

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Morning
October 3, 2016 - 1 Tishri, 5777
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

Over last spring break, my sister came to visit and my son suggested that we all go see a movie together. "Let's go see Batman vs. Superman!" he said. And so we did. In Imax. In 3-D.

In the film, Superman is blamed for destroying Metropolis after his previous battle with General Zod. People are conflicted about whether Superman is a hero of hope or an alien threat. Billionaire socialite Bruce Wayne, also known as Batman, sees Superman as a potential threat to humanity and becomes obsessed with him. He decides to build a Kryptonite weapon to use as a defense against Superman.

Meanwhile the evil Lex Luthor, who has manipulated Batman into his fight against Superman, kidnaps Superman's mother Martha, and demands that Superman kill Batman or else. In the midst of their epic struggle, when Batman has nearly overpowered Superman with his kryptonite weapon, they realize both of their mothers are named Martha and understand they are really on the same side. Together, they fight to defeat Lex Luthor, who has fashioned a superpowered monster, but at the end, the monster is destroyed. Then, in its dying breath, the monster kills Superman ... or does he???

In a spirit of shared suffering, I have related this story to you in this abbreviated fashion. This movie stole 151 minutes of my life that I can't get back. I love my son, and it is because of that love that I have chosen this Rosh HaShanah to forgive him for bringing our family to see this film.

But I can't really blame him. The film grossed \$166 million dollars in the opening weekend. The fact is people love superheroes. We always have.

Back in the 1930s, two creative Jewish high school friends, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster began to invent a comic strip called Dr. Occult, a supernatural "ghost detective" who would battle vampires, ghosts, and sorcerers. Soon, Dr. Occult was dressed in blue tights and a red cape and began to demonstrate supernatural powers. They called their new character: Superman.

Arie Kaplan, who chronicles the group of Jews who created the comic book industry, notes that Siegel and Shuster created Superman as adolescents in the midst of the Great Depression and

as Hitler was rising to power in Germany. "The Superman narrative is ... rich in Jewish symbolism. He is a child survivor named Kal-El (in Hebrew, "All that is God") from the planet Krypton, whose population of brilliant scientists, is decimated. His parents send him to Earth in a tiny rocket ship, reminiscent of how baby Moses survived Pharaoh's decree to kill all Jewish newborn sons. In the context of the 1930s, the story also reflects the saga of the *Kindertransports* - the evacuation of hundreds of Jewish children, without their parents, from Austria, Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia to Great Britain. Angst-ridden adolescent fans, Jewish and not, shared Siegel and Shuster's feelings of helplessness and yearned for a super-savior."¹

Comics scholar Peter Coogan defines a Superhero as "A heroic character with a universal, self-less, prosocial mission; who possesses superpowers - extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical and/or mental skills... The superhero's mission is to fight evil and protect the innocent."² As superheroes evolved, they came to hide their superhero identities with alter-ego personalities: Superman was mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent, Batman was billionaire orphaned playboy Bruce Wayne. The messianic overtones to the message seem clear - even the average person you would least suspect could potentially be the savior of the world.

And wouldn't that be great? Wouldn't it be great if we could be protected from all that we fear by some perfectly altruistic selfless superhero? Wouldn't it be great if someone with superpowers could rescue us from our scary, corrupt, and broken world and just fix it once and for all?

It's something we've dreamed of forever. When our people were enslaved in Egypt, there appeared from out of nowhere the perfect Jewish superhero - Moses. It was as if he came in from outer space, wandering into Pharaoh's palace as if he belonged there. A savior. He even appeared to have superpowers. He could turn his staff into a snake, he could strike the waters of the Nile and turn the river into blood, he could hold his arm over the waters and caused the sea to part.

But as they journeyed through the wilderness the Israelites were taught that Moses was not a superhero. Moses was not their God. He was just like them, fully and profoundly human.

¹"How The Jews Created The Comic Book Industry," by Arie Kaplan. *Reform Judaism Magazine*, Fall 2003, Vol. 32. No. 1.

²*What Is A Superhero?* Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 3-4.

There is a midrash that talks about the moments before the revelation at Mt. Sinai. Moses had returned to the mountain to get God's instructions. The midrash imagines that God had wanted to give the Torah right then and there, but Moses was in the way. "God thought: When I am revealed to them and say: 'I am YHVH your God,' they will ask, 'Who is speaking? God or Moses?' Let Moses, therefore, descend and then I will proclaim: "I am YHVH your God."³ God is afraid that the Israelites will think that Moses is God, but Moses isn't God. He is simply one of them.

