

You are my heroes
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In the beginning, there was nothing... but potential.

That's not usually the way we tell this story. Usually we start with chaos, with primordial ooze and swirling shadows, threatening to pull us toward entropy and darkness, even before the beginning of time.

But alongside this *tohu vavohu*, this unknowable uncomfortable disorder, there was God. *Ruach Elohim merachefet al pnei hamayim* (Genesis 1:2): the spirit of the Divine hovered over the impenetrable watery depths.

And thank God...instead of succumbing to nothingness, all God saw was possibility.

When I think about that pregnant pause, that infinite moment right before "Let there be light:" I wonder: how did God decide to create the universe?

The answer lies in the very process with which our universe was called into being:

A simple act, initiated by an even simpler command: "*Vayehi or*, let there be light!" And then, the honest, in-the-moment reaction: "*ki tov*, the light is good." With divine power of separation, God parted the clouds of frenetic energy and created two enduring forces that will never cease to reassure our world with their regular cycles: light and darkness.

In other words, God saw what needed to be done, and did what God could do.

The next day, and the next day, and the next, more and more deeply, God explored the power of separation against the pull of chaos. And on each subsequent day, the maelstrom quieted just a bit more as God revealed heaven and earth, water and land, sun and moon, birds and fish. And as each momentous act of creation manifested, God saw that all of it was good. Not just the breathtaking expanse of color, light, texture, sound, and movement,

but the feeling of **purpose**. In simple acts of separation, God discovered that divine power could start a **revolution**.

This singularity, then, that began everything, was *not* a miracle. It was God simply realizing how to channel God's power, how to contend with the unknowable: by bringing comfort and connection and redemption, **transforming mere possibility into actualization**. The most beautiful, complex, audacious project of all time started with a simple act of separation, that grew and grew into something previously unfathomable, even by God. All of our voices join with God's as the sun set on the sixth day with the surprised and awe-filled chorus of "vayehi tov me'od, this is very good!"

When we think of people who are powerful enough to create worlds or change the world, we think about superheroes. In our popular imagination, these extraordinary specimens are just that: scientific wonders that defy our natural expectations, those who live on the periphery of society because their differences draw them away from everyone else. And yet, their genetic mutation, or their bite from a radioactive spider, or their childhood abduction by aliens, forces them to action. Burdened by their power, they can either choose public service in the limelight, opening themselves to raucous support or bigoted bullying from those they try to protect, or they can live as recluses, hiding their identity, or worse, becoming villains, menaces to society. Either way, to quote a fundamental Jewish proverb: "with great power comes great responsibility." Those who are given extraordinary ability to act *must* do so, otherwise they're guilty of a great moral failing.

And with apologies to fans of the Marvel or DC Universe, this kind of social coercion does not a hero make.

Rather, the Torah teaches us that we are all equally powerful, equally cherished, **equally capable** of profound action.

As our ancestors approached Mount Sinai, edging closer to the moment that changed us forever, when we received Revelation, God reminded us that we

are *mamlechet cohanim vegoi kadosh*, a kingdom of priests, and therefore, a holy nation (Exodus 19:6).

This is surprising, given that priests and levites receive special tasks and expectations later in the Torah. Uniquely, they are both blessed and burdened with lives of service to God and our people. Obligatory heroes, you might say, the Cohanim and Leviim give up the right to own their own land in exchange for the exalted and essential duty of allowing the people Israel to connect with God through prayer and sacrifice. Cohanim enjoy the remarkable ability to receive and channel God's blessing, and through the priestly benediction, use its hallowed words to sanctify and comfort the entire people.

And though this may sound all well and good, we've read the ending to this story. We know that this kind of authority, when limited to a select few, becomes corruptive and perilous. Believing that one has unique access to God leads to heinous abuses and misappropriations of power, defiling the entire project that was set up in the first place.

The rabbis decentralized that power, teaching that the ability to access God and tradition does not come from dynastic inheritance, but from earnest and whole-hearted exploration of torah study, practice of mitzvot, and engagement in community. A perfect framework for imagining the pivotal moment of Revelation, when we were all together, all equal, all standing at Sinai shoulder to shoulder.

And it is with the same spirit that I honor new parents at a bris or naming celebration as they bring forward stunning new babies to join the eternal covenant of our people. Of course, not all parents are cohanim, and yet we believe that they all merit the ability to use the priestly benediction to summon God's attention and protection. Why? Because, like God, **they had faith in the goodness that would result from their act of creation.** By embarking on the unpredictable, painful, ecstatic journey of parenthood and raising up our next generation of teachers and leaders and builders and world-changers, parents, more than anyone else, understand what it means to throw caution to the wind and have kids anyway. I mean, how many of us were terrified of screwing up our kids like generations of parents before us (sorry mom and dad), but did it anyway?

For this is what makes a hero: Choosing faith in others and in God, believing in the quivering potential lying latent in primordial raw materials, and acting as the prime mover, activating the singularity, bringing forth a dazzling new life, into a world full of wonder. *Ki tov meod*, it is very good.

