

The Pen is Mightier  
Rosh Hashanah 5783  
Rabbi Matt Rutta, M.A.Ed.

A young child is hastily put into a vessel and sent adrift, the sole survivor and potential savior of a doomed society. The child's fate is put into the hands of faith in divinity and to the people in whose care they might end up. One day, they are fated to change the world.

This statement could be true of Moses who was put by his mother, Yocheved, into a basket in the Nile to save him from the murderous decree of the Pharaoh of Egypt. However, it could also be true of a baby Kal-El, put on a tiny rocket ship by his father, Jor-El, to escape from the dying planet of Krypton. And it could be true of our friend Maggie Furst who, as a young child in 1939 Germany, was placed on a train as part of the Kindertransport to escape the Nazi menace. Moses was discovered by the daughter of Pharaoh who pitied the crying child and raised him as her own son. Kal-El was discovered by Jonathan and Martha Kent who raised him in Smallville to become Superman. And Maggie would be raised by kind strangers in England before coming here to Dallas. Three survivors who escaped for a second chance at life, legends all.

So much of Jewish history has been about escape, whether willingly or unwillingly. Persecuted and oppressed wherever we go, exploited by the populace until they no longer need us, blamed for every woe that faces their society, forced to convert and confess, we are the eternal outsider. (Plague? Jews. A child goes missing? Jews. Jews get blamed for something? Jews.)

The Jews of Germany and German-occupied lands needed to get their children as far away from the Nazis as possible; stripped of their citizenship and their property, they would continue to be stripped of their humanity and lives.

Meanwhile, 4,000 miles away in New York, two Jewish children of immigrants wanted to create a character that not just Jews but all Americans could rally behind, to escape from what was happening and about to happen. Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel envisioned a character that literally flew in the face of Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch*, the superior human and the *Untermensch*, the subhuman. The All-American Superman was disguised as Clark Kent, the bespectacled mild-mannered reporter of the Daily Planet. He was a foreigner who sought to fit into society and yet be seen as exceptional, strong, and heroic. Under his costume of normalcy lay the alien Kal-El, Hebrew for "Voice of God," son of Jor-El, Hebrew for "Fear of God" They couldn't have come up with a more powerful Jewish name! The previous generation served God in *Yirah*, fear and meekness; Superman will act as a *Bat Kol*, a thunderous heavenly voice, prophet, mouthpiece, and defender of what is right, good, and godly: Truth, Justice, and the American Way.

Shuster and Siegel weren't the only Jews to have this epiphany. We also had Bill Finger and Bob Kane with Batman, Jack Kirby with Captain America, Stan Lee with Spiderman, the X-Men and most of the Marvel Universe. Many of these writers changed their names to sound less Jewish, much like their superheroes' alter-egos. With their gentile-sounding nom-de-plumes their voices might be accepted by a wider society that still harbored antisemitic sentiments. But

their message would not be hidden. Almost universally, the first opponents of the All-American superhero were the Nazis, with the cover of the very first issue of Captain America featuring the superhero punching Adolf Hitler in his mustached face while deflecting bullets fired by Nazi soldiers.

Even the X-Men villain Magneto could actually be seen as an anti-hero. The opening scene of the first X-Men Movie and major plot point of a sequel is that he is a Jewish mutant who survived Auschwitz and his subsequent fear and hatred of everything non-mutant is inspired by how people treated, feared, hated, oppressed, and murdered his Jewish brethren and his parents in particular. At a point when the joint navies of the United States and the Soviet Union launch missiles to destroy all the mutants, Magneto uses his metal-manipulative powers to not *stop* the missiles and hurl them harmlessly into the ocean but, instead, turns them back toward their ships. When the altruistic Professor X tries to dissuade him by saying these sailors are “good, honest, innocent men who are just following orders,” the Holocaust survivor Magneto responds, “I’ve been at the mercy of men just following orders. Never again.”

