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ARTICLE

Teaching The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Through Graphic Narrative: Identity, History, Violence

Brian Hillman

Abstract

This article argues for the pedagogical utility of graphic narratives for teaching the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the discipline of Religious Studies. Graphic narratives articulate the perspective of an author. These texts present the perspectives as dynamic, shaped by an author's identity and life experience, but not bound by it. They also provide important historical background about the conflict while encouraging student engagement through the affective experience of studying a visual and textual medium. This article explores three themes of graphic narratives that facilitate the study of the conflict in a religious studies framework: (1) the role of religious education in shaping political identity; (2) the narration of history; (3) the depiction of violence. It focuses on works by American (Sarah Glidden, Amy Kurzweil, Harvey Pekar, and Joe Sacco), Palestinian (Leila Abdelrazaq and Mohammad Sabaaneh) and Israeli (Boaz Yakin, Ari Folman with David Polonsky and Tohar Sherman-Friedman) authors.

Keywords

graphic memoir, Religious Studies pedagogy, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Jewish identity, Palestinian history

Introduction: Religious Studies and Identity

Religious Studies scholars conceptualize religion as a source of meaning, community, and identity. These aspects of human culture also inform people's political commitments. Rather than merely a reflection of discrete views or principles, people's political commitments are entangled with other parts of their identity, including their religious identity. Thus, how people come to hold certain political beliefs, as well as how they express them, is within the purview of religious studies. Moreover, as this article contends, analyzing political commitments using the methods of religious studies can illuminate aspects of political identity that may be missed if one ignores or misunderstands religious identity. Religious identity is not merely the acceptance of what one has been taught, without questioning or changing one's views, but is constructed and maintained.

Religious studies classes often discuss political issues from the partition of India and Pakistan to the rise of the Islamic State to Christian Nationalism in America. Another conflict, often explored in introductory courses on Judaism, is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Given the politically contentious and emotionally charged nature of this issue, teaching the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is inherently risky.[1] Being perceived as supporting a particular side of the conflict risks both alienating students who may hold different views, as well as instilling the perception that one's teaching is biased.

A strategy for both emphasizing the different views and perspectives actors hold, as well as how those are informed by one's broader life experience or religious upbringing, is to use graphic narratives, specifically non-fiction graphic memoirs, graphic biography, and comics journalism. Although not a novel strategy, its relevance for teaching the conflict by foregrounding questions of religious studies merits exploration as it isolates how political identity is informed by religion, history, and memory.[2]

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1 On teaching the conflict, Janice Fenheimer comments, "As an educator offering an introduction to a complicated topic, I feel deeply responsible for how that introduction is shaped and how it in turn shapes how students think about the region and its peoples" (Janice W. Fernheimer, "Comics and Conflict: Using the Graphic Narrative to Wrestle with the Complexities of Israel/Palestine" in *Teaching the Arabi-Israeli Conflict*, ed. Rachel S. Harris [Wayne State University Press, 2019], 28–42, 30).

2 This essay does not engage with one-page political cartoons as they generally do not narrate change over time and are not necessarily autobiographical.

Thomas Juneau and Mira Sucharov argue for the utility of using graphic narrative in international relations pedagogy, particularly in attending to how individual actors inhabit their political identity. They write:

> A narrative approach— meaning one that focuses on the experience of political actors in understanding and framing their actions—helps unpack the sometimes elusive concept of identity.[3]

Their emphasis is on identity which, they note, is also a central part of "most, if not all, ethnic conflicts."[4] Thus, understanding the experiences of an actor in a conflict helps one to understand how political perspectives form and change but also emphasizes that an actor's perspective is just that: a perspective. The pedagogical dividends of focusing on individual narratives "can help students set aside questions of right and wrong—debates that can easily create a brittle classroom atmosphere—and instead focus on the explanatory questions essential to understanding how world politics unfold."[5] Juneau and Sucharov argue that teaching the conflict through individual comics narratives, rather than through historiography, encourages students to analyze how people understand the conflict as comics foregrounds the subjectivity of a given author. This is an important distinction, particularly for a religious studies class. Historical scholarship is not irrelevant, but this approach focuses on how actors come to understand the conflict and how that intersects with other aspects of their identity, upbringing, and experience.

Juneau and Sucharov claim that teaching graphic narratives facilitates the consideration of different perspectives on the conflict, rather than centering one narrative. They write:

> Working with the assumption that each collective actor under analysis has a certain "version" of events—stories that that group tells about itself and about the Other—reminds students that they too might enter the classroom with particular frames, biases, or assumptions.[6]

Graphic narratives offer distinct advantages over prose narrative texts insofar as they constantly remind the reader that all accounts of history have

3 Thomas Juneau and Mira Sucharov, "Narratives in Pencil: Using Graphic Novels to Teach Israeli-Palestinian Relations," *International Studies Perspectives* 11, no. 2 (2010): 172–183, 173.

4 Juneau and Sucharov, "Narratives in Pencil," 173.

5 Juneau and Sucharov, "Narratives in Pencil," 173.

6 Juneau and Sucharov, "Narratives in Pencil," 173.

subjective elements. They foreground the author's inherently subjective perspective concerning both how to narrate history and how to depict it visually. In other words, there is more material to analyze in texts that combine words and images on every page rather than through words alone. As Hilary Chute explains, the "basic hand-drawn grammar" of graphic narratives that includes frames, gutters, lines and borders" permits them to presents aspects of temporality and perspective textually in ways prose cannot.[7] This is a structural feature of graphic narratives (multimodal texts combining words and images) as well as a contingent feature of the autobiographical narratives that have appeared to date.

Janice W. Fernheimer, in her reflections on using graphic narratives to teach the conflict, states that the "strategic juxtaposition of graphic narratives helps students to focus on multiple perspectives simultaneously." Through juxtaposition, the course uses graphic narratives to "offer a way for incommensurable narratives to be present simultaneously."[8] Many of the comics narrate the history of the conflict, each with a different starting point and key events. This allows for comparison between different narratives with each reflecting an author's understanding of the conflict, and how their family and personal life history are depicted in the narrative.

As authors and characters are drawn into graphic narratives, readers are reminded that a perspective being represented is just that—an individual perspective that is shaped by someone's life experience. Even when they are not drawn into the comic, the author is (or the author and illustrator are) in control of how events and characters are visually portrayed. Some of these texts contain reflections on the author's process of identity formation and, often, how their views have changed.

My discussion is bound by comics narratives published to date. The work of Maltese-American Joe Sacco, work he characterizes as "comics journalism" (discussed in more depth below) has been foundational in comics discussions of Palestine. Sacco's *Palestine*, as well as his 2024 short comic *War on Gaza* are published by Fantagraphics, a prominent comics publisher with wide distribution.[9] Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* and *Journalism*

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7 Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 33.

8 Fernheimer, "Comics and Conflict," 28.

9 *Palestine* appeared as single-issue comics which, admittedly, had a smaller distribution than the book version which collects all the issues. *Palestine* was republished in a new edition in 2024 with a new afterword by Amira Hass. It includes Palestinian academic and activist Edward W. Said's introduction from the 2001 Fantagraphics edition. A new co-authored work of comics journalism by

are published by Metropolitan Books, an imprint of Henry Holt & Co., a major publisher.

Indeed, many of the long-form graphic narratives published in English to date on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are authored by Jewish Americans and distributed by prominent publishers. Harvey Pekar's *Note the Israel My Parents Promised Me* (2012) is published by Hill and Wong (distributed by MacMillian), Sarah Glidden's *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less*, after being released by Vertigo in 2010 is now distributed by major Canadian publisher Drawn and Quarterly, and Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch* (2016), is published by Catapult, a prominent literary press. Narratives by non-Palestinian thus are more readily available and have received more attention than those by Palestinians themselves.[10] The discussion would be enriched if there were more graphic narratives by Palestinian Christian or Muslim authors. The paucity of perspectives on the conflict by non-Jewish actors results from a multitude of economic, artistic, and cultural factors. Pekar himself pioneered autobiographical comics in America and Glidden and Kurzweil builds upon this tradition pioneered by Pekar, Art Spiegelman (author of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*) and others.[11] Political cartoons, most prominently the work of Naji al-Ali (1938–1987) have been important components of Palestinian political life and media. As this study focuses on longer narrative texts, they have not been included.[12]

Two narrative texts written from Muslim Palestinian perspectives are Leila Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi* and Mohammad Sabaaneh's *Power Born of Dreams: My Story is Palestine*, both published by Just World Books, an independent

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Sacco and journalist Chris Hedges titled *Requiem for Gaza* which is based on interviews with Gazans who fled to Cairo is scheduled to published by Fantagraphics in October 2026.

10 Even as nearly every book is available for purchase from an online bookstore, publishers like Henry Holt and Fantagraphics have larger marketing budgets than smaller presses like Just World Books. Moreover, books published by the former than the latter are more likely to be stocked in bookstores, making them more discoverable by consumers.

11 On Pekar see Brian Doherty, *Dirty Pictures: How an Underground Network of Nerds, Feminists, Misfits, Geniuses, Bikers, Potheads, Printers, Intellectuals, and Art School Rebels Revolutionized Art and Invented Comix* (Abrams, 2022), 254–257.

12 The English translation of a collection of al-Ali's comics is published with an introduction by Joe Sacco. See Naji al-Ali, *A Child in Palestine: Cartoons of Naji al-Ali* (Verso, 2024 [2009]). Verso is currently distributed by Penguin, a major publisher. On al-Ali see Sune Haugbolle, "Naji Al-Ali and the Iconography of Arab Secularism," in *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East: Rhetoric of the Image*, ed. Sune Haugbolle and Christianne Gruber (Indiana University Press, 2013), 231–258.

publishing house committed to social activism.[13] It also published a collection of Sabaaneh's political cartoons.

