

Jewish Anime Characters – The Goods, the Bads, the Questionables

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(Author bio)

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I consider two things to be of central importance to my identity: my Jewish background, and my love for Japanese media such as anime and games. These two things have shaped me into the person I am now, but unfortunately, the venn diagram of “Jewish Anime” is an extremely tiny sliver. There just aren’t any “Jewish” anime, much less anime with Jewish characters.

On the face of it, I know it’s silly to expect there to be—the Jewish population of Japan is tiny, and mostly comprised of expats and their families. There are synagogues in Tokyo and Kobe, but most Japanese people have never had any exposure to Jews or Judaism. I had to explain to my host mom that I couldn’t eat pork because Judaism has rules against it. The word for Judaism in Japan is *Yudaya-kyo* (“The Teachings of Judea”); as opposed to Christianity, *Kirisuto-kyo* (“The Teachings of Christ”) or Buddhism, *Bukkyo* (The Teachings of Buddha). To say you’re Jewish in Japan is to say you are a *Yudaya-jin*—someone from Judea. Just try finding that on a modern map!

And yet, despite all odds—there are Jewish characters in anime! *Am yisrael chai!*

More often than not, you’ll find Jewish concepts or mythological figures than actual Jewish characters.

Golems are common, as are angels and demons from Jewish pantheons. There are even a few appearances of characters like David or Solomon—the latter more often in connection with magic or demons than with Judaism. Sometimes, there will be a character who seems coded Jewish but who isn’t confirmed one way or another. Sometimes you’re given a Jewish-sounding name and left to fill in the rest for yourself.

And sometimes you’re given characters or concepts that have Jewish names but bear no actual resemblance to anything Jewish; the creators just used the terms because they sound cool. (I’m looking directly at you, Neon Genesis Evangelion)

And so, to save you a lot of time combing through the veritable ocean of anime and games, I’m here to present a list of Jewish characters in Japanese media that I’ve come across. I’m including games in this article because many Japanese-made games are drawn/illustrated in “anime” style or have anime adaptations; and I’m only including titles I’ve watched or played.

Let’s get the questionables out of the way before we move on to the good stuff.



The Mystic Archives of Dantalian – Estella, and Golems

Set in Victorian England, *The Mystic Archives of Dantalian* follows the adventures of a man named Huey, who has inherited a large estate from his grandfather, along with a book-loving girl named Dalian. Episode 2 of *Dantalian* centers around the story of Estella, a young woman who lives alone in a mansion because everyone who tries to remove her from it is brutally murdered. As they chat with her, Huey and Dalian learn that Estella's mother was a foreigner, while her father was an Italian who made a fortune from music boxes. I found it odd that her father's origin is specified, while her mother's is not.

As the episode goes on it's revealed that an automaton was behind the killings, and Dalian explains that the automaton is called a "golem". Huey says that he's heard of golems—that they were "monsters created by heretics who were persecuted in their country for a string of murders". These "heretics" were also foreigners who weren't native to the place they lived. The Japanese audience may not have picked up on the connection, but to the Jewish ear, that description raises a couple of pretty big red flags. Jews have been considered "foreigners" in Europe since their arrival hundreds of years ago, and have been considered "heretics" by European Catholics for at least that long. These foreigners getting persecuted for murders is literally what the blood libel was—non-Jews would leave children's corpses in Jewish houses and accuse the Jews of murder. The story of the golem specifically came about as an answer to the blood libel; the golem was a superhuman entity who could help prove that the Jews were being framed. While the connection is sound, the problem is that there's no acknowledgement in the show that the murders were not actually committed by the people who made the golem.

