

# Deconstructing Gilgul, Finding Identity

## Captain America and the Winter Soldier in a Judaistic Perspective

### ABSTRACT

Captain America and Bucky, characters who appear in Marvel Comics, seem to be temporally displaced. The article scrutinizes that temporal displacement, comparing it with the Judaistic concept of *gilgul* – the transmigration or reincarnation of the soul – in Kabbalah and Hasidism. Furthermore, the article compares the presentation of these characters and their displacement in the original comics and the subsequent movies.

### KEYWORDS

Marvel Comics, Movies of Marvel Comics, Judaism, Reincarnation

### BIOGRAPHY

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For about a decade there has been a significant increase in the number of publications about the relationship between Jews, Jewishness and Judaism, on one hand, and comics, on the other. Noteworthy popular or journalistic studies that are the work of comic-industry insiders, comic journalists or savvy fans document the history of primarily American comics and their Jewish authors.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, however, scholarly interest in Jews and comics has grown notably and looks beyond American production.<sup>2</sup> In both instances Judaism as religion may be touched upon, but it is infrequently the focus of these studies. Instead they tend to concentrate mostly on Jews and their history as a people and some-

1 Fingeroth 2007; Kaplan 2008.

2 Baskind/Omer-Sherman 2010; Benhaïm 2007; Buhle 2008; Strömberg 2012; Tabachnick 2014; Leroy 2015.

times adopt the newer inner-Jewish perspective that reconstructs Jewishness as a culture, with Judaism a vital formative ingredient.<sup>3</sup> Yet an ultimately religious reading of comics can also be identified – as has also been evident for Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

The authors, especially when scholars, do not necessarily stem from the religious background they are analyzing in the comics.<sup>5</sup> I, too, am not Jewish. I am, however, fascinated by Judaism and its vast history of theological thinking, and I currently work on Judaism in Franco-Belgian comics. My non-Jewishness notwithstanding, I would like to present here a Judaistic reading of the Captain America comics and movies. The series was created by Jewish authors and artists, although since the time of Joe Simon, Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, many other authors have worked on the series, not all of them Jewish. Furthermore, the movies have been produced, written and directed by a diverse group of creative people, although they draw on material from throughout the series, including the very first episodes of the 1940s and 1960s. That situation necessitates some methodological reflections at the beginning of this article; subsequently I scrutinize Captain America and Ed Brubaker's reactivation of Bucky Barnes in comics and movies using a Judaistic and Kabbalistic perspective focused on the concept of *gilgul*.

## MARVEL COMICS AND JUDAISM: METHODOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES

Neither Stan Lee nor Jack Kirby intentionally involved Judaism or even Jewishness as a cultural trait in their comics. Lee, who was in a mixed marriage, never seems to have had strong ties to his religious background, and he explicitly denied ever reflecting on the Jewishness of his creations.<sup>6</sup> Kirby, by contrast, came from a religious family and seems to have been a practicing Jew, yet he, too, did not intentionally involve his religion in his co-plotting<sup>7</sup> – at least not before he left Marvel in 1971 and created his Fourth World saga and, in his later days, comics such as *Silverstar*. A similar distancing from their religious roots can be seen in other Jewish members of the Marvel bullpen. Indeed evident religious references sought to ensure that their Marvel comics blended in with the dominant Christian American culture. So, for example, the wedding of Reed Richards and Sue Storm of the Fantastic Four is not carried out as a Jewish marriage,

3 Biale 2002, 2011; Bronner 2008.

4 Weinstein 2006; Garrett 2008.

5 Ahrens/Brinkmann/Riemer 2015.

6 Brod 2012, 90.

7 Brod 2012, 85, 89.

but is prepared and performed by an obviously Christian clergyman.<sup>8</sup> In *Captain America* explicit positive references to Christianity can even be found. At the end of one of his frays with Batroc, Captain America emphasizes the value of giving one's "life for the masses" as someone did "centuries ago", an apparent reference to Jesus.<sup>9</sup> Two years later Captain America cites Matthew 16:26 to underline the importance of remaining true to oneself.<sup>10</sup> A reader's comment on the first reference that appears on the letters page supposes that Stan Lee's "religious background probably is that of the traditional Christian view in America", a supposition that goes uncorrected.<sup>11</sup> While it is indeed the case that there are no responses to any of the letters on that page, when that absence is seen together with the positive references to Christianity, it can be understood as an attempt to camouflage Lee's Jewish identity and assimilate the comics to the dominant Christian culture.