Three of the limited number of comics available in English that showcase Israeli perspectives complement this analysis.[14] Boaz Yakin, an American filmmaker born to Israeli parents, collaborated with Nick Bertozzi on *Jerusalem: A Family Portrait* (2013). Based on stories told by Yakin's father, the comic explores how Jews in Mandate Palestine sought to resist British rule through the story of internecine family conflict. Ari Folman (another filmmaker) and David Polonsky's *Waltz with Bashir: A Lebanon War Story* (2009) is a comics version of their film about the search for the truth of Folman's involvement in the 1982 Lebanon War.[15] Tohar Sherman-Friedman's *Good Girls Go to Hell* (2024) explores her coming-of-age in the occupied West Bank.

In this article, I argue for why comics, rather than merely prose narrative, accomplish the pedagogical goals of showing how the acquisition of political views is part of a broader process of identity formation and life history, as well as the pedagogical utility of including graphic narratives in college courses. I follow Scott McCloud and Hillary Chute's analysis of comics as a visual-verbal medium in which time is spatialized on the comics page.[16] I also consider how using graphic novels facilitates student learning motivation and supports the perception that visual-verbal texts are more accessible to students than prose texts are.

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13 Sabaaneh also illustrated Khaled Beydoun's *Eyes on Gaza: Witnessing Annihilation* (Street Noise Books, 2025). On their website, Street Noise Books under the heading "Who We Are" write: "Our books have a radical, intersectional feminist, queer and inclusive vision, and seek to provide a platform for the voices of marginalized people" (Street Noise Books website, https://www.streetnoisebooks.com/#whoweare). In August 2025 Sabaaneh's *30 Seconds from Gaza Diary of Genocide* was published by Interlink Books. Interlink is a "Palestinian-owned, Massachusetts-based independent publishing house that offers a global perspective to readers" (Interlink Books website, https://interlinkbooks.com/about/). Although Interlink is an independent press, it is distributed by Simon & Schuster, known as one of the "big five" American publishers. Street Noise Books is expected to publish Sabaaneh's *Welcome to Hell: From the West Bank to Gaza* in 2026.

14 Rutu Modan is the one most prominent Israeli comics artists working today. Several of her books have been translated into English and are published by Drawn and Quarterly. Juneau and Sucharov discuss Modan's *Exit Wounds*, trans. Noah Stollman (Drawn and Quarterly, 2007).

15 *Jerusalem: A Family Portrait* (2013) was published by First Second, now an imprint of Macmillan Publishers (one of the "big five").

16 Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 4.

I then examine how American Jewish comics artists connect their understanding of Israel to their Jewish education.[17] The attention to the intersection of religious education (and how authors internalize, reject, and nuance their education) and political perspective is a unique focus of studying the conflict using the perspective of religious studies. Non-Orthodox American Jews often receive religious instruction only during their youth until they participate in the Bar or Bat Mitzvah confirmation ceremony around age thirteen. Some may receive additional formal Jewish education through their synagogue or Jewish day school, but for many American Jews formal education ends after their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Some participate in a program called Birthright which provides free ten-day trips to Israel for Jewish adults aged 18–26. Informal education from Jewish parents and grandparents also shapes their identity.[18] This section concludes by contrasting these American narratives with one from an Israeli West Bank settlement.

Next, I compare how graphic narratives by American, Israeli, and Palestinian writers narrate the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The nuances of each historical account, including narrative tone, the depiction of individual actors, and which events are narrated (or not), reflect the author's view. For texts by American Jews, we can consider how their perspective on the conflict shapes how they narrate its history. For Palestinians and Israelis, their narrative more directly reflects their lived experience. Comparing histories, rather than presenting a singular narrative shifts the focus from mere history (i.e., what happened) to how individuals *understand* history and, concomitantly, how it informs and reflects their identity. The focus, then, is on individual perception (and its entanglement with Jewish identity) rather than a historiographical narrative that seeks to meet the academic standards of historiography.

In the following section, I examine how these comics, as visual-verbal documents, function as witnesses to violence and trauma. I focus on the different strategies artists employ for depicting violence. We will see that artists employ a range of forms, from the abstract to the hyper-realistic.

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17 As Fernheimer notes, the order in which students are introduced to texts can influence their understanding of the conflict. Anchoring students in a perspective can create bias. This article is open to the same critique. Foregrounding American perspectives in this essay reflects my own context as an instructor, having been educated at and taught at American universities, but it is not imperative to center them in any course using the texts and methods described in this essay.

18 It would have been ideal to compare the religious education of Muslim and Christian Palestinians to these Jewish narratives, but long-form narrative comics are not extant.

Depicting violence is one aspect of how to talk about victimization, how to bear witness to suffering, and how that process of bearing witness is coupled, in some cases, with one's own victimization.

The article triangulates among American, Palestinian, and Israeli texts and perspectives (and, by extension, Jewish and Islamic perspectives) to understand how people come to hold beliefs and how they narrate personal aspects of the conflict. It troubles the notion that there is a monolithic perspective or experience by personalizing the conflict through graphic narratives that views the life-histories of actors, victims, and witnesses.

Before turning to my analysis, I note that I have taught two classes devoted to graphic narratives at two different large public universities. I draw upon these experiences by detailing the aspects of these texts with which students engaged at length and generated the most discussion.

Comics and the Visual Language of Perspective

Comics scholars from Scott McCloud's landmark study *Understanding Comics* have sought to explain how comics function.[19] McCloud defines comics as a medium of communication of images in sequence. He attends to the essential role of the reader in the creation of meaning in the comic by emphasizing the transitions between panels as "aided and abetted by" the reader's imagination. Comics require reader involvement to provide logical connections between panels.[20] As the panels are "in sequence," time passes on the comics page. "In learning to read comics," McCloud writes, "we all learned to perceive time spatially, for in the world of comics, time and space are one and the same."[21]

The spatialization of time helps to explain why the graphic narrative is a powerful medium for understanding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In her study of autobiographical comics by Jewish women, Tahneer Oksman observes that, in mapping time as space, graphic memoir "emphasizes the importance of both time and location as the key to the unique brand of autobiographical storytelling." Autobiographical narrators are "focused on 'finding' themselves, on affirming their presences, by drawing themselves and their worlds both in present and over time."[22] Autobiographical graphic

19 McCloud builds on Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (Poorhouse Press, 1990 [1985]) in developing his conception of how comics function.

20 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Harper Collins, 1993), 68–72.

21 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 100.

22 Tahneer Oksman, *"How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?": Women and Jewish*

narratives are strong pedagogical tools, as their authors are often drawn into the story. The author's perspective is always foregrounded, shaping what material appears in a comic and how it is presented.[23]

Hillary Chute explores how the comics form provides unique advantages for the depiction of violent conflicts. She argues that comics, with its "unique spatial grammar of gutters, grids, and panels … offers opportunities to place pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality—as well as on the idea that 'history' can ever be a closed discourse, or a simply progressive one."[24] For Chute, war comics grapple with how to "picture trauma and suffering." Against conception of trauma as disappearance (i.e., the loss of life, of the absence of something) and against a world saturated with photographic and filmic images of suffering, comics offer alternative possibilities for depicting the effects and aftermath of trauma. Chute calls this the practice of "drawing to tell"—a unique form of witnessing in which the comics artist participates.[25] The comics page is neither the mere photography of suffering or its aftermath, but a slow, active process in which the author makes decisions about depicting reality. Chute's analysis motivates the comparison between different historical narratives and the depiction of violent conflict in the comics form.

There is some evidence that students are more motivated to engage with graphic novels than with more traditional texts.[26] Although some have suggested that graphic novels are easier to read than prose-only texts, Kristy Brugar and her collaborators suggest a different approach. Graphic novels are not necessarily cognitively easier to comprehend due to the relatively low number of words on a given page. Rather, they require both verbal and visual literacy to comprehend.[27] On this view, graphic narratives require more complex reading processes to understand them than prose does.[28] The

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American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs (Columbia University Press, 2016), 8.

23 *Not the Israel* is a collaboration between an artist and a writer (was Pekar's method). Although Pekar died before it was published, there is no reason to think that he would have objected to the final version

24 Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 4. Note: The gutter is the space between panels (McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 66).

25 Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 4–6.

26 See the sources cited by Kristy Bruger et al., "More Than Mere Motivation: Learning Specific Content Through Multimodal Narratives," *Literary Research and Instruction* 57, no. 2 (2018): 183–208, 186.

27 Brugar, et al., "More Than Mere Motivation," 186–187.

28 The multimodality of comics may both make students more motivated to read them because they are more engaging without thereby being easier to understand; they may be more engaging because of their complexity, not despite it.

complexity of the language of comics is a key insight into their utility as pedagogical tools. They allow for the articulation of content through words, images, and, crucially, the complex interaction between words and images. The tools of visual language open ways for authors to "show" rather than to "tell,"[29] while also providing authors with tools to convey background information subtly and parsimoniously.[30]

Jewish Education and Identity

This section examines how American Jewish comics artists develop their understanding of Israel. They learn about the conflict in a mediated way through their private, extracurricular Jewish education, their own independent reading, and through conversations with members of their family, rather than by talking directly to Israelis or Palestinians or by visiting Israel/Palestine for extended periods. Even as Glidden and Kurzweil travel to Israel for brief periods on the curated Birthright tour, they acknowledge their ignorance of Palestinian lived reality. Pekar (1939–2010) remembers the exuberance of the founding of the state of Israel, a feeling shared by his parents. Amy Kurzweil (b. 1986) and Sarah Glidden (b. 1980) were born roughly a generation and a half after Pekar. Comparing these three accounts showcases different perspectives and the different ways Jewish Americans develop their attitude toward the conflict through formal education, travel, and reading.

Ned Curthoys discusses Pekar and Glidden's texts using the lens of the *Bildungsroman*, although his analysis could easily apply to Kurzweil's memoir. Curthroys comments that the conflict "is an abiding personal preoccupation that shapes their sense of self, thus requiring an immersive exploration of their changing relationship to the Jewish state."[31] Let us examine this "immersive exploration."

Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch* integrates the biography of her idiosyncratic grandmother Lily Fenster, a woman who escaped from the Warsaw Ghetto and survived the Holocaust, with Amy's own coming-of-age. Amy graphically depicts Fenster's oral history from 1994 using block font

29 Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

30 Junea and Sucharov, "Narratives in Pencil," 174.

31 Ned Curthoys, "Coming of Age in Graphic Novels Representing the Palestine/Israel Conflict" in *Literary Representations of the Palestine/Israel Conflict after the Second Intifada*, ed. Ned Curthoys and Isabelle Hesse (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 165–183, 165.

reminiscent of the typewriter print of the testimony. Victoria Aarons writes that, for Kurzweil, the "act of telling both her own and her grandmother's stories increases her understanding of her grandmother's past but also of her own fraught maturation."[32] *Flying Couch* is both the graphic narrative of how Amy's grandmother's survived the Holocaust as well as the story of how Amy produced a graphic narrative based upon it. Amy's identity as a third-generation Holocaust survivor shapes her Jewish identity and her perception of Jewish history.

Chapter three, "Home Schooling," opens with an adolescent Amy walking into Sunday school at her local synagogue. She writes that "whatever Jewish Education I required was doled out at Temple Shalom," a place where "the young adults of my suburb came to fulfill their respective quotas of Jewish learning" before their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs.[33] Amy's Jewish education focused on the State of Israel and antisemitism. Kurzweil depicts this with images lining the walls that lead to her classroom. She writes that "the only lessons I remember were about Israel. Jacob and Leah were mythic figures but Herzl and Golda Meir were still rolling in their graves." Below this text box, Amy looks at portraits of Meir, Herzl, and Ben-Gurion. The next three images are of the gates to Auschwitz with the slogan "never again" fixed above it, following by an Israeli "pioneer" (*chalutz*) with the phrase "The Zionist Dream" and, lastly, the Israeli flag. Kurzweil describes this as "Israel: A refuge where our people, broken and demoralized by rampant oppression, could come and build their lives anew in peace and prosperity."[34] Her classroom experience reinforces these themes.

In one scene, the teacher writes "ANTI-SEMITISM" on the board and asks students to define it. The students eagerly offer anecdotes attesting to it: why there has never been a Jewish president and why they have school on Rosh Hashanah.[35] Amy offers that this is "why the Holocaust happened and some people made Israel."[36] The teacher praises Amy for her response and begins a detailed and energetic discussion of the Israeli history. She asks her students if they think antisemitism decreased after the founding of the state of Israel. They emphatically respond, "no." As the instructor continues, Amy

32 Victoria Aarons, "Mapping Transgenerational Memory of the Shoah in Third-Generation Graphic Narratives: On Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch*" in *Holocaust Graphic Narratives: Generation, Trauma, and Memory* (Rutgers University Press, 2019), 125–150, 126.

33 Amy Kurzweil, *Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir* (Catapult, 2016), 73.

34 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 76.

35 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 77.

36 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 78.

sits cross-legged, looking troubled and cautiously asks who killed Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, for Amy had heard that he was killed by an Israeli. Amy crosses her legs, appearing increasingly uncomfortable. Her teacher stammers, saying "umm …", then pausing, and finally declaring they will discuss it next week. The scene ends with Amy appearing visibly annoyed, unsatisfied with her teacher's response.[37]

Kurzweil's unresolved feelings about Israel leads to a crisis of identity when she enrolls at Stanford University as an undergraduate. One page, laid out in 3 by 3 style, is titled "Great Game of Jewish Practice: College Edition." She attends both Hillel and Chabad. At one dinner, the attendees discuss Israeli military aggression, intermarriage, and their personal connection to the Holocaust. When Amy leaves, she faces two paths: avoidance, and confusion. She takes the former, a heavenly voice shouts" WAR IS REAL! GO LEARN SOMETHING!" which sends Amy running to the "confusion" path.[38] This scene is depicted on the same page, starting from the top to bottom. This is an excellent example of how time is spatialized in comics and how the graphic form facilitates the playful visualization of ideas.

The path leads to a (satirical) "university-wide identity fair." She walks past such identity categories as "politically active Black people" and "stoners for the environment" before entering the section for "Jews (various)." She is brusquely welcomed by a woman with curly hair reading Kafka who gestures behind her. Welcome to the Real World," she says. "Go choose your Jewish identity."[39] Amy stands in front of several large boards with a hole for her face, each detailing the pros and cons of different Jewish identities. The first "Ardent Pro-Israel Jew" boasts "comfort and uncomplicated loyalties" but is "inoffensive to parents." Amy rejects this option as well as "Radical Anti-Zionist Jew" and "Politically and Culturally Apathetic Jew," instead reluctantly opting for "Expert Educated Jew." The only pro it offers is a "wealth of knowledge" while cons include being overwhelmed by inconclusiveness, alienation, and an inevitable existential crisis.[40] She inhabits

37 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 82–83.

38 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 101–103. In an interview, Kurzweil states she initially did not see a "conflict between Holocaust narratives and narratives of Israeli history." Yet she came to understand that this narrative, reinforced by her mother and grandmother, is just one narrative of the conflict (Sandra Chiritescu, "'Where Their Feelings Begin and Mine End': Transgenerational Holocaust Witnessing in Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch*" in *Jewish Women in Comics: Bodies and Borders*, ed. Heike Bauer, et al. (Syracuse University Press, 2023), 79–87, 83.

39 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 105.

40 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 106–107.

this identity for the rest of the comic. Amy is handed a towering stack of books that she lugs back to her apartment. They include novels by Jewish authors, traditional religious texts, comics, histories of Israel, and works by Sigmund Freud. These books end up challenging Amy in ways she depicts through the medium of comics.

Amy plops on her couch as the first book opens, out of which emerges the biblical Patriarch Jacob. Jacob informs Amy that, now that she has resolved to become a Jewish intellectual, she must "do your part to honor your proud ancestors" by "wrestling with the demons of the past" just as he had to wrestle with an angel (Genesis 32:22–32). Jacob falters when he attempts to articulate the end goal of this wrestling before walking away.[41] This unresolved goal of wrestling reemerges at the end of the comic. Next, Sigmund Freud appears to Amy to "ensure that you've properly analyzed the details of your familial life in the context of your American identity."[42] Finally, Theodore Herzl appears to emphasize the importance of Jewish cultural unity so the Jews "remain safe and thriving."[43] Looking frazzled, Amy declares that she "just wants to draw pictures before fleeing the room as Freud, Herzl, and Jacob, as well as Jewish comics artists Art Spiegelman, Will Eisner, and Harvey Pekar look on. As a budding Jewish intellectual, Amy is challenged by her cultural inheritance and feels compelled to grapple with it.

As part of her identity crisis, she attends Birthright. Even though she had "never been around this many Jews before," Amy "resolved to shun any forced comradery … to be sold an identity or a family."[44] Amy begins by enjoying herself in Israel: admiring Israeli men, riding a camel, and visiting the Western Wall in Jerusalem. She is challenged when the tour visits the Syrian border. Noam, the Israeli tour guide, explains that this is the site of two Israeli wars, one that claimed the life of her brother.[45] Another speaker introduces himself as an American Jew from Cleveland who has lived through many wars in Israel. He laments that "Every day, I look out and see the flags of my enemy. Every day I realize that my life is threatened. Every day I am afraid."[46] Someone hesitantly asks the speaker about his perspective on the Palestinians. "What Palestinians?" he retorts. As the questioner stutters through an explanation, the speaker's face contorts in paroxysms of anger. Being from Cleveland, he dons a baseball hat of the local team, then

41 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 110–112.
42 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 112.
43 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 113.
44 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 122.
45 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 129.
46 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 133.

known as the Cleveland Indians, with their culturally-insensitive former logo, a Native American character named "Chief Wahoo." He explodes into a profane denunciation of Palestinians who, he claims, are trying to kill them.[47] That night, Amy drifts to sleep reading Alan Dershowitz's *The Case for Israel, A History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, and Joe Sacco's *Palestine*.[48] The day's images intermingle as she sees an anguished Noam, Chief Wahoo, and the speaker from Cleveland, now wearing a hat with the logo of the Lebanese paramilitary group Hezbollah. Chief Wahoo may suggest a link between Israel and colonialism. Amy's subconscious remains torn between empathy for Noam and disdain at anti-Palestinian aggression.

The narrative structurally links Amy's experience with the Holocaust as, in the next scene she visits *Yad Vashem*, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. She draws herself looking intently at the exhibits, with a mix of troubled expressions on her face as she bears witness to tragedy.[49] But her trip ends on a note of life as she visits her extant family in Israel, receiving a warm welcome.[50]

Amy graduates from college toward the end of *Flying Couch*. After the parallel narrative of her grandmother concludes (which was Amy's senior thesis project), she is again confronted by Jacob, Freud, and Herzl, now joined by her mother and grandmother. "That's it?" they ask, "you graduate and the story is over?" Amy starts to run as Freud shouts "aren't you leaving complications unresolved?" Amy's Jewish forebearers follow her in a line until she marches off the page which leads into the memoir's final chapter.[51] At the end, Amy has sought to balance the narrative she was taught about Israel as a necessary salve against antisemitism, and her positive experience with her family in Israel, with her complicated feelings about the conflict, including treatment of Palestinians.

Sarah Glidden's *How to Understand*, which records her Birthright trip from 2007, shares some similarities with Kurzweil's telling. Glidden discloses little about her upbringing in *How to Understand* (and has few Jewish friends) but maintains a Jewish identity. After she persuades her friend Melissa to join her on Birthright, Glidden spends the weeks before the trip reading about Israel. Glidden desires to visit Israel to see the "reality of the other side of

47 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 132–136.

48 Alan Dershowitz, *The Case for Israel: A History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (John Wiley & Sons, 2003).

49 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 142–149.

50 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 150–152.

