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“Biblical Superheroes”

When I was little there was nothing more that I wanted to be than a super hero. I used to fantasize about flying like Superman, having a secret bat cave like Batman, and swinging on a web like Spiderman. I read all the comic books I could find about them and I even ordered special underwear to dress like them.

My mother tells a story about how, once, when I was four or five years old, I decided I could cross the street by myself. I was just like Superman and no car was going to hurt me. Luckily for me, my mother managed to stop me before I got anywhere near the curb.

Amazingly, in my adult life, I found out that all of my comic book heroes were developed by Jews. Jerry Siegel, Joel Shuster, Jewish teenagers from Cleveland who dreamed up Superman in 1938. Bill Kane or Robert Kahn and Bill Finger came up with Batman in 1939, in response to Superman. And, in the 1960s Stan Lee and Jack Kirby developed Spiderman and a whole host of characters, like Captain America, Thor, and the Hulk for Marvel Comics.

More than though, these very *goyisha* superheroes, actually had many Biblical and even Jewish themes.

The most obvious example is Superman, whose childhood story closely follows the story of Moses. A boy born in a time of grave danger for his people, is shipped off to an unknown world, only later to realize the great powers that were bestowed upon him. While Superman's Egypt is galaxies away on the planet of Krypton, there is no doubt that young Siegel and Shuster had some Hebrew school training.

More than this though, Superman's secret identity Clark Kent can easily be understood in a time period when Jews often had to hide their identities in order to make it in the world. The 1930's in America was a period of intense antisemitism, where job listings told Jews that they need not even apply and where Jews were often barred from social clubs and even hospitals.

Indeed, there is a long history of Jewish superheroes: Judah the Maccabee, Mordecai from the Book of Esther, Samson, Moses, and, of course, the hero of the high holidays, Abraham. I say, of course, because in looking at Abraham's story, it is not much different from those of modern superheroes. A person with unusual gifts, rises to defeat a bevy of enemies. While comic books were not invented until the 20th Century, its clear superheroes were invented a long time before then, perhaps even in a galaxy far, far away.

Let's look at the life of Abraham. He emerges from the land of Haran at the age of seventy-five. Up to this point, nothing remarkable about his life, other than his journey with his father Terach from the Ur of the Chaldeans, thousands of miles away. However, at the beginning of Parashat Lech Lecha, Abraham finds God and is transformed into a man of immense power. Whatever he touches becomes golden and he even has the power to defeat any enemy that he wants. Those of you unfamiliar with this story from Genesis 14, it is truly remarkable even by Biblical standards. It goes something like this: Lot, happily settled in Sodom, became the victim of a war involving the major kingdoms of the region. Although Abraham was hopelessly outnumbered, he mobilized his people and went into battle to rescue Lot. Miraculously he triumphed, and, in a further demonstration of his noble character, he refused to accept any spoils, though he was entitled to them by the international law of the day.

However, Abraham's super powers go far beyond mere fortitude in battle, but even grant him the power to argue with God. We see this in another rescue of Lot several chapters later, when Abraham negotiates with God to save as many people of Sodom and Gemorah as he can. Mind you,

that he does all of this at an age when he would be toting his senior citizen card around today.

All of this power, no doubt, must have given Abraham the impression that he was invincible. Nothing could stop him, not even death.

Of course we know that Abraham's life was not as easy as that. As with most heroes, super or otherwise, his struggles occurred in his family life. On Rosh Hashanah we get just a tiny glimpse into his negotiations with Sarah and Hagar and struggles he has with his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. In the Torah portions we read today and tomorrow, we get the most human version of Abraham presented in the Torah. In both of these stories, he is not all wise, he is not all powerful, and he certainly does not make good decisions.

I think the negative response that people often have toward Abraham is largely generated by the weight of expectations that he accrues earlier on in the Torah. After all, he is Abraham, after all, the father of our nation. How could he, in good conscience, send one son away to die in the wilderness and attempt to sacrifice the other on Mount Moriah?

Rabbinically, this often one of the main struggles of the High Holidays. What do you do with Abraham? What do you do with the Akeda, the binding of Isaac? How do you not let this become a way of rationalizing his utterly irrational behavior?

