

Maybe
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By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

“What can one person do to impact on the many challenges facing our world?” asks Rabbi Ammi Hirsch on Erev Yom Kippur, reflecting on the war in Ukraine and our synagogue’s humanitarian mission. “We overcome despair by countering despair — one day at a time, one place at a time, one person at a time... We defeat helplessness by helping.”

Last spring, 23 congregants traveled to Poland. For weeks we watched from the safe confines of our living room the Russian military maul millions of innocent civilians in an unprovoked, unjustified, unconscionable, unrestrained, merciless and savage invasion. I was inexpressibly frustrated by simply watching. I wanted our synagogue to do something — for Ukrainians — but also for ourselves. We are morally diminished if all we do is bemoan orgies of atrocities from afar, lamenting all manner of human perversities while downing the last sips of our morning repast. Synagogues aspire not merely to be observers, commentators or critics. We want to be in the arena, messengers of mercy, co-workers of kindness, consolation and comfort, representing and expressing the best of Jewish values.

You — our congregants — and many others who follow us online - raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to support aid workers and humanitarian organizations. We brought 1,200 pounds of supplies with us, everything from undergarments, to toiletries, medicines and hygiene products. And most importantly, we brought compassion and kindness to Ukrainians who had lost everything.

We saw hundreds of refugees. At the Ukrainian border, we stood by busloads of broken, shell-shocked human beings disembarking from their harrowing journey, finally free of Russian terror. In Warsaw and Krakow we interacted with refugees who were just beginning to grapple with their new reality: They would not be returning to their homes or their former lives anytime soon, if ever.

One encounter in Krakow reduced me to tears. We entered a giant warehouse, established in haste from a converted shopping mall. Mountains of clothes, donated from every part of the globe, were offered to any person who entered the facility. No money was exchanged. Ukrainian refugees simply took what they needed. Dresses, shirts, pants, underwear, socks, shoes, were neatly arranged according to style and size. If you didn’t know the tragic background, this place would seem like any thrift shop in the West. That was the point: to provide not only basic necessities but to offer as much dignity and compassion as possible. It reminded me of the stories I heard about how, immediately after the War, displaced persons camp officials made a concerted effort to restore basic dignity to survivors, as quickly and as comprehensively as possible. Traumatized and dehumanized women were offered fine clothes of the latest European fashion, cosmetics, perfumes, and hair stylists, so they could feel themselves coming back to themselves.

We spent 45 minutes in the warehouse. But it was only when we were outside that I was overwhelmed with emotion. We arrived first thing in the morning. By the time we left, a long line had formed. They were almost all women and children. Men between the ages of 18 and 60 were prevented from leaving Ukraine.

I looked deeply at these suffering souls who had lost everything. Feelings of utter helplessness overwhelmed me. All these millions of people suddenly rendered refugees, all this suffering — it was

caused by one man, Vladimir Putin. He decided to launch this brutal assault. For sure, he was enabled by many others, but the invasion of Ukraine would not have happened if Putin didn't want it to happen.

It is astonishing to me how history often consigns so much power to one person. The fate of many millions were in Putin's hands. If not for him, there would be no war, 12 million displaced Ukrainians would still be in their homes, and the tens of thousands of killed and wounded would still be leading peaceful lives.

We do not give enough consideration to the type of people who lead us. Learned experts analyze the power politics of international relations, as if there is some master algorithm that directs and constrains all leaders. Of course, there are rules to the game of thrones, but Putin's values drove his decision to invade Ukraine. His personality, life experiences and principles led him to launch and fight the kind of war he inflicted on Ukrainians, an unrestrained perverse all-out onslaught against civilians. At the core of most of the world's conflicts is a fundamental clash of values.

Did we achieve anything worthwhile in Poland? The war is still raging. Ukrainians are still suffering grievously. Needless to say, we had no influence on the Kremlin. Putin didn't even know we were there, and were he to have known, he would have laughed at the inanity of it all.

Why do anything that makes so little difference? What can one person do to impact on the many armed conflicts raging around the world? What can I do to combat global warming, economic distress, mass shootings and crime, let alone, this awful pandemic that just keeps rolling along? The anguish I felt in the Polish refugee hub could describe my relationship to practically every challenge facing our world.

What can one person do? How to make a difference in a world that seems on the precipice, teetering over the valley of the shadow of death, cruelty, stupidity, and immorality?