Thus, aside from Izzy Cohen of Sgt. Fury's Howling Commandos or Sidney Levine of S.H.I.E.L.D, who seem to have been the very first Jewish characters in comic books (and still could not be labeled as such),<sup>12</sup> explicitly Jewish characters and Jewish themes are only found in Marvel comics more than a decade later – for example, in Kitty Pryde and in Magneto's Jewish background in Chris Claremont's X-Men stories and subsequent films.<sup>13</sup> Comic experts and scholars broadly agree, however, that Lee and Kirby both intuitively drew on their Judaistic and Jewish heritage when they developed their characters and plots.<sup>14</sup> Consequently such references in their comics remain indirect: Judaism appears in disguise in character traits, transfigured narrative topoi, and values that are often amalgamated with American civil religion. In Lee and Kirby's *Captain America* the references to Judaism that can be reconstructed are therefore mostly, perhaps solely, implicit.

Ed Brubaker attests to having been "raised going to church"; he therefore has a Christian background, even though he emphasizes that he does not believe in God and is not a religious person.<sup>15</sup> While it is still possible that Brubaker uses Judaistic references to embellish his stories, they would therefore seem unlikely to be intentional. None of his interviews give any clues to anything more. Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely, the scriptwriters of the *Captain America* movies, also provide no information about any deliberate referencing of Judaism. Certainly Brubaker, Marcus and McFeely draw heavily upon

8 Fantastic Four 37/1965, 19f; Fantastic Four Annual 3/1965, 23.

9 Captain America 105/1968, 20.

10 Captain America 122/1970, 4.

11 Captain America 108/1968, LP.

12 Fingeroth 2007, 108–109.

13 Brod 2012, 93–94.

14 Fingeroth 2007, 92–112; Kaplan 2008, 92–115, 126–136; Brod 2012, 66–100.

15 Brubaker 2012.

the classic Captain America stories by Lee and Kirby, which leaves open the possibility that they have unintentionally and unknowingly incorporated indirect references to Judaism generated by the original authors, but that argument is rather tenuous, and hardly provides solid foundations for Judaistic references in Brubaker's take on Captain America and in Marcus and McFeely's movies.

I adopt here a different hermeneutic approach. German scholarly culture still prefers to look for explicit intentions or, at least, implicit links in an author's background when the specific traits of that author's work are being reconstructed. American scholars, however, permit themselves to adopt thematic perspectives that cannot be linked with authorial intent or background.<sup>16</sup> In that approach, a relationship with religion is established largely on the sole basis of the text itself. I shall meander between those two approaches – I hold it likely that Lee and Kirby unintentionally created parallels to Judaism in their narrative constructions, whereas it seems to me that the narrative creations of Brubaker, Marcus and McFeely may involuntarily carry links to these parallels where they use material generated by Lee and Kirby. Additionally, the application of a Judaistic perspective to Captain America and Bucky is legitimate when structural or topological parallels can be established and provides interesting insights even when a direct or indirect relationship between the narrative material and Judaism cannot be substantiated.

In that respect I shall scrutinize the temporal displacement and ordeals of Captain America and Bucky in comics and movies through the lens of the Judaistic concept of *gilgul* (reincarnation). As we will see, *gilgul* and the displacement of Captain America and Bucky have significant topological correlations. A reader might wonder why I choose to concentrate on *gilgul* rather than on the broader traditions of Hinduism or Buddhism, where reincarnation certainly has a more central position; I would point out to that reader the established links of Captain America to Judaism, and the absence of any such links to Asian religions (although I recognize a Hinduist or Buddhist view can be applied<sup>17</sup>). Furthermore, both the concept of *gilgul* and Captain America's quest have identity as a background theme, with both affirming that identity can only be found by understanding oneself in relation to community and by working for the betterment of the world (*tikkun*).<sup>18</sup> That position is distinct from the modern (and

