

Rosh Hashana 2016
Batman, the Most Jewish of all Super Heroes
Har Shalom –Rabbi Irv Elson

When I was a little kid, long before I ever decided to be a rabbi, I have loved the High Holy Days. Even as a 5 yr . old I looked forward to these very long days sitting in synagogue next to my parents.

Why, you may ask? Well, it wasn't the prayers .. I was just a little kid .. it wasn't the music or the chanting, that was tedious and boring and it certainly wasn't the sermon. I couldn't understand a word that the rabbi was saying!
... so what was it about the High Holy Days that attracted me?

Well, for three days out of the year , I could sit uninterrupted, quietly pretending to read my Mahzor , while in actuality, tucked inside this most holy of prayers books, I was reading the latest issue of my favorite super-hero comic book .

For three days out of the year , I was, pun intended, in heaven ... countless uninterrupted hours of Superman , Spiderman , Capt America, Wonder Woman, and of course, my absolute favorite, Batman!

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of Super Heroes. You cannot go thru a summer without a new remake of a super-hero movie. Once again, super heroes have captivated the American psyche, coming with super-natural powers to save the world.

Many of you have asked me about my fascination with super-heroes as you have seen me wear my batman tallit or my batman kippah. Both of which Fran, my wife, forbid me from wearing these High Holy Days...

Well, the truth of the matter is that to my mind, there is, in fact, an invisible line of connection between Judaism, these days of *heshbon ha Nefesh*, of introspection, and the idea of the super hero.

Zeddy Lawrence, the famous TV writer and producer began to recognize some connection between Jews and comic books when he said: "It may not always be true, 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 are Jewish, as in Goldman, or Feldman.

Or b) they are a super hero, as in superman, Spiderman or Batman."

And so today I want to spend a little time talking about the Jewish/High Holy Day/Superhero connection.

So I think the best place to begin is making two unequivocal statements:

1. Not all super heroes are created equal. There are clearly some more "**super**" than others.

2. The most important, the most Jewish and the most " Super " of all super heroes is clearly ... Batman, the Caped Crusader .

Allow me to explain

It has been 74 years since Batman first swooped onto the scene in America.

The year was 1939. Just a year prior in 1938, Superman appeared for the first time in Action Comic Books # 1.

Immediately, Jews living in America, related to the Man of Steele. There was a certain resonance to this Super Hero's story. Coming over from the old country, changing his name from Kal El to a more American name, Clark Kent. (Michale Chambon, noted author and Pulitzer prize winner joked that " only a Jew would pick a name like Clark Kent for himself' .)

Superman could fly, he had enhanced strength, x-ray vision, and impeccable good looks ... he was the whole package!! He was the **first** Super Hero!! He was someone that Jews could relate to in those hard times as the clouds of Nazism and war brewed over Europe.

But something was missing ...

A year later, Batman came into the scene ... and he was different.

Batman had no super powers. He couldn't fly, unless it was in the Bat-plane.

He didn't have superhuman strength, or x-ray vision ...

And yet the Batman comic books took off immediately and though they never

outsold Superman comic books, for the past 75 years, Batman, the Caped Crusader has been the most Jewish and certainly the most important of all super heroes.

What is it about Batman that made him stand out for our people and for me as a child, as a Jew and now as a Rabbi??

In his 2000 novel "The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Klay" author Michael Chambon characters give us a hint to the answer.

The two main characters, Sam Cavalier and Joe Klay, two Brooklyn teenagers both aspiring comic book authors and illustrators are discussing the creation of a super hero for their new comic book.

"If he's like a cat or a spider or a wolverine, if he's huge or tiny, if he can shoot flames or ice ...It doesn't matter ...because ["How he does what he does" } is not the question that matters. "How" is not the question and "what" is not the question, So what is the question that matters?, asked Joe ..

*"The question that matters is why?" **Why** is he doing what he does?"*

The story of Batman's rise to Super hero-ness is **sad but simple:**

As a small child, little Bruce Wayne sees his parents murdered by a common criminal as part of a petty robbery gone wrong ...as he grows up, and inherits

his parent's wealth, Bruce Wayne chooses to use his wealth and skill to fight crime plain and simple.

