including intention of artist) via a comparative study of a particular image with others. The fourth phase looks for a social or historical background of the theme, and tries to answer why an artist chose a particular subject at a particular place and time and in a particular way. These levels are fluid and overlapping, but together can define the methodology called iconology.¹¹⁵

Given that the Wandering Jew image began in the service of the Church, I often refer to Christian art when exploring Jewish appropriation of the image. This does not imply that the artists below knew the terminology and standard usage of Christian symbols, but the fourth phase of my analysis, as described above, gives me license to look beyond the artist's apparent or stated intentions.

¹¹⁴ Marc Chagall is included because no investigation of Jewish appropriation of Wandering Jew imagery would be legitimate without him.

¹¹⁵ The definitions (based on Erwin Panofsky's research) are drawn from Roelof van Straten, *An Introduction to Iconography* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 4.

Artists:

- 1) 1899 Samuel Hirszenberg
- 2) 1919 Reuven Rubin
- 3) 1920s Marc Chagall
- 4) 1933 *Der Vandernder Yid* (film)
- 5) 1940s Arthur Syzk
- 6) 1950s Adolph Gottlieb
- 7) 1968 Mordecai Moreh
- 8) 1976 Evgeny Abesgausz
- 9) 1983 Michael Sgan-Cohen
- 10) 1996 Samuel Bak
- 11) 2003 Zoya Cherkassky

1) Hirszenberg: Altarpiece of Catastrophe

One of the first Wandering Jew images created by a Jewish artist is still one of the most powerful.¹¹⁶ The suffering in Samuel Hirszenberg's *Wandering Jew* (1899) (fig.14) is neither dignified, as in Doré's series, nor caricatured, as in Doré's 1852 cartoon (fig.9): it is palpably horrific.¹¹⁷ His painting is one of the earliest Jewish interpretations of the Wandering Jew, and must have been conceived in part as a response to the popular Doré images. Where the suffering in traditional Wandering Jew pictures belonged primarily to Jesus, leaving a residual gesture towards a repentant yet still culpable Jew, Hirszenberg's suffering is completely Jewish, and most stridently inflicted on the Jews in the name of Jesus. At last in the hands of a Jewish artist, the wanderer is no longer defined by a hostile other.

Originally from Lodz, Hirszenberg was sensitive to and critical of "the vulnerability of the traditional world of Eastern Europe."¹¹⁸ The series of Russian pogroms beginning in 1881, the May laws of 1882, and other successive restrictions against Jewish settlement, work, travel, and property were devastating to Russian Jewry.¹¹⁹ Simultaneously victimized and blamed for their own victimization, Jews responded by emigrating (when permitted), joining revolutionary groups to overthrow the Czar, and forming new political entities like the Bund; a Jewish socialist party, and Jewish nationalist groups. Hirszenberg's response was the *Wandering Jew*, which was

¹¹⁶ Hirszenberg's painting is considered the second Jewish example of a Wandering Jew painting, after the 1876 self-portrait *Ahasuerus* by his mentor Maurycy Gottlieb. Avraham Ronen suggests Gottlieb's painting was a response to Wilhelm von Kaulbach's antisemitic *The Destruction of Jerusalem*, wherein a Wandering Jew figure is tormented by raging demons. Hirszenberg, Gottlieb's student, would have had occasion to see the Kaulbach painting when he was a student in Munich. See Ronen, "Kaulbach's," 243-262. For more on Gottlieb, see Larry Silver, "Jewish Identity in Art and History: Maurycy Gottlieb as Early Jewish Artist," Catherine M. Soussloff, ed., *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 90-92.

¹¹⁷ I persist in crediting the caricature to Doré, but admit to continuing a search for evidence.

¹¹⁸ Cohen, *Jewish Icons*, 224.

¹¹⁹ Wistrich, *Antisemitism*, 171-172.

reproduced in posters and postcards advertised in Jewish newspapers, and which became the centerpiece of the Bezalel Art Institute in Jerusalem.¹²⁰



fig.14

¹²⁰ Cohen, *Jewish Icons*, 224. Bezalel was founded in 1906 by Boris Schatz, who hoped to foster a new sense of “Jewish art” in Eretz Israel. The school is named after the chief artisan of the Biblical Tabernacle (See Exodus 31:1-11, 36:2). In 1907, Hirszenberg emigrated to Palestine in order to teach there.

Hirszenberg's Jew is accompanied not by the physical presence of Jesus, but of Jesus' symbol *ad infinitum*. He runs away from a towering forest of crosses, over murdered Jewish corpses, straight at the viewer, as if to find refuge. His eyes are wide open and beseech our own in a desperate appeal. Rarely in any Wandering Jew picture, Jewish or otherwise, does the Jew present his eyes, face-on, to the viewer. The "Jewish gaze," the antisemitic idea that a Jew can exert his uncanny will through his eyes, was a superstition too dangerous or offensive to depict.¹²¹ In Jewish folklore, too, the eyes can possess dangerous power: the *ayin hara*, or evil eye.¹²² Hirszenberg strips his scene of all such notions and lays bare the sheer terror of a man—and by symbolic extension, of an entire people—blind to anything but the flight from certain death.

The Wanderer, elderly and frail, has been stripped of most standard attributes, and is reduced to a diaper-like rag: the same kind of cloth worn by Jesus in so many depictions of the crucifixion.¹²³ Another mainstay of crucifixion scenes is the heavenly spotlight, whereby Jesus' body is illuminated, picked out from the surrounding cast. Here, the Wanderer's arms are raised against a piercing, supernatural light, coming from directly above. The uncompromising light forces what was formerly in shadow to the fore: Jewish suffering.

Even the size and shape of the canvas deliberately mimic depictions of Jesus on the cross. At 343 x 293cm, and with a gently arched top, the picture is reminiscent of

¹²¹ Gilman, *Jew's Body*. 68-69.

¹²² Alan Dundes, *The Evil Eye: a Casebook* (Madison : University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 46-47.

¹²³ The name for this minimal garment is *subligaculum*, and it may be historically accurate, unlike the loincloth (*peritoneum*) imagined in the Middle Ages. Hall, *Dictionary*, 82.

traditional, imposing altarpiece panels.¹²⁴ The shape suggests a triumphal arch, under which would usually be framed a Christ victorious over sin and death. Hirszenberg exchanges this devotional image for a desperate, old Polish Jew whose suffering saves no one.

One final comparison with Doré is the cross to the immediate left of the figure (closest to his right arm). The angle and formal position is identical to the single cross in Doré's second *Le Juif Errant* panel (fig.12). I propose it is a deliberate appropriation of a Christian symbol of suffering. Hirszenberg has appropriated it as one of an entire landscape of crosses: each one a perverted symbol of torture wrought by Christians upon Jews.¹²⁵

2. Rubín: Jew vs. Jew

A Romanian-born artist, Rubín (1893-1974) briefly studied at the Bezalel Art Institute—where he would have seen Hirszenberg's *Wandering Jew*—before emigrating to Palestine in 1922. His *Jésus et le juif, or la Rencontre*, 1919 (fig.15) shows a meeting of the Wandering Jew and Jesus, apparently set in Romania, where Rubín lived at the time.¹²⁶

The meeting is placed against a symmetrical idyll of hill, river, and town, and flanked by two saplings serving as frame in the foreground. Bridging the vista is a bench, upon

¹²⁴ Such as Raphael's *Mond Crucifixion* (ca.1502), now in London's National Gallery, but originally the altarpiece for a chapel in S. Domenico in Citta di Castello. Kaulbach's painting, if a direct inspiration, is arched on the sides (flat on the top), but of a width far larger than Hirszenberg's and traditional altarpieces.

¹²⁵ Thanks to Jay Geller for pointing out this similarity between the two crosses.

¹²⁶ Braillon-Philippe, *Juif Errant*, 165. Although the title does not explicitly refer to the Wandering Jew legend, the work was included in the 2001 *Le Juif Errant* exhibit in Paris. *Rencontre* is a meeting in general, but more specifically a meeting between opposing forces. Regrettably, the "re" prefix does not imply a subsequent meeting.

which sit, as far apart as possible, Jesus and the Wandering Jew. Jesus has taken himself off the cross, the Wandering Jew has taken himself off the road, and they meet on common ground, or rather, on common cross: a bench made of cross-like wooden planks. They sit as if balancing the bench as a scale. True balance, however, is skewed by their postures. Jesus is erect, his head turned toward the Jew, but the Jew is turned away from Jesus. Jesus' body extends to the upper and lower edges of the picture plane, as if filling it beyond capacity, but the Jew sits shrunken and diminished, resting his head and arms upon his staff, and presenting his rounded back as the uppermost point of his body. They sit together, but apart.

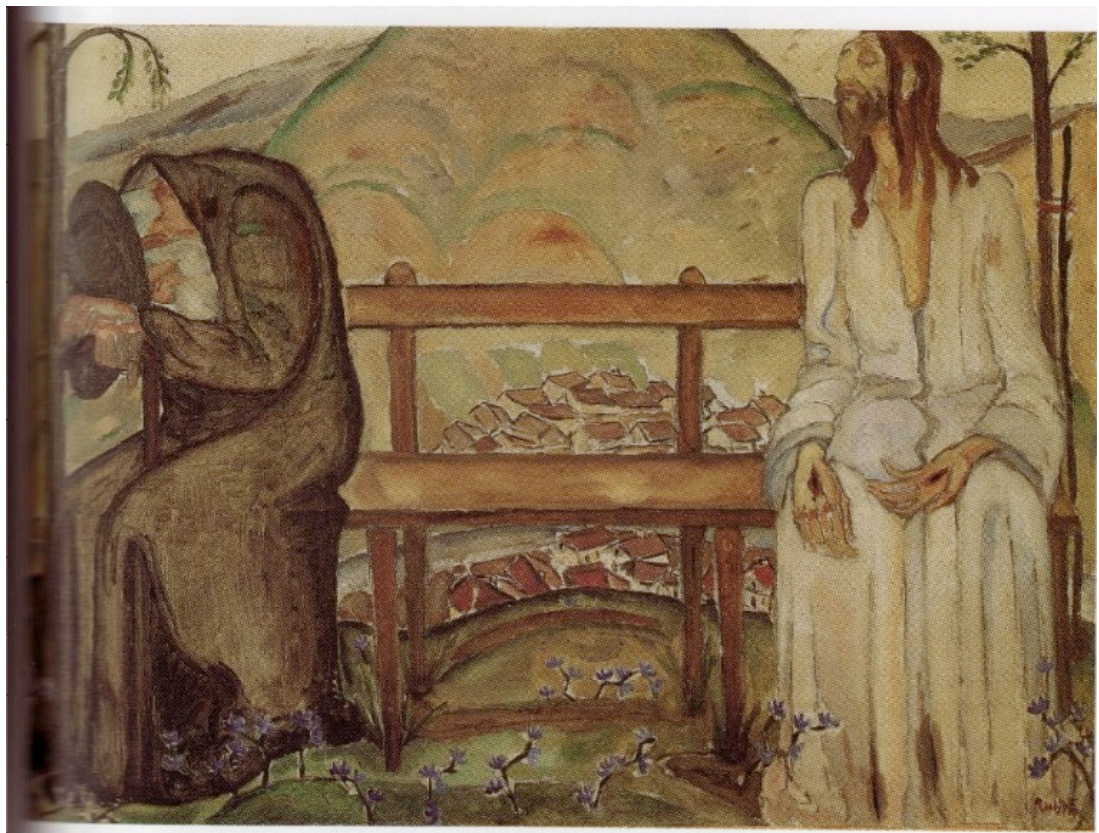


fig15

The benchmark—the unit of measurement—is suffering.¹²⁷ Both figures suffer under a curse. Jesus' is to take on the suffering of all humankind. The traditional role of the Wandering Jew is to highlight the suffering of Jesus while enduring his own curse. In anti-Jewish Wandering Jew pictures, Jesus still weighs in as a vehicle for salvation, whereas the Jew remains a representation of damnation. The Jew is damned for his indifference to Jesus' message; for turning his back (as here, literally) upon Jesus. However, in Rubin's version, both figures play more ambiguous roles.

The picture can be read as proof of the fulfillment of the Wandering Jew's curse.¹²⁸ The title could imply this is the ultimate scene of the Ahasverus storyboard, where a repentant Jew is finally allowed rest, and a risen Christ is finally returned to usher in a new age. True, the Jew is seated, which would suggest an end to his wanderings, and he even rests his head upon his staff, but Jesus is seated as well, bloody hands limp on his knees, and this is hardly a triumphant position for the second coming. Jesus' features add to the ambiguity, for he is composed of attributes from the antisemitic repertoire. His heavy-lidded eye, prominent hooked nose, thick lips, and receding chin are all codes for Jewishness. Most notable is his reddish hair; a lock of which hangs in front of his ear suggesting *peyes* of traditional Jewry.¹²⁹ A traditional Jew, of course, sits nearby, wearing the traditional black coat and hat that brand his identity, but his position makes it impossible to detect *peyes* or any physiognomic likeness to the "King of Jews." He sits, it should be noted, on Jesus' right: the "good" side, on which in crucifixion scenes is

¹²⁷ My wordplay may work in English, but not French. Rubin's first language was Yiddish, but I am assuming his works were given French titles, as this was the artistic language of Balkan artists for whom Paris was central.

¹²⁸ Rubin's paintings from 1919-1920 tend toward tragic themes. Sarah Wilkinson, *Reuven Rubin* (New York: Abrams, [1974]), 35-36.

¹²⁹ For red hair as a Jewish marker, see Mellinkoff, *Outcasts*, 153-154.

positioned the good thief, the good mourners, and the good *Ecclesia*, and in Last Judgment scenes is positioned the good souls selected for Paradise.

The setting is likewise ambiguous. It could convey hopefulness and fertility—and therefore some hope of reconciliation—simply because of the greening, polymastic hills, cozy homes, and wildflowers. Or, it could be linked to Jesus, firmly within Easter Week, especially if the blue ephemerals are Pasque flowers and the saplings are willows. Willow Sunday is an old name for Palm Sunday in Europe, and is called *Florii* in Romania, where willows and Pasque flowers are used in Easter celebrations.¹³⁰ The celebration of the resurrection would be an optimal time for Jesus' second coming. If the *Rencontre* is occurring referenced to Easter, this is one boost in Jesus' favor.

Willows also figure into Jewish traditions. These sapling branches look very like the willows used in a *lulav* for the festival of Sukkot (which may be the historical basis for later Christian tradition of Palm Sunday).¹³¹ Or, the trees could be the willow *salix babylonica*, linked by folklore to the sorrow of Jews during the Babylonian exile.¹³² The sapling beside the Jew bends two young compound leaves towards his head, weeping in commiseration with the bent sufferer underneath. The reference to ancient exile is still relevant, since the Jew even in 1919 remains in exile, and Jewish statehood is not a

¹³⁰ See website: www.folkromania.com/articles.php?ai=66. For general use of Pasque flowers at Easter, see also Marcel de Cleone, Marie Claire Lejeune eds., *Compendium of Symbolic and Ritual Plants in Europe, vol.2: Herbs* (Ghent : Man & Culture, 2002), 51. Rubin grew up in a hasidic family, but near several monasteries (where he was influenced by neo-Byzantine frescos), and so was aware of the larger Christian environment for which Easter would have been a visible event. See Milly Heyd, "The Uses of Primitivism: Reuvin Rubin in Palestine," in *Art and Its Uses*, ed. Ezra Mendelssohn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 50-51.

¹³¹ For the link between Jewish willow-waving at Sukkot and Christian palm-waving at Easter, see John Shelby Spong, *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 241-244.

¹³² Margaret Baker, *Discovering the Folklore of Plants* (Princes Risborough, England: Shire Publications, 2001), 159-160. Willow is also linked with sorrowful connotations in Christianity: it is one of the woods attributed to the cross itself, and was used at Jesus' scourge.

certainty. The two leaves near Jesus' head, however, reach straight out and up. This would suggest less suffering than does the Jew's tree, but for the fact that Jesus' sapling is tied to a stake, and with a scarlet rope, no less, which could reference his body affixed to a cross.¹³³ The Jew's tree, on the other hand, may be lacking a stake because the Jew already has one: the staff allowed as part of his curse.

The eyes of Jesus and the eyes of the Jew are closed. Both figures, fairly equalized by their surroundings and ambivalent attributes, are reduced to their lowest common denominators: suffering and Jewishness. They might simply be two wretched-looking Jews sitting on a bench: each one blind to the true nature of the other.

3. Chagall

Jewish Wandering Jews from the 1910s to the 1940s can easily be represented by a single artist: Russian-born, French modernist painter Marc Chagall (1887-1985). Just as Doré created the quintessential anti-Jewish Wandering Jew images of the nineteenth century, so Chagall created the quintessential Jewish Wandering Jews of the twentieth. Chagall's "style" has been heavily marketed to consumers: commodified in posters, greeting cards, calendars, and countless *tchotchkes* that invite instant visual consumption, not deliberate study. However, by exploring Chagall in the light of the Wandering Jew, familiarity can be put aside so that the strangeness of his works can be recovered.

¹³³ Jesus is clad in a scarlet robe by the soldiers in Matthew's Passion narrative (Matt. 27:28). Also, in the tradition of *arma Christi*, he was flagellated while bound to a tree or column (See Hall, *Illustrated*, 187). Rubin's trees may be stylized and not intended as botanical specimens. The only clearly delineated leaflet (one over the Jew's head) shows opposite, pinnately compound growth which also suggests Rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*), common throughout Europe. Alan Coombes, *Trees* (New York: Dorling Kindersley, 2002), 275. Sticks of Rowan tied with scarlet thread have apotropaic properties, as does all Rowan wood. Walking sticks made of Rowan are particularly prized. Baker, *Discovering*, 135 and Christina Hole, ed., *Encyclopedia of Superstitions* (New York: MetroBooks, 1961) 289.

That Chagall openly identified with the Wandering Jew is well-known, and a chronological timeline of his travels can confirm the physical truth of the assessment.¹³⁴ His artistic wanderings took him from traditional, realist Jewish roots in Vitebsk—from which he developed his boyhood palette of stock shtetl figures—to modernist acclaim in the cultural epicenters of Berlin, Paris and New York.

Chagall's wandering creatures and objects are unbound by gravity and conventions of color, space, and time, and can reflect the existential and/or political exile experienced not just by Jews, but by everyone before, after, between, and during world wars. They all originate with Chagall's own experiences and observations. For example, Vitebsk was "flooded by refugees" in 1914 and 1915: desperate, homeless wanderers.¹³⁵



fig.16



fig.17

His Wandering Jew was a flexible character, taking on various moods and meanings throughout his long career. See, for example, the cartoonish figure walking past a church

¹³⁴ Harshav, "Role," 62.

¹³⁵ Idem, *Marc Chagall and His Times: a Documentary Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), xiii.

(with cross-topped steeple) in *Le Juif Errant* (1923-25) (fig.16), complete with all the accoutrements: staff, beard, cap, and bag; and the oversized, floating man in *Over Vitebsk* (1914) (fig.17). These two (and in the drawing *Jew with the Cane*, 1913 (fig.18), which looks much like a study for *Le Juif Errant*) show a properly outfitted wanderer in isolation, not as a character in a multi-centered scene: a configuration reminiscent of the stereotypical Wandering Jew portrayal as perpetual alien.



fig.18



fig.19

In other works, however, a pack and staff-bearing walker appears as part of a community, or as a fellow refugee from disaster. In *La Révolution* (1937) (fig.19), such a figure rises ghost-like (or Elijah-like) from the bottom, right-hand side of the picture. Moving forward and up without the use of his legs, out of the confines of a house and toward chaotic dangers suggests two elements shared by the anti-Jewish legend and Jewish history: involuntary expulsion from home and a supernatural imperviousness to physical harm.¹³⁶ The figure is not above danger, however, but still below, in the thick of it. He moves towards the spiritual center: the resting rabbi, not toward the political

¹³⁶ Elijah as immortal wanderer qualifies as impervious to harm.

center: the direction indicated by (the upside-down) Lenin's pointing hand.¹³⁷

Chagall uses another type of Wandering Jew, a figure seen rescuing a *sefer* Torah (Torah scroll) from attack, especially after Hitler came to power.¹³⁸ *La Révolution* contains both types, since the rabbi figure holds a Torah.¹³⁹ The visual theme of a Jewish Wandering Jew holding a Torah had been introduced in 1901, when Alfred Nossig's statue (fig.4) achieved instant fame during the Fifth World Zionist Congress. I do not know if Chagall was aware of the precedent, but Chagall's Torah bearers are more harried and refugee-like than was Nossig's robe-wearing old man, who intentionally bore a striking resemblance to Moses.¹⁴⁰

Harshav, in an article that examines the use of written language in Chagall's art, claims Chagall broke with the undertone of pity always present in Yiddish literature's Wandering Jew imagery.¹⁴¹ This seems true of the early wanderers, who are buoyant and dreamlike, though sturdy. But, as Chagall moves closer to World War II, his refugee wanderers are mournful enough. Some take flight, while some take a seat, paralyzed. A range of emotions and responses should be expected from any symbol of self-understanding.

The range of emotion, however, as well as the gravity of his weightless figures, has

¹³⁷ The picture is generally interpreted as a statement of Chagall's "distrust" of revolution (the Russian revolution and the Spanish civil war). Braillon-Philippe, *Juif Errant*, 214.

¹³⁸ Ziva Amishai-Maisels, "The Artist as Refugee," in Mendelsohn, ed. *Art*, 112.

¹³⁹ Although Harshav labels this figure the "eternal jew" of the painting, not the rising figure with the sack, both are Wandering Jews. See Harshav, *Marc Chagall*, 5.

¹⁴⁰ Especially to Michelangelo's Moses (mentioned above, regarding the Doré, fig.12). Moses and Nossig's wanderer sport beards similar in length and texture, and both grasp locks in the right hand. Nossig's placement of the Torah is defiantly central, as opposed to Michelangelo's placement of the Tablets to the side and at an angle. This, of course, reflects the centrality of Torah to Nossig's vision of the Wandering Jew, and the periphery of "Jewish Law" to Michelangelo's tribute to Pope Julius II. The Jewish beard-holding precedent seems to have been set centuries earlier, with the Wandering Jew illustrations on the 1140 tractate (discussed earlier): both these figures grasp ludicrously long (and serpent-like) beards in their right hands.

¹⁴¹ Benjamin Harshav, "Role," 60-62.

largely been forgotten. What remains to attract a casual consumer of Chagall-ware are the bright colors and happy cartoon-shapes that put a sweet spin on yet another Jewish myth: “the shtetl culture.” It is no coincidence that we who buy such things are also able, if asked, to hum at least one melody from *Fiddler on the Roof*.

4. *Der Vandernder Yid*¹⁴² : The Wandering Jew Speaks

A 1933 American incarnation of the Wandering Jew image has the distinction of being the first of several categories: the first film to protest Nazi antisemitism, the only Yiddish film of its era to do so, and the first filmic instance of the Wandering Jew speaking for himself.¹⁴³ *Der Vandernder Yid* (1933, re-released 1938), directed by George Roland and starring Jacob Ben-Ami, frames its message with the story of a Jewish artist and professor in Berlin, whose shaky acceptance by Berlin society (and non-Jewish girlfriend) crumbles into chaos under escalating outbursts of antisemitic violence.¹⁴⁴ His works, his job, and his life are now in danger. In defiant desperation, he

¹⁴² *Der Vandernder Yid / The Wandering Jew*, dir. George Roland, 54 min., National Center for Jewish Film, 1999, 1933, videocassette.