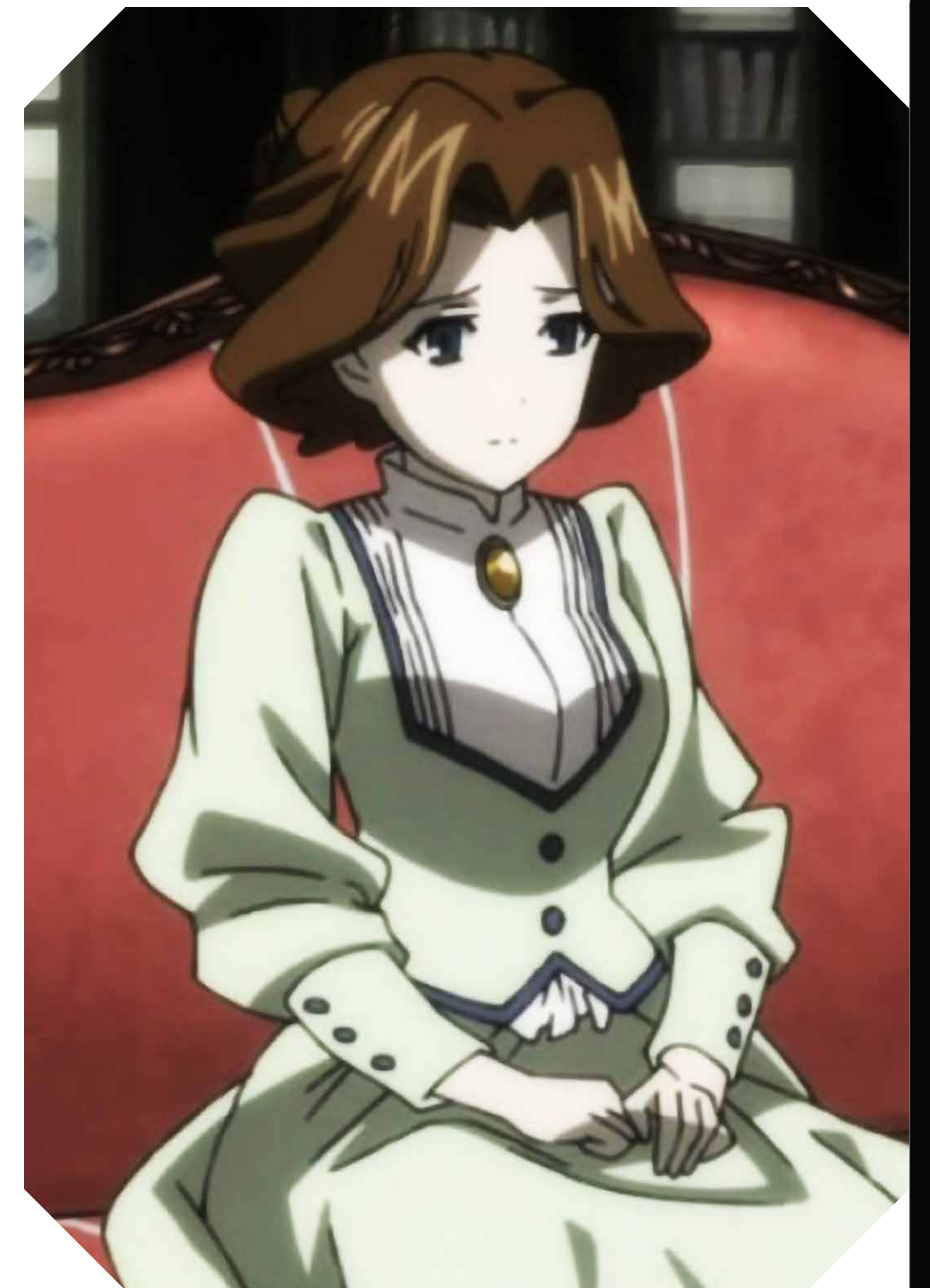
By the end of the episode, it's revealed Estella is actually the killer, and that the women in Estella's family all have a penchant for killing—her mother got it from her grandmother, who got it from *her* mother, all the way back through the line of women. Hearing this, I was immediately reminded of something else that's passed through the maternal line—Judaism. Since her mother was stated to be a foreigner, it's not terribly hard to put two and two together and identify Estella's maternal line

as descended from the "heretic" foreigners mentioned earlier. Of course, the unfortunate implication of all this is that Estella's Jewish heritage is also the root of her bloodlust.

