

Gut Yontuv and Shanah Tovah.

We are going to start with a quiz – feel free to call out your answers. We're going to start easy:

- 1) Complete this quotation: "Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird. It's a plane. It's _____!" (*Superman*)

- 2) A little harder: Who teaches us - "With great power comes great responsibility" (*Spiderman*)

- 3) Finally, who says: "Have you ever danced with the devil in the pale moonlight? I always ask that of all my prey – I just like the sound of it." (*The Joker*)

So, my friends, what do these quotes all have in common? Yes, they were all concerning or said by comic book characters, but there is something even more interesting – the characters were all created by Jews! It is virtually impossible to study the history of comic books and superheroes without also studying the Jewish roots of both. In the 70+ years that have passed since Superman was first created, Jewish writers, illustrators and publishers have been key to the development and proliferation of these American mythological figures.

In reading more about the history of early American Jews and comic books, prompted by books like Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Clay*, and the three-part article that ran in Reform Judaism magazine a few years ago, I was struck by this indelible relationship: what was it about Jews that led us to be at the forefront of the comic book industry?

What was it about comic book characters, especially superheroes, which inspired Jews to create so many of them?

In the beginning, even before Superman, there was a Golem. Yet, even before the Golem, which I will return to, there were our biblical heroes. The *Tanach* – the Hebrew bible – is filled with larger-than-life characters and heroic, supernatural events. Moses, from his extremely humble beginnings as a baby in a basket on the Nile, to his magnificent triumph over Pharaoh and subsequent leadership of the Israelites towards our redemption in the Promised Land, is a great figure. In fact, Moses' burial site was purposely not recorded by our ancestors, for fear that it would become a site to worship or even deify him.

In his book, *Holy Superheroes*, Greg Garrett points out that Samson, our Jewish Hercules, performs amazing feats of strength and power. Garrett jokes, "Samson needs only some long underwear to make his way into the pages of modern comics – any man who could slay huge numbers of foes with the jawbone of an ass, burst ropes by expanding his chest, and push apart pillars to collapse a temple on his enemies is pretty close to prototypical superhero status already."¹ Only cutting Samson's hair will diminish his strength in his fight against the Philistines. Then, there's our beautiful Queen Esther, who must hide her true, Jewish identity behind a secret identity named "Hadassah," in order to save her people from a wicked villain named Haman.

¹ Garrett, Greg. *Holy Superheroes! Exploring Faith and Spirituality in Comic Books*. Pinon Press, 2005.

These stories in the *Tanach* inspire us; they serve as the tapestry upon which we develop our cultural and religious memories, they influence the tales we tell our children, and the figures we may even aspire to become.

In the 16th century, due to centuries of persecution, we had to create a different kind of hero, a hero outside of ourselves, as exemplified in the stories of the Golem. The most famous golem narrative² involves 16th century Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague. Rabbi Loew is said to have created a golem, a monster made of clay, to defend the Jewish community in Prague from Anti-Semitic attacks. According to the legend, the Emperor made an edict proclaiming that the Jews in Prague were to be either expelled or killed (depending on the version of the story). So, following prescribed rituals, the Rabbi built the Golem out of clay and made him come to life by reciting special incantations in Hebrew. Rabbi Loew also wrote the Hebrew word, *Emet*, Aleph-Mem-Tav, meaning "truth," on the Golem's forehead, in order to bring him to life. The Rabbi's intention was to have the Golem protect the Jewish community from harm. In the face of the strength demonstrated and violence perpetrated by the Golem, the Emperor begs Rabbi Loew to destroy the Golem, and in return he would promise that the persecution of and violence towards the Jews would stop.

