**ROSH HASHANAH 5778**

WE DON’T NEED SUPERHEROES

RABBI MARC ISRAEL

Over the past few years, my son Oren has introduced me to a number of new friends. These friends don’t go to Perelman or Barrack, nor do they go to Camp Ramah. In fact, most of these friends are much older than Oren, some of them are much older than me. They have been around for quite some time but I hadn’t been paying attention to them. It was only when Oren started talking to me about them that I actually noticed them and realized that there was much more to them – individually and as a group – then I had ever realized. But I have learned a lot from these friends, and now I want to share them with you.

Let me introduce you to someone many of you may already know. [PULL OUT CPT. AMERICA]

Steve Rogers, aka Captain America, aka Cap was a frail young man who enlisted in the Army to fight in World War II, but was not strong enough to serve. However, he took part in an experimental program, where he was given a Super-Soldier Serum and "Vita-Ray" treatment to transform his strength, endurance, agility, speed, reflexes, durability, and healing to the peak of human perfection to join the United States fight against the Nazis. While he has no superhuman powers, he is armed with a nearly indestructible shield that he throws at foes. His body regularly replenishes the super-soldier serum so that it won’t wear off.

My next friend has a more “Strange” background [PULL OUT Dr Strange]

Stephen Strange was a highly successful, very wealthy and very egotistical neurosurgeon. Something of a playboy, Dr Strange lived life in the fast lane, especially when it came to driving. One night he left the hospital, driving too fast on a curvy mountain road. While texting and driving, he was in a terrible car accident. Despite the best of surgeons and rehabilitation, he could not get use of his hands. He was once the master of Western medicine, now it failed him. Out of options, he reluctantly turns to Eastern sources, and meets the Ancient One, who discovers he is equally skilled at Eastern magic as he was at Western medicine. He learns how to transcend time and space and uses it to help others, becoming a superhero, Dr Strange.

And the final of our heroes has a special place in my heart… [PULL OUT WONDER WOMAN]

Princess Diana of Themyscira, Daughter of Hippolyta, is the only woman in this group, and she is also the only one depicted by an Israeli actress! Unlike the others, she was born with her superpowers, as a creation of an Amazon mother, Queen Hippolyta and a Greek god or a series of Greek Gods. In addition to her unique origin, Wonder Woman was trained as an Amazonian, developing a wide range of extraordinary skills in tactics, hunting, and combat. She also possesses an arsenal of advanced technology, including the Lasso of Truth, a pair of indestructible bracelets, a tiara which serves as a projectile, and, in older stories, a range of devices based on Amazon technology.

But, I am not here today merely to introduce you to some of my 11 year old son’s favorite characters. Rather, I want to explore with you the concept of the hero, not only the superheroes of the comic books and movies, but what makes someone a hero in Jewish tradition, and to consider some modern-day heroes. Looking at these examples, I hope that each of us will be able to look within our own lives to see our own inner-hero – those times when we may be a hero to someone else, as well as to recognize the times when we might be in need of a hero to rescue us.

There are two very different definitions of what makes someone a hero: 1) “a person of superhuman qualities and often semi-divine origin, in particular one whose exploits were the subject of ancient Greek myths.” 2) “a person noted for courageous acts or nobility of character” or “a person who, in the opinion of others, has special achievements, abilities, or personal qualities and is regarded as a role model or ideal.” The difference between these two definitions is quite profound, for the first one limits the concept of who can be a hero to the “superhuman” and most of us, despite what we may wish, are not superhuman. The second definition is much more open – it allows for the possibility that any of us could be a hero if we work at it.

The superheroes that are standing around me are clearly all in the former category. Of this group, Wonder Woman may be the only one who is said to be of divine origin and born with her skills. The rest acquired their super-human characteristics as a result of a tragic life event. These origin stories are important – in fact for those who follow the superheroes closely, the origin stories are the key to understanding the hero. But regardless of how their abilities were acquired, the truth is, we know that we are looking at something that none of us could achieve.

Perhaps that’s why when I was growing up that I wasn’t particularly drawn to them. I liked The Original Superman movie, I watched the Batman cartoons on TV, and I read a few Spiderman comic books. But I never “followed” them in the way that Oren and so many others are today.

It turns out, I am not alone. Three of the top four grossing movies of 2017 so far are superhero movies. In fact, over the past five years, there has been an average of more than 3 superhero movies in the top 10 grossing movies each year. Compare that with twenty years ago, in 1987, when there was not a single superhero movie in the top 10. In fact, in the entire decade of the 1980s, there were only 3 superhero movies that made it into the top 10 of their year. 3 out of 100 over 10 years, compared with 3 out of 10 each year for the past five.

