

## ROSH HASHANA SERMON: GHANA

Victoria, 5768

We take so very much for granted in our lives here in North America.

From the basics like running water and electricity,

to homes with carpeting, upholstered furniture, and kitchens,

to the high tech conveniences of plentiful ATM's and restaurants and

shops that take credit cards.

Not to mention well supplied classrooms for our children,

and relatively satisfying and well remunerated jobs.

I am just as guilty as anyone else.

That is why I responded so readily to an Op-Ed piece by

The New York Times' columnist, Nicholas Kristof.

In it, he challenged his readers as follows:

"The only way to truly understand the challenge of global poverty

is to see it, smell it, feel it." So Kristof encouraged his readers

to take a trip to Africa.

"You'll encounter malnutrition, AIDS, malaria and wretched schools,"

he wrote.

“Expect to see plenty of heartbreak,  
but also heroic people who are making real progress  
in overcoming poverty.

I'm hoping the experiences will help transform you –  
not turn you into an aid worker,  
but leave an unforgettable imprint on you that will affect your priorities  
for the rest of your life.”

I decided on the spot to find a way to get to Africa,  
to see how most people in the world live,  
and to volunteer my time in order to help, if only just a little.

I hooked up with a group called Global Volunteers  
and signed up for a two-week teaching stint in Ghana.

On July first, our team headed for Senchi Village,  
near the town of Akrade,  
neither of which is on the map.

The village, which they actually call a town, has 2,000 inhabitants  
who live in veritable mud huts with tiny spaces  
you could hardly call rooms.

Most have no running water;  
just a communal spigot where girls and women  
fetch water in large bowls. Some have electricity and televisions,  
however. This is a phenomenon I noticed when I was in Peru  
some 30 years ago – as I rode through the Andes,  
I was struck by the fact that, from the hovels hugging the hills,  
there rose television antenna after television antenna.

It left me wondering:  
what effect do scenes of conspicuous consumption  
that these people surely witness on screen have  
on a population whose deprivation is so great?

I still marvel at the fact that it has not prompted more people  
to engage in a revolution.

The people I visited in Ghana– like so many in the developing world –  
live on a true subsistence level.

In Senchi Village, if they have work -- which many don't –  
they are farmers and fishermen -- the town is near the Volta River.  
Many have goats and chickens which roam freely,  
throughout the town as well as in the classrooms.

The schools are four-room mud structures,  
built for the most part 50 years ago, so they are crumbling,  
with big holes in the floor, no doors,  
and blackboards that are cracked and rumped.

The children begin their school day doing maintenance:  
using machetes, they cut down the bush,  
or move very heavy cement bricks on their heads  
to locations where volunteer organizations are  
building new structures.

The schools have no bathrooms.

At my school, the office of the headmistress  
consisted of a table and chair located under a mango tree.

School has been free and compulsory through 6th grade  
for the past two years. There are not enough books to go around,  
and children often don't have a pen.

Some students come to school hungry,  
so the government is now starting a free meal program.

Ghana has also instituted universal health care.

The children also engage in environmental studies which teaches them basic hygiene such as boiling water from the river before drinking it, and the importance of brushing their teeth. In addition, they are learning about erosion and environmental degradation.

The official language of Ghana is English, but most don't speak or read or write it well – the most common tribal language is Twi.

I taught English, Math and Integrated Science to 6th graders. One problem they had was understanding my American accent. They learn British English and have a thick Ghanaian accent, so this was a challenge.

They responded most to the songs I taught them. They particularly loved: “This Land Is Your Land, This Land Is My Land ...”

Ghanaians get very excited about America – they think Americans are all rich and happy. They want to come and live the good life in the US.

They have a very hard time believing  
that there is poverty in America -  
and that the US, the great land of opportunity,  
has 47 million people without health insurance,  
or that there are 90,000 homeless people in Los Angeles alone.

What was most wonderful about my experience in Ghana  
were the children.

They are so eager and enthusiastic,  
especially to learn from, and interact with a white person.

They are very well behaved, as discipline is very harsh:  
we saw children being caned, even little ones of 5 and 6.

The country is very religious, mostly Christian,  
and they take the Bible seriously.

My headmistress quoted me the verse:

"Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child."

White people are rare in the village.

The word in Twi for white person is "Oburoni,"  
and as we walked through the village on our way to and from school,  
little children would pop out from everywhere calling out, "Oburoni,"  
as though they had made a sighting.

Then a group of them would start chanting, "Oburoni, Oburoni,"  
jumping up and down, waving and smiling broadly.

They would run up to us to shake hands,  
anxious to feel our strange white skin.

Any time you want to take a picture,  
mobs of these kids run into the frame, peering up into the lens.

Since we all had digital cameras,  
we showed them the pictures as we took them  
which caused them to scream with delight,  
as they jumped up and down.

One of the common sights all over Ghana  
is women, baby strapped to their backs,  
carrying on their heads a load of wares to sell.

Everywhere, people are selling: fruits and vegetables, dried fish,  
used clothing.

We even saw people along the road holding up,  
by the ears, freshly killed game for sale.

You wonder who could possibly buy all this stuff.

Though the village is barebones, it is nothing  
compared to the poverty in the capital, a city of a million people.