¹⁴³ Contemporary audiences may have been familiar with a silent Wandering Jew from the 1920 “box-office hit” German film *Der Golem: Wie er in die Welt kam* (*The Golem: How He Came into the World*) that was distributed in Europe and Moscow, and ran an entire year in New York. In a film-within-a-film showing the history of the Jews and “patriarchs,” two long lines of wanderers are joined by Ahasverus (so named in an intertitle). He staggers slowly towards the camera, and in a close-up turns his head and desperate, staring, heavy-browed eyes left and right. At this moment, the laughter of the palace “audience” triggers the collapse of their building. Ahasverus’ long robe and beard; tall, crooked staff; and uncanny approach towards the camera are also elements in *Der Vandernder Yid*, whose wanderer Jewish filmmakers designed to be noble and courageous, not pathetic or comic. See Emily D. Bilski, *Golem!: Danger, Deliverance, and Art* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1988), 36-43, and also Omer Bartov, *The “Jew” in Cinema: from the Golem to Don’t Touch My Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 1-6.

¹⁴⁴ Not to be confused with the 1933 English film called *The Wandering Jew*, which reached the United States in 1935. The film follows Conrad Veidt as the Jew of Christian legend (named Mattathias instead of Ahasverus) from the beginning of his curse (after he spits on Christ), throughout the Crusades and the Inquisition, to his eventual redemption and death on a cross (with supernatural illumination). For synopsis and photograph, see John T. Soister, *Conrad Veidt on Screen* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 249-252.

begins to destroy his *magnus opus*, a life-size painting of a Wandering Jew modeled after his late father, before frenzied protesters do it for him.



fig.20

The painting (fig.20) is a frontal view of an upright, elderly man with long white hair and beard, tunic, cloak, sandals, and a headdress that looks remarkably similar to the one worn by the 1602 chapbook figure (fig.1). He holds onto a wooden staff with both hands. The posed, full-frontal view may be unique among Wandering Jew images, as indeed it should be, since the idea of commissioning or executing a conventionally formal portrait of the figure is new.¹⁴⁵ The presentation indicates a confrontational quality—not like Hirszenberg’s wildly panicked refugee, but with the unwavering, calm gaze of a subject

¹⁴⁵ The closest thing would be Maurycy Gottlieb’s *Ahasuerus* (1876), a self-portrait cloaked in ambiguity, which shows the artist with $\frac{3}{4}$ view of head and chest, and averted, languid eyes. In contrast, the portrait from *Der Vandernder Yid* is straight-on, full-length, and confrontational in gaze.

who knows himself worthy of such a portrait. In the film's dialogue, the look is commented upon by an old (Jewish) family friend, with apparent unease: "the stern glance in his eyes is not a Jewish characteristic."

Thanks to [low-tech] special effects, the figure comes to life and frees himself from his wooden frame—not as the artist's father, but as the ancestral spokesperson of all Jews. His message is clear: hope, and with a messianic flavor. The essence is this: from Pharaoh to Hitler, every generation has produced a persecutor of the Jewish people. However, every generation has produced a deliverer, as well. Just as Pharaoh was countered by Moses, so too, Hitler will be countered by a leader of the Jews: the legacy of Theodore Herzl, a modern-day Moses.

Herzl, who died in 1904, was revered (or reviled, by opponents) for his tireless efforts to create a Jewish state, and is regarded as the father of modern political Zionism.¹⁴⁶ The film's Wandering Jew character concludes his impassioned homiletic (a cinematic timeline of *Judenschmerz* punctuated with answering heroes) with a fair summation of Herzl's goals, sufficiently vague to also encompass the goals of most political, secular, and even religious Zionists at the time:

A nation among nations, a people among people we'd like to be. We do not want war, but we will protest against this ignoble attack upon our race until our fight is won! They may destroy the written word, but they can never extinguish the Eternal Spirit ("das ewige Geist"). In all eternity, *ad infinitum*.¹⁴⁷

—[from English subtitles of narration by the Wandering Jew.]

¹⁴⁶ Herzl was also the focus of another film entitled *Wandering Jew*, subtitled *The Life of Theodore Herzl*: a 1921, silent, biographical film from Austria. Like *Der Vandernder Yid*, it featured flashbacks of Jewish oppression throughout history, with Herzl as a Moses redeemer figure. (From WorldCat database record: OCLC: 54613936 at <http://newfirstsearch.oclc.org/>)

¹⁴⁷ "Destroy the written word" refers to actual Nazi burnings of Jewish books. The film dramatizes individual, jacketed volumes succumbing to flames (Heine, Mendelssohn, Zweig, Toller, Feuchtwanger, Einstein).

The last phrases concerning *ewige Geist*, eternity, and infinity are uttered in ringing tones as the Wandering Jew escorts the young professor, now in a matching outfit of robe and staff, through leaping flames. Striding in characteristic Wandering profile against a black background of generic eternity, the film ends. The costume change shows the conversion of the young professor to the Wandering Jew's mission: no longer willing to surrender to antisemitic oppression, the man garbs himself in timeless symbols of wandering, as befits his role as custodian and transmitter of the eternal, Jewish spirit.

In a nutshell, the film uses religious Wandering Jew imagery to serve a political end: a call for auto-emancipation. The figure speaks with authority backed by biblically-inspired dress and story-telling, and by the calculated crescendo of pictorial and verbal imagery of oppression and messianic intervention. Yet, while crediting divine intercessions of the past, the Wanderer urges viewers to rise up and actively anticipate the next deliverance. How? By supporting political Zionism—in essence, to force God's own hand. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and in 1933, the year the National Socialists ascended to power in Germany, times would soon be far more desperate than even this prophetic filmmaker imagined.

Below is an excerpt from the Nazi party newspaper on June 26 of that year:

We must build up our state without Jews. They can never be anything but stateless aliens, and they can never have any legal or constitutional status. Only by this means can Ahasverus be forced once again to take up his wanderer's staff.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Excerpt from *Volkischer Beobachter*, June 26, 1933, as found in Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: a History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), 39.

5. Szyk: Positive Propaganda

Desperate times were precisely what Arthur Szyk (1894-1951) meant to expose with his wartime editorial cartoons. Already a successful artist and political cartoonist in his native Poland, Szyk organized his own transfer to America in 1940, promising the Polish government-in-exile propaganda powerful enough to solidify American support of Allied forces—a promise he kept. Starting with two magazine covers after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Szyk’s prolific output soon made him the regular feature cartoonist for the *New York Post* and the *Chicago Sun*, as well as a syndicated artist for hundreds of newspapers nationwide.¹⁴⁹ His trademark style blended techniques from “medieval manuscript illumination and Persian miniature painting” with an unflinching caricaturist’s eye: unusual tools that delivered scathing commentary on Axis powers and wartime injustice.¹⁵⁰

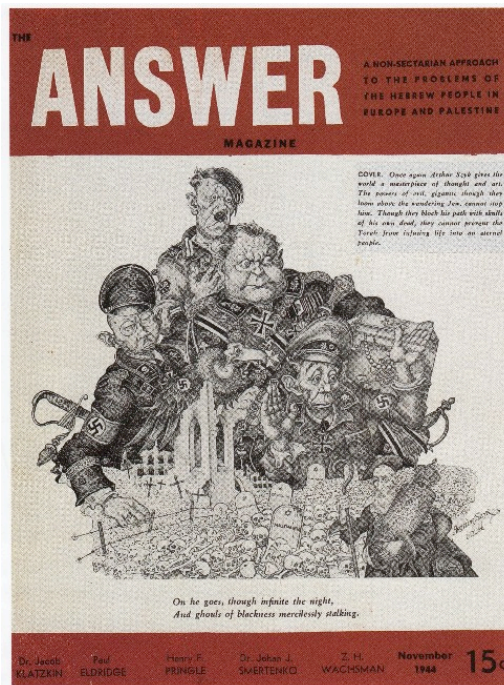


fig. 21

¹⁴⁹ Steven Luckert, *The Art and Politics of Arthur Szyk* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2002), 54.

¹⁵⁰ Luckert, *Art and Politics*, 1.

A Wandering Jew appears in several of his works. In *Oh! Ye Dry Bones* (fig.21), commissioned for a 1944 cover of a Zionist magazine, the figure walks wearily past piles of bones, and under a Nazi quartet of Hitler, Goring, Goebbels, and Himmler.¹⁵¹ Most notably, he carries a *sefer* Torah in addition to his staff. Like the Chagall figures who hasten scrolls to safety, Szyk's Torah-bearing wanderers carry in their arms an entire people condensed into a portable symbol.

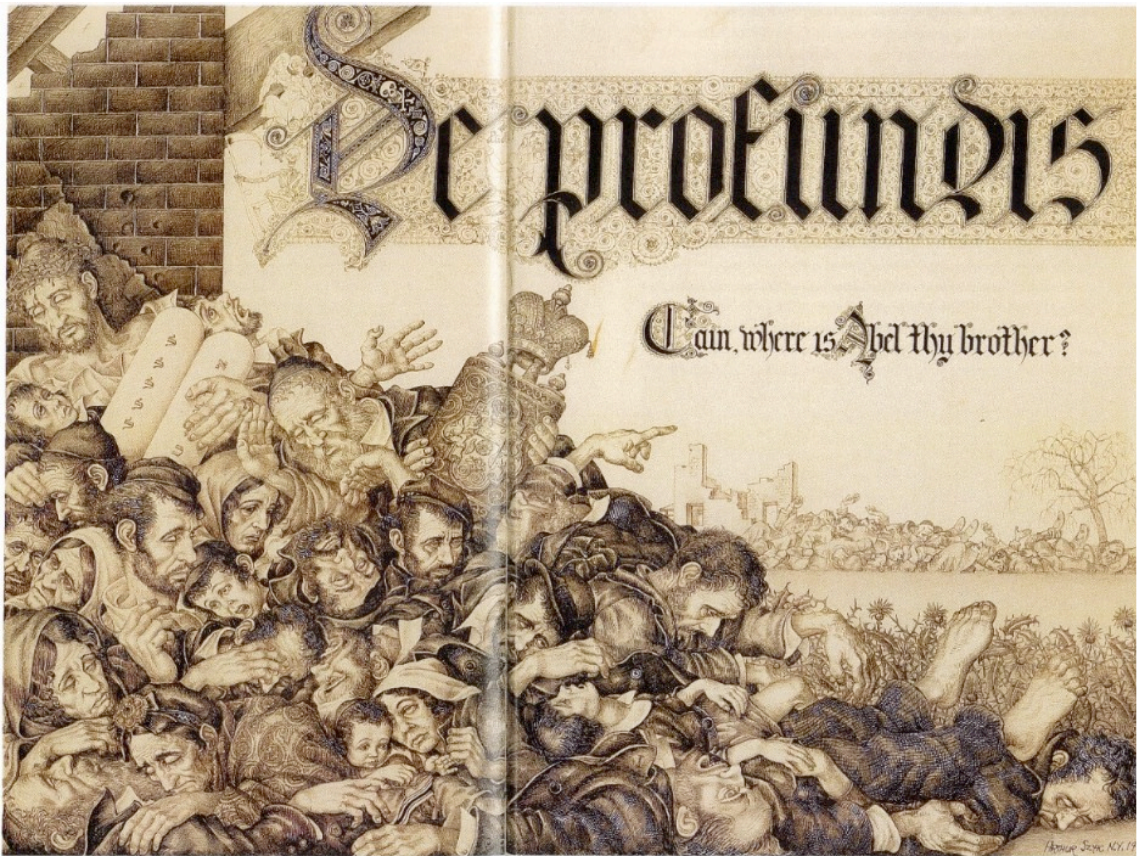


Fig.22

In *De Profundis* (1943) (fig.22), a piece for the *Chicago Sun*, the Wandering Jew is accompanied not just by a Torah, but by a mangled heap of other Jewish victims, dead

¹⁵¹ Image from *The Answer*, November 1944, found in Luckert, *Art and Politics*, 114. The dry bones are a reference to Ezekiel 37:1-14, where they represent the bones of the “whole house of Israel.”

and dying. He thrusts a dressed Torah scroll from beyond the diagonal mass of bodies, isolating it against a pale background to nearly touch the illuminated title's operative word: *profundis* (depths). *De Profundis* is a Christian term taken from Hebrew scripture: the first two words of Psalm 130 in Latin, the equivalent of: "Out of the depths..." In common parlance, the phrase is used to denote utter wretchedness, and to describe an artistic work that expresses unmitigated suffering.

