

Superman and Jewish Pride

Rosh Hashana Morning 5787

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Twenty years ago, when I first arrived in Portland and at Congregation Beth Israel, I laid out my vision for the kind of Judaism I wanted the Temple to represent. What was need in the 21st century, I stated, was a Judaism that was “joyful and meaningful.” I had grown up in a different Judaism; a Judaism of obligation and guilt – perhaps a natural response in the decades immediately following the Holocaust. But, I said then, joy and meaning were what was needed today to create a Judaism of inclusion, of welcome; a synagogue and community where you want to belong.

Now as I am beginning my last High Holidays as Senior Rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel, before my retirement at the end of June, I see a community which has embraced this vision and has raised a generation in Jewish joy and meaning.

And I believe finding Jewish joy and pride is even more important today than it was twenty years ago.

It has been a difficult few years as anti-Semitism has been loudly and violently on the rise. Where only a few years ago most of us felt secure and safe to publicly express our Jewish identity, culture and religion – some of us are suddenly feeling the need to hide. Jewish businesses and institutions have been targeted, Jewish politicians have been harassed, and some “visibly Jewish” individuals have been physically attacked.

While I understand the desire to hide – that has never been a strategy that has worked or kept Jews safe. I prefer to embrace and expand Jewish joy and Jewish pride. And I hope you will, too.

During this retirement year, I am inviting friends and teachers from around the country – and here at home – to share examples of Jewish pride. Some from history, some more recent. Today, I am going to start with. . . Superman.

Just how Jewish is Superman? Now, you might think that is a ridiculous question. I mean, look at the guy! We might not know exactly his religious upbringing – but Ma and Pa Kent were probably not taking him to shul on Shabbos. One could imagine “Super Gentile” might be a fair assessment. But that’s not the way to look at him. When we think about the creation of the character and the entire superhero genre we see it differently. Just how Jewish is Superman? The truth is: pretty Jewish. And that fact tells us something of what it means to be a Jew in America today. As he has done for more than 88 years, Superman today gives us Jewish hope. And right now, what we really need is Jewish hope. And joy.

In the early 1930s, two young men were struggling to break into the new world of comic books and newspaper strips. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were both sons of Jewish immigrants. Siegel’s parents had fled anti-Semitism in Lithuania and Shuster’s parents immigrated from the

Netherlands and Ukraine. They met as teens in Cleveland's Glenville High School and created comics together. Their first character known as Superman was created in 1932, but the Superman we know was developed later and over many years as the pair tried unsuccessfully to sell their story and art. It was not until 1938 that Superman first appeared in DC Comics. To get Superman out into the world, the pair sold all the rights to their creation for \$130. Although they never benefited personally from it, those two Jewish boys sparked an artistic and cultural revolution. Jewish pain and alienation turned into a hero who has given joy and inspiration across generations and nations.

The late 1930s was a high tide of antisemitism in the United States making today's antisemitism look tame. The Great Depression sparked an anti-immigrant panic which reflected on Jewish Americans, including those fleeing Nazi persecution. Jewish quotas kept those refugees from safety on our shores. Right-wing groups in America – some inspired by Nazi propaganda – blamed the economic crisis on an imagined international Jewish conspiracy. American Fascist groups were inspired by the earlier anti-Semitic writings of Henry Ford; and the massively popular and hate-filled radio host and Catholic priest Father Charles Coughlin, the podcaster of his day, spread anti-Semitic lies which were adopted by the masses. Jews faced widespread bans and discrimination in employment, strict quotas in elite Ivy League schools and restricted access to American social life. Hotels, country clubs and residential neighborhoods often had explicit bans on Jews.

In this milieu of rising animosity against the Jews, Siegel and Shuster created a character who could literally fly above the hatred. Whose secret identity allowed him to blend in but who had the power to fight the battles they could not. The pair created the backstory of an alien immigrant – drawing perhaps on their religious school memory of baby Moses put in a basket and sent away from his family. Superman – whose real name is the Hebrew sounding Kal-El which is a divine reference - is sent by his parents as a baby far from his homeland. The secret immigrant with a secret identity who can change the world.

In a time of deep and normalized anti-Semitism in the United States, which limited the career possibilities of Jewish writers and artists, two young boys of Jewish immigrants created a character who became so popular he inspired an entire new art form. Beloved by fans, Superman became the archetype which inspired a new genre of superheroes. Comic books were already a heavily Jewish industry because they were considered low art and discrimination kept many Jewish creatives from other forms of art and publishing. But the Superman character became so popular that this once marginal art form of comic books has today become a multi-billion dollar industry of film, TV, books and streaming.

I tell this story, not to go on about comic books or superheroes, although I think that is fun. I tell this as an inspiration of Jewish ingenuity. I tell this as a way of taking pride in the accomplishments of our people. This is not about Superman, but about appreciating those who have lived in times of anti-Jewish bias and turned oppression into inspiration. As happened with Broadway, comedy, movies and many other art forms – the marginalized Jew, facing discrimination and hatred; excluded from the “respectable” art - uses their genius, ingenuity

and creativity to create whole new categories of art, redefining American culture. And so can we. Embracing Jewish pride means having the confidence in our own identity and apologizing to no one for it. Jewish joy means refusing to internalize the slander and instead to believe in ourselves. It is about standing up to Jewish hatred with Jewish pride.