The Rabbi accepted this offer. To destroy the Golem, he rubbed out the first letter of the word "*emet*" from the golem's forehead to make the Hebrew word "*met*," meaning death. It was made clear to the Emperor that the Golem of Prague's remains would be stored in a coffin in the attic of the Old New Synagogue in Prague, and it would be summoned again if needed. Will Eisner, creator of *The Spirit*, once said, "The Golem was very much the precursor of the super-hero

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golem>

in that in every society there is a need for mythological characters, wish fulfillment. And the wish fulfillment in the Jewish case of the hero would be someone who could protect us. This kind of storytelling seems to dominate in Jewish culture.”³

With these types of figures in our past, it is perhaps not surprising that, faced with an emerging enemy in early 20th century-Germany, which was unlike any seen in Jewish history, two Jewish boys from Ohio, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, were inspired to create a new hero to save us all. Beginning in 1934 and culminating in 1938 with their first published comic book, Siegel and Shuster created the incredible story of Superman. Born on the planet Krypton, Kal-El, or as we know him, Superman, was sent off into space when his parents realized that their planet was going to perish. In his small craft, the infant Kal-El flies towards Earth and lands on the small farm of Martha and Jonathan Kent. He is given a new identity – Clark Kent. In his book, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!* Simcha Weinstein notes that, in Superman’s backstory, we see profound parallels to the Jewish experience in America – born with a foreign name (and Kal-El is very similar to names of our prophets and angels, like Ezekiel, Michael, R’fael, and is often understood to mean “Voice of God”), we took very generic sounding names.

My own family’s name was changed from Belofsky to Bellows upon their arrival in this country. Kal-El’s parents knew that his life was threatened, just like Moses’ parents, and they sent him off so that he could survive to do great things. And, just as Moses is told by the burning bush that he must return to Egypt to save the Israelite people, young Clark Kent is told by his adoptive father,

³ Quoted in “How the Jews Created the Comic Book Industry,” by Arie Kaplan. *Reform Judaism Magazine*, Fall 2003.

"Now, listen to me, Clark, this great strength of yours – you've got to hide it from people or they will be scared of you... but when the proper time comes you must use it to assist humanity."⁴

Superman is also similar to the biblical Samson – kryptonite weakens Superman just as a haircut would weaken Samson. This similarity wasn't lost on the character's creators. A comic book in 1938 opened with the statement, "Friend of the helpless and oppressed is Superman, a man possessing the strength of a dozen Samsons!"⁵ Just as we are told in the pages of *Pirke Avot* that "The world stands on three things: truth, justice, and peace," Superman stands for three things: "Truth, justice and the American Way." His character seeks out injustice, helps the widow and the stranger, and saves the world from evil.

Though Superman is never said to be Jewish, the undercurrents of Jewish values and experiences are undeniable. The character's immediate popularity in the late-30's and early 40's was not lost on the Nazis. In fact, Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda, denounced Superman as a Jew. Yet, the fact that he took the time to make such a statement demonstrates what a powerful impact Superman must have had on the world.

However, if we were to focus only on Superman, and not on Clark Kent, we would be missing the true heart of the story. Inspired by a 2005 debate on BBC Radio, entitled, "Is Superman Jewish?" London *Times* journalist Howard Jacobson said, "Touch Superman with kryptonite and he is no longer his adopted self, no longer Clark Kent, but Kal-El, the boy with the [Jewish]

⁴ Weinstein, Simcha. *Up, Up and Oy Vey!* Leviathan Press, 2006. P. 26.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 27.

name, the boy from the shtetl. Superman might be Jewish, but it's only so long as no one knows he's Jewish that he is capable of performing wonders. And you can't get more Jewish than that."⁶ Thus, Superman only has power as long as his true identity, perhaps even his Jewish roots, remains hidden.

While Superman fought in the light of day, one of today's most popular characters, Batman, fought in the darkness of night. Bob Kahn, who later changed his last name to Kane, was a second-generation American whose family experienced tremendous hardship during the Great Depression. Thus, he was inspired in 1939 to create millionaire playboy, Bruce Wayne, who fought criminals at night as a masked vigilante – Batman. Young Bruce Wayne witnessed his parents' brutal murder in a back-alley of Gotham City, and used this as motivation to pour his wealth into the creation of incredible weapons and vehicles to aid in bringing criminals to justice.