16 Mills/Morehead/Parker 2013, 5.

17 See, for example, Mohapatra 2010.

18 There may also be parallels in the tradition of American literature, where we also find accounts of the temporal displacement of a character, as for example in Washington Irving's "Rip van Winkle" or Mark Twain's "Yankee at King Arthur's Court". While the latter sends someone into the past (the most common form of time travel, in science fiction too), Rip van Winkle travels to the future – as does Donald Duck in a classic 1950s Carl Barks story based, ironically, on Irving's tale (WDCS 112/1950). It might be revealing to consider at least Irving's endeavor in relation to Captain America – but my goal here is different. Other than with Carl Barks in the cited story, Kirby and Lee – like Brubaker, Markus and McFeely – do not establish obvious connections with the literary tradition.

more traditionally American) idea of individual identity as something constituted only by the subject and only free of social bounds, but it is in line with the broad Judaistic tradition of emphasizing the importance of community and the Judaistic topos of healing the world.

## THE MANY LIVES OF CAPTAIN AMERICA AND BUCKY

When Joe Simon and Jack Kirby launched *Captain America Comics* in the early 1940s, America had not yet entered the Second World War. Yet the two authors had their hero sock Hitler in the face on the cover of the first issue, even though that scene was not taken up in any of the stories featured inside.<sup>19</sup> Like the majority of the Jewish American population, both authors strongly favored American participation in the war,<sup>20</sup> as a product of their concern for European Jews. Their Captain America comics thus functioned on one level as a popular form of *littérature engagée*. Even though Simon and Kirby stayed with their creation only for the first ten issues – they left Timely Comics, and other authors, including Stan Lee, continued the production – their political engagement in the series laid the groundwork for Captain America’s strong links to reflective discourse about ideas, values and questions of societal existence.

The Captain America comics of the 1940s were an undoubted success, with some million copies per issue sold. It is therefore hardly surprising that Lee and Kirby wished to reuse the character (after a short and unsuccessful stint in the 1950s) when Marvel Comics debuted in the 1960s. Seeking to build on the success of the 1940s, they planned to revive the original character, the “living legend of World War II” as the splash page of *Tales of Suspense* had it from issue 69/1965 on. To do so they invented a narrative gimmick that bridged the gap between Captain America’s first appearance and his revival. In *Avengers* 4/1964, Captain America is found by Prince Namor, another creation of the 1940s, inside a large ice block in the Arctic Ocean, and subsequently thawed out and rescued by the Avengers. His frozen state explains why he has not aged in appearance, but the cryo-hibernation determines not only his unaltered physical state but also his psychological condition, his unchanged personality and mindset, which have not been touched by the passing decades, societal changes and cultural developments. Lee and Kirby could thus ensure that readers identified in their Captain America precisely the character who had been such a success in the 1940s – and would not confused him with the unsuccessful endeavor of the 1950s. But by planting the unaltered Captain America of the 1940s in the 1960s without giving him the chance to experience, and psychologically evolve with,

19 Captain America Comics 1/1941.

20 Brod 2012, 66, 69; Fingeroth 2007, 57.

the decades in between, they also created something unique among superheroes: a character with temporal displacement. The cryo-hibernation in effect extracted Captain America from his present and placed him in a completely different time. It was as if he had died in the 1940s and been reincarnated in the 1960s. The process in the movies is very similar, but with a time gap that at almost seven decades is even more extreme.

The temporal displacement of Captain America bears striking resemblance to the Judaistic concept of *gilgul*, the transmigration or reincarnation of the soul. The same can be said of Brubaker's reintroduction of Bucky as the Winter Soldier in the 2000s and the movies' adoption of these comics. The concept of *gilgul* first appeared in an affirmative form in the book *Bahir*, which was redacted in the 12th century.<sup>21</sup> It then became part of the Kabbalah, especially in the teachings of Yitzchak Luria (1534–1572) and the writings of his disciple Hayim Vital (1543–1620). Via the Kabbalah, reincarnation took root in Hasidism and it remains a presence in contemporary Kabbalistic, Hasidic and Jewish mystic circles.<sup>22</sup> In the Zohar and the Lurian Kabbalah the transmigration of the soul is intensively interwoven with cosmology, whereas Hasidism focuses on spiritual destiny and development of the individual.<sup>23</sup> The common principal reason for reincarnation lies, however, in the need for the purification and elevation of the soul.<sup>24</sup> After the Zohar and from the 14th century on, chains of reincarnation were constructed, connecting biblical persons.<sup>25</sup>