The golem itself didn't end up factoring in as much as I thought it would. It was actually not made by Estella's mother, but her father—supposedly to have something to blame for the murders, and hide the evidence that the women in his family like killing people for giggles. Dalian and Huey disable it by summoning the Canaanite god Ba'al to destroy the clock tower holding the 72 names of God that make the golem run (this anime has already shown that accuracy to myths is not really its intention here).

In the end I guess I'm not *mad* that things turned out like this, or even really that offended. Anime has a pretty bad habit of borrowing mythology and other cultural points and then stripping them of context or misinterpreting them entirely. This isn't new, and I'm certain the people making this show weren't consciously trying to disparage Jews. I'm just kind of sad that this is how they chose to present a story that's pretty important to my people, and it's unfortunate that their storyline kind of implied Jews are natural murderers. If anything, *Dantalian* provides a good example of the dangers of taking Jewish concepts out of context.

The Mystic Archives of Dantalian is available to watch on Crunchyroll.



Estella, as seen in episode 2

Fate/Grand Order – King David, Romani Archaman

And now for something a little lighter!

Fate/Grand Order is a highly popular Japanese mobile game that is available in English for Android and iOS. In the game, the player summons “Servants” - legendary spirits that fight on the player’s behalf. Servants are larger-than-life figures who have magical powers based on their accomplishments in life and legend (for example, some of the Servants you can summon include Gilgamesh, King Arthur, Oda Nobunaga, and Alexander the Great). One of the available Servants is King David. As a Servant, David joins the Archer class alongside such names as Robin Hood and Billy the Kid; while he fights using projectiles, he’s much more known for his strong defensive skills. David first appears in the third main story arc, Okeanos, where he aids the player against other servants competing for the Holy Grail. Once the player completes Okeanos, they are given a copy of his card as a reward. He has also made appearances in side story events, such as the 2017 Christmas event (don’t worry—it’s played for laughs).

The David in FGO is deeply rooted in his original mythology. The game recounts the biblical tales in the “Biography” part of his profile, embellishing here and there, but keeping the basic story largely intact. His special skill is called Hamesh Avanim (The Five Stones) and is a reference to the sling he used to defeat Goliath. He’s described as “a friendly, sincere Servant, but he is absurdly weak towards women, so care is required in regards to that point.” (Likely a reference to his adultery with Bathsheba.) It’s clear that, unlike many of the other Servants in the game, David’s legends and legacy are treated with the utmost respect. The David in the game almost seems like he’s walked straight out of the pages of the Bible—and that’s saying something in a game where many Servants have been exaggerated or transformed so that the only resemblance they bear to the original is their name. The game also uses him for tongue-in-cheek jokes on occasion, such as referencing the “Uriah Incident,” flirting with female Servants, or calling his own son a “cruel, vulgar good-for-nothing” when he thinks Solomon isn’t listening.

It should be patently obvious that King David is Jewish, so I don’t have a lot to say arguing that point—other than the fact that it’s incredibly cool to see an important Jewish Biblical figure in an anime context. His Judaism isn’t really mentioned or brought up, but neither are the religions of any of the other Servants (possibly excepting overtly Christian figures such as Joan of Arc and Saint Martha).

FGO has at least one other Jewish character, and he’s a bit of a Hidden Yidden until the very end of the main story.

—Spoilers for Fate/Grand Order’s Final Singularity below—

King Solomon also has a presence in the story; his existence is hinted as early as the First Singularity, but it’s not until later in the game that he makes a

formal appearance. However, it later comes out that the “Solomon” we see in the game is a demon impersonating him; the real Solomon has in fact been under our noses the whole time...

... as Romani Archaman, the bumbling doctor who helps you along your quest.

Romani himself may not be stated to have a religious leaning one way or another, but if he’s been Solomon this whole time, I’m allowed to believe he’s Jewish!!

