

In a world where no-one can be super-human, we need to be humans who are super!

Faster than a speeding bullet.

Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

Is it a bird, is it a plane.

No ... it's a nice Jewish boy.

It may surprise you all to know that Superman is Jewish. I am not trying to claim him as one of our own in the way that we like to find Jewish roots for every celebrity. The man of steel is really Jewish.

The two creators of Superman, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, grew up in the Jewish community of Cleveland in the first half of the twentieth century. And they drew upon the experiences of an immigrant Jewish community to create a Jewish hero who could be embraced by American society, and ultimately the world.

Superman and the American Jews of the 1940s shared defining characteristics. They were immigrants who had come to America from a foreign world; his world was Krypton, ours was Eastern Europe. Superman's entire family and race had been wiped out by a disaster of epic proportions, his home was destroyed. For the Jews witnessing the Holocaust, they watched as their home communities were devastated and their families killed.

And just like the American Jewish community, Superman sought to find a way to assimilate, and become a part of American society. He assumed the identity of Clark Kent as a way of fitting in, and it was only in secret that his true identity could be revealed. He shed the clothing of Krypton, and assumed the look of a shy and insecure American journalist. Like many Jews, he also hid his Hebrew name. On Krypton, Superman was not Clark Kent, he was Kal-El, a beautifully symbolic name,

which is derived from the Hebrew, 'Kol El' meaning either 'All is God', or 'The voice of God'. It is in the line of names which includes Israe-El, Micha-El, Gavri-El and my own Dani-El.

I like to think of Superman as Kol-El – The Voice of God. He was sent to Earth to remind us of God's message, and to help us hear God's still small voice in the world. Superman's core values are Jewish values; he pursues truth, justice and the American way. Truth and Justice may seem obvious as Jewish values, but if we take the American way to represent the words of the Declaration of Independence 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' we can again see that Judaism is present.

When Superman was sent to earth by his parents; his father said to him about us: 'They only lack the light to show them the way. For this reason, above all-their capacity for good-I have sent them you.' Superman was sent to earth to help bring out the good in us, to help us to be the best we can be, and to make this world a better place.

However, Superman is only able to accomplish his purpose on earth when he stays true to his heroic identity. The 'S', emblazoned on his chest, and the cape are not the costume, they are his true essence. The costume which Superman dons is the two piece suit of Clark Kent and the cowardice which accompanies it. He is unique amongst the Superheroes; Spiderman is really Peter Parker, and Batman is really Bruce Wayne – they conceal their humanity and assume a costume to be heroes. Superman, on the other hand, strips himself of his heroic qualities to become human; heroism is his nature, humanity is his costume.

This is the disturbing truth concealed in the Superman stories; when the man of steel looks at human society, he sees us as weak, cowardly and unheroic. Clark Kent is his attempt to assimilate into this culture. We require a saviour from Krypton to save us, as we are incapable of saving ourselves. In a comparable vein, neither Peter Parker

nor Bruce Wayne are heroes; they need to conceal their human identity, and don a mask, so that they may behave in a heroic way as Spiderman and Batman respectively.

Why can't humans be heroes? Why do comic book creators require that their heroes come from distant planets or conceal their humanity in masks and costumes? Why is it so unbelievable that humans are capable of heroism?

When we look at the world around us, it is disturbing to see just how similar our reality is to the fantasy created in comic-books. After all, it is our reality on which the fantasy is based. In today's society, it is easy to spot the villains; it is much harder, however, to locate the heroes. This past year we have witnessed gunmen going on rampages in Tuscon, where Congressowman Giffords was shot, in Carson City and in several other places across the country. We are still suffering the after effects of the greed which brought the global economy to a standstill. And we have listened as the voices of bigotry and hatred have grown louder, both in the Middle East and closer to home.

If this is what humanity has become, is it any surprise that we require a superhero to come down from a distant planet to save us? If this is what humanity has become, is it any surprise that humanity and heroism are adversarial terms instead of interchangeable ones? If this is what humanity has become, is it any surprise that human nature is often used as an excuse for someone's negative qualities rather than their positive ones?

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Superheroes present us with a *magic* solution for the problems and ills within society. It is highly reminiscent of the messianic idea which dominated Judaism from the

destruction of the Second Temple through to the birth of Reform Judaism. Our ancestors accepted their situation as oppressed, humiliated and landless because they accepted an idea that a Messiah would eventually come and save them. They accepted an imperfect world, and more significantly, they accepted their powerlessness to change it. They waited for their Messiah to come, and we are still waiting.

Reform Judaism said something different. We rejected the idea that a Messiah would come and save us, and instead we developed an understanding of a Messianic Age. This time would not come about as a result of God or an external superhero.

Instead, we will be the builders of a Messianic Age.

We will be the masters of our destiny.

We will not wait for the world to become a better place; we will begin the work of making our world better.

The wait for a Messiah encouraged passivity; the need for a Messianic Age is a call to action. We need to hear the call, and we need to respond!

Becoming humans who are super, and repairing the entire world may appear like quite a daunting task, but we achieve it one good deed at a time. The Jewish idea of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world, is built upon the idea that every positive action, no matter how small, helps to make the world a better place, and takes us one step further on the path to fixing our broken planet. Mitzvot are accumulated, and they grow beyond what could initially have been imagined.

Fred Scarf and Shiri Gumbiner met in Study Hall in 2004 during their freshman year of High School in California, and they soon became best friends, going everywhere together. They had plans for the future, and were looking forward to eventually attending their High School prom together. When they met Shiri had already been diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a rare form of bone cancer, and despite the

aggressive treatment she received, she passed away that August, when she should have been preparing for her sophomore year.