51 Kurzweil, *Flying Couch*, 232–233.

the Green Line," meaning the West Bank, a trip that will require her to stay several days after Birthright.[52] As she prepares to leave for the trip, she acknowledges to her non-Jewish partner Jamil that she has been fixated on the trip as she "prepared to discover the truth behind this whole mess once and for all."[53] Once in Israel, her skeptical boldness wanes as the experience bucks her expectations. Sarah's bus tour visits the Golan Heights and is shown a video about it. The video highlights the region's recreational offerings and emphasizes its military significance. The narrator explains that:

> [I]ts geographic position makes it indispensable to the nation's security. Before the war, Syria sent rocket attacks into Israeli villages below. And now … Syria wants it back. Israel has tried to compromise with the Syrian government, but Syria won't budge at all![54]

The video ends with the ghostly apparition of Yitzhak Rabin who says "withdrawal from the Golan Heights is unthinkable." Sarah exclaims "I knew it! This whole trip is going to be a regional propaganda tour!"[55] She confronts the tour guide Gil with her assessment who, against expectations, agrees it is propaganda. Sarah looks sheepish as her "gotcha" moment, evidence that the entire trip is mere propaganda, is thwarted.[56] On the bus, Gil contextualizes the film. Acknowledging the sentiment that it felt like propaganda, he explains that it was made in 1992 when returning the Golan Heights was a realistic possibility. The experience challenges Sarah's assumption that Israelis are uncritical proponents of Israel.

The trip exposes Sarah to moments in Israeli history during which she empathizes with the actors involved, as described in the next section. As Sarah begins to enjoy the trip and identify with Israel, her crisis of identity emerges. She says to a fellow Birthright participant that she feels that she ought, as a Jew "to support Israel no matter what" but as a leftist progressive, any support for Israel is seen as a betrayal of the Palestinians.[57] Her identification with Israel comes to a head when the trip visits Independence Hall in Tel Aviv, where the Jewish state was declared in 1948. The Hall's tour guide narrates the founding of the state of Israel as a necessary measure to

52 Sarah Glidden, *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2016 [2010]), 17.
53 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 6.
54 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 39–40.
55 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 40.
56 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 40, 45.
57 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 76–77.

ensure safety for Jewish people given the threats of unwelcoming Arab forces in the region and the Holocaust. Today, the speaker explains Israelis' primary desire is peace as they face treats of terrorism and send their children to the army at age 18.[58] As she listens, Sarah becomes increasingly pensive and emotional, resting her head on her hands. She sees some Israeli soldiers standing by the door and thinks: "Are these our soldiers? My God they're so young!" Sarah rushes out of Independence Hall, now in tears. Reflecting her racing thought, the panels depict scenes of violence both against Jews (a Nazi solider stomping a man wearing a Jewish star) and by Jews (an Israeli soldier pointing a gun at an older Palestinian woman).[59]

An Israeli tour guide finds Sarah crying. Sarah explains that she's lost confidence in her perception of Israel. "I know the Palestinians are wrong sometimes. But … I always thought Israel was **more** wrong because it has all the power." Now Sarah feels challenged by the notion that Israel is also her home as Jew.[60] Blotting her tears with a roll of toilet paper, Sarah shouts: "So you guys win! I feel a connection, okay? I hope you're happy." But, she adds, "how can I feel a connection to a place that causes so much suffering?"[61]

Before Birthright, Sarah had rejected the notion that she had any intrinsic connection to Israel. She acknowledges that Israel plays some role in her identity as Jew while never abandoning her concern for Palestinians. After Birthright she arranges for a car to take her to Ramallah, finally to see the Palestinian perspective. Unfortunately, the car does not arrive at the arranged meeting place. Thus, Palestinian concerns remain abstract to her in contrast to Israeli issues which she experienced firsthand. Sarah has developed a connection to Israel based on her identity as a Jew, moving from settled notions about Israel to a more complicated perspective.

Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me has three interlocking narrative lines: (1) Early 2000s Cleveland in which Pekar and Waldmann traipse around bookstores and libraries; (2) Pekar's youth and gradual disillusionment with his family's commitment to the state of Israel; (3) Jewish history from antiquity to the present. Pekar introduces himself to the reader as collaborating with Waldmann on a book about Israel while also explaining how his attitude towards Israel changes; more specifically, how he "lost faith

58 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 97–99.

59 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 99–100.

60 Tahneer Oksman observes that Glidden's perspective evolves as she moves from "abstract and indirect" knowledge of the conflict gained through books to one gathered from people (Oksman, "*How Come Boys*," 174).

61 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 103–105.

in Israel" after moving away from his parents who strongly influenced his view of the conflict.[62]

Despite his mother's atheism, Pekar's parents were committed Zionists and enrolled him in a Zionist school. His mother believed that Jewish people would not be safe until they had "their own country."[63] This sentiment is reinforced by his father and his parents' friends. Any nuance or debate about Israel's actions was beyond the pale.

Pekar's disillusionment with Israel starts in the 1960s when he becomes aware of Jewish ethnic prejudice. "Back then" he says "I was big on semitic brotherhood. I thought all semites could get along." But when he accepts that even Ashkenazi-Sephardic prejudice exists, he starts the process of abandoning his conception of Jewish moral superiority.[64] More importantly, he begins to critique Israel when it acts in ways that undermine peace. Following his parents' perspective, Pekar accepts that a Jewish state is needed for Jewish safety. When it acts in ways anathema to peace, it is open to censure.

In one scene set in the 1970s, Pekar, while reading a newspaper, reflects on Menachem Begin's promotion of Israeli settlements of the Occupied Territories. Pekar thinks "this is a really stupid thing to do! It's sabotaging their best chance for lasting peace!"[65] He professed this sentiment publicly by publishing an op-ed in his local Cleveland paper the *Plain Dealer* in 1978 titled "A Jewish Dissident Asks: Must Israel Forever Live Under Siege?." Pekar is playfully drawn standing on top of the page of newspaper displaying the piece.[66] In the article, Pekar introduces himself as a Jew, the son of Zionists. He acknowledges that his criticism of Israel leads some to consider him "naïve or disloyal to the Jewish cause." However, he critiques the recent Israeli invasion of Lebanon "obviously morally reprehensible and politically ill-advised" for it was motivated by the "attempt to quell PLO terrorists" which jeopardizes peace negotiations. He adds that West Bank settlements are anathema to peace.[67]

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62 Harvey Pekar and JT Waldman, *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me* (Hill & Wang, 2012), 4.

63 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 10–11.

64 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 47–49.

65 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 138.

66 Harvey Pekar, "A Jewish Dissident Asks: Must Israel Forever Live Under Siege?" *Plain Dealer*, March 30, 1978, 27a.

67 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 145–146.

One of the final scenes of the comic shows Pekar and Waldman discussing the possibility of a two-state solution. An intricate maze fills the space between them, suggesting the labyrinthine attempt to find a solution to the conflict.[68] Pekar, like Kurzweil and Glidden, remains unsure of the proper path forward but, for our purposes, has moved away from the uncritical Zionism of his parents.

These texts depict the process of identity formation, both personal identity and the community with which one identifies. As Glidden, Pekar, and Kurzweil show, one's perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is informed by one's religious identity while also being malleable, changing as one acquires new information and has new experiences. The perspective of all three shifted as they learned more about the history of the state of Israel, discussed next.

Before turning to history, it is instructive to compare these conceptions of Israel with a narrative by a Jewish Israeli. Tohar Sherman-Friedman's *Good Girls Go to Hell* chronicles her coming-of-age in an observant Jewish family in the settlement of Kedumim in the occupied West Bank. Because she lives in an almost exclusively Jewish environment in a settlement, her Jewish education is intertwined with politics. In 2004, a young Tohar is brought to protest the impending Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip. Her family uneventfully drives through an Arab village and a military checkpoint to reach the Gaza strip. Tohar's parents tensely discuss the political situation, speculating about a civil war.[69] The Sherman-Friedman family is clad in orange to protest the disengagement.

The young Tohar is uncomfortable, sweating and standing still among the protesters once they arrive. The scene ends on a note of ambivalence. Tohar comments that she didn't understand the significance of the protest at the time although, on the way home the "air felt heavy" and she felt "like a warrior." The chapter concludes with Tohar suggesting she should have stayed home.[70] The scene locates Sherman-Friedman as a Jewish Israeli settler, protesting the disengagement from the Jewish settlements in Gaza.

Although Sherman-Friedman's father is a rabbi, her relationship to normative religious belief and practice is complex. Tohar contends with existential questions of religion, such as the existence of God, as well as frustrations with the restrictions on female dress. On one Yom Kippur, an

68 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 158–159.

69 Tohar Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls Go to Hell*, trans. Margaret Morrison (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024), 10–11.

70 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 12–15.

adolescent Tohar asks her friend Atara if she "has doubts" about this, meaning Judaism. Atara demurs, saying that she doesn't agonize about her Orthodox clothing and that she feels secure in the reality of the Jewish sabbath. Tohar replies that she feels guilty, wondering if part of her is broken. She asks if the dietary laws are logical, feeling unable to believe in their veracity.[71] Tohar's doubts become known to her teachers. Consequently, she gets summoned to the principal's office of her all-girl's school. The principal asks if she believes in God. Tohar says she does not. The principal suggests that her emotional disconnection could be mitigated by more prayer, Tohar demurs, arguing that prayer won't address her intellectual reservations. Although Tohar continues to dress modestly and perform Jewish practices, her reservations grow.[72]

In another scene, Tohar wakes up late for high school and, after trudging to school in the heat, is turned away by the male security guard because her outfit that shows her knees is "indecent." Enraged, Tohar returns home, shouting that those who follow Jewish law are "just primitives" and that Jews "hide behind the laws so you don't have to think." She returns to school modestly dressed but, disgruntled, takes a vow of silence for several days lest her ranting put her socially at odds with her peers in Kedumim.[73]

Even when Tohar informs her father that she no longer desires to be observant, her father tells her that he loves her although he, perhaps patronizingly, says "when you're older you'll understand."[74] Despite this change of practice (which manifest visually in Tohar's increasingly immodest dress (by Orthodox Jewish standards), she continues to live with and remains on good terms with her parents throughout the book.