This wouldn’t be the first time that Jews have had stories of defenders who have exhibited superpowers. We’ve been punching Nazis since the very beginning! Jews originated fan-fiction; we call it midrash. Wunderkind Abraham acknowledges one God, smashes his father’s idols, survives a showdown with the most powerful king that had existed at that point as well as a stay in a fiery furnace. In the actual canon, we have the stories of Abraham single-handedly defeating the Mesopotamian invaders, Jacob’s brains beating Esau’s brawn, Moses and Aaron armed with the Rod of God and the ability to bring Egypt to its knees with the plagues, Deborah uniting the Israelites and leading them to victory from under her palm tree against a much stronger nation, Samson and his super-strength and typical superhero kryptonite weaknesses (his hair and women), David defeating the giant Goliath, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his destructive laser eyes, a litany of false messiahs who many thought were the real messiahs at the time (and some still do) and, of course, The Golem of Prague. My 14x and 15x great grandfather (in two separate lines), Rabbi Yehudah Loew, the Maharal of Prague, supposedly created a golem, a clay creature imbued with Truth and the Name of God, to defend the Jews against yet another Pogrom in which the gentiles of Prague falsely claimed that the Jews murdered a Christian child and used her blood to make their matzah for Passover. The Golem has inscribed on his forehead, on the same place we Jews would put our tefillin, the word *EMET*, truth. Truth and Justice are the *Jewish* way, and it brings to life the creature that will defend us against the lies and liars of the blood libel. The prescient words of the rabbis of the Passover Haggadah: “In every generation they rise up to try to destroy us, but the Holy Blessed One saves us from their hand.”

It is in these times of trouble that we most need a defender and the 20th century was certainly one such time. “The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay” is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel that combines the two themes of superhero and escape: Michael Chabon writes about young Jewish Czech Josef Kavalier being spirited away from Nazi-occupied Prague to his cousins, the Claymans, in Brooklyn in a giant coffin. The macabre method of exit has shades of a similar Talmudic story of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, the rabbi who is probably most responsible for

saving Judaism from Roman destruction and total annihilation, who was snuck out of Zealot-controlled Jerusalem in a coffin in the year 70 CE to negotiate with the Romans besieging the city. Joe Kavalier isn't alone in his coffin: he is courier to the very-real Golem and has to get the 500-year-old clay defender of the Jews of Prague as far away from the occult-obsessed Nazis as possible. The novel describes the decision by the Bohemian Jews entrusted with the secret of the Golem. "There were even a few in the circle who, when pressed, admitted that they did not want to send the Golem away because in their hearts they had not surrendered the childish hope that the great enemy of Jew-haters and blood libelers might one day, in a moment of dire need, be revived to fight again." Ultimately, they decide the safer choice would be to send it away.

When Joe arrives in Brooklyn sans Golem, he joins up with his cousin Sam Clay and together they invent their own unique superhero, The Escapist, a crime-fighting homage to Jewish escape-artist and magician Harry Houdini. In Joe's drawn proposal he wins World War II in 1940, over a year before America actually entered the war. "On the very last page, in a transcendent moment in the history of wishful figments, the Escapist had captured Adolf Hitler and dragged him before a world tribunal. Head finally bowed in defeat and shame, Hitler was sentenced to die for his crimes against humanity. The war was over; a universal era of peace was declared, the imprisoned and persecuted peoples of Europe—among them, implicitly and passionately, the Kavalier family of Prague—were free." And it was the disguised Jewish superhero, avatar of their son, Joe Kavalier, who was responsible!

We simultaneously want to be proud Jews but also want to hide our being different as a visible minority in society. We might wear our Star of David necklaces on our chests but do we wear them over our shirts or under our shirts? If you see me in the wild in my civilian clothing, you will always see me with my head covered, but often you will see a baseball cap over my kippah. This is not only because I'm too lazy to comb my hair nor to show my unwavering support for my beloved Los Angeles Dodgers (Go Dodgers!) but because, even though I have experienced very little antisemitism in North Texas compared to LA or New York, I don't know how the wrong person will be triggered and will react to my visible Jewishness.

