



## **WIDE AWAKE: A SPIRITUAL RESPONSE TO THE COLLAPSE OF COMPASSION**

**Rosh Hashanah Day One**

Four facts:

1. In the last 4½ years, the war in Syria has killed about 240,000 people, including 20,000 children.
2. 11.6 million people have been displaced, 4 million of whom are now refugees.
3. Half of the refugees, vulnerable to starvation, disease, abuse and exploitation, are children.
4. None of these facts matter much to any of us.

In fact, and I say this not to be cruel or needlessly provocative, we have known all of this for the past several years. Aside from the fact that the numbers grow steadily each day, nothing has really changed here – until last week, when *everything changed*.

Everything changed when a photo came out of three year old Aylan Kurdi washed up on the Turkish shore with his tiny sneakers and his sweet head cocked to the side like my son's when he sleeps. Except that this boy was not asleep, he was dead. Drowned, along with his 5 year old brother and mother when his desperate father could no longer keep their three heads above the water, having been battered by unrelenting 15 foot waves that their rubber raft simply could not sustain.

This small Kurdish boy tore into our consciousness, a boy who, at three years old, spent his entire life in the crosshairs of a battle between heinous criminality and utter depravity. This boy who pulled our hearts right out of our chests, who never got a chance to kick a soccer ball or lose his first tooth or beg his parents for an ice cream from the guy with the cart in the park. He never went to school, didn't get to learn to read, never wrestled with a difficult math problem, didn't get to fall in love or cut class or go on a hike or learn to hate cilantro. I stared at his sweet, tiny body like we all did, wanting nothing more than to be able to hug this boy back to life.

And all of the sudden, we are awake. The world's shofar blast. What all those numbers, stats, warnings couldn't do – wake us up - the picture of Aylan did in an instant. Like a knife through the collective heart.

Paul Slovic of University of Oregon told us years ago that numbers don't affect us. Hearing about the millions of displaced Syrians does *nothing* to awaken the human heart. In fact, ironically, the greater the numbers, the less likely we are to respond. It's what he calls *psychophysical numbing* – in which we make a fateful calculation: *I can't do everything, so I'll do nothing*. But one child, one small boy washed up on the shore crumbles the whole façade. Without warning, we are thrust to the depths of sorrow, consumed by a tragedy that hundreds of thousands of deaths couldn't awaken us to.

How we have failed you, Aylan. What could we have done to avert the catastrophe that would eventually lead to the end of your too short life? What if we had had the courage, the *will* to see what was happening in your country years ago - what then would your life have been like?

What if we had demanded a repair to our crippled refugee and asylum system years ago? Instead, we allowed legitimate but vague security concerns to eclipse the human tragedy unfolding before our eyes. Even in our beloved Israel – we watched the leadership shamelessly claim the country lacks the “demographic and geographic depth” to take in refugees, leaving them to die at the border. No room for a thousand children, orphaned by war? One hundred? Have we forgotten so quickly that Jewish refugees – fleeing for their lives - were denied entry by this country and so many others under the very same set of justifications and excuses? A couple of weeks ago, Jon and Wendy brought their new baby up for an aliyah and spoke of how they chose her name. When Jon's father came to the US from Germany, much of his family stayed behind, including his first cousin, Deiter. Deiter was among those who boarded the SS St. Louis to flee Germany in 1939, along with 900 other Jewish passengers. They made their way across the ocean, only to be denied entry by Cuba, then the United States, then Canada. The ship was sent all the way back to Europe and Dieter, like so many of the passengers of the St. Louis, was deported to a death camp. He was five years old when he died. “When our baby grows a little older,” Jon said, “we'll tell her that she's named after a very special little boy who never had a chance in life.” I'm not talking about opening floodgates. I'm talking about making room for children and their parents, running for their lives, who want nothing more than the chance to try to build beyond the ashes of their past.

