

Interfaith Advocacy

*Religious leaders have been instrumental in confronting the genocide in Darfur. In the following pages several leaders explore the roots of their activism and how coalitions of faith groups can impact the future of the region. **Rabbi Harold Schulweis** has served Congregation Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California for 37 years. Schulweis has been instrumental in developing innovative synagogue programs and, after the revelation of the genocide in Darfur, he founded Jewish World Watch to raise the moral consciousness within synagogue communities across the country. He has authored many books, including *Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion* and *For Those Who Can't Believe*. **Jana El Horr**, born and raised in Lebanon, is the American Islamic Congress' Washington, D.C. Program Director and is spearheading efforts to strengthen Arab-Muslim participation in the anti-genocide movement. A Fulbright Scholar, she speaks regularly on issues of pluralism in Islam and lectures on the social, political, and developmental challenges in the Middle East region. Jana works closely with Save Darfur on outreach to the American Muslim community, and collaborates with many interfaith and activist groups to raise awareness about the current crisis in Sudan. **Reverend Gloria White-Hammond** is co-founder of My Sister's Keeper, an organization that supports the initiatives of women in Southern Sudan, and was chair of the 2006 Million Voices for Darfur campaign, organized by the Save Darfur Coalition. She is now working on an initiative to engage the voices of Sudanese, African American, and Muslim women in building a global network of grassroots advocates to work on behalf of all of Sudan. She is a pediatrician at the South End Community Health Center and pastor at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Boston.*

*The three activists spoke with **Rabbi Or Rose**, Associate Dean and Director of Informal Education at the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College. He is a co-editor of *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice* and *God in All Moments: Mystical & Practical Wisdom from the Hasidic Masters*. Or Rose is a member of the editorial board of Sh'ma.*

Or Rose: In a world that is so broken, in a world with so much pain and suffering from environmental degradation, illness, and poverty, how did you decide to become a Darfur activist?

Harold Schulweis: During the Holocaust we constantly asked, where are the priests, the pastors, where is the church, where is the Pope? I didn't want my children or grandchildren to ask the same question — after Rwanda and Chad and Darfur — where were the rabbis and where were the synagogues? “Never again” did not mean never again would Jews be persecuted, but “never again” meant that no ethnic group, no religious group, no racial group would ever again be abandoned as my people had been abandoned. This message has reinvigorated our youth. They have been involved in rallies, protests, marches, and raising money.

Gloria White-Hammond: I'd not planned to become a Darfur activist. My activism is rooted in my ongoing understanding of being called to a bi-directional commitment to God and to one another. I

have always had a particular commitment to people of African descent, since that is where I come from. I've worked in a number of countries in Africa doing medical mission projects over the years. I became involved in Sudan out of my interest in the impact of slavery as a byproduct of the genocide in southern Sudan, and began working with women's groups in southern Sudan even before Darfur erupted. I began advocating for Darfur at the behest of women in southern Sudan who understood that they could not know true peace until the people in Darfur also knew peace.

Rose: Are there particular teachings from your religious tradition that inspire your activism?

Schulweis: Oddly enough, I'll share something from a secular philosopher, Bertrand Russell. He said that the mark of a civilized man or woman is to be able to add up a column of figures and cry. And I think we know a great deal; we know the math, and we can't use the excuse that we haven't heard about Darfur; we know what's happened. And

it seems to me that the very essence of faith in general, our faith, is compassion, which means the ability to suffer with an individual.

One verse that moves me is Abraham's challenge to God before Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom and Gomorrah are not made up of Jewish citizens and when God apparently decides to destroy them the cry of Abraham resonates throughout the prophetic tradition, "Shall the judge of all the earth not do justly?"

White-Hammond: In the New Testament, the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches that there was a man who was beaten and left by the side of the road; several people passed by, until finally the Good Samaritan passed by and responded. He provided for the man's shelter and nursed him back to health. Jesus challenges each one of us to be like the Good Samaritan.

Jana El Horr: I see myself more as a secular rather than a religious leader, but I'll share something from my Arabic culture: "Being silent is something that's status quo." So if we are silent about the violence or genocide, it implies that we are accepting the atrocities.