Writing about Batman, comic book historian and creator Alan Oirich observed, "In the late 1930's, Jews in some of the capitals of Europe were being killed in the streets, with high culture and gothic architecture serving as settings for acts of uncivilized violence. Like the aghast eight year old Bruce Wayne, post-Holocaust Jews have witnessed the generations before them shot down in the streets. They struggle to understand, to avenge and to decide what in the world to do in response to such unfathomable tragedy."⁷

⁶ Quoted in *Up, Up and Oy Vey*, P. 29.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 37.

Following these two major characters, others joined the scene. Captain America, created by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon in 1941, sported a big letter A on his forehead, very much reminiscent of the letters on the Golem's forehead.

Fears of nuclear war spurred the next big burst in comic creation. In 1962, Stan Lee, whose original name was Stanley Lieber, created the Fantastic Four – four superheroes who worked together to save the world. One of the four, a rock-like monster named "The Thing," was revealed to be Jewish when, in a 2002 issue, he recited the *Shema* over a dying man. The Incredible Hulk, also created by Stan Lee, debuted in 1962, and he was so Golem-like that he was originally colored gray like clay!

Spiderman, created by Stan Lee in 1962, was one of the first characters to just be a normal teenager like any one of us. He was a little nerdy, a little shy, and not your typical superhero. Yet, a spider's bite turned him into a hero who could walk on walls, swing from his web, and save the distressed and needy in New York. Interestingly, a 2004 issue of Spiderman revealed a great little bit of trivia: All superhero costumes in comic-book land are actually designed by a Jewish tailor from the Lower East Side. When this tailor character first sees Spiderman hurtling across the New York skyline, he mumbles, "Meshugge!"

Finally, the X-Men, also created by Stan Lee, were first printed in 1963. The X-Men are a mutant group of people with extraordinary abilities. They are both celebrated and feared by the general population, and they have two leaders. One, Professor X, teaches tolerance and the use of

powers for the good of society. The other, Magneto, is revealed to be a Holocaust survivor who vows, "I will not see another people fear what they don't understand and destroy what they fear." Magneto, focused on vengeance, embodies "Never Again" and the power of striking back against those who persecute people who are different. Magneto believes that humans want only to imprison and kill mutants, just as the Jewish people were destroyed in the Holocaust. So the only way to prevent genocide, in his view, is to take power away from the humans and control them.

In contrast to Magneto, a character named Kitty Pryde is introduced in the X-Men world in 1980. Kitty is a young woman from Chicago whose grandparents survived the Holocaust. She doesn't view her Judaism as a reason to seek vengeance – Yet she takes pride in her religion. In one fascinating issue, she defeats a vampire not with garlic or a cross, but with her Star of David necklace! Kitty even speaks at an event at the US Holocaust Memorial in Washington, D.C., in honor of her grandparents.

Superman, Batman, Spiderman, The Hulk, Captain America, X-Men, and more – They are all the creation of Jews. Zeddy Lawrence, a television writer, once joked, "It may not be true in all cases, but it's a pretty good rule of thumb. If the word "man" appears at the end of someone's name, you can draw one of two conclusions:

- A) They're Jewish, as in Goldman, Feldman, or Lipman; or,
- B) They're a superhero, as in Superman, Batman, Spiderman."⁸

These heroic characters arose when we most needed heroes. The Great Depression, The Holocaust, and the fear of nuclear destruction all led to a need for heroes.

⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

The recent influx of superhero movies over the past few years, like Batman, Spiderman, X-Men, Iron-Man, the Fantastic Four, all came at a time when America was once again at war, feeling threatened, and needed a dose of both escapism and heroism. Each character provides catharsis in one-way or another – They explore the Jewish themes of the ambiguities of assimilation, the pain of discrimination, the difficulty of the misunderstood outcast. Through them, we are able to experience these feelings with some degree of disconnect. However, their prevalence may lead us to believe that the hero must always be someone else.

We Jews have been most creative in this area, in the past and in the present, when we feel as if we cannot do anything as individuals to help ourselves. We feel small and helpless, so we create stories like King David's triumph over Goliath, Or the Golem who saved our whole community, or Superman who is virtually undefeatable. They give us hope that, in the end, no matter what, good will prevail over evil. Inside ourselves, and outside in the world, we are constantly struggling to reach that time when "things will get better."

