

ROSH HASHANA
TO SAVE ONE LIFE
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RABBI VERNON KURTZ

The story is told that one year, as Yom Kippur was coming to an end, the people of the people were being led in worship by Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev in his synagogue. All of a sudden, the great Rebbe stopped and stood frozen. What had happened? The people knew that their great Rebbe's soul had traveled to heaven to speak to the Creator of the universe.

Levi Yitzhak found himself before the Creator and, and he said: "G-d, You expect too much of Your people. We suffer and do our best. Please have compassion upon us." G-d said: "You know, Levi Yitzhak, you have a point. I will be merciful." Levi Yitzhak, at that moment, realized that he had caught G-d in a great mood and decided to press his case. "G-d, why not save the world now? Bring the Messiah." G-d seemed open to the idea. Levi Yitzhak thought he could save the entire world that day, if he just had a few moments to convince G-d.

But, in the corner of his eye, Levi Yitzhak saw that, back on earth at his Shul, Samuel, the grocer, had fainted. He needed to eat. Samuel was not a particularly nice man and he was stubborn. He would only eat when Levi Yitzhak concluded the service and the Shofar blast was heard. But to do that, Levi Yitzhak's soul would have to return from heaven. He would not be able to convince G-d to save the world. At the same time, if Levi Yitzhak waited, he knew Samuel would die.

Levi Yitzhak turned around and went back to earth. Instead of saving the world, he returned to save one human life. As he was returning, an angelic choir proclaimed: "Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev is indeed saving the world."

This story is based upon a passage from the Mishna of Sanhedrin which teaches us that every life is unique, sacred, and special. In a section outlining the manner in which witnesses were warned to tell the truth in capital cases, the text tells us: "For this reason was man created alone, to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul Scripture imputes guilt to him as though he had destroyed a complete world; and whoever preserves a single soul, Scripture prescribes merit to him as though he had preserved a complete world." The statement reminds us that, according to biblical and rabbinic thinking, all humanity originated from Adam and Eve. All of us go back to one source and, therefore, all of us have the same measure of Divinity attached to our lives.

In fact, the Gemara, in commenting on this particular statement, makes the point even clearer by suggesting that “the dust of the first man was gathered from all parts of the world.” Rabbi Oshaiah said in Rab’s name: “Adam’s trunk came from Babylon, his head from Israel, his limbs from other lands, and his private parts from Akra di Agma,” which is a town in Babylonia. In other words, each of us is created by G-d bearing the same Divine imprint, created out of the same dust of the earth.

The passage reminds us that each individual is a world unto himself. And, if we can help one individual we help of all humanity. However, if we injure an individual we diminish the Divine presence in the world in which we live.

We live in a world of numbers. Natural disasters are calculated by the numbers of lives lost, the property damage, and the amount of insurance claims. We gauge the severity of terrorist actions by the number of people who are killed, maimed, and injured. So often in news reports we concentrate on gross numbers failing to take into account the individuals whose lives will never be the same, either because of injuries or because their families have lost their loved ones. Numbers don’t tell the entire story.

Rabbi Dov Lipman, who currently works for the World Zionist Organization and is a former member of the Knesset for Yesh Atid, wrote an article in which he reminds us of the complexity of seeing people as numbers. He writes: “Forty-nine killed in a terrorist attack in Orlando; fourteen killed in a terror attack in San Bernadino; one hundred and twenty-nine killed in a terror attack in Paris; thirty-two killed in a terror attack in Brussels; thirty-eight killed in a terror attack in Tunisia; one thousand three-hundred and seven killed in terror attacks in Israel since 2000; and thousands more. Numbers. After every terror attack we are told how many innocent people have been murdered, how many are injured. Indeed, we are trained to ask, ‘How many killed? How many casualties?’”

Lipman continues: “The problem is that numbers mask the true story, and that true story unites every victim of a terror attack; they are all innocent human beings with life stories, with lives cut short, with dreams that have come to an end. I believe we must adjust our focus to ask ‘who’ the victims were, instead of ‘how many?’”

In the world in which we live numbers mask the true tragedies of life. And, they do so in so many different ways. We lose track of the individuality of each person, their unique story, and their contributions to their families and communities.

As a Rabbi, I sense this all the time. I am present at births and deaths in our community. The birth of one child brings joy to a family and a new soul to this earth. It changes the family and perhaps the world forever. When a member of our community passes away, there is sadness. The journey has ended and it is time to tell their story. We have been diminished when they leave us as this one light is snuffed out. We learn to appreciate having been enriched by their life and their legacy.

I am very often asked how many members we have in our congregation. We are approximately 1,080 families. But, that doesn't tell the whole story. Synagogues are usually gauged by the number of families. However, churches are usually enumerated by the number of souls. So, when asked that question I have learned to answer, we are approximately 1,080 families, meaning roughly 3,500 souls. And, it is my task to attempt to minister to all of them.