The early scene of attending the protest, as well as her dissatisfaction with religious practice strictures and tenets, alienates Tohar from normative Judaism but not from her family or community. Unlike Pekar and Kurzweil, Tohar's rejection of her parents' religiosity results not in alienation, but in a negotiation of her own religious identity. Living in a Jewish settlement affords Tohar the freedom to negotiate her identity although, as discussed below, her story is just as important for what it does not explore: The treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank or the violent history that led to the creation of a settlement like *Kedumim*.

71 Sherman Friedman, *Good Girls*, 25.
72 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 30–31.
73 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 38–41.
74 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 91.

Historical Narrative and Strategic Juxtaposition

Many of the texts that engage with the Palestinian-Israel conflict also depict historical scenes that reflect the author's perspective, showcasing how they perceive historical actors. They also show how characters (often younger versions of the author) absorb and contest certain aspects of what they have been taught, as well as the circumstances under which they learned about history. Sometimes characters empathize with specific actors, a process that is often depicted through a character's body language even if it is not acknowledged with words. Other times they contest the narrative they have received, or question what they were taught. Historical narratives may also serve a rhetorical function, reminding the reader of what has happened rather than informing them.[75]

This section will first discuss the historical narratives presented in the previously discussed American Jewish texts before comparing them to Israeli and Palestinian framings of important historical events and actors. Even though the extant graphic narratives do not cover all the same events, they are similar enough to deploy Fernheimer's strategy of strategic juxtaposition: introducing students to multiple accounts of events.

As described above, Amy Kurzweil's understanding of Jewish history is informed by her Sunday School education and by her grandmother. She is taught that the state of Israel is a necessary response to antisemitism. Her Sunday school instructor teaches that Israel has endured many wars because of "persistent anti-semitism the Middle East" writing the years 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973 on the board. She also says that many "heroes" have devoted their lives to the pursuit of peace writing the names of Ben-Gurion, Meir, and Rabin. Kurzweil challenges this view by asking who killed Rabin. A critical stance toward Israeli-centric narratives becomes part of Kurzweil's education as an "expert educated Jew." It is noteworthy Kurzweil does not consider the Palestinian perspective on this history, even as she shows the absurdity of the denial of the reality of Palestinians.

Glidden engages with historical actors and events dialogically. Using the visual language of comics, she presents herself as talking to and being challenged by historical actors. This is an opportunity for empathy, an emotional experience through which she moves from settled notions about Israel to critical skepticism.

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75 This may be the case with the depiction of extremely well-known events such as the Holocaust and the founding of the modern State of Israel.

At the Kinneret cemetery, Sarah's tour guide recounts the immigration of Jews to Palestine from Eastern Europe. The comic cuts back in time to scene where a *chalutz* reads Hayim Nachman Bialik's Zionist poem "In the City of Slaughter."[76] He tries to persuade his female companion that moving to Palestine is their only path for avoiding antisemitic violence. Sarah appears and implores them to consider the people already living in Palestine. The *chalutz* naively says "they will welcome us."[77] The *chalutz* begins agricultural work in Palestine. Sarah again appears, flapping her arms and shouting "none of you are thinking of the consequences of your actions! What you're a part of will escalate into a war in which thousands will **lose their homes!**"[78] The *chaultzim* reply that they need to take care of themselves and that they are not hostile towards the Arabs, only fighting in self-defense.[79] The scene continues, but *How to Understand's* method of engaging with history is evident: Sarah imagines herself as in dialogue with historical actors that challenge her perspective. Dialoguing with Jews of the past is part of her coming to identify with the state of Israel.

At Independence Hall, Sarah's tour guide explains that immigration to Palestine increased after World War I. Sarah, still critical of Israel, whispers to her friend that those Jews wouldn't employ any Arab laborers. She passes a painting of an artist working at an easel. The artist, now animated, tells Sarah that she would have immigrated too. Sarah waves her hand dismissively, claiming she would have left Eastern Europe for America. The artist reminds her that America had quotas for Jews, suggesting that Palestine would have been her best option.[80] In these two examples, Glidden portrays herself being challenged by the choices of historical actors, recognizing their lived reality in ways she didn't before.

Harvey Pekar's recounting of Jewish history is a parallel narrative to his own Zionist upbringing and subsequent disillusionment. Pekar and Waldman are drawn perambulating the stacks of bookstore and library shelves, reaching for familiar, scholarly-looking titles. Although Pekar never visited Israel, he believes that his extensive reading has helped him to understand the conflict. The prominence of books gives their narrative an air of authority. Traipsing from used bookstore to library gives the impression that Pekar and Waldman must know what they're talking about. Moreover,

76 Hayim Nachman Bialik, "In the City of Slaughter," University of Maryland website, https://faculty.history.umd.edu/BCooperman/NewCity/Slaughter.html.

77 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 60.

78 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 61, bold used in text for emphasis.

79 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 62.

80 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 96.

Waldman draws Pekar's face into the historical narrative to emphasize the fact that he's relaying the information. In one example, Pekar's large head overlooks the hills of Palestine as he commences explaining how Zionists purchased land from Ottoman landholders.[81] The presence of his head emphasizes that the reader is being presented with Pekar's narrative.

Pekar's narrative generally adheres to the "Lachrymose" conception of Jewish history.[82] On this view, Jewish history is almost exclusively the account of Jewish suffering and victimization. Mocking the idea of Jews as the "chosen people," Pekar rhetorically asks: "Chosen for what? To be murdered and hounded around the globe for thousands of years?"[83] The entire scope of Jewish history is thus relevant to Pekar's views on the state of Israel as it grounds his critique of it. As perennial victims, Jews, of all people, should not oppress others and should be committed to peace and security, something they have never had. Pekar rehears anti-Jewish violence from antiquity to the present. Justifying the significance of the entire narrative of Jewish history in his book about Israel, Pekar comments that "if you don't understand what's going on in the background, how are you gonna understand the main event?"[84] In other words, one cannot understand contemporary Israel without understanding Jewish history.[85]

Pekar does not engage at length with the issue of Palestinian displacement by the Zionist enterprise. In describing World War II, he says "while the war raged in Europe, the Arabs claimed Jews were pushing them out of their homes in Palestine." The accompanying image shows not the Jews displacing the Arabs (as the Palestinian comics discussed below do), but Waldmann and Pekar in a car. [86] Pekar acknowledges the conflicting accounts of the Israeli War of Independence and the "Nakba," accompanied by lines of indistinct soldiers facing each other. He also mentions that the 1948 Deir Yassin Massacre challenged his perception of Jews as virtuous.[87] Still, these scenes take up about 1/3 of a page together. Without engaging the perspective of Palestinians, his narrative is almost

81 Pekar, *Not the Israel*, 102.

82 This term was coined by Salo W. Baron in his 1963 essay "Newer Emphases in Jewish History," *Jewish Social Studies* 25, no. 4 (1963): 245–258.

83 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 5.

84 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 71.

85 Pekar's lengthy Jewish history adopts the styles of each historical period he discusses. For example, the rabbinic period appears using a mosaic-like style, while the history of the medieval period is reminiscent of the illuminated manuscripts composed in that period.

86 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 112.

87 Pekar and Waldman, *Not the Israel*, 43.

exclusively focused against Jewish actors. Pekar critiques Israel for squandering the opportunity to provide a safe haven for the Jewish people rather than for the displacement and suffering inflicted on Palestinians, even as it challenges his conception of Jewish moral superiority and perennial victimhood.

Palestinian narratives present alternative narratives to the ones discussed. Mohammad Sabaaneh begins his collection of short (usually consisting of one large panel) political cartoons, *White and Black*, with "The Story of Palestine: Some Highlights."[88] In his introduction, Sabaaneh writes that the timelines "provide a framework" for the one-panel comics.[89] The final part of the book collects comics written during his time in Israeli military detention in 2013, an experience that forms the basis of his *Power Born of Dreams*.[90]

"The Story of Palestine" is a timeline, carried across several pages, that begins in 1922 and ends in 2016, the year before the book was published. Above the timeline are densely packed scenes of violence and suffering. Sabaaneh's densely packed and cubist- landscape-oriented drawings, are reminiscent of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). In another text, Sabaaneh explains that he sees "a correlation between cubism and destruction." He chose cubism "to display what is left behind, homes demolished, a city turned to rubble" acknowledging the influence of Picasso's *Guernica*.[91]

In the panel describing the period from 1922 to 1965, gigantic Israeli soldiers herd smaller Palestinians into a temporary tent structure, reflecting their expulsion from their homes. Barbed wire wraps along their path. As bombs are dropped by war planes, Palestinian resistance fighters aim much smaller weapons at the Israelis. The text at the bottom of the page begins with 1922 when the League of Nations gave Britian a "Mandate" to govern Palestine. The next period is 1947–48 when "Zionist militias" expelled 750,000 Palestinians from their homes. Palestinians remained hopeful for a UN-backed process that would allow them to return to those homes (symbolized by the keys in Sabaaneh's drawing). When that did not materialize, Palestinian liberation groups formed.[92] The absence of any

88 Mohammad Sabaaneh, *White and Black: Political Cartoons from Palestine* (Just World Books, 2017), 6–13.

89 Sabaaneh, *White and Black*, 2.

90 Mohammad Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams: My Story is Palestine* (Street Noise Books, 2021)

91 Mohammad Sabaaneh, *30 Seconds from Gaza; Diary of a Genocide* (Interlink, 2025), 15.

92 Sabaaneh, *White and Black*, 8.

mention of the Holocaust serves as a stark contrast between Jewish and Palestinian narratives. From the Palestinian perspective, the causes of Jewish immigration to mandate Palestine, or the declaration of the state of Israel, are irrelevant when compared to the loss of life and home.

The following panel jumps to 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon in hopes of destroying the Palestinian Liberation Organization. In the process, Israel "orchestrated the entry of sharply anti-Palestinian militants into the Sabra and Shatila camps, where they slaughtered at least 1,500 residents." This event is central to *Waltz with Bashir* but absent from American-Jewish narratives.