Expanding Judaistic moral anthropology, which differentiates between the wicked, the mediocre and the just, two reasons for incarnation are given – while the mediocre are sent back into another circle of earthly life to be given another chance to purify and elevate their souls (the wicked are sent to hell, *gehennom*, for purification), the just may also return in order that they might assist others and for the betterment of the world.<sup>26</sup> Hasidism, in particular, developed stories about famous spiritual masters, *tsaddikim*, who return after their deaths to other bodies. Reflections on a past life or past lives became important, providing the starting point for theories about reincarnation that explained, for example, the seemingly pointless suffering of children as a form of retribution for their sins in another life. Even though the soul normally has no recollection of its past life, detecting that past life began to function not only as an explanation for present sufferings – not unlike the Hindu or Buddhist concept of *karma* – but also as a vital basis for overcoming such suffering and leading the soul to

21 Eylon 2003, 89–124.

22 Pinson 1999, viii; Weiss 2005.

23 Grözinger 2005, 463–682; 805–808.

24 Pinson 1999.

25 Scholem 1956, 75–76.

26 Scholem 1956, 73–74.

a new spiritual level. The Hasidic *tsaddik* there often played the specific role of a wise individual who knows someone's past life and can help untangle present biographical constellations.<sup>27</sup> Also, souls that have been connected by kinship, marriage or common experience in their past existence may meet again in another life and help each other perform the remaining tasks of redemption and purification.<sup>28</sup>

From the 13th century on, speculation that parts of the soul were reincarnated began to spread.<sup>29</sup> These ideas were grounded in a medieval Judaistic differentiation of the soul: *nefesh* as the vegetative and life spending soul, *ruach* as the animalistic spirit and *neshama* as the rational soul.<sup>30</sup> The Kabbalah also differentiates between each of these souls, making them hierarchical levels of spiritual development and completing these levels with two other souls, *chay-ya* and *yichida*, the highest reachable levels.<sup>31</sup> These concepts form the origins of the associated idea of sparks of the soul, which may be reincarnated separately,<sup>32</sup> generating the additional concept of soul sparks' inhabiting a living person and besieging his or her own soul. With parallels to the two principal grounds for reincarnation – a bad soul returning for purification, and a just soul to help others – both the whole soul and sparks can influence an existing person in two directions: the *Zohar* contains the idea that at a crucial moment an individual might additionally be inhabited by a just soul that has already been to Paradise and now returns to further the efforts of that individual to fulfill a command and purify his or her soul;<sup>33</sup> the same support can be given by the sparks of the souls of the just. In Hasidism that role may be played by a *tsaddik* who returns and impregnates the soul of a living individual to further spiritual development,<sup>34</sup> a positive form of impregnation called *ibbur*. A negative form of impregnation also exists, however, and may take place when an individual turns to the dark side of life and sins. He or she then may open his or her soul to impregnation with the whole soul or spark of a wicked one.<sup>35</sup> Popular Jewish culture of the 17th century coined the term *dybbuk* for that negative form of impregnation.<sup>36</sup> In both cases the impregnation can last a whole life or only a certain period.<sup>37</sup>