But we shouldn't feel like we have to escape or to hide! We can't escape! We can't live without Torah like a fish cannot live out of water! When the Roman occupiers of Judæa banned Torah study under penalty of death in the early second century, Rabbi Akiba's friend, Pappas, told him he should stop teaching to save his life. Akiba responded by telling him the fable of the fox and the fish. A fox saw a school of fish swimming rapidly in fear and asked the fish from what were they fleeing? The fish responded that the fishermen were putting nets throughout the water to catch them. The fox told the fish that, if they would live on land with him, they would be safe from the fishermen's nets. The fish responded that in the water there was at least a chance they could survive being caught, but on dry land they would die for sure. If we were prevented from learning and living Torah, which is likened to water, both equally necessary for a Jew to live, we might as well be dead.

250 years earlier, Jews tried to escape and hide their Judaism in very physical and social ways. In particular, the Jews became obsessed with the Greek ideal of the perfect body and wanted to assimilate and hide the circumcision, the very visible physical difference between Jew and Greek in the nude gymnasias. This was the *casus belli* for Matityahu and his five sons, the Maccabees, to launch attacks on the Greek Assyrians and Hellenized Jews alike; this was the very reason for Hanukkah.

And yet today, in that same part of the world where we experienced the attacks and the allure of the Greek-Assyrians and Romans two millennia ago, we are witnessing the rise of a new pride in the Jewish people at the very core of Zionism. At the Second Zionist Congress in 1898, Max Nordau, who cofounded the Zionist movement with Theodore Herzl, spoke about *Muskeljudentum*, Muscular Judaism, in which Jews would fight back against their oppressors with strength. We would no longer be seen by the world with the classic stereotypes of weak victim and easy prey, that we would no longer go silently as sheep to the slaughter. We would exercise our bodies as we exercise our minds and a Jewish state would have a strong military and populace; those that hate us would think twice before attacking us, something, I point out, is a very real deterrent today. And yet there are still those who wish to destroy us. This month we too-quietly marked the 50th anniversary of Palestinian terrorists murdering 11 of Israel's athletes, the paragons of strength and valor, at the Munich Olympics. Rockets still fly over the border. Jews still get punched. The haters can't stand that the next Captain America movie will feature an Israeli analogue, Sabra. *We* must become the *muskeljuden*, the muscular Jews.

Many of us participated in the Secure Community Network Run-Hide-Fight training so we can be safe if the worst, God-forbid, happens. We all watched in fear in January as, just a few miles away, Rabbi Charlie Citron-Walker and three others were held hostage in their synagogue in Colleyville. Thankfully, their cool heads, strategic timing, and a well-thrown chair allowed them to escape many hours later and the terrorist was neutralized. I spoke with Rabbi Citron-Walker at an interfaith event a few weeks later and I thanked him for being an inspiration. I told him I did the SCN training and now feel much safer. He responded that, on the contrary, I shouldn't feel safer but I should always be alert and constantly come up with plans for any possible situation.

This came to the test this past May when I was sitting with my students at the end of a night on the town. We were playing *Shesh Besh* (a Middle Eastern version of Backgammon) in the Old City of Yafo in Tel Aviv. When an excessively inebriated German tourist started creeping closely behind some of my sitting students, my Mama Bear instincts went into overdrive. I am a man of peace and words but I was seriously considering if I'd have to suckerpunch this guy if he attacked one of my students and that he'd stay down long enough for us to escape. While he was distracted and turned the other way, I whispered to the students that it was time to go. We left the area and, while he followed us for a moment, we were too quick for his staggering gait; violence and a potential night in a police station were averted. I could've taken him!

May we soon see the day that we no longer need to run, to hide, to fight. May the day come when Israel doesn't have to put in so much of their budget toward defense and instead to focus on solving global drought and curing cancer, two things they are - God-willing - on the verge of

accomplishing. May we feel comfortable to walk down the street visibly and proudly Jewish with nothing to fear. May we recognize and celebrate our true heroes.

The Bible is the bestselling book of all time, with its heroic stories inspiring millennia of the majority of the world's population. The stories of superheroes dominate the list of top grossing films of all time. But beyond the stories that are the basis of our faith or the stories that entertain us, we should be celebrating the stories of the very real heroes who put their lives at risk to save others and enshrining the testimony of those that remind us that "Never Again" is not just a buzzword. After all, not all superheroes wear capes! Some, like our friend Maggie, wear flowery dresses, colorful scarves, and brilliant brooches.

Shanah Tovah!