I am not the first Rabbi Ammi in history, nor am I the first Rabbi Ammi to have been reduced to tears by human behavior. One of the best-known Talmudic sages was Rabbi Ammi ben Natan. He lived in Palestine in the third century, and was the author of many profound Jewish teachings. The Talmud records that when he came upon the following biblical verse from the book of the prophet Zephania, he wept:

“Seek righteousness, seek humility, perhaps you shall find shelter when the day of judgement arrives.”

The same Talmudic passage records that Rabbi Assi — Ammi's best friend — wept whenever he read the biblical verse from the book of the prophet Amos: “Hate the evil, love the good and establish justice in the gate, perhaps God will be gracious.”

Why did these great teachers weep upon reading biblical verses that are among the most profound and inspiring sentiments in the entire Jewish canon? We would have assumed that Rabbis Ammi and Assi would be uplifted by the prophetic sentiments.

Why did they weep? Because of one Hebrew word — *ulai* - “perhaps.” Seek righteousness and humility — and if you do — *ulai* — maybe — God will spare you on the day of judgement. Hate evil, love the good and establish justice in the gates — and if you do — *ulai* — maybe — God will be gracious. In other words, even when we do the right thing — we may still not be rewarded, let alone change the world.

Rabbi Ammi is recorded as saying: “All this — *ve’ulai?*” Devoting my life to justice, righteousness, humility, goodness - and only maybe God will spare me?

I think that Rabbi Ammi and Rabbi Assi wept not only because of the uncertainty of their own lives - that even if they lead moral lives, they will still suffer, see loved ones die, and endure all the pains and hardships of life. They also wept because they realized that even if they stay humble, hate evil, love the good, and pursue justice — if the world around them is arrogant, corrupt, unjust and immoral — there is no place to hide. They, and everyone else, will be swept up in the wrongs of the age.

There is a passage in the Midrash, composed 1,500 years ago, that describes 21st-century climate change as if it were written today: “Be careful not to destroy My world. If you do, there is no one to repair it after you.” I cannot escape the effects of global warming, no matter how many electric cars or sun panels I purchase. I cannot influence the climate to spare me — to ensure that it is ten degrees cooler over my house than your house.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught: “[There were once] people on a boat. One took out a drill and began drilling a hole in the boat beneath his seat. The others said to him, ‘What are you doing?’ He replied, ‘Is it any concern of yours? [I am not drilling a hole beneath your seat] but only under mine.’ They said to him: ‘But you will sink the whole boat and we will all drown.’”

All of humanity is in the same boat. The rising tides of immorality, stupidity, ego, self-regard, lust for power and conquest, threaten all. And the more technologically advanced we become, the more we are at the mercy of others. There is no place for the moral person to hide. We are all at risk of going down with the ship. And when Rabbi Ammi and Rabbi Assi realized this — they wept. Their despondence, demoralization and despair overwhelmed them.

But Judaism also provides the response. We overcome despair by countering despair — one day at a time, one place at a time, one person at a time, at one moment in time. We defeat helplessness by helping. We surmount hopelessness by bringing hope. We conquer powerlessness by empowering. Our lives are driven by the way we see ourselves. We become — not what we were meant to be — but what we choose to be.

That is why we traveled to Poland. Of course, we wanted to do good - to relieve anguish for as many people as possible — and with your generous help we did that. But we also wanted to overcome our own feelings of moral impotence. We wanted to convince ourselves that we are who we choose to be and we choose to be Jews who seek righteousness, love the good, hate the evil, and pursue justice.

This is the reason we repent tonight. Repentance is a good thing, a declaration of empowerment; an expression of responsibility: I am responsible. The mistake of omission or commission is mine — and I can act to rectify the transgression. Atonement is my determination to transform insecurity into confidence, cynicism into faith, and isolation into friendship. We can overcome even our own pain and loneliness if we turn our energies outwards to relieve the pain and loneliness of others. We are at our best when we emphasize hope, not despair, when we acknowledge the brokenness of our world and work towards repair.

We saw hundreds of humanitarian aid workers in Poland. These were people who dropped everything in their home countries to encamp on the Ukrainian border and in Polish cities and towns, motivated by the desire to do good, and driven by the impulse of compassion and kindness. We met Alessio in

Krakow, an Italian chef who felt that he could not stand idly by and watch the suffering inflicted on innocent Ukrainians. On his own, and using his own money, he began cooking for refugees in train stations, hospitals and at the border. Every few weeks he would make the dangerous trek into Ukraine, itself, and offer meals. When we met him, he estimated that he had already cooked and served 40,000 meals. We never have enough of such people. "There is always more misery in the depths than compassion in the heights," wrote Victor Hugo.