One of my favorite hero stories is from the Talmud, Tractate Ketubot (62b). We learn about a wealthy landowner from Jerusalem named Kalba Savua, who employed a number of farmers and shepherds to run his estate. Kalba Savua had a daughter Rachel—lovely and wise and self-assured. One of the shepherds, Akiva, caught her eye, because he was humble and kind. She saw something in him that he couldn't see in himself.

Rachel approached Akiva and offered herself to him in marriage... on the condition that he would leave his post with her father and become a torah scholar. Without a moment of hesitation, he accepted, and they became secretly engaged.

So you can imagine, when her father found out, he was enraged. Not only did he lose a talented shepherd, his daughter went and got herself betrothed to a penniless worker, now set to become even more destitute in his complete devotion to Torah study. Kalba Savua cut Rachel off and subjected her to a life of poverty, so that she would understand the impact of her willful disobedience.

Rabbi Akiva, meanwhile, immersed himself in torah study for twelve years. Already forty years old when he embarked on his learning journey, I'm certain he never expected to become one of the most renowned and beloved teachers in our tradition. Kalba Savua certainly didn't think he had the chops. But Rachel saw him and immediately understood her call to purpose.

When Akiva returned to Jerusalem, the Talmud tells us, he brought twelve thousand students with him, ardent and passionate followers of his whole-hearted approach to learning.

And as the throngs entered their neighborhood, Akiva overheard an older man challenging his beloved Rachel: how is it that you endure this life, acting widow to a living man, alone while your husband fulfills his destiny somewhere else?

And Rachel retorts: If I had it my way, he'd return for another twelve years, to continue his immersion in sacred learning. Akiva overheard her charge and returned to the Beit Midrash. And right on schedule, twelve years later, he once again entered the home of his beloved, this time with twenty-four thousand students, and the hearts of all of us who study his opinions.

Who is the hero of this story?

You might say Akiva—it can't be easy to change careers at 40, live away from his partner, learn and conquer a new language and tradition.

But it was Rachel who saw his potential, his swirling unformed masses longing for purpose. It was Rachel who created the moment of singularity, pushing Akiva to find his voice. It was Rachel who suffered hunger, destitution, and at times, the pity and shame of her neighbors. And despite all of this, it was Rachel who used her power to call Akiva's into existence. Thanks to Rachel's strength and courage, and yes—heroism—we all have access to a world of critical insight, that would change our approach to torah study forever.

I have been so deeply moved by the love and generosity of spirit I've received from you all, my Shearith family, in response to Adam's and my partnership with our beloved friends to bring a new life into the world. We have been blessed by your words of hope and gratitude; so many times you've insisted that there is no greater mitzvah. And let me tell you, your enthusiastic support gave Adam and me the remarkable comfort that this was exactly what we were meant to do, here, in this holy community, with our friends who are now our family.

But we are not the heroes of this story.

The heroes are the ones who refuse to submit to the stifling roars of chaos in an unpredictable and unforgiving world. They are the ones who share their disappointments and their dreams, their hopes that yet remain. And in an act of such profound kindness and trust that I can't yet completely fathom, they are the ones who accepted our crazy offer to help, who **activated our latent potential and transformed it into meaningful action.**

There are other heroes in this story too, as I continue to discover. So many of you have shared with me your own experiences of loss, disappointment, and hope. You are all my heroes: you who have suffered miscarriages, you for whom it's dangerous to carry your own child. You who struggled through many rounds of IVF, you who partnered with gestational carriers, you who adopted in order to achieve your dream of becoming a parent, and also you whose dreams have not yet been realized. I am forever changed and impacted by your courage, your strength, and the power of your love.

The truth is that you are all my heroes. I see the way you show up, to offer your unique gifts and powers, to help in the way that only you can. When we send messages of need, whether for a Jewish community on the other side of the world, or a family here in Dallas committed to escaping homelessness, you show up. When our folks need help with hospital bills, or a place to stay after a tornado hits, or meals while recovering from surgery, you show up. You tend to the bereaved and the lonely, you gather food for the hungry, you build holy spaces where community can gather, you give and you give and you give because you are activated by a world clamoring for justice, and **you see your place** in our ever-expanding universe of *chesed*.

And there is no ultimate mitzvah. The beauty of the heroism in our Shearith family is that it is diverse, reflecting the unique divinity within each of us. **There is only the God-given potential that we hold, and whether we make the choice to use it when the opportunity presents.**

When I look around this room, I see none other than *mamlechet cohanim vegoi kadosh*, the powerful heroes that constitute our holy nation. Because each of us has the ability to activate powers of creation, redemption, connection, and love in others, and each of us has the ability to answer the call.

As we join together to mark the beginning of another auspicious new year, I feel the stunning and vast power of our potential. I see our unfathomable raw materials—unfathomable, until they are called to being, called to purpose. I pray that this year brings us abundant opportunities to transform our latency into action, our possibility into realization. Let us be re-created into the heroes that we were always meant to be.