Sabaaneh's next panels depict the first two intifadas, the stalled peace process of the Oslo Accords (during which the "separation wall" was built and Israeli settlements in the West Bank proliferated), and (in the last panel covering 2015–2016) "renewed attention to Jerusalem and the right of return."[93]

Leila Abdelrazaq's *Baddawi* graphically narrates the coming-of-age of her father Ahmad in the refugee camp Baddawi in Lebanon. The comic begins with the founding of the state of Israel, described as the *Nakba*. It opens with a map showing the village of Safsaf, home to 1,000 people, near the Palestinian/Lebanese border.[94] On October 29, 1948, "the Irgun storms and ethnically cleanses Safsaf."[95] Abdelrazaq's language is charged, unambiguously emphasizing Israeli violence. The image shows seven men tied together being watched by solider brandishing guns and grinning with teeth that appear crocodilian. The text elaborates that men were shot and killed, their bodes dumped in a pit, and three girls were raped. These bodily violations aren't depicted visually. Instead, Abdelrazaq's family is shown fleeing. The next panel shows the outline of an Israeli soldier pointing a gun at the white outline of a family, showing their absence in Palestine. The text explains that "Zionist gangs were ethnically cleansing villages all over Palestine, committing widespread massacres. After Israel was established, they barred Palestinians from returning home, in direct violation of UN Resolution #194, the Right of Return."[96] This is how Ahmad, the Palestinian child born in 1959, came to be born in a refugee camp.

Ahmad is raised with a strong commitment to Palestinian culture and identity. This strongly rejects Golda Meir's claim that there was no Palestine

93 Sabaaneh, *White and Black*, 9–13.

94 Leila Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi* (Just World Books, 2015), 14, 16.

95 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 17.

96 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 18.

or Palestinian identity before 1948.[97] Violence and displacement continue to shape Ahmad's life in Lebanon, but he nonetheless has something of a regular childhood. He goes to school, forms friendships, and is cared for by his elders. When Ahmad expresses the desire for money to buy soccer shoes, his mother offers to pay him for collecting thyme. The narrative explains that thyme is an essential ingredient in za'atar, "a staple ingredient in every Palestinian household."[98] Several pages depict Ahmad peacefully gathering herbs and then preparing the spice blend. When Ahmad returns home, his mother optimistically claims that the next time Ahmad gathers herbs, it will be in Palestine. She tells him that "the Arab armies are going to fight the Israelis. It looks like we are going to win! This means that we can leave the camp and go back to Safsaf."[99] This example shows how Ahmad develops attachment to Palestine even in exile as well as the broader Palestinian commitment to their homeland.

Ahmad's mother's prediction of an imminent return to Safsaf was wrong. The next page introduces "al-Naksa" (the setback), a term for the 1967 military conflict. The text explains that the Israeli military victory resulted in the displacement of 300,000 Palestinians, an "ethnic cleansing" of the region that resulted in the "most brutal military occupation of modern times in the West Bank and Gaza." *Al-Naksa* is, for Palestinians, a "second *Nakba*."[100] A Palestinian boy, perhaps Ahmad, reaches a path leading to an outline of the state of Israel (with a sign pointing toward it reading "Palestine" in Arabic) that is now cracked. This graphically shows the perception that a return to Palestine will be more difficult after 1967.

Tensions flare in 1969 when the Israeli military enters Baddawi, killing Palestinian resistance leaders as well as any witnesses.[101] Later, when Israeli forces bomb the camp, Ahmad's family decides to move to the large city of Beirut.[102] But violent conflict, including the 1973 "Spring of Youth"[103] incident in which Israeli troops killed three Palestinian leaders in Beirut, and the 1975 "Bus Massacre" that fomented the Lebanese Civil War, made it difficult for Ahmad to continue his education.[104] He asks to return to Baddawi to focus on his studies. The panel depicting their deliberation shows

97 Sacco discusses this as well in *Palestine* (Fantagraphics, 2024), 42.
98 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 31.
99 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 34.
100 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 35.
101 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 40–41.
102 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 62–66.
103 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 73.
104 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 80.

Ahmad's parents caught between soldiers on one side and a tank on the other, reflecting both the tensions in the region and their concerns about letting their son go. From Baddawi, Ahmad applies to and is accepted into the University of Houston. Although his parents encourage him to marry a woman with whom he has become close, and attend American University in Beirut, he reasons that the job prospects for a Palestinian in Beirut would be limited. *Baddawi* uses the visual language of comics to display decision as the alternative of two paths, one to America and the other to Lebanon, both leading to Palestine. Either way, the text suggests, Ahmad's true home is in Palestine.[105] He leaves for America, not knowing that he won't return for a decade.[106] In *Baddawi*, the political and military events dictate the opportunities for the life of a Palestinian refugee family while neither consigning it to a life of complete suffering or severing its connection to Palestine.

Joe Sacco characterizes his work as "comics journalism."[107] Comics journalism reject the norm of objectivity. Rather than trying to present a perfectly accurate account of "what happened" from a "viewerless position,"[108] Sacco, by drawing himself in the narrative, acknowledges that his reporting is inherently subjective and, more to the point, interpretive.[109] Sacco explicitly distinguishes between journalistic accuracy and objectivity. Although he endeavors to present things accurately, his artistic work requires some amount of imagination. A drawing necessarily "reflects the vision of an individual cartoonist." Sacco emphatically rejects the journalistic pretention to complete objectivity or a "slavish adherence to 'balance.'" By drawing himself into comics, Sacco signals to the reader that journalism is "a process with seams and imperfections, practiced by a human being."[110] Sacco consistently wears glasses, obscuring his eyes and, hence, making his facial expressions more challenging to discern.[111] Even when Sacco isn't visible in a

105 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 113.

106 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 116.

107 Sacco's oeuvre has received considerable scholarly attention. See the essays in Daniel Worden, ed., *The Comics of Joe Sacco: Journalism" in a Visual World* (University Press of Mississippi, 2015) and Chute, *Disaster Drawn*. Sacco's other works of comics journalism are highly influential but beyond the purview of this article.

108 Marc Singer, "Views from Nowhere: Journalistic Detachment in *Palestine*," in *The Comics of Joe Sacco*, ed. Worden, 67–81, 69–71.

109 Isabel Macdoland, Drawing on the Facts: Comics Journalism and the Critique of Objectivity" in *The Comics of Joe Sacco*, ed. Worden, 54–68, 57.

110 Joe Sacco, *Journalism* (Metropolitan Books, 2012), xiii.

111 Wendy Kozol argues that the glasses call attention to Sacco's status as a voyeur with a privileged position in the story. See, Wendy Kozol, "Complicities of Witnessing in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*" in *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and*

frame, his interlocutors are regularly drawn as speaking to the reader who inhabits Sacco's position. It is not uncommon for a page to include a speaker relaying memories and their memory depicted visually on the same page. This temporal layering, licensed by the visual language of comics, is a unique component of comics journalism.

Sacco's views are far from opaque, as he bears witness to the lived experience of Palestinians and to their mistreatment. Even as Sacco bears witnesses to suffering, he is cognizant of what Hilary Chute terms "the instability of knowing." Comics, she explains, is "always already self-consciously … an interpretive, and never purely mimetic, medium."[112] Throughout his Palestinian comics, Sacco draws upon eyewitness accounts of Palestinians and Israelis while acknowledging his own role in shaping the narrative. Even when he uses the visual language of comics, he aims to be authentic to his sources.[113]

Sacco completed several journalistic tours of the West Bank and Gaza in the early 1990s and 2000s (resulting in *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza*, respectively). *Footnotes in Gaza* narrates the attempt to record memories of the 1956 Khan Younis Massacre. The official record of the episode in which 275 Palestinians were killed reports that "there is some conflict in the accounts given as to the causes of the casualties." The report claims that Palestinians engaged in armed resistance of Israeli soldiers even as it acknowledges that "the refugees state that all resistance had ceased at the time of the incident" and that the civilians were unarmed." [114]

Footnotes in Gaza largely refutes the notion of Palestinian resistance. Throughout the comic, Sacco surveys elderly witnesses to the conflict, recording both their reports of events and the process of interviewing them. Depicting the memories in comics visualizes different possible versions of history. Sacco's interlocutors present conflicting memories, a problem he addresses in a chapter titled "memory and the essential truth."[115] To give one example, witnesses disagree on whether Israeli soldiers lined up the men of

Literature, ed. Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore, 165–179 (Routledge, 2012), 167.

112 Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 198.

113 Marc Singer argues that, in *Palestine*, Sacco's rejection of objectivity is "highly selective" in "effac[ing] himself at the moments that most disturb his own liberalism humanist views "such as when Palestinians support attacking civilians or expresses antisemitic views (Singer, "Views from Nowhere," 78–79).

114 Joe Sacco, *Footnotes in Gaza* (Metropolitan Books, 2009), 117. The full report is included as an appendix.

115 Sacco, *Footnotes in Gaza*, 112.

one family in front of their home in Khan Younis and shot them together, or if they shot them as they came out of the house, or if some escaped.[116] Despite these incongruous memories, none of his interlocutors disagree about the violence or the brutality of the attack, even if the full truth is lost to history.

Early in *Palestine*, Sacco relates the development of the state of Israel in comics in a mocking tone. Herzl is depicted in the hills of Israel with several behatted Europeans behind him giving his famous quotation: "[A] land without a people for a people without a land!"[117] In some ways, *Palestine*, by showing the lives of Palestinians, is a refutation of Herzl's proclamation specifically and the notion that Israel is exclusively for Jewish people.