While the Wanderer's Torah points to a human message of despair, the dead man next to it points to a divine message of accusation: "Cain, where is thy brother?" (Gen. 4:9). In anti-Jewish Wandering Jew images, the Jew pointed at Christ (to remind viewers of Christ's sacrifice on the cross), or ahead (to remind viewers of his assigned eternity of traveling ahead). Here, a nameless corpse reminds viewers of the layers of anti-Jewish meaning in the Cain story: the template for the first murder, the template for a projection of all Jews, and the "type" for the Wandering Jew. Szyk adds a new, ironic twist: Cain as a real-time template for the epoch of Nazi mass murder.

He also focuses our attention on a more positive reading of the Genesis verse, which reminds viewers of humankind's responsibility for each other. In this sense, the finger does point at Jesus, but not the Jesus of ancient spurious curses or contemporary Aryan atrocities. Szyk's Jesus is simply part of the ideal brotherhood of humankind implied in the Genesis quotation. Shown at the apex of the hill of bodies (a modern Golgotha, or "place of the skull"), he is a Jew; brother to all Jews, and plays no genuine part in the catastrophic misrepresentation of his Gospel that has fueled two thousand years of antisemitism.

That Jesus is a brother to the Wandering Jew is evidenced by their relative positions in the picture. Both are submerged to their chests in the top row of bodies, both have closed eyes, they are placed parallel to one another, and they both carry symbols of Jewish law, also held parallel. “Symbols of Jewish law” is more commonly a Christian designation for tablets and scrolls in art.¹⁵² The appropriate Jewish terms for each would be, respectively, the Decalogue (the ten utterances) and the Torah. The characterization (indeed, reduction) of Jewish scripture as simply “law,” is an ancient sticking point in Jewish-Christian discourse. Szyk dives into this dispute by giving “the Tablets of the law” to the wrong person. In Christian art, it is Moses who holds the Tablets, not Jesus. The image of Moses and the law being superceded by Jesus and grace is a typological theme standard in Christian theology. Jesus bearing the law—the very concept he is usually depicted as triumphing over—is an outrageous reversal of traditional iconography. Here, Jesus hasn’t triumphed over Judaism; he is part of it. He literally upholds the law, which emerges with him unscathed out of the pyramid of mangled bodies.

Szyk’s Jesus has one more twist for readers of Wandering Jew images. In Christian iconography, Jesus with a crown of thorns, stigmata, and closed eyes represents the devotional image called “Man of Sorrows,” a phrase appropriated from Isaiah 53:3.¹⁵³ The attributes characterize a non-narrative episode in the Passion cycle, and acts as a “visual summary” of suffering. This is in contrast to iconography meant to convey

¹⁵² The familiar *tabulae* symbol (usually white) was yet another legacy from the Fourth Lateran Council, used as a badge for Jews. From Schreckenberg, *Jews*, 15.

¹⁵³ To be distinguished from the *Ecce Homo*, in which Christ does not bear the stigmata. See Stefano Zuffi, ed., *Gospel Figures in Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003), 330-333.

episodes during or after the “second coming,” or Day of Judgment, a distinction that is crucial to interpretations of Christological images in the narrative of the Wandering Jew. In the latter, a Jesus at the second coming marks the Wandering Jew’s concluding chapter: the meeting during which he is finally redeemed. Szyk’s “Man of Sorrows” is used here to emphasize the shared nature of suffering: that Jesus is one of many Jews suffering from government-sponsored murder.¹⁵⁴

Unlike the balancing bench in Rubin’s *Le Rencontre* (fig.19), Jesus and the Wandering Jew are depicted on indisputably different levels. Two practical considerations can explain this easier than would speculation on who had the worst deal: Jesus or the Wandering Jew. First, Jesus’ placement as uppermost of the Jewish victims is a shock tactic meant to startle a reader into attention . And second, the cartoon was commissioned by a Christian group dedicated to fighting antisemitism.¹⁵⁵ Jesus was their man, and as such the likely pick for top billing.

Jesus and the Wandering Jew are used to power what amounts to a righteous public service announcement that dares to rewrite the very psalm it illustrates. Not in place of, but in addition to the original beginning of Psalm 130: “out of the depths I call you, O Lord...listen to my cry,” Szyk’s new, implied demand is this: “out of the depths *we* call you O *World*...listen to *our* cry.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Roman government in Christian scripture, and German government in contemporary reality.

¹⁵⁵ From online source: www.szyk.org/szykonline/profundis.htm. The advertising copy underneath encourages public intervention to correct deliberate antisemitic misinformation in children’s textbooks. See above URL for an image of the entire newspaper page.

¹⁵⁶ This carefully crafted call to the world was published during the year 500,000 Jews were killed: the same year Pope Pius XII announced that the Vatican was able to help “oppressed peoples” with “our prayers” only.” Quotation found in Harran, ed., *Holocaust*, 407.

6. Gottlieb: A Revolution of Exile

Although Adolph Gottlieb's *Drift* (fig.23) was painted in 1971, it is firmly rooted in the "Burst" style he developed twenty years earlier, and so will represent the 1950s for this paper.¹⁵⁷ In the 1950s, Abstract Expressionism developed into an international revolution in art history, marking a definitive and conclusive departure from figurative painting.¹⁵⁸ The consequences are still with us: every subsequent movement and style is in some way a consequence or a reaction to this breakthrough.

Gottlieb (1903-1974) and several other American Jewish artists were among the founding members, including Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Philip Guston, and joined by refugee artists fleeing Nazi Europe.¹⁵⁹ Although "Jewishness" was not necessarily on the agenda for these artists, especially considering their mission of universality and the various name changes (Goldstein to Guston, Rothkowitz to Rothko), I still suggest the features of Abstract Expressionism bear a distinctive Jewish stamp (a positive mark of Cain, if you will). They and their non-Jewish colleagues were responding to a post-war spiritual and artistic crisis that no earlier movement—figurative or abstract—could adequately express. However, the crisis was far more evident in the writings and works of the Jewish artists, as opposed to that of the non-Jews. Art historian Matthew Baigell argues that the former were "motivated by what was happening to

¹⁵⁷ Visual Wandering Jew images, so named or not, from the 1950s are apparently rare. I have found none so far, even among Holocaust art and art from the new state of Israel.

¹⁵⁸ More "a term of convenience than a precise stylistic appellation," Abstract Expressionism included forms of abstraction and self-expression, but was in part a rejection of American Abstract artists, German Expressionism, Surrealism, and other styles. The movement is usually noted for two "schools:" the gesture and the color field, and for its large canvases. Quotation from Matthew Baigell, *A Concise History of American Painting and Sculpture*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1996), 298.

¹⁵⁹ See Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xxxiii. Also, Jewish art critics were highly influential in their support of the new movement, notably Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg, and Thomas Hess. The patronage of Peggy Guggenheim was also instrumental: her Art of this Century gallery was the main showcase during the formative period.

European Jewry more than anything else. Not exclusively, but more than anything else.”¹⁶⁰

The war had shattered utterly all foundations of art and life. Without foundations, one (oneself or all of humanity) is left adrift, homeless, in exile, wandering; and who better qualified than Jewish artists to forge images of exile and wanderings? Whether referenced from a wandering imposed by a hostile legend or from a wandering as a constitutive element of Jewishness, Jewish artists could draw inspiration from experience and collective memory. And even though the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 made available (theoretically at least) a physical homeland to Jews worldwide, Jews still had two millennia of metaphysical exile to contend with and to create with. In art history, Abstract Expressionism, led in part by Jews, can be a metaphorical analogy of this condition. It is a self-imposed exile from the “home” of figurative painting. Centuries of illusory groundedness in external “reality” are replaced by an authentic, internal reality, grounded only by the picture plane.¹⁶¹

Stopping short of characterizing all of Abstract Expressionism as a Wandering Jew, I will, however, take creative license to interpret a single work from the movement as such: Gottlieb’s *Drift*. By selecting various personal statements and pairing them with the context of Wandering Jew imagery, a case may be made. For example, Gottlieb gravitated toward archetypal and biblical subjects, and declared they must be “tragic and timeless.”¹⁶² At the same time, he was open to multiple readings of his works and

¹⁶⁰ Matthew Baigell, *Jewish Artists in New York* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 105.

¹⁶¹ Some would argue that Jews existed in a self-imposed exile from art entirely, due to aniconism and a preference for word over image. See my note for the Sgan-Cohen painting (fig.26) below.

¹⁶² Lawrence Alloway and Mary Davis MacNaughton, *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective* (New York: The Arts Publisher, 1981),40.

purposely invested in each painting “a range of ideas.”¹⁶³

Gottlieb liked dyadic images composed of two parts that relate to “the fundamental idea of order,” but in a non-narrative way.¹⁶⁴ His *Burst* series, of which *Drift* is considered a late example, consisted of heavenly bodies and a textured earth plane.¹⁶⁵



Fig.23

¹⁶³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 58.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 57.

Drift as a Wandering Jew is dyad: a floating, red Jew disc and an anchored black island of calamities. Since they are not figures *per se*, but only symbols, they exist in a non-narrative, emblematic relationship, consistent with the artist's criteria. The disc drifts from right to left: the same direction in which most mid-stride Wandering Jews travel. Wandering is suggested by the drips of paint that fly from behind, and by the position of the disc in the top third of the plane. Gottlieb, especially in later works, emphasized mobility of these upper forms by "shaking loose, floating, flying."¹⁶⁶

The second half of the dyad is the black island rooted in a darker band of background color. It erupts in random, confused trajectories that lash out towards the Jew disc, but do not ultimately affect its drift. The island remains fixed, at home and at rest on its base: a steady state of calamity. Generally, Gottlieb's *Burst* islands were intended to rest on an implied grid and suggest stability.¹⁶⁷

The size of the canvas can also be taken into consideration. While Gottlieb deliberately keyed his large, broad, vertical canvases to a human scale, *Drift*, at 90" x 48," is a bit larger than life-size.¹⁶⁸ It can be imagined as keyed to the larger-than-life-size (and, considering the issue of immortality, longer-than-life-size) supernatural Wandering Jew legend. Such a large canvas must be painted flat on a trestle, enabling Gottlieb to apply paint from different directions, which he felt implied the presence of different vectors.¹⁶⁹ Throughout its long history the Wandering Jew image has been turned, and also bears the marks of different vectors. Each visual interpretation

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 62.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 62.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 59.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 58.

throughout the centuries is a vector, even this one.

Drift as a Wandering Jew would be the ultimate appropriation of antisemitic iconicity. The other artists in my chronological line-up use figures to convert the Wandering Jew; they play by the enemy's rules even when changing those rules. Gottlieb's dyad rejects the figurative and embraces the tension between its components. It addresses the chaos and suffering (the catastrophe that is the twentieth century), and sublimely transcends it. Abstract Expressionism changes the rules and changes the game.

7. Moreh: The Flying Jew

Mordechai Moreh (b.1937) emigrated from Baghdad to Israel during the legal window of opportunity (May 1950 to August 1951) dubbed "Project Ezra and Nehemiah: the Exodus of Iraq's Jews." He was one of about 123,500 Jews able to flee what had become a mounting wave of persecutions.¹⁷⁰ Resuming with the end of the British Mandate in 1932 and sharply escalating with Israel's statehood, Jewish persecutions—seizure of property, imprisonment or death if convicted of "Zionism," destruction of synagogues, etc.—continued until virtually all Jews were eradicated from the country. His *Le Juif Errant* (1968) (fig.24) was created shortly after Israel's Six Day War.

Like Gottlieb's Wandering Jew disc, Moreh's dry-point Jew is afloat.¹⁷¹ He is a literal *luftmensch* (air man): a Yiddish term describing one "who has neither trade, calling, or income and is forced to live by improvisation, drawing his livelihood 'from the air,' as it were."¹⁷² He is suspended with open eyes; the better to witness the calamity above which

¹⁷⁰ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Iraq," 8:1452-1453.

¹⁷¹ I cannot resist the irony of a dry-point Wandering Jew dry and suspended above calamitous wetness.