I’d have more to say about him, but Fate/Grand Order’s main story is quite dense and at the time of writing I haven’t progressed far enough to see the conclusion of the story yet. New players can access Solomon’s story anytime, provided they’re willing to put in the work of reading the preceding chapters!



Image of David from Fate/Grand Order

Fate/Apocrypha – Solomon Ibn Gabirol (Avicbron)



Images from *Fate/Grand Order*. At right is the bumbling doctor Romani, and at left is his Servant alter ego, Solomon.

Another iteration of the aforementioned Fate franchise, *Fate/Apocrypha* is a series of novels-turned-anime that depict a different imagining of the *Fate*'s central Holy Grail War concept. In it are two teams of Servants - Black and Red - that compete for the grail. Joining the Caster class for the Black team is the great Jewish thinker and scholar, Solomon Ibn Gabirol. In-universe he's credited as the founder of Kabbalah, but his real power lies in his ability to create golems. He relies on a small army of golems that fight for him, and can create specialized golems for different tasks.

Most notable is his special attack, which takes the form of a titan-sized golem named Keter Malchuth. Named for the real ibn Gabirol's most famous poem, Keter Malchuth is a physical manifestation of the fictional character's ultimate goal: to create an exact copy of Adam.

Unfortunately, *Apocrypha*'s version of ibn Gabirol is more of a sinister, morally corrupt antagonist figure. He has no qualms about using lab-grown homunculi as magical batteries to power his golems, and seems to consider most of the people around him as disposable as his creations. He can even use magic to rob opposing Servants of their will, making them into a sort of flesh-golem to do his bidding. He's not exactly the kind of guy you want to pal around with.

Since there's so little Jewish representation in anime to begin with, it kind of sucks to see a great Jewish thinker and scholar using one of our most beloved folk creatures for this kind of naked evil (and this is now the second time I've seen an anime warp the golem folktale in an uncomfortable way). Despite that, I'd never heard of Solomon ibn Gabirol before dipping my toes into *Fate/Apocrypha*, so I'm kinda glad for the chance to learn a little more about my heritage through anime.

You can watch *Fate/Apocrypha* on Netflix to see him in action! He was also added to the American release of *Fate/Grand Order* in 2020, under the Latinized name Avicbron. If FGO keeps adding more Jewish characters, maybe someday my dream of an all-Jewish party could be realized...

A quick side note before we move on from Fate, Moses also appears briefly in a Fate title (the Drama CDs *Fate/Prototype: Fragments of a Blue Sky*) but since those are difficult to acquire legally, I don't have much exposure to Fate's iteration of Moses. As far as I can tell he's just a side character who comes up in relation to the Servant Ozymandias (Ramses II). Since Ozy is a summonable Servant in *Fate/Grand Order*, one day I hope Moses will get his chance to shine in the game too. Let my people FGO!



Avicbron character portrait from *Fate/Grand Order*

Puzzles and Dragons—Noah

Puzzle and Dragons is yet

another mobile game (available in English for Android and iOS) that incorporates mythological figures from around the world. Unlike FGO, PAD is much less story-driven and is instead more focused on building teams of monsters and characters to progress through dungeons. Its selection of monsters far outstrips that of familiar titles like *Pokémon*, and there are even some collaboration characters you can add to your team—such as Wonder Woman, Tanjiro from *Demon Slayer*, or the protagonist of *Persona 5*. PAD also has several anime adaptations of varying quality.

PAD borrows from popular mythologies from around the globe, and has several groups of monsters named for angels and demons from Abrahamic mythology and Goetian demonology. (Side note, a particular PAD favorite of mine is Sandalphon). Amid all these, one actual bible character joins the fray: Noah appears as the boss of a special dungeon, whom you can defeat for a chance to add to your team.

But this Noah may not resemble the one you're familiar with.

Noah in *Puzzle and Dragons* appears as a blond, blue-eyed anime girl with a flying Ark.