The Israelites in the wilderness are vulnerable and scared. They feel powerless against all the threats they face to their survival. Stamped in their consciousness is one word - slave - a person who cannot make his own decisions, a person who cannot control her own destiny. As slaves, their lives were in Pharaoh's hands, for after all, Pharaoh was a God. And so now they wonder if their lives are in Moses' hands, and they wonder if Moses is their God.

The fact is in many ways we are those same Israelites wandering in the wilderness. We also feel vulnerable and scared. We worry that our destiny and our future is not under our control.

And so we look for superheroes. We look for superheroes who will come and save us, superheroes who will protect us from evil, who will right the wrongs of our world and make us safe.

So often this is what we expect from our leaders. We expect our president to be a superhero - who can come into office and instantaneously fix everything that's wrong with America and the world. We expect that the president can single-handedly make our adversaries stop hating us, lead us into battle and painlessly vanquish our enemies, restore us to prosperity, protect us from those who would seek to hurt us, and ensure that the injustices in our world and our country are made right. We expect the president to be free of fault, to be of pristine morality, to live with altruistic integrity, to be constantly of good humor, agreeable, never given over to anger or frustration. We demand that our president be all-knowing, all-powerful, and clairvoyant.

We want our president, we expect our president, to be a superhero. And in order for the president to be a superhero, then it only follows that whoever opposes the president must therefore be a villain - these days a supervillain.

³Exodus Rabbah 28:3

If the superhero is the one who makes you feel safe, then the supervillain is the one who makes you feel afraid. Robin Rosenberg writes in her book *What is a Superhero?* that there are lots of different kinds of villains. A villain may be simply a straightforward criminal, or maybe a person who is out for revenge to hurt those who hurt him. A villain can be seemingly heroic, who, with a warped sense of altruism, employs evil means for what may seem a worthy goal, and sometimes a villain is a sadist, who takes grotesque pleasure in wreaking death and destruction.⁴

To be sure, there are supervillains in our world. Want to see a supervillain in action - look to Bashar Assad in Syria, dropping barrel bombs on innocent civilians, attacking aid workers who seek only to help the humanitarian crisis, deploying chemical weapons on his own people.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is another supervillain. The founder of the Islamic State or ISIS, he employs gruesome and sadistic means to cultivate fear and effect control over portions of Iraq and Syria. He twists the teachings of Islam to inspire others to commit hideous acts of terror and violence in ISIS' name throughout the world.

The list of villains is long. And in some ways they are winning. Not because they tactically can do much damage to any of us, but because they have succeeded in making us afraid.

Terrorism works because it attacks people seemingly at random - a pizza restaurant, a dance club, a random street corner, with no immediate justification or rationale. Terrorism succeeds when we recoil in fear at the prospect of doing what should be simply part of a normal day. As Daniel Gardner writes in his book *The Science of Fear*, "Terrorism is vivid, violent, unjust, and potentially catastrophic. It presses all of [our] buttons."⁵

Ironically, despite our growing fear of terrorism, the likelihood that any of us here today will be hurt in an act of terror is infinitesimally small. The University of Maryland reports that in the twenty years from 1995 to 2014, the number of Americans killed by terrorist attack in the United States was 3264, the overwhelming majority killed on September 11, 2001.⁶ The number of people killed in automobile accidents in the United States in the same period was 785,195. In 2013 alone,

⁴Op. Cit. Rosenberg, pp. 107-111

⁵Daniel Gardner, *The Science of Fear*. New York: Dutton 2008, pp. 282-283.

⁶ https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_AmericanTerrorismDeaths_FactSheet_Oct2015.pdf

almost 57,000 people died from the flu and pneumonia. A recent article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine reported that "Americans were more likely to die in an accident involving a bathtub (one in 950,000), a home appliance (one in 1.5 million), or a deer (one in two million)."⁷

We must not be naive. Forces like ISIS are truly evil, and we must do all we can to vanquish that evil. But we have a choice with what we do with our fear.