There is some money there, primarily foreign—

in fact, foreign companies own the resources of the country –  
gold, bauxite, diamonds. With this wealth, they have built  
luxury hotels, houses, and apartment buildings.

Smack in front of these solid structures are shanty towns  
set up on dirt: lean-tos with rusting corrugated roofs,  
garbage piled up, animals wandering around. A horrible stench.

These incredible disparities are very upsetting.

Even worse, I couldn't help thinking  
about the root causes of Africa's poverty.

To begin with, between 1450 and 1850,  
at least 12 million Africans were taken as slaves  
across the notorious Middle Passage of the Atlantic.

The slaves were then sold for huge profits in the Americas.

Men, women and children endured  
an incredible degree of savage cruelty.

Up to 20% of those chained in the holds of the slave ships  
died before they even reached their destination.<sup>1</sup>

The slave trade deprived Africa of millions of able-bodied people,  
fomenting predatory wars that disrupted its economy.<sup>2</sup>

Further, the European colonial powers exploited  
the continent's natural resources, exporting copper, timber, oil, gold  
and other raw materials to feed the industrial revolution.

Of course, the resulting wealth was not invested  
in the African continent.

The emphasis was on developing the resources for export,  
not for local use or consumption.

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<sup>1</sup> BBC

<sup>2</sup> "Justifying the role of imperialism in Africa." Review of *Aid to Africa: So Much to Do, So Little Done*, by Carol Lancaster. Review by Ann Talbot.  
[www.wsws.org/articles/2000/aug2000](http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/aug2000)

Profits from the export of mineral and agricultural goods were sent to Europe. In almost all situations, Africans labored in poor working conditions, for long hours, with inadequate pay.<sup>3</sup>

While most of the African colonies gained formal independence in the 1960s, they could not break free from the political domination of the former colonial powers, nor from the economic exploitation of the giant corporations that controlled the trade in African commodities<sup>4</sup>.

This system has continued to the present day.

Indebted African countries are net exporters of capital although they are among the poorest in the world.

Debt relief has had very little effect.

Of course, corruption on the part of African governments is also to blame – but the legacy of colonialism cannot be ignored.

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<sup>3</sup> [exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/students/curriculum/m7b](http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/students/curriculum/m7b): Unit Two: Studying Africa through the Social Studies Module 7B: African History, the Era of Global Encroachment Student's Edition Activity Three: The Practice and Legacy of Colonialism: Expand

Which means that, to a certain extent, the privileges that we enjoy in the developed world, have been secured, at least in part, at the expense of others -- those in the developing world.

On this day of reckoning, I think it is appropriate to think about our debt to those who have suffered while we have prospered.

I think the rabbis wanted us to. That's why they chose the story of Hagar and Sarah as the traditional reading for the first day of Rosh Hashana.

Remember that Sarah, who has been barren, tells Abraham to sleep with her servant Hagar.

They have a son, Ishmael.

Later, Sarah finally conceives and bears a son, Isaac.

Sarah perceives Ishmael, Abraham's first-born, as a threat to her son Isaac. So she orders Abraham to banish Ishmael and Hagar. Abraham obliges, leaving mother and son to fend for themselves in the desert where they almost die.

Are you surprised, by such behavior on the part of our blessed foremother and forefather?

Despite the shame we might feel, in a traditional shul at least,  
we read this story every year on Rosh Hashana.

It's as though the rabbis are saying to us:

You often get your hands dirty when accomplishing a goal –  
and we're not going to let you sweep that under the rug.

Tamara Eskenazi, a professor and friend,  
underlines this point by saying that “the narrative forces us  
to see Hagar as the shadow side of Abraham's success,  
our success story ... the text refuses to let us overlook her plight.”

Now, of course, you and I are not colonialists.

Nor do most of us run giant corporations that extract  
raw materials from Africa.

So what is our responsibility?

I would argue that, since we benefit from this legacy,

Africa's poverty becomes our burden as well.

But what can you and I do to help alleviate the seemingly intractable  
problems of a huge continent 8,000 miles away?

There is obviously no silver bullet – but there are many ideas.

For example, Columbia University's Jeffrey Sachs believes that, by supporting the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, global poverty and disease can be cut in half by the year 2015.

The goals include: promoting gender equality, empowering women, reducing child mortality, and combating AIDS and malaria.

To finance these goals, in the year 2000, the industrialized countries committed themselves to providing development assistance equivalent to 0.7% of their gross national income.

To date, only five countries have achieved this goal – Canada, by the way, is not one of them.

As a concerned citizen, the best thing you can do, says Professor Sachs, is to help convince your government to meet its promises on aid.

To do this, you can write your political representatives or your newspapers.

Educating others is also important:

You might organize a dinner party to get people informed about global poverty and the Millennium Development Goals.

I have a Handout with the goals and other ideas about how you can get involved.

You might also think about becoming a volunteer through one of many organizations that work in Africa including the American Jewish World Service.

We were told that our main contribution as volunteers was to interact with the children, demystifying who we are as white people, showing we care, offering them a vision of a better future they can aspire to. Parents apparently are more eager to send their kids to school when they know Americans are coming to teach; and the kids' English improves with our presence (more teams of volunteers preceded us and will succeed us).

I do hope that we contributed to these children's outlook.

I would like to know that they can fulfill their dreams to be scientists, teachers, doctors, and the like.

Let's work together to help make their dreams a reality.