But here we are. Awakened too late to the horrors of a crisis fueled by our own indifference.

We've been here before. We woke up to the insanity of this country's gun culture after parents and grandparents had to bury their childrens' little bodies, stuffed animals and dreams when they were shot down in their classroom in Sandy Hook. It was too awful, too vivid to sleep through. But even then, we were lulled back asleep all too quickly. Again and again we revert to complacent disengagement. We did after Virginia Tech. And Tuscon. Aurora. Oak Creek. Fort Hood. Isla Vista. Charleston.

Asleep, awake, asleep again.

Just like when we all suddenly started talking about the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow when Trayvon was killed and the law didn't blink. Of course we dozed off again until Michael Brown's lifeless body lay on the streets of Ferguson for four hours. Then Eric Garner died in a strangle-hold for the crime of selling loose cigarettes without a permit, or, more accurately, for the crime of Walking While Black. Again, no indictment. No charges. For a moment, we were outraged, until we fell asleep again. Then Tamir Rice, who was 12 years old when he was shot while holding a toy gun. Walter Scott in N. Charleston, shot like a deer in hunting season after being stopped because his brake light wasn't functioning properly. Freddie Gray, shoved into a police van with such blunt force and callous disregard that he suffered spinal cord injury and ultimately death.

Asleep. Awake. Asleep.

Just like we cared – but only momentarily - when we learned of the massacre of the Yazidis, and heard that more than 5,000 Yazidi girls and women were kidnapped by ISIS last year, sentenced to life as sex slaves. We then fell back asleep, of course, until their story hit the front page of the New York Times.

It is a cruel and unending cycle: we wake, we sleep, we wake, we sleep. Wouldn't the world be so much simpler if all we had to worry about was Private vs. Charter, heels vs. wedges, Wildwood vs. Oakwood, 6 vs. 6 Plus. And yet here comes Aylan's image in my inbox once again – shattering the complacency, forcing me to pause, for just a moment, to remember how fragile it all is.

The blasts of the shofar come this year to save our lives – to pull us from the hell of paralysis. Presumed powerlessness. Meaninglessness. To save us from a life of sleepy disconnect, of privileged detachment from the triumphs and tragedies of the human community. Listen to Rambam:

*Uru y'shenim* - Wake up, you sleepers, from your sleep! Get up, you slumberers, from your slumber! Look at yourselves – you can do better. *Zikhru bora'akhem* - Remember Your Creator [or: Where You Came From]! You – you who forget, again and again what truly matters, you spend your years in pursuit of shadows, yearning for vanity and emptiness that will not help anyone nor will it save anyone, including you. Look at your souls! Contemplate deeply your actions – you can do better! Each one of you - abandon your bad behavior and your narrow thinking. It's no good for you! (MT Hilkhoh Teshuvah 3:4)

But could Rambam have understood the enormity, the ubiquity of the suffering we encounter now every day? Think of how many news alerts we receive in the course of a morning. Could Rambam have fathomed the spiritual confusion that comes when we carry tiny screens with us everywhere, notifying us in real time to every attack, every violent protest, every shooting? Never before have we had access to so much input. How could we possibly hold it all? A corollary to Slovic's psychic numbing, there's talk now of the *collapse of compassion*. There is a

natural human resistance to encountering overwhelming need. As a result, we shut down preemptively so as not to have to deal with our own inability to respond adequately. If I don't feel your pain, I won't feel bad about not helping you.

What is the breaking point? At what point do we disengage? It's not once there are 1000 victims, or even 100. Students in one study were asked if they'd be willing to donate back \$5 of their earnings from participating in the study to feed a small starving girl from Mali named Rokia – and they were showed a picture of her sweet face. Nearly everyone agreed to do so. But when asked if participants would be willing to donate the same \$5 to feed both Rokia and her brother Moussa, showing their pictures together, the response rate fell by nearly 50%. There is a very low saturation point at which we no longer have the will or capacity to take in more, and all we want to do is shop Nordstrom online or kick back and watch Monday night football. I mean, who doesn't want to see if Sam Bradford's knee will hold up?