This has been a horrific summer in the City of Chicago. As the number of shootings and killings have risen in our city, we have become almost inured to the individual tragedy by the aggregate of people who have been killed. Each weekend brings a new series of numbers. As we read them we shake our heads, that is, until the story of one of them is told and we feel a sense of sadness. This summer Nykea Aldridge was killed while she was pushing her young child in a baby carriage. She was not the object of the murderous bullet. She just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The only reason we know about her is because she was Dwayne Wade's cousin. Otherwise, she would just have been a statistic. But because her cousin is a famous basketball player, her story became national news. The real news is that her family has to continue on without her. A mother of four children was stricken down in a violent act and now her family and, especially her children, have to put their lives back together. One life destroyed, an entire world diminished. We must find a way to end this senseless violence.

I think of this message on Rosh Hashana because on this day, according to our tradition, we are all judged. According to one rabbinic tradition, Rosh Hashana represents not the birthday of the world, but the birthday of the first man. Creation began, according to this tradition, on the 25th day of Elul, and man was created on the 1st of Tishri. In our Musaf service, we recite the well-known poem U'atane Tokef that sets the scene of G-d's judgment. One-by-one, as sheep counted by the shepherd, each life passes in review before G-d, and our fate is inscribed in the Book of Records which contains the story of every person's life. In other words, each life is judged individually because each life is unique. On Rosh Hashana Day, when we commemorate the creation of all humanity, we need to concentrate on the uniqueness of each life and the special nature of each soul.

This past February, as a member of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, I participated in a mission to Israel. On one of the days of our sojourn in Jerusalem we were taken to a museum, one with which I had not been familiar, but one which touched me very deeply. Located in the Nahalat Shiva section of Jerusalem, just outside the Old

City, the Friends of Zion Museum tells the story of ancient Israelite history, the exploits of heroes, and the establishment of the State of Israel. The museum was established by Dr. Michael Evans and it is meant to portray the saga of Christians who helped create the State of Israel and are still great supporters of it. It is a technological marvel because you descend below ground and visit six different rooms complete with sound, lighting, and interactive displays. The displays record the founders of the Zionist promise, the dreamers who kept it alive and created the State, and the visionaries and fighters, especially non-Jews, who continue to defend it.

It is a remarkable museum not only for its technological advancements, but for the stories that are told. It concentrates its message on Christians who will come through its doors and be shown the affinity that they should have for the modern State of Israel dating back from the Biblical promise to the present day. However, I must admit I was greatly touched by the stories told and the manner in which they were conveyed.

In particular, the fifth room, the one entitled “Lights in the Darkness” moved me greatly. The gallery tells the story of the righteous among the nations who saved the lives of Jews, young and old during the Holocaust in Europe. As the official description on their website states: “In dramatic fashion, images appear on a dark ‘shattered’ wall, introducing us to Christian personalities from Germany, Poland, Holland, Japan, and Sweden, who – impelled by their belief and conscience exercised extraordinary and dangerous initiatives to save Jews during the Holocaust in Europe. These heroes are represented on the screen before us as beams of light against a totally dark background, hence, the name of the gallery – Lights in the Darkness.”

Towards the end of the presentation there is a unique and very moving technological demonstration. You are asked to hold out your hand and a beam of light shines upon your palm. As you look more closely, you see the name of a Jewish individual who was saved by the kindness of another person. I immediately thought of the American spiritual I learned many years ago, “He’s got the whole world in His hands.” This time, I had it in mine, and I thought of the Mishna in Sanhedrin which relates that to save one human life is to save an entire world.

Over the years, I had heard the stories of many who had saved Jewish lives, from Oskar Schindler, to Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese Consul General in Lithuania, who issued exit visas to Jews and whose house I visited on one of my trips; from Miep and Jan Gies, who sustained the Frank family in Amsterdam, where many of us have visited; to Raoul Wallenberg, who saved thousands of Hungarian Jews by making them wards of his care. I have seen the safe houses in Budapest where they lived. Only a few days ago we were introduced to the Sharp family on a PBS Ken Burns’ documentary who courageously saved Jewish lives. And there are many more.

In January of this year at the Israeli Embassy in Washington Staff Sargeant Roderick “Roddie” Edmonds was named a Righteous Gentile by Yad VaShem. He became the first U.S. soldier to receive the designation and the fifth U.S. gentile so designated. Waitstill and Martha Sharp were the second and third.