Schulweis: Darfur activism is a bridge between the secular and religious. We don't need to know what one "believes" but rather what one does.

Rose: How do you understand the relationship between humanitarian efforts and political advocacy in the Darfur movement?

White-Hammond: I understand from a pragmatic point of view why humanitarian groups have been loathe to become involved in the human rights advocacy work. Nowhere is that caution better understood than on the ground in Darfur where the humanitarian groups are regularly harassed by government representatives. Humanitarian workers know that opposing the government would be dangerous for their people on the ground. But if they can't say it, we must be vigorous in our human rights support. When I first became involved in Sudan I was more involved with humanitarian aid, but I felt like I was using a bucket to collect water from a dripping faucet. Though commendable, at some point it only made sense to get right to the faucet and turn it off. We need a two-pronged approach.

El Horr: When we started working on

the issue of Darfur we realized that there was a gap, a disconnect, between the advocacy group and the humanitarian workers. We started a group in D.C. called The Darfur Interfaith Network, which does advocacy and also raises money for humanitarian agencies working on the ground in Darfur. We're sponsoring a concert in October of African music, with Darfurian poets and storytellers.

Rose: Some of the most impressive activists in this anti-genocide movement are teenagers and young adults. Why do you think this particular issue has captured the imagination of youth around the country?

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Schulweis: Today's youth craves idealism and they're not getting it. Their schools emphasize knowledge, education, quotational Judaism, and ritual. Though important, this isn't clearly connected with idealism. Second, our teens are more skeptical than we adults about phrases such as *tikkun olam*, "repairing the world." They want to know if we mean the *world*.

This year is the 92nd anniversary of the Armenian genocide, which was not acknowledged by most of us. If we really mean that we want to repair the *world*, we need to acknowledge others' suffering. This also strengthens our collective voice.

White-Hammond: This is the generation that has lived through Rwanda. They may not even remember Bosnia so much, but they've seen the movie, *Hotel Rwanda*, and they're meeting Rwandans. Genocide is a live issue, and there is a growing interest in all things African. Our young people think globally; Australia is in our backyard and China is the next street over. It's a confluence of issues that have made Darfur important. And young people know they can do something about it. And the prophetic voice that people of faith bring to this, makes it clear that God will stop this genocide, but it will require a communal effort, a global community coming together. This will

change a well established paradigm in history and make a difference.

El Horr: Today, the Internet is playing a very important role — especially with the youth. Blogging and FaceBook help young people integrate current political issues into their lives. Technology is making the young generation more aware of what's going on in the world and it's making them feel that the world is smaller. Through blogging on various activists' websites over the past couple of months, the AIC organized many events in different Arab countries on the genocide in Darfur.

We need to empower Arabs to speak against this genocide and violence. Right now we're feeling ashamed that our own people are not speaking against these atrocities.

Schulweis: Jana, do you think it's possible for Islamic, Jewish, and Christian youth, who are not going to talk about their local issues — the Palestinians, the Israelis, and Hezbollah — to use Darfur as an illustration of the capacity of religion to heal and not just to do war?

El Horr: We have a big network of human rights activists in the Middle East who are interested in Darfur and we would like to link them with activists from other faiths. They could focus on Darfur as a point of unity, defending human rights and calling for an end to this violence.

White-Hammond: I'd like to challenge the African American Church to make the intervention for African people today that was not made for our ancestors 400 years ago. After I returned from Sudan in November, I spoke to the Greater Boston's Black Ministerial Alliance about the crisis. They were concerned about the perilous situation of camps in both Darfur and Chad, about the hospitals not having adequate supplies, the people not having food and shelter. The Alliance set out to raise \$15,000 and eventually raised \$50,000. Though the amount of money is significant, what's more significant is the willingness of African American congregations to express their tangible support for the people of Sudan.

African countries have a critical role to play in influencing and putting pressure on both Sudan and China to do the right thing by their brethren in Sudan. But here, African Americans have a unique opportunity to serve as a bridge to the people of those 53 African countries. I challenge people to be active on three levels. First, locally, if all you do is vote. Second, African Americans need to have a national agenda — Katrina. And third, we need a global agenda and that immediately takes us to Africa. There's no issue more critical than the situation in Sudan.

