

RH I

2019 Rabbi Irving Elson

If Captain Marvel Can Change, So Can You!!



March 8<sup>th</sup> of this year, was the day the world changed forever.

Does anyone know what happened that day?

March 8<sup>th</sup> 2019, a Friday, I believe, was the day that the Captain Marvel movie came out in movie theaters around the United States.

Those of us who grew up reading comic books knew captain Marvel well.

Or at least we thought we did.

The original captain marvel was created by Stan Lee (alav HaShalom) and Gene Colan in **Marvel** Super-Heroes #12 (December 1967). The

character of captain marvel or CAPT MAR-Vell was a an alien military officer of the Kree Imperial Militia, who was sent to observe the planet Earth as it began to develop technology to travel into space.

You heard me right...in the original comics, Captain Marvel was a *male* alien and Ms. Danvers, (who in this new version IS Captain Marvel,) was a former Air Force officer, was girlfriend to the hero.

How did this transformation happen? As the feminist movement of the '70s advanced, so did Ms. Danver's prominence in the comic book world. She soon became a superheroine known as Ms. Marvel ("Ms." in honor of Gloria Steinem). And in March of this year, Ms. Danver was transformed as Captain Marvel.

But that is just by way of introduction... because what I really want to share with you today lies well within the plot of the 2019 movie Captain Marvel.

So, sit back, and join me as we learn together about Captain Marvel and the real meaning of change.

The plot of the movie captain marvel is actually quite simple. It follows the journey of someone we think she is an alien thru her journey of self-discovery after suffering from memory loss. Mar-vell she finds herself on an unfamiliar planet (earth) and must regain her identity as a woman and heroine.

As she little by little regains her memory, Mar-Vell realizes she is not an alien at all, but a human from earth who had been held back much of her life from being able to pursue the kinds of things she wanted to pursue. She was constantly being told, 'Girls shouldn't do that,' or, 'It's too dangerous for you; you'll get hurt.' As a little girl, Mar-vell fights not to accept the boundaries put in front of her!

I'm sure by now you can predict what happens in the movie...aliens attack, yadah, yadah, yadah, and Mar-vell shatters those boundaries and

becomes Captain Marvel, a super-heroine who saves the world. Easy right?

Well not really...

It's great for super heroines and super heroes, that's fine in the movies, but you and I know that the real world, the world that you and I live in is a little different. **Change is hard**, overcoming boundaries is difficult and many times life gets in the way of us reaching the changes we want to make in ourselves.

On December 4<sup>th</sup> 1960, President Eisenhower, and the American people, received the gift of a rare, white tiger named Mohini. For years, Mohini lived in the Washington Zoo and spent her days pacing back and forth in a 12-by-12 foot cage. Finally, the zoo decided to build her a larger outdoor park enclosure, so Mohini could run, climb, and explore.

But, when she arrived at her new home, she didn't rush out, eagerly adapting to her new habitat. Rather, she marked off a 12-by-12 foot

square for herself, and paced there until her death, never enjoying her new habitat. At first, this might seem very peculiar, but behavioral psychologists knew exactly what had happened...and so did the rabbis... Noted rabbinic scholar Sara Hurwitz, explained this tiger behavior in the following way: "As we age, our brains are hardwired to reject change. We are conditioned to resist new challenges and remain within our comfort zones."

Does that sound familiar? It should, overcoming this resistance to change is exactly what the High Holy Days are all about....

During these days we are encouraged to explore the cages in which we reside and, literally and figuratively, to think outside the box about how we might embrace changes for our future.

There are, of course many kinds of changes:

There are changes that are out of our control: the death of a loved one, or an unexpected diagnosis that turns our lives upside down; the job

that ends abruptly or the one that changes because of relocation, a new deployment, or a merger or acquisition. And there are other changes out of our control caused by events such as natural disasters, crime, accidents, crises, war, or terrorism often demanding major changes that we didn't want and certainly didn't ask for.

And there are changes that are a result of the fact that the world keeps changing. People are constantly inventing, evolving, and discovering new technologies, science, cures, and possibilities previous generations could only dream of. That Star Trek tricorder is no longer a figment of Gene Roddenberry's imagination. There are real medical devices that do so much of what the fictional tricorder was supposed to do, from evaluation to diagnosis, and people are working daily to perfect the design.

The Epcot and World's Fair visions of tomorrow, that we marveled at as children, are now in our homes, our schools, our businesses, and even

our synagogues. The rabbis of old could never have dreamed of a Torah cam.

(story of Torah repair scanner)

Changes happen rapidly today, especially in the world of technology, whether we are ready for them or not.

Not too long ago I went to a Kosher Chinese restaurant where the mandatory Fortune cookie at the end of the meal said, "Remember that change is the only constant. Whatever is going on now, for better or worse is not going to last. So why not be strong through it? You want to look back and be proud of yourself."

There are times that life demands change from us, and there are times that we demand or need change in order for life to be better for us.

So I guess that the question to ask is: What is the best way to change?

Years ago, Dr. Steven Danish, a Pennsylvania State University psychologist said, "I think people don't understand how difficult it is to change behavior. You need to be setting a goal that you can think about and apply daily." **The key to climbing the ladder of change is one accessible rung at a time.**

Story of Lincoln as a child...what do you see.

What about our Jewish lives, Can we apply that to our Jewish lives and our observance?

Candles, then Kiddush, then shabbat services, not so bad, not so fast

How about our Jewish souls, one kind thought, then one kind word, then one kind act....

My friends, Change is built into the universe. It is a necessary part of living and aging, but change not only happens to us; it is forged by us...one rung at a time.



*“Who are you?” said the caterpillar...in the novel Alice in Wonderland...*

*“I hardly know, Sir, just at present,” Alice replied rather shyly, “at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”*

Alice in Wonderland knew that our bodies change every single day.

Guess, what..we are able to change our minds, as well.

On these High Holy Days, change is demanded by God, but not just any change – change for the better. God only asks us to make changes that we can be personally responsible for, and changes that can be made with an act of contrition or atonement, like an “I’m sorry,” or a change in attitude or behavior – like getting a grip on anger, gossiping, or jealousy. We are never asked to make change for the sake of making change. That rarely bares fruit.

Perhaps the best framework comes from the Babylonian Talmud, in the section called Rosh Hashanah, page 16b. Jewish tradition teaches that Rabbi Isaac said:

“Four things change a person’s fate, namely

- *tzedakah*,
- *tze’akah* (crying out) ,
- *Shinui ha’shem* (changing one’s name) &
- *shinui ma’aseh* (changing one’s conduct) ... and some rabbis added:
- *shinui makom* – changing one’s place.”

**Tzedakah:** I know for a fact that philanthropy and a practice of giving is at the heart of everything we aspire to be as human beings. Judaism teaches over and over again that one must give of one’s substance to open one’s heart and see that you are not the only person in need. It begins with the thing we seem most inclined to hold on to...*our money*. Givers change the lives of others and in doing so open their own hearts to change.

The practice of giving opens your heart in ways NOTHING else can. Tzedakah more than any other Jewish value changes our fates and the fates of others. Tzedakah links us to the God within and helps us to become “vessels of God” in our world

The second thing that changes our fate is:

**Tze’akah (Crying Out):** It is not enough to post a rant on Facebook or Twitter. You need to use your voice and your will to make effective change in the world through **action**. Not speaking out against evil and wrong in our world is one of the greatest sins of all for Jews.

Even in times when our voices were silenced as a persecuted minority, we spoke out for righteousness and justice at personal peril. Those who do not cry out against injustice are complicit to it.

Let me say something quite radical here:

Those who only **post** for change on Facebook, from the comfort of their homes **fail to be God’s change agents in the world**.

There are issues that obligate all Jews; issues that require TZE'AKAH – *screaming out* for the voiceless and most vulnerable everywhere. There are people living in boxes smaller than 12X12. What are we **doing** to change that? Wanna really change? Cry out for something you believe in!!

The third thing to change is:

**Shinui Ha'Shem** – literally “taking a new name” “*Change your name you change your mazel.*” But, imagine for a moment that you changed your name by changing the way you perceived yourself: “I am not a loser, I am a winner.” “I am not an outsider, I can be an insider.” I know you’ll find this hard to believe but let me tell you that I wasn’t popular at all in school. I was a brainy comic book, band nerd. It is still a marvel to me that people want to talk to me . Sometimes, I still can’t believe that little Irving is Rabbi Elson. Think tall and you will be tall!

We are all nouns: husband, wife, student, boyfriend, athlete, friend, classmate, neighbor, colleague, writer, artist, dancer, scientist,

grandparent, and the list goes on. But, the name change that is most important is the adjective we put in front of those nouns: loving son, faithful friend, supportive sister, attentive caregiver, tireless volunteer, caring person, good Jew. **Change your adjective in any relationship for the better and you will change your life.**

The fourth category of change for the rabbis is:

**Shinui Ma'aseh:** Change what you do. There are things we all do that could use improvement. We fall back on old habits and responses. I have learned in all my years of counseling that people who make an effort to change, or improve one thing, find it easier to change the second and third thing. The first change is the hardest to make – ending an unhealthy relationship, starting a diet. You can't always anticipate every change ahead, but avoiding change doesn't get you very far. And, it is usually best to take one change at a time.

At a service honoring him in Jerusalem... a righteous Gentile who acted bravely for our people during the Holocaust said this: "I did little; but if many had done their little, it would have added up to much."

The rabbis conclude: Just by tending to our small corner of the world, we have the potential of making a great contribution."

And some of those rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud add a fifth change... change your place.

To me this means living the Jewish axiom from the Mishneh, Pirke Avot 2:6 attributed to Hillel the younger, Hillel ben Gamliel: *Bamakom sheayn anashim tishdadayl lhiyot ish*. "In a place where there are no human beings, strive to be human."

Back to Captain Marvel...I am thinking of the girl who left her dysfunctional family always telling her, she couldn't do...fill in the blank here....and ended up saving the world. Captain Marvel changed her name, her environment and how she looked at herself.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg writes:

Take a moment to sit and be still. When you are ready, think about the following:

Imagine yourself five years from now as you would most like to be.

- What change or changes would you have to make now to enable the answers in your heart to become the daily and continued reality of your life?

One last story: Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (1740-1809) told the story that he started out his rabbinic career wanting to change the world. After several years, he realized that was too hard, so he decided to change his community. Several years later, that goal was also abandoned as too difficult, and Rabbi Levi Yitzchak chose to concentrate on changing his own family. We could have told him – Good luck with that! **He finally concluded that the only one he could really change was himself.**

If we decide not to change ourselves, then we can't possibly hope to make all the other repairs that are so desperately needed in this broken and divided world.

You can live as Mar-Vell forever, or you can change yourself into a captain Marvel, and then your world and perhaps even someone else's world for the better.

**For Jews, the possibility to change is given by God. The desire to change is all up to us.**

So I ask you, "Can you make change?"

Shana Tova!