We return to the High Holy Days, each and every year, seeing the evil in the world around us, reflecting on the sins we personally have committed, and we promise to try harder next year. This ability to keep trying again, to return to ourselves, to seek out the light within and without, is a central Jewish concept.

However, I wonder – do superheroes provide super-excuses? How does each of us become the hero of our own stories? When do we thank the superheroes for their services and see that we

ordinary human beings can be just as great? We need not mimic a superhero, but we can unleash the heroic within us. *Teshuvah*, the process of repentance and return, enables us to come back to the divine spark within ourselves, to reconnect with God, to repair broken relationships. At this time of year, we are seemingly average people who are suddenly revealed to have immeasurable potential. We can become the greatest versions of ourselves through the work of *teshuvah*.

Luckily, we don't have to battle enemies like The Joker or Lex Luthor, but there is often much that we must battle inside of ourselves. The part that would like to remain passive, to sit on the couch, to spend the day on the computer, rather than seeking to alleviate human suffering, heal the emotional pain of those around us, volunteer time to social action activities, or even visit a sick family member or friend. In *Superman on the Couch*, Danny Fingeroth states that we are all heroes.

He writes:

"A hero can be said to be someone who rises above his or her fears and limitations to achieve something extraordinary. In the real world, firemen who race into burning buildings, soldiers who advance in the face of enemy fire, astronauts who launch into space despite the high odds of lethal outcome, are often the standard by which heroism is measured.

On another level, a teacher who, day after day, attempts to educate under adverse circumstances, an accident victim who, despite pain and enormous difficulty, persists in relearning lost skills, or a physician who ministers to AIDS patients in plague-stricken, third world nation can all be considered heroes. They fight the odds, and sometimes beat them.

Indeed, do we not all, at one time or another, as the alarm clock rings and we steel ourselves to face another day in the struggle that life can be, regard ourselves – even as we laugh at the assessment – as the heroes of our own lives? There are days when simply taking the subway to work and getting through the day seems like the triumph of Gilgamesh, or the Green Lantern, for that matter."⁹

⁹ *Superman on the Couch*, p. 14.

Every single one of us has the power to do great things – to do what is just, good, and meaningful, and not just what feels, tastes, or looks good.¹⁰ Superman fought for integrity, Batman for justice, Captain America for patriotism, Fantastic Four for teamwork, Spiderman for responsibility and redemption, X-Men against anti-Semitism and for reconciliation. We are all capable of fighting for the same values. We all have a responsibility, a mandate, to make the world a better place. We can't fly, bend bars, or change the flow of a river, but we can become people of peace, love, compassion, and ACTION. We must vote and donate to causes that are meaningful to us. We need to do what is right instead of what is merely convenient. We need to question the status quo and create change. We must clean up, give away, speak out, act up in every aspect of our lives.¹¹ I am not asking you to be superhuman, or to drive yourself crazy with high expectations or perfectionism. Rather, I charge you to be your best human self – to be most true to yourself.

How can you do it right now, tonight? Apologize to those you may have hurt, knowingly or unknowingly, in the past year. Forgive those who have hurt you and allow yourself to be freed from the residual anger. Embrace your parents, children, grandchildren, and friends, and love them for exactly who they are, not for who you want them to be. Join a new committee, club, or arm of the synagogue this year, and be a part of making Temple B'nai Torah the exciting place that it will become. Donate canned goods to our local food pantries. Clear out your closets of clothes you no longer wear and donate them to good will or a local thrift shop. Take it upon yourself to learn about important issues facing our country, like health care reform, equal rights for all, regardless of sexual orientation, reproductive rights, and the economy.

¹⁰ *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!* p. 25.

¹¹ *Holy Superheroes*, p. 169.

Figure out how you feel, study what Judaism says about these topics, and do something to make the world a better place. Participate in a rally to support a cause that is important to you; write your senators and representatives when they have a relevant bill before them. One person can make a difference – all of us together can truly change the world. Because, of course, when do heroes ever turn away from a battle worth joining?

I will see you there!