Media coverage of the Chilean miners' rescue was excessive

Like you, I was transfixed by the plight and rescue of the 33 Chadian children saved from starvation during the 2010 Sahel Famine. How at first all seemed lost, and then the hope they would be saved. The dedication of so many individuals, the use of sophisticated technology and government resources...Chad's president greeting individually the rescued children. And, then, Steve Jobs giving each child an iPod.

We all felt part of this two-month vigil, thanks to the hundreds of reporters, photographers and videographers who amassed at the scene. And now we can celebrate a rescue from almost certain death!

Okay, that's not quite what happened. There were 33 trapped Chilean miners and not 33 starving Chadian children. And this might prove to be the most unpopular column I have ever written. But was I the only person not transfixed by the plight and rescue of the 33 Chilean miners? The only one who thought the intensive media focus was out of all proportion to the event?

I understand the human interest in the miners' saga. It has been a gripping story, full of emotion and drama. And yet, was it really deserving of the vast media attention devoted to it?

Let us, instead, imagine such overwhelming coverage for the millions who still require rescue from death. Why would saving 33 children, let alone 33,000 or 33 million children, from famine or malnutrition not be at least as good a human interest story? I, too, like a good story, but I want an even greater one!

Is this simply a matter of numbers? And do numbers matter? Is this what I am hung up about?

After all, the Talmud tells us that to save a single life is to save an entire world! How can one diminish the joy of saving 33 worlds? And yet, is there no difference between saving 33 and 33 million worlds?

It's a far cry from the wisdom of the Talmud, but almost three decades ago, two Jewish actors disputed this question. In "Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan," Leonard Nimoy as Spock, sacrifices his life, insisting, "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." He adds later: "or the one."

In "Star Trek III: The Search for Spock," William Shatner as Captain Kirk counters, "The needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many."

I am not sure what to take from this latter discussion. And, while a discourse on utilitarian versus libertarian ethics is beyond the scope of this week's column, there is much worthy of contemplation and discussion here.

To trouble you more, you are bound to hear about moral psychology's trolley problem, if you have not heard of it already. A train is hurtling uncontrollably down the tracks; if nothing is done, the train will crash into and kill five workers on the tracks. However, you are close enough to the switch that will divert the train onto an alternate track, where only one worker is standing and will be killed. What do you do? Nothing? Or divert the trolley? Do the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one? But what right do we have to make this decision, to sacrifice the one for the five? Yet, how could we not? And do the numbers matter? One against two? One against five? One against 50?

The problem gets stickier. You are on a bridge over the tracks, and the train is hurtling uncontrollably and will crash into and kill five workers. However, a morbidly obese individual is leaning over the guardrail of the bridge; if you push him, he will interrupt the train's path and be killed, but the five standing on the tracks will be saved. The situation is absurd and objectionable, but this is how the moral psychologists pose it, so for the sake of the thought experiment, let us suspend disbelief and accept the premises. Morally speaking, is the second scenario any different from the first? If so, in what way?

And what would a good Jewish, a thoughtfully Talmudic, answer to this dilemma be?

As usual, I find myself asking questions more than providing answers –but I think there is something about the morality of numbers that leaves me uncomfortable with all of the attention and prizes lavished upon these miners who indeed survived an ordeal, something that prevented me from being swept up in this gripping story and wondering about other situations and sufferers perhaps more deserving of our attention.

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