¹⁷² Quotation from Ausubel, *Treasury*, 731.

he magically hangs. Balanced on a flying unicycle, he is splayed in a cruciform position and bears marks of stigmata in both hands. The cross is implied or invisible, and reinforced by the small crossbars of the pedal-less unicycle. His excessively long beard (an exaggeration of the typical Wandering Jew attribute) is not shifted by the wind that apparently moves the cords of his tunic. His body, if not his belt, is thus untouched by the natural disaster, unlike the objects, animals, and human succumbing below.



fig.24

The traditional Wandering Jew's role as a "porter of pestilence" implies that he is not only a mere forecaster of disaster, but a carrier.¹⁷³ The disaster, of course, never

¹⁷³ Anderson, *Legend*, 233.

physically affects the Wandering Jew. If Moreh's figure brought this deluge, is his crucifixion a punishment for the crime? If so, by whom was he crucified? Since the original curse that created the Wandering Jew was delivered by the crucified Christ, perhaps in a terrible, ironic twist Christ has, in effect, crucified the Jew.

The Hebrew caption, also floating in air, is a pastiche of verses from Psalms, all having to do with the asking of divine help:

1) Out of the depths I call you, O Lord, listen to my cry. 2) Ropes of death encompassed me. 3) The torments of Sheol overtook me. I came upon trouble and sorrow. 4) In distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered and brought me relief. 5) I turn my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come? 6) O Lord, hear my prayer, let my cry come before you. Do not hide your face from me in my time of trouble. (JPS)¹⁷⁴

Note that the verses are in past and present tense, implying that the request for and answer to aid is an ongoing cycle. Combined, they comprise an example of *melitzah*, a form of Hebrew literature: "a mosaic of fragments and phrases from the Hebrew Bible as well as from rabbinic literature or the liturgy, fitted together to form a new statement of what the author intends to express at the moment."¹⁷⁵ This accounts for the otherwise curious method of using more Psalms than seems necessary to express the same ideas. For example, "ropes of Sheol" are mentioned just four words past the end of quotation number two (Psalm 18:5), and yet are omitted in favor of the Sheol reference in number three, which is from Psalm 116:3. This is true of other imagery, such as ropes and bonds of death, crying out, seeking help, etc. Once identified as a *melitzah*, this mix and match collection implies a learned, condensed, and powerful cry.

¹⁷⁴ In order, from Psalms 130:1-2; 18:5; 116:3; 118:5; 121:1; 102:2-3.

¹⁷⁵ Quotation from Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 71, quoted in Jay Geller, "Atheist Jew or Atheist Jew: Freud's Jewish Question and Ours," in *Modern Judaism* 26.1 (2006), 6.

The mouth of Moreh's figure does not seem to be employed in any of this calling, crying, and praying. His expression, however, implies genuine distress, and observant Jews do recite Psalms when troubled. Actually, the Jew may not be speaking at all. Since the beginning echo of "out of the depths" is quite clearly coming from the deer's mouth, might not the artist have made equally clear the source of the main caption? Iconographically, deer represent the soul yearning for the divine, an image drawn from a Psalm not included here: "Like a hind crying for watercourses, my soul cries for You, O God; my soul thirsts for God..."(42:2-3)¹⁷⁶ Perhaps the deer *is* the source of the main caption; after all, it is clearly bound by taut vines—"encompassed by ropes of death." It wanted watercourses, and it certainly got watercourses: the Lord did answer, even if the answer brought unforeseen, ominously exaggerated consequences. If so, then this particular Wandering Jew is voiceless and cannot trouble Heaven with his bootless cries. He must silently survive, as per the parameters of his curse. His monologue continues *ad infinitum*, unable to engage the divine in true dialogue.

Birds typically represent the human soul as well, although they can also be harbingers of doom.¹⁷⁷ Moreh's perched bird could serve either function: as a soul in peril or, with the Wandering Jew, another presager of calamity. The plumage suggests it may be a peacock, emblematic of the Passion and resurrection.¹⁷⁸ Regardless of breed, it is certainly an attribute of the air, even though in this waterscape, it remains flightless.

¹⁷⁶Meanings of deer imagery may be found in Lucia Impelluso, *Nature and Its Symbols* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003), 244-5.

¹⁷⁷ The bird in a flood recalls Noah, who sent birds to bring back living evidence of dry land, signaling an end of the ordeal.

¹⁷⁸ Peacocks lose their plumage in the autumn to regain it in the spring (Impelluso, "Nature," 309-312). This cyclical, regenerative attribute harmonizes with the Wandering Jew's cyclical, regenerative nature. Because he never dies, some versions of the legend involve the Jew growing old and young with the seasons or the moon. Supposedly, this explained why Wandering Jew sightings were sometimes of a young man, and sometimes of an old. Bengt af Klintberg, "The Swedish Wanderings of the Eternal Jew," in Hasan-Rokem and Dundes, eds., *Wandering*, 158-159.

Nothing here is as it should be: the unicycle has no mechanism to propel it on land or in air, the boats are capsized, the tree is uprooted, the barefoot human is upside down and most certainly dead, the deer is tethered in deep water, and the bird does not fly to safety; while, of course, the crucified Wandering Jew does. In a surreal landscape such as this, anything is possible.

8. Abesgauz: One Last Look

Evgeny Abesgauz's *My Old Home* (1976) (fig.25) is a self-portrait as Wandering Jew, a not uncommon trope among visual and literary artists.¹⁷⁹ In the 1970s, he was the leader of "Aleph," an underground group of young Jewish artists in the Soviet Union who struggled to express their Jewishness under a hostile regime. By the date of this work most synagogues had been closed, prayer books were not printed, Passover matzah was restricted, there was no centralized Jewish religious organization, and antisemitism was rampant. Diplomatic relations with Israel were severed after the Six-Day War, and "a frenzied wave of anti-Israel and anti-Zionist incitement, unparalleled in the depth and extent of its hatred, was unleashed in the press, in other mass media, and in all diplomatic and propaganda channels, evolving almost into a blatant campaign of hatred against the Jewish people and the State of Israel."¹⁸⁰ Of the tens of thousands who applied for exit visas, very few were granted, but Abesgauz finally received one in 1976.¹⁸¹

My Old Home depicts the liminal moment longed for by Abesgauz's colleagues and so many Jews at the time: the act of leaving the Soviet Union and emigrating to Israel or

¹⁷⁹ The most obvious examples are Marc Chagall's various Wandering Jews. Artists identify with the alienation from mainstream society as personified (and so immediately recognizable) in the Jew. See also the Courbet example mentioned earlier.

¹⁸⁰ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Russia," 14:488. Also Robert Wistrich, *Antisemitism*, 180-183.

¹⁸¹ This painting was created immediately before Abesgauz emigrated to Israel.

the United States. For this self-portrait, the underground, communal wish has become an above-ground, individual wish-fulfillment.

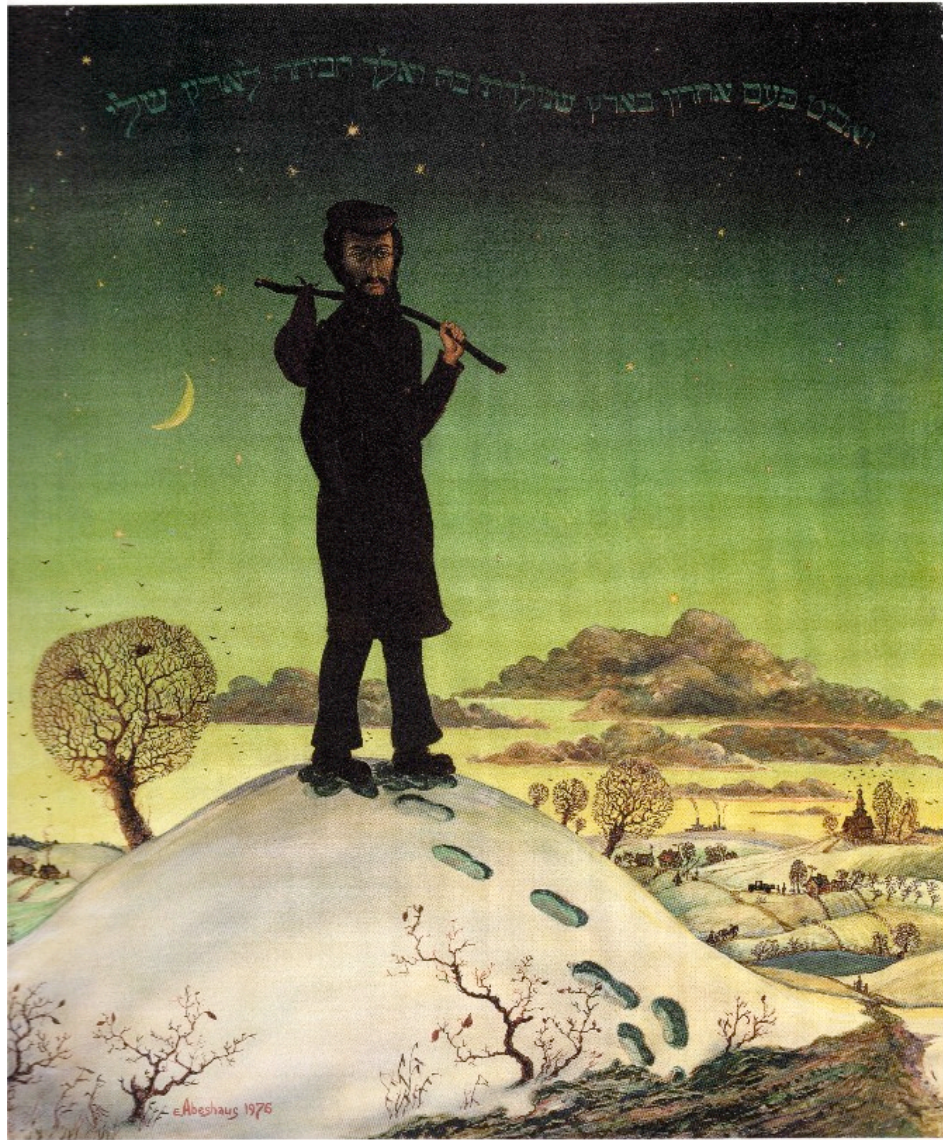


fig.25

Abesgaus uses a Russian folk style of painting to create the scene of abandoning the Soviet Union. In the distance is a church whose steeple, the dominant structure in the landscape, points as a reminder of the original curse upon the Wandering Jew and of the prevailing ascendancy of Christianity (or of Christian prejudice) over Russian Jews. The Soviet presence is made clear with the belching factory in the distance. In defiance of

these elements, Abesgauz subverts the Russified landscape with the forbidden language of Jewishness.

Emblazoned across the heavens is a caption not in Russian but Hebrew, the *loshen kodesh*, or holy tongue, the teaching of which was forbidden in the Soviet Union.¹⁸² Sacred language and font reinforce the Biblical literary style of the quotation they record, which begins with “and” (the letter ׀ “vav”), as do so many Biblical verses: “And I [will] look one last time at the land of my birth and I [will] go home to my land.” The figure looks intently out of the picture straight at the viewer, deliberately engaging us in a fixed, powerful gaze. Is it us he looks at one last time?

Grammatically speaking, the tense of the caption is indeterminate, placing the words mystically *sub specie æternitas*—under the aspect of eternity. The awkwardness of the saying distinguishes between two lands: the land of his birth and the land of his home. His true land is not the Russian land of his birth, and neither is it his home. “My land,” *l’eretz sheli*, is Israel. Though the word *eretz* means land, the addition of a definite article (as Abesgauz has used) transforms land into The Land: Israel. In popular Zionist parlance, the land, *ha-eretz*, always means Israel.

The caption carries another layer of the sacred with the two words centered above the trio of stars that triangulate over the wanderer’s head: *v’elekh ha-baitah*, “and I [will] go home.” The word for go, *elekh*, is a reference to the command given the patriarch Abraham in Genesis 12:1 JPS: *Lekh lekha*, “go, go forth.” Abraham went. He followed a divine order to leave the land of his birth and go to the land shown him by God, the land promised to him and his offspring—offspring who would be as numerous as the stars in

¹⁸² Wistrich, *Antisemitism*, 175.

the sky (Genesis 15:5).¹⁸³ The land, of course, would eventually be called Israel, named after Isaac's son Jacob: Abraham's grandson. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the three patriarchs of Judaism, were each promised the land. Thus, those three stars are symbolic of the three patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They crown our Wandering Jew and give twinkling approval to his plan. The original covenant proves to be ongoing: the land belongs just as much to a Soviet Jew in 1976 as to the Biblical patriarchs.