Today, Lord knows we have reached the saturation point. Our compassion has officially collapsed. No surprise, then, the growing backlash to the world's newfound sensitivity to refugees. We humans are so predictable.

I was asked, on a panel of rabbis this spring, if the world was better or worse off now than one hundred years ago. Is our trajectory one of progress or regress?

I immediately thought of the midrash – perfect for this Day of Creation - in which the Holy One, preparing to create *Adam haRishon*, the first person, sees the ministering angels break into factions and start arguing:

The Angel embodying LOVE argues: "Let them be created – they will perform acts of love!"

TRUTH responds: "Let them not be created – they will all be liars!"

JUSTICE says: "Let them be created – they will fight for justice!"

PEACE shouts: "Let them not be created – they will only make war!"

God, irritated, thrusts the Angel of Truth to earth, creating a 2 to 1 majority in favor of humanity (a technique, incidentally, that would pass for democracy in some parts of the world...). And so *Adam* is created. "Now stop fighting!" the Holy One shouts. "The matter is resolved" (Midrash Rabbah 8:5).

Have human beings made the world better or worse? The rabbi seated to my left says that, sadly, we are worse now than a century ago. He speaks of the atrocities - millions dead to war, hatred, fascism, now religious extremism and terror. The only thing the past century brought was better technology to weaponize our hatred and kill more efficiently and effectively than in years past.

And he's right. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was unforgiving: world wars and genocides and famines that took hundreds of millions of lives. Oppression, repression, suppression. Outbreaks, epidemics, pandemics. Terrorism, violent crackdowns, exploitation, enslavement. These have been dark times, to be sure.

The rabbi to my right takes the opposite approach. He is clearly enamored by the advances of the past century. He lauds our new understandings of the body, our unprecedented ability to treat illnesses – so much so that some deadly diseases, like smallpox, have even been effectively eradicated.

And he's right too. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw outstanding advances in science, medicine and technology, breakthroughs in biology, chemistry, physiology and pharmacology. Think of the accelerated rate of progress: how quickly – in the scheme of things - we moved from cars to electric cars to driverless cars, from planes to commercial space travel, from radio to TV to color TV Ultra HD. From Texas Instruments and Atari to universal wifi and little devices on our beings at all time – including watches some of you are wearing now that tell you when to walk around the room to keep the blood flowing and deliver email to your wrist. God forbid we should leave the smartphone at home one day we wouldn't be smart enough to know where to go, how to get there, who we're meeting or why we're even going. The other day I got into the car late for a meeting, put the address in Waze and just started to drive, while toggling between two work calls. It occurred to me at some point that I was driving further north than I thought I needed to go, but, as we say in our family, "In Waze We Trust." Twenty minutes later I ended up miles from my destination and now *really* late. It seems I neglected to put in the SOUTH part of the address before the street name. Telling my kids the story that night, I explained that we used to have a street map library in our house growing up (the NJ equivalent of the Thomas Guide), and whenever we went on the road we'd lay out the map and plot our route. They laughed and laughed – as if I was explaining that we used to make fire from rubbing sticks together.

So are we better or worse off than we were one hundred years ago?

This rabbi is right, and this rabbi is right. And I sit right in the middle.

I see the progress. And I see the pain.

I see expansive potential, and I see a dangerous narrowing of the heart.

I see the enormity of the tragedies unfolding even as we speak, and I see that we wake up to them only to quickly lull ourselves back to sleep.

In the past century we have figured out how to tap into vast sources of energy with flick of a switch. We are 3D printing prosthetics – bioengineers are working now on kidneys and livers. We have figured out how to safely perform full face transplants: jaws, teeth, and tongue.

But we have not yet figured out how to deal with the legacy of slavery and this country's original sin – racism. How to address the fact that African American community still suffers from economic inequality, lack of opportunity, stigmatization and isolation, that African Americans make up 15% of the general population but nearly 60% of the prison population, and that there still exist in this country, in 2015, extremists intoxicated by a racialized ideology, hell bent on starting a race war and willing to spill the blood of parishioners in a church Bible study to prove it.

Did you hear? Just last week scientists discovered a galaxy 13.3 billion years old. Forty-six years after we landed on the moon, we're now preparing to establish a base on Mars!

And yet we render ourselves *completely powerless* – fresh out of ideas – as to how to protect children in our classrooms and malls and theaters from disturbed young men armed with weapons of war.

Tell me - how is it possible that we have discovered ice volcanos and geysers on Pluto and brought species back from the brink of extinction...

But we can't muster the collective will to care for the world's most vulnerable: refugee children, leaving them no choice but to venture into a raging sea on broken inflatable rafts?

Astonishingly, our abundant resources, ever-increasing competence and immense capacity have done little to improve our overall lot as a human community. Our exceptional achievements in science and technology in some ways only make our moral failures more damning. Now it's undeniable: we can do almost anything, and yet we so easily throw up our hands when it comes to human tragedy, as though we can do nothing at all.

*We have the ability. What we lack is the will.*

We are the most powerful people alive, *convinced* of our powerlessness.

When it comes to human suffering, we'd rather roll over and hit snooze.

That is the *definition* of a MORAL CRISIS.

Rosh Hashanah bursts into our September with a vengeance this year. Sleeping soundly while the world burns – or drowns - is simply not an option.

Remember the Israelites, standing at the edge of the Sea. Five days have passed since they left enslavement in Egypt. Five days, and already Pharaoh's troops are bearing down on them – determined to bring them back as slaves or lead them to the slaughter. The people panic. They cry out to God and to Moses: *Were there no graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the Wilderness?* (Ex 14:11-14)

What does Moses do? He prays and prays. And then prays more. Nothing happens. Until finally the Holy One gives him some hard love: *Ma titzak elai?* Why are you crying out to me? My children are on the verge of drowning in the sea. There is a time to be longwinded, exceedingly deliberative, slow to action – and there is a time to get to the point. There is only one thing to do right now, Moses: speak to the Children of Israel and tell them to *start walking*. (Shemot Rabbah 21:8)

*Ma titzak elai?* Don't just cry there... do something!

Empathy is a critical first step. But it *must be* paired with moral action for it to make a damn bit of difference to the children at the other end of the barrel, or those holding on for dear life to a raft that has no business crossing the rough sea. Or to the parents who fear that their children won't make it home from school alive.

*The purely righteous people do not complain about evil; they add justice.*

*They do not complain about heresy; they add faith.*

*They do not complain about ignorance; they add wisdom.* (Rav Kook, *Arpelei Tohar*, p 39)

The only thing to do is to start walking. Fight the inevitable backpedal. Mobilize *now* – before there is another beautiful dead child all over our FB feed.

In 1967 at an interfaith conference in Washington, DC protesting the War in Vietnam, Abraham Joshua Heschel told a story about his first encounter – as a seven year old - with the Akeidah, the binding of Isaac, which we'll read tomorrow morning. He is sitting in class, reading the story from the Book of Genesis. When the moment comes that Abraham holds the knife over his son's throat, Heschel begins to weep. By the time the angel cries out: *Abraham, Abraham, lay not your hand on the child!* Heschel is sobbing uncontrollably, overcome with terror. 'Why are you crying?' the Rabbi asks him. 'You know that Isaac was not killed!' 'But rabbi,' he says, 'supposing the angel had come a second too late?' The Rabbi comforts him, explaining that an angel cannot come late. "My friends," Heschel concludes decades later, "an angel cannot be late. But we, made of flesh and blood, we may come too late."

Across the world, one little boy has stopped time. One precious child of God, who showed us all so vividly the brutality of war and our own silent complicity. We all remember – it was just last week. But his image is already starting to fade. *We're already late*. The question is: will we do something now or will we doze off once again?

The answer to the crisis in Syria is not resettlement of every person in the country – it is an end to war. That, clearly, is not something you or I – with all the best intentions – could make happen. But as long as there remains a political crisis, there will be an equally devastating humanitarian crisis. And rather than sit ensnared in rage and despair, awaiting the inevitable return to apathy, it's time for those of us who heed the call of the shofar, who are awake today, to start the new year by stepping up and doing something.

I am asking today that we honor of the memory of Aylan Kurdi by taking a few tangible steps in response to this crisis.

First, [HIAS](#) – Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society – is leading an advocacy effort to get the US to raise its refugee quota, given the urgency and immediacy of the moment. We can and should support this effort by signing their petition as soon as yontif ends.

Second, Germany – as you know - has brought in 800,000 refugees. I reached out to Rabbi Gisa Ederberg in Berlin to see how we can help. There is a Catholic Hospital just behind the Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue. A few months ago, they finished building a new wing to the hospital and decided to dedicate it to use as a refugee shelter. A critical side note: this hospital is located just next to the Jewish Home for the Elderly. Under the Nazis, that very same Jewish Home for the Elderly was a collection point for deportation to the camps. During one round up, some Jews managed to escape from the building and the nuns at the Catholic Hospital next door took them in, wrapped them in bandages and put them in beds, simulating an intensive care unit. It saved their lives. Today, the Jewish community is working in that same Catholic hospital to bring hope and healing to Muslim and Christian refugees. They need our partnership and support – we can make contributions to [Masorti Olami](#), earmarked for this relief project.

Finally, there is a growing interfaith interest in organizing a kindertransport for Syrian children who have been orphaned by war, who may be able to enter the United States with fewer security barriers than adults. We'll need strong leadership from community members to work on assessing the feasibility of this path. IKAR can play a significant leadership role in this effort.

Each year we ask every person in our community, during these days of contemplation and reflection, to make a spiritual pledge – a commitment to turn our best intentions into meaningful action. This year, I'm asking us to act, rather than fall back asleep. Take out your pledge card and grab a sticker. Make a commitment to participate in one or more of our *Minyan Tzedek* paths: either Feeing Our Neighbors – direct action in response to hunger and homelessness in Los Angeles, or Green Action – our environmental justice and sustainability group, or the Organizing Path – which is focused this year on mass incarceration and criminal justice reform, or Global Partnership – which will now include not only our work in Katira, Uganda, but will also be the home address for our refugee response.

“I do not want future generations to spit on our graves,” Heschel said in 1964, “saying: ‘Here lies a community which living in comfort and prosperity, kept silent while millions of their brothers [and sisters] were exposed to spiritual extermination’” (Heschel, *A Declaration of Conscience*, 1964)

*Uru y'shenim* - Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep! Wakefulness does not demand of us asceticism or self-abnegation. There's time for family dinners and theater and even football games. And private vs. charter is no small matter. And yes, there are people in our own community and our own homes who desperately need our love and attention and resources too. *There is room in our hearts to hold all of this.*

We're wide awake now. A sweet boy in a red t-shirt woke us up. Together, let's turn our best intentions now into moral action.

Please stand and pray with me.

*El Rahum v'Hanun* – God of Mercy and Love-

This year, help us remain awake.

Help us remember that while we come together during these holy days to pray and learn, dance and cry, You have called us to turn our holy tears into action.

Help us dedicate our vast expertise, experience and resources, our brilliance, creativity and exceptional privilege into not only life-saving advances in medicine, technology and science – but also into life-saving advances in human dignity.

Help us find our power this year, God, and help us use it to bring justice, light, hope and peace to all of Your children.

Shanah Tovah.