A rare instance in *Palestine* when Sacco departs from the comics form and opts for prose is a section entitled "Remind Me." The chapter opens with a horde of children on a busy muddy dirt road looking out at the reader asking, "What is your name?" They are from the Balata refugee camp, the largest in the West Bank. Some Palestinians living in Balata "fled or were forced out of what is now Israel in 1948." Sacco somewhat rhetorically asks, "Do we need to talk about 1948? It's hardly a secret how the Zionists used rumors, threats, and massacres to expel the Arabs and create new demographics that guaranteed the Jewish nature of Israel."[118] Over the next page full of prose, the only images are the portraits of former Israeli Prime Ministers David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir. Sacco quotes Meir's claim that there was no Palestinian identity prior to 1948, a claim Sacco emphatically rejects. He writes, underlining words for emphasis: "But they <u>did</u> exist, and they <u>do</u>, and here they are … and their children's children … and <u>still</u> they are refugees."[119] Sacco's stilted prose, with three-dot pauses used for dramatic effect, slowly reject Meir's proclamations. Balata's residents are suspended between history and the present. They are refugees, but their homes were likely among those razed in 1948 or taken by Israeli settlers. In Balata they have a "shabby permanence," as do many other places in which Palestinians live in Gaza and the West Bank.[120] By showing the present condition of Palestinians in his comics, Sacco gives the lie to Meir's narrative while bearing witness to Palestinian suffering, past and present.

116 Sacco, *Footnotes in Gaza*, 103–116 covers the entire incident.
117 Sacco, *Palestine*, 12.
118 Sacco, *Palestine*, 41–42.
119 Sacco, *Palestine*, 42.
120 Sacco, *Palestine*, 42.

Why did Sacco use prose? It could be that portraying the well-known history was deemed unnecessary. Or, as *Palestine* is motivated by a desire to bear witness to Palestinian life, illustrating Israeli political heroes risked dignifying them. Sacco thus deemphasizes the well-known narrative of the founding of Israel in favor of the lived reality of Palestinians.

Boaz Yakin's *Jerusalem: A Family Portrait*, created in collaboration with artist Nick Bertozzi, presents the dynamics of a Jewish family in Palestine in the period just before and after the founding of the state of Israel. Two brothers, born in Jerusalem at the end of the nineteenth century, Izak and Yakov Halaby, can barely stand each other. Three of Izak's sons are politically engaged: one serves in the Jewish Brigade of the British forces, another joins the Palmach, and a third works with the communist underground which includes Arabs as well as Jews.

Jerusalem troubles any easy narrative of the founding of the state of Israel. Jews in Mandate Palestine were subject to abuse from French and British powers. In an early scene, a French Catholic teacher hits a student for speaking the forbidden language of Hebrew. As he resists and is dragged out of the room, he sings "Down with the white paper" and "*David melech Israel, Chai, chai, vekayam*!"[121] The former references the 1939 White Paper issued by the British as part of their colonial governance. The latter is a popular Hebrew song lauding the biblical King David, in this context promoting Jewish sovereignty.

British soldiers are ubiquitous in Jerusalem, often coming into conflict with Jews. In one scene, British soldiers enter Izak's house in search of anti-British leaflets. They gratuitously destroy the kitchen, breaking plates and leaving it in disarray before coercing Izak to sign a document attesting that the search was orderly and nothing was "unduly appropriated by the present officers."[122] Izak is later stopped in the street and hit with the butt of a British soldier's gun before being forced to present his papers.[123] Given these circumstances, the euphoria surrounding Israel's declared independence is understandable. In an extended scene, both free and imprisoned Jews huddle around radios as the votes are tallied before exploding into the streets in celebration.[124]

Jerusalem also shows one of the Halaby brothers participating in the Deir Yassin Massacre of 1948. Although both Palestinian villagers and Israeli

121 Boaz Yakin and Nick Bertozzi, *Jerusalem: A Family Portrait* (First Second, 2013), 10.
122 Yakin and Bertozzi, *Jerusalem*, 59–63.
123 Yakin and Bertozzi, *Jerusalem*, 98–99.
124 Yakin and Bertozzi, *Jerusalem*, 216–245.

soldiers of the Hagana engage in conflict, the villagers are largely unarmed. Graphic scenes of bloodied Palestinian bodies, as well as women and children fleeing, now showcase Jews as aggressors rather than victims. *Jerusalem* provides a different perspective from those discussed earlier. For Jews living in Mandate Palestine, the British and French are their main foes. But the fighters of the nascent Jewish state are not mere innocent victims as they participate in the military sieges of Deir Yassin and, later, Latrun.

Ari Folman and David Polonsky's *Waltz with Bashir*, like *Footnotes in Gaza*, seeks to excavate the truth from the realm of memory and forgetting. It chronicles Folman's quest to discover what happened during his time serving in the Israeli army in 1982 when its actions facilitated the Sabra and Shatila Massacre. Folman suffers from amnesia, likely a product of PTSD. He interviews fellow soldiers, friends, military leaders, and even an academic. Folman's traumatic amnesia slowly fades as he learns about others' experiences.

The comic shows how the Israeli military facilitated the massacre of over 1500 Palestinians by Christian Phalangists in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp. Israeli soldiers are witnesses to the conflict and, only once it is discovered, understand their role in allowing it. For example, Folman comes to understand that he set off flares that alighted the camps, allowing the Palestinians to be murdered. Drawing on historical memory, Ari's friend Ori surmises that Ari felt himself "cast in the role of [a] Nazi," a cog in the machine of mass murder.[125]

Waltz With Bashir challenges Sabanneh's historical narrative of Israeli soldiers as flat aggressors as well as the "heroic" narrative promoted by Kurzweil's teacher and some Birthright tour guides.

Trauma, Violence, and Witnessing

Scholarship on many of the texts explored here emphasizes its role as witnesses to the conflict.[126] The notion of witnessing is used by scholars to denote the process of "bearing witness," attesting to the reality of what happened with a (*pace* Chute) "desire to understand." It is an activity that foregrounds the humanity of the victim rather than making the violence

125 Ari Folman and David Polonsky, *Waltz with Bashir: A Lebanon War Story* (Metropolitan Book, 2009), 106–107.

126 C.f. Amy Mazowita, "Privileged Witnessing and the Graphic Self in Sarah Glidden's *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less*," *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society*, 6, no. 1 (2022): 26–44; Chute, *Disaster Drawn*.

against them a spectacle.[127] This section explores the different ways authors function as witnesses to the conflict by focusing on how they depict violence.

Sacco's work is often the most graphic in terms of its depiction of violence and serves as a useful contrast with other comics, especially Palestinian narratives. Sacco, the "comics journalist," takes great pains to present Palestinian people and perspectives in his texts. Sacco realistically depicts Palestinian bodies (displaying the full range of human emotions), homes, and cities. As a journalist, he is a witness: an observer of rather than an actor in the conflict. But as a comics journalist, Sacco draws himself into his comics, depicting himself as an "on the ground" witness to the conflict.

Illustrating the violence inflicted by Israeli soldiers is essential to Sacco's project. As he receives conflicting reports of the Massacre, he sketches conflicting memories to contest the official document that suggests Palestinian violence against soldiers. In a concluding scene that considers different accounts of the murder of the brothers of a Palestinian man Khamis, Sacco writes: "But all this should not let us forget the essential truth: Khamis's three brothers were shot dead by Israeli soldiers." These words hang about a scene of three men and an infant splayed on each other, all with stomach wounds. As Sacco accepts "the problems that go along with relying on eyewitness testimony in telling our story," the incontrovertible fact of violence remains.[128] The realistic portrayal of dead and wounded bodies risks undermining the dignity of victims by making the violence against them, rather than their humanity, the spectacle. This risk may explain the difference between how Sacco and the Palestinian authors portray violence against Palestinians.

The Palestinians develop their perspectives through direct encounters with the Israelis, almost exclusively Israeli military personnel. But this does not always manifest as dehumanizing hatred of the enemy. Discussing his political cartoons, Sabaaneh writes that he attempted to "spot the humanity of the occupier." However, he adds, "this effort proved difficult to sustain when an Israeli soldier placed handcuffs around my wrists or dragged me from an interrogation room or prevented me from moving from one part of my homeland to another."[129]

Born in Kuwait in 1979, Sabaaneh moved to Palestine in 2000, just before the Second Intifada. Like Abdelrazaq's father Ahmad, Sabaaneh had been raised on images of the "Palestinian hero who struggled for freedom

127 Chute, *Disaster Drawn*, 29–33.
128 Sacco, *Footnotes in Gaza*, 116.
129 Sabaaneh, *White and Black*, 2.

and justice in an idealized Palestine."[130] He had been drawing political cartoons for years when he was arrested in 2013 and spent five months in prison, part of it in solitary confinement. In the introduction to his 2017 collection *White and Black*, Sabaaneh writes that in prison he questions his lionization of the Palestinian political prisoner. Imprisoned himself, Sabaaneh is unable to consider himself a hero due to his "weaknesses" of fear and pain. "Was everything I drew a lie?" Sabaaneh wonders. He suggests that the myth of the heroic prisoner was a "coping mechanism" necessary to survive the "dehumanizing" conditions of imprisonment while safeguarding their ability to resist the occupation.[131]

Sabaaneh narrates his grueling ordeal in Israeli military detention in *Power Born of Dreams* in his trademark cubist, wood-cut style. Adding a dark tinge to the comic, the pages are black and the words and images are colored white, perhaps reflecting the darkness of prison life. In one scene, an Israeli soldier leads a blindfolded Sabaaneh to an interrogation room via a winding path of stairs reminiscent of the work of M.C. Escher, thereby reflecting the surreal experience of being in prison.[132] Soldiers shout at an uncomprehending Sabaaneh before he bears the tedium of solitary confinement.[133] In prison, Sabaaneh is visited by a bird, a symbol of freedom (as the free bird contrasts with Sabaaneh's state). He first relates his story of imprisonment to the bird beginning with an Israeli soldier mocking the idea that Sabaaneh is a hero now that he is in prison. Rather, he is among "criminals and thugs."[134] Sabaaneh is taken to Naqab Prison where, living now in barracks among prisoners experiencing obvious distress, he learns that "no matter where you are, life needs hope."[135] The bird suggests helping Sabaaneh's artistic pursuits: The bird will bring stories of Palestinians from the outside and Sabaaneh will draw them.

