

The plight of the Rohingya (April 2018)
D'var Torah for Parshat Shemini & Pesach (&
pre-Yom HaShoah)

The greatest mitzvah of Passover is not to eat matza or refrain from eating chametz. The whole purpose of the food and the seder is to tell the story – but never as a tale from another place or time, always a personal retelling, in the present moment.

B'chol dor vador chayav adam
lirot et atzmo kilu yatzah ata
miMitzrayim.

“In every generation
one is obligated
to view oneself
as if she is leaving Egypt
RIGHT NOW.”

But why is this story different?

On all other Jewish holidays,
we hear the story of long ago.

Why only on seder night
must we internalize it
as a moment
in the present?

Rabbi Soloveitchik,
a brilliant mind of the 20th century,
taught that
“the experience of Egypt
inculcated compassion
within the consciousness
of every Jew.”

“We are not allowed to forget our obligation to be compassionate for even a moment.”¹

Every year,
just after Passover,
we read *Parshat Shemini*,
which includes
God’s sudden decision
to kill Aaron’s sons.

His ‘response is described
in ‘simple yet powerful words:’
Vayidom Aharon.
‘And Aaron was silent.’

¹ The Night That Unites (haggadah), p. 96.

In *The Women's Torah Commentary*,
Blu Greenberg writes:

“Aaron responded
with a profound, shattering silence,

a stunning silence,

a shocked silence.

He does not justify the cruel decree
by blaming his sons
and excepting their fate...

[Nor] does he...
protest God's actions.
Total silence.”

Aaron is all of us –

offering a
profound human “response
to the reality
that there are times
when good people die unjustly...
consumed in tragedies
that seem arbitrary...
with nothing
to ameliorate the pain
and loss
of those who love them.”²

² P. 633.

Since August 2017,
almost 700,000 Rohingya people
have fled ethnic cleansing.

The Rohingya
are an ethnic and religious minority
in Burma,
the victims of
a Burmese military campaign
including indiscriminate violence,
rape and murder.

Entire villages
have been set on fire,
in what the UN called
'the fastest growing
refugee emergency.'

The United States
Holocaust Memorial Museum
has expressed concerns
about mounting evidence
of genocide.

In the face of
such suffering and injustice,
it's natural that we,
like Aaron,
may be too shocked to speak.

We feel powerless.

Yet, We have an obligation
to both honor that silence
as a natural response
to incomprehensible suffering,

and to challenge ourselves
to transform our mourning
from silence to vocal outrage.

We are not powerless.

We cannot save millions,
but we can
make direct improvements
to the lives of hundreds
or thousands
of innocent people,
by doing two
simple
things.

First,
the *Burma Human Rights
and Freedom Act of 2018*
is a bipartisan bill
believed to have
a decent chance of passing.

It lays out US policy
and uses our leverage
to alleviate suffering,
create conditions
for the Rohingya to return home,
and hold the perpetrators
accountable.

Contact your senators.

Tell your family and friends.

Second,
American Jewish World Service
has been working in Burma
for many years.
They have a Rohingya Crisis Fund
which will disperse your gift
to local,
direct assistance organizations
within 48 hours
of your donation.

A few dollars goes a long way
towards medical care,
security,
and many other needs.

You can go to
American Jewish World Service's
website
(ajws.org)
and both contact your senators
and donate
in just a few minutes.

It's a meaningful opportunity
to fulfill that Passover obligation –

“Let all who are hungry
come and eat –
let all who are in need
join our Passover.”

Rav Kook,
the 1st Chief Rabbi of Palestine
before Israeli independence,
taught that
we first call out to the hungry,
because now that we are free,
we can feed others.

However, this is not enough,
we “aspire to more,
for it is followed by,
“let all who are in need partake.”

The hungry
are those with
urgent physical needs.

Rav Kook explains that
'those in need'
refers to spiritual needs,
for 'we were liberated
from bondage in Egypt
so we could bring liberation
to the entire world –

however,
we must first liberate ourselves
so we are able to
fully serve the world.”³

³ The Night That Unites, p. 71.

As we prepare to observe
Yom HaShoah next week,
I am reminded that
the full name is

Yom Hazikaron laShoah ve-laG'vurah

"Holocaust and Heroism
Remembrance Day"

Heroism is part of memory.

Elie Wiesel taught:
“The opposite of life
is not death,
but indifference.”

‘For the Rohingya people,
indifference is a luxury
we can no longer afford.’⁴

⁴ Robert Bank – March 2018

Pesach is about
looking upon ourselves
as if from slavery
WE were freed.

Perhaps this year,
that means looking upon
the Rohingya
as if they were US.

Moadim I'simcha.

Have a joyous rest of Passover.