

Wonder Woman
Rosh Hashanah 5778
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As a kid growing up in rural New Jersey in the 70's, I had my favorite TV shows. And they usually involved women with magical or super human powers: I Dream of Jeannie (I'll admit it -- I loved her bottle's pink, plush interior décor), The Bionic Woman, Bewitched and, of course, Wonder Woman. So, I was happy to polish off my bracelets this summer and join the throngs in seeing the Wonder Woman remake. Extra bonus, of course, -- Gal Gadot -- an Israeli actress whose name I could proudly and easily pronounce -- had won the title role.

Without getting into a High Holiday movie review, my feelings about the film were mixed. But it revived my childhood interest in superwomen, and I had fun reading a new comprehensive history of this comic book form. In "The Spectacular Sisterhood of Superwomen," author Hope Nicholson introduces us to 1930's Torchy Brown, an African-American heroine created by Jackie Ormes, the first African-American female comics artist. Torchy took on issues of racism, sexual violence, and environmental pollution. In the '70's, Batgirl came onto the scene, demanding equal pay for equal work: she made sure we knew that she made less than Robin in a TV public service announcement by the US Dept of Labor. In one comic book storyline, she realizes that the best way to fix crime is to change legislation -- so she runs for U.S. Congress and wins!

As diverse as their time periods and story lines are, the comic book superwomen share a determination to keep on fighting, regardless of the obstacles. We can use that kind of inspiration now -- for on this Rosh Hashanah, we find ourselves as Jews and as Americans living in times that challenge so many of our central values and ethics.

Judaism teaches us *b'tzelem elohim* -- that all are made in the divine image, that all people have the same intrinsic worth. It commands us -- no less than 36 times in Torah-- to love and welcome the stranger. Because we were once strangers in Egypt, we know, with the essence of our being, the experience and the struggles of the stranger.

Judaism insists that we engage in conflict productively, honoring the humanity of those with whom we might disagree.

Torah commands us regarding the responsibilities of wealth -- that resources must be stewarded to create just societies in which the most vulnerable are cared for.

In Judaism, providing health care is unquestionably a societal obligation. Maimonides listed health care first on his list of the 10 most important communal services that a city must offer its residents.

The prophet Micah provided us with a powerful vision of respect for diversity and religious freedom: "They shall sit every person under their vine and their fig tree; and none shall make them afraid... For let the nations walk each one in the name of its God but we will walk in the name of Adonay our God for ever and ever. (Micah 4:4-5)

Judaism calls on us to recognize, as well, the sacredness of all creation and our mandate to steward, guard and protect the earth and all its creatures.

It has been a year when we have seen every single one of these core values challenged in our public sphere. So this Rosh Hashanah, I ask: How shall we continue to build our lives and communities? How do we pursue justice and compassion as God's partners if we find ourselves drained by the constant struggle? In the real world, there are no superheroines or superheroes, just people like us. But Judaism can be for us a wellspring of tremendous strength.

Our long tradition offers models of courage, teachings for resilience, and practices for replenishing our souls. This morning, I would like to focus our attention on just three different aspects of Jewish teaching that can give us strength in the year ahead.

The first is this: When you stand up for what is just, you are not alone.

I've thought a lot this year about Shifra and Puah, the midwives to the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh commands them to kill every newborn Hebrew male child. They do not obey, but continue to deliver and care for every infant. When Pharaoh catches them, they think on their feet, telling Pharaoh that the Hebrew women simply give birth too quickly. In the end, Shifra and Puah's courage and defiance ensure the very survival of the nascent Jewish people. This is what heroism looks like without bulletproof bracelets. In world literature, it's the first recorded story of civil disobedience. And it is our story. When we stand up against oppression and cruelty, we stand with Shifra and Puah.

What was the source of their strength? Where did they get their courage? The Torah text itself gives us only one clue: "The midwives, in awe of God, (*va-tireyna ha-m'yaldot et ha elokim*), did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live." (Ex. 1:17)

In our day, within our own congregation we encompass a wide range of ideas about God, and what it might mean to be in awe of God. Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great rabbi, philosopher and civil rights activist, believed in a God who cares deeply about humanity and needs us to be partners in completing the work of creation; it is a sacred mission of humanity to create a world that reflect God's attributes of justice and compassion.