Fred wanted to do something to honor the memory of his friend, but as a 15 year old he was uncertain about where to start. In a Barnes and Noble, he stumbled across a book: "How to Form a Nonprofit Corporation." Despite the fact that this seemed like an impossible goal, he also realized it would be the perfect way to honor Shiri. During that year he divided his time between homework and filling in the mountain of paperwork required to set up a 501c3.

His initial aim was to raise money to fund research into finding a cure for osteosarcoma, and he did this by selling t-shirts, which simply said: 'I'm fighting bone cancer by wearing this shirt'. But he soon realized there were other ways that he could make a difference, and honor the memory of his friend. Shiri was never able to attend her High School Prom, and Fred knew that many other teenagers were also missing out on this opportunity. So in 2007, he set about organizing a prom for teens with life-threatening illnesses, giving these patients an opportunity to enjoy that special night that everyone looks forward to and remembers. At the first prom, there were 16 teenagers. At the most recent prom, held at the Madame Tussauds Museum in California, hundreds of young people attended, many of them taking time out from their treatment to be there.

In 2008 Fred was a recipient of a Diller Teen Tikkun Olam Award, and in 2010 he was recognized as one of CNN's heroes. Fred wanted to honor the memory of his friend and to help other people in a similar situation. He started out small and he has made a tremendous difference in the lives of hundreds if not thousands of young people. He is a human who is super, offering a heroic example we can seek to emulate.

Rabbi Shimon ben Zoma asks the question in Pirkei Avot: 'eyzeh hoo giboor?' 'Who is a hero?' And he answers; the hero is the one who suppresses his evil inclination, the *yetzer harah*. I agree with Shimon ben Zoma, but I would phrase my answer slightly differently. The hero is the one who maximizes his good inclination, the *yetzer tov*.

We are heroes when we pursue what is good and right. We are heroes when we act courageously in the pursuit of justice. And we are heroes when we help to make the world a better place. When it comes to heroism, we always have a choice. Superman could have hidden his powers, or used them for sinister purposes; instead he chose to be a hero. He chose to follow his good inclination and use his powers to fight for what is right. We need to make the same decision, behaving in a way which is worthy of our best qualities.

I would like to clarify that I am not suggesting that we need to be perfect or infallible; on the contrary, many of our heroes were far from it. Moses, who like Superman was destined to be a guiding light, leading the Israelites to freedom, certainly had his flaws. He tried to avoid God's call, at times he lacked faith, he was insecure, absent from his family and had a tendency to lose his temper. But Moses overcame his shortcomings to find the good within them; I believe it was Moses' imperfections that helped make him the person that he was and helped him lead us to be the people we would become.

Even Superman, our Jewish man of steel, was fallible. When exposed to Kryptonite he became weak and frail, and he would on occasion succumb to his anger and seek revenge. But every day was a new day to make it right; every day was another opportunity for heroism to triumph. Being super and heroic does not mean being perfect in an imperfect world; being super and heroic means trying to make our imperfect world a better place. To be superhuman is an impossibility. Such a

thing does not exist, nor should it exist. But to be a human who is capable of super acts – therein lies a word of possibility.

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When Abraham received his call from God, he was told 'Lech Lecha' – 'Go forth!' This enigmatic phrase called on him to undertake a journey to an unknown destination. But it also called on him to discover himself, as the Hebrew could also be translated as 'go to yourself.' To be the Patriarch of the Jewish people, he did not simply have to journey to a promised land; he had to discover the promise within.

This Rosh Hashannah, as we begin our Jewish new year, I am committing to undertake my own Lech Lecha. Just like Abraham, I do not know the destination to which I am journeying, but I know how it begins. It begins with the internal journey; it begins with self-reflection. I will take time to discover what is inside me, who I am and who I want to be. Then I will attempt to begin the journey towards heroism.

Abraham did not undertake his journey alone; he had a community to support him. Looking out at all of you, my new community; I ask, who will join me? Who will join me on this journey of Lech Lecha? Who will search within themselves to discover the courage, righteousness, and heroism that exists within us all? Who will join me to try to make a difference one mitzvah at a time, until together we can save the world. Together we can ascend Sinai, the mountain of our human potential, reaching up to the stars; rather than looking up to them for salvation.

This coming year, how will we change the world? Whom will we protect? What are we willing to fight for?

The story is told of a man who came up to Heaven, the angels asked him questions about his life and the way he lived. As the final question one angel asked him: 'Do you have any scars?' The man was puzzled and thought for a moment before responding 'No, none that I can think of.' The angel looked at him and said: 'So was there nothing worth fighting for?''¹

The story does not mean that we have to go out into the world ready for a physical fight, but it does suggest that we should be prepared to 'fight for what is right' and be prepared to bear the emotional scars and bruises. Humanity is something worth fighting for. Being a hero is not always easy, and it can be difficult to make a difference, but we must be prepared for the struggle.

This new Jewish year, we must fight to make humanity worthy of heroism. We must fight to make humanity synonymous with heroism. We must fight to make humanity heroic.

Kal-El, a nice Jewish boy from Krypton, was endowed with super powers. He chose to use these super powers for the good of humanity, and so he became Superman. Each one of us has the power to be a superhero; each one of us has been endowed with gifts to make a heroic contribution to society. If we can do this, then we will not need a super-human to come and save us, for we will have saved ourselves, saved each other, and in turn, helped save the world.

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Shana Tova.

¹ Story told to me by Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman.