

## Overload

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By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

Do you ever feel that it is all too much? Every day another abuse. Every day another scandal. Every day another insult. Every day another lie.

The times seem out of joint. Daily political outrage, mass shootings, trade wars, the rise of a belligerent China and Russia, the continuing warming of the planet, the huge wildfires in Siberia over the summer, unprecedented heat waves in Europe and Australia, the rapid erosion of the Brazilian rain forest.

How do you respond nowadays to children separated from their parents on our border – or news of boatloads of migrants from Africa drowning at sea trying to reach Italy? With the same moral fervor as before? Or have you lost a moral step? Do you feel you are ethically, emotionally and even physically overloaded – unable to keep pace with, and weighed down by, the affronts and profanities of our times; of a world that seems to be spinning out of control?

Are you discouraged, despondent, demoralized, even depressed – feeling helpless, unable to make any difference at all? That there is too much suffering, too much chaos. Are you still engaged, or have you checked out, paralyzed by the bigness of a world that doesn't care about your small concerns?

*Hakuna matata.* "What a wonderful phrase. *Hakuna matata*, ain't no passing craze. It means no worries for the rest of your days. It's our problem free philosophy, *hakuna matata.*"

There is so much anger nowadays – ungracious, uncaring, ungenerous and often unhinged: People out to rage about nothing and people doing nothing about outrage. Do you find yourself fatigued by the spirited *wokeful* – rather than *awokened* from your spiritual fatigue? That you are on overdrive - overburdened and overtaken by problems not of your making, and impenetrable to your undoing.

Who doesn't feel this way – at least from time to time? How often can we be indignant? How many times can we rage against another mass shooting – without reaching a breaking point, when our conscience atrophies and our spirit withers?

The more sensitive we are, the greater the frustration, the tendency to admit our failure to make any kind of difference at all. The complexity of the world is crushing, overwhelming. Political leaders appear unable to chart the way forward. Some seem interested in just blowing things up, undoing what has taken decades to build. Others are more like bureaucrats, desperate to manage events that they do not fully understand or control. We do not feel in the saddle, riding progress. Rather, as Emerson wrote: "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind...and doth the man un-king." We are distracted and divided, dejected, discouraged, disheartened and morally debilitated.

Part of me envies Jonah, the forlorn prophet of Yom Kippur. It must have been comfortable inside the whale. You can imagine Jonah setting up a rocking chair and a candle inside the living room of the whale's belly. He could read Greek poetry, or study Socrates, a possible contemporary of the author of the book of Jonah. He could be completely oblivious to the outside world. Nothing would reach him through layers of whale blubber. No sound, no disturbance, no disruption. Even the mightiest shofar

blast would go unheard inside the whale. This prophet whom God so challenged, could devote himself solely to himself – the world’s cacophony of contention impregnable to his cocoon of contentment.

It was the ancient world’s first story of escapism – the human tendency to retreat into our own space – *hakuna matata* - to leave the troubles of the world behind when they appear too overwhelming. Instead of alighting to Nineveh to proclaim moral judgement upon it – which, after all, is the job of a prophet – Jonah escaped to Tarshish – as far from Nineveh as the ancients imagined. The world’s iniquities were so overwhelming that it triggered in Jonah the flight, rather than the fight, impulse.

The Book of Jonah warns that even prophets get discouraged. Even they want to hide. Jonah was so demoralized that he asked God to die: “Take my life, God, for I would rather die than live,” Jonah pleads.

He was not the only prophet who prayed for death, unable to bear the weight of their times. “I cannot carry this people by myself, it is too much for me,” cried Moses. “Kill me, I beg of you, and let me see no more of my wretchedness.”

“Cursed the day that I was born,” Jeremiah lamented. “Cursed be the one who brought my father the news and said ‘a boy is born to you.’ Why did I ever issue from the womb – to see misery and woe?”

If you reach this point of alienation – desperate to disengage from the degradations of our age – I know exactly how you feel. I often feel the same way. I catch myself shrugging my shoulders and moving on after the latest mass shooting. It hardly registers with me anymore. I am embarrassed and concerned by my inability to summon the moral indignation of Columbine, Sandy Hook or Stoneman Douglas.

But to disengage from the fight is to leave the field to the armies of infamy and the captains of chaos – who may be passionate, but are passionate for the wrong things. To withdraw leads to a world where “things fall apart; the center cannot hold. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

Sooner or later we will discover what Jonah discovered, and what every society since has learned and relearned: We cannot hide. We cannot shut out the problems of the world. Our 20th century prophet, Martin Luther King, said it best: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I cannot be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.” “This is the inter-related structure of reality,” said King – who offered that much better definition of intersectionality than what faux prophets offer today.

To run to Tarshish is to distance ourselves from ourselves. To shut ourselves off – to live inside the whale – is to live outside the human experience. It is the opposite of safety. To be human is to be vulnerable. By empathizing with the struggles of others, we strengthen ourselves. We build immunity to moral disease. To shut the world out is to invite moral chaos that will eventually lead back to us anyway.

Human emotions, human unreason, the human vices of envy, revenge, and conquest will hunt you down even in your carefully constructed cocoon. They will find you, even inside the whale at the bottom of the ocean.

As Herman Melville put in the mouth of Captain Ahab: “Death to [the whale]...God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!” I’ll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the

Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up...Towards thee I roll... to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee."

There is no escaping the sordidness of those who Melville described as "morally enfeebled;" who carry the hot fires of, "all the general rage and hate felt by the [human] race from Adam down."

So if escape is not the response, what is? There is only one response in Judaism: To fight back. The fight is what counts. The fight for justice, itself, gives meaning. We cannot retreat from the world. To be Jewish is to care about people and society. We are forbidden to disengage. We fight till the last gasp.

To fight for others is to fight against alienation and despair. We know that we will be unable to finish the task, but Judaism does not demand that we finish – only that we not withdraw.

*Lo alecha ha'melacha ligmor, ve'lo ata ven chorin li'vatel mi'mena.*

"You are not obligated to complete the work," Rabbi Tarfon taught, "but you are not free to neglect it."

We are not free to desist because to desist is to allow the instincts of empathy to deteriorate, and the muscles of responsibility to atrophy. We are commanded to act because our resolve weakens when we do not act. There is not enough oxygen inside the whale to keep the candle of conscience burning. It must be kindled conscientiously, constantly.

Judaism is one giant proclamation of dissatisfaction that the world is not what it could be, and one giant struggle to create a world that ought to be. A believing Jew is a disquieted Jew. Our purpose is not serenity - patiently awaiting our passage from this world to eternity. There is, of course, speculation in Judaism about the world to come. But our primary focus was always this world. For Jews, engagement is required.

Everything we receive from Jewish tradition pleads with us: Get more involved. Be more active. Do not give up. Never give up. Trying is what Judaism expects. We know that the wolf will not lie down with the lamb today, nor will the leopard lie down with the kid tomorrow. But we also know that human beings ought to be peaceful: that each of us ought to be able to lay under vine and fig tree unafraid. Do not give up. Do not retreat.

*Ve'eshma et kol Adonai omer: et mi eshlach, u'mi yelech lanu. Va'omar hineni, shelacheni.* "And I heard the voice of God asking: 'Who shall I send and who shall go for us?' Then I said: 'Here I am. Send me.'"

Do not let your conscience corrode. When it dies, you die a form of spiritual death. The life of the spirit is what gives substance to our limited days, sustenance to our struggle for meaning, and subsistence to our fragile community. Apathy, lethargy and complacency hollow out our human essence, that capacity to care about – and empathize with – fellow human beings.

When you feel spiritually down, overloaded and overwhelmed, force yourselves to look at that picture of the refugee father and child washed up dead on the beach. Force yourselves to look at the desperation of hunger and homelessness in our country. Force yourselves to look at the misery of the inner cities, to consider the deprivations of poverty and its insidious erosion of the human spirit. Force yourselves to look deeply into the eyes of the victims of gun violence – their torn bodies and their shattered families.

And then resolve to fight back in any way you can. If you are a writer, write about the struggle to straighten the crooked timber of humanity. If you are a teacher, teach not only mathematical calculus, teach moral calculus, teach not only value, teach values. If you are a preacher, preach God's demand for a just world. If you are an attorney, fight for justice. If you are well off financially, if you are privileged, learned, influential or capable, use these – not to find shelter from the world, but as a springboard to change the world. Use your powers for good. As Mordechai said to Esther: "If you keep silent in this crisis... you and your father's house will perish. Who knows, perhaps you have attained this influential position for just such a crisis."

Aristides de Sousa Mendes was the Portuguese consul general in Bordeaux in June 1940. He attained this influential position during the gravest crisis of the 20th century. A devout Catholic, he concluded that could not remain silent about the humanitarian catastrophe ravaging Europe. As the consul general of a neutral country, he could do something that would make a difference by offering visas for safe passage to Portugal.

Sousa Mendes directly saved at least 30,000 human beings, 10,000 of whom were Jews – many of them and their descendants never knowing that they owed their lives to this sensitive, courageous, benevolent soul. Even today, many of us have never heard the name Aristides de Sousa Mendes because for decades the Portuguese government buried his memory.

After the fall of the Maginot Line in the spring of 1940, hundreds of thousands of refugees streamed south, desperate to cross the Pyrenees into neutral Spain and Portugal, and, from there, to America, Britain, or any other place that would keep them out of the Nazis' reach. By May 1940, a mighty torrent of humanity had surged into Bordeaux that was weeks from being occupied. Men, women, children, the mighty and the meek, Austrian royalty, the Belgian government-in-exile, Polish peasants – they were all desperate for visas. Spain allowed passage through its territory only if one could show a Portuguese transit visa.

On May 17, 1940, Portuguese dictator Antonio Salazar issued a strict order to all his embassies and consulates that "under no circumstances would any visa be granted unless specifically authorized by Lisbon on a case-by-case basis." Effectively, the Portuguese government choked off the only escape route. Day and night refugees gathered on the steps of the Portuguese consulate, hoping for that magic signature that would unlock the doors of the gates of hell. Some could not endure the desperation and committed suicide in front of the consulate, witnessed by the consul general.

Sousa Mendes stood at the crossroads. His signature on a piece of paper was the difference between life and death. The stroke of his pen would save, his apathy would condemn. He could do what most of us would do in these circumstances: nothing. He could have reasoned – like most of us would – "It is not my job to determine policy; I simply follow the instructions of my government. I have a family to support. And in any case, what can one person do? This crisis is too big, and I am too small, to make any difference at all."

Or Sousa Mendes could defy the Portuguese dictator and obey a higher authority: his conscience, his sense of right and wrong, the commands of the Eternal God. "The only way I can respect my faith as a Christian," he said, "is to act in accordance with the dictates of my conscience."

And so he acted. He knew the price of defiance. It could cost him everything. On June 14, 1940, like so many prophets before him who asked God to die, Sousa Mendes had some kind of emotional

breakdown. He lay in bed for three days. We can only imagine his mental agony and spiritual turmoil as thousands desperately gathered each day on the steps of the consulate. When the storm passed and the clouds of doubt parted, he arose from his bed, it was as if he was newly born, determined to carry out the will of God, come what may. He instructed the consulate support staff not to disturb him for anything: no food, no phone calls, no business. He would come out when he was ready, he said. Thus began the most consequential four days of courage, valor and nobility. In a frenzy of non-stop single-minded heroism, Sousa Mendes created an assembly line of 30,000 visas. Day and night, he stamped the passports of those who had passports – and for those who did not, Sousa Mendes signed transit visas on ordinary slips of paper.

He didn't restrict himself to Bordeaux. He also supervised the smaller Portuguese consulate in Bayonne, further south. In mid-June, Sousa Mendes set up a visa assembly line there as well. He even traveled to the border town of Hendaye, where he walked the streets, issuing visas on scraps of paper that any refugee presented to him, free of charge.

The Portuguese dictator was incensed. It took a month to shut down the visa operation, and to recall Sousa Mendes to Lisbon. By then, tens of thousands had been saved.

Salazar's authoritarian rule lasted for decades, until 1968. He had a 32-year reign. Sousa Mendes was destroyed overnight. He was officially shunned and declared a "disgraced non-person." The government described him as an emotionally unstable rebel and ordered that no one be in contact with him or his family. Stripped of his right to practice law, his diplomatic status, his pension, he lost everything – his good name, position, standing, income. He lost all his wealth; he lost all his friends.

He lost his family, who were blacklisted. His wife, Angelina, died three years after the war. All but one of his 14 children emigrated from Portugal. Sousa Mendes himself spent his final years disgraced and impoverished, taking meals at a HIAS soup kitchen. In 1954 he died penniless in a Franciscan monastery. No one paid any attention. There were no obituaries and no public recognition.

In 1966 Yad Vashem honored Sousa Mendes as a righteous gentile. It was only in 1988, that the Portuguese government finally dismissed all charges, promoting him to the title of "ambassador," and acknowledging the unique heroism of this amazing man.

Sousa Mendes never regretted what he did. Even during the time of his greatest hardship, shunned and discredited, he said: "I could not have acted otherwise, and therefore accept all that has befallen me."

I can't stop thinking of what he is reported to have told Angelina in June of 1940, upon making his fateful decision that would save the lives of so many, at such a high cost to him: "I have it in my hands now, to save the many thousands of persons who have come from everywhere in Europe in the hope of finding sanctuary in Portugal. They are all human beings, and their status in life, their religion, their color, are altogether immaterial to me."

And he concluded by saying these immortal words – words that reach out to us from eight decades ago, words of soaring inspiration – describing the very sentiments that propelled so many prophets and freedom fighters throughout history to stand up for humanity and decency, knowing that they risked all: Aristides de Sousa Mendes said to Angelina: "I would rather stand with God against Man, than with Man against God."