Batman's "what" is unimpressive ... he doesn't fly, he doesn't have superhuman strength, he's just a guy running around in tights in a really cool car. .. (Johnny Carson, interviewing Adam West, the original Batman jokingly said: " Any guy who dresses as a Bat clearly has issues ... "

BUT..it is Batman's "**why**" that makes him a super hero ...

Upon the death of his parents, Bruce Wayne has a choice to make, and in true super hero fashion chooses not for **revenge but for justice ...** and the rest is history.

For the last % of a century Batman has been seeking, not revenge, but justice.

A simple but important choice, a super hero choice, a very Jewish choice

So what about us, here, today, not in Gotham City but here in Potomac and now?

What is our "why?"

Can we too become like Batman?

I pray that none of us have to face the circumstance leading to the choice that Bruce Wayne had to make, but it is clear that in our lives, we too have to confront choices that could easily leads us to the path of good or the path of evil.

All of us confront evil, injustice and wrong in one way or another, in one degree or another. That is inevitable. That is something we cannot control.

But the High Holy Days ..and Batman remind us that while we can't control **what** we encounter, the only thing we CAN control is our reaction to that evil, to that wrong, to that injustice.

In a way, that is the simple message of these High Holy Days:

How did we confront evil, injustice, wrong during this past year?

What choices did we make?

What did we learn from our choices?

And most important how are our past choices going to effect the choices we are to make in the year to come?

Perhaps one of the most salient prayers in the High Holy Days service is the Unetaneh Tokef ... the few words strike awe and fear in many of us ... "

In Rosh Hashana it is written and in Yom Kippur it is sealed ...who shall live, and who shall die " .

A little scary, isn't it?

Based on our choices, our fate is decided

We are judged by how we reacted to the evil that is presented before us ..?

The rabbis of old represented this a little differently:

In the Talmud, (Megillah 28a) they wrote:

"One who waives his right to retribution, " says the Talmudic sage Rav, "is requited of all his sins. "

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin explains, " If you are unforgiving to those who have offended you, then you forfeit the right to ask God to treat you with mercy

Conversely, **if you are compassionate, that entitles you to a greater portion of God's compassion."**

Sadly, this has been a tough year for America and for the world. We cannot watch the evening news without seeing or hearing about the great evils around us; terrorism, racism, and all the other "isms".

We indeed have had plenty of opportunity to confront great evil in the world.

This past year, as I personally struggled to confront my ghosts of combat experiences, I too struggled to find the right answer to how I was to confront the evil I encountered in war .

The choices were scarily simple for me: Do I hate my enemies, or do I fight for Justice ... For years I have hated my enemies and those who did harm to my

Marines. It sound kind of silly now, but it has taken the better of part of a very painful year to learn a different way and to come to the same conclusion that Batman, my super hero came to years before.

Life is a series of choices about how we confront evil.

In a very divided America, both politically, economically, racially and socially, we too are confronted with a series of choices about how we confront evil and how we confront injustice.

And while this year in particular , as an election year , we are given the opportunity to make a political choice, we actually have that choice every day, about how we behave with out fellowman, how we speak to others, what and how we speak to our children about the world they are growing upin...

My friends, in these High Holy Days, when we pray for mercy and for giveness,

both the Rabbis of old, AND the Caped Crusader remind us, **that it is not what is done to you, but it is how you chose to react that you are judged on.....**

It is our choices that can make us super heroes or villains ... and THAT is what the Almighty looks at when writing in the Book of Life.

Why is Batman the most Jewish of all super heroes?

" Batman is the story of someone who suffers a terrible tragedy and the overcomes it by not only working on himself, but also by putting himself in the service of others- in saying: this terrible thing happened to me, and I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure it doesn't happen to others.

Batman had the determination to say, *I will do whatever I can to make the world a better place, not by getting revenge, but by seeking justice ...* **that** is the Batman way, that is the Jewish way.

As we begin this High Holy Days season, my hope and prayer is that we all use this time to look at our choices of the past, and commit ourselves to making choices in the future which are based on justice, mercy, and a passion to make this a better world. Amen