

# A Rabbi Investigates in Sudan

## An Interfaith Delegation Examines the Issue of Genocide

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**I**N JUNE 2005, I WAS INVITED by the Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation to be join an interfaith, interracial delegation of religious leaders to visit Sudan. My gut told me that I had to go. My parents were Holocaust survivors, and I grew up in a home crowded with murdered grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. I was to be the only rabbi in the delegation. How could I not go, with headlines of genocide in Darfur?

The day before our delegation was scheduled to be briefed at the U.S. State Department, the Sudanese government arrested the two senior members of Doctors Without Borders for releasing a report on rape. Kofi Annan's Sudanese interpreter had been arrested only several days before. Journalists were being detained and accused of being spies. I learned that Sudan does not allow people to enter the country who have Israeli stamps on their passports, and that leading officials had blamed Zionists for the unrest in Sudan. I imagined myself being arrested as a Zionist spy.

I felt caught in a classic parental dilemma: balancing responsibilities to my family with an opportunity to serve the larger world; being a dad versus doing something publicly heroic. (My first wife died eight years ago, leaving me to raise four young children.) For centuries, men have sacrificed their relationships with their families to serve a larger cause. How could I betray the message of "never let it happen again" that has



*The author (right) in a Darfur refugee camp, with delegation leader Mahdi Brey (left), as well as an official of the camp and a French journalist.*

been absorbed by every cell of my body? Wasn't this the purpose of my life, wasn't this the *tikkun* (repair/healing) that I was born to do? Yet how could I responsibly do anything that might endanger my life? Being loyal to the legacy of my heritage was in tension with responsibility to my living family.

I talked it all over with Lynne, my wife. We leaned towards my not going, but decided that a lot would ride on the State Department briefing.

**I met the rest of my delegation at** the State Department. Among us was the Reverend Walter Fauntroy, a very close associate to Martin Luther King, Jr., and, for twenty years, a non-voting Congressman from the District of Columbia to the House of Representatives, where he chaired the subcommittee on aid to Africa. Two years prior to our visit, he had chained himself to the gate of the Sudanese embassy in Washington to protest their war atrocities. He was, in short, no political naïf.

The chair of our delegation was the executive director of the Muslim American Society Freedom Founda-

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tion, Mahdi Bray, a progressive political activist for over thirty years who had been to Africa many times.

We were escorted to the office of the chief U.S. official for Sudan, a classically “WASPy” career diplomat

others, the former ambassador to the U.S., the governor of North Darfur Province, cabinet officers, and with Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir. The government also arranged meetings with the senior military and

in Africa, bordering on nine nations, and has just concluded a twenty-year civil war with its southern portion. In Darfur alone there are sixty-five tribes.

Some government officials seemed more truthful than others about the violence and suffering. The issue of rape, however, was particularly minimized or completely denied by many. Clearly there had been extremely serious, government-sanctioned violence, with many tens of thousands killed and widespread rape. Yet there was a sense among many whom we met that the worst phase was over. The government had stopped its air strikes in support of the Janjaweed militia, and peace talks between the government and the Darfur rebels were about to begin in Abuja, Nigeria. A new government, as stipulated in the peace treaty with the south, was to be organized. A sense of hope was expressed by many.

***Our delegation was accorded great*** respect wherever we went, and we were repeatedly asked what Americans thought of events in Sudan. We ended every meeting with a prayer circle, much to the surprise of our hosts, who always participated. Most of the people we met had never met a rabbi before, were curious about the Jewish community, and were always surprised when I said that we followed the events in Darfur and were very concerned about genocide.

We concluded that all allegations regarding rape, human rights violations and genocide must be fully investigated, and that all responsible parties must be held accountable by both the laws of Sudan and international statutes. We believed that government officials wanted to make peace. We spoke and prayed with them about their hunger for it. We

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— the kind that my mother always warned me were anti-Semitic. I was deeply impressed with his knowledge of Sudan and his grasp of issues, and within a one-hour conversation I was assured by him that we would be safe — based both on the situation on the ground and the official meetings on our itinerary. I still was not quite convinced.

As we were leaving, he touched me on the shoulder and said, “My Jewish mother would never forgive me if something happened to you.”

At that moment, I decided that I would be going.

***The delegation set its goals as follows:*** to discern the current political, geopolitical and social realities in the country; to express the call of the interfaith community in the U.S. for an end to all forms of armed conflict and human rights violations in Sudan; to discern, in consultation with the Sudanese parties, how members of the Abrahamic faith communities (Christian, Jewish and Muslim) of the U.S. might play a constructive role in helping to relieve the immense suffering in the country

Upon arriving in Sudan, we were surprised to be greeted by the chief diplomat for relations with the U.S. For the next five days we were given VIP treatment, replete with a motorcycle escort and access to the highest officials. We met with, among

political officials of both the United Nations and the African Union, who are the peacekeepers on the ground in Darfur. In addition, we spoke with the staff of the American embassy, religious leaders, leaders of the rebellion in southern Sudan, and officials of international aid agencies.

