

# The Re-Imagining of Spiderman and the Torah

## Parashah B'ha'alotkha 5783



I am a big Spiderman fan.

How cool was a kind of nerdy kid who had super-secret abilities?

He lived in Forest Hills, Queens, not far from where I grew up, and, like me, was a Mets fan.

Empire State University, which he attended, seemed a lot like NYU or Columbia, where I spent a good amount of time.

And he loved to jump around and I love to jump around!

And his theme song was the best -

"Spider-Man, Spider-Man

Does whatever a spider can

Spins a web, any size

Catches thieves just like flies

Look out

Here comes the Spider-Man."

I mean come on - does it get any better than that?

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Over the years, however, I have been getting confused.

There have been more and more Spideymans, or is it Spidermen? They have different backstories, and they are played by different actors.

Three of them joined together to face numerous villains from across the Multiverse in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*.

So you can imagine my confusion when I saw the commercial for another Spiderman movie - the animated *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*.

I discovered the backstory of why there are so many of these movies: It turns out that Marvel sold the rights to Spiderman to Sony in 1998. Marvel kept the comic rights, and Sony got the movie and the merchandise.

But the deal stipulates that Sony keeps the rights to Spider-Man only for as long as they continue to produce a Spider-Man movie at least every five years, which they have done.

That's why the writers keep returning to the original Spider story; they repeat, re-interpret, and reimagine it for new films.

And we are left with lots of interpretations!

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So, what does this have to do with anything?

Fair question.

Well, among the many moments in the morning's Torah reading which Elle nicely described in her thoughtful D'var Torah, we find Moses explaining the mitzvah of Passover - again.

The Israelites are told to offer the Pesah sacrifice on the fourteenth of the month... just as we learned they should when they left Egypt.

It's as if all the commandments Moses told the Israelites in the book of Exodus did not happen.

It got my Spidey-sense up.

The rabbis ask the same question and re-spin it by saying repeating instructions is important because people forget things.

Logical.

I have found this in my own life as information whips by me, sometimes, I need it repeated a few times.

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But there is a deeper Jewish message here about learning. Learning is not a one-time pursuit; it is a life-long endeavor.

There is no morning when I wake up and say, "I have mastered Judaism." If anything, all my rabbinic training has taught me what I still need to learn.

And every text I explore invites me to return to it repeatedly, digging deeper, finding new pearls of wisdom, and reimagining it.

Judaism does this in many ways.



The most obvious way is what we did this morning - we read the same Torah portions every year, gleaning new insights.

But this is also woven into other places. When we finish a great book of Jewish learning like a tractate of Talmud or an order of Mishnah, we recite, addressing the text, "*hadran alakh* - we will return to you."

Great books never leave you, and you come back to them again and again.

This is related to another much less well-known custom in our tradition. At a funeral, there is a special mourner's prayer called the Burial Kaddish - the *Kaddish D'Ithadita*, which speaks of the heavenly Jerusalem.

This Kaddish is recited only at two moments - at the graveside and at the



completion of a great book.

The idea is a profound one - great people, like great books, never leave us, and we never leave them. We return to them, and their memories and teachings live on in us.

This is what the memorably named teacher - Ben Bag Bag said: *hafokh bah v'hafokh bah, d'kholah vah*. Turn (it) [the Torah] over, and turn it over [again], for everything is in it.

The more we study, the more we find.

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And the Torah makes another point in this morning's reading. It is not merely retelling the commandments of Pesah, but also stating that now the Israelites are going to observe Pesah one year after it actually occurred for the first time. This is to occur in the wilderness where they are, not in some future time when they enter the Promised Land

Now, it is clear that Passover is an annual ritual - wherever we are. Not only do we study the Exodus, but we are commanded to reenact its greatness each year.

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The power of a great narrative is not merely in hearing it once, but it is in its retelling, reliving it through practices that take us back in time and make us want to pass them on into the future.

Great stories invite us to look back at them, seeking new meanings and gleaning new insights.

That is what Judaism offers us: a chance to go back, to go back to the sources - look at them anew, with fresh eyes, with new approaches - see something you missed or find a new understanding.

Great texts produce that type of experience.

And I would argue that this is also an approach to life - look back on your own life, your family's journey, on our people's history and find something you missed, or see something differently.

And in that return to the narrative, you can open up a new approach. For example, we can look back at an upsetting experience and, instead of seeing ourselves as helpless, view ourselves as resilient.

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Judaism invites us to look at the world anew each day.

While each day may be similar to the one before, it does not have to be.

Appreciate the past to envision a new future.

Or as the great Rabbi, the Ba'al Shem Tov taught - "*z'khirah sod geulah* - remembering is the secret of redemption." When we remember, reenact, or even re-see the past, we invite a tomorrow that can bring new healing to our lives and to the world.

Just as the original frame of Spiderman has yielded so many different narratives, we, too, look back at Torah and find new insights that can help us reimagine our future.

Clearly, there is a bit more or actually, a lot more, to Torah than to Spiderman, but maybe we should give all these Spidermen another spin.

