



Solidarity born of shared horrors

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Created 21 May 2009 - 1:19pm

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Collective tragedies become a part of the consciousness of a people. So it is with Jews and the Shoah.

From a young age, I learned that however much the Jewish people suffered and were persecuted, they remained fundamentally resilient and unbowed, a people, a religion and a civilization that revelled in community, learning and doing the right thing. I found much joy in Judaism, never finding it weighed down by the sadness and pains of the past, however enormous and overwhelming.

So when I came to Rwanda, knowing our history I thought that although the individuals I would encounter and their stories of survival in the face of unspeakable terror and brutality would be painful, I would not break down emotionally.

I was wrong.

I broke down as a Tutsi survivor told me his story because I simply did not have the strength to contain the fact that human behaviour repeats itself so mercilessly. He had to hide in a similar way as Jews had to hide during the Shoah, when fellow Rwandans — Hutus — sought to kill him, his family, and the entire Tutsi community simply for being Tutsi.

Something shattered inside me when he spoke and a bond of solidarity was born. He comforted me, because he understood that in hearing his story I saw myself and my people, and I saw what happened to us happening again, in my lifetime.

Rwanda is far from the Jewish world. It is a tiny country of lush, green hills. It would be easy to consider the Rwandan genocide as yet another of many terrible atrocities caused by humans. But we would be wrong as Jews if we did not recognize that Rwanda is different: its genocide survivors make a unique moral demand of us.

Emile Fackenheim famously said that after the Shoah there is a 614th mitzvah and that is to strengthen the Jewish people and Judaism, to ensure that Hitler does not receive a posthumous victory. In Rwanda, I discovered a 615th one: from the terror and the pain and suffering of your past build a bridge of empathy and solidarity to individuals and peoples who have suffered

similarly.

To be a people targeted for genocide places you in a position that very few peoples can understand. Jews, as no other people, can offer Rwandan genocide survivors compassion and chesed, and assist them to achieve tzedek in their lives in a way that honours their dignity and resilience, and gives them real cause for hope.

Organizations like the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee have taken the lead, developing a youth village for Rwandan orphans modelled on the Yemin Orde village near Haifa. The Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village is one of the largest and most exciting community development projects in Rwanda.

The American Jewish World Service supports projects for female genocide survivors, many of whom are victims of rape and who have HIV as a result.

Jews like Taylor Krauss, founder and director of Voices of Rwanda, are bringing their passion and skills, recording oral history of genocide survivors, collecting these testimonies to be used by researchers, teachers, and students around the world.

Rwanda is desperately short of psychologists, doctors, nurses, social workers and trauma counsellors. People with those skills should consider going there. Murakoze (thank you).

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