

Address by Noam Schimmel on the Commemoration of the 25th Anniversary of the Rwandan Genocide Against the Tutsi, Kalamazoo, Michigan, June 8, 2019

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Before I begin my address I want to offer my thanks to Albert Gasake for inviting to me to speak and for generously visiting George Washington University and sharing his wisdom, experiences, and perspectives as a survivor in April. We were fortunate to have him for five days. You in Michigan are far more fortunate to have him all the time!

When Al invited me to speak I noticed that today's commemoration falls just as the Jewish holiday of Shavuot is about to begin tonight. This holiday has great significance to me in relation to Rwanda because of one of the scrolls that we read on the holiday, the Book of Ruth.

I am often asked about my work with survivors, my commitment to survivors. When I try to explain how it came to pass that ten years ago after an internship with the Office of the Prosecutor at the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda I realized that my purpose was to support genocide survivors, and to work in partnership with them to advance their rights and welfare, I turn to the Book of Ruth. In it, Ruth, who becomes a convert and joins the Jewish people states something that has always inspired me because it stems from the essential human capacity for empathy.

Empathy does not require leaving one's own identity, particularity, and lifeworld – as Ruth did in a radical and totally self-transformative way. But it does demand stepping outside the boundaries of the comfortable and familiar, getting close to the uniqueness and distinctiveness of others, and sometimes to their loss, pain, suffering and grief. It does entail willingness to change and to grow. And that process remains transformative even as it remains grounded in ourselves, our identities, histories, and experiences which serve as springboards and bridges – and which we need not leave behind in order to empathize. If anything, through our empathy, we develop greater understanding of all those many strands of our selves and of life more broadly. Empathy is an intrinsically reciprocating moral and emotional orientation and dedication.

In the Book of Ruth, Ruth says, 'Where you go I will go, where you stay I will stay, your people will be my people.' That is my responsibility to survivors, that is my respect for them, that is my companionship and accompaniment with them. It is the infinite inspiration they offer me and us in their resilience, courage, fortitude, generosity of spirit, and sheer force of life. It is the greatest honor and privilege to do whatever things I can – however humble, and inevitably insufficient and incomplete - to stand in solidarity with survivors and to embrace them.

On the Jewish holiday of Shavuot in addition to reading the Book of Ruth we also recite the Ten Commandments. Traditionally, Jews come to synagogue specially to hear this once-a-year recitation of these fundamental transcendent values. Irrespective of whether one identifies with a religion or humanism, agnosticism or atheism – or some combination thereof or nothing at all - there are several commandments within the Ten Commandments that are essential to human rights and human dignity which relate to all of us. I state them today as a reaffirmation and as a rebuke of the evil and inversion of the Ten Commandments that the racist Hutu Supremacist movement issued over and over again in the years leading up to the genocide and during the genocide, devaluing, dehumanizing, denigrating, and demeaning Tutsis and encouraging their murder.

Tutsis were mocked and humiliated in the most savage ways imaginable – and in many ways that are unimaginable in their depravity, violence, and how they maimed and destroyed Tutsi bodies, individuals, lives and communities. The appropriation of commandments which at their heart safeguard the value of human life above all, and recognize its sacredness, to kill and destroy - with a brutality that is unfathomable but to which we must expose ourselves if we are to understand the genocide, its impact, and the pain and losses of survivors - is but one example of the propaganda and evil of the genocidal regime and its millions of proponents, believers, and actors.

What do the Biblical Ten Commandments say? What are their moral imperatives?

- ‘Do Not Kill’
- ‘Do Not Steal’
- ‘Honor Your Father and Mother’
- ‘Do not bear False Witness Against Your Neighbor’
- ‘Do Not Covet Your Neighbors Wife, House, and other Property.’

The genocidaires took these principles that safeguard life, peace, honesty, humility, coexistence, and human dignity and replaced them with death, violence, cruelty, lies and slander, collective narcissism, and sadistic brutality.

