

**PARSHAT EMOR**  
**MAY 3, 2014**  
**RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

On Sunday morning I received an e-mail message from a friend to make sure that I knew that on 60 Minutes that evening that there would be a special report that would be enlightening. As I watched Bob Simon interview Nicholas Winton, a 104 year old British gentleman, I learned of his amazing story.

Nicholas Winton was born Nicholas Wertheimer on May 19, 1909 in West Hampton, England and was baptized by the Anglican Church by the decision of his parents who had German-Jewish ancestry. He was a stockholder by profession, but that's not the important part of his story.

In December 1938, Martin Blake, a friend of Winton's, asked him to forego his plans of a ski vacation in Switzerland and visit him in Czechoslovakia, where he had traveled in his capacity as an associate of the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia. The Committee had been established in October of that year to provide assistance for the refugees created by the German annexation of the Sudeten region under the Munich Pact. Winton decided to go and it changed his life.

He visited refugee camps filled to capacity with Jews and others who were political opponents from the Nazi regime. He decided that he needed to do something, especially as he knew that only a month beforehand, the Kristallnacht riots in Germany had occurred. He was especially touched by the plight of the children of these refugees who had no place to go. He later stated: "I decided to try to get permits to Britain for them. I found out that the conditions which were laid down for bringing in a child were chiefly that you had a family that was willing and able to look after the child, and 50 English pounds which was quite a large sum of money in those days, that was deposited in the Home Office."

Winton decided to stay in Prague, opened an office in the central part of the city, and soon thousands of parents lined up outside his office seeking a safe haven for their children. He contacted the governments of nations he thought could take in the children. Only Sweden and his own government said yes.

When he returned to London he established an organization, The British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia, Children's Section, without authorization, consisting of himself, his mother, his secretary and a few volunteers. He then looked for families who would take care of these refugee children. By day, he worked as a stockbroker, and then in the afternoons and evenings he continued his rescue efforts. He raised money and found foster homes hoping to bring as many children as possible to safety.

The first transport of children left Prague for London on March 14, 1939. Seven further transports departed by rail out of Prague and across Germany to the Atlantic coast, and then by ship across the English Channel to Britain. At the train station were British foster parents to collect the children. The last trainload left Prague on August 2, 1939. Unfortunately, the biggest

transport of children was to take place on September 1, 1939. On that day, Hitler invaded Poland and all borders were closed. None of the 250 children were seen again and the families waiting at Liverpool station that day waited in vain.

After the war Nicholas Winton told no one of his exploits. He served in the British army after having served in the Red Cross. Eventually, he came back to London and worked, married and raised a family. Only many years later, after his wife found some papers in their attic about his exploits, did we begin to learn about his exploits. What he had done was save 669 children who would most assuredly have been killed and who were given a second chance at life. Those 669 children had more children, and since Winton is 104 years old, he has seen more of their children since then. Because of his exploits, over 5,000 people are alive today.

I did not know the story of Nicholas Winton until the 60 Minutes broadcast. Since that time, I have read a book of his exploits and seen a DVD entitled *Nicky's Family*, both available in our Maxwell Abbell Library. Shame on me that I didn't know his story, for it is people like this who are truly inspiring, who even under the most extraordinary of circumstances make this a world in which it is worth living.

Winton's story dovetailed nicely with reading I had just done over Shabbat afternoon. I have been enamored with the writings of Malcolm Gladwell, who has written some fascinating books and whose works have been incorporated into our vocabulary. Many of us in organizational life talk about "The Tipping Point", or "Blink", or "The Outliers" – all of which are titles of Gladwell's books. His latest one is entitled *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Mystics, and the Art of Battling Giants.*"

His introduction concerns the story of David and Goliath, well known to all of us. However, he understands the biblical story a little differently than most of us. According to his view, David is going to be the victor all along against this great giant. Ancient armies, he informs us, had three kinds of warriors: The first was cavalry –armed men on horseback or in chariots. The second was infantry - foot soldiers wearing armor and carrying swords and shields. The third were projectile warriors – who today would be called artillery: archers and, most important, slingers. According to Gladwell a "slinger" is one who takes a rock or a lead ball and swings it in increasingly wider and faster circles, and releases, one end of the rope, hurling the rock forward. Slingers, he inform us, will always defeat infantry. And, Goliath was heavy infantry.

