

## Hero Israel

### Vayeitzei

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If you could choose one of the following superpowers, what would it be: Flight or invisibility? You can only choose one. I'll give you a moment to contemplate this profound philosophical challenge, one which our sages might refer to as דברים העומדים ברומו של עולם, matters that occupy the highest spheres of the human intellect. You might say flight, but what would you use it for? Without superhuman strength, could you do anything virtuous with it? And in considering invisibility, think about the temptations that come with evading detection.

This past week, this question suddenly assumed a greater significance and poignancy with the passing of Stan Lee (Stanley Martin Lieber), the founder of Marvel Comics and the creator of many beloved characters.

It is bashert that his passing coincides with the parsha of Vayetze, in which we encounter a Biblical character who possessed not one but three superpowers.

Commenting on the opening verse, describing Yaakov's journey from Be'er Sheva to Charan, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 95b) suggests that travel time was remarkably reduced, as if the ground had folded up beneath his feet:

דכתיב (בראשית כח, י) ויצא יעקב מבאר שבע וילך חרנה וכתוב ויפגע במקום וילן שם כי בא השמש כי מטא לחרן אמר אפשר עברתי על מקום שהתפללו בו אבותי ואני לא התפללתי בו בעי למיהדר כיון דהרהר בדעתיה למיהדר קפצה ליה ארעא מיד ויפגע במקום

This phenomenon, known as קפיצת הדרך, would soon become commonplace in many a Chassidic tale about the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples, but the very first time we find such a feat recorded in Jewish lore is right here in reference Yaakov.

But Yaakov's newfound abilities are not limited to traversing vast distances in a single bound. Consider the peculiar encounter between Yaakov and the shepherds as he reaches the house of Lavan (Bereishit 29:3-9). Yaakov arrives and he has discovered Lavan's workers who have prematurely retired from their workday. They even went so far as to close off the well by rolling a large stone over the opening:

וּגְלָלוּ אֶת־הָאֶבֶן מֵעַל פִּי הַבְּאֵר

In response to this indolence, Yaakov offers a harsh reprimand:

לֹא נוֹכַל עַד אֲשֶׁר יֵאָסְפוּ כָּל־הָעֵדָרִים

As this was taking place Rachel walked by accompanying a flock of sheep. After having one look at Rachel, Yaakov handily rolls the very same stone off of the mouth of the well, allowing her to water the sheep:

וַיְהִי כִּאֲשֶׁר רָאָה יַעֲקֹב אֶת־רַחֵל לַבַּת־לָבָן אֲחֵי אִמּוֹ וְאֶת־צֹאן לָבָן אֲחֵי אִמּוֹ וַיָּגֶל אֶת־הָאֶבֶן מֵעַל פִּי הַבְּאֵר וַיִּשְׁק אֶת־צֹאן לָבָן אֲחֵי אִמּוֹ:

Our Sages note that the word “ויגל” is written in the singular in reference to Yaakov, while it written in plural in reference to the shepherds- “וגללו”-demonstrating that Yaakov possessed the strength of many men.

Lastly, Yaakov had one more impressive ability to add to his super-strength and power of flight - our great Patriarch could bend time as well.

As Lavan, the unscrupulous father in law, tricked him into another seven years of servitude so that he may wed the girl of his dreams, the Torah states that the years went by in a flash:

וַיְהִי בְּעֵינָיו כִּימִים אֶחָדִים בְּאַהֲבַתּוֹ אֹתָהּ

What would otherwise be an endless period of pure torture due to the interminable wait went by for Yaakov in an instant.

Yaakov could fly *lehavdil* like Iron Man, even without a suit that conferred magical powers. He could perform acts of phenomenal strength like Hulk, though he was never exposed to gamma radiation, and, like Dr. Strange,

להבדיל, he could bend time though he had did not possess the mystical Eye of Agamotto!

What is the secret of Yaakov's superpowers? It is tempting to view these as three separate occurrences, but that would be mistaken. They are, in fact, united by one common denominator: each of these magical feats attributed to Yaakov was fueled by his passion and purpose. When Yaakov first ventures out of his parents' house, we know he is afraid; he does not possess the attributes that portend success in a life lived on the lam, but he knows where he must go and he knows that he is headed there. He is fulfilling his mother's wishes and running from his brother's murderous designs. That sense of purpose allows the land to fold underneath his feet, because when we are driven by a sense of mission, there is no distance too great. Imagine that, God forbid, someone you loved desperately needed your help and assistance but you were separated by several time zones. You wouldn't ask about the price of the ticket or the number of days off you would burn; the ground would fold under your feet. When Yaakov meets Rachel, his super strength is once again fueled by passion. Just a month and a half ago, we said as much in the *Tefillat Geshem* prayer:

זְכוֹר טַעַן מִקְלוֹ וְעֵבֶר יְרֵדָן מַיִם

יְחַד יֵלֵב וְגַל אֶבֶן מִפִּי בְאֵר מַיִם

Maybe it was his desire to provide for the woman he fell in love with at first sight, or perhaps his sense of justice when he saw that a group of people were stealing from their employers, that motivated his feats of strength- or both- but it doesn't really matter. This was an expression of pure passion on his part. And Yaakov turned seven years into a matter of days because he knew that Rachel was worth waiting for.