From a Reconstructionist perspective, God is not a supernatural being outside the universe, but, as Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan wrote, "...the process that makes for creativity, integration, love and justice." (Diary, 1/15/31).

Whether we believe in God who commands, or in God as the process that works through us, we can draw strength to stand against injustice.

An example: In the summer of 1964, as civil rights activists pressured Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act, fifteen rabbis traveled to Florida in response to an urgent request from Dr. King. They acted as a decoy as African-American and white demonstrators dove into the Monsoon Motor Lodge's segregated pool. As journalists watched, the hotel owner poured acid into the water. The next day, as the horrible pictures appeared in newspapers across the country, the 83-day filibuster in the Senate ended, and Congress passed the Civil Rights Act. The rabbis wrote from jail:

"We make no messianic estimate of man's power and certainly not of what we did here. But it has reaffirmed our faith in the significance of the deed....We came to stand with our brothers and in the process have learned more about ourselves and our God. In obeying [God], we become ourselves; in following [God's] will we fulfill ourselves. [God] has guided, sustained and strengthened us in a way we could not manage on our own."

From Shifra and Puah to our own day, when we stand against injustice, we do not stand alone. We stand in the company of our forebears; and as they felt God's presence with them, so may we.

The midwives take the stage in the very first chapter of Exodus, before the birth of Moses. Decades pass before the Israelites are finally redeemed from slavery in Egypt. Did Shifra and Puah know the part they were playing in the larger story?

When we work for what we believe in, when we make God manifest in the world through deeds of justice, compassion and healing, we may not see immediate returns. Injustice, unfairness, indifference may persist. Many of us are familiar with Dr. King's teaching that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." When we win a victory, we celebrate how it bends toward justice; but when we struggle without immediate gains, or when we suffer losses, it's much clearer that the arc is long.

The siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple were calamities that tore apart the fabric of Jewish life, and altered the very nature of Judaism. The Talmud, though, recounts a story concerning Rabbi Akiva. As he and his colleagues walked near the ruins of the Temple, they saw a fox scramble out from the very place where the Holy of Holies - the most sacred place in the Holy Temple - had been plowed under. Overwhelmed with grief and despair, his colleagues broke down, weeping. Akiva, though, began to laugh. "How can you be laughing?" they asked. Akiva replied that according to different texts in our tradition destruction will lead to rebuilding and ultimately redemption. Having seen destruction; he knows that the second part of the story can now come true.

We do not rejoice at suffering; but the idea that defeat is temporary and that we must not give in to despair is a familiar trope for us. Joseph is thrown into a pit and left for

dead, only to rise to the heights of power in Egypt. And this presages the overarching story of our people who fall into slavery in Egypt to be lifted up to Sinai, who are exiled from the land but return. A central tenet of Judaism is that the Messiah hasn't come -- yet. We are always working now toward redemption in the future.

What is there for us, though, when the faith in our efforts wavers, our belief that things can get better flags? When the times we live in feel bleak, Judaism offers a tremendous gift for replenishing our souls: the gift of parallel time. Sacred time. Jewish time.

No matter what is going on around us or within us, the cycle of the Jewish year continues. Even when we may be feeling trapped in our daily lives, Passover calls on us to tell our ancient story of redemption and reminds us that freedom is possible.

When we are surrounded by darkness, Hanukkah teaches us to kindle light.

Each week on Shabbat, we can enter a world of being and not doing – A day not of struggling and creating, but appreciating creation, community and time for those close to us: one day each week dedicated to refreshment of the body, mind and soul.

Today we've entered into the sweep of sacred time. As we celebrate the first stirrings of creation we see in ourselves the possibility to begin again, that renewal in our own lives is possible. To be a Jew is to live in ordinary time and sacred time simultaneously, and to know that in the cycles, rituals and celebrations of Jewish time we can find comfort and strength.

Some of us have come to this Rosh Hashanah weary and anxious, uncertain about what the New Year will bring. Entering this sacred time and place together, we see that we are not alone; we stand with each other and with those who have come before us. We gather faith, as well, from an understanding of the arc of Jewish history. And we know that throughout the coming year there will again be festivals for rejoicing, reminders of freedom and possibility, and refuge for our souls. May it be a good year. One in which we feel renewed strength and hope. L'shana tova
