

SUPERMAN'S TRUE IDENTITY

BY LEN SOUSA

Sometime last year, I had what I believed to be a novel concept: Superman was, in fact, a super Jew—that is, an icon of Jewish identity. I was slightly dismayed when researching the topic I discovered Howard Jacobson's article in *The London Times* titled, "Up, Up And Oy Vey." Begrudgingly, I'll admit that while I may have had a similar idea, I could never have come up with such a witty title. That said, I was happy to see his article didn't exactly present my own theory regarding our blue-tighted hero.

As Jacobson mentions, Superman was created by two 24-year-old Jewish lads named Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. A few years before, starting in 1933 and until the start of World War II in September 1939, an estimated 90,000 German and Austrian Jews fled to neighboring countries. It was during this modern exodus that Siegel and Shuster created their emigrating hero in 1938.

It's not unreasonable to believe that Siegel and Shuster knew of the rise of Nazi Germany and Hitler's skewed view of Jewish culture. It's possible that it was even a topic of discussion at home with their families in Cleveland. These dinner table chats may have even subconsciously planted the early seeds of Superman as a Jewish icon.

So let's look at the basics: Superman comes from a foreign land (planet) named Krypton where he is the son of a powerful family. Superman's name on this planet is Kal-El. The impending destruction of his homeland forces Kal-El's father to send his youngling hurtling through space to a new world—or, as it's nearly called, small town America (Smallville, Texas). The result is Kal-El being raised as human, his name changed to the less-ethnic sounding Clark Kent, and the clothing he was wrapped in (the familiar red "S") hidden away from public view. It's only after he grows older and his powers begin to manifest themselves that he allows his true nature to be expressed in the form of—dun-da-dun-da—Superman. A hero literally draped in the markings of his race and conquering foes with the strength of the world he left behind.

Of course, to fit into his adopted society, Kal-El must conform to the American ideals where he lives. In a vain attempt to blend in, Kal-El becomes Clark Kent, a bumbling fool with little or no ability to handle himself in society. His desire to appear like everyone else has turned him into someone he never was. By denying his ethnic roots, Kal-El becomes a caricature of a human; he is a nervous, seemingly dimwitted, personality. Surely, Kal-El had been around people long enough to know how they acted. But because he has



He's a real mensch, that Superman. Can a comic book superhero demonstrate the perils of assimilation?

ILLUSTRATION BY KENDRA PLUMLEY

hidden his true nature for so long, he has lost his soul—regaining it only by leaping to life wrapped in the emblem of his old world.

As Superman, Kal-El finds the identity he has lost. He astounds millions with his gifts by storming into the skies not in the small town where he grew up, but in the largest city in the country, Metropolis. Of course the rub is he can't maintain this super (i.e. authentic) identity. Kal-El comes from a world where people are much like those on Earth. The difference is that the Earth's sun affects Kal-El differently and gives him superhuman powers. In other words, by entering another world, the Jewish hero becomes stronger because of his roots and weaker when he denies them.

Jacobson believes that “so long as no one knows he's Jewish that he is capable of performing wonders.” But it's clear that Superman wears his Jewishness like a coat of arms. People even know that he is from a foreign planet. It is precisely when he hides this fact that he is rendered powerless. In order to fit in and adapt, Kal-El denies his heritage and hides his Kryptonian past, making himself completely powerless. Therefore, he creates Superman not as a way to hide from his past but as a way to rebel against hiding it.

So where does Kryptonite fit in? Its function is to render Superman powerless, and its origins are (oddly enough) his home planet of Krypton. Why does a mineral from Kal-El's home world, the one he has so proudly displayed on his uniform, cause him such tremendous pain and weakness? Jacobson argues that it serves as a reminder of his past and that this renders him unable to continue his charade as a non-Kryptonian (or gentile). But it's clear that Kal-El's ethnicity (or Jewishness) gives him strength. His acceptance of it is what made him create Superman.

Kryptonite serves as a different kind of reminder. It's not a reminder of embarrassment or of a heritage he wishes to deny, but it's a reminder of a world he has lost. One he can no longer return to because of actions beyond his control.

The Nazis in 1939 began to force Jews into ghettos and their homes were looted then abandoned. The fortunate ones who escaped to safe countries knew their homeland was gone. Even if their houses had survived, it's likely friends and family did not. Kryptonite symbolizes the acute pain of a displaced people who have no home to return to and must make due in a new land; at times, under a new guise. Kal-El's weakness comes from facing this past and realizing his loss—a loss we may not all share specifically, but one we can still understand.

Able to leap tall wastebaskets in a single bound, mild-mannered Len Sousa wonders how Clark Kent can keep his blue tights on all day without chafing or removing them to use the restroom. If anyone has some answers, or just a good recipe for latkes, let him know at www.len-sousa.com.