

Rabbi Jesse Olitzky

Rosh Hashanah 5780: “Avengers Assemble”

Every summer as a child, I’d go to Camp Grandparents. We would drive the 4 plus hours to the suburbs of Washington DC where my parents would drop off my brother and me at my grandparents’ home for a couple of weeks full of getting spoiled. It was only once I became a parent myself that I realized the importance of these weeks — not just so I could develop a close and special relationship with my grandparents, but also conveniently — and logically — for Camp Grandparents to take place during that inconvenient time at the end of August when camp is over, but school has not yet started. And so now, as a parent, I appreciate Camp Grandparents more than ever, where at the end of August my own children spend days at their grandparents’ home along with their cousins.

This past summer, with seven kids between the ages of two and nine, it was a packed and exhaustive schedule full of activities, so much so that when a trip was planned to take all of them to Hershey Park, I was called in for reinforcements, with a strong need for another adult body to play zone parenting defense against this group of kids.

At one particular moment in the water park section, we settled on dividing and conquering. We spread out between the corkscrew water slides and the kiddie pool, the big pool and the little slides, the lily pads and the splashpad. And when we came together afterwards, we realized that no one knew where Hannah was. There were three adults, but only six children. My two-and-a -half-year-old daughter had wandered off, with each adult thinking she was with another one.

The panic immediately set in and the screaming of her name began soon after. For approximately ten minutes, all of which seemed like an eternity, Hannah was gone. I found her in the arms of an employee, a first aid staff member, soaking wet, wrapped in a towel. The employee explained that she apparently wandered over to the deep end of the adult pool and with a smile, jumped in.

I asked if a lifeguard brought Hannah to her. She responded with a definitive ‘no.’ With hundreds of kids in the pools and on the water slides, the lifeguards were pulled in too many directions and never even saw her fall in. Apparently, a young mother was wadding in the pool with her infant in her arms and saw this happen from a distance. She bolted over there, scooping my daughter out of the water with her one free hand and handing her to the first aid squad. When I saw Hannah, she was all giggles and smiles, having no idea the ordeal that she had put us through, or what she had done. We spent that evening in the emergency room, with Penn State’s Children’s Hospital conveniently located across the street from Hershey Park, making sure she didn’t suffer from secondary drowning. And throughout the evening, she continued to smile and laugh the entire time, like we were just on another amusement park ride.

I asked the employee to introduce me to the young woman who saved Hannah and pulled her out of the pool. But she had left. She said that the woman handed her my child and went back to her family. We walked around to see if she could find her, so I could hug her, and properly thank her for saving my daughter's life. But she was gone. This stranger saved her life, saved our world, and I don't even know what she looks like. I do not know her name. I never spoke a single word to her. And yet, she had more of an impact on our family than she'll ever know, for she changed our destiny in that very moment.

The Talmud teaches that there is nothing more pious than saving a life, and we have no idea the impact of any of our interactions. We have no idea when we become a superhero and have the power to save someone's life. Ultimately, that is our role in this world — to protect others, as uncomfortable as it sounds. Our role is to honor God. We see God and we find God's Presence in this world in each other. And so, our responsibility is to protect each other. Of course we protect our loved ones. We would do anything for those that we love.

But that is not what we are taught. We must protect everyone, even the strangers among us. Tractate Sotah teaches about a person who sees a child struggling to swim in the river while he was in the middle of his morning prayers and responded by saying, let me first remove my tallit and tefillin before I save him. As he is unwrapping his tefillin, the child drowns. The Talmud calls this person a "foolish pietist." There is nothing pious about their actions. There is nothing praiseworthy. But the stranger, who saves the life of the one that they don't even know, that is to be admired. That is who we strive to be. And sometimes, we don't even realize the impact of our actions in that moment.

Now Jacob loved Joseph more than all his children... And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so much so that they could not speak a friendly word to him. Joseph became Jacob's eyes and ears, making sure his siblings followed directions.

