

To Be A Superhero

It's a bird, it's a plane, it's....

Yes, we all know it's Superman. He will forever be my favorite of all superheroes. There are just so many dimensions to this man. He's incredibly strong. He can fly faster than a speeding bullet. He can reverse time. He can exhale ice. He has heat and X-ray vision. He is kind. He is always on the lookout for helping people in need. And he can get changed in a jiffy. Superman has got it all. There are no other superheroes, in my opinion, that compare to him. He's the Muhammed Ali of superheroes: the greatest there ever was.

While none can quite measure up to "The Man of Steel," many other superheroes have very similar roots.

Just think about it for a moment: Who created Superman, Batman, Spiderman, The Fantastic 4, The Avengers, The Incredible Hulk, Ant Man, Iron Man, Thor and Captain America? Jews! Jewish comic book writers and illustrators created nearly all of the most well-known superheroes we have come to love.

Take for instance Superman's creators. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, two Jewish kids from Cleveland, met in High School and developed their most famous character in 1933. Siegel's parents fled pogroms in Lithuania around 1900, the same time my family came to America from Lithuania, and coincidentally, with the same exact surname. Joe Shuster's parents came from Jewish families in Kiev and Rotterdam.

Batman's creators, Milton Finger and Robert Kahn¹, also grew up in Jewish households.

¹ Changed to Bob Kane

Captain America's creators as well. Hymie² Simon and Jacob Kurtzberg³ descend from Jewish families in England and Austria, respectively.

Spiderman, the Hulk, and so many others were created by Stan Lee, born Stanley Lieber, to Romanian-born Jewish immigrants.

Not only were these characters created by Jews, but so many of their stories mirror Jewish history.

Superman is partially based on the Jewish archetype of Moses. Both were sent away by their parents from their places of birth in order to survive annihilation and both heeded a call to assist humanity. In Superman's story we also see parallels to the American Jewish experience. His birth name, Kal-El⁴, was changed to a more generic American sounding name, Clark Kent, once he arrived in this country.

The very first issue of Captain America shows him knocking out Hitler on the cover of the comic book.

The Thing, whose birth name is Benjamin Jacob Grimm recites the *Shema* in one story and Bat-woman is seen celebrating Chanukah with her then-girlfriend, Renee Montoya, in another.

Furthermore, in so many of these stories, we see one aspect of the superhero's identity at home and another identity at work or outside the house. How often have Jews lived this way, expressing their Jewish identity at home but covering it up when they step outside?

There's a common saying that if a person's name ends in "man" they are either Jewish or a superhero.

² Changed to Joe

³ Changed to Jack Kirby

⁴ Meaning "voice of God" in Hebrew

Had I known about this Jewish connection to superheroes when I was growing up, I might have chosen to collect comic books instead of baseball cards.

This fascinating link between Jews and superheroes actually dates much further back than the creation of Superman.

Yehuda Loew ben Bezalel, also known as the Maharal, was a highly respected 16th century rabbi in Prague who created the golem. (He also happens to be my 15th great-grandfather.) The golem, as so many of us know, was a human figure created from clay and brought to life by use of God's name. My ancestor created the golem to protect his Jewish community from anti-semitic attacks as well as to help out doing physical labor, since golems are very strong. The Incredible Hulk was actually based off of the golem.

But we can go even further back in time to find Jewish inspiration for the creation of superheroes. In the book of Judges, we meet a character named Samson, another model for Superman, who was destined by God to save the Israelites from the wicked Philistines.

In one episode of the story, on his way to meet his bride, Samson first discovers his super-human strength: "Suddenly a full-grown lion came roaring at him. The spirit of Adonai gripped him, and he tore the lion apart with his bare hands."⁵ Not long afterwards, Samson uses his superhuman strength to kill 30 Philistine men. And then in one of the most famous of his feats, while captured and tied up, Samson busted out of the ropes, "came upon a fresh jaw-bone of a donkey, and he picked it up; and with it he killed a thousand men."⁶ That's a superhero!

If we go back even further we meet Shifrah and Puah, the two Hebrew midwives who defied Pharaoh's order that they kill all newborn boys. Due

⁵ Judges 14:5-6

⁶ ibid 15:14-15

to their courage for standing up against this tyrant, Moses is born and we know how the rest of the story unfolds.

While most of these characters display superhuman qualities, I wonder what part of their repertoire makes them a “hero.” According to Merriam-Webster, the primary definition of a hero is:

a : a mythological or legendary figure often of divine descent endowed with great strength or ability

b : an illustrious warrior

c : a person admired for achievements and noble qualities

d : one who shows great courage

This seems to sum up most of our superheroes. However, if we look to our sacred texts we find several other definitions of what it means to be a hero.

According to Pirke Avot 4:1, “Ben Zoma says...Who is the heroic one? He who conquers his impulse, as it says, ‘slowness to anger is better than a mighty person and the ruler of his spirit than the conqueror of a city.’”⁷

Being heroic is not so much about moving mountains or stopping a runaway train dead in its tracks and displaying other miraculous feats. In the minds of our rabbis, a hero is someone who is able to control their urges and desires. A hero is someone who can show self-restraint. The example they give shows that overcoming the urge to get angry and upset is the true mark of a heroic character.