The caption is not in Modern Hebrew script, but in the calligraphic style of traditional sacred Hebrew texts, including the Torah. They manifest themselves in colors that match the sky and reflect the setting sun, which makes the words integral to the scene rather than layered onto the presentational plane. Like Moreh's Jew, the figure does not appear to be speaking, but given the straightforward, folk art style (as opposed to Moreh's surreal storyboard), the words in this painting do seem to originate from the figure, in intent if not *in medias res*.

The floating text and other celestial elements assert the Wandering Jew's Jewishness in defiance of Soviet oppression. Since the factory smokestacks (a Soviet presence) are active, the time of day depicted is more likely sunset than sunrise. This places the critical moment at moonrise, thus twinning the beginning of a new political and religious life with the beginning of a new day: a new day by the Jewish calendar, which reckons days from sunset to sunset. The three large, bright stars that triangulate over the figure's head hint that the day is a Jewishly auspicious one: *Yom Rishon*, the "first day" after Shabbat, and the first day of the Jewish week. The presence of three stars in the sky is the

¹⁸³ The artist uses *b'erezt shenoladit* (first person, "at the land of my birth) based on the third person command from Genesis 12:1 "*martzkha umemoladtkha*, "from your native land." Both come from the same Hebrew roots for land and birth. Abesgauz is using Abraham as a template for his own statement of purpose.

traditional Rabbinic signal that separates one day from another, especially when calculating the arrival and departure of the week's climax: *Shabbat*. The service that acknowledges and celebrates this separation is *Havdalah*, 'separation,' which begins with the sighting of the three stars and continues with verses from scripture and special blessings over wine, spices, and flame. The final blessing illustrates the distinction made manifest in Abesgauz's scene:

Who makes separation between holy and secular,
Between light and darkness,
Between Israel and the nations,
Between the seventh day and the six days of work,
Blessed are You, God, You are He, Who separates the holy from the secular.

Abesgauz's idealized self is setting forth at an idealized time: the moment Shabbat surrenders to the work week. Rest has ended and the work of journeying toward Israel has begun, illuminated by the three *halachic* stars and Abesgauz' chorus of lesser ones.¹⁸⁴

Havdalah is not the only Jewish ceremony that could be depicted here. The sickle moon, despite being an element of folk art and of Soviet symbolism, may be another clue to the painter's "outing" of his Jewishness. *Rosh Hodesh*, the head of the month, is celebrated at the appearance of a new moon, which in ancient times meant the first sighting of the slim crescent.¹⁸⁵ It remains a monthly Jewish festival that links the constant renewal of the moon with the constant renewal of the Jewish people. Rabbi Irving Greenberg describes the historic connection between moon and Jew: "the moon's

¹⁸⁴ Traditional Jews do not carry burdens or otherwise work or travel on Shabbat. If Abesgauz is depicting a subversive, Jewish sacred manifesto to contrast the anti-Jewish and anti-religious Soviet regime, he could not have picked a more fitting moment.

¹⁸⁵ *Hodesh* can also mean "renewal." The blessings used to celebrate *Rosh Hodesh* are called *Kiddush Levanah*, or sanctification of the moon. Part of the kiddush is said to have originated under another hostile regime, the Roman Empire, when, like during Soviet times, Jews had to conduct religious services in secret. See Leo Trepp, *The Complete Book of Jewish Observance* (New York: Behrman House, 1980), 85. The new moon was often illustrated as a crescent with stars. See *minhagim* woodcuts in Scott-Martin Kosofsky, *The Book of Customs* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004), 91, 99, 364.

stubborn reappearance after every disappearance became identified, in the mind of the Jews, with this people's power of rebirth after every catastrophe."¹⁸⁶ Greenberg's two hopeful Jewish metaphors are easily reversed to reveal the ever-renewed Wandering Jew ever-bearing catastrophes which he alone will survive.

The message of renewal is central to *Rosh Hodesh* and to *My Old Home*. Abesgauz's figure sets out in snow, but signs of spring and rebirth are evident in the melted path, the few leaves clinging to the shrubs, the blue, ice-free pond, and the bird nests in the trees. In the *Rosh Hodesh* liturgy that sanctifies the moon, the renewal of the Davidic line is stressed, which gives the festival a hopeful, messianic flavor. A Kabbalistic tradition holds that with the coming of the Messiah (from David) the moon will regain her former size as equal to the sun. Not only will the heavens be restored to perfection, the Jews will be restored to Zion. Abesgauz's Jew, without waiting for messianic intervention, is restoring himself to Zion.

When a Jew does emigrate to Israel, the phrase used is "make *aliyah*." *Aliyah* means "to go up," and implies that the move to the land is the highest of honors. The same term is used to describe the honor of being called "up" to read the Torah in synagogue. Abesgauz uses verticality and implied upward movement to reinforce the concept of *aliyah*: the ultimate in upward movement. The trees, hills, clouds, path, smoke, steeple, moon, and stars are all rising. The birds, too, rise in flight towards home. They, like Abesgauz's Jew, are still wandering if but for the moment. Even the figure's footprints are rising: he has paused at the top of a hill to take one last look before aiming his next steps towards his true home.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way* (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 415.

¹⁸⁷ This Wandering Jew leaves footprints of hope, whereas the traditional Wandering Jew leaves footprints of pestilence (cholera, plague, famine, natural disaster, and so on).

9. Sgan-Cohen: Flightless Jew-Bird

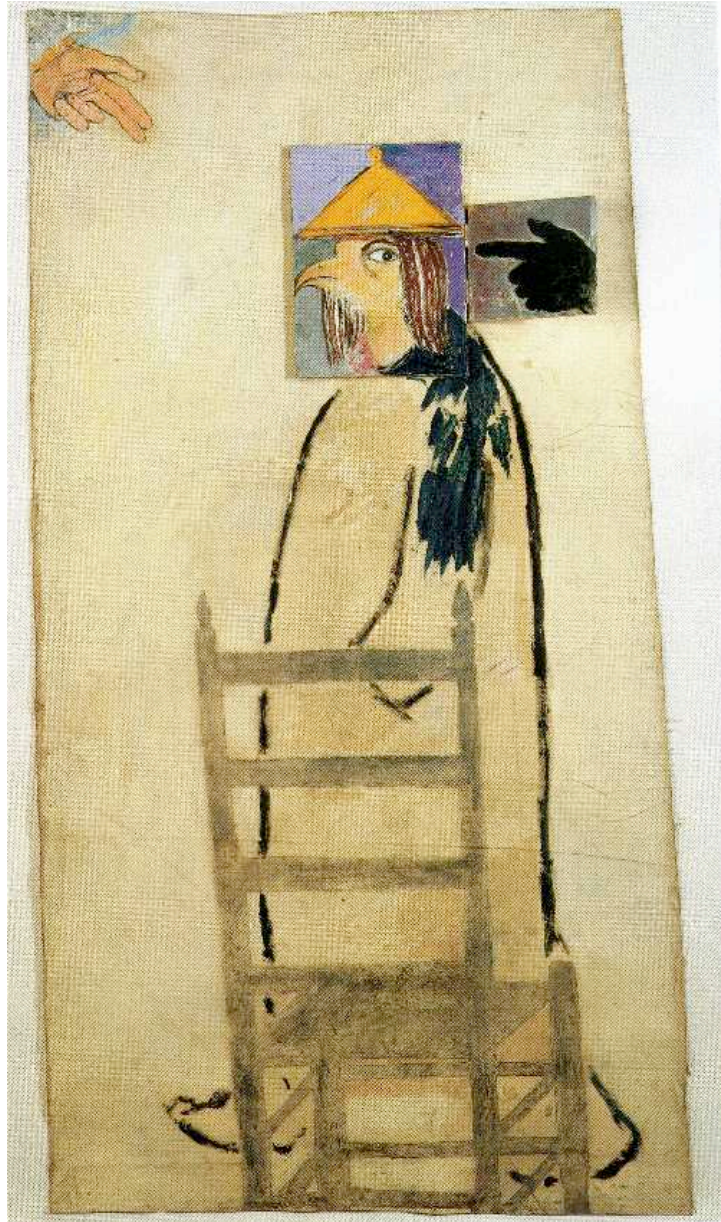


fig.26

Le Juif Errant (1983) (fig. 26) by Israeli artist Michael Sgan-Cohen (1944-1999) illustrates the “eternal” nature of the image of the Wandering Jew by showing it can survive even minimal presentation. The title begs closer inspection, which reveals that the unlikely pairing of bird-head humanoid and chair can indeed personify the Wandering Jew. Beard, hat, reddish hair, and side stride are characteristic attributes, but the

zoomorphism is novel. The bird head seems as if it has been cut and pasted from the famous *Birds' Head Haggadah*, an illuminated manuscript from the 1300s, in which Jews are depicted with avian features. Moses himself has a bird head, goatee, and yellow peaked hat. The common explanation for this distortion of the human figure is that it was an artistic loophole in biblical injunctions against graven images.¹⁸⁸ According to Bezalel Narkiss, however, there was no prohibition against human figures in manuscripts. It is more likely that the *haggadah* was intended for an ascetic, iconophobic community who thought the human form a distraction from the text (as if bird's heads are any less distracting).¹⁸⁹

The scribe of the *haggadah* and the artist of *Le Juif Errant* are Jews illustrating Jews with bird heads in an act of self-identification. Antisemitic art depicting Jews with heads of birds is also an act of self-identification, but of the antisemite. In this case, animal attributes are used to depict sub-human qualities of heretics and demonic beings, including Jews. The earliest examples of Jews as monstrous creatures are found in ninth-century Psalters (with animal heads, unruly hair, thick lips, horns, etc.).¹⁹⁰ More recently, nineteenth-century political cartoons show Jewish men with bird beaks as exaggerations of the stereotypical "Jewish" nose (*Schnabel* in German and beak in English are, after all,

¹⁸⁸ The interpretation of the second commandment as a divine injunction against Jewish art persists in modern scholarship. Aniconism is used to explain why Jews are incapable of creating true art, "despite the apparent evidence to the contrary amassed by a host of archeologists, ethnographers, archivists, and art historians." The historicization of this controversy has become a field in itself. Quotation from Kalman Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 13.

¹⁸⁹ Most modern readers would find the oddly beguiling half-humans more distracting (and more difficult to pass over). Note that other illuminated Hebrew manuscripts from the German School employ similar figures. Means other than animal attributes are also used, such as obscuring faces with head gear or blank features. See Narkiss, *Hebrew*, 29-30.

¹⁹⁰ Amishai-Maisels, "Demonization," 50. This is in contrast to positive zoomorphic depictions in Christian art intended to portray spiritual elevation. St. John is often depicted as having a bird head: specifically an eagle's, which symbolized "intellectual acumen." Matilde Battistini, *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2005), 170. Narkiss cites a source which suggests the Christian and Jewish use of animal attributes to designate holy or righteous people originated in Muslim and Persian motifs. Narkiss, *Hebrew*, 30.

slang for nose). This practice marks the Jew as other, and by identifying otherness, the antisemitic cartoon identifies that which is paramount to the artist or complicit audience.

The peaked hat is another example of a symbol of otherness turned inside-out. In the *Bird's Head Haggadah* and Sgan-Cohen's painting, an identifying symbol once foisted upon Jews is used by Jews to identify themselves.

The *errant* part of *Le Juif Errant* is implied by the unused wooden chair in the foreground—an object of forbidden rest and domesticity (even the meager rest a rigid, utilitarian peasant chair such as this can offer). Placing the chair's back foremost on the canvas brings the viewer forward, putting us on the side of illicit respite, as if we are in the second row of an audience watching the Jew on his eternal journey. We are confronted with the same choice the legendary Wandering Jew had: to help or not to help. In the original, Christian version, the burden was the weight of the cross on Jesus. In this version, the burden is the weight of the curse on the Jew.