On a cold January morning in 1945, as the advancing Allied armies were vanquishing the remains of the Third Reich, a Nazi major stood before 1,000 U.S. troops at Stalig IX – A POW camp in western Germany. The previous night an announcement over the barracks intercom had commanded all the captured Jewish soldiers – only the Jews – to assemble for the morning roundup. Nearly all of the U.S. prisoners, from the 422nd Infantry Brigade, a thousand or more, mustered in the open field.

According to eye witnesses, the Major said to Staff Sergeant Rodrick Edmonds, the highest ranking U.S. non-commission officer there, “they cannot all be Jews.” Edmonds declared, “We are all Jews here.” The major pressed his pistol against Edmond’s forehead, “I’ll give you one more chance. Have the Jewish men step forward or I will shoot you on the spot.” Edmonds responded: “According to the Geneva Convention, we have to give only our name, rank, and serial number. If you shoot me, you will have to shoot all of us, and after the war you will be tried for war crimes.” The major, enraged, walked away. And the lives of 200 Jewish soldiers were saved.

Edmonds survived 100 days of captivity, and returned home after the war, but never told his family of his actions. His wife gave his son, Reverend Chris Edmonds, a copy of the diaries his father had kept while in the POW camp. Rev. Edmonds began researching his story, locating several of the Jewish soldiers his father had saved, who provided witness statements to Yad VaShem. On February 10, 2015, his father was recognized as a member of the Righteous among the Nations. And, on January 27, 2016, at the Israeli Embassy, Ron Dermer, the Israeli Ambassador and Yad VaShem Council Chairman Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, himself a survivor of the Holocaust, presented Edmonds’ family with the Righteous Gentile medal and certificate. The ceremony was attended by the President of the United States, Barack Obama. Because of Staff Sargeant Edmonds’ brave act, an estimated 2,000 descendants of those 200 POWs are now alive.

Roald Hoffmann was hidden with his mother Clara and other relatives from January 1943 until June 1944 in the attic of a school house in the village of Uniow, Ukraine. Mykola Dyuk, who served as the teacher in the one classroom school, lived with his wife Maria and their three children in the schoolhouse. Hoffmann’s father was killed by the Germans for his involvement in a plot to arm camp prisoners. Hoffmann and his mother survived. Roald Hoffmann is an American theoretical chemist who won the 1981 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. Francois Englert, the son of Jewish Polish immigrants to Belgium, was brought to the home of Camille and Louise Jourdan, the owners of a café restaurant in the village of Lustin in the Ardennes. His parents were hidden in the same town, but for sake of security, he was not told about their whereabouts.

He had no contact with the outside world. Instead of going to school, Jourdan arranged for a local teacher to give him private lessons. After a few months, when there were new threats, the Englerts took Francois to another town where he was sheltered by one of the residents and the local priest. The family survived the war, but all of their relatives in Poland were killed. Francois Baron Englert is a Belgian theoretical physicist and a 2013 Nobel Prize laureate in Physics.

Needless to say, neither of these families knew that those whom they hid would become Nobel laureates. They were just showing kindness to another human being, while at the same time, putting their own lives and their family's lives in danger. Yet, through the goodness of their soul, the generosity of their spirit, their courageous acts allowed these individuals to live and, eventually, to make their mark in the world.

I have often wondered whether I could ever live up to that kind of challenge. Would I have the courage and the faith to make decisions which might endanger my own life even as I might save another? Frankly, I am not sure I could. But, what I do know is we need to tell and re-tell these stories of these brave individuals. When the light shone on my palm with the name of one human life in the Friends of Zion Museum this February, I was personally challenged to recognize that in order to create a better world, I had to be a better person and be prepared to help another human being.

We don't have to be great heroes but we can, most assuredly, be kind, generous, thoughtful, compassionate, and caring. We can pay attention to others, we can reach out to those in need, we can show kindness to someone who craves a friendly gesture, we can offer warm hug to one who is grieving. We can make a visit to one is ill, a telephone call to those who are shut in. These little acts go a long way in creating a better world for another human being. I don't know whether I could live up to the examples of those individuals whose names grace the trees as we enter Yad VaShem in Jerusalem. However, I do hope that I can, in my own way, better the life of another human being and thus, allow my soul to touch theirs.

On this day of Rosh Hashanah we are asked to look at our own lives and improve our world in the coming year. We believe that G-d judges us each individually – our actions, our words, and our deeds. If this was the day, according to our tradition, that humanity was created, then as part of humanity we have a significant role to play in the lives of others. Rabbi Levi Yitzvak of Berditchev had the opportunity to save the whole world with the coming of the Messiah. But, when he saw Samuel the grocer faint he knew he was needed to help one human individual and he knew he could not wait one more moment. He had descend to earth and save the world by helping Samuel.

I pray as we begin the New Year of 5777, we will add our personal contribution to saving the world by caring for other human beings, by being sensitive to each unique human soul, one who is part of our circle and one who is not, so as to make a better world for all.