How did Yaakov, the meek “man of truth,” transform himself into a businessman, a patriarch, and a person who stood up to tyrants? It was through finding something *virtuous* that he was passionate about and using it to fuel his life's mission. Yaakov's story is not a “superhero origin story.” It is eminently relatable to so many of us who don't possess the traits our social construct deems desirable. We are not alpha males or queen bees, and were more likely picked last in basketball games or weren't invited to every party. We are not necessarily tall, confident, wealthy, well dressed or assertive. We are either too book smart, or academically challenged. Yet it is precisely that person whose rise to greatness is most compelling.

Yaakov was meek and studious, two character traits that could easily spell doom in the ancient near east, as they led to financial dependency and social subordination. No wonder the Abravanel comments, on last week's sidra, that Yitzchak chooses Esav to be the de facto head of the clan because he is strong, outgoing, knows how to earn a living, and has the moral

fortitude to grapple with Nimrod. No one ever chooses the איש תם, the nerd. It is the athlete, the extrovert, the one who flashes the toothsome grin who ultimately triumphs. Stan Lee's pantheon of greats was populated by flawed individuals and counterintuitive heroes; the X Men are a bunch of freaks and outcasts; Xavier is the handicapped (and bald) guru who takes them under his loving wing. Peter Parker is a socially awkward kid who is picked on relentlessly, Matt Murdoch is blind before he becomes daredevil and on and on.

By creating such characters he gave hope and a sense of belonging to generations of nerds and outcasts, providing them with a canvas to realize their dreams of greatness. In so doing, Stan Lee's most interesting characters were not found in the crisp pages of a new comic book; they were the hundreds of thousands of readers throughout the years who learned to identify their own "super-powers". We too must do a better job of identifying the kids and adults who have yet to find their own כוחות, who have things they could be passionate about and don't know it.

There is a second legacy the great Stan Lee leaves behind. Aside from his message of empowerment, the Marvel comic universe is a binary one: there is only good and evil, and nothing in between. To be sure, within each of these it was remarkably egalitarian. You could be black or white, male or female and be either villainous or virtuous. Secret talents did not confer

greatness upon a person; superpowers were inherently neutral and depended only on how they were used.

An excellent illustration of this occurred when the humorist John Hodgman asked a group of random people to choose between flight and invisibility, one woman had a ready answer<sup>1</sup>:

*I'd go into Barney's. I'd pick out the cashmere sweaters that I like. I'd go into the dressing room. The woman says, how many items? I say five. I go into the dressing room. I put those five sweaters on, and I summon my powers of invisibility in the dressing room. I turn invisible. I walk out, leaving her to wonder why there's a tag hanging from the door that says five and no person inside.*

We may feign surprise that this woman chose to use her powers for thievery or worse, but that's the thing about powers - they can manifest themselves in very positive or negative ways.

And when you dealt with a villain, at least you knew you were dealing with one. Red Skull, for example, was a red skull that wore a swastika on his armband. We live in a world in which nothing is binary anymore, and people often seem confused about what should be simple, clear cut issues. Yaakov is not just a “nerd,” he is the *ish tam*, which means that he sees good and evil for what it is. He possesses the ever elusive trait of **moral clarity**. Every time Yaakov is swindled, he confronts Lavan, who always seems to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/508/transcript>

have a ready and reasonable answer. “It is not our custom here to marry off the older sister first.” Or, when Yaakov tried to leave after 14 years of dedication, Lavan says, “How can you take my babies away from me!?” To a person who is *tamim*, such spin doctoring and chicanery were unacceptable. This past week, we had another reminder of the dangers of moral confusion and wrongly nuanced thinking. Israel continued to be the victim of relentless aerial assault by their murderous neighbors with nary a word of condemnation from the international community, save for the standard moral equivalence always drawn between Israel and Hamas. It is at times like this that we pine for the good old days when we sit in a tent, with clear definitions of good and evil; Stan Lee gave us that place, albeit a fictitious one. Yaakov shows us that it can exist outside the realm of fantasy. May we find our hidden wellsprings of power and passion, and at the very least, let us connect to the *temimus* of Yaakov and the clarity of his world.

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