Sgan-Cohen's choice of a ladder-back chair, out of all other historical styles of chair, may be a reference to the ladder often used in scenes of Christ's crucifixion.¹⁹¹ That the chair is made of wood is reason enough to link it to the presence of the cross (always explicit or implied in anti-Jewish Wandering Jew images), especially in absence of a staff. Regardless of style or material, however, the use of an empty chair is actually quite common in Israeli art. Avraham Levitt, in his article "Israeli Art on its Way to Somewhere Else," says an empty chair is a symbol of Jewish failure of the past and/or future: the failure of Zionism and the ongoing rootlessness resulting from this failure.¹⁹²

The most obvious Jewish reference to the chair, however, would be to Elijah. An

¹⁹¹ A traditional inclusion at the raising of and descent from the cross.

¹⁹² Avraham Levitt, "Israeli Art on its Way to Somewhere Else," *Azure*, no.3, (winter 1998).

empty chair is still included at many Passover seders in simulated expectation of a visit by this herald of the Jewish messiah. Elijah's chair; his reputation as *bone fide*, immortal Jewish wanderer; his appearance at Passover (the holiday for reenacting exodus wanderings); and his link with a messiah; combined with a celebrated, historic *haggadah* motif (the bird-head) all point to intentional dialectic with the stereotypical Wandering Jew.

The figure walks behind the empty chair, framed from ahead and behind by disembodied, pointing hands. Pointing hands are in many Wandering Jew images, especially in nineteenth century French versions, but usually the hand is the Jew's own, pointing ahead to his next destination. Hands here point at the Jew from the sky and from directly behind his head. The sky-borne hand, with thumb, fore and middle fingers extended, makes a traditional Christian gesture of blessing: the *benedicto Latina*.¹⁹³ However, the hand from heaven is a left hand, which casts the gesture's intent in a literally and figuratively sinister light. Christian art depicts God and Christ using this gesture with the right hand, either to indicate blessing or to point to heaven. According to St. Augustine, the left hand is used for judgment and the right hand for mercy.¹⁹⁴ Our *Juif Errant* is the recipient of judgment, not mercy; a curse, not a blessing. Whether the verdict is from God or Jesus it is not clear. In medieval manuscripts, disembodied, pointing hands surrounded by a cross or nimbus were Jesus', and those without were God's. Sgan-Cohen's heavenly hand is surrounded by a sky blue that breaks in upon the dull sand of the wanderer's desert-like ground, but it is not an obvious nimbus.

¹⁹³ A description of the *benedicto Latina* is in Sally Fisher, *The Square Halo and Other Mysteries of Western Art: Images and the Stories that Inspired Them* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 96.

¹⁹⁴ Charbonneau-Lassay, Louis, ed., *The Bestiary of Christ* (New York: Arkana Books, 1991), 38-39.

The other hand, black and pointing at the figure's head from behind, is impossible to identify as right or left. It is placed at the right of the figure, just as the left hand above it is placed at the left of the figure, but beyond this hint its position and meaning are ambiguous. Pointing with an index finger has a range of meanings: accusation, indication, command, threat, or instruction (as a teaching gesture). The shape and color of this hand, however, suggest a weapon. It makes the same silhouette as would a child imitating a pistol and trigger. The figure appears to concur, and directs his wide, stylized eye back towards the weapon rather than the road ahead. Framed between threats ahead and behind, he must bypass the available chair and wander between the two authorities, not even able to use the capacity for flight which his head suggests.

Whether the figure has hands of his own is another unknown. Hands in one's pockets can indicate disrespect or quite the opposite. Hands covered or hidden in sleeves can refer to an ancient sign of submission in the presence of rulers.¹⁹⁵ Several depictions of Moses at Sinai, for example, show Moses with hands concealed. More practical is the consideration that hands in pockets are hands unavailable for use: for self-defense, communication, or any other action.

In *Le Juif Errant* the divine is anthropomorphized and the human is zoomorphized. Both substitutions are layered into the plane with collage-like rectangles of the superimposed black hand and head. This creates a cut and paste quality; a feeling of assemblage which is heightened by the blue brush strokes that try to connect the head to

¹⁹⁵ "Veiled hands in the presence of Christ, [is] a token of respect—an ancient oriental custom." Hall, *Dictionary*, 144.

the body.¹⁹⁶ The blue, feathery marks are quickly abandoned, and the head remains boxed and contained, as a bird in a cage. If birds, as creatures of the air, represent the soul, this one is a soul entrapped. The entire painting can be a cage, wherein the Wandering Jew is trapped in a complex, multi-layered collage of paradoxes. It is an apt description of the image at any stage of its long history.

10. Bak: Unbearable Burdens

Samuel Bak (b.1933), who now lives in America, was a boy in Vilna when the nearby forest was the site of “mass executions of tens of thousands of local Jews.”¹⁹⁷ Most of his works, like this one, deal with the *Shoah*.¹⁹⁸ His *Wanderer III* (1996) (fig.27) overturns the legendary role of the Wandering Jew as transmitter of destruction and recasts him as a transmitter of tradition.¹⁹⁹ Admittedly, he looks much like a genuine *luftmensch*, or a patient in Charcot’s clinic, seeming to travel between death and life; as rootless as the severed tree he bears. The tree is a literal cross to bear, if by cross is meant the means of government-sanctioned execution.²⁰⁰ It also inverts the old Wandering Jew narrative: the Jew that mocked Jesus carrying the cross now carries a cross of his own. This one, however, speaks of the unimaginable suffering not of one figure, but of millions.

¹⁹⁶ The exchange of Jewish heads in a wholesale cut and paste effort was a notorious suggestion by Johann Fichte, who in his opposition to Jewish citizenship proposed to “chop off all of their heads and replace them with new ones, in which there would not be one single Jewish idea.” Quotation from Johann Gottlieb Fichte, “A State Within a State (1793),” in *The Jew in the Modern World, 2nd ed.*, eds. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 309.

¹⁹⁷ Samuel Bak, *In the Presence of Figures: Recent Paintings* (Boston: Pucker Gallery, 1998), 3.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2. I employ the term *Shoah* over the more commonly used Holocaust, to avoid the sacrificial connotations (“burnt offerings”) of the latter term. *Shoah* is Hebrew for “disaster.”

¹⁹⁹ I use the phrase transmitter of destruction in reference to the variant of the Wandering Legend that puts disease and disaster in his footsteps.

²⁰⁰ The phrase “cross to bear” refers to the Roman practice of forcing condemned prisoners to carry the horizontal cross beam to their own crucifixion. (See *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, 14th ed., 286.) Bak’s *Wanderer*, the intended victim of Nazi policy, carries a portion of his own vehicle of destruction: a tree from the forest at Vilna.



fig.27

Trees are nearly limitless in their capacity for symbolism, but an obvious association here is the tree as Torah. The traditional metaphor of the Torah as the tree of life, *etz chayim*, stems from Proverbs 3:18.²⁰¹ Bak's *Shoah* survivor carries the wounded Torah/ *etz chayim* out of the fires of destruction towards an uncertain future. In Jewish tradition, the Torah can be defined minimally as the five books of Moses or maximally as the entirety of Jewish written tradition, including the whole of Hebrew scripture and all

²⁰¹ The two wooden spindles supporting every Torah scroll are known as *etz chayim*, as well.

Rabbinic commentary up to the present day. Bak's figure carries both. He cradles the main part of the tree over his right shoulder, exactly as the dressed *sefer Torah* is cradled during the Torah procession at synagogue services.²⁰²

He has bound his own trunk to the tree stump, pulling the burden on a cart emerging from the frame of the picture. He is also attached to the cart—an ark of sorts—by a rope looped around his left hand as would be a strap for *tefillin*—the leather box worn on the forearm during morning prayer that contains a tiny scroll of the *Shema*, Judaism's central prayer.²⁰³ Here, the *Shema's* command to hear and teach the one-ness of God, in part by wearing the prayer, is made concrete: Bak's Jew wears, instead of the small, boxed scroll, the physical roots and trunk of the scroll's intent. The rope, however, is slack, and cannot possibly serve to move the burden forward.

Bak's figure seems to be attempting to salvage tradition by transferring and transplanting it in more hopeful ground. However, several elements are presented in binary opposition and give pause for ambivalent interpretation. The weather could be threatening or clearing; the sun setting or rising; the city ruined or entire. The scene is real (with landscape and cityscape) or surreal (with a man cradling a large, severed tree). The tree branches, both bare and greening, could be dead or alive. The wanderer is moving forward, or he is still; his feet poised to take the marked or unmarked path, with neither destination visible.

The man bears the marks of imprisonment and freedom. His clothes, hat, and

²⁰² Carrying the Torah is one of the highest synagogue honors. A dressed scroll wears a mantle, breastplate, *rimonim* (metal caps for the rollers), and a *yad*, which is a small pointer tool, often made of wood, used during the Torah reading. Note that in the Bak tree/Torah a small, severed, transverse branch is caught suspended near the top, *yad*-like, pointing down towards both the trunk and the direction from which the man has wandered.

²⁰³ The first words of Judaism's monotheistic manifesto are "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one," taken from Deuteronomy 6:4. It is to be recited three times a day (once with *tefillin*) and placed upon all doorposts of the home. Arm *tefillin* properly laid extends from the left hand to the upper arm.

emergent beard are marks of freedom, but newly acquired. The layers of clothing do not conceal the striped cuff of a concentration camp uniform. Although physically freed from a death camp, he is still bound to it, and wears the memory as a perpetual garment.

Bak's birds, unconcerned with affairs outside of their own sphere, settle in the ruined tree. Like the dispersed Jewish people, they are able to make homes nearly anywhere. Are we to infer that a *safe* Jewish homeland is still a possibility? Or are Jews as shortsighted as these birds, who create a home in a frame that cannot support them, and that will ultimately be their undoing?

The cart, pack, and pans echo the Jewish peddler component of the Wandering Jew legend, and provide another clue. Instead of wares to sell, the cart holds the roots of the severed tree, where might be stored the potential for life, re-growth, and renewal. The stump retains one small, green shoot, with which it can receive nourishment from above, and several roots searching for ground below. One root reaches nearly to the earth, giving the impression that, should the figure ever pause for a moment, life (the tree, the Torah, the people Israel) could sustain itself anew. Note, however, that the wanderer is at the crest of a hill.²⁰⁴ If his next steps take him downwards, the cart will soon succumb to momentum. With no visible structural support to stave off the cart from behind, it will overtake the figure and become doubly burdensome: a disaster anticipated by the absurdly slack hand-rope. The wanderer has willingly, dutifully (if inexpertly) bound himself to his burden of tradition, and in so doing illustrates an excruciating, paradoxical legacy of the *Shoah*: unmanageable burdens that must nonetheless be borne.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ A striking counterpoint to Abesgauz' wanderer on a hill.

²⁰⁵ I take the last phrase from Lawrence Langer's remarks made about another of Bak's works. Bak, *Presence*, 6.

11. Zoya: Discomfited Comfort



_fig.28

Zoya Cherkassky (b.1976) is a Russian-born Israeli artist who fearlessly explores issues of Jewish identity.²⁰⁶ Her embroidered pillow *The Wandering Jew* 2002 (fig.28) is stuffed with ironies.²⁰⁷ The first is the vehicle itself: an object designed for rest and comfort, decorated with a technique from the domestic arts, and perversely used to depict a figure for whom there is never rest, comfort, or domesticity. This literal object-ification

²⁰⁶ Her ritual murder/blood libel seder plates feature cartoons of bound, naked children surrounded by drops of blood. The positioning of one child mimics an illustration of the infamous fifteenth century ritual murder case of Simon of Trent. (For images of the plates, see website in next note. For images and history of ritual murder accusations, see Hsia, *Myth*.)

²⁰⁷ The pillow is part of the artist's 2002-2003 "Collectio Judaica" exhibition at Tel Aviv's Rosenfeld Gallery, and may be viewed online: www.rg.co.il.

—transforming the Wandering Jew into a physical object—is the next logical step from figurative objectification.²⁰⁸

Zoya's Jew is untraditionally traditional.²⁰⁹ Most Wandering Jew images do not feature a *kippah* (skullcap) and *peyes* (side locks), but this one does. The striped outer robe resembles a *tallit* (prayer shawl), although it has sleeves and lacks the requisite *tzitzit* (fringes).²¹⁰ These attributes of Jewish religious life leave no doubt as to the figure's religious identification. He is a resolutely un-assimilated Jew. Two other in-your-face clues for viewers are the yellow Jewish Star above the figure's head (a reference to the yellow fabric badges mandatory for Jews in Nazi Germany), and, just in case we have overlooked all other indications, a caption. In block Hebrew print (also on a white ground bordered by black) are the words: היהודי הנודד (*Ha Yehudi ha Noded: The Wandering Jew*). Like a specimen on display in a collection, he has been classified and labeled.²¹¹

The usual Wandering Jew attributes of bag and staff are present, although the staff is curiously sinuous. This is yet another version of the unstable, broken reed; and of the crookedness of mind, body, and purpose; but also a specific reference to the perception of the Jewish male as “feminine,” which is a consequence of the perennially disturbing

²⁰⁸ Meaning a shift from two-dimensional representation to three. A farther step would be consumer goods on a mass marketable scale which, in a sense is what happened with the 1602 chapbook. For pictures of other manufactured wares, including objects directly related to the legend such as durable walking shoes and alcohol (the wanderer was famously abstemious), see Brailon-Phillipe, *Juif Errant*, 178-197. My favorite is an illustrated handkerchief (because of its intended use wiping skin and nose secretions: two physical weaknesses assumed to be particularly present in Jews).

²⁰⁹ The artist exhibits under her first name.

²¹⁰ *Tzitzit* are commanded in the *Shema*. They serve as reminders of the one-ness of God, and must be worn at all times by observant males.

²¹¹ According to Thompson's *Motif-Index* mentioned above in Chapter I, we could add to the label “Q502.1” for further taxonomic accuracy. Ironically, George Anderson predicted in 1965 that because the figure had “become a plaything for the academics, a topic for research... sooner or later he will be put under glass and framed in a case like a dead beetle.” Anderson, *Legend*, 395.

notion of obligatory circumcision.²¹² In the Aryan imagination, complete castration is implied by circumcision: an inscrutably alien and apparently gender-bending Jewish custom.²¹³ In addition, the curves of the *peyes*—*peyes* being another Jewish custom thought to be less than masculine—nearly parallel the undulations of the staff. Even the medium of this Jew has been feminized: he is an image imposed upon an object associated with women in its creation and its use.²¹⁴ Needlework is women’s work, and the need for softness, effeminate.

The ambiguous staff remains within the frame of the pillow, but the figure’s feet have wandered out of the frame slightly, as if he is challenging the constraints of the black and red borders. His feet have picked up the same red, as has his open mouth, thus making his modes of transportation and communication the color of his own captivity. For centuries, the traditional Wandering Jew’s feet and mouth were the means of his pedagogy: he spread the news of Christian truth via his feet (by endless peregrinations) and his mouth (as the eyewitness reporter for history in the Common Era). Red also being the color of blood, it could have repercussions with ritual slaughter, ritual murder, blood libel, the Passion, and even “the blood of the lamb” (the Exodus version or the New Testament version).²¹⁵ Each of these bloods has been used in antisemitic

²¹² “The act of circumcision sets the Jewish male apart (in that he is no longer fully a male).” Gilman, *Jew’s Body*, 155-156.

²¹³ The connection between circumcision and castration predates Freud’s observations in *Moses and Monotheism*, and goes back (at least) to Emperor Hadrian, whose confusion between the two procedures led him to outlaw circumcision in Judea. Jewish response to the law is cited as one of the causes of the last Jewish revolt against Rome (117-138 C.E.). J. Alberto Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah*, 3rd ed. (London : SCM Press, 1999) 382.

²¹⁴ Small, embellished accent pillows such as this (35 x 35 cm.) would be considered appropriate wedding gifts from woman to bride.

²¹⁵ All Christian anti-Jewish blood references probably stem from one of the most charged verses in the New Testament: “Then the people as a whole answered: “His blood be on us and our children” (Matt. 27:25). A popular interpretation is that Jews, in perpetuity, are responsible for the death of Jesus.

literature.²¹⁶

The eye witness to history seems unable to see. The lids are white, not skin-toned, which means they are open but blank: a postmodern, needlework variation on *Synagoga's* blindness. They could literally be worn out from watching two thousand years of history, just as his feet are bloodied from two thousand years of wandering. However, a closer inspection reveals brown irises embroidered in the inner corners, making the Jew cross-eyed. "Crossed" is an unmistakable, ironic descriptor for eyes belonging to a figure cursed for not helping Jesus with the "true" cross. The Jew's sight is impaired and his body afflicted (again, reflecting an inner, afflicted essence) because of the cross: its role in the legend, and its role as symbol for theological antisemitism. The result is a cross-eyed Jew whose Jewish gaze is subverted and robbed of power (and any semblance of dignity). Power is the key word: the wandering eyes and the overall presentation is shocking enough to subvert and liberate a powerful icon.

The final, exquisite irony is that the pillow owes its design to a type of needlework known as cross-stitch. Every spot of color is an intersection of two diagonal lines: a cross of thread.²¹⁷ The cross-eyed Wandering Jew is composed entirely of crosses.

²¹⁶ See Hsia, *Myth*, 8-9. For images, see Schreckenberg, *Jews*, 273-291.

²¹⁷ In an email exchange with the artist, I learned the materials used: mouliné thread on cotton fabric. This dashed my hopes of highlighting *shatnes* as another irony. (*Shatnes* is the mixing of flax and wool prohibited by Jewish law: a commandment which this traditionally-garbed wanderer would have observed.) However, she also informed me the pillow is based on a Chagall drawing, which is a genuine irony: she appropriates the work of an appropriator!

CONCLUSION

At first, my selection of these eleven images was guided by their immediate appeal and complexity. Upon reflection, I have grasped themes that make the grouping feel cohesive rather than disparate, and more synchronic than merely chronological. First, the artists, whether deliberately or no, are custodians of the Wandering Jew image. Their work preserves evidence of the image's original function and use: a worthy act of minatory vigilance, and a necessary "folder" in the dark archive of antisemitism. The Wandering Jew as part of cultural history is not necessarily well-known outside secular scholarship and seminarian circles, and with more than a century of appropriation now to its credit, the phrase has shifted meaning so often that the original definition may soon be lost to all but the briefest encyclopedia entries.²¹⁸

Second, each image, in some way, dramatizes the radical shift in the "usefulness" of the Wandering Jew—from anti-Jewish icon to ironic Jewish avatar—by undermining the utility of one or more of the objects depicted. Thus, each image becomes a judgment on the very utility of its own theme. In the Hirszenberg, the cross is no longer the conventional religious attribute unique to one figure: the Christian Messiah. It has now been exposed as a weapon wielded by Christian antisemitism, upon which many, many figures have suffered. In the Rubin, a "meeting" is no meeting when the participants do not participate, but sit at opposite sides of a bench. The bench itself, meant for sitting

²¹⁸ The standing of the Wandering Jew as a component of cultural literacy has declined dramatically. The generous Wandering Jew entry in the 1898 edition of *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* is completely omitted in the 1992 "twentieth-century" version, which excludes on principle "any entry that does not truly belong to the twentieth century." See (or rather, do not see) *Brewer's Dictionary of 20th-century Phrase and Fable* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

together, becomes in Rubin's tragic image a place for Christ and the Jew to sit irreconcilably apart. Chagall's Wandering Jews wander in a lost world of Eastern European Jewry where even gravity need not apply. The ordinary village street is not a thoroughfare to walk down but a lost home to fly over and away from, forever. In the Yiddish film, a voice from the same lost world speaks through a painting, breaking the bonds of frame and canvas (although still within the equally alien medium of celluloid film). In Szyk's drawings, Jewish Law as symbolized by the Torah, the scriptural quotations, and Christ's—not Moses'—Tablets no longer works; it is no longer an adequate foundation for sustaining life. Adolph Gottlieb's exilic burst declares narrative and figuration inadequate. Moreh's crucified, flying Jew (a riff on Chagall, perhaps) is suspended by an object neither all cross nor all unicycle. Abesgauz's would-be emigrant proclaims, in picture and text, that home is no longer a home. Sgan-Cohen's enigmatic creature bypasses a chair that can never be used. Bak's *luftmensch* lumbers through a post-Shoah dystopia with a dying Tree of Life. And last, the form of Zoya's curse-turned-cushion forbids its soft use by the hard figure that inspired it. All eleven works are united by an inutility of objects in service to the inutility of the stereotypical Wandering Jew.

Even the utility of the “reformed,” Jewish Wandering Jew figure is called into question. Just as there is no single, monolithic Jewish version, there is no single, monolithic antisemitic version. The image is subject to each artist's imagination and agenda, whatever the reason for wandering (curse, blessing, election, exile, choice), whatever the type of wandering (physical or metaphysical), and whatever the portrayal:

e.g. an indictment against persecution, a unifying symbol of nascent Zionism, an outmoded symbol of Diaspora failure, a symbol of Zionism's failure, an expression of resistance politics, an ironic self-identification as a Jew who does a lot of traveling, and so on. Anything is possible with the Wandering Jew, including making the figure an objective correlative to its inutility.²¹⁹

Third, each work also has in common a statement against theological antisemitism, with all but the Gottlieb depicting overt references to Christian iconography. In the name of Christ has the Wandering Jew been employed so long and so extensively. This brings me to one final irony of the Wandering Jew, a revelation already hinted at in readings above: that Jesus himself is a Wandering Jew. After all, his ministry was accomplished on foot. The entire gospel account could be subtitled "the Wanderings of Jesus." His mobile mission essentially de-territorialized what became a new religion, moving the focus away from the Temple as cultic center. Meanwhile, Zionism's mission has been to re-territorialize. The territory—*eretz* Israel—remains a crucial component of even liberal and secular Jewish identity worldwide, and traditional liturgy still includes daily prayers for the rebuilding of the Temple. The longing for territory can be said to have inspired Judaism's foundational text: if, as proposed by the authors of *The Jew and the Other*, the Torah is fundamentally "a political charter and the basis for a historical claim."²²⁰

Territory is at the heart of the wanderings of the Jews, for they are all concerned with it in some form or another; physical or metaphysical; the re-gaining of it and the keeping of it.

²¹⁹ I may perhaps be getting a bit of my own revenge on T.S. Eliot (for his revolting, stereotyping Wandering Jew poem "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar") by appropriating his beloved idea of the "objective correlative" to this purpose.

²²⁰ Quotation from Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias, *The Jew and the Other* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) xiii. The Torah as political character is a claim of religious Zionists.

It is no coincidence that most of the Jewish artists in this paper lived or worked in Israel.²²¹ Territory is survival. Jesus may have wandered to teach, but other Jews wandered to live.

The Wandering Jew, then, was cursed by a wandering Jew from Nazereth: a curse which may prove to be a blessing, or at least be made redundant, because of the intentional, ingenious, and ironic use of its iconography by the victims whom it was designed to define. The *real* curse was antisemitic authority that codified the laws of religious and “racial” hatred so efficiently that Jews became alienated in their own eyes.²²² If, as Jean-Paul Sartre said, “it is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew,” then the antisemitic Wandering Jew created the Jewish Wandering Jew. Starting with Hirszenberg’s altarpiece of desperation in 1899, Jewish artists have taken attributes that encode negative difference of the other, and appropriated them to encode difference of the self: be it positive or negative or perplexingly paradoxical. The vehicle used to ascribe collective identity to the individual is recycled, but now the personification is done by the personified. The Wanderer as transmitter of destruction is thus transformed into a transmitter of tradition, and the chronicler of anti-Jewish myth is converted into a chronicler of Jewish history. The process continues to unfold in a constant construction and reconstruction of identity. Jewish artists continue to orient an ancient image homeward in acts of defiant self-definition. The Jew wanders in his own behalf at last.

²²¹ Adolph Gottlieb excepted (I do not yet have information about the director of the Yiddish film). I notice that none of the artists that lived in Israel actually remained there (they continued to wander). As for Gottlieb, he explicitly chose to “wander” from Jewishness itself: a choice in keeping with self-imposed exile from artistic traditions.

²²² Benbassa, *Jew*, 117.

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