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# THE QUEEN'S GORNISHT

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## The Queen's Gambit and Jewish Exclusion

By Cevin Soling, President of Spectacle Films and Xenu Records, and Harvard Academic

Picture a movie about a person from Albania enduring a hardscrabble life. She sacrifices her youth training to become a marathon runner, and when she reaches the world stage, none of the top competitors are from Africa. No matter how exceptional that film might be, this omission would be offensively glaring, even racist, given that it could not possibly have been an oversight. Anyone writing a movie on long-distance running would be keenly aware that Kenyans and Ethiopians dominate the sport, so their absence could only be intentional. The film would feel cheap as triumphs would be empty without top-tier competitors, and it would also be galling if the movie were used as a vehicle to celebrate Albanians as underdogs while ignoring the accomplishments of oppressed Kenyans and Ethiopians in this field.

[mks\_pullquote align="right" width="300" size="24" bg\_color="#000000" txt\_color="#ffffff"]This is not to say that [The Queen's Gambit](#) is devoid of Jews. Quite the contrary. However, they are depicted in a demeaning manner and never appear as the top players. If any other minority entity dominated chess and was treated similarly on screen, there would likely have been calls to boycott the series.[/mks\_pullquote]Enter [The Queen's Gambit](#). Highly regarded as an extraordinary miniseries, the TV movie tells the story of fictional child prodigy chess player Beth Harmon, as she becomes a world champion. What is missing at the top tier are Jews. According to chess.com, half of the ten greatest chess players of all time have Jewish ancestry. Given that Jews comprise just 0.2% of the world's population and have suffered, and continue to suffer, violent discrimination – chess Grandmaster Gary Kasparov changed his last name from Weinstein when he was 12 so that people would not know his father is Jewish – this is an extraordinary achievement and a glaring omission.

This is not to say that [The Queen's Gambit](#) is devoid of Jews. Quite the contrary. However, they are depicted in a demeaning manner and never appear as the top players. If any other minority entity dominated chess and was treated similarly on screen, there would likely have been calls to boycott the series.

The first time Jews make an appearance occurs when a pre-teen Harmon is introduced to a Jewish high school chess club teacher. After defeating him, she plays the entire Duncan High School chess team at once, which is mainly comprised of Jews. Not only does she beat all of them, she later comments on how poor their skills are. As opposed to her other opponents, who are individuals, the Jews are simply a mass, unworthy of individuation or respect. At no other time in the series does she demean anyone else's chess skills. Only marginally better are Danny Weiss and Dave Friedman, who she easily beats at the Ohio championship match before facing the highly skilled non-Jewish Benny Watts in the finals.

The series depiction of Harry Beltik best reveals the series' troubling vision of Jews. While it is never explicitly stated, his surname intimates that he is Jewish. He also embodies antisemitic stereotypes. Beltik is portrayed as a sympathetic figure and first appears as a local champion, but he loses his title to a teenage Beth Harmon. He reemerges a few years later and briefly lives with Harmon and helps her train despite being a weaker player. While he is a man of good character, Beltik's "inferior" stock is evidenced not merely by his weaker skills but by the extensive dental work he has done to fit in with the world of the gentiles. A nose job would have been too obvious, yet the effect is the same. Nevertheless, the change is only superficial, and we later learn that Beltik was never able to sexually satisfy Harmon during their relationship – a vicious dig that seems intended to be read emblematically of Jews. While living with Harmon, Beltik has an epiphany that he cannot compete with Harmon or others in her league and not only drops out of playing chess but leaves Harmon's life as well. Trying to assimilate is futile because Beltik can never escape his Jewishness. In short, he fulfills the antisemitic fantasy of self-imposed Jewish erasure.

In the final competition in the USSR, the last Jews Harmon competes against are Laev and Shapkin — the latter awkwardly and comically kisses Harmon's hand after his defeat. This display of gawkiness is worse than the frustrated sore-loser display of Hellstrom, another player she defeats. While Hellstrom may be uncouth, at least he understands social conventions. The interplay suggests that those who do not, i.e., Jews, presumably, do not belong in society as Shapkin embarrasses himself and Harmon.

The final chess Grandmasters Harmon faces are the elite players Flento, Luchenko, and Borgov – none of whom are Jewish. The match against Luchenko was notable because he was a former champion and was magnanimous and gracious in defeat – bowing before Harmon in a heartfelt sign of respect. Making Luchenko Jewish would have involved very little in terms of script revision and would have gone a long way to redeem the antisemitism at the core of [The Queen's Gambit](#), but that would have been contrary to a deeper agenda.

*Cevin Soling is the president of Spectacle Films and Xenu Records and an American Mensa Member with three Masters degrees from Harvard University. Soling has been published in The Atlantic, Forbes, Wired, The Daily Beast, Science 2.0, Mind/Shift, and other outlets. Soling is the author of The Student Resistance Handbook. He has appeared on TV as a featured guest on The Colbert Report as well as FOX, MSNBC, RT, and Newsmax. His award-winning films, which include A Hole in the Head, and The War on Kids, have appeared on HBO, Showtime, Sundance, BBC, PBS, Learning Channel as well as in theaters.*

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