Haloacheicha ro'im bish'chem, l'cha v'eshlacheicha aleihem (Gen. 37:13) – Your brothers are pasturing in Shechem, Jacob said to Joseph. Come and I will send you to them. Joseph answered, Hineni. I am here. I am ready. When Joseph reached Shechem, his brothers were not there to be seen. Vayimtz'ehu ish v'hineh to'eh ba'sadeh (Gen. 37:15). He found a man – an ish – wandering in the fields. The man explained Nas'u mizeh ki shamati omrim nelcha dotanah (Gen. 37:17) – They have gone from here. I heard the say they were going to Dothan. And with that single exchanged Joseph changed course. We know what came next. He went down to find his brothers, who first thought about killing him, then threw him in a pit, sold him into slavery, where he ended up in prison, and then eventually rose up to become Pharaoh's second-in-command, saving the entire region from starvation during famine.

A stranger, someone who Joseph only speaks a handful of words to, has the greatest influence on the path he ends up on. A stranger seemingly so insignificant that he isn't even given a name in the Torah, has a great impact. The

Torah seemingly goes out of its way to help us understand his influence. By not naming him, but simply referring to him as an *ish basadeh*, a man in the field, we are reminded that it's not always those closest to us that impact us, not just those who we are on a first name basis with. Sometimes, strangers, those whose names we don't even know, those who we encounter on our way, are the ones who still influence our destinies. Midrash Tanchuma suggests that this man was the archangel Gabriel, who took the shape of a man. Maybe the strangers that influence our lives are angels. Or maybe it's a reminder that we all have the ability to be angels for each other.

This past year, The Jewish community in this country lost one of our great cultural influencers, one whose passing went unnoticed by many, and influence not realized by most. Stanley Martin Lieber died last winter. If that is a name you might be familiar with, it's understandable. You might be more familiar with his, nom de plume, Stan Lee, former comic book writer, editor, creator, and producer, who helped turn the humble and small Marvel Comics into a worldwide Multimedia brand, responsible for creating some of the most iconic superheroes around. [I apologize if I sound like I am "geeking out" a little bit.]

Stan Lee wrote in his memoir that superheroes and comic books became especially popular during WWII, roughly 80 years ago, when the term superhero came into usage. But he noted, after wartime, comics books continued to be popular. He believed that was because the heroes he created were those that readers could look up to, but also relate to. They were superhuman, but still human. They were heroes, but still flawed. As Lee put it: "they weren't glossy do-gooders who never made mistakes — they were men and women with heart and humanity. Their appeal was undeniable."

And maybe that is what has made these superhero movies the highest grossing films of all-time. Not just the blockbuster nature of it all. Not just the team-ups and battle sequences. Not just to see if they return from being snapped to finally defeat Thanos. [And if you don't know what I'm talking about, then you need to add "watching the highest grossing movie of all-time" to your new year's resolution.] What makes these movies so popular — and the comic book stories before them — is that despite superhero powers caused by being bitten by a radioactive spider, or being exposed to gamma radiation, or being injected with a super soldier serum, the human nature of these heroes made each of us feel like we too could be a hero. We too have the power to stand up to evil. We too have the power to help the strangers among us. That's only if we are willing to. That's only if we accept our power. Because as Spider-Man was once told, with great power comes great responsibility.

But those with great power, those with the loudest voices, largest soapboxes, and most frantic tweets, are trying to tell us to be afraid of strangers. They are trying to tell us to ignore those who call out to us for help. This administration is doubling down on efforts to say that those who look differently than us, or speak differently than us, or pray differently than us, are people we should be afraid of. The Statue of Liberty declares Emma Lazarus' poetic words, words that resonate

with so many of our own ancestor's Jewish immigration stories: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddle masses yearning to breathe free." Yet, the President's policies suggest we must build walls to keep our distance from strangers. They reinforce xenophobic ideas that we should be scared of those who are different than us, when in reality, we should love those who are different than us.

Vahavtem et haGer ki Garim heyitem beretz mitzrayim. Love the Stranger for we were once strangers. We are commanded to love the stranger. We are commanded to love those who are different than us. Not just sojourners and migrants. We are commanded to embrace the stranger because we were once strangers. Loving the stranger ultimately means we understand that we have the ability to impact each other. Loving the stranger means actively embracing our ability to make a difference in another's life. Loving the stranger means understanding that we are all interconnected. We can and must rely on each other.

We must open up and be kind to strangers because we have no idea the impact that that kindness will have on our lives. When Abraham saw three travelers in the distance, he was not fearful that they were approaching him. He did not lock his door. He ran to greet them. He approached them and invited them into his home.