27 Grözinger 2005, 739–742.

28 Grözinger 2005, 742.

29 Scholem 1956, 78–79, 80–81.

30 Scholem 1956, 81.

31 Pinson 1999, 35.

32 Scholem 1956, 78f, 80, 83.

33 Scholem 1956, 86.

34 Scholem 1956, 89; Pinson 1999, 109.

35 Scholem 1956, 88; Pinson 1999, 115.

36 Scholem 1956, 88; Pinson 1999, 116–117.

37 Scholem 1956, 86.

The theme of temporal displacement is introduced in *Avengers 4/1964*, where Captain America comments on the differences between the life-worlds, urban civilization and everyday technology of his time and the 1960s.<sup>38</sup> He is already experiencing these differences as a loss of his proper place: “I don’t belong in this age – in this year – no place for me.”<sup>39</sup> This experience is reiterated throughout the Captain America series, where Captain America even deems himself “a relic – a holdover from some dim and dismal past”.<sup>40</sup> Having lost his temporal setting and with it his cultural setting, Captain America feels exiled in a way. That topos can also be found in the Lurian Kabbalah, where *gilgul* is interpreted as the necessary wandering of the soul through exile, when the soul has to work for its own redemption.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, from the start Captain America’s temporal displacement is combined with a deep backstory wound, which must be healed, and by a feeling of guilt, with which he must be reconciled. In the 1960s, superhero sidekicks seemed outmoded, and Stan Lee, who had never been fond of these juvenile characters, decided to drop Bucky. To that end, a flashback scene in “*Avengers*” comics showed how Bucky had been killed in the last mission he and Captain America had executed, after which the latter was frozen.<sup>42</sup> From that point on Captain America suffers from survivor’s guilt, because he had been unable to save his youthful partner.<sup>43</sup> His journey into the exile of the present is thus motivated from the start by a need to overcome what he feels as past wrongs and to find redemption for his soul.

Some of these aspects are played down significantly by the movies. Yes, Captain America also experiences temporal displacement in the movies, but he is only moderately out of date. In the second movie, agent Romanov, the Black Widow, ironically asks Captain America, in his civilian identity as Steve Rogers, and Sam Wilson, the Falcon: “Either one of you know where the Smithsonian is? I’m here to pick up a fossil.”<sup>44</sup> In no scene, however, does Captain America act in light of this displacement. Even his attitude toward women, surely an opportunity to highlight very different understandings of acceptable behavior and of the specific roles of men and women – as found in the TV series *Agent Carter*, a spinoff of the Captain America movies – appears to be nearly up-to-date in the 2000s. Instead, the temporal displacement mostly concerns Captain America’s loss of his former social ties, especially his love Peggy Carter, and the new configuration of good and evil in global politics. The latter is of particular concern

38 *Avengers 4/1964*, 9.

39 *Avengers 4/1964*, 10.

40 *Captain America 107/1968*, 6.

41 Scholem 1956, 107.

42 *Avengers 4/1964*, 7.

43 *Avengers 4/1964*, 7, 10–11.

44 *THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER* (2014), 00:03:10.

for Captain America's identity, which in the movies, too, is strongly connected with political ideas and the political ethos.

As stated above, redemption is the central reason for reincarnation. To find redemption, the soul must perform better in situations similar to those it sinned in during its past existence, usually by obeying commands it once neglected or contradicted. Kinship relations or other connections between souls in the constellations of past lives can come into play here also. True to these Kabbalistic points, in the comics Captain America tries to right the wrong he feels he had done to Bucky. In his reintroduction issue, Rick Jones, the youthful partner of the Hulk, appears to him as if Bucky reincarnated.<sup>45</sup> Captain America and Rick Jones therefore relate to each other like souls connected by a common past life, and Captain America feels a very specific responsibility for Rick. Subsequently co-plot writer Jim Steranko even has Rick act as Captain America's sidekick wearing Bucky's costume.<sup>46</sup> In the first case Captain America saves Rick from deadly dangers and thus tries to rectify his (supposed) past failure in the present;<sup>47</sup> in the second case Rick shows he is capable of taking care of himself and thus exculpates Captain America symbolically.<sup>48</sup> However, Captain America has to confront his survivor's guilt again and again, until Ed Brubaker resurrects Bucky. In an emblematic issue, Lee and Kirby have evil psychoanalyst Dr. Faust seek to use Captain America's feelings of temporal displacement and guilt to destroy the hero mentally. The Captain is confronted with psychotic situations in which Bucky accuses him, Nazis torture him and he seems to have aged overnight into a feeble old man.<sup>49</sup> Here especially, the central task of Captain America's new life is shown as an existential process of the soul. Also, other relationships from his past life are structurally reiterated – as, for example, through the love stories with the woman from the French Resistance in the Second World War and with Agent 13, Sharon Carter, in the present, or through Captain America's struggles with past foes like the Red Skull and Zemo.<sup>50</sup>

Once again the movies moderate traits of the comics. In the first movie Bucky seemingly falls to his death not from a plane, as in the comics, but from a train. Even though Captain America blames himself for the death of his partner, the moment is only briefly presented in the first movie, with a short scene in which he is shown trying to get drunk out of remorse, and that moment is swiftly overcome by Peggy Carter's admonition that leads the Captain back into action against Hydra.<sup>51</sup> In the second movie Captain America has a sentimental mo-

45 *Avengers* 4/1964, 10.

46 *Captain America* 110, 111, 113/1969.

47 *Avengers* 4/1964, 22.

48 *Captain America* 111/1969, 15, 17.

49 *Captain America* 107/1968, 3, 9f, 15-16.

50 *Tales of Suspense* 77/1966.

51 *CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE FIRST AVENGER* (2011), 1:30:00.

ment at the Smithsonian’s exhibition about his previous life, when he encounters the display about his friendship with Bucky,<sup>52</sup> but there is none of the tormenting remorse he experiences in the comics. Even though Captain America’s survivor’s guilt is not a dominant feature of the movies, the reiteration of past constellations and the resurfacing of past foes do appear. So, for example, Sharon Carter, who in the comics is a relative of Captain America’s old love, is mentioned in the second movie.<sup>53</sup> From amongst his foes, in the first movie Captain America again confronts Dr. Armin Zola, the evil scientist and henchman of the Red Skull, who lives on as an artificial intelligence and orchestrated the subversion of S.H.I.E.L.D by Hydra.<sup>54</sup>

In Brubaker’s revival of Bucky in the comics, Bucky had definitely died before he was picked up by the submarine of Russian General Vasily Karpov after the fatal incident told in the flashback scene of *Avengers 4/1964*.<sup>55</sup> Karpov delivers Bucky to his Communist superiors and he is revived, but besides his physical and trained reflexes and learned languages, he has lost his complete memory.<sup>56</sup> He thus offers the Russians very special skills but a blank personality, and from the 1950s to the 1970s is reprogrammed with a completely new personality and, codenamed “Winter Soldier”, used for undercover contract killer missions in the West.<sup>57</sup> Between missions he is returned to cryogenic stasis and thus does not significantly age over the decades. He serves as Karpov’s bodyguard in the 1980s and, after decades-long stasis, is used again in the 2000s by Russian general Lukin, who at the time of the story is inhabited by the Red Skull.<sup>58</sup>

From a Kabbalistic viewpoint, Bucky, having been undoubtedly dead, is reincarnated into his own body, but regains only parts of his soul – the vegetative and animalistic aspects and some of his acquired rational abilities. His new programming superimposes a different and evil soul, that is to say, a *dybbuk*. In accord with Kabbalistic theory, in his previous life Bucky had acquired a negative disposition that accounted for his impregnation with that *dybbuk*: Brubaker gives Bucky an additional backstory from his time with the military in the 1940s, when he was trained by the U.S. Army to carry out killer missions that official members of the army could not execute. The remaining aspects of Bucky’s original soul, however, are still linked to the soul parts he lost and that formed his personality and biographical memory. These links render him unstable, so that his Russian superiors in the late 1950s make him “undergo Mental Implantation

52 THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 0:19:00.

53 THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 2:06:00.

54 THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:03:14.

55 Captain America 11/2005, 5.

56 Captain America 11/2005, 6-7.

57 Captain America 11/2005, 9.

58 Captain America 14/2006, 22.

at every awakening”.<sup>59</sup> Thus, in addition to his *dybbuk* Bucky also receives mission-specific soul sparks that renew the *dybbuk* on each instance. Even though he goes AWOL after a mission in America in the 1970s, Bucky is incapable of remembering his past life on his own.<sup>60</sup> He therefore needs the help of a *tsaddik* – which fittingly is Captain America – to remember his previous life, regain his personality and thus find the *tikkun* of his soul.<sup>61</sup> In a second series Brubaker has Bucky undergo his ordeal again: on a mission against other remaining sleeper agents of the Cold War, who were once trained by Bucky, he is pinned against one of these sleepers, who even forces him temporarily to renew his *dybbuk* and become the original Winter Soldier again.<sup>62</sup>

Again, the movies differ from the comics. Not only does it remain open whether Bucky had died and is then revived, but additionally he does not fall into the hands of the Russians and work as a Communist agent. Instead he is rescued by Nazi organization Hydra and reprogrammed by Dr. Zola to serve as its “fist”.<sup>63</sup> He is, however, also *dybbuked*. Unlike in the comics, Bucky had not acquired a negative disposition for that *dybbuk* in his previous life – he is basically a good person, and thus Hydra’s double agent Pierce has to deceive him about the character of his missions: he tells Bucky that his “work has been a gift to mankind”<sup>64</sup> and that the goal of Hydra is “to give the world the freedom it deserves”.<sup>65</sup> Also unlike in the comics, Bucky experiences flashbacks from his previous life all by himself.<sup>66</sup> His mind, however, is wiped, and at the end of the second movie, Captain America must once more act as a *tsaddik* for Bucky, helping him to start remembering who he really was and is. That process is continued in the third movie, where Bucky regains his complete memory and fights alongside Captain America in a mission to counter the revival of Hydra’s sleeper agents – the movie thus reproduces parts of the second cycle of Brubaker’s stories about the Winter Soldier and again modifies elements. Bucky thus seeks redemption for his actions as an assassin for Hydra.

## FINDING IDENTITY

One theme that is not explicitly treated but nevertheless forms in effect a subconscious gravitational center for the concept of *gilgul* is that of identity. Finding the true self connects, for example, the links in the chains of reincarnation

59 Captain America 11/2005, 13.

60 Captain America 11/2005, 14–16.

61 Captain America 14/2006.

62 Winter Soldier 1–14/2011–2013.

63 THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:25:00; 1:37:00.

64 THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:28:57.

65 THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:29:27.

66 THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:37:44.

for biblical characters, motivates *tsaddikim* to enlighten community members about their past lives and spurs a quest to detect and eliminate *dybbukim*. In the two latter instances the goal is to enable a person who is experiencing psychological dissonances to find inner coherence and to overcome social dissonances between an individual and that individual's community. The person is to become whole by righting past wrongs, including those that have affected social constellations. In that respect, the similarities between past and present constellations join the contemporary iteration of relationships between souls that were connected in the past in enabling evolution toward a better end, which in the Hasidic context is often helped by a *tsaddik*. In the Lurian Kabbalah in particular, the soul's task includes working for the elevation of all things, of the whole world, into holiness by fulfilling the commandments and, in case of reincarnation, rectifying the wrong constellations of the past.<sup>67</sup>

The Kabbalah there takes up the more general Judaistic topos of healing the world as the specific task of God's chosen people. Both the redemption of the soul and the elevation of the world are called *tikkun*, which can be translated as "rectification", "restitution" and "completion".<sup>68</sup> Thus the identity question is answered with a specific task that can be recognized by being informed about one's past life and that gives one's present life its specific meaning and fulfillment. Through the connection with the *tikkun* of the world, that task includes working for the betterment of the present state of the world and of that world's social relations. Finding one's identity thus always means finding one's social place and specific task in the world.

On the subject of identity, Judaism thus differs significantly from modern (Western) thinking: since René Descartes and Immanuel Kant's epochal turn that made subjectivity the foundation of philosophy, identity in modern Western culture has been conceptualized as an autonomous act of the rational subject – or, more pointedly even, as the construction of a human individual on the basis of his or her inner processes of self-constitution alone. *Freedom* rather than *relationship* is thus the modern *conditio sine qua non* for finding identity, a position that is not part of Judaism (which in the case of the United States is more in line with communitarian concepts than with modern and postmodern individualism).

In the comics Captain America is his own *tsaddik*, for he is aware of his past life and thus knows the knots it contains. As a *tsaddik* he is his own spiritual guide and master. He must find, however, his place in the present and thus his identity in new social circumstances. His quest for identity is not undertaken as a solitary inner act of self-constitution; from the outset it is situated in the ex-

67 Scholem 1956, 107.

68 Pinson 1999, 53.

ternal context of his subjectivity, an essential context if he is to find his identity. And his quest is not about gaining his identity for selfish reasons; the goals of his quest are necessarily concerned with (political) society and human community. Captain America can only find himself if he works for the ideals of that society and thus for securing a communal life based on these ideals.