We are not living in the 1930's today – or in its image. But we are living in a time of increased anti-Semitism. We – all of us who have lived our lives in what has been called “the Golden Age of American Jewry” - are suddenly facing a changed world. A world in which popular influencers, podcasters and political figures are comfortable recycling old anti-Jewish conspiracy theories. This didn't start on October 7th and anti-Zionism is a convenient cover for this ancient Jew hatred. Although past generations would have envied the freedom and acceptance Jews have today, there is a growing awareness that something is amiss here and now. Violence against Jewish individuals is growing and exclusion of Jews from both Left and Right spaces is becoming more normalized. Although some commentators have tried to promote the idea that Jews themselves, or the Jewish state, are responsible for this hatred, that is also an old anti-Semitic trope promoted by the Nazis of the 1930's, who portrayed themselves and Germany as victims of Jewish conspiracy. Soviet Russia promoted this as well, relying on both earlier Tsarist anti-Jewish propaganda and recycled Nazi imagery. And both sources inspired anti-Jewish conspiracy theories in the Arab world which predates the state of Israel, but fuels the rejection of a modern Jewish state in that part of the world regardless of its actions. That does not give Israeli leaders or citizens a free pass on their decisions and actions – but hatred towards Jews does underlie and inflame the situation which reverberates onto the Jewish condition here in America.

All Jewish institutions face security concerns and criticisms unlike those facing most Christian churches, schools or charities. Only Muslim institutions and some Black and immigrant churches in America feel that same weight of difference – forced to invest heavily in security. Together we face an unease which many of our fellow Americans are entirely unaware of. Many of us are surprised that our friends and neighbors have no awareness of our unease. As has happened in the past, we are called “too sensitive” or our calling out of anti-Jewish discrimination is dismissed and used against us.

But I want to turn all of that around. We are not living in the 1930's or 40's, but the actions of our Jewish predecessors from that era may serve to inspire us. They did not give up on America, they did not disappear – they took oppression and they turned it around, creating whole new industries and art forms. And Jews in the decades that followed built institutions and programs which helped to push back on the anti-Semitism of their time. They learned to lobby politicians and helped build an American culture of inclusion which benefited many marginalized communities. I have no doubt we will do the same. Despair and fear are not our normal modes. Jews are proud: of our heritage, of our values, of our contributions to society. Jews are overrepresented as leaders in medicine, science, politics, and art. It is our way of responding to hatred. When we are faced with the limitations of discrimination we respond with creativity, humor and invention. Our best response to Jewish hatred is Jewish joy and Jewish pride.

Superman, created by two young Jewish sons of immigrants, grew under the guidance of Jewish artists and writers. In the lead-up to World War II, Superman comics showed him moving from fighting common criminals to literally punching Nazis. A famous cartoon from 1940 shows Superman grabbing Hitler and Stalin and flying them to Geneva to be tried before the League of Nations. If only! In that same year Joe “Hymie” Simon and Jack Kirby, two Jewish artists, created the new character of Captain America to continue punching Nazis. Batman, Spider-Man, X-Men, the Hulk – all come from the imagination of Jewish creators. These and other “Golden Age” Jewish artists took their pain, discrimination and outsider status to invent an entire industry which has had a major impact on American and world culture.

Superman, this creation of Jews facing American anti-Semitism, wears a costume that helps him blend into society. That costume is Clark Kent. But his authentic self, Kal-El, wears clothes which proudly proclaim his identity, just as a kippah or star of David might proclaim the identity of a Jew. His cape can be likened to a tallit, a unique symbol of Jewish ethnic and religious identity. When Superman is a hero, he wears his identity proudly. He does not hide it, no matter what people think. Superman is the ultimate immigrant and minority who repeatedly saves the world and represents the best in all of us.

Pretty Jewish!

During this year of my retirement, we are going to hear from many Jewish creative individuals. One of them, who will be featured at our April gala, has been a leader in a new generation of Jewish comic book and graphic novels creators – who has infused his deep Jewish identity into his characters and stories. Brian Michael Bendis is one of those who has responded to Jewish hate with Jewish joy.

Superhero comics is only one example. This has been our Jewish way of responding to difficult times. We have created, we have laughed, we have answered Jewish discrimination with Jewish joy. We have responded with Jewish creativity and imagination. We have refused to hide. And we will continue to do so. We don’t know what will happen next as we see a rise in American and global anti-Semitism. But we do know that we can face Jewish hatred with Jewish joy and with Jewish pride.

Twenty years ago, I was honored to begin my role as Senior Rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel with a call for meaning and joy. We need these today in ways I could not have imagined then. As we move into this new era in the life and history of our congregation, under the leadership of Rabbi Rachel Joseph and Cantor Rayna Green, as we face a more complicated environment to be a Jew, may we find meaning and joy, creativity and confidence in our American Jewish life.