

## God is Not a Superhero

I've got a soft spot for superhero movies. My favorites are imaginative blends of sci-fi and fantasy with blood-pumping action interwoven with deeper themes of right and wrong. As I exercise these days, I'm rewatching the classic X-Men films – starring my favorite English actors, Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellan – which raise even more poignantly than usual philosophical questions of morality and human nature. Stories like these are entertaining to be sure, but they also get us to think. And they serve as helpful analogues for the Passover themes of liberation and *tikkun olam*. In short, we often imagine God as the hero of the Passover story and yearn for a repeat performance; but in truth, *we* are the heroes, and real redemption is up to us.

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The Passover seder's four cups of wine are tied to God's four promises of redemption: "**I will bring you out** from under the labors of the Egyptians and **I will deliver you** from their bondage. **I will redeem you** with an outstretched arm and through great judgments, and **I will take you to be My people**, and I will be your God" (Exodus 6:6-7).<sup>1</sup> With each cup, we focus our attention on God; after all, the Torah insists הוֹצִיא יְהוָה אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, "**The Eternal** brought the Children of Israel out of the Land of Egypt" (Ex. 12:51). Moses's name is nearly absent from the Haggadah because we want to give credit where credit is due.

This sets the stage for the classic image of God – if you will – as a superhero. God uses extraordinary power to overcome the bad guys, rescuing the innocent from the villain's evil plot. It's a gripping story, almost cinematic, and it has captured our attention for thousands of years. But it can also lead to unrealistic expectations of divine intervention in everyday life. We look around at a broken world and ask – if God could save us then, why not do so now?

It may surprise modern readers that this is a very old question. Consider Psalm 44: "We have heard, O God, our ancestors have told us the deeds you performed in their time, in days of old" (Ps. 44:2). The psalmist extols God's power to displace nations and thwart our foes; and yet, he cries to God: "Wake up! Why do you sleep, O Lord? ... Why do you hide your face?" (v.v. 24-25). The psalm ends plaintively, without the usual note of comfort: קוּמָה עֲזֹרָתָה לָנוּ, "Arise and help us! Redeem us as befits your faithfulness" (v. 27). Starting with the story of salvation handed down through the generations, the psalm ends in confusion and despair. Where is God? Can't God see our bat signal in the clouds?

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<sup>1</sup> See PT Pesachim 10:1.

The dilemma seems simple at first glance: The story tells us that God has the power to redeem; but we are not redeemed. So, either the story is wrong or God is holding back. But the truth is more complex. I'd like to suggest that even the Torah, which insists that God alone brought us from Egypt, doesn't believe that God alone brought us from Egypt. *We* are the real heroes.

Remember when I said Moses's name was *nearly* absent from the Haggadah? Well, it does appear in one place: After the recounting of the Ten Plagues, the Hagaddah quotes the Torah: "When Israel saw the wondrous power the Eternal wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Eternal. They had faith in the Eternal and in Moses, God's servant" (Ex. 14:31). For the Hebrews, believing in God and believing in Moses were the same act. God freed us by acting through human hands.

This picture of human agency also appears in Psalm 77.<sup>2</sup> The speaker alludes to the splitting of the sea and wonders, "Has such faithfulness disappeared forever?" (v. 9). He concludes with characteristic consolation: "Your way was through the sea. ... You led your people like a flock מִן־מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־אַהֲרֹן, *by means of Moses and Aaron*" (v. 20-21). So while God deserves the credit, human beings did the actual work.

And this is the message of Shabbat Hagadol, this last Shabbat before Passover. The haftarah from the book of Malachi sounds like Yom Kippur. שׁוּבוּ אֵלַי וְאֶשׁוּבָה אֵלֵיכֶם, "Turn back to me, and I will turn back to you" (Malachi 3:7). God promises redemption for those who "remember the teaching of Moses, my servant" (Mal. 3:22), who shall "trample the wicked to a pulp" (Mal. 3:21). Elijah will come to reconcile the generations (see v. 23-24), but the actual work of salvation is up to us.

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Superhero movies express our yearning that someone else will save us from our problems. They are entertaining fantasies, but we know they aren't true; and it's a mistake to think that Passover is just another superhero movie.

Over and over again, we are reminded that redemption is in our own hands. God doesn't intervene as history, and our texts are not trying to teach us otherwise. From the Torah to the Rabbis to our own modern age, Jewish tradition has insisted that human beings take charge of our fate and work to bring redemption to a world sorely in need of peace.

Time and again, when we face trouble and strife, we point our fingers and look to the horizon. Our distress is *their fault*, we say; and *someone* needs to fix it. Yes there are problems beyond our control – and thank God we live in a democratic society where we can take action to make things better. But there is also much that we can do to improve our own lives and communities. When we tone down cathartic complaining, we can tune in to the power we have to make a difference, the power to alleviate

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<sup>2</sup> I'm grateful to Shai Held for pointing out these psalms' reflections on the Exodus in his 2026 lecture "Why Doesn't God Redeem Us Again?: Living With and Without Exodus" ([video](#) and [sources](#)).

suffering and calm anxiety, to bring peace to those who fight and security to those in need of help.

This is the radical transformation offered to us by Passover: The power of redemption lies not in *their* hands but in our own. Person by person, family by family, at seder tables across the world, we are reminded that we ourselves have the power to save. To be partners with the divine is to “pray as if everything depended on God and act as if everything depended on you.”<sup>3</sup>

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As Aunt May said in Tobey Maguire’s *Spider-Man 2*, we all “need a hero, courageous, self-sacrificing people, setting examples for all of us.”<sup>4</sup> We cannot look to a fantasy version of God to fill this role for us, and our tradition doesn’t want us to. Rather, Jewish wisdom agrees with Aunt May’s observation, “I believe there’s a hero in all of us that keeps us honest, gives us strength, [and] makes us noble.”<sup>5</sup> If we can bring out just a little bit of that hero in each of us this year, *dayenu*, may it be enough.

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<sup>3</sup> *Mishkan T’filah*, p. 47 [165] and 125 [243] and *Gates of Prayer for Shabbat and Weekdays*, p. 81, attributed to Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman (1898–1972).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNs52gmDJVQ>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*