

What does it take to be a Superman?

You might have it in you!

Shabbat Shira

January 2016

There is a teaching from our ancestors about what will sustain this world of ours: truth, justice and peace.

As many of you know, my father, Len Cohn, passed away in early January. I have had a lot of time to think about his life and since his death, the nature of his life and what we did with one another has been flooding through my mind. In very wonderful and meaningful ways.

Not quite sure what I would share on the original evening this was planned (which was the Shabbat right after the week of shiva for my father), Art Bloom sent me a song that would highlight the night for the choir. “Al Shlosa”. There are two famous ‘al shlosa’s in rabbinic literature. They both come from Pirkei Avot, the tractate of ethical maxims by the rabbis from roughly the first and second centuries.

The first one is: Al shlosa d’varim haolam omeid – On three things does the world stand: On Torah, on divine worship/service, and on deeds of loving kindness. The second is: On three things is the world sustained: on truth, on justice, and on peace.

My father was a man who upheld Torah and very much wanted to see it sustained as he greatly valued and promoted institutions of Jewish learning and Jewish scholarship, from Reform Jewish summer camps to centers for higher Jewish learning. And while all that was very high-minded, when it comes to reading, my father was not as inclined to Torah commentaries as he was to mysteries, biographies and action novels. In recalling memories of my father, I am taken back to his reading the newspaper every day and settling in pretty deep to the comics page. In fact, as a child that was really where I started reading the newspaper and getting my fingers covered in black ink.

My earliest books that I remember having were comic books and my father, growing up in the 30s and 40s lived as a child during the growth and flourishing of that industry, which was largely Jewish in its inception and development. The classic characters to which our minds wander were created by Jews ... almost entirely young men whose parents were immigrants from eastern Europe and came to this country nearly penniless and eeked out a living in industrial towns like Cleveland, Rochester, New York City.

Joe Simon (Joseph Henry ‘Hymie’ Simon) created Captain America.

Stan Lee & Jack Kirby (born: Stanley Martin Lieber & Jacob Kurtzberg) created through Martin Goodman's Marvel Comics: Spider-Man, the Hulk, Thor, Iron Man, and Nick Fury.

But of course, the grand-daddy of them all and my personal favorite: Superman, created by Joe Schuster and Jerry Siegel in 1938, at a time when forces of evil ... real forces of evil were amassing and committing horror upon Jews and anyone who didn't look 'right'. Superman became a symbol and hero for oppressed minorities in the coming decades to have a model of what was right and what should be done to make the world safe and secure for all peoples.

How noteworthy that a group of Jewish immigrants to a country that holds dearly freedom and liberty created super heroes to send a message to our world that darkness and wrong must be squashed by forces of justice and good. Historians have commented on a connection between heroes like Superman and the Golem ... the Golem now dressed in spandex with an alter ego – Clark Kent (whose name derives from actors Clark Gable and Kent Taylor). Tonight, I would like draw a connection of Superman's classic tagline "Truth, justice, and the American Way," to the teaching from Pirkei Avot that the world is sustained by truth, justice and peace.

I discovered that Superman's various writers over the years have included the expression 'American way' partly based on geo- and local- politics. Truth and justice have always remained in his tagline but from the 1942-44 the 'American Way' showed up surely to encourage our troops. And in the 1950s the phrase was used most likely in response to the Red threat. When Superman himself says it in the 1978 film it stands in the face of the recent events of Watergate and our departure from Vietnam.

The idea of a man who upholds the values of truth and justice definitively and will fight all the forces of evil that try to stand in his way is a noble fight and an inspiration to us all – particularly in dark times. And so maybe reading the comics is not just an escape, exclusively, but also a chance to find hope.

When the rabbis wrote the line of what will sustain the world: truth, justice and peace, they did so in the face of a Roman Empire that did not always promote such values. They held this line up as a truth and realized that without a hope to create such a life (one of truth, justice and peace) in Israel, in North Carolina or these United States then such a life is not worth living ... or one that could be sustained. If we are not operating to promote truth, justice and peace, then we cannot sustain this earth.

My dad was not Superman. And he certainly would not want me to say he was. He certainly loved the idea of Superman and believed firmly in truth, justice and peace.

And my father had his kryptonites – and was entirely human. But his strength and will were noble as were his desires to leave this world a better place than he found it upon arrival.

This world is sustained by three things: truth (emet), justice (din) and peace (shalom). How wonderful that when someone dies, we call upon God as the Judge of Truth – dayan ha-emet. And of the deceased we say alav hashalom – may there be peace upon him. For in death and in life, we are eternally connected. How? Through our pursuit to create a world that is indeed, sustained by truth, justice and peace. As was done by those who came before us, those with whom we have walked in this life and we pray by those who follow us as well.