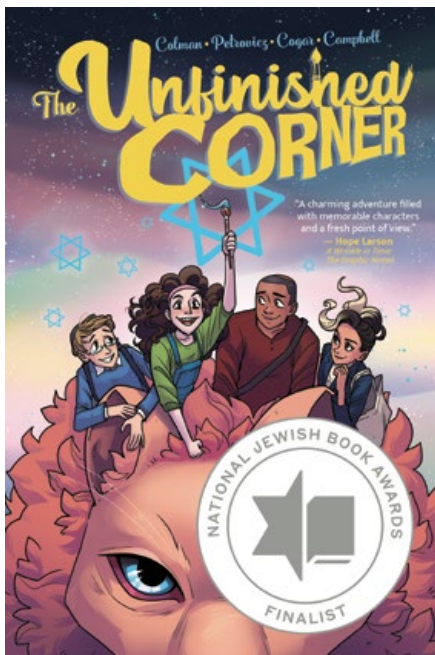


# The Unfinished CORNER

BY DANI COLMAN (WRITER) &  
RACHEL "TUNA" PETROVICZ (ARTIST)



## About the Book

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD MIRIAM IS FULL OF QUESTIONS, BUT THE WHOLE UNIVERSE IS COUNTING ON HER FOR ANSWERS.

Jewish mythology states that when the universe was created, one corner of it was left unfinished. Opinion is divided on why, but everyone agrees that the Unfinished Corner is a dangerous place full of monsters. Twelve-year-old Miriam neither knows nor cares about the Unfinished Corner. She's too busy preparing for her Bat Mitzvah, wrestling with whether she even wants to be Jewish—until a peculiar angel appears, whisking her, her two best friends, and her worst frenemy off to this monstrous land with one mission: finish the Unfinished Corner.

### National Jewish Book Awards 2021 Finalist!

*The Unfinished Corner* is a middle grade fantasy adventure full of friendship, magic, monsters, and mythology. An original graphic novel!

**"It's exciting, heartfelt, and so, so, new!  
A proper fun adventure for children in  
the amazing worlds of Jewish lore."**

— PAUL CORNELL (Doctor Who, Elementary)

- Students Miriam (Miri), Avi, David, and Judith attend Jewish school, where all four of them have won an art competition. The prize? A bus trip to Washington, D.C. Chaperoned by Rabbi Adam Yehudi, they soon discover that no one is driving the bus - and their destination is nowhere near Washington, D.C. And, on top of everything, Rabbi Yehudi is no rabbi. Instead, he is the angel Ma'alachiel, who leads them on an adventurous quest through Jewish mythology, folklore and history. After learning there was a small corner of the universe inhabited with monsters left unfinished after creation, Miriam and her friends are tasked to finish the unfinished corner of the universe.
- On their journey, they meet Miriam (from the Old Testament), ride the mythical Lion of Judah, and travel inside a gigantic whale. They meet angels, legendary heroes, and demons, and they visit present-day Prague to learn about its rich Jewish history.
- It's also a journey of self-discovery, learning more about themselves and each other, as their friendships are tested and strengthened.
- Miri's artistic abilities and imagination are the skills needed to finish *The Unfinished Corner* with help from her friends.

## Learning Standards

*The Unfinished Corner* can be used to address many of the Reading Literature Common Core standards for middle grades including:

- RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.3, RL.6.4, RL.6.5, RL.6.6
- RL.7.1, RL.7.2, RL.7.3, RL.7.4, RL.7.6,
- RL.8.1, RL.8.2, RL.8.3, RL.8.4, RL.8.6, RL.8.9
- RL.9-10.1, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.3, RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.5, RL.9-10.6, RL.9-10.9

The novel and activities in this guide may also be used as a springboard for addressing numerous Common Core standards for Writing, Speaking, and additional related ELA-Literacy standards.

## Introducing the Novel

### SETTING

This book has multiple settings, some of them familiar and contemporary, and some taken directly from myth and legend. The story begins in a contemporary family home and a school. Very quickly, it becomes clear that the bus has taken them away from anything familiar.