At the very least, PAD gets the motifs down. Her stage 2 and 3 art depicts her with the ark, rainbows, and doves. Her two skills are called “Vast Dawn” and “Divine Ship of World Protection”. So, while it may be jarring to see a biblical patriarch depicted as a hot anime girl—in the end, are we really that surprised? I'm just glad to see more representation for Jewish biblical figures, period. I may no longer play PAD at the time of writing, but I was happy to see figures from my own mythology alongside names I recognized from other places.

Noah image courtesy of Puzzle Dragon X



Granblue Fantasy – Adam, Golems, and the Kingdom of Erste

Granblue Fantasy is a sprawling browser-based mobile RPG that was recently adapted into an anime. Like *Fate* and *Puzzle and Dragons*, Granblue draws heavily from world mythologies for its own worlds and lore. There are a plethora of characters and summons named for figures in Abrahamic mythology—take the rebellious archangel Sandalphon, the ship-building spirit Noa, and the comically lewd demon Belial, to name a few. Sandalphon even calls out the name of his special attack in Hebrew.

But among these supernatural characters is (what appears to be) a regular human, Adam - and the kingdom from which he hails.

Throughout the game, the player and their ragtag group of friends clash with the Erste Empire, a major political power in the skydom. Erste is ruthless, hungry for power and conquest in the way the Empire from the original Star Wars was—the specifics of their motives aren't clear, but we know they're Bad. As the characters soon discover, Erste was not always an empire. It began as a kingdom on the desert island of Mephorash.

The Erste Kingdom was known for their weaponry, and the most famous of their inventions was the golem—an automaton that could fight tirelessly. Erste's golems more resemble robots than the golems in Judaism (Granblue even has its fair share of elemental golems that are unrelated to Erste) but the specific use of that term for Erste's creations piqued my interest. I tried not to get my Jewish hopes up at first, but as I kept playing through that story arc, I discovered that the palace that used to seat the Erste royalty is called “The Palace of Elijah Chelm”. At that point, there was no doubt in my mind that Erste had a connection to Judaism. (Mephorash is also home to the Shem Desert and a boss fight with Baal, who has a chance to drop a weapon called Solomon's Axe for defeating him. The more you know!)

The obvious connections stopped there, however. Perhaps a result of the empire's conquest, the people of Erste don't really resemble Jews in any tangible way. We don't get to meet many of them, aside from conniving villains that are implied to have joined the Erste bandwagon after it became an empire. Even the former Erste princess, Orchis, doesn't give us many clues about her background. For a while I wondered if little name drops were all I was going to get, but then a new face joined the story: Adam, an admiral in the imperial army.

From the beginning, there are hints that Adam isn't quite all he seems. He often references past events as though he

was there to witness them. He'll go down fighting off hordes of soldiers, only to reappear later unscathed. He even appears in two places simultaneously. Many of the characters are left wondering whether Adam is some sort of Primal (living weapons created by a more advanced people, the Astrals), though the Primal cast members don't think this is the case.

Above all, Adam holds the pride and history of his people in high regard, and mentions that he is sworn to protect it. While his loyalty may seem reasonable for an admiral, Adam is also quick to betray his superiors in order to help the heroes bring a stop to Erste's plans. He repeatedly says that carrying out his duty is his sole reason for living—even if that means bringing Erste to a merciful end.

In the end, after the heroes defeat the final boss, they return to find Adam defending their ship with his clothes in tatters. Beneath his admiral's uniform was a body of porcelain and wood. Adam reveals, at long last, the truth of his existence—he is a golem created during the Kingdom of Erste's golden age, at the height of their technological ability. His creators tasked him with protecting Erste at all costs.

Finally—more than just a living weapon—here is a golem who *protects*.

While Adam's story seemingly comes to a close after that arc, he does appear again much later in the main story. He was also made into a playable character in 2022. To finally see a golem that more closely resembles the original lore made my tired Jewish heart so happy, and I'm glad that they brought him back for further adventures after his initial role in the story ended.