On this 25th Anniversary of the Rwandan Genocide Against the Tutsi what has endured through these violations of rights and dignity and humanity, what grows and will grow ever stronger, more expansively, more beautifully, more fully day by day, year by year, in healing, in resilience, in community, in creativity, in artistic and literary expression, in rebuilding of lives, is the spirit of the survivors – and of those who lost their lives whose spirit has never left us and never will. Today we commemorate and remember, we protest grave injustice and indifference, and we come together in honor, dignity, defense, and celebration of what it means and meant for those who did not survive,

and for you the survivors to be Tutsi, and to be bearers of infinite human dignity as Tutsis, as human beings with a particular identity and shared experience, with human rights, which we celebrate and affirm.

You the survivors have endured the machetes and the bullets and the clubs and the hoes, the fires and the whistles and the murderous chants of the Interahamwe, the roadblocks and the terror and the days and nights of hiding in the marshes starving, bleeding, shivering in fear, surrounded by death and the taunting of the killers.

But you have survived. Nothing will intimidate your spirit, nothing will deny it, nothing will silence it. Nobody will steal the identity of survivors, the memory of who they lost and why. The genocidaires wanted to kill every Tutsi, to destroy every remnant of them, to leave no one to transmit memory, family, community, culture, and spirit. That is what the genocidaires wanted. And that is what they will never get. Because survivors are writing their memoirs and telling their stories, they are having families and building communities, they are educating and commemorating and transmitting memory with growing confidence and unrelenting hope, with a humble and healthy pride and with indefatigable vigor. They are undaunted. They are building a culture of remembrance, of peace, of defiance in the face of evil, and above all – a culture of life.

As Maya Angelou says in a poem that speaks about the African-American experience but also speaks about the Tutsi experience in Rwanda since 1959 of oppression, racism, discrimination, dispossession, humiliation and hate - despite and through such torment - dignity, confidence, community, empowerment, and self-respect emerge, transcend and renew themselves. Each survivor is a living expression of his or her own unique affirmation of life - of infinite value and beauty - that cannot be suppressed and that stands tall, resolute, and refuses to submit to those who denied and who would deny if given the opportunity, the rights and dignity of Rwanda's Tutsi minority. As Maya Angelou says,

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise.
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise.
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise.
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise.
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise

I rise
I rise.

It was not only in Rwanda by Hutu supremacist Rwandans that the fundamental moral values of the Ten Commandments, of human rights, and of human dignity and decency were violated so massively, ruthlessly, and in the most totalizing way. It was also here in America, in Europe, and all around the world that virtually everyone willfully, knowingly, cruelly, and unforgivably – stood by – complicit - while the blood of Tutsis was spilled over and over again, individual by individual, more than one million times during the genocide.

How did this happen? Why did this happen? Why are we here?

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We are here because of the decisions with catastrophic consequences that US Ambassador to the UN, Madeleine Albright, President Bill Clinton, and Members of Congress made not to act to prevent and stop the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994 when they had the power and resources to do so and the knowledge of its imminence and its unfolding terror.

We are here because when the head of UN UNAMIR forces in Rwanda, Canadian General Romeo Dallaire, asked the then head of the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, Kofi Annan, for permission to take action against weapons caches to be used in massacres against Tutsis, Kofi Annan and the UN denied him that approval, enabling the planning and arming for genocide to expand undisturbed.

We are here because of how the New York Times and other American, European, and world media depicted the Rwandan genocide as a spontaneous paroxysm of tribal violence, when it was neither tribal nor spontaneous, but a meticulously planned and executed political project of genocide against the Tutsi that had been organized over several years. Today, reputable newspapers such as Britain's 'Guardian' – which often has exemplary coverage of the situation of genocide survivors has unfortunately also provided a platform to genocide deniers who falsify history, defame, and incite against survivors and against Tutsis – demonstrating that the ignorance of the media about Rwanda and its history remains.

We are here because the world preferred to watch Nelson Mandela celebrate the end of apartheid when he said, 'Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another' and spoke of, 'glory and hope for newborn liberty' in May of 1994 than to do something about the Rwandan genocide, happening at the same time. Mandela must have myopically meant only South Africa and not Africa as a whole when he spoke of liberty and an end to oppression, because at that very moment he made this claim and in full knowledge of the world, while the African National Congress celebrated South Africa's transition to freedom and democracy, Tutsis were being tortured, raped, and massacred in the tens of thousands every single day in Rwanda.