They journey through the Biblical Desert of Zin and find their way to Miriam's Well. They visit the Palace of -Ishtar, the Morning Star and enter realms of frightening demons.

Their search for safety takes them to current-day Prague, and their search for answers takes them to the land of the Demon King. Within that kingdom, they ultimately discover the entrance to the unfinished corner.

### CHARACTERS AND RELATIONSHIPS

The four main characters are students at a Jewish school who have won an art competition.

- **David**, whose family is originally from Iran, has just returned to school after living in Prague with his family for a few years. David often comes to Avi's rescue.
- **Avi** is a serious boy and dedicated scholar of all things Jewish. He is often the target of teasing and bullying. His deep knowledge of Judaism often causes him anxiety, as he worries about whether he is following its rules and traditions correctly.
- **Miriam (Miri)** is close friends with David and Avi. She sees herself as Avi's protector. With her Bat Mitzvah approaching, she is confused and worried about how to cope with life's questions and complications as an adult.
- **Judith** is the fourth competition winner. The other students don't know her very well. She arrives late to school - just in time to board the bus. At first, she keeps herself apart from the others, who view her as a know-it-all; their friendship with her develops slowly as the story progresses.





## Jewish religion, traditions, and culture

There are many references to the Jewish religion, traditions, and culture in *The Unfinished Corner*. Here are some Jewish concepts you will encounter in the story:

- **The name of God:** Jewish tradition holds that the true name of God is unpronounceable. Instead of trying to pronounce it, Jews write “G-d”, and say “Hashem” (which literally means “the name”) as stand-ins for God’s name. On p. 21, Miri reassures Avi that “Hashem” would not punish him for accidentally tasting bacon.
- **Bat/Bar Mitzvah:** Miri and her family are preparing for Miri’s Bat Mitzvah. Jewish boys have a Bar Mitzvah and girls have a Bat Mitzvah ceremony at the age of 12 or 13 depending on their community. This ceremony marks the passage from childhood to adult responsibilities. Children prepare for this by learning to lead prayers in Hebrew and by learning to read Hebrew passages from the Torah. It is an important and joyous event which is usually followed by a party.
- **Torah:** The Torah is the scroll containing the first five books of the Old Testament, written in Hebrew. Torah scrolls are very precious. They are kept in the synagogue and brought out during services so that passages can be read to the congregation. Miri had to learn to read from the Torah scroll for her Bat Mitzvah ceremony.
- **Hebrew and prayers:** The language of prayer for Jews is Hebrew. The Torah is written in Hebrew and traditionally all prayers are recited in Hebrew. Modern synagogues often include translations of prayers in English in their prayer books. On page 56, as the children and the Rabbi leave Miriam’s well, she says a prayer in Hebrew. This prayer is called the travellers’ prayer. On page 67, Ishtahar says a prayer in Hebrew. This is a prayer of thanksgiving.
- **The Golem:** According to legend, the Golem was a clay man, created and brought to life by a rabbi in 16th century Prague to protect the Jewish community from violence and persecution. The Golem is said to be always waiting to be called forth by the Jewish community in times of crisis.
- **Yeshiva:** A Yeshiva is a school of Jewish learning. Religious students attend Yeshiva in order to learn more about Judaism.
- **Prague:** The city of Prague is the capital and the largest city in the Czech Republic. At one time, it was the home of a dynamic Jewish community; the Jewish synagogues and other sites are now tourist attractions. At the beginning of World War II, there were over 56,000 Jewish residents of Prague, including German Jews who had escaped from Nazi Germany. However, the Nazis occupied Prague and deported most of them. There were less than 15,000 Jews still alive in the region of Prague after the war.
- **The Holocaust:** The Holocaust is the word used to describe the destruction of the Jews of Europe by the Nazis. Jews were deported, sent to ghettos, imprisoned in concentration camps, made to work as slaves, and were routinely murdered or died from disease and malnutrition. It is estimated that over six million European Jews were killed in the Holocaust.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

### PROLOGUE (P1)

- Most religious traditions have stories and legends about how the universe began. Which ones do you know? How do they compare with each other?
- The prologue introduces us to Lilith, whom we meet again later on in the book. Who do you think she is?

