

Dry Bones: Ezekiel's Valley in Rwanda
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Have you ever seen dry bones?

Now I would imagine that if you take on a hike in the woods you might see an old shriveled squirrel or bird carcass.

But have you ever seen a collection of dried human bones?

Now as a doctor, I've had my share of bones to deal with. I remember in medical school for our anatomy class they gave us a box which contained one each of every long bone, and a few others. But I don't mean that. And as a pathologist... well, you don't want me to go there.

The Passover liturgy is filled with striking contrasts. During the seder we repeatedly switch back and forth between the bitterness of slavery and the sweetness of freedom. And today, on Shabbat Hol Hamoed, on the one hand we read the lustful poetry of Shir Hashirim, taking place in lush gardens, and on the other we read in today's haftarah Ezekiel's gruesome vision of dry bones in a desolate valley.

Ezekiel did live through a gruesome time. The destruction of Jerusalem was ruthless and devastating. While none of the prophets gave a body count, we can be confident that many thousands of people died, and in the utter chaos, there was no one to bury the corpses. As bodies decomposed and were consumed by jackals, rats, and vultures, much of what was probably left in many places was indeed just a pile of dry bones.

Unfortunately, as we know the situation in Jerusalem 2600 years ago is not unique in world history. Devastating slaughter of human beings has, as we all know too well, continued to the present day.



Last year, Margie and I were fortunate to spend some time in Africa, where we were both tourists and volunteers. In Malawi, Rwanda, and Uganda, I worked in hospitals teaching in the pathology departments, while Margie carried around an electric keyboard and played for kids in the pediatric wards and preschools. Possibly our favorite place was Kigali, Rwanda. Kigali is a beautiful city, which like Jerusalem is very hilly—in fact it is known as the land of 1000 hills, *mille collines* in French—and it is also very lush. Today the city is a thriving center of commerce and education, with a brand-new Marriott hotel and convention complex, and tall buildings are being constructed in the downtown area. The streets are absolutely litter free, and it probably is the safest city in the world that we have ever visited. We would walk home from dinner at a restaurant with a world-class chef after dark for two kilometers, without ever having any concern for danger.

Of course, it wasn't always this way. As you remember from all too recent history, in 1994 Rwanda was turned into a slaughterhouse, as approximately 1 million people were killed over the course of 100 days. Now time does not permit me to go through the history of the prolonged conflict between the Hutus and the Tutsis. Suffice it to say that after tensions had been growing for decades, following the mysterious death of the president, the country exploded.

I'm sure many of us remember the news headlines, and we also saw the movie *Hotel Rwanda*. By the way, that is an actual hotel, its real name is the Mille Collines, and it is a must for any visitor to the city to go to the sixth floor terrace to have a drink at sunset, with possibly the most spectacular view in the city of all the thousand spectacular hillside vistas.

After the Rwandan genocide, suffice it to say that the city was a mess. The manager of the apartment building where we stayed, a soft spoken Rwandan woman a little younger than ourselves, told us that she had been fortunate enough to be across the border in the Congo during the conflict, but she returned to Kigali, two months after the killing had stopped. She told us that even then, months after the Slaughter had ended, she could not walk 100 meters down the street without having to step over at least one dead body that had yet to be removed. And we heard remarkably similar stories from other people as well.

In Kigali there is a Genocide Memorial. It is also on the "must visit" list. It is a very tastefully done museum. I have heard, though I don't know this as verified, that the designers of the memorial went to visit both the Holocaust Memorial in Washington and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem as part of their planning.

There are also smaller genocide memorials scattered throughout the country, at sites of especially extreme brutality. Margie and I each kept a journal of our trip, and I would like to read a section from my journal now about our visit to one of them.

Ntarama is barely marked from the main road, the only sign you see is for a school, and when you reach the memorial in fact what you really notice is the bustling school next door with the squealing and chattering primary school kids, dressed in white shirts and blouses and fire engine red shorts and skirts.

We were the only visitors at the time, and we were greeted by a young guide. She explained that this had been the site of a Catholic church. In a previous Hutu uprising in 1992, many Tutsis had sought refuge in the church, and when the Hutus came, the nun there held them at bay and actually called a BBC radio talk show and said on air that a government-backed mob was threatening to kill all the people there. In response, someone from the British Foreign Service called the Rwandan government and said, “we have a Sister on the line telling us this story, is it true?” The government called off the mob. In retaliation, a group of Hutus returned the next year, raped and killed the nun, and impaled her body on a spear outside.

