

Darfur
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Leo Rosten, the author of "The Joys of Yiddish" notes that there are over twenty words in the Eskimo language for snow. The linguistic essay about the philology of language points out that a great deal is revealed about a people when you study what words require multiple distinctions by many variations each with its own subtle nuance.

Thus, Yiddish has a whole litany and an entire of vocabulary for characters and characteristics which either do not exist, are overlooked, or are lumped together in most other languages --- giving us words such as: nebech, nebbish, shlemiel, shlemazel, klutz, kuni lemmel, each having its own unique definition.

One can conclude that the preponderance of these words indicates that Yiddish is the language of the downtrodden. As the Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer noted, "It is the only language on earth that was never spoken by people in power."

If there is any one thing that we Jews know something about, and that should be reflected in our language it is the experience of powerlessness, of pain, suffering and anguish. The history of what people have done to the Jews throughout the millennia is one of persecution and destruction. But as we know, that is not the full story of the history of the Jews. For the other part of the picture is how we responded and what we created in the face of these acts. The ideas, beliefs, books, scholars and communal institutions we created and developed in response to and in spite of what was done to us is truly one of the marvels of the history of the world.

So if there is a people well-versed in tragedy, it is us. We are experts on the subject, the authority to whom the world should listen when our collective voice is raised.

Once again, we are playing that role of being the moral alarmists and conscience of the world, as Jewish organizations have brought to the attention of the world the travesty that is taking place in Sudan.

Sudan is one of the largest and poorest countries in Africa. A remote region of western Sudan, bordering on Chad, which is in the news, is known as Darfur. The region has had problems since the late 1980's when the Arab Muslim rulers captured, enslaved and sold black Sudanese Christians. In February 2003 two rebel groups attacked government outposts in northern Darfur, demanding greater political and economic representation for black farmers living in western Sudan. The Arab dominated Sudanese government responded by sending their proxy militia, the Janajaweed to ethnically cleanse the Darfur region of the mainly black African tribal people who are the source of the rebel groups fighting the central government. The term Janajaweed, in Arabic means evil men on horseback. They are conducting a scorched earth campaign to wipe out the black pastoralists in Darfur by burning their homes and crops, destroying their wells and torturing and murdering countless civilians. Human rights groups acknowledge that the rebel groups are also responsible for abuses and raiding and stealing from humanitarian

aid convoys. To date about 200,000 people have died and another two million civilians have been forced from their villages and live in camps overcome by starvation and disease. There is concern that unless there is greater intervention by international troops and forces, the killing will continue to rage on, unrestrained.

A march is scheduled to take place tomorrow here in Washington to push for greater action to prevent continued loss of life, and in the forefront of the charge are Jewish groups. It may seem unusual for Jews to care so much about an issue which, after all does not involve Jews. Although it has nothing to do with Jews, it has everything to do with Jewish values.

The other night I taught the Joint Conversion Class session about the Holocaust. I focused at the end of the class about the lessons of the Holocaust. The message that I personally always think about and seek to convey whenever I study or teach the Holocaust is how correct and prescient the first century sage Hillel was. One of his sayings recorded in Pirke Avot is, "*Im ein ani lee, me li?*" If I am not for myself, who will be for me. In other words, we Jews learned the sad lesson when so few lifted a finger to rescue or help us, when no nation was willing to open its gates to admit Jewish refugees, that we could not rely on others to save us. The overwhelming apathy of the world to our plight painfully reinforced the realization that no one else cared about the fate of the Jews. (Incidentally, tomorrow afternoon we will have a play here about the powerful story of a brave woman who defied others and saved 2500 Jews as a result.) But the logical extension of Hillel's teaching is that we are obligated to insure Jewish survival and not expect or wait for others to bring it about.

This is one of the reasons why I am such a passionate, constant and unrelenting advocate for Israel.

But then I pointed out to the class that Hillel's statement continued, "*Ucsheh ani lee, az mah ani?*" He went on to caution that we not be self absorbed -- But if I am only for myself, then what am I? Which reminds us that we cannot only care about ourselves, but have the moral obligation to care for others as well. This then is the Jewish moral imperative – to be particularists and universalists. To be passionate advocates for Jewish peoplehood and Jewish survival, while not neglecting the rest of the world; to use our experience and encounter with history to sound the cautionary note for others. This is our mission and purpose, what it means to be the Chosen People.

And then Hillel concluded his three part saying with the challenge, "*im lo achshav, aimatai?* If not now, when?"

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