From the beginning the quest for the *tikkun* of his soul – his search for redemption because of Bucky’s presumed death – is interwoven with his quest for the *tikkun* of the world. Consequently, Captain America can only find his identity and become whole when he is able to name the reason for his existence in the present world. In the issue in which he is reintroduced that reason is given as “being in costume – on the trail of some strange, unknown menace”,<sup>69</sup> but very soon that idea is complemented by the values of individual freedom and the liberty of society for which he had already fought in the Second World War. Spreading these values and fighting anything that menaces them becomes Captain America’s *raison d’être*. The temporal displacement he experiences, however, saves him from becoming a one-dimensional representative of chauvinistic nationalism. Instead, Captain America increasingly becomes the reflective hero. In an iconic issue, Stan Lee and artist and co-writer Gene Colan have him question his actions and ethos over five of the 20 pages.<sup>70</sup> The passage generated many months of letter-page discussion, involving readers and Lee about patriotism. With this issue, reflectiveness became a permanent trait of the series and its hero. His ethos and critical reflectiveness also made Captain America the leader of the resistance to governmental control of superheroes in Marvel Comics’ *Civil War* event of 2006/7 – and have him resign that role after he has experienced the disastrous consequences of the ensuing conflict.

His striving for freedom and his critical thinking mean that Captain America constantly works for the *tikkun* of the world, in which he finds his identity. And even though he identifies his quest as fighting for freedom, namely the freedom of individuals, that quest cannot be fulfilled by realization of his own freedom; his task is to work for a society whose freedom and constitution go hand in hand, for a community that offers relationships of freedom and thus constitutes a body politic. Captain America was a communitarian long before communitarianism appeared in the 1980s as a political theory – and his communitarianism is a product of his ties to Judaism and to the Judaistic concept of community as the necessary context for and counterpart to becoming an individual. In Brubaker’s revival of Bucky, the character regains his identity in relation to the people in the world around him and by redeeming the deeds of his past life as the

69 Avengers 4/1964, 12.

70 Captain America 122/1970, 1–5.

Winter Soldier. He only finds his true self by righting the wrongs of the past, and thus he too realizes the *tikkun* of his soul by working for the *tikkun* of the world.

Here the movies do follow the comics, even though Captain America does not demonstrate critical thinking or question his actions to the same extent as in the comics. Nevertheless, he has to be reflective and autonomous if he is to realize his ethos and adapt his quest for liberty to the present. The Second World War context was, he recognizes, different and less complicated, for the Nazis were an obvious evil, and indeed, in the United States the Second World War is still termed the “Good War”. In the present world things are more complicated, so Captain America muses, “For as long as I can remember, I just wanted to do what was right. I guess I’m not quite sure what that is anymore. And I thought I could throw myself back in and follow orders. Serve. It’s just not the same.”<sup>71</sup> Instead of simply integrating himself into given institutions, like the army in times of war and now S.H.I.E.L.D, he has to find his own position and make his own judgments. As the showdown approaches, positions of authority are reversed: with S.H.I.E.L.D exposed as infiltrated and subverted by Hydra, not Nick Fury but Captain America is giving the orders.<sup>72</sup> At the same time the rationale behind the intelligence community’s actions is questioned. Agent Romanov confirms that lying is integral to the intelligence community strategy, but Captain America represents honesty.<sup>73</sup> With that honesty he also denounces the surveillance measures and preventive violent actions taken against presumed future threats that are defended by the “realist” stance of Nick Fury (and also Pierce) in the second movie,<sup>74</sup> and positions himself against governmental regulation that requires the registration of superheroes in the third movie. Bucky, by contrast, needs to find his identity by remembering his past life and by making amends for his wrongs as the Winter Soldier, largely in the third movie.

Even though temporarily Captain America has to go against his social surroundings and existing institutions, in the end he has found his identity by defending his values and by saving what these institutions were originally meant for. He has worked not only for the *tikkun* of his soul but also for the *tikkun* of the world, and he finds his place in the latter again. Again the pivotal point of his identity is not solitary subjectivity but the ideal of a community of free people living together. His quest for identity is met not through inner self-constitution but by striving and working for a community founded on values and by finding his own place in that community. For Bucky, there is at least a chance that the *tikkun* of his soul and his efforts to right the wrongs of the past at long last also will provide him with his place in the present world, even if he chooses at the

71 THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 0:21:00.

72 THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:32:14.

73 THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 1:10:50.

74 THE RETURN OF THE FIRST AVENGER (2014), 0:17:43.

end of the third movie to be returned to cryogenic hibernation for the time being.

“Who am I?” and “Do I fit in?” – two questions that link Kabbalistic and Hasidic reflections about reincarnation with the temporal displacement of Captain America and Bucky. The answer is, “Be true to yourself and work for the betterment of the world – then you’ll also fit in.”

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