What Gladwell wants us to learn from this are two concepts: "The first is that much of what we consider valuable in our world arises out of these kinds of lopsided conflicts, because the act of facing overwhelming odds produces greatness and beauty. And second, that we consistently get these kinds of conflicts wrong. We misread them. We misinterpret them. Giants are not what they think they are. The same qualities that appear to give them strength are often the sources of great weakness." He tells us that being an underdog can open doors, create opportunities and make possible what might otherwise have seemed unthinkable.

One of his chapters concerns the people of Le Chambon. Their story was known to me. During WWII, in Vichy controlled France, the town of Le Chambon decided to make a

difference by saving young Jewish children. Le Chambon is a village not far from the Italian and Swiss borders in south central France. It is a remote area and the region is heavily agricultural. For several centuries, Le Chambon had been home to a variety of dissident Protestant sects, chief among them the Huguenots. The local Huguenot pastor was a man named Andre Trocme.

On the Sunday after France fell to the Germans, Trocme preached a sermon in which he stated: “We shall resist whenever our adversaries demand of us obedience contrary to the orders of the Gospel. We shall do so without fear, but also without pride and without hate.” As conditions grew worse for Jews across Europe, Jews began appearing at the home of Andre Trocme and his wife, Magda. They took in these refugees and before you knew it the stream became a flood. By 1944, enrollment in the school rose from 18 pupils on the eve of the war to 350. Thousands were saved by the good people of this town.

Gladwell suggests that the Nazis were never able to overrun this town because of the David and Goliath principle – that is, the wiping out a town or a people or a movement is never as simple as it looks. The powerful are not as powerful as they seem – nor the weak as weak. The Huguenots of Le Chambon had lived precarious lives and people had tried to wipe them out before. They were used to being persecuted and threatened. Magda Trocme stated that the people in the village were able to understand the persecution of the Jews better perhaps than people in other villages, for they already had a kind of preparation. In short, the Nazis could never be successful against the resources of such a people.

Eventually, Trocme was forced to flee, arrested and but able to escape. The story of the pastor and his wife and the people of Le Chambon teach us that individuals and/or community can make a difference if they are willing to stand up for what is right, even if it sometimes seems as if you are David fighting Goliath.

In our Torah reading of this morning there are two major sections. The first concerns the responsibilities of the Priests to maintain their purity as they perform their official duties. The second concerns the festival cycle and how we mark holy time. In between, there is a phrase which I think illuminates our responsibility not only in these areas but in all areas. The Torah says: “You shall faithfully observe My commandments: I am the Lord. You shall not profane My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the Israelite people - I the Lord who sanctify you.” It is our responsibility not only not to desecrate G-d’s name but to sanctify G-d’s name. G-d addresses this specifically to the Israelite people, and to those who are their descendants, us. We have a continuing responsibility to stand up for what is right, to attempt to do the seemingly impossible, and to make a difference in the world as we sanctify G-d’s holy name.

The political philosopher Edmund Burke once wrote: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men should do nothing.” Individuals such as Nicholas Winton and the people of Le Chambon teach all of us that it is possible to stand up against impossible odds and make a difference.

In a 1939 letter written by Nicholas Winton he claimed: “There is a difference between passive goodness and active goodness. The latter, is in my opinion, the giving of one’s time and energy in the alleviation of pain and suffering. It entails going out, finding and helping those who are suffering and in danger, and not merely leading an exemplary life, in a purely passive way of doing no wrong.”

These stories, and so many others like them, should energize us to recognize that in our little corner of the world we can make a difference if we have belief in our project, strength of character and conviction, inner fortitude, and the spirit to follow through on that which is necessary.

I pray that we may find that strength and that spirit. The world needs it.