Don't misunderstand me: Abraham is a terribly flawed person. He casts out part of his family, and almost kills other members of his family. He lies to the King and pretends that his wife is his sister, just to save himself. We see that he is human. We see that he is imperfect. And we also see him going out of his way to be kind to the strangers he encounters.

In quoting the book of Job, Exodus Rabbah tells us that "The stranger should not lodge outside." Midrash explains that this means that God sees no creature as unfit. The gates of repentance — at this time of year, but also at all times — are always open, all who desire may enter it. Such Midrashic explanation requires that we see each individual as divine, as made in God's image. It means that we do not see strangers as strange. Instead, we see them as angels.

Abraham did not know that these strangers were angels. They are simply called men. Yet, a single interaction with them changed the course of his life's journey. These strangers were angels, Malachim, divine messengers. And so too are the strangers among us, those that we don't know who in some ways, have a greater influence on our lives than those that we do. Our unexpected interactions with them lead us to unexpected consequences.

We can't control who those angels are in our life. We have no idea what interaction will metaphorically, or literally, save our lives. We just have to be willing to embrace all in our midst. Doing so not only allows for us to encounter our angels, but to be angels for one another, to truly love the stranger.

This requires us to change our mindset. This requires that we tear down the walls that divide us – the literal bigoted walls that are built, but also the symbolic walls that are the reason we avoid strangers. Look around. I am sure you see someone who you don't know — maybe it's someone who you've never seen before, and maybe it's someone who you awkwardly and inauthentically smile and nod at, but don't really know (and of course, you've smiled and nodded so many times, you can't introduce yourself again). Know them. Care about them. They are not in your family. They are not in your social circle. And yet, they matter. And you have the power to make sure they know they matter.

Rabbi Meir taught that there is no greater definition of wickedness than that of the city Sodom, the biblical city that God was keen on destroying. He said that when a person is so wicked, you call them a Sodomite. And yet, the book of Ezekiel explains the sins of the city of Sodom: They were arrogant. They did not care about others and were only concerned with themselves and their own needs. If we do not seek to embrace the kindness of strangers, if we do not seek to be those strangers and exude kindness, then we all become Sodomites. Then we destroy our society. Look at what we've become.

Maybe Stan Lee was a hidden biblical scholar. After all, he was born in Manhattan to Jewish Romanian Immigrants who, at the turn of the 20th century, set out to be heroes themselves, to provide a better life for their family. Maybe his daily afternoon learning in *cheyder* as a child informed his understanding of heroes. For they are just like the Bible's depiction of angels. They appear in the everyday as human and flawed. But in masked disguise, they are larger than life. In the original comics, these heroes make sure to stick to their aliases and alter egos.

They go to great lengths to make sure that the world doesn't find out who the man – or woman – is behind the mask, never conflating the ordinary with the extraordinary. They do not seek to take credit or be celebrated. They act, because how could they not. Because they understood their responsibility. They understood exactly what the Talmud understood, that even without a magic hammer or a mechanical suit of armor, to save a single life is to save the world. They understood that they are divine messengers, for we are all divine messengers. We are all heroes. We are all angels.

To the woman whom I've never met who saved my daughter's life at Hershey Park: Thank you. To the woman who did not wait around to be celebrated or rewarded, and yet, did not flinch when she saw a young child in need of her help, thank you. I don't know who this woman is, but I am sure, like each of us, she is far from perfect.

For all I know, she could be sitting in a pew somewhere similar to here right now, acknowledging her own failures and misdeeds, hoping for a clean slate to be written and sealed in the Book of Life for the year to come. Yet, none of that stopped her from being our hero, from being our angel.

We spend these Days of Awe hoping to change. But we end up spending so much time focusing on what we've done wrong, on our mistakes, how we have disappointed others, and how we've disappointed ourselves, that we ignore that we've still been heroes this past year. You may not even realize, because we never do. We don't get to read ahead in life like we do in Torah; we don't know what becomes of the Josephs that we meet after a single interaction. But we have been heroes without even realizing. Appreciate your power and embrace your power.

Now, in the new year, as we examine our souls and examine ourselves, let us use our power to still make a difference in the life of the strangers among us. Because with great power, comes great responsibility. Shana Tova.