In one story, a couple (Amir and the pregnant Manal) living in the "chaotic" area of Kafr Aqab (in East Jerusalem in the West Bank) brave considerable traffic to get to an Israeli checkpoint in hopes of entering Jerusalem so Manal, now in labor, can give birth. The guard refuses to let them through, shouting at the parents. "But the child refused to obey" and is born in spite of the refusal. They are depicted frowning with their hands on their temples as the mother's umbilical cord is still attached. In the next

130 Sabaaneh, *White and Black*, 1.
131 Sabaaneh, *White and Black*, 1–2.
132 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 5–6.
133 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 6–11.
134 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 22.
135 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 24.

panel, Amir triumphantly holds up the smiling child, birth their first act of defiance of the Israeli occupation.[136]

Another tells the story of Ziad, an older teacher in Palestine. His job exposes him to the excruciating pain of his young students coming to class with bullet wounds and broken bones.[137] One student's mother comes to his classroom and announces between sobs: "I am the mother of the void that sits between you."[138] The scene ends with Ziad gesturing towards the sky. The accompanying text reads: "One day you realize you have acquired your share of your country's suffering. It is the price we pay, so cry a little. Then smile for the hope of historic justice that may come."[139] Witnessing this amount of pain is not a cause for despair but, instead, for resilience and hope. The bird laments that he cannot bring Sabaaneh all the stories of Palestinian suffering as "there are too many to be told." Israeli military personnel are depicted as aggressors, often shouting at Sabaaneh or keeping him in chains. But the focus of his time in prison is bearing witness to Palestinian suffering as well as Palestinian resilience.

Baddawi depicts violence less graphically than Sacco. The death of "the butcher" Abu Muhammad is a case in point. A teenaged Ahmad regularly visits Abu Muhammed, the butcher, who serves Ahmad a Kafta sandwich. The panel zooms in on Muhammad's hands as he explains that he is making Ahmad's Kafta "special today — fresh!" He adds "only the best for my family!" explaining that as Ahmad's sister Afaf is marrying his son, they are related. Muhammed consequently refuses to accept any money from Ahmad. Kafta is associated with Palestinian culture. Even in the refugee camp Ahmad is cared for by his Palestinian elders with Palestinian food.

Several pages later, Ahmad visits Abu Mohammed after being cheated out of a day's pay for his manual labor musing that "on days like this" only Abu Muhammed can make him feel better. The butcher gives Ahmad a Kafta sandwich and pats him on the shoulder. In the next scene an explosion occurs. The word "Boom!" takes up the center of the page. Ahmad rushes to the scene as woman shouts "they shelled the butcher's! A man holds the black shadow of a figure and says "Abu Muhammad! He's Dead![140] In depicting the death of a figure beloved by the protagonist, Abdelrazaq uses the language of comics to show that he was killed rather than showing his

136 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 34–35.
137 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 46–47.
138 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 47.
139 Sabaaneh, *Power Born of Dreams*, 47.
140 Abdelrazaq, *Baddawi*, 98–99.

death in graphic detail. The reader connects the "Boom" with the butcher's death. Bearing witness Abu Muhmmad's death is accomplished not by focusing on how he died or the spectacle of his body; rather, the comic emphasizes his kindness and humanity.

Even when the political and moral implications of Palestine are acknowledged, Palestinians as people are largely absent from American Jewish narratives and Sherman-Friedman's memoir. Consequently, graphic depictions of violence are rare in their texts. Kurzweil acknowledges the military aspects of the conflict. But they remain abstract to her. Pekar operates in a documentary mode in his account of Jewish history, often with small panels that require the reader to get close to the page to see their details. Two salient exceptions are the 1937 murder of the British district commissioner Lewis Yelland Andrews by anti-British Arab militants. Three men are depicted with blood gushing from their heads as four Arab fighters with shot guns stand behind them.[141] This contrasts with the depiction of the Deir Yassin massacre. This incident in which "militant Zionists killed 200 or more Arabs in cold blood" helped Pekar to challenge the idea that Jewish people were inherently virtuous.[142] The panel shows the aftermath of the massacre with indistinct bodies arranged in two rows and a non-descript figure standing around them. It is noteworthy that the comic depicts Arab-on-British violence graphically while showing only the aftermath of the Israeli attack on Palestinians.

How to Understand bears witness to the victims of terrorist attacks in Israel by depicting the presence of absence. In an emotional scene, the relatives of victims of terrorist attacks tell their stories to the Birthright group. A Jewish Israeli man, Amit tells the story of his sister who died in a suicide bombing. As he recounts his grief and anger, and how he was exempt from mandatory military service due to being a bereaved family member, his sister appears as a white ghost, listening to him and reacting emotionally to the story. The brother of a Palestinian woman who was killed also speaks. Rather than depicting the violence that ended their lives, Glidden conjures their likeness to show what they meant to their family members. Glidden foregrounds the humanity of the victims and the tragedy of their death (through depicting them as a ghost), rather than the spectacle of their death.[143] The acknowledgement of Israeli and Palestinian casualties and trauma foments Sarah's shifting perspective.

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141 Pekar and Walman, *Not The Israel*, 111.

142 Pekar and Walman, *Not The Israel*, 43.

143 Glidden, *How to Understand*, 150–153.

Sherman-Friedman rarely experiences violence despite living in the West Bank. In a chapter titled "Living in Peace" she comments that life in Kedumim "goes along at a slower pace than the rest of the world."[144] The relatively calm setting of Kedumim contrasts sharply with the experience of Palestinians, such as Abdelrazaq's father Ahmed, living under military occupation. Sherman-Friedman briefly contends with violence when her sister Tiferrett, after trying to persuade Tohar to leave her friends and come for a drive, had stones thrown at her when she drove through the Palestinian village of al-Funduq. Tiferett is uninjured as the stones only damaged the passenger seat where Tohar could have been sitting had she gone for a drive with Tiferett. As Tiferett, in tears, sits on the couch being consoled by her parents, Sherman-Friedman's juxtaposes two visualizations of the attack. In one, Tohar sits in the passenger seat gazing out the window, unaware of the impending attack. In the other, it shows a large object having crashed through the passenger seat window with Tiferett in the driver's seat.[145]

Tohar's other sisters understand this as a case of divine protection. They encourage Tohar to understand the near-miss as a case of divine protection which casts doubt on Toahr's rejection of the existence of God. She draws herself in the modest clothing of Orthodoxy, a contrast to the tank top she wore upon learning of the attack. The panel depicting Tohar contemplating that she was ungrateful to God in her hasty rejection of divine existence shows her splayed on her bed alongside her modest clothes.[146] However, her faith is short-lived as she hears on the radio about a fatal attack on the 12 bus that left six dead and 40 injured. Although the violence is not depicted visually, and Tohar learns about the attack on the radio, it elicits a dramatic response. She muses on the theodicy problem: How could a good God allow so much death? The next two panels show Tohar slipping her copy of the Hebrew Bible into a drawer, symbolically showing she has abandoned her faith. Tohar writes: "I was mad at myself for having lost my identity, my way. How could I, on a whim, almost have joined the millions of people mutter psalm eyes closed, deep in religious texts, looking for signs?" The panel shows mourners, interspersed with typical portents of bad luck: a ladder, a black cat, a broken mirror. The juxtaposition suggests that Jewish belief and practice are no more defensible than superstition.[147]

Folman and Polonsky's project of memory recovery includes some scenes of violence, but they come towards the end of the comic, once

144 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 80.
145 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 107.
146 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 107.
147 Sherman-Friedman, *Good Girls*, 108.

Folman has begun to regain his memory. In the book's climax, a young Folman walks through the Lebanese refugee camp and, witnessing piles of dead bodies, he has the epiphany that he later represses— he was "looking at a massacre."[148]

The range of approaches to depicting violence, from the realistic to the implied, using the gutter of the comics page, reflects the different roles violent conflict plays in each narrative. American narratives rarely depict violence directly, given their focus on negotiating their own identity. Given their goals of preserving and promoting historical memory, Folman, Yakin, and Sacco depict the violence that occurred both by and against Israelis and Palestinians. Perhaps surprisingly, Palestinians depict violence less graphically. The Palestinian narratives function as connection witnesses by collecting and recounting stories of victimization while emphasizing a resilient to Palestinian freedom. They acquire this sentiment through their lived experience in Palestine, solidarity with other Palestinian victims, and their familial stories. For them, Palestinian victimhood does not need to be demonstrated; it is the recognition of Palestinian humanity that is lacking.

Conclusion

This article has examined how graphic narratives can be used to teach three aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: its relevance to questions of Jewish identity, how different actors narrate its history, and the different approaches taken to bearing witness to violent conflict. It builds on extant scholarship that shows the utility of graphic narratives in disciplines such as political science and rhetoric.

Other graphic narratives can be added to this discussion to nuance other aspects of the conflict. For example, Miriam Libicki's *jobnik*! (2008) details her time as an American serving in the Israeli army during the First Intifada.[149] Guy Delisle's *Jerusalem: Chronicles of the Holy City* (2013) is a travelogue of his year in Jerusalem accompanying his wife who works for Médecins Sans Frontières.[150] Works depicting the events of October 7, 2023 are already being published, including works by Sabaaneh and the French collection *Au Coeur du 7 Octobre*, edited by Uri Fink and published by Delcourt

148 Folman and Polonsky, *Waltz with Bashir*, 113.

149 Miriam Libicki, *jobnik!: An American Girl's Adventures in the Israeli Army* (Real Gone Girl Studios, 2008).

150 Guy Delisle's, *Jerusalem: Chronicles of the Holy City* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2013).

in 2024.[151] As the conflict continues, graphic narratives can help us to understand the range of perspectives people have toward the conflict

Brian Hillman *(he/him) is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Towson University in Towson, MD. His research focuses on modern Jewish thought, mysticism, religion and literature, and religion and popular culture. His work has appeared in the* Journal of Jewish Identities, Jewish Studies Quarterly, *and* Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal*, among other venues.*

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151 Uri Fink, ed., *Au Coeur du 7 Octobre* (Delcourt, 2024).