We are here because of the racist legacy of Belgian colonization and the way it set Hutus and Tutsis against each other, pursuing a strategy of divide and conquer and sowing seeds of hatred and resentment that yielded a racist Hutu supremacist regime which the Belgian government enabled, recognized, and supported from 1959 through 1994.

We are here because Rwanda lacks natural resources and geostrategic importance to the United States and many other powers in Europe, China, Russia, and elsewhere, and because it is a small country in Africa that many people had not heard of in 1994, did not care about, and that many still do not care about.

We are here because of the failure of some human rights organizations - such as Amnesty International – to report correctly, adequately, and early enough on the genocide as it began and because of the failure of humanitarian aid agencies to assist survivors during and in the immediate aftermath of the genocide.

In June and July of 1994 many humanitarian aid agencies were more concerned with the refugee crisis in Congo than the situation of individuals targeted for genocide in Rwanda. That crisis had received dramatic media attention; thousands of Hutu genocidal leaders who had just implemented the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi embedded themselves amidst Hutus fleeing Rwanda. Over 1 billion dollars was spent in aid for them, with little attention provided to the rights and welfare of Rwanda's genocide survivors within Rwanda's borders.

We are here because the development aid industry worked closely and cooperatively with the Hutu supremacist regime ruling Rwanda until 1994 and was complicit in the racism and discrimination they employed against Tutsis and the deep structural violence they employed against them, as illustrated in Peter Uvin's research. Many development and aid agencies working in Rwanda today including UN agencies and the US Agency for International Development as well as NGOs such as CARE, Oxfam America, World Vision, Save the Children and many like them – refuse to recognize

the unique vulnerabilities and disadvantages of genocide survivors. Their lack of support for them and denial of their right to reparative justice further marginalizes and disadvantages survivors.

We are here because the United States government argued during the genocide against bombing the RTLM hate radio station that was inciting violence and mass murder of Tutsis, perversely and disingenuously insisting that free speech - including free speech directly inciting to violence and in fundamental contradiction and violation of our nation's Constitution, laws, and founding principles - took greater precedence than the lives of Tutsis.

We are here because when massacres of Tutsis in the thousands took place in 1959, 1961, 1973, and in 1990-1994 up to the genocide, the UN and its member states were overwhelmingly passive and indifferent, enabling the Hutu supremacist regime to murder with impunity in a series of large scale massacres that culminated in the Rwandan genocide.

We are here because more than any other government ,the government of France was complicit in the Rwandan genocide, trained the genocidal regimes militias and armies, supplied them with weapons, and provided them with diplomatic cover before, during, and after the genocide and disguised part of these efforts under the claims of humanitarianism as illustrated by the research of Andrew Wallis and Daniella Krosiak.

We are here because of the weapons sold by many different countries to the genocidal regime - including the very machetes used to hack Tutsis to death as Linda Melvern, a historian of the Rwandan genocide, has shown.

And we are here because instead of keeping its peacekeeping force in Rwanda and expanding it to intervene and seek to prevent and stop the genocide, the United Nations shamefully -beyond the deepest recesses of the meaning of that word - cut down its force, withdrew most of its troops, and did this with the active support of the US, Great Britain, France, and most of the members of the UN and its Security Council, in effect green-lighting the genocide.

We are here because the United Nations recognized the genocidal regime and allowed it to maintain a seat on the Security Council while it implemented its genocide. Under international law the UN has sovereign immunity - in what is a uniquely pathological irony of the international legal system and of international human rights law – because they enable the UN itself to violate the very laws and protections it promulgates and is meant to protect – giving the UN immunity from legal responsibility for its policies, actions, and inactions. The United Nations itself and not only its member states carries profound moral responsibility for its complicity in the Rwandan genocide.

We are here because the Catholic, Anglican, and most other churches in Rwanda supported and participated in the organization and implementation of the genocide and because churches themselves were used as places in which to rape, torture, and murder Tutsis. Priests and ministers played a central organizing and implementing role in the genocide across the country and actively incited genocide as the journalist Chris McGreal has extensively documented.

For all these reasons, and others, we are here.