Similarly, the Chofetz Chaim teaches, “The person who guards his speech builds real power. This is the power of self-discipline, the knowledge that one has control over his impulses, that he has the inner strength to restrain himself, measure his words, and act in accord with the highest aspects of his words.”⁸

⁷ Proverbs 16:32

⁸ Rabbi Israel Meir Kagen, the Chofetz Chaim, 1838-1933

Imagine a superhero who's main superpower is the ability to control him or herself when temptation sets in. The Hulk is certainly no hero according to the rabbis.

In Mussar thought and practice, the greatest strength we have is the strength to overcome our greatest challenge: ourselves.

In a culture that promotes self-indulgence, each of us could probably work hard to master self-restraint. Are there ever times in our lives when our urges keep us from doing something that is actually healthy and life-affirming? I have found myself, on more than one occasion, choosing to watch a show in the evening instead of practicing my ukulele, reading a book or taking my dog for a brisk walk.

Exercising self-restraint is difficult. It is dependent on having some self-awareness, on knowing ourselves in an honest way.

Alan Morinis, author of *Everyday Holiness* writes, "Jewish tradition recognizes that human drives are natural to us, and are a source of our productive capacity. But our drives, like all sources of energy, are still potentially dangerous."⁹

Where in your life do you have difficulty saying no to your desires? Maybe it's coffee, beer, sweets, television, gossip, YouTube, Facebook or lottery tickets.

Desires can be very powerful, and overcoming them is nothing short of heroic.

Our tradition teaches that there is more, however, to being a hero than having self-restraint.

Moses was the greatest prophet in our history, and now we also know, the model for Superman. He certainly was a Jewish superhero. But what char-

⁹ Morinis, E. Alan., and Micha Berger. *Every Day, Holy Day: 365 Days of Teachings and Practices from the Jewish Tradition of Mussar*. Trumpeter, 2010. p. 205

acter traits made him so? There is no passage in the Torah that specifically mentions his qualities except in one obscure section in the Book of Numbers. In the story where Miriam and Aaron are gossiping about their brother Moses' non-Israelite wife, the text reads, "Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other human on earth."¹⁰

He shows humility several times throughout his life. When Moses first learns of his mission at the Burning Bush, he responds by saying, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"¹¹ Moses receives criticism and heeds advice from his father-in-law, Jethro. He also lovingly passes on the mantle of leadership to Joshua without any hint of jealousy.

As important as Moses was, he understood the space he filled. "Being humble doesn't mean being a nobody, it just means being no more of a somebody than you ought to be."¹² Moses not only grasped this concept, he lived it.

Humility is such an important Jewish value that one of the most influential books on Jewish ethics, *Sefer ha-Middot*, teaches, "A small deed done in humility is a thousand times more acceptable to God than a great deed done in pride."¹³

Humility might just be the most common trait superheroes share. Have you ever wondered why so many of these fictional characters are masked. This is their way of saying, "It's not important who I am; it's important what I do." Remember, Moses also wore a covering over his face when he visited the *mishkan*.

Finally, Judaism emphasizes that there is no more heroic action than helping others. In the Mishnah, we read one of the more oft-quoted verses from

¹⁰ Numbers 12:3

¹¹ Exodus 3:11

¹² Morinis, E. Alan. *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*. Trumpeter, 2009. p. 47

¹³ This book is also known as *Orchot Tzaddikim*

our sacred texts: “Whoever saves a single life is deemed...as if he had saved a whole world.”¹⁴ What is more heroic than this? On Sunday, each of us will have the opportunity to donate blood and get swabbed for the bone marrow registry. You can still sign up to participate.

In 1997, Esquire magazine, a publication intended primarily for a male audience, ran a special issue titled, “New American Heroes.” They chose Mr. Rogers. Can you believe it? And the caption on the cover next to his picture read, “Can you say Hero?” Mr. Rogers was my hero as a young boy. After watching the documentary, *Won't You be My Neighbor?*, I was reminded of the time when he told us to always look for the helpers when there is a crisis. That was his way of guiding children to see the good in any situation.

Saving a life or aiding in the aftermath of a disaster are just two of many ways to help people and Judaism urges us to be mindful of these opportunities. It might not seem like lending a hand to a stranger, advocating for someone or simply being present for a friend are heroic feats, but in the Jewish tradition they most certainly are. Our impact might be much more far-reaching that we can imagine. Saving a life can be manifested in many different ways.

While Superman, Batman, Wonder-woman and so many of their famous friends are not necessarily Jewish like their peers Menorah Man, Yarmulke Youth, Matzah Woman, and Minyan Man (yes, these characters do exist!), we can still be inspired by their bravery and also have a little *naches* that they originate from Jewish roots. Yet, when it comes to actually being a hero, our tradition makes it very clear: what is required of us are not other-worldly traits, but values we already cherish and an awareness of our surroundings.

My friends, as we enter a new year, let us commit to living up to our heroic potential. We need not mimic Batman or Wonder-Woman, but we can become the greatest version of ourselves by being honest with who we are

¹⁴ Sanhedrin 4:5

and working on self-restraint, exercising humility, and jumping at any opportunity we can to help other people in need. A simple recipe for greatness.

May each of us strive to be heroes in 5779. *Ken Yehi Ratzon* – may this be God's will.

Shanah Tovah