But here's the thing: In the midst of all this suffering and depravation, those humanitarian workers were not anxious and they were not fearful. They were confident, strong, content, satisfied with themselves, and even joyous. They were physically and morally upright, filled with the celestial energy of doing God's work. They inspired others. Soon people heard of Alessio, and contributed resources to him so that he could continue cooking.

Our highest humanity always leads to someone or something other than ourselves. The more we actualize our humanity the more we are led to serving others; helping others; loving others; believing in others. We seek to repair the world: to unlock the fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of bondage; to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke; to share what we have with those in need. Our most inspirational moments are when someone helps us peer into our own nature and to intuit the moral sentiment that lies at the core of the human creature.

And if we have seen this glorious sight; if we have looked into our very souls and detected the moral spark that lies within; we will learn to like ourselves. We will inspire ourselves. We will acknowledge the beauty in ourselves. We will become less fearful, less anxious. We will affirm and love life, an affirmation which, in turn, will encourage love of life in others. And we will be better able to endure the disappointments of life because we will know that life has a purpose. We will suffer loss, sickness and disillusion. We will learn that life is unfair. We will see that sometimes the bad prosper and the good suffer. And we will still march on, saddened but unbowed: because we believe: We believe in ourselves; we believe in humanity; and we believe in the up-building of the world.

Ovadia Baruch was born in Salonika, Greece, in 1922, one of seven children. Even after the Germans marched into the city in 1941, life remained reasonably tolerable for the Jews. But in 1942 Adolf Eichmann arrived, and soon thereafter, the Jewish community was forced into ghettos and vicious anti-Jewish incitement began.

On March 15, 1943, the first deportation to Auschwitz left the station. Twenty-year old Ovadia and his large family were on the train — dozens of cattle cars long, up to a hundred people per car — old and young, feeble and disabled — with no food, water or toilets. The Greek Jews had it worst. Greece was further from Auschwitz than any other European community. It took seven days and seven nights to reach the death camp.

At 2:30 a.m. on March 21, the train finally screeched to a halt. Ovadia staggered out of the car into the strobe-lit night. Armed guards shrieked at the top of their lungs, vicious dogs growled, and hollow-eyed inmates clad in striped rags ran this way and that. "They must have brought us to an insane asylum," Ovadia thought. Not everyone heeded the command to leave the train. They couldn't. They were already dead. The hollow-eyed striped-clad inmates would dispose of them quickly. The next trainload of tortured Jews would have no idea what transpired a few hours before them.

Awaiting on the platform below was Josef Mengele. He, alone, determined who would live a few months longer and who would die that night. Ovadia's entire family was loaded onto trucks, never to see the sun rise again. Ovadia was sent to the main Auschwitz camp, and eventually ended up working at the munitions factory, along with many other men and women, manufacturing bombs for the German war machine. One night, Ovadia was caught stealing food and received sixty lashes as punishment. As he was agonizing on the ground, a German guard kicked him so viciously that he cried out "O Madre, O Madre," Ladino for "O mother."

Aliza Tzarfati, a 16-year-old teenager who also worked in the munitions factory, heard the word "Madre" — and assumed that the man in agony must be Greek. Greek Jews spoke Ladino. She asked the Kapo on guard, "Can you arrange for me to meet this man?" "If I do," the Kapo responded, "the two of you will be risking your lives; if you are caught you will both be executed." Aliza responded — "come what may, I want to meet this guy."

Moved by her courage, the Kapo put a dummy 250-pound bomb on a wagon, and Aliza wheeled it to where Ovadia lay in agony. "Are you from Greece?" Aliza asked. "Yes," Ovadia replied. "Me too," said Aliza, "Where in Greece?" "Salonika," Ovadia answered. "Me too," said Aliza. In retelling this story, Ovadia wept. "Aliza was so beautiful," he said, "that nothing hurt anymore." He couldn't stop looking at her. "The only thing I wanted was to see Aliza."

In the bowels of Hell, they fell in love. They wrote secret notes to each other, risking everything. On one of those notes, Ovadia wrote: "If we survive this, I am going to marry you."

Throughout their captivity, Aliza never told Ovadia what happened to her in Block 10. Those of you who have traveled with our synagogue to Auschwitz, you will remember that we stood outside this building. It was the medical experimental block where sterilization surgery was performed on female prisoners.

Aliza was in Block 10 for about a month when Josef Mengele entered the building and scheduled Jewish women for experimental operations. Her day arrived, along with two other female prisoners. Horst Schumann came to get her. Schumann was a German surgeon whose special area of interest was experimenting on mass sterilization of Jews by means of X-rays. Aliza barricaded herself with the beds in her room and screamed at Schumann. Enraged, he pointed his gun at her and said, "I'm going to operate on you, myself, but you will be the last of the three operations."

While the surgeons were operating on the first girl, an air raid siren sounded throughout the camp, and the German staff ran to the bomb shelter, leaving the last two procedures to Maximilian Samuel, a well-known Jewish obstetrician from Cologne. Dr. Samuel was guarded like a hawk by another physician whose job was to make sure that Samuel performed the surgery as planned.

When it was over, Aliza was wheeled back to her room. Every day, Dr. Samuel would come to change her bandages, and Aliza would scream at him: "You are Satan, you are a wicked man. I'm sixteen and a half years old — and you sterilized me?!" Samuel responded:

"Aliza'leh, try to stay alive. One day you will understand."

Miraculously, Ovadia survived Auschwitz and inhuman death marches. When American soldiers found him lying on the ground in Mauthausen, Austria, he weighed 80 pounds. After months of recovery and

rehabilitation, he made his way back to Salonika to search for family members who may have survived. Every day for six months he would go to the Jewish community center and look at lists of survivors.

“I didn’t think of Aliza,” he said, “because I assumed she could not have survived the death marches, but after six months I saw her name on the list of survivors, and I decided to wait in Salonika, thinking that maybe she would return to search for her family. One day, there she was.”

“Aliza!” he shouted. “Ovadia!” she cried. “We embraced.” We wouldn’t let go of each other.” Aliza said to Ovadia, “I have not forgotten what you wrote to me, but I cannot marry you.” You came from a very large family; you lost everyone — and I can’t you give you children.” She then proceeded to tell him of the surgery performed on her in Block 10.

Ovadia cried: “Marrying you is enough. I don’t want children if it means giving you up.” Day after day, he wore her down. Finally, Aliza relented but told Ovadia, “I will marry you only if you promise to put in our ketubah that you know we will not have children.” “Aliza,” Ovadia responded, “I’ll sign 17 ketubahs to marry you.”

They married in 1946, and soon thereafter set sail for Palestine on an illegal immigrant ship. They were placed in an agricultural community in central Israel, living in an abandoned cattle shed. A woman in the settlement, Mrs. Goldberg, had compassion on the young bride and invited her to take showers in her house. One evening Aliza returned from Mrs. Goldberg, distraught and feeling ill: “I’m never taking any more showers at Mrs. Goldberg’s house. “Why not?” Ovadia asked. “Because I caught the disease that she has.” “What’s wrong with Mrs. Goldberg?” “Haven’t you seen how fat she is?” Aliza responded. “Just look at her belly. She has intestinal worms or an infection and I caught it from her.”

“That very day we took Aliza to the hospital,” Ovadia recounted. “They examined her thoroughly, and the medical staff came in to give her their diagnosis. She was three months pregnant with their son. Fourteen years later, their daughter was born.

“Aliza’leh try to stay alive. One day you will understand.”

Maximilian Samuel sabotaged her surgery. Several weeks later, Dr. Samuel was dead: an informant reported what he had done.

Aliza died in 1993. She was 66 years old. Ovadia died in 2010 at the ripe age of 88. They had five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren — the best revenge on Mengele, Hitler, Eichmann, Schumann and the entire pathetic band of Nazi racists.

What can one person do to change the world?

Maximilian Samuel changed Aliza’s world. He changed Ovadia’s world. Children are alive today because of Dr. Samuel. He did not sabotage every operation. Jewish doctors in the camps were often despised and condemned after the War. They were placed in morally untenable situations. To resist meant likely discovery and certain death. To comply meant violating every ethical vow of medicine and humanity.

But even when we do the right thing, we are not necessarily rewarded. Maximilian Samuel was caught and executed.

Our entire lives are governed by the short Hebrew word — *ulai* — maybe. But we do the right thing not only to be rewarded, and not only to relieve the suffering of others. We do the right thing because it is the right thing for us. To fight for justice is to fight for ourselves. To ignore injustice, to tolerate evil — is to distance ourselves from ourselves. By empathizing with the struggles of others, we strengthen ourselves. We build immunity to moral disease.

The fight counts. We cannot retreat from the world. To shut the world out is to invite moral chaos that will eventually lead back to us anyway. To fight for others is to fight against alienation and despair. To withdraw is to allow the instincts of empathy to deteriorate, and the muscles of responsibility to atrophy. We act because our resolve weakens when we do not act. Apathy, lethargy and complacency hollow out our human essence — the capacity to care about, and empathize with, fellow human beings.

When conscience dies, we die a spiritual death.

We need to try to stay alive. *Ulai* — maybe one day we will understand.