### CHAPTER 1 (P5)

- Miri's parents play a joke on her on the morning of her birthday. What is the joke and why do you think Miri doesn't believe them?
- Miri has three big events coming up, what are they? How does she feel about them?
- Why do you think there needs to be an armed guard outside Miri's school?
- Why is Avi so angry? What does David mean by "the angry goy brigade"?

### CHAPTER 2 (P25)

- The flying bus lands in a terrain that clearly isn't the city of Washington, D.C. Where do you think they are?
- Rabbi Yehudi reveals his true name and his true form. What is your idea of what an angel looks like?
- Both David and Rabbi Yehudi think that Miri will be able to finish *The Unfinished Corner*, although for different reasons. What are their reasons?



### CHAPTER 3 (P41)

- Miriam (the biblical figure) tells Miri that her stubborn streak is what will help Miri get to the end of her journey. Is being stubborn a positive or negative quality? How has being stubborn helped Miri so far in the story?

### CHAPTER 4 (P57)

- While travelling on the lion's back, the group has a discussion about degrees of Jewishness. Discuss the different ways that Avi and Judith show their Jewishness. Do you think that one of them is more Jewish than the other?
- In this chapter they meet Ishtahar, and she tells them the story of her and her sister and their engagement. Why do you think the panels in this section (p60- 63) are mostly drawn in monochrome? How does this add to the story?
- Would you describe Avi as a worrier? What is he worried about in this chapter? What is his special ability?
- What was Ishtahar's gift to Avi? How does he use it for the next part of the journey? Why would it be useful when they try to finish the unfinished corner?

### CHAPTER 5 (P78)

- How did David know to let the whale swallow them?
- What happens when they meet the Nephilim (half-angels)? Do you agree that music is a powerful tool? How could you use music to get out of a difficult situation?
- Judith often sets herself apart from the others. She can be a know-it-all. Name the things she claims to do well. Why do you think she is like that?
- What's Na'amah's reaction when they tell her that they want to finish the unfinished corner? Who do you agree with? Why?

### CHAPTER 6 (P90)

- What did Avi do to persuade the Nephilim not to hurt them? What is the clue in the illustration on p. 92 that shows us what Avi did?
- The color scheme changes when they visit Azazel's realm. Why do you think the artist has done this? What does it tell us about Azazel?
- Why does Azazel propose a makeover challenge to Judith? How does Azazel view make-up as compared to Judith's view? Which one do you think is right?
- Why didn't Azazel keep his promise?

### CHAPTER 7 (P105)

- Under what circumstances does Rabbi Yehuda show his true form as the angel Ma'alachiel? Why do you think he keeps his Rabbi form most of the time? What do David and Avi do to help them escape the demons?
- What clues are there in the drawings on p 109 which tell you that they have left the lands of myths and legends?
- What famous Jewish sites do they visit in Prague? What are they looking for? Why does Avi think that the Golem no longer exists in Prague?

### CHAPTER 8 (P120)

- Why does Miri call David "the dork with perspective"?
- What does Avi want to ask the Golem?

### CHAPTER 9 (P134)

- Look back at the legend of the Golem on p 111-112. What happened to cause Rabbi Loew to hide the Golem's body?
- What happened for Miri and her friends when they woke the Golem? How do they feel about the Golem's actions?
- If the Golem was created to protect the Jews of Prague, why didn't it protect them during the Holocaust? How do you feel about the Golem's answer to Avi's question?
- Each person heard the Golem's message in a different language, except Rabbi Yehudi/Angel Ma'alachiel. Why do you think the Rabbi-Angel didn't hear anything?

### CHAPTER 10 (P150)

- In your own words, explain what is happening in the wordless panels on pages 157 and 158.
- Why is Miri suspicious of King Asmodeus?