In 1994, when the 100-days slaughter began, many locals, remembering what had happened earlier, sought refuge in the church again, thinking—hoping, actually—that they might be safe there. About 7000 people were crammed into a space that I estimated to be about 1500 square feet, maybe 50x30. This time the Hutus were ready. They surrounded the church and stormed the grounds, taunting the people inside, “we’ll kill all you cockroaches!”, jabbing spears and poles through the windows and the gates. The nuns resisted and were killed. What ensued was a slaughter in which literally only handfuls of people survived, and they did so only because they were seriously wounded and motionless and were left for dead. People were speared, machetéed, bludgeoned with clubs and hammers, and shot. Accounts included people bribing their killers to “please shoot me in the head so as to shorten my suffering” or “please shoot me first so I don’t have to see my loved ones die.”

The memorial site today is a preservation of the church as it was. The corrugated aluminum ceiling is riddled with bullet holes, and the cement floor is pock-marked by bullets, and there are still blood stains on the walls. Downstairs, which is only lit by sunlight filtering in from above, is shelf after shelf of long bones—I recognized femurs, humeri, others—and skulls. All ages, from young children to adults. You don't have to have any forensic training to recognize the cause of death on so many of the skulls—a long gash for a machete strike, a depressed, irregular fracture for a bludgeoning, a clean, round hole for a bullet, a more jagged hole for a spear.

Back upstairs, I stopped, and I uttered the *Ayl Malei Rachamim*, the Jewish memorial prayer, inserting from memory the best I could similar words to those used to remember those killed by the Nazis in the Holocaust. And at that moment, Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones came back to me.

From today's haftarah: “The Lord set me down in the valley, and it was full of bones. He led me around them; there were very many of them spread over the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, ‘*Ben Adam*, can these bones live again?’ and I replied, ‘O Lord God, only You know.’”

An English pediatric nurse we had met one day told us we had to go to visit a Reconciliation Village, one of six such villages scattered about the country. This village was located about half way from the city to the mountains, so we had our driver stop there on the way to visit the gorillas. Again, abstracting from my journal:

Margie and I and our Rwandan driver were the only visitors, but about 100 people came out for us. The ceremony begins with about 20 women singing and dancing, men and women banging on drums, we are seated on folding chairs facing the group, someone brings over an umbrella to shield us from the sun. The guide welcomes us and asks us to introduce ourselves. I am an American doctor volunteering (audible “oohs” when this is translated), and Margie is a teacher volunteering (more “oohs”). We are introduced to a young woman who is a survivor. She doesn't really tell her story: we don't know where she lived, what she saw, how many family members she lost. She simply says that what she has to do now is live together with others, including the perpetrators, in reconciliation. She finishes, everyone applauds. Then a man in his fifties introduces himself as someone who was a Hutu who was proud to be so and was taught to hate Tutsis. He had killed Tutsis. Again, no details—where, how, how many. He now realizes that you can't hate, you have to live together. He finishes, more applause.

All of this takes place one line at a time, with the guide translating each line, adding drama to the already dramatic scenario. Then—a surprise. The guide asks us to give our testimony as well. That’s the word he used, “testimony.” Margie and I look at each other, she says, “Honey, you’re much better at this than I am.”

I stand up slowly, take a deep breath. I’m glad my *testimony* will be translated one line at a time, it will give me time to think of my next line. “Thank you for having us here today...it’s so hard to imagine...we (pointing to myself and Margie) are Jewish ... when we were born our people had just lived through a horrible genocide...when we were growing up we were taught that it was our responsibility to teach the world ...our motto was ‘Never again’...when we learned about what happened in Rwanda, we were sad, and we were also disappointed...in ourselves, we had failed to prevent this from happening again...still today there is so much hate in the world...but today you have showed us that we should not hate, that we can live together...you give us hope.” I sit down, applause.

The quasi-mayor of the village, I’m not sure of his exact title, then also testifies that he too had been a perpetrator—again no details—that he regrets what he had done, that he is thankful to live in a spirit of reconciliation. More singing and dancing, the guide thanks us again, it’s done. Wow!

And I realized then that Ezekiel’s bones did not represent those who had died, but rather they were the living remnant, those fortunate enough—dare I use the word “fortunate”?—to have survived the slaughter but who were now shell-shocked, soulless, disconnected beings roaming in a desolate valley of despair. In the haftarah, the bones say “we are dried up, our hope is gone, we are doomed.” But God says to them, “I will put my breath in you, and you shall live again.”

