

# Genocide: “What are we going to do about this?”

Ellen J. Narotzky Kennedy

For most of my life, I’ve had recurrent dreams that I call my “Anne Frank” dreams. I’m running from the Nazis, with discovery, capture, and death imminent, and I wake up in a cold sweat with my heart pounding and in complete terror. I used to assume that everyone like me had these dreams. Growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust, we were raised on stories of family members who perished; we feared that “never again” would happen all over again.

I never talked about those dreams. But for the past fifteen years or so, I’ve had some experiences that made me feel that something was just around the corner, something that I had to do that would be critically important, a commitment with my life that would be different from my lifelong career as a professor. And whatever it was, it somehow would be related to those dreams.

Over the years, without any conscious intent, I visited some of the sites of the twentieth century’s worst atrocities: Auschwitz, the killing fields of Cambodia, Hiroshima, Rwanda, Turkey — where more than a million Armenians were killed in 1915 — and Greece, where the Nazis wiped out nearly the entire Jewish population. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I was becoming a witness to genocide.

I’m a sociologist, and I’ve been teaching about the Rwandan genocide for several years. After reading Phillip Gourevitch’s terrifying book about those horrors, *We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*, Ina, a student in my class, came to me and said, “What are we going to do about this?”

I was completely taken aback by her question. I thought I’d been “doing” a lot: teaching about genocide, helping raise global awareness, and perhaps creating a lifelong commitment to social justice among my students. But Ina needed something more tangible, something that would make an impact in the prevention of genocide.

I had visited Rwanda a few months earlier. On that trip, a Rwandan college student,

Alice, was our translator. One day in 1994, when Alice was 14, her mother sent her on an errand to her cousins’ home in the next village. When Alice returned, she discovered the mutilated bodies of her mother and father, grandparents, 12-year-old sister, and 9-year-old brother. Alice is an orphan survivor of that genocide.

She took us to a memorial honoring the victims. There was a Quonset hut behind the memorial building. I walked in and what I saw shocked and horrified me. There was a long table filled with skulls and bones, remains of Tutsis who had been killed in the nearby forest but not yet buried. I began to sob. Alice put her arms around me and gently turned me away, saying “You don’t have to look at this. It isn’t your problem.” I thought about Alice’s statement, and Ina’s question, and my Anne Frank dreams, for a long time. I realized that I needed to do something but I had no idea what.

Weeks later, I came across an article about the Genocide Intervention Network. GI-Net was formed several years ago by Mark Hanis, then a student at Swarthmore College. Mark is the grandson of four Holocaust survivors and grew up in a small Ecuadorian community where the Jewish elders bore tattooed numbers on their arms, visible daily reminders of Hitler’s atrocities. From an early age, Mark was determined that the international community should never again allow genocide to happen. When he read early news articles and reports of the deteriorating conflict in Darfur, he was compelled to act.

GI-Net’s mission is to empower ordinary citizens to take steps to prevent and stop genocide. The three goals are to educate people about genocide; to teach people how to advocate with their legislators to prevent or to stop genocides from occurring; and to raise funds to increase safety and security for those whose lives are at risk. GI-Net’s staff of fourteen is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and has over 700 chapters around the country, including one that I started at the university where I taught and

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October 2007

Cheshvan 5768


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one at my synagogue, Congregation Shir Tikvah in Minneapolis.

My involvement with GI-Net began in a small way in 2005. We showed films and hosted speakers on campus and at the synagogue. We raised money for a civilian protection program in Darfur. We began to get requests from other local organizations to speak about genocide, specifically regarding the crisis in Darfur.

And now, about 18 months later, this has become a full-time commitment for me. Last year I spoke at nearly 30 colleges, universities, religious organizations, and civic groups, reaching almost 3,000 people. Our efforts here succeeded in making Minnesota become the thirteenth state in the country to divest its public pension fund from companies complicit in the genocide. Edina, the Minnesota suburb where I live, became the third city in the country, after Chicago and San Francisco, to officially support a United Nations resolution to prevent genocide and to urge our national legislators to take a stronger stand in protecting innocent people caught up in the crossfire of war. We've raised more than \$65,000 from Minnesotans to support efforts to keep women and girls safe from gender-based violence in Darfur.

Genocide *is* my problem. And I've found something to do about it. Along the way, my Anne Frank dreams went away. 

## Discussion Guide

*Bringing together myriad voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of the ideas, we offer the following questions:*

1. Why have Jewish communities been so forthcoming in the anti-genocide in Darfur movement?
2. Given Jewish history, and Israel as an ingathering of exiles, should the Israeli government open its doors to Sudanese refugees?
3. Is divestment a strategy that works in pressuring governments to change policy? Might it be deployed against Israel? Should that impact Jews involved in the anti-genocide in Sudan movement?

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the same time we have to be self-critical about why we are choosing certain injustices. The International Crisis Group lists in alphabetical order 83 crisis situations around the world that it monitors. When we get to "s" in the list we find Sudan together with other "s" crisis-countries such as Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone. Why is it that Darfur in Sudan has become a rallying point for activism while most of the same people have not heard of either Sri Lanka (the government is accused of extra-judicial killings, the rebels of suicide bombings) or Sierra Leone (on the verge of destabilization and possible civil war)? During the Cold War, the United States overlooked the human rights abuses of Western-aligned dictators while being very vigilant in pursuing human rights abuses in Communist countries.

On Erev Rosh Hashana in 1982, the Christian Phalangist militia entered Sabra and Shatila, two Palestinian refugee camps and indiscriminately slaughtered hundreds of Palestinians. The Israeli commission of inquiry found that Israeli troops under direct commands from Ariel Sharon had surrounded the camps and offered logistical support. Public opinion was divided between those who were appalled that the IDF was implicated and those who thought that since the IDF didn't do any direct killing the responsibility was all on the Phalangist militia. When interviewed by Israeli Radio, the head of my yeshivah said, "The first line of the *Avinu Malkenu* prayer is 'Our father, our king we have sinned before You.'" What I have always taken from this verse is that the prerequisite for intervening when someone else is silent is clean hands. 