Syria and the Scandal of our (Orthodox) Synagogues

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Thoughts to Ponder 524

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Nathan Lopes Cardozo

“Lord of the Universe, I beg You to redeem Israel; but if You do not want to do that, then I beg You to redeem the gentiles.”

Rabbi Yisrael Hopstein, Maggid of Kozhnitz

and legendary Chassidic leader in Poland (1733-1814) (1)

When Rabbi Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), the famous American Chassidic thinker who lived a fully Orthodox life, was once asked by a journalist “why he [as a *religious* leader] had come to a demonstration against the war in Vietnam,” he said “’I am here because I cannot pray’….Confused and a bit annoyed, the journalist asked him, ‘What do you mean, you can’t pray so you come to a demonstration against the war?’” Rabbi Heschel replied, “’Whenever I open the prayer book, I see before me images of children burning from napalm’” (Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings* [Maryknoll, NY:

Orbis Books, 2011] p. 17).

On another occasion, while walking with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Alabama, at the famous Civil Rights March against racism, he felt a sense of holiness that reminded him of his younger years when he would walk with the great Chassidic rebbes in Poland. For him the march was a deeply religious undertaking, a mitzvah. “I felt my legs were praying,” he said (Ibid p. 35).

His message was clear: We forfeit our right to pray when we become indifferent to the atrocities done to our fellow men (2).

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Indeed, how dare we come before the Lord of the Universe with our personal prayers asking Him for His kindness and gifts, when we ignore the enormous atrocities done to other human beings?

“Prayer” said Rabbi Heschel, “must never be a citadel for selfish concerns but rather a place for deepening concern over other people’s plight” (Susannah Heschel, idem page 17).

To this very day, we Jews are justifiably outraged beyond description when we remember how the world was silent as six million of our brothers and sisters – including more than one million Jewish children – were slaughtered during the years of the Holocaust. We feel great animosity toward Pius XII, Hitler’s pope, for failing to call on millions of his Catholic followers to protect the Jews and stand up against this ferocious murderer.

This came to my mind when I read about the terrible atrocities that are now being committed against hundreds of thousands of innocent Syrians, including tens of thousands of children, who are being killed and mutilated (not to mention the savagery and barbarity in so many other countries). No, this *cannot* be compared to the Holocaust, but the brutalities in Syria defy all description.

Fortunately, the Government of Israel and members of the larger Jewish community in and outside of the State of Israel have not sat idle in the face of this crisis. They have arranged medical and financial help for the victims, organized solidarity marches and have been taking to the streets, and much more. What Jew would not join these noble acts?

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Yet, one place that seems to be totally indifferent to what is happening in Syria and in other parts of the world is the Orthodox synagogue, the most Jewish place of all, and of which I am a proud member.

While I have been informed that synagogues of different denominations have introduced special prayers, it seems, as far as I have been able to investigate (and I hope I'm wrong!), that most Orthodox synagogues (including those in yeshivot) have failed to introduce any prayer, or even the reciting of *tehillim* for the Syrian victims. These terrible atrocities have, in general, not even been mentioned. All we hear is thundering silence.

Orthodox Rabbi Yuval Cherlow of Petach Tikva, Israel, whom I consider to be a *Gadol Hador* (a great religious and halachic leader of our generation), wrote a special prayer (https://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2013/08/29/rav-yuval-cherlow-composes-prayer-for-the-situation-in-syria/) related to the Syrian catastrophe, but it seems to have been ignored by most if not all Orthodox synagogues.

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Several months ago, a prayer for world peace was sent to thousands of people and hundreds of Orthodox synagogues, which, except for some *hesder yeshiva* students, was totally ignored by those Orthodox synagogues, including the Modern Orthodox. This prayer is a plea to God to have mercy on all victims of war, terror attacks, tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, raging fires, tornadoes, starvation, homelessness, and population displacement. (http://www.cardozoacademy.org/thoughts-to-ponder/against-indifference-prayer-for-the-world/) (3)

The only communities that responded were Reform and Conservative synagogues and, to the great surprise of many, several churches, the leaders of which said they would include the prayer in their services. (This prayer takes no more than a minute to recite.)

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In the introduction to his magnum opus, *Ha'amek Davar* on the Torah, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Berlin (1817-1893), the last Rosh HaYeshiva of the famous Volozhin Yeshiva, makes the powerful point that the greatness of our patriarchs Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and no doubt the matriarchs, was the fact that they cared about the well-being of the gentiles in their day, even if they were idolaters. One example is the famous story of Avraham arguing with God to save the people of Sedom, who had fallen to the lowest possible level of moral behavior. Nothing

stopped him from trying to save these people, even when it meant having to fight with God Himself (*Bereishit* 18: 23-33). No doubt this is why Avraham is called the "father of a multitude of nations" (Ibid 17:5). But this is not merely a compliment; it is a deeply religious mission for all the People of Israel. To be an example to the world, and to stand up for all those innocents who have fallen victim to the unspeakable evil of others.

It is for this reason that Rabbi Yosef Karo, in his monumental codex, the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chayim* 576:1), legislated the law that in times of catastrophe one should fast and lessen one's pleasures (including sexual intercourse), based on the Talmudic statement:

"When the community is in trouble, a person should not say: I will go to my house, I will eat and drink and all will be well with me" (*Ta'anit* 11a).

This is not Reform or Conservative; it is Orthodox law. So why ignore this important ruling?

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The worst sin toward our fellow human beings is not to hate them but to be indifferent to them. People are not aware of their own insensitivity. Conscious insensitivity is almost a contradiction in terms. But one begins to sincerely wonder whether that's true when there is a call to our synagogues that is completely ignored.

Sure, the members of Orthodox synagogues are generally sensitive people, but they don't seem to realize that *as a community that believes in prayer, and constantly prays for its own welfare,* they cannot stand idly by and fail to pray when great evil is heaped upon their fellow humans. I cannot think of a stronger form of narcissism.

The point is not whether our prayers for all these victims will be answered. This is left up to God. But the message we send to ourselves and our children is that we're not even prepared to take the time during our synagogue service to draw our attention to the plight of thousands and thousands of children who are being killed, who have lost their arms and legs, and whose bodies have been burned beyond recognition.

How can we be outraged by the world's silence in the face of six million of our brothers and sisters being murdered in the Holocaust when our synagogues can't even take a moment to say a prayer for other human beings, especially children,

who are suffering beyond imagination? Do we, the Orthodox, start praying only when the atrocities are as bad as the Holocaust? Or only when it relates to our fellow Jews?

Millions of people are occupied with physical pleasures, the need for honor and comfort, their hates and loves, all of which are for the most part not worth our time and energy. Yet synagogues refuse to take time for the real issues, which will determine the well-being of hundreds of thousands of innocent people.

As Jews, we realize that since the world has "failed to fight *for* right, *for* justice, *for* goodness; as a result we must fight *against* wrong, *against* injustice, *against* evil" (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*, Samuel H. Dresner (Ed.) [New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983] p.95).

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In all honesty, as an Orthodox Jew, I wonder how anyone can believe that God will listen to our prayers when we can't spare even one minute to pray for the women and children of Syria and the millions of others living in unimaginably devastating circumstances.

Maybe it would be more honest to stay at home and forfeit our right to pray. When we become indifferent to the atrocities done to our fellow humans, then, as Rabbi Heschel teaches us, we had better be silent and live in shame.

As American actor and author William Redfield (1927-1976) once said, "To try may be to die, but not to care is never to be born" (*The Book of Bill: Choice Words, Memorable Men*, Tom Crisp (Ed.) [Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel Publishing, LLC, 2009] p. 72).

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1 Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hassidim*, vol 1, p.289, New York Schocken, 1961.

2 See also the powerful poem by Chief Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, "Shir Meruba" (The Fourfold Song), in which he pleads to pray for all human beings and all of creation. *Orot HaKodesh* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1985) pt. 2, sec. 3, essay 30.

3 It was suggested to say this prayer Shabbat morning after the prayers for the State of Israel, the Israeli soldiers on the battlefields, and those who are missing in action.