For these reasons hundreds of thousands of Tutsi families and one million Tutsi individuals are not alive today. For these reasons, in the heart of Kigali, at the Kigali Genocide Memorial, 250,000 men, women, and children with dreams and hopes and loves and frustrations and pains and memories and

what would have been futures - each with a face and each with a name - are buried in mass graves beside the genocide memorial. At memorial sites all across the country their friends, family members, and other Tutsis are similarly buried and some are unburied - their bodies brutalized after they had been hacked and tortured to death and dumped into latrines and pits, their bodies found year by year by survivors who then bury them in a dignified manner.

Today these over one million individuals tortured and murdered in the genocide cry out to you and to us and ask us why and demand an honest answer. Not the one of prevarications and mendacity the State Department spokesperson in 1994 was instructed to repeat about 'acts of genocide' taking place in Rwanda, as though a massive genocide on a national scale was not taking place, because the State Department and the US government had no interest in acting to prevent and stop the genocide and so they preferred to engage in duplicity, to downplay and deny it.

History can have about it a feeling of inevitability. It happens and quickly becomes normalized and it is hard to imagine it unfolding differently from how we know it to have taken place, however horrifically, immorally, tragically, and cruelly.

But the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi was not inevitable.

Many of its perpetrators are still alive today. Some find shelter in countries such as France, Belgium, and Britain and elsewhere in Europe where all too often the authorities choose not to prosecute them. Here in the United States, some have also found themselves free despite their crimes. Some find shelter in African countries that do the same such as Malawi, Zambia, Congo, Uganda, and Mozambique. Many are released from prison early by the Residual Mechanism, of the UN

International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which maintains the ignoble legacy of devaluing the lives of individuals murdered in genocide and sentencing genocidaires who are responsible for mass murder in the hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands, to sentences that are often shorter than those routinely provided to individuals in the US, Europe, and most other legal jurisdictions who kill one, two, or three people.

Today over 300,000 Rwandan genocide survivors live in Rwanda and most of them lack access to their fundamental human right to reparative justice. Many struggle with inadequate healthcare, housing, and educational opportunity. Many live in extreme poverty and suffer from profound trauma, including the trauma of sexual violence and rape by men who were HIV positive and who used rape as a weapon of war with the aim of causing Tutsi women a slow, tortuous death from AIDs. For many years when these women came to testify as witnesses at the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda they were objectified and instrumentalized for the cause of international justice; their testimony was taken and was necessary to ensure convictions, but they were denied access to life-saving anti-retroviral medications. The UN did, however, insist upon providing these medications to the genocide perpetrators on trial.

25 Years after the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi it's time that the survivors are heard, justice is done, and the rank hypocrisy and impunity come to an end. It is time to remember and educate, to commemorate and respect, and to ensure that the Kinyarwanda phrase - the language spoken by all Rwandans - Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa alike - 'Imana yiriwiwa ahandi igataha mu Rwanda' - God spends the day elsewhere but he sleeps in Rwanda - is no longer evocative of the 100 days of inhumane moral slumber, silence, savage indifference, and inaction that characterized the response of the world's governments and peoples and of the UN to the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi.

It is time that individuals in government with the power, resources, and capacity to intervene and protect human lives and defend human rights finally do so – and that we demand this of them - for the survivors, for their next generation, and for Rwanda today, tomorrow, and always.

I would like to close with the words of a survivor of the genocide, Reverien Rurangwa. This is an extract from his book, 'Genocide: My Stolen Rwanda.'

Reverien says,

“I will never, ever rest. I will continue to fight for justice the rest of my small life in this world of madness. In the twenty-first century, we do not have the right to shut our eyes. In doing this we will build a better world for us, for our children, for all human beings. It is not easy to survive but I endure because I must, out of love for all those who were dear to me. I did not choose to be who I am, but I am proud of it and I did once have the right to be happy, to have a family, to have two hands, two eyes. And that is all I ask of humanity; to be able to live for myself and for my family. I no longer eat, I barely sleep. I think of them. I simply want our people to be remembered, not forgotten.”

And I promise Reverien and the survivors here and elsewhere that I will never rest, that we will never rest, and you will never walk alone in fear and terror as you did when you and your families and friends – your people - *my people* - were abandoned and betrayed.

I thank you.