Today I'm going to suggest a new interpretation of that moment when our patriarch bound his son upon the sacrificial table and raised his knife to slaughter his progeny. I will call this the de-superherofying of a superhero.

Before the Akeda, Abraham had no inkling, not only that he might get hurt, but that at some point he would die. Why would he have? According to the Torah's genealogical charts, before Abraham came around most people lived well beyond 200 years. This included Adam who lived to 930, Methusaleh who lived to 969, and Abraham's very own father, Terach, who lived to 205.

It is only at that moment, with the knife in hand, that he finally came to realize that he and his son might not, in fact, live forever. Here the Akeda is not a father's struggle with his son, or a challenge of the power of God, but simply a test of mortality. You can almost hear Abraham saying, "God, as I hold this knife up to my son's throat, I want to know what does the future hold for my son and I? Can we, in fact, die?"

Truthfully, I can very much relate to this aspect of Abraham. Up until the past few years, I, too, had trouble thinking about my own death. It is not that I didn't know my own mortality, but rather, that I thought that something far away in the future. I actually never had a significant person die in my life until I was almost twenty years old and a friend of mine were killed in a bus bombing in Israel. I remember the crowd gathered at that particular funeral and how odd it felt, that a person in their early twenties could be stolen away just like that. How lucky it is to grow up in a place where this is the case, especially with so many places even in our own inner cities where young people are killed every day!!!

As a rabbi, of course, I regularly confront death. It is the unspoken fear any time the phone rings at an unusual time, or a person I have not heard from in a while gives me a call. There is something in being a rabbi that prepares you for death more so than in most professions.

During the High Holidays, mortality is a constant topic of conversation. The Unetaneh Tokef prayer that is recited several times on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, epitomizes this aspect of the holidays.

"Unataneh tokef kedushat hayom, Now we declare the sacred power of this day." The liturgy proceeds to present of possible ways a person could die in the coming year. How strange these always seemed to me: death by fire, by drowning, by beast, by sword, by earthquake, by plague, strangulation, by stoning, or by starvation. These seemed such archaic ways to die, almost like reading a list of tortures from the middle ages. But, in truth, people still do die like this. Newspaper headlines ring out

with untimely and horrendous deaths. And, unfortunately, in a world as small as our own, there have been more than a few times when myself or someone I knew was connected to the person on the front pages of the paper.

And, yet, perhaps, all the way through September 11, 2001, that I believed I was somehow immune from all of those misfortunes. Today we sit only a few days removed from the sixth anniversary of that date, the date when so many of us in the room realized their own mortality.

In early childhood development, it is perfectly normal for a child to believe he or she has superhuman abilities. Psychologists call this “magical thinking,” and is best exemplified by a child's belief that the thoughts in his or her head influence the world around them. If I want it to rain, it will rain. My attempt to cross the street through traffic without getting hurt was, not only every parent's nightmare, but a natural thing for a child of that age to believe in.

But, eventually, you have to learn that you are not a superhero and that you live in with limited powers in a limited world. This is a powerful lesson for Abraham and Isaac on their fateful day and also for us here today.

No where have I ever gotten a more clear demonstration of this, than working as a chaplain on a Bone Marrow unit this past summer.

For those of you who are not familiar, bone marrow is the soft tissue found in the hollow interior of bones. However, more importantly, bone marrow contains stem cells that help create new red and white blood cells. In some people, the normal functioning of these stems cells ceases to occur and a person develops an extreme shortage of white or red blood cells. Without these that person has no ability to fight disease. Thankfully, doctors today have developed a method of transplanting bone marrow, or more specifically the stem cells in bone marrow, to save these peoples' lives. The bone marrow can either come from the actual person or from a matching donor, most likely a sibling. This

type of treatment is most commonly used with patients suffering from leukemia, sickle-cell disease, myelodysplastic syndrome, neuroblastoma, lymphoma, Ewing's Sarcoma, Desmoplastic small round cell tumor, Hodgkin's disease, and multiple myeloma.

It is truly an awful treatment to behold, for in order to prepare the body for such a transplant, the person first has to undergo a very intense form of chemotherapy that takes place over the course of a week or two, instead of a few months, as with other cancers. During the summer, I watched countless people go through this, so much so that I could see in depth how each stage of the chemotherapy and transplant effected each person.