### CHAPTER 11 (P164)

- David and Lilith have different explanations for David's sister's death. Which one do you believe?
- Do you believe that amulets can protect people?
- What does Lilith's love of her demon children tell us about motherhood and maternal instinct?
- Why do you think Judith says that men write the myths?
- Do you think Miri is right about Avi? Is she blaming him for being a victim?

### CHAPTER 12 (P182)

- Miri has reached her breaking point. What factors brought her there? Do you think her friends understand her? What would you say to Miri if you were her friend?
- What's Miri's conclusion about the best way to complete her task and finish the Unfinished Corner? Do you agree with her? Why does the Rabbi disagree?

### CHAPTER 13 (P198)

- What does the Rabbi mean when he refers to the box of broken tools as "a metaphor"?
- What is Miri's agreement with Lilith? Do you think that Lilith and her children will keep the agreement?

### EPILOGUE (P209)

- What do you think Miri, Judith, Avi and David will do next?



## Extension Activities

### ANGELS

The children meet two angels in their travels: the angel Ma'alachiel and the fallen angel Azazel. The ending "el" in their names means God. Ma'alachiel means "God's messenger" and Azazel means "God's scapegoat" (Azazel is blamed for the ills of the world.) The word in Hebrew for angel is "ma'alach" which means messenger. Here is a list of angels from the Bible and what their names mean:

- **Gabriel:** God is my strength
- **Michael:** Who is like God?
- **Uriel:** God is my light
- **Raphael:** Healed by God
- **Daniel:** God is my judge
- **Nathaniel:** God's gift

**FOR READERS BELOW GRADE LEVEL:** If these six angels came to your school and disguised themselves as teachers, what would they teach? Make a chart showing the teachers and their subjects – think about what their names mean.

**FOR READERS AT GRADE LEVEL:** In Judaism, angels are messengers. If they came to your school, what would their messages be? Write their messages as tweets (a 280-character Twitter message) for each of these angels.

**FOR READERS AT ABOVE GRADE LEVEL:** What would Ma'alachiel tell the other angels after Miri finished the Unfinished Corner? Write a short -transcript of the conversation between Ma'alachiel and the other angels. Would they all be happy about the outcome?

**THE LION OF JUDAH:** The four friends ride on the back of the Lion of Judah. The lion is the symbol of the tribe of Judah in the bible and is found as decoration in many synagogues. It is also the symbol of the city of Jerusalem, in Israel. A lion symbolizes strength, bravery, and protection. Most religions have animals as icons, sacred symbols, and representations of the All Powerful being to which they pray. Christians, Muslims and Jews share some of these animal symbols.

**FOR READERS BELOW GRADE LEVEL:** Think of six animals and make a chart showing the animal's name, what qualities it represents, and how it might help a group of children on an adventure.

**FOR READERS AT GRADE LEVEL:** Think about the qualities that the whale represents and write a conversation between the children and the whale that swallows them and gives them a ride. Would the whale be kind and helpful, or arrogant and indifferent?

**FOR READERS AT ABOVE GRADE LEVEL:** In Judaism and other religions, the serpent often represents temptation and deception and is an agent of evil. Imagine what role the serpent might play when the children meet Azazel. Write a dialogue between the serpent and the children that could be part the story in chapter six.