You can play *Granblue Fantasy* for free on any device that supports Google Chrome, or watch the anime on Crunchyroll!



Adam image courtesy of GBF.wiki

Black Lagoon - Benny

(And here's where I put a mild content warning for strong language)

So far this article has seemed like a lot of grasping at straws – I've either been pointing directly to anime versions of biblical figures/Jewish thinkers, or reading into lore that hints at Jewish influence without naming names. Readers, from this point on I'd like to declare everyone in the latter category cowards.

Benny from *Black Lagoon* is a self-identified Jewish man.

It happens so fast that you'd miss it if you blinked. In one episode, Benny and his friends (a team of south sea pirates) are tasked with recovering a Nazi painting from a sunken submarine. In an odd turn of events, they end up butting heads with some actual Nazis—or, rather, skinhead wannabes who still dream of Hitler's aryan nation. Dutch, a black man, asks what Benny's opinion of them is as a white man. Benny comments that their style of machismo isn't for him, before adding, "Besides, I'm Jewish. 'F*ck the Nazis' was a family creed."

I had to go back and re-watch that bit to make sure the subtitles weren't lying to me. They weren't—Benny actually identifies his family as *Yudaya-kei* - of Jewish descent.

Listen: I have a bachelor's degree in Japanese. I spent four years studying it. I lived in Japan for four months. This was my first time hearing the Japanese word for "Jewish" spoken aloud by a native speaker.

As a modern-day pirate on the run from the FBI, and who doesn't seem to really have a connection to Judaism, Benny may not be the *greatest* Jewish representation out there. But the bar for this is *so low* that all Benny had to do was say onscreen that he was Jewish to have my undying support. To my knowledge, this is an anime first—and remains so nearly 20 years later. Other anime, step it up.

You can watch *Black Lagoon* for free on Crunchyroll, but be aware that the show contains graphic violence, strong language, difficult subject matter, and other mature content. Viewer discretion is very much advised on this one.



Benny explaining the family creed.

Honorable Mention:

Cowboy Bebop – Spike Spiegel

Spike's mane of curly hair, Jewish-sounding last name, and preference for an Israeli model of pistol has led some (myself included) to believe the smooth-talking protagonist of *Cowboy Bebop* might be Jewish. While it wasn't addressed in the show, when asked whether Spike might be Jewish, the show's creator, Shinichiro Watanabe, said "sure, why not?"

You can't tell me Spike's not Jewish. Spike Spiegel is Jewish and I'm going to hold on to this headcanon until I die.

So, that just about does it for this list. It's not a lot, but it's also kind of a miracle that there are this many. It's a bummer that most of the entries on this list are mythological figures, but what can you do? Even with mythology from around the world used as inspiration for anime left and right, it's still kind of cool to see Jewish mythology represented too—especially in titles like *Fate/Grand Order*, where our everyman protagonist gets to pal around and fight arm in arm with some of our greatest heroes.

That said, it would be cool to see more actual Jewish characters in anime outside of their connections to biblical or historical figures. The fact that Benny tossing off a one-liner about his heritage struck such a deep chord with me is a testament to how much cooler it would be to have more self-identified, bona-fide Jewish anime characters. To see myself reflected in the media I love so much.

I know it's unreasonable to expect Japanese-made anime to cater to western audiences and show more diversity in their characters, but

I've also noticed that the anime industry in general is starting to recognize and take advantage of its global reach. *Yuri on Ice*, a show about international figure skating, had a diverse cast of characters that resonated with fans around the world. The second season of *FLCL* aired in English in America, where the first season had garnered a cult fan following, ahead of its Japanese release—and despite its presumably Japanese setting, it had a surprisingly diverse cast as though to reflect the diversity of its fans. Many new anime have had their world premieres at Anime Expo in Los Angeles rather than Japanese events.

It would be cool if this increased awareness of the global audience leads to more diverse, international stories in anime as well. Maybe even some Jewish ones!



Spike Spiegel