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Darfur D'var Torah

Parsha Vayitzei

Rabbi Dollin, Rabbi Gruenwald, Cantor Goldstein, congregants and my peers, Shabbat Shalom. I was not expecting to be on the bema until my Bat Mitzvah, but I have been asked to talk about a sensitive topic linked to my school learning and today's Parsha.

In this week's Parsha, Vayitzei, HASHEM appears before Jacob in a dream, **a dream that forever changed him.**

I have been blessed with parents who enable me to attend Herzl/RMHA. There, I participate in a very important class, Tikkun Olam, the repairing of the world.

It is a service learning class during which, I and my fellow students do an in depth study of a topic, and have a hands-on opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others.

And believe me, we have learned that we, as young as we are, **can** make a difference. **This has changed me.**

Darfur is our chosen topic and Rabbi Dollin was very much willing to turn over the bema to a 7th grade Tikkun Olam student to inform the congregation about our "Change the world. It just takes cents"™ project.

"Change the world. It just takes cents" is the **only** interdisciplinary, interactive, anti-genocide, social action educational program, focused on **process**, driven by middle and high school students from the Denver metro area, as well as from throughout the USA, and as far as England, Israel and Sweden.

To date, we have raised sufficient funds to rebuild the D-Kaire school in Korma, Darfur in Western Sudan. Our current fundraising efforts benefit Darfuri refugees seeking a safe haven in Israel, as well as those who have settled in Colorado. **BUT our work is not yet done.**

We continue to advocate and speak out, loudly and clearly, at every opportunity for the people of Darfur. We write letters, make phone calls, distribute informational materials, and keep the fire burning nationwide by collaborating with national and international initiatives such as the Damanga Coalition for Freedom and Democracy, Darfur Alert, Genocide Intervention Network, Enough, Save Darfur, Amnesty International, and “Tents of Hope”, ...just to name a few.

As recently as May of this year we launched an extensive letter writing and telephone campaign calling for the release of Alghali Shegifat, head of the Darfur journalist association, and other Darfuri journalists and lawyers unjustly arrested in Khartoum. This call to action was picked up by Jen Marlowe - author of Darfur Diaries, Amnesty International and other major human rights agencies and resulted in Alghali's release in July...so you see, even our efforts help...if only in a small way.

We also organize an annual student forum so that our fellow students can join us in making the " **necessary noise**". The 2008 Forum was attended by 580 students, representing 19 schools.

One of the highlights for the first generation “Change the World It just takes cents” students was learning about the political process surrounding Divestment.

The 2nd was standing alongside Governor Ritter as he signed the Colorado Divestment Bill into law.

As a group, we represented the Darfuri youth as runners and speakers at The Dream for Darfur rally, the Denver Olympic Torch Relay, and Colorado Springs' Torch Rally denouncing China's involvement in Sudan.

We recently received an email from a friend in Darfur, a school principal. He wrote: ***"attached is opposite to what your children in grade 8 are doing. They are collecting money to build a primary school while primary school children and their moms are massacred in the Kalma Refugee Camp. Please speed up and spend every effort to stop it. We believe this attack on children and women can be stopped from U.S.A. by adding further momentum to push the government in Sudan to stop its notorious acts against the children and women. No impunity shall be allowed."***

In three short months we, the third generation of "Change the world. It just takes cents"™, have learned about Sudan, about the Darfuri people, about their culture and about the terror that lurks in every corner of Darfur. We have learned that segregation and ethnic cleansing is happening again. People are being attacked, mutilated, dispersed, and killed, **NOT** because of their religion, but because they are different. They are Africans.

Why? What would trigger such horrifying behavior?

While many people have heard of Darfur, few know the history of this present day genocide. The conflict officially began in mid 2003, though reports of attacks go back into the early 1990's. Like most wars, it started over what seemed to be a basic disagreement.

The two main occupants in Sudan were Muslim nomads and Muslim farmers. The nomads would wander in search of land and water to feed their livestock. These same nomads began trespassing on the farmers' fertile land to graze their animals. This resulted in the farmers becoming angry and retaliating for this injustice. The farmer's formed rebel groups to fight against the nomads. However, the Sudanese government supported the **ideology** of the Arab nomads and offered no help to the land-owning African farmers.

Over the years, the conflict has escalated to huge proportions. Today, a government supported militia, called the Janjaweed, meaning man on horseback, continue to attack innocent farmer civilians, burn whole villages, kill children, rape women and do other horrible things. **This is genocide.**

This learning experience has changed me. I now see and understand things very differently.

We are all created by HaShem.

Yet, the Muslim Arab Nomads in Sudan - where Darfur is located - are robbing the African Muslim farmers of their land, their dignity and their lives. They have no respect for the Darfuri because they **think** that they are better, SUPERIOR.

We should never look down on someone just because they are different. This goes for women, race, ethnicity, and even religion. This problem was never what Jacob could have foreseen. I understand...Everything happens for a reason, but why do millions of people have to die?

The ladder in Jacob's dream connects Heaven and Earth. Today, WE need to be the angels taking Heaven's morality and its justice

codes and bring them down to earth.

As descendents of Jacob, we understand injustice... 20 years in Lavan's home, subjected to constant trickery and unfairness. He finally felt it was time to leave and return home. But Darfuri people ARE home; leaving is not an option. We need to help them fight the Lavan they face on their own turf and support their rights to build their lives as they choose.

Ya'akov felt truly alive after his inspirational dream. He was filled with new focus, he "lifted his feet," and **stepped forward** to face the future **realities** of life, family, society and justice.

The direction we take in life is motivated by many factors some negative and some positive. We may choose a safe path because we are afraid of the unknown or because we believe it offers the best guide for the future. Whatever our motivation, it is our actions, even the smallest one, that make a huge difference. ///

Before his dream, Yaakov was nervous as he journeyed into the world. He thought he was abandoned and all alone. Once he saw Hashem's interaction in this world, he realized that he would never be alone.

We MUST show the Darfuri people that they are NOT alone.

We MUST not avoid the problem or it will grow.

We MUST become informed about the situation_

We MUST NOT be a bystander – rather, we must be an upstander and **make conscious decisions** to do the right thing.

We MUST **take immediate action** without a thought - just like Jacob did.

We MUST stand united ; Speak out, write letters, attend rallies.

We MUST say NO to another genocide.

On Monday December 15, 2008 a “Children to Children – Denver to Darfur” candlelight vigil will take place on the West Steps of the Colorado State Capitol from 6:30- 8:00 pm. This event has been organized by the “Change the world. It just takes cents” student activities council. Join us, and students from Colorado’s diverse schools, city and state officials alongside local clergy in a show of solidarity and hope for all victims of the Darfur genocide, particularly the children.

Rabbi Gruenwald will be participating in the program and your presence would be greatly appreciated.

If you have further questions, you may ask me or my teacher, Sara Kornfeld, after services.

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom.