

Jewish World Watch
Valley Beth Shalom
February 24, 2006

The growing crises in Darfur: We have only one choice, to respond.

I am deeply grateful to Rabbi Schulweis, Janice Kaminer-Reznik, Marcy Rainey and all those who have supported JWW. You have had a tremendous impact on our community and in our schools – and your work has been of great benefit to the people of Darfur. On behalf of International Medical Corps, I want to thank JWW for your generous support which is helping IMC to provide critically needed health and nutritional services to many people in Darfur.

I would like to present Rabbi Schulweis with picture from a Darfurian refugee – a twelve year old boy living in a Chadian refugee camp. His picture captures the nightmare he has lived through. Rabbi Schulweis, I greatly admire you for your vision and for your convictions – you hold the people of Darfur close to your heart and you work tirelessly on their behalf. I dedicate my remarks tonight to my friend Adam who lives in the Kouonongo refugee camp in Chad and all those who have been victimized by this genocide.

It was during the summer of 2004 I first became aware of the horror that was taking place in Darfur. At first, I didn't really grasp it, it didn't really penetrate. Like all of us – I was busy with my own life and trying to comprehend and ferret through the multitude of issues that already bombard us here in America – poverty, hunger, the serious problems in our schools, the disregard of those suffering from mental illness, the dismantling of a social system, the growing crises in medical care – to name but a few.

How can one digest one more issue? Are we not already bombarded with way too many problems? How can one digest the figures: over two million people displaced from their homes; several hundred thousand people who have been murdered or died from malnutrition or disease which is directly linked to the conflict.

This morning on the news I saw a very powerful report about a woman in Pakistan who has taken in women there who suffered serious spinal cord injuries during the earthquake and has set up a clinic to help them. She was asked why she is doing this: Her response, so simple, so humble – I am a human being, is there any choice?

Then I started to learn more about the crises in Darfur. I heard Secretary Powell in September of 2004 label it as genocide, giving further credence to

the earlier bipartisan and unanimous vote of the US Congress which gave it that label. I learned that this genocide is an attempt to eviscerate the six million people of Darfur, people who for the most part belong to the Fur, Masalit and Zangawa tribes. People like you me, who simply want to have food, water, shelter – some dignity, some hope. I looked at their pictures and I thought about them. I looked into their eyes – and I saw that it could be me, my wife, my children, my friends – or that it could be you. I felt the mandate of our tradition “you shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.” I realized that mandate is not just for when it is convenient, or when we can relate to the people, or when our own lives are totally together, or when we have solved all the other problems – but that there are issues that transcend our other concerns. We as a people know that genocide is at the top of the list. It is only sixty years ago that we saw million of our people murdered as well as five million other people. We still live with the shame of twelve years ago of not acting when one million people were slaughtered in Rwanda. What to do – I needed to respond, I am a human being, is there any choice?

My decision was personal – and deeply steeped in my identity as a Jew. I always think of the story of the young Hasid came to see Rabbi Mendel, with a terrible confession. I am angry at God, he said, for he has made a terrible world, full of pain and suffering, full of deceit and cruelty. Reb Mendel said to the young man, and you think you can make a better world? The young man answered meekly, that’s just it, I think that I could. Then Reb Mendel took him by his shoulders and shook him back and forth and shouted at him, THEN BEGIN. I wish to amend that story – it is not God who made a world where people die at the hands of human beings every day – it is we who made that world and it is we who need to transform it. I also wish to add to the story – JWW and others have begun – but now is the time to deepen our resolve.

Thus, my journey began on Yom Kippur of 2004 when I visited refugee camps in Chad. I met so many people on that trip who are desperately looking for help, for humanity, for hope. On that visit, I met refugees and heard their horrific stories of how their villages were destroyed by the janjeweeds; of how their sisters and daughters and friends were raped; of how their husbands and teenage sons were murdered. I learned of their journey by foot through the sub-Saharan desert, to a place of refuge, the refugee camps in Eastern Chad. I also saw in these people an inextinguishable spirit, a deep resolve to go on with life. I watched the extraordinary work of International Medical Corps (which JWW so generously supports) and how they provide medical attention, supplementary feeding, psycho-social programs, health education – and attempt to provide a sense of well-being for tens of thousands of people. I met humanitarian workers from all around the globe – who have taken time from their lives to work in the worst of situations and to be there for their fellow human beings. Their spirit filled me with hope – of the power that good people can have when we choose to make a difference.

That trip had tremendous impact on my life. I made a sacred vow to the people of Darfur and to myself: I will not forget you, I will tell your story, I will do every thing possible to help you and make sure that you have food, water, medical attention. I made a vow to my friend Adam, a Darfurian refugee with six children – that our lives are inextricably linked. I also made a vow to myself – that each and every day I would be mindful of these people. Each day I would try to be aware of how I could make this a more just world. Since that first trip, I have been back to Chad and also visited Darfur. I have sat in the places you read about – Nyala, Amanabak, Al Salaam. I have heard countless stories of unspeakable acts that often haunt me not just at night but during the day.

And yet the situation seems to be getting no better. Just a few weeks ago in what has been labeled as a “stunning act of moral and political betrayal” the State Department has suddenly decided that Darfur isn’t the site of genocide after all. The Assistant secretary of State for African Affairs, Jendayi Frazer labeled it a serious concern but that it really is “a series of small attacks and incidents.” Is that what it is for the approximately 350,000 people who have been murdered or died by disease and malnutrition which are directly connected to the genocide? Is that what it is for the over two million people who have seen their villages and homes destroyed and now are internally displaced? Is that what it is for the 275,000 Darfurian refugees in Chad? Why has Darfur and the crises there taking more of a backseat for our policy makers? What is that what accounts for the significant decrease in government and UN funding for humanitarian work in Darfur. IMC’s budget, like all NGO’s has been affected by a 60 percent cut in Darfur. However, we are not changing course, we are staying and will raise the funds privately to continue providing the much needed life saving services. We are committed to raising one million dollars in the next ninety days to sustain our life saving programs.

I believe that the lives of the people in Darfur are inextricably linked with ours – and that the more we understand about each other – the more we can help each other. They face the worse of human cruelties on a daily basis. They live with great indignity. Each day is about physical survival. We can do a lot for them – we can be their advocates, we can provide humanitarian supplies, we can help them rebuild lives. And we here in the West do not worry about our physical survival on a daily basis. Our worry is our spiritual survival – the survival of conscience. Have we as a society grown numb to the outcry of the disinherited of the world? Has the plague of indifference taken insidious root in our characters and souls? Have we lost the moral conviction to stand out and say injustice in whatever form, small or large is wrong? The people of Darfur serve as painful reminders of these modern day plagues and challenge each of us to do deep examination of our conscience.

We who are here tonight and many others care deeply – but I am worried that we may not care enough. We have to be careful not to let ourselves become complacent or for fatigue to set in. It cannot – there is too much at stake. An important part of JWW’s role is to remind our community that this crisis still exists. Faced with an ever changing political climate, a decrease in interest in the area – on this first anniversary of JWW, what we need is to deepen our resolve to help the people of Darfur through humanitarian activities; political advocacy and education. The labels may have changed but the situation on the ground is growing worse. We have great concern about the spread of disease. We have great concern about the conflict spilling over to Chad. JWW is needed more than ever – and I would add what is really needed is a Community World Watch where people of all faiths and traditions join together in speaking out and doing something about these acts which are embarrassing for all of us as human beings.

The great Indian writer and UN leader, Shashi Tharoor tells a story from his tradition one that is found in many cultures. It revolves around a question that we also give great consideration to in our own tradition. “A sage says to his disciples, When does the night end? The disciples say, Why, at dawn of course. The sage says, I know that. But when does the night end and the dawn begin? The first disciple, who is from the tropical south of India, says, “That’s very easy. It is when the first shafts of sunlight shine on the palm fronds of the coconut trees swaying gently in the morning breeze. That is when the night ends and the dawn begins. The sage says, No, that is not it. The second disciple, who is from the snowy north of India, says, I know. It is when the first glimmers of the sun illuminate and reflect off the snow of the mountain tops of the Himalayas. That is when the night ends and the dawn begins. The sage says, No, my sons, you are both wrong. It is when two travelers from the farthest corners of our globe meet and embrace each other as brothers, and when they realize that they sleep under the same sky, see the same stars, and dream the same dreams. That is when the night ends and the dawn begins.”

When does the night end and the dawn begin. When the people of Darfur have food, water, shelter and human dignity and to some degree have their lives restored and are able to go to sleep at night in relative security and peace. It is when we know that we did everything humanly possible, truly everything humanly possible, to help them.

Rabbi Lee T. Bycel