



**Rosh Hashanah, 5776**  
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**Exponential**

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Does this ever happen to you? You wake up in the morning, you get news about our world that is profoundly disturbing. Violence. Chaos. Suffering. Death. On a massive, historical, epochal scale. You don't know what to do with it, so you just, somehow, go about your day.

We read about the migrant crisis, about 3-year old Aylan Kurdi who drowned and washed up on the shore, together with his 5-year old brother and their 35-year old mother, both of whom also drowned. Their husband and father survived. How could he make it through a single day?

We read about ISIS committing unspeakable atrocities, evil on the march.

We read about open wounds of racial strife in our beloved country between police and communities of color.

So disturbing, and yet we don't know what to do with it. We finish our breakfast, we fold our newspaper or turn off our ipad, and we go about our day. Despite the migrants and ISIS and racial strife, we drop off our kids at school. Despite the migrants and ISIS and racial strife, we go off to the gym. Despite the migrants and ISIS and racial strife, we go to work and put in a day at the office. Despite the migrants and ISIS and racial strife, we go grocery shopping, we cook dinner, we do the dishes, we go to the movies on Saturday night, we go to the Cape over the summer. Despite the migrants and ISIS and racial strife, we act like things are okay in the world. After all, what can I do here in Newton about the world's unsolvable problems?

And yet, there is this gnawing concern that will not go away. *Didn't that used to be us?* In the 40s, in Hitler's Europe, *wasn't that us?* We saw *Woman in Gold*, how the Jews were stuck in Austria. Stuck in Europe. Couldn't get out. *Wasn't that us?* On the St. Louis, turned back at sea, migrants floating back to their death, *wasn't that us?* And when that *was* us, didn't we always say: where was the rest of the world? And now it is happening to others, some part of us wonders where are we, while the other part of us wonders what can I do about it?

Israel knows from the migrant crisis. Some 47,000 people from South Sudan and Eritria, asylum seekers, crossed into Israel, and they are not thriving, to put it mildly. One of our teachers this summer at Hartman, Yossi Klein Halevi, shared that he did not particularly want to see them. He was already struggling with, in his words, "moral exhaustion." After all, Israel faces so many problems. Hezbollah in the North, Hamas in the South, the Iranian nuclear threat, the derailed peace process, cynical politics, challenges for minorities in Israel who are citizens already. We saw the painful reality of Jewish terrorism in Israel this summer. With all these problems, he had reached that point of moral exhaustion where he could not take on one more problem.

Yet, his son said to him Dad, you have to go. So he went on a Hartman mission to meet with these asylum seekers. The minute he got there, and saw them, and heard their stories, he realized the Torah was right when it taught that we cannot avert our gaze and we cannot be indifferent to moral challenge, however full our plate already may be. He felt Israel could and must do better. He felt that he could and must do better. But what? But how?

*What do we do about problems that we cannot solve and that we cannot ignore?*

It was while grappling with just this question that I read a story over the summer which

speaks to our moment. The story is about a man named Sir Nicholas Winton who died in England this summer at the age of 106.

In December, 1938, Nicholas Winton was a 29-year old stockbroker working in London who was all set to take a fabulous ski vacation in the Swiss Alps. Just then a friend of his suggested that he cancel his ski vacation and come instead to Czechoslovakia. “Don’t bother to bring your skis,” the friend added. What Winton found was not glorious ski trails, but desperate Jews after Kristallnacht who wanted to flee Hitler, but Western countries, including America, were not permitting Jewish immigration. There was only one exception. England had started a program called Kindertransport that would allow unaccompanied Jewish children up to the age of 17 to come to England if there were an English family willing to host them. 10,000 Jewish children from Germany and Austria were saved.

When Winton came to Prague, he saw thousands of Jewish children at risk, and he decided to create a mass children’s refugee effort in Prague.

He took a room at a hotel in Prague and set up shop. Desperate Jewish parents lined the hallways to see him. Please save my child. As a result of his labors, 669 children took trains from certain death in Prague to life in England.

This story speaks to our world now because it is about problems that cannot be solved and cannot be ignored.

Winton could easily have gone skiing in the Alps instead of visiting the refugee camps of Prague. After all, how could he stop the Nazis? The problem was way bigger than his ability to solve it.

We learn three things from the story of Nicholas Winton.

The first lesson is that Nicholas Winton embodies the teaching of Rabbi Tarfon: *loh alecha hamlacha ligmor vlot atah ben chorin lehibatel mimenu*. You are not obligated to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it. In other words, do *something* even if you cannot do *everything*. Nicholas Winton could not and did not save *all* of Czech Jewry, but he could and did save 669 souls. When moral exhaustion tells us that we cannot solve it all, Nicholas Winton says okay, do something even if you cannot do everything.

And here is some consolation, which leads to the second lesson. When we do *something*, often the something that we do is *not only good, but exponential good*. The good we do generates more good that we cannot quantify, cannot foresee, may never even know about. But our doing something sends out repair into the cosmos that is real and dramatically helpful.

Nicholas Winton not only saved those 669 Jewish children, but he also saved all the universes that flowed from those children. Those 669 children had children who had children. There are now 15,000 people living who owe their lives to Nicholas Winton. Sixty Minutes did a story on Nicholas Winton two years ago, when he was only 104. And as the segment put it, the two week ski vacation he did not take resulted in 15,000 lives being lived.

He did not just do good. He did *exponential* good. The children he saved not only went on to have their own children and grandchildren, but they went on to heal the world. Renata Laxova is a geneticist who has done pathbreaking work on congenital diseases and their cure. Hugo Marom founded the Israeli Air Force. Karel Reisz became a film director who made *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Alfred, Lord Dubs became a member of Parliament. Every person healed, inspired, challenged, uplifted by one of those 669 would not have been without Winton. How much good did he do? Exponential good. How much good? Unquantifiable good.

The 60 Minutes segment concluded with a picture of what exponential good looks like.

Nicholas Winton was in a room filled to the brim with people. The speaker at the podium says to the crowd: If you owe your life to Nicholas Winton, please stand up. Every person in the crowded theatre stood up.

And here is the third lesson from Nicholas Winton. The good works we do, that's all we have. The good works we do, at the end of the line, when our story is over, when our story is told, those good works *are* our life.

Nicholas Winton died this year at the age of 106. At the end of 106 years, who was with him? His daughter Barbara and two grandchildren were at his bedside . But not only them, also the memory of all the good he did. That was also with him. That is all any of us gets. We don't get monuments or tributes or medals. All we get is the good we did when we did not succumb to moral exhaustion but found our way to do some good that was exponential.

Do something even if we cannot do everything. The something we do is not only good, but exponential good. And the exponential good we do, that is our life.

Consider David Grossman. David Grossman was a lawyer living in New York, working at a big law firm. But something was broken that he really cared about: poverty and homelessness. So he left his big firm job, and his big firm pay check, to become a professor of poverty law at Harvard. He was dedicated to helping tenants threatened with eviction stay in their homes. Those who had no voice, those who had no advocate, those who were about to get thrown out of their homes and onto the streets, had an advocate in David Grossman, who would come to Housing Court every Thursday and fight for them. And they had an advocate in the students at Harvard Law School whom he taught and mentored over 20 years.

This past summer, after a heroic fight with cancer, he passed away at the age of 57. While his death was tragic, his life was heroic. So many people came to pay their respects, of all

races, colors and creeds, to thank David for doing something inspiring with his life, and for inspiring them to do something ennobling with theirs. He received many letters from grateful students, but for me anyway, one stood out.

Dear Dave,

Thank you for being an incredible teacher; for showing your students what it means to live full and meaningful lives devoted to justice....

As always, I will keep you and your family in my prayers, especially in this last week of Ramadan. May you and your family find strength and beauty in your good work on this earth. May you find deep comfort in knowing that you've inspired many classes to live up to this teaching: "You are not obligated to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it."

With deep respect and affection,  
Fatima

A woman who observes Ramadan quotes Pirkei Avot. Fatima quotes Rabbi Tarfon. Noble ideals bring people together. Idealism in action brings out the best in all of us.

What about us? What can *we* do? We're not Nicholas Winton, heroically saving hundreds of lives in the Shoah. And we're not David Grossman who can win the day for the dispossessed in the courtroom and mentor disciples in the classroom. But every one of us can do something even if we cannot do everything—something where our good will be exponential.

Which brings me back to Yossi Klein Halevi, already struggling with moral exhaustion and now realizing he cannot avert his gaze from 47,000 asylum seekers who are not thriving in the Jewish state. Yossi and his colleague Donniel Hartman acknowledged that they cannot solve the whole asylum seeker problem. But what *can* they do? They can adopt one nursery school in South Tel Aviv. As Donniel said, our faculty knows how to change diapers. We'll go *every month* to that nursery and change diapers. The best Torah scholars in the world are going to drive from Jerusalem to South Tel Aviv *once a month* to change diapers, to create a connection,

to do something, and who knows how much good that can lead to? Who knows if the babies whose diapers Hartman scholars change today grow up to become teachers at Hartman tomorrow? The thing about exponential good is that we never know where it will lead.

In that vein, I want to ask us to make a commitment in this coming year, when there are problems that cannot be solved and cannot be ignored, to do something that will yield exponential good. Since we are a community that values choice, let me pose a couple of options.

Perhaps we want to do something about the migrant crisis. Consider whether, as a community of faith and high ideals, we can sponsor one migrant family that relocates to greater Boston. The Pope is asking Catholic churches to do that. Can we do something like that here?

This is all new. We've never done this before. The world has never quite known a problem quite like this before. We do not have a playbook. We do not yet have answers to important practical questions like who, what, when, where, how, and how much. But after the holidays Rabbi Robinson and I will be convening a meeting to come up with a plan for how to do what we have not yet done. If you are not put off by having to innovate in uncharted waters, please let us know. That is one option. Do something for one migrant family.

But if doing something for migrants is not your thing, fine. Unfortunately there is all too much other brokenness in the world as well. Pick one area where things are really broken, and where you really care, and do something about it. Something that will result in exponential good. And hold yourself accountable. Next year at Rosh Hashanah you want to be able to say about a problem that you cannot solve but cannot ignore, *this* is what I did.

Why? Because our life is the good we do. The love we show. The people we help. The kindness we extend in the short moment we have. The times we responded to moral exhaustion

not by saying what can I do but by saying this is what I did. A broken world now beckons.

Desperate people now await. What will you do? *Shanah tovah.*