There is a cycle of a relatively healthily person entering the hospital, followed by a few days of feeling reasonably good, to a week or two of nausea, vomiting, tiredness, aches and pains, and either constipation or diarrhea, depending on the day. Most of this bad time is in almost complete isolation, as any exposure to disease could be fatal. Even showers are off limits, for fear the person might cut him or herself and not be able to stop the bleeding.

It takes incredible bravery to go through this type of treatment. Every person on the unit, along with all the doctors and staff, know that this is a fight to the death, you against the disease, and hopefully an opportunity to extend a life five to ten years, or maybe even much beyond that. While cure is not often spoken about, a life beyond Bone Marrow full of richness, love, and health, is possible and, in a lot of cases, likely.

I consider the men and women whom I witnessed there this summer to be true superheroes. One person, in particular, stands out to me.

A man in his mid-fifties, he had been battling his cancer for several years before I met him and knew that his end was imminent. A devout evangelical Christian we wrestled all summer on religious grounds, he wanting to convert me, me wanting not to be converted. His liver had failed him, along with many of his internal organs, and a terrible yellow tone overtook his entire body, including his

eyes. But, somehow, in this time, the two of us developed a deep affection for each other. Hours away from his home and with only a once a week visit from his wife, I was essentially his only confidant at the hospital. I had him teach me songs from his hymnal, which he sang with a wonderful baritone voice as if he were in church. And, we talked about the differences between Judaism and Christianity.

What struck me most is how hopeful he was, despite the daily dose of pain with little relief, and despite knowing an end was here. "I'm going home," he would tell me and he was not talking about his actual home. Soon, he would return to his maker, a place he imagined to be joyfully bereft of any bodily concerns.

About a week before the end of my program, on his fifty fourth consecutive day in the hospital, he did go home, to his actual home, albeit briefly. He was put on home hospice and passed away only a few days later. But despite the simplicity of his faith, as one doctor labeled it, I appreciated his courage and strength in facing his own mortality. Even in a hospital, rarely are you able to talk directly with someone about death. For him, it was a natural subject, and I learned through this how not to be afraid of that final moment.

One of the songs we would sing together, and the only one that I knew as well, was *Amazing Grace*. Propped up in the bed, he would sing with his eyes closed, almost in meditation. His voice, even that weakened state, booming like a church choir:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

That sav'd a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.

He had lived a hard life, as a truck driver. From what I was able to gather, it was not a life that he was that proud of. While in later years he had found religion, he had many years of being lost. He

had a son from a previous marriage who he rarely saw or spoke to. He had acted badly and had much he was unhappy about it in his life.

The song continues, although I do not think he ever made it to this verse:

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,

And mortal life shall cease;

I shall possess, within the veil,

A life of joy and peace.

It is this peace that I learned from this man, a peace even after much suffering.

At the end of the Akeda, Abraham returns home, almost a different person. He has learned that he can die, or why would God have stopped him from killing his son. And, never again, does he attempt a superhuman feat. Isaac too is scarred, suffering most of the rest of his life in near blindness.

However, the realization that suffering is part of life and so is death, should not have meant that their lives were over. As I learned on the bone marrow floor, there is great strength in facing one's own mortality. For if they survived, the people on that floor knew that they could do anything they wanted in life. For nothing would ever be as hard as what they just went through.

This is the secret of the Shofar call on Rosh Hashanah. Like an ancient version of the bat signal, an image projected through the night that calls Batman in the comics books, the Shofar is our call out to ourselves. Yes, we can die, but in the mean time we must live.

As Horace wrote in Latin thousands of years ago:

“don't ask — it's dangerous to know — what end the gods will give me or you. Don't play with

Babylonian; fortune-telling either. Better just deal with whatever comes your way. Whether you'll see several more winters or whether the last one Jupiter gives you is the one even now pelting the rocks on the shore with the waves of the Tyrrhenian sea--be smart, drink your wine. Scale back your long hopes to a short period. Even as we speak, envious time is running away from us. Seize the day, there is nothing else beyond that."

During this high holidays, may we soar with our superhero capes, but also live in the wonder and merriment of every day life.