

Just over a decade and a half ago, in June of 1999, in London, England, there was a remarkable event that took place. Over a thousand people assembled for a very special reunion. The majority of those attending were Jewish people in their sixties and seventies, who had been among the ten thousand children rescued from Nazi Germany and brought to Britain as part of the kinder transport at the outset of the Second World War. Many of those who gathered had the opportunity to tell their respective stories, of the families they had left behind, and the families they had been welcomed into, upon their arrival in England. One of those present who did not have a direct familial connection to the particular historical events, but who was there to bear witness and to document what was shared, was the then chief rabbi of Great Britain, Lord Jonathan Sacks.

In his recounting of what transpired during those two days, he describes the emotional power of hearing the accounts given by each of the survivors, but he notes that the most moving narrative came, not from one of kinder-transport refugees directly, but from the late Lord Attenborough, whose family had been among the rescuers.

Here is Rabbi Sacks' recollection of that presentation:

Lord Attenborough spoke of how his parents summoned him, along with his two brothers and told them they wanted to adopt two young Jewish girls from Germany, Helga and Irene. They explained the sacrifices they would all have to make. They would now be a family of seven rather than five, which meant that they would have to share more widely, and that, his parents said, included their love, because "you have us, but they have nobody". The boys agreed and the two girls became part of their family. As he told this story, Lord Attenborough wept and said that day was the most important day of his life. At that moment, he and his brothers realized that it is the sacrifices we make for the sake of high ideals that make us great and that applies to nations as well as individuals.

I think it bears consideration that Rabbi Sacks called the sharing of this particular story the most powerful moment among two full days of what must have been a set of extremely poignant reminiscences.

My own sense is that the profound power of this story grows out of the fact that the behavior and values that it documents stand in strong contradiction to the expectations we tend to hold of those who live beyond the boundaries of our own community.

It's not that we take it for granted, or are unmoved, when members of the Jewish community are willing to make personal sacrifices in order to provide support for a fellow Jewish person in need, but the fact is that there are extremely strong historical, cultural and religious forces at work that pull us towards those kinds of behaviors, whether we're aware of them or not.

As a number of us learned in our Elul study sessions last month, Jewish tradition has quite a bit to say about the reciprocal obligations of that exist between the community and the individual, and by extension, between individuals who are members of the same community.

Some of these obligations are framed as overarching principles, such as the teaching, Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh ba Zeh, or in English, every member of the Jewish people has responsibility for one another.

In other places, the obligations are spelled out in a more specific and legal way and are clearly meant to be applied to particular localities, such as this law recorded in the Mishneh Torah of Moses Maimonides:

“One who settles in a community for thirty days becomes obligated to contribute to the charity fund together with the other members of the community. One who settles there for three months becomes obligated to contribute clothing with which the poor of the community can cover themselves.

One who settles there for nine months becomes obligated to contribute to the burial fund for burying the community’s poor and providing for all their needs of burial.”

Even as our tradition prioritized caring for the vulnerable in one’s local community, there was always also an awareness of challenges faced by more distant Jewish populations and a commitment to supporting them whenever possible. One significant example of this from the Middle Ages involved the efforts made to raise the funds necessary to pay the ransom of Jewish people being held captive in another country. In more modern times, the international movement to free Soviet Jewry, and the extensive resettlement process that took place in the aftermath of its success, remains an inspiring instance of the Jewish community being true to this value.

And, an even more impressive example in some ways can be seen in the Israeli commitment to welcoming vulnerable populations of Jews from throughout the Middle East and Ethiopia (as well as the former Soviet Union). Clearly, this ideal has held and continues to hold an important place in the hearts and minds of Jewish people around the globe, and we have good reason to be proud of the way we have collectively taken care of one another.

But, to return to the story told about Lord Attenborough’s family, I think what stands out is that we encounter a readiness to make a similarly profound and personal sacrifice in order to take responsibility for other human lives that have little or no cultural, tribal or familial connection; a heroic act that is grounded simply in a recognition of unmet human need, and of one’s potential capacity to meet it.

There are of course, in this same category, many thousands of documented examples of righteous gentiles who were willing to extend support to Jewish people during the holocaust, a good part of them going even further than Lord Attenborough’s family in that they were prepared to put their own lives and those of their families at risk in the process of trying to preserve Jewish lives.

Unfortunately, these courageous and exemplary acts were very much the exception rather than the rule of how the world at large responded to the plight of the Jews at that time.

And, regrettably, this same stance of relative unresponsiveness has characterized global reactions to many of the human tragedies that have taken place in the post-holocaust period.

In one sense, there is nothing surprising in this, given that historically, human beings in general have had an understandable tendency to be more inclined to act on behalf of those to whom they feel some connection, and much less so when those in need of assistance are experienced as different, or other, from them. However, it is also the case that most of the world's major spiritual traditions contain teachings that put forth an ideal of people responding with compassion for anyone who is suffering or oppressed, simply on the basis of our shared humanity.