It is always hard to draw clear conclusions about cause and effect. Does Hollywood make more movies of a certain genre because there is greater interest in that subject? Or do the movies they produce drive greater consumer interest in the genre. I would guess that both are important, but one thing that seems clear is that there is a greater interest in superheroes today than there had been previously.

Experts point to a wide variety of reasons. Some suggest the current surge in superhero movies can be attributed to the rapid improvement in the technology of film-making, so that what was once an impossible maneuver, can now be computer-generated and seamlessly integrated with the live characters.

Others believe that it is due to the difficult nature of our current world, as Mark Millar, comic book writer and movie consultant, notes:

Whether it’s random terrorist attacks, over-population, rising crime rates, the threat of financial collapse, the mental hangover of the Global Financial Crisis, prejudice, ignorance, infectious killer viruses, or just traffic congestion, our world is on a constant knife edge. And in troubled times, people enjoy escapism, and perhaps secretly wish that there were superheroes around to hose down all of the horrors of the world. “Good economic times usually signal the death of superheroes, and bad economic times see a surge in their popularity” –

According to Dr. Ben Saunders, University of Oregon English professor and director of the Comic Studies – yes, such a thing exists – the appeal of superheroes increases any time there is a disconnect between the world we desire and the world we experience. He writes:

Who has never felt anguish at the apparent gulf between our sense of what is just and the vagaries of fortune? Who has never felt anger at the way social and political “realities” contradict our sense of what is moral and right? In superhero comics, at least during the first thirty years or so of the genre, the venomous, venal supervillains are always vanquished by the victorious forces of virtue! In fact, with their enhanced, elastic, and invulnerable-bodied characters, and the comfortingly schematic moral oppositions of their plots, superhero stories surely offer their readers some of the most primal fantasies of basic wish fulfillment available for commercial consumption…"

You can see that each of these three friends ultimately appeal to us to precisely because they help us to escape from our reality, not to enhance it. After all, regardless of the adversity any of us may have faced, no one here, at least not that I’m aware of, actually possesses any superpowers. [Although, I have wondered, when I look all the work some of you do on behalf of the synagogue, while working full time and raising children.] The aforementioned superheroes allow us to imagine a fairer and more just world, but they are not role models, for at their very essence they represent something that we cannot achieve.

Let’s step away from our Hollywood superheroes, then, and look at our Biblical heroes.

Who could be greater heroes then Avraham and Sarah? They founded the Jewish people, escaped from their idol-worshiping surroundings and discovered the one true God, thereby creating a new beginning for humankind. But they are never presented as super-human. In fact, the Torah seems to go out of its way to emphasize their humanity. We witness self-doubt, when the promise to become a great nation of multitudes seems to be delayed. We see jealousy and anger in yesterday’s Torah reading, as Hagar and Ishmael are cast out. In the next generation, we have Yitzchak and Rivka. Yitzchak, who always seems to be acted upon and never the actor, and Rivka, who orchestrates Jacob tricking Esau out of his blessing. Jacob and Rachel start as a beautiful love story, but soon the trickster is tricked and a love triangle ensues with wives competing for one another for their husband’s affection and Jacob showing favoritism among his children.

Moses, perhaps the greatest hero of the Torah, the one who is singled out to speak with God panim al panim, lacks the confidence to speak to Pharaoh on his own, due to his speech impediment. And, of course, at one key moment, we see his faith waver, and he is therefore not allowed to enter the promised land.

Being exposed to their flaws, does not take away from the heroism of Moses or the other Biblical heroes. In fact, it increases our regard for them. They are people, just like you and me, and yet they “rise above their station,” to quote newly discovered hero, Alexander Hamilton, and they achieve and inspire us. While Moses was aided by God’s superpowers – the subject of a different sermon – for the most part, they are heroes precisely because they achieve what they do while facing the same struggles that we do.

It is also striking that our greatest hero, Moses, is also described by the Torah as the “most humble person.” True heroes rarely see themselves as heroes. These are the heroes that our Torah presents us. They are people – people, who have their own flaws, but human beings who still demonstrate a faith and sufficient deeds to be the ancestors whose merit we call upon during these Holy Days. In fact, it is precisely because of their humanity that they become heroes. We read the stories of their lives and we can imagine how we might act in the same situation. Their only superpower is the ability to hear God’s voice, a voice that we can still hear today through our study of Torah.

