

Intervention in Darfur Is A Moral Imperative

Genocide currently is taking place in the Darfur region of Sudan and in refugee camps within neighboring Eastern Chad. As many as 2.5 million people have been uprooted and deported women are being systematically raped. Disease is rampant. Thousands upon thousands have died and an estimated 10-15,000 additional folks are dying each month.

Let us praise Governor Jon Corzine and Representative Donald Payne for their courage and moral leadership in this bi-partisan sacred cause. As the immediate Past President of the statewide New Jersey Coalition of Numerous Jewish, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Moslem Religious Leaders, I am proud that the Coalition worked with Jon Corzine's senatorial office in the Spring of 2005 in organizing a Sabbath Weekend of Darfur Awareness. We arranged visits to a mosque, to a variety of churches, and to our synagogue. The goal of that effort as with the recent [April 30, 2006] "March on Washington" has been to encourage people of good will to ignite the moral conscience of government policy in our nation's capital.

In a recent Torah Portion, we read Leviticus 19:16 "do not stand idly while your neighbor's blood is being shed. The content of this biblical call for action against life-threatening evil is clear. As noted in our Etz Hayim Torah commentary: "not standing idly while your neighbor's blood is being shed" imparts an obligation to help someone facing any type of serious distress. The Hebrew word for "neighbor" (rey-echa) is intentionally distinct from the Hebrew word for "brother" [achee-cha]. This moral imperative rests upon us whether or not the victims are people to whom we are related by family or by faith. We are commanded to respond whenever any human being is placed in dire circumstances.

As the Sages of the Talmud elaborated: "If one can prevent the whole world from a sin and does not, he/she is punishable for the sin of the entire world." If we have the capacity to raise public awareness, and to set into motion a groundswell of moral outcry that can affect governmental policy and we choose not to act, we become complicit in this evil.

Communities of faith have the capability of informing public opinion and social activism. We are enjoined to behave in a manner depicted by the prophet Ezekiel. He echoed the words of God, by commanding the Israelites, "I have appointed you as a watchman" If the watchman sees the sword advancing and does not blow the horn, so that people are not warned, and the sword comes and destroys "I will demand a reckoning" (Ezekiel 33)

Additionally, we are required to emulate our great role model of the Passover season. Moses was raised in the House of Pharaoh, but could not tolerate witnessing the evils of Pharaoh's regime. When Moses saw a taskmaster in the process of beating a slave to death, the Prince of Egypt intervened at peril to his lofty status. So, too, did Moses as a refugee not stand by when he caught sight of Jethro's

daughters' being threatened by hostile shepherds in Midian. It was Moses' social activism that made him a suitable choice to lead the Exodus and to be our ethical exemplar!.

During this week in which we solemnly have commemorated Yom HaShoah [Holocaust Memorial Day], the Jewish community has an added responsibility to speak out against moral indifference. We must oppose the temptation once again to have the world become by-standers to evil. In the words of Elie Wiesel, speaking at the White House in 1999 on the topic The Perils of Indifference, "Should the Sudanese victims feel abandoned and neglected, it would be our fault" and perhaps our guilt. That's why we must intervene. If we do, they and their children will be grateful to us. As will be, through them, our own what is at stake is our own humanity.

Let us take every opportunity to speak out on behalf of the victims in Darfur and Eastern Chad. Let us tell friends and neighbors what is taking place. Let us contact our Congressman, the White House and the Secretary of State to urge that combating this latest form of genocide be elevated to the highest priority.

With a sense of urgency,
Rabbi Alan Silverstein