This is certainly true of Jewish tradition. We have the central stories of Abraham and Moses who actively intervene on behalf of people who are from beyond their community. There is a parallel idea expressed in the book of Jonah, although there, it is the character of God, rather than the prophet, who becomes the champion of this principle. We have the well-known teaching from the Mishnah which equates saving a single life to saving an entire world, and does not distinguish in any way between the lives of those within or beyond the Jewish community. And, we have an entire group of rabbinic texts which require us to provide the same kinds of support to the needy who are not part of the Jewish community as we do to those who are.

And, in truth, a range of individuals and organizations within the American Jewish community over the past century, and more recently within Israel, have in many instances very much embraced this dimension of our tradition and sought to make concrete contributions to support the struggles of other groups who were seeking paths out of oppressive or threatening circumstances.

Still, even with recognition of the ways in which we have been willing and able to reach out and offer support in the past, it strikes me that our world is entering a new era in which all of us will be called upon to do a deeper level of soul searching regarding our capacity and our readiness to give of ourselves to others, especially others whose need is great and whose identity places them further away from us in terms of what is familiar and comfortable. We are now living in a world in which we are all connected to one another, to an extent that is unprecedented in human history. We are given immediate and direct access, via the internet and social media, as the stories of human tragedy and resilience unfold in every corner of the planet.

And whether these stories are related to natural disasters like the tsunami that hit Indonesia in 2004 or to man-made disasters such as the current refugee crisis driven by the brutality of the conflicts in Syria and other parts of the Middle East, there is something about this direct knowledge of what is transpiring that places a claim on our souls.

It is clear that this reality in no way negates previously established patterns of commitment to our families, our communities, or our country, but it is equally clear that it urges us to extend the circle of our concern to any of our fellow human beings who are in distress no matter who or where they may be.

One thing that is lacking clarity is how we are, collectively, responding this new, more deeply inter-connected reality. There is much ambivalence and even resistance to its pull. We have seen this ambivalence played out over the past several weeks as the refugee crisis has worsened and received increased attention.

Since its inception, the conflict in Syria has displaced over 11 million people, four million of whom have left Syria to seek asylum in a number of neighboring countries.

Three of those countries, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, have taken in the bulk of these refugees but they have been woefully under-resourced which has prevented them from offering anywhere near a sufficient level of meaningful support. And so, large numbers of these refugees, out of a deep sense of desperation, have chosen to leave their current locations and are attempting to make their way to various European destinations in the hope of achieving some semblance of a safe and sustainable life for themselves and their families. The tragic outcomes of some of these attempts have become well known in recent weeks.

A number of European leaders and governments have responded to the flood of refugees with paralysis, with bigotry, and with apparent refusal to even consider moving towards offering any substantial help to them. The language and attitudes expressed by some of these leaders have hauntingly evoked similar kinds of responses to Jewish refugees during the holocaust who were desperately trying to get beyond the reach of Nazi forces.

But alongside these voices, there have been other voices that express the same spirit found in the Attenborough family's readiness to welcome two young girls from another country and another culture, into their lives. There have been voices expressing compassion and support, coming both from other European governments and citizens groups, with Germany, most notably and most poignantly, in the forefront of this response. It is in these voices that I think we can hear the beginnings of an embrace of the ever more clearly emerging reality of our global inter-dependence and inter-connectedness. And, these voices of empathy in Europe have in turn sparked conversations in many other parts of the world, at national and local levels, including here in the U.S., around how to engage with this situation in a productive and life-affirming way.

There is one major American Jewish organization, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, or HIAS, which is working to focus the American Jewish response to the Syrian refugee crisis. It happens to be the oldest refugee resettlement organization in the country, with a long and well respected track record of working with refugee populations, at first, exclusively within the Jewish community, but later on with refugees of many different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

They have published informational materials that explain the origins of the crisis and also advocacy materials with recommendations for actions that anyone can take which will contribute to building support for the resettlement of refugees in the U.S.

I would like to put their recommendations forward for all of us to consider. Specifically, the three actions they suggest are: making a commitment to learning more about the dynamics of the Syrian refugee crisis and its relationship to the global refugee crisis; communicating with congress and the president about the importance of prioritizing our national response to the refugee crisis and joining local initiatives focused on welcoming refugees and asylum seekers. All of these actions can be accessed on the HIAS.org website, and there are also flyers out in the lobby with information these initiatives.

When Rabbi Lord Sacks reflected recently on the refugee crisis, he expressed the following perspective:

“I used to think that the most important line in the Bible was “Love your neighbor as yourself”. Then I realized that it is easy to love your neighbor because he or she is usually quite like yourself. What is hard is to love the stranger, one whose color, culture or creed is different from yours. That is why the command, “Love the stranger because you were once strangers”, resonates so often throughout the Bible. It is summoning us now.”

As we stand at the entrance to a new year, and reflect on the challenges confronting our world, let our hearts and minds be open to that summons, and let us resolve to do whatever we are able to further the value of human empathy that transcends the boundaries of national, religious and ethnic identities, surely a key ingredient for a future built on hope rather than fear.

Good yuntif and shanah tovah!