

NOT OURS

“With all due respect, Rabbi,
why spend energy, time, urging us to shout protest,
to lift up people ground mercilessly into the parched soil
that grows only ghosts?
They are a different fate and faith.
They own a different geography and history.
Theirs is a different language, a different culture.
Have we not burdens enough?
Theirs are not ours.”

How respond?
What answer would satisfy?
There is no utilitarian benefit that will accrue to us
for the spending of our passions.
Would it not be wiser to turn a blind eye
and to seal lips to silence?

The question is honestly presented,
the answer must not be less forthright.
It is not a quick and simple answer
but one that lies deep at the core of our being.
We are Jews, and we have been raised as Jews.
And we have faith in our God who is the God of the entire globe,
Who plays no favorites but embraces all His children,
especially the lame and the poor and the sick
and the frightened and the pariah the lepers of our society.
Are God’s children not ours?

If a child not the color of my skin is tormented by savage hate,
if a child not my own is beaten by men on horseback,
smitten with whips and swords and hacked to pieces,
can our Jewish faith say to us “Sorry, but they are not ours” ...?

If a woman Black, Muslim, Christian, Animist
is frightened and raped and humiliated,
her future wiped out,
will our Jewish soul say,
"They are not ours" ...?

If starvation hovers over the emaciated skeletal forms
of those I do not know
does our Jewish heart merely sigh,
with our hands neatly folded,
"Sorry, they are not ours" ...?

Can we live with ourselves,
can we sleep the slumber of peace when the shrieks pierce
our pretended deafness?
Can we shrug with regret and whisper,
when an entire people is hemorrhaging,
and their dreams are drained away, can we say
"They are not ours" ...?

When we pray to the God of *ha-olam*, the God of the entire universe,
whose children must be protected,
whose orphans and widows
must be lifted up from the depths,
can we mutter, *"Sorry"*
and then conclude, *"Amen" ...?*

The Rabbis taught us to pray
not with lips alone, not with eyes shut.
We are taught to pray with hands, minds and spines.
Build hospitals, water wells, latrines.
Send aluminum solar cookers,
that little girls and trembling women
are not forced to forage for wood with which to fuel their fires,
and become vulnerable to predators
who burn deep brands into the skins of the shamed.
Are they not ours?

Do you know of any Jewish prayer that concludes with the words
"Sorry, but they are not ours" ... ?

We have been better taught by our prophets,
and our patriarchs and our sages:
Be the fathers and mothers
of the fatherless and motherless.
And if they are abandoned by the world,
exposed to all kinds of diseases,
gather our children close.
Prepare knapsacks with mosquito netting,
shoes, medication and colored pencils
along with a note in a language not our own
— in Arabic —
“You are not alone.”

We have memories deeper than the ravines
in which they threw our people.
The noblest vindication of our dead
is that their children and children’s children
will staunch the wounds of innocent men, women and children.
We’ll never allow the genocide of others.

The Prophet answered the question:

*“Is such the fast I desire?
A day for men to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock fetters of weakness.
And untie chords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.”*

Not an easy faith, ours.

Not a faith set to dogmas,
but a faith that offers no excuse
whoever, wherever, whenever.

- Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis