

Jewish Responses to the Ebola Crisis Lunch and Learn—October 28, 2014

Genesis 1

כִּזְוֹ וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים
בָּרָא אֹתוֹ: זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, בָּרָא אֹתָם . 27 And God created man in God's own image, in the image of God
created God him; male and female created God them.

Leviticus 19

וְזוֹ לֹא תִעַמְדַּם עַל-דַּם רֵעֶךָ: אֲנִי, יְהוָה . 16 ... neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbour: I am the
LORD.

From Ruth Messinger, President, American Jewish World Service

October 1st, 2014

As Jews around the world prepare for Yom Kippur — a day when we pray to be “sealed in the Book of Life” for the year to come — the people of West Africa are struggling to save the lives of their loved ones from the Ebola outbreak, one of the most desperate crises of our day.

In Liberia, the country hardest hit by Ebola and one I last visited just two years ago, people are dying outside overcrowded hospitals. The bodies of those who have succumbed to the virus lie in the streets for days, awaiting burial. Ebola has already claimed the lives of more than 2,600 people in West Africa, and the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other authorities have estimated that it might infect between 20,000 and 1.4 million more before the outbreak is contained. Clearly, the book of life is closing far too early for many West Africans.

The virus is spreading like wildfire, in part because many people don't understand how it is transmitted. Some communities view Ebola as something caused by evil spirits; others think it's a government conspiracy. In some parts of Liberia, Ebola is inadvertently spread by traditional healers.

Fear is also fueling the epidemic. Neighbors are accusing neighbors of inflicting a curse. Not surprisingly, those who fall ill — and the families they leave behind — are marked with stigma and shunned. The epidemic has also sparked violence, as the Liberian government has sent armed soldiers to cordon off slums and impose quarantines — often with no warning.

As Jews, these developments are chilling. We know too much about human suffering as a consequence of panic and fear, dating from Medieval times when Jews were blamed for the spread of the plague—and from Nazi Germany, when we were depicted as vermin-like carriers of illness.

Our history and our ethical values — especially our deep belief that every human is created in the image of the creator — command us to act and support those who are struggling with this epidemic and the hysteria it is generating.

That's why American Jewish World Service is supporting trusted community groups in Liberia who are working to quell the panic and to share important public health information that can help bring the Ebola outbreak to an end. These local groups are now going into communities that trust them, to dispel misinformation about how the virus spreads, calm people's fears and encourage a rational response.

...

This Yom Kippur, let's take stock of ourselves and ensure that our brothers and sisters in West Africa get the help they need to overcome Ebola. We cannot stand idly by as others die. Our merits this year are not just measured by how we relate to the creator of this universe, but how we respond when our fellow human beings are in desperate need.

- See more at: <http://blogs.ajws.org/blog/2014/10/01/why-yom-kippur-tells-us-to-fight-ebola>

Deuteronomy 21

- א כִּי-יִמָּצָא חָלָל, בְּאֶדְמָה אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ נָתַן לָנוּ לְרִשְׁתָּהּ, נָפֵל,
בְּשָׂדֶה: לֹא נֹדַע, מִי הִכָּהוּ .
- ב וַיָּצֵאוּ זִקְנֵיהָ, וְשֹׁפְטֵיהָ; וּמִדָּו, אֶל-הָעָרִים, אֲשֶׁר, סְבִיבֹת הַחָלָל .
- ו וְכָל, זִקְנֵי הָעִיר הַהוּא, הַקְּרֹבִים, אֶל-הַחָלָל--יִרְחֲצוּ, אֶת-יְדֵיהֶם,
עַל-הָעֵגְלָה, הָעֲרוּפָה בַּנָּחַל .
- ז וְעָנוּ, וְאָמְרוּ: יָדֵינוּ, לֹא שִׁפְכָה (שָׁפְכוּ) אֶת-הַדָּם הַזֶּה, וְעֵינֵינוּ,
לֹא רָאוּ .
- 1 If one be found slain in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee to possess it, lying in the field, and it be not known who hath smitten him;
- 2 then thy elders and thy judges shall come forth, and they shall measure unto the cities which are round about him that is slain.
- 6 And all the elders of that city, who are nearest unto the slain man, shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley.
- 7 And they shall speak and say: 'Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it.

-Ruth Messenger and Aaron Dorfman, American Jewish World Service, in *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice*

[T]he rabbis explain, the Torah is demanding that the town elders proclaim publicly that they did not *know* that the victim was out there, in the wilderness, lacking sustenance or protection. ... *We did not know*, the town elders must swear. The implication is that, had they known, the person would have entered their universe of obligation, and they would have taken care of him. In other words, know that people are suffering thrusts those people into our universe of obligation.

...

Our tradition offers a model for responding to the people of the developing world without the pity that Sontag and Arendt teach us is ultimately self-serving. The central command of the Passover seder is to see ourselves as if we have been freed from Egypt. We don't sympathize with the experience of slavery or pity the Hebrew slaves; we find ways to relive their oppression. And we don't just imagine freedom; we're told to embody it. Some haggadot even include mirrors on the page where this text is found.

The message of the seder, then, is to see ourselves as intimately connected to our own history of oppression and liberation, and to connect our narrative with the struggles for liberation of other oppressed peoples. This becomes a recurring theme in the Bible—take care of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, we are commanded, because you once were slaves in Egypt.

But the message is deeper. When we become aware of the suffering of others, they enter our universe of obligation. And when they enter our universe of obligation, our own moral identity becomes inextricably tied up in their fate. Acting from a place of that awareness minimizes the possibility of pity and enhances our ability to act. As Lila Watson, an Australian Aboriginal activist, puts it, "If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, let us work together."