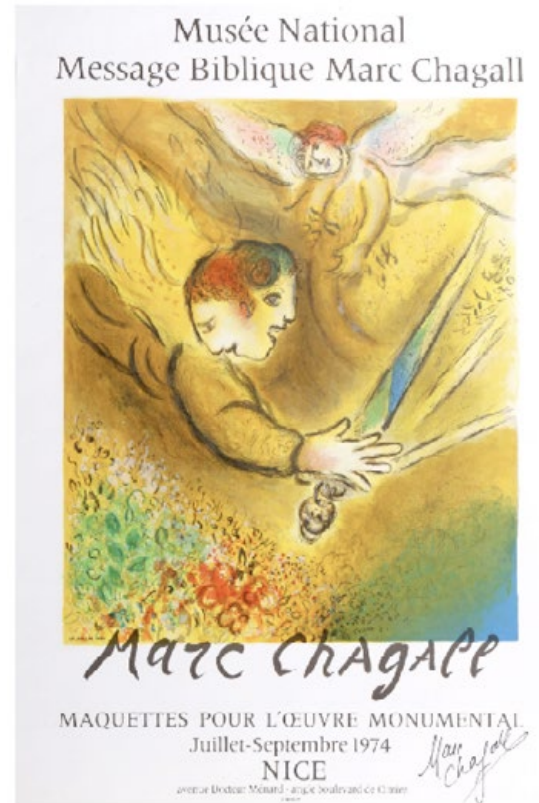
## Jewish Artists

Miri asks Ma'alachiel why he didn't choose a well-known Jewish artist to complete the Unfinished Corner. She mentions three Jewish artists: Marc Chagall, Genndy Tartakovsky and Rube Goldberg.

**FOR ALL READERS:** Marc Chagall is famous for brightly coloured, joyful paintings. Many of them depict scenes from Jewish village life and Jewish legends. Look at some of Chagall's work, including *The Angel of Judgment* (1974) and create a drawing or painting of *The Unfinished Corner* as you imagine it, in the style of Marc Chagall.

**FOR ALL READERS:** Genndy Tartakovsky is an animation artist who created the dark fantasy animated series *Primal*. Look at some of the drawings from *Primal*, and draw your own version of the encounter with the Nephilim (chapter 5) in the style of Genndy Tartakovsky.

**FOR ALL READERS:** Rube Goldberg is famous for his drawings of fantastical contraptions. Design a Rube Goldberg contraption for the make-over challenge in chapter 6.



## Reference Material and Resources

- **Judaism and modern Jewish life**

- *It's a Whole Spiel: Love, Latkes and other Jewish Stories*, edited by Katherine Locke and Laura Silverman
- *What We're Scared Of*, by Keren David

- **Virtual tour of Jewish Prague**

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-m1iZHYlyI> This is an interesting tour of Prague, conducted by a young woman and a young man. The first half introduces the history and general sites of Prague. The second half specifically covers the Jewish sites in Prague, including those mentioned in *The Unfinished Corner*.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFD1N6eRWFg> This short video also features some of the sites mentioned in the book.

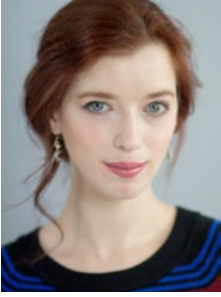
- **The Holocaust**

- *The Diary of a Young Girl*, by Anne Frank
- *When the World was Ours*, by Liz Kessler

- **Jewish Myths and Legends:**

- *Legends of the Talmud: A Collection Of Ancient Magical Jewish Tales*, by Leah Vincent
- *Dan and the Mudman*, by Jonny Zucker
- *Miriam's Tamborine: Jewish Folktales from Around the World*, by Howard Schwartz.

## About the Author



**Dani Colman** is a writer and educator from London, England. She plays the violin, dabbles in standup comedy, and is absolutely terrible at videogames. When she isn't writing comic books and novels, she teaches aspiring writers how not to annoy their editors. She currently lives in San Francisco with her husband (creator of many comic books), and two cats (creators of many hairballs).

## About the Artist



**Rachel 'Tuna' Petrovicz** is an illustrator and comic artist from Vancouver, Canada. She has a penchant for the creepy and the cute, and in her spare time enjoys experimenting in the kitchen. Her lifelong goal is to befriend every cat she sees.

## Discussion Guide Author

Known as “**Mrs. Lou**” to her pupils, **Lou Tribus** has been a teacher for over 20 years and specializes in teaching about world religions. She is the outreach coordinator for her synagogue and routinely visits schools to run workshops or welcomes school groups to the synagogue to teach them about Judaism.