Again from Ezekiel: “I prophesied to the bones as I had been commanded, and suddenly there was a sound of rattling, as the bones came together, bone matching to bone. I looked, and sinews, then flesh, then skin formed on them.”

One of the restaurants we had heard about in Kigali was called Heaven. It was actually the very first high quality restaurant in the city, and it had been opened by an American couple, Josh and Alyssa Ruxin, who had moved to Kigali in 2004. Josh was a management MBA guy, one of those mover and shaker types. They had come to help with some health management projects, and he really accomplished some great things in health clinics, which the government adopted as a model for their own programs. Alyssa had started the restaurant, which became the model for the ensuing two dozen or so other quality eateries in the city, as well as a model for employment and training of locals. When we first showed up, the owners had just left, but Margie got Alyssa's email address and proceeded, with her characteristic chutzpah, to invite ourselves over to their place for Shabbat dinner—oh, did I mention that they're Jewish?—which didn't happen, but we did get the opportunity to have a wonderful lunch with them. This is a family that embodies *tikkun olam*. Josh has written a wonderful book about their experiences, appropriately entitled *A Thousand Hills to Heaven*. It's available both on Amazon and on Audible.

So how did the Rwandans rise from desolation, a collection of dry bones, to a thriving society based on reconciliation, with rapidly growing GDP, great restaurants, and burgeoning foreign investment? Now, don't get me wrong: Rwanda certainly has its share of problems, but it is still one of the most successful countries on the continent.

Actually, Ezekiel's vision gives the formula: First, the bones have to come together. People need to wake up and connect with each other, and realize that they are all people—not Hutus and Tutsis, those designations are not muttered at all today—but all Rwandans. Then, they need sinews and flesh to be laid upon the bones. They need to rebuild societal institutions and establish a stable infrastructure. *Im ayn kemach, ayn Torah*—without sustenance there can be no higher spiritual achievement.

But that too is not enough. Ezekiel says, "I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had grown, and skin had formed over them, but there was no breath in them." It wasn't until God breathed into them His breath that they came to life. The Rwandans after the Genocide formulated a vision of a country based on unity, reconciliation, and personal and public responsibility. Without this vision and divine inspiration—and I mean inspired both figuratively and literally, as in God's breath—then the most any society can hope to become is a soulless, skin-covered mass of bones and flesh.

There is a poster in the Genocide Memorial in Kigali, which tells the story of how some Tutsis, fleeing certain death, came to a house owned by a Muslim man. Now it turns out that the Muslims, who now make up around 10% of the Rwandan population, were willing to protect the Tutsis when they could. In spite of threats from the Hutu mob, he kept the people in his house safe. When he was later asked why he risked his life to do this, he responded, “In my religion we have a saying: he who saves a single life, it is as if he has saved the whole world.” In his religion! Who knew? In the Memorial, there is a glass pillar on which the phrase is etched, and the attribution is listed simply as “The Talmud.”

Margie and I intend to go back to Kigali, God willing. We want to spend an extended time there, maybe three or four months there in the winter. I’ll take more teaching materials for the residents, Margie will go to the atrium of the pediatrics building and sing with the kids. We’ll rent a two-bedroom apartment, so that our friends and family can also come and visit. You’re all invited! Spend a few days in the city, go to the Genocide Memorial and Ntarama, shop for baskets, have drinks at dusk on the terrace at the Mille Collines. Then we’ll send you to the east for a few days to see the lions and giraffes and rhinos, then a trip to the mountains in the west to see the magnificent, gentle gorillas. And, of course, lunch at Heaven.

So, I can’t finish a *dear torah* on the Dry Bones without reference to the song *Dem Bones*. First recorded in 1928, it has been covered by dozens of artists, ranging from the Tennessee Ernie Ford (my favorite) to the Lennon Sisters, and even Alvin and the Chipmunks. “Oh the toe bone’s connected to the foot bone, the foot bone’s connected to...” Oh, if only my medical school anatomy class had been that easy! In the song’s refrain, “Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again” is repeated. But what is most important is that last line of the chorus: “Now hear the word of the Lord.” Without a commitment to a society based on divine principles of justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, equality, and respect, we can be nothing more than a hollow bag of skin and bones.

On this Shabbat, in the middle of our festival of freedom, let us commit to be truly inspired (deep breath) in every way by Ezekiel’s vision.

Moadim l’simcha! Shabbat shalom!