Their hero-ism comes from rushing to greet strangers and provide them with a meal, or to offer water to a wandering man and his camels, when others might shut their tent flaps. It is Isaac walking up the mountain, wondering who is to be sacrificed, knowing the answer in his heart and yet continuing up the path with his father. It is Jacob and Esau, who after decades of struggle with one another that forced Jacob to flee for his life, find the ability to come back together after many years of struggle. It is Abraham arguing with God to save the cities of S’dom and Amorah, lest innocent people be put to death along with the guilty. It is King David, when confronted by the prophet Natan about his cruelty in having Uriah killed, who admits his mistakes and pleads for forgiveness.

They are not perfect, they do not get it right every time. They are human and yet, those instances in which they act in ways that others would not – this is what makes them a hero.

Their hero-ism is one that we can look to and emulate. We can see ourselves both in their struggles and their triumphs. It is the hero-ism of being able to look beyond our own troubles and to be able to see the bigger picture. It is an uncanny ability to look out, to see not only the challenges that lay before us, but the promises of what can be. It requires a certain vision that many of us don’t possess.

Many people I have spoken to over the past several weeks have pointed to the events of the year 5777 and have shared with me a strong desire to this year end, in hope that next year might be better. Perhaps you feel the same way. Those who have spoken to me have noted the increased displays of divisiveness and hatred in our public discourse. They talk about the terrible destruction we have seen this past year – not only from hurricanes, wild fires and earthquakes but also from terrorist attacks, war and growing fears of nuclear annihilation. I share all of these concerns and certainly understand the despair that many feel in not knowing how to fix these problems.

And yet, I am also constantly reminded of the many acts of heroism that we see in the midst of these problems. I wish that they made cardboard cut-outs of these people so I could share their faces with you. They are the faces of neighbors who spent hours upon hours going in boats to rescue neighbors. They are the utility workers who traveled thousands of miles to help restore power, working long shifts and sleeping in their trucks. It is not only the nun with the chainsaw, whose picture went viral, but the nuns, priests, rabbis and congregants who opened their synagogues and churches to shelter people whose homes were destroyed and to host services for congregations whose own house of worship lay in ruin. It is people like Oakland California Fire Battalion Chief James Bowron and his crew - they were dispatched to Houston with four boats on a truck to help with rescue efforts. After being away from their families for nearly a week and working non-stop, the waters began to recede, they were sent home and were anticipating several days of rest. They made it as far as New Mexico when the call came that they were needed in Florida for Hurricane Irma rescue efforts. Despite their exhaustion and desire to go home, they immediately turned the truck back East and continued their rescue efforts on Florida’s west coast. It would have been easy for Chief Bowron to say, its someone else’s turn. But it is precisely their willingness to self-sacrifice that made them into heroes.

I also see the heroism of an anonymous 22 year-old soldier from Neve Tsuf Halamish who was having a quiet Shabbat dinner at his parent’s house when he heard screaming from the house next door. As he stepped outside and realized what was happening, he ran back to get his gun and shot the terrorist with one bullet, preventing an awful massacre from being even worse. I’m not trained as a soldier, but even if I were, I have a hard time imagining that I would do the same thing. I wish that it were different, but if I’m honest, I’m not sure what I would have done.

What is it that these people, and others like them who we would deem heroes, share in common? Are they blessed with different skills, somehow hardwired differently or do they care more deeply about others than the rest of us? I’m not sure, but I tend to think not.

I think that most of us would agree that wearing a cape or a costume or being endowed with superpowers is not what makes one into a hero. In fact, as several of the superhero story lines have shown in the past several years, there is a dark side to their powers that can just as easily be displayed. The dark side of Superman, Spiderman and, most recently, even Captain America make clear that it is not the power itself that makes one into a hero.

Here again, our tradition may provide some insight. The most common word for hero in Hebrew is Gibor – which usually is related to one’s physical strength. And yet, the rabbis in Pirkei Avot teach us, eizeh hu gibor? Who is strong or who is a hero? Hakovesh et yitzro – the one who able to conquer his desires. The hero is not the one who demonstrates how strong she is by defeating others, but the one who learns to control and channel her strength to benefit others. He understands that he must overcome his desire to choose the expedient path and forge ahead on the more difficult one.

It is hard to name exactly what quality it takes to be a hero, but I certainly know it when I see it. And when I do examine those heroes, I find two commonalities.