Rose: There are some people within the Darfur movement who say the Jewish community is too visible in this struggle. What do you think about this claim?

Schulweis: There's nothing more drastic than an invisible community. The responsibility rests with the leadership. We must overcome the notion that the Holocaust, as a genocide, is privatized. It's my genocide, it's my Holocaust. We can't make comparisons between yours and mine. The Talmud puts it very clearly when it says you cannot kill another individual: "Because your blood is not redder than his." We are beginning to recognize the interdependence of our lives, transcend our provincialism and parochialism. And that's why all of us pray in one form or another, "Bless us our Lord, our God king of the universe," and not the king of one particular place.


White-Hammond: Not only could you not get a *minyán*, you couldn't even get a church service in Darfur. Nevertheless, we need to challenge all faith groups to step up with the same kind of passion, intensity, and enthusiasm as our Jewish friends.

El Horr: I was waiting for the question about why there's been a lack of Muslim and Arab involvement in this issue. We need to empower Arabs to speak against this genocide and violence. Right now we're feeling ashamed that our own people are not speaking against these atrocities. The AIC has put together a speakers' bureau called the Arab and Muslim Voices for Darfur to contact student bodies around the country to build a stronger Muslim and Arab voice against this genocide. Our conferences train activists and journalists about the principles of

human rights education and nonviolent activism. We're putting together a Darfur blog so they can find online activism and share their experiences. We've started the "Light the Candle online for Darfur," campaign where one can light a candle online and the person's name will appear on a candle on a map that shows Darfur activism is spreading around the world. We started the candle campaign because one of our activists — an Iraqi who is affected by the violence in Iraq every single day — bemoaned that although violence is a part of his daily life, he didn't want to be detached from other violence around the world.

Rose: Jana, you are speaking with us

from Beirut. How have people there responded to your work on Darfur?

El Horr: I'm currently in Lebanon trying to network with civil society here in order to have a stronger presence in Arab countries, trying also to talk to human rights organizations about our work in Darfur. But I haven't had a good response because everybody's main concern was the Lebanese crisis. And whenever somebody tells me, "we have a lot of problems in Lebanon. We cannot deal with Darfur now," I tell them the story about the Iraqi who has so much empathy, so much will, so much love, so much compassion for others that we must learn from his experience how to be an aware citizen 

A Jewish Prayer for Darfur

Margie Klein

Merciful Creator, please give us the strength to move our hearts to action.

Every day we give thanks to You for our redemption from Egypt, for our freedom as individuals and as a nation. I feel blessed that I have the freedom to work, to study, and to enjoy time with family and friends.


But, across the ocean, in a refugee camp in Darfur, I have a sister who is not so fortunate. She is short and fiery like me, she loves dancing like me, and telling stories to children. Her skin is darker than mine, her language different, but we are sisters.

God, my sister is afraid for her life; afraid for her body; afraid for her children. She cries out to You on behalf of her people. She utters her own version of the Amidah — "Sh'ma Koleinu, Hear our voice, Lord our God, pity us, save us, accept our prayers with compassion and kindness." She prays with every fiber of her being.

But she and I both know that You will not, cannot, act alone.

Source of Compassion, let my sister's cry pierce our hearts like the wailing sound of the shofar. And once our hearts have been opened, help us move from prayer to action; let our action stir others to act as well.

God of Memory, help us to remember our sisters and brothers in Darfur even when it is easier to turn away. Let us hear the echo of their prayers deep within us.

Blessed Redeemer, who liberated our ancestors from Egyptian bondage, help us to take up the mantle of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, and do all that we can to help liberate the people of Darfur, so that they may enter the promised land of freedom, dignity, and hope. 

Margie Klein, a third-year student at the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, is founder and leader of Moishe House Boston: Kavod Jewish Social Justice House. A graduate of Yale University, Margie founded and directed Project Democracy, a youth voting project that mobilized 97,000 college students to vote in the 2004 election. With Or Rose and Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, Margie co-edited Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice, forthcoming from Jewish Lights.

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