One option is to tell ourselves to be afraid. We can, if we choose, succumb to the fear that a terrorist seeks to instill. We can listen to those who would seek to be our leaders who tell us that we need to be afraid, afraid of our neighbors who practice Islam, afraid of refugees fleeing their war-torn country, afraid of immigrants from Latin America, the Middle East, or south Asia. We can criticize and mock those who do not foment our fears as not sufficiently patriotic or as somehow in cahoots with our enemies.

Fear is natural and useful. As Rabbi Donniel Hartman explains, "fear instinctively causes us to go into defense mode, to shift our attention to our own needs, and protect ourselves from the real or supposed dangers that threaten us." Moral behavior, however, is based on the ability "to see others, their pain, their needs, and to respond." But then fear becomes dangerous: "At times," he says, "fear does not merely shift our vision from the 'other' to ourselves, it also changes the way we see the other. Fear can lead to anger, anger to hatred, hatred to vilification, and vilification to denigration." Fear he says, can be like an infectious disease, depriving us of the ability to hope. "Hope," Hartman says, "cannot be constructed from the building blocks of fear. Its foundation must be the reaffirmation of our vision of both the world as we want it to be and ourselves as we ought to be."⁸

We cannot conquer our fears by waiting for a superhero to tell us what we should fear and how he and he alone can make us safe. That's what villains do. Villains do everything they can to make us afraid. Like Lex Luthor in *Batman vs. Superman*, villains use lies and deception and half-truths to divide us from one another, to make us afraid of one another, and to seize power through that division and fear.

⁷<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-08-15/how-safe-are-we>

⁸"Fear and Hope: The Core Emotions of our Moral DNA" by Donniel Hartman. Delivered at the Shalom Hartman Institute July 10, 2016, Jerusalem, ISRAEL.

We do not need leaders who pretend to be superheroes. The fact is there are no superheroes. We don't need leaders who pretend to be Pharaoh, who think they are gods, infallible and all-powerful. What we need are leaders who bring us together to face our fears with courage and hope and faith. What we really need are people like you and me to refuse to be cowed by fear, to come together each and every day to do the right and good and loving thing, even when we are scared, even when we feel vulnerable, threatened, and weak.

This is the truth that Sebastian Junger uncovers in his book *Tribe*. In this extraordinary little volume, Junger seeks to uncover why veterans returning from war have such a difficult time adjusting to civilian life in America today. He explains that throughout the centuries and in a variety of different cultures, we learn that a healthy society is one in which people come together as a tribe, and take mutual responsibility for each other, working for the common good.

Junger writes that "Today's veterans often come home to find that, although they're willing to die for their country, they're not sure how to live for it. It's hard to know how to live for a country that regularly tears itself apart along every possible ethnic and demographic boundary... To make matters worse," he writes, "politicians occasionally accuse rivals of deliberately trying to harm their own country - a charge so destructive ... that most past societies would probably have punished it as a form of treason. It's complete madness," Junger writes, "and the veterans know this."⁹

Junger explains that it is a platoon's tribal bonds of love and sense of collective responsibility that is the source of its strength. "A modern soldier returning from combat goes from the kind of close-knit group ... back into a society where most people work outside the home, children are educated by strangers, families are isolated from wider communities, and personal gain almost completely eclipses collective good."¹⁰

We don't need superheroes to save us from our fears. We need each other. We need to know that we can rely on each other, that we can depend on each other. We need to be willing to sacrifice for each other, and in turn, trust that there will be others who will sacrifice for us. We need to turn away from the politics of derision and division, to replace our own selfish cares and concerns with what is in our collective interest and the collective good.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 124-125.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.93.

Junger writes that "The United States is so powerful that the only country capable of destroying her might be the United States herself, which means that the ultimate terrorist strategy would be to just leave the country alone..."¹¹ But that isn't the way it has to be.

In the year 5777, our nation and we as individuals face monumental choices. What kind of a society do we want for ourselves, and what kind of leaders do we want to lead us? But even more importantly, we must also ask ourselves what kind of citizens ought we to be, how will we face the challenges that lie ahead, and how will we confront all that rightly causes us anxiety and trepidation and fear? In making those choices, let us choose not to give over to fear but instead to cultivate hope. Let us choose to reject selfish care and concern and realize that our strength lies in how we choose to break down the barriers of division and fear. In this New Year 5777, may the sounding of the shofar call us to embrace the truth our people has taught for centuries, the truth embedded in the motto of this great nation - E Pluribus Unum - Out of many, We shall be One.

We continue on p. 248.

¹¹Ibid, pp. 127-128.