First, their actions inspire others and make us think differently about how we act and what we might be capable of doing. Nearly four years ago, I had the opportunity to introduce you to one of my heroes, Rabbi David Saperstein. David is not just a professional mentor to me, although he is that. David is not only a friend of our families who we can depend upon in times of need, although that is true also. Watching David, from afar and from up close, colors the way I look at the world. When I struggle with a decision, I can often hear his voice in my head. There are things that he taught me – both in his purposeful teaching and through his example, that I regularly reflect upon. And I know that I’m not the only one for whom this is true. But even more than that, it is his seemingly endless energy to do that which he thinks is right, even when others around him are telling him to stop. Nothing can deter him from his pursuit of justice. For me, that makes him a hero.

Second, our heroes have the ability to look at a situation and to see things differently from how others view the world. This special vision is not the X-Ray vision of a Superman or the “spidy-sense” of Spiderman that allows him to sense danger. Rather it is an ability to look out at the world and see the possibilities that others could not imagine. It is the David Ben Gurions of the world, who look out at a desert that has been barren for centuries and can imagine how to make it bloom. He doesn’t merely imagine, he does it. It is the Menachem Begins, a follower of Jabotinsky, who not only fought strongly against concessions to the Arab countries, but fought against the Jewish establishment for his beliefs. And yet, he was also able to see beyond the conflict and to find a way to reach a peace accord with the Egyptians. In both cases, it is not a question of whether I agree with him or not – their heroism was in having the courage to change the landscape and to see a reality different from what others might recognize.

Think for a moment about a Torah scroll – most of us look at the scroll and only pay attention to the letters themselves, written in black ink. Yet, the Talmud (Menachot 29a) teaches that that every letter in a Torah scroll must be completely surrounded by parchment. In other words, the white parchment around the letters is just as integral part of the Torah as the letters. Without it, the Torah scroll is disqualified. In fact, the ability to read the white space is said to be an even higher form of Torah study.

There are times when there are extra spaces that are left blank to separate sections of the Torah. The Sages explained that these separations allowed Moses to reflect upon and absorb the previous lesson. The black letters are the revelation of intellect into the realm of language — our instruction manual. But the white spaces correspond to the realm of thought and contemplation. It is here that we reach out lifnei meshurat hadin, beyond the requirements of the law, to see and discover the space where we can create our own Torah; to consider our own skills and talents and how we can use them to contribute to the world around us. And this is what heroes do – they go beyond the requirements and act in super-human ways, being able to see in those white spaces the opportunity to transform the world.

At the beginning of the book of Leviticus, when God calls out to Moses, the letter Aleph in the word Vayikra is written in a smaller font. Our rabbis explain that for Moses to hear God’s call, he needed to increase the amount of white space around his “anochi” – his own self and his own needs – in order to see the needs of others. His heroism, as has been noted, is not only about his rescuing the Jewish people. It is also about his humility. This humility is not a byproduct or some minor character trait. At the end of his life, it is this quality that the Torah notes to tell us about Moses’ unique stature.

This is the difference between a star and a hero. A star also possesses many talents, but stars tend to flaunt it, making sure everyone is aware of their accomplishments. A hero goes about doing what needs to be done without calling attention to himself or worrying about who will get credit.

As much as I may enjoy the momentary escape that the superhero movies may provide, the truth is that we don’t need superpowers to be a hero. What we need is the courage to do that which is needed, to be able to see the white space around the letters, and to act without regard for the need for recognition.

Think about the heroes in your life. [PAUSE]

Now consider the ways that you may be or could be a hero for someone else. [LONG PAUSE]

I agree with those who argue that the prevalence of superhero movies is in direct correlation to the upheaval many people feel at this time.

However, In a world where there is such tremendous pain and suffering, we don’t need a superhero to help us escape. And so I say goodbye to these friends. [PUT CARDBOARDS DOWN}

And I turn to all of you.

Look around at the people sitting next to you and across from you. These are the faces of the heroes we need today. Not those cardboard superheroes. It’s each one of us who has the opportunity to dig deep within ourselves to find the hero within.

As we enter this new year – I ask you to think about a way that you might be able to be a hero in someone’s life.

What can you do that will make a significant impact on our world?

What are the ways that you can use the powers that you have been given to truly make a difference.

You are the heroes that we need – real people doing heroic work to help solve the very real problems we face.

We do not need – nor can we afford - to escape from them and hope they will disappear.

Our world needs heroes – Are ready to step up? Are you ready to make the sacrifices necessary? Are you able to stretch yourselves beyond what you may think yourself capable?

The world is in need of heroes.

Will you be one?