***We were taken to a refugee camp*** in Darfur. My parents had been refugees, and I anticipated this visit with dread. The camp of 70,000 was clearly a “show” camp, which kept me thinking of Theresienstadt (Terezin) as we met with the camp director, walked around and interviewed inhabitants. Everyone looked healthy, including the children. The men were most agitated about not having work. When asked why they were there, it was hard to get clear answers. I felt conflicting emotions: relief at how well the children appeared, disappointment about not seeing more human misery, and shame about that feeling. How much were we being lied to, I wondered — and how much could I, feeling vulnerable as the identified Jew, publicly challenge the government?

Every member of our delegation had been to Africa before, and four had been to Sudan. We were all deeply impressed by the complexity of the situation, which was not nearly as simple as the media has portrayed it. Sudan is the largest single country

all felt that nearly everyone we met with listened to us. We believed that there was power in being an Abrahamic delegation in a religious country, and that our ability to speak with a collective voice as an interfaith group gave them hope.

We were wrong —and we were a fairly sophisticated group.

**President Bashir and senior Sudanese** officials repeatedly lied, with great sincerity, right to our faces about the past and about their intentions. They were credible, in part, because the United Nations and African Union officials were telling us about hopeful developments happening on the ground at that time.

Over the course of our week in Sudan, we met the cultural and political elite of the country. At one evening reception, we encountered many of the founders of the first government following Britain's departure — scores of elderly Sudanese with Ph.Ds from European and American universities. They were charming, erudite, lovely people who did not admit to us any government wrongdoing. Yet tens of thousands had already died. I have no idea how much these members of the elite actually knew such facts, but I think I now understand better how privilege and denial function together — as happened in Germany. It made me reflect on my own levels of denial as a privileged person in our global society.

**Since September, 2005, the situation** in Sudan has rapidly deteriorated. There is no unity among the rebels in Darfur, who fight among themselves, while the government is again providing outright support to the Janjaweed militia that attack and kill the people of Darfur. There

**Information about the April 30<sup>th</sup> Washington demonstration** against genocide in Sudan can be found at the website of the American Jewish World Service (AJWS, the main Jewish organizer), [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org). There you will be able to participate in a "Million Voices Postcard Campaign," letter-writing, community and student organizing, and more.

**JEWISH CURRENTS and The Workmen's Circle** are supporting the April 30th demonstration by **postponing our organizational "wedding" ceremony**, which was scheduled for that Sunday. **The new date for the ceremony is May 7<sup>th</sup>**. Watch your mailbox for an invitation.

is still widespread rape. Aid workers are also being attacked and many of the humanitarian organizations may need to leave. There are over a 100,000 Sudanese refugees over the border in Chad, with tension mounting between Chad's and Sudan's governments.

On January 27<sup>th</sup>, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a forty-two-page report that chastises the government of President Bashir for making token gestures while murder and torture go unpunished. "The human rights situation for Darfurians was made worse by the failure of the government to prevent and protect the internally displaced villagers from being killed, assaulted and raped by armed militias," the report states. ". . . In some of the attacks there was clear government involvement," with troops fighting alongside militiamen or targeting civilians in alleged response to rebel attacks.

The report described Sudan's situation as the world's worst ongoing humanitarian crisis, with at least 180,000 already dead and 2,000,000 displaced persons, many of whom are at immediate risk of dying from hunger or disease.

***This is a slow genocide. It lacks***

the drama and intensity of Rwanda or Serbia, but tens of thousands more Darfurians are now at risk of death. Colin Powell, while secretary of state, called it genocide, while the British government has called it a successful campaign of "ethnic cleansing."

We Jews are the people who said "Never Again," and we are being vocal about Sudan. In large part through the work of the American Jewish World Service, the Jewish community has taken a leadership position in calling on the Bush administration to take an active role. While the African Union has taken on the responsibility for creating safe conditions in Sudan, they do not have the necessary troops or logistical capacity to do so. They must have aid from NATO and the UN. The U.S. can play a crucial role in making this happen. Otherwise, hundreds of thousands of people will die.

On April 30<sup>th</sup> there will be a demonstration in Washington, D.C. calling on the U.S. government to act. We need hundreds of thousands of people to be there. Every Jew who has ever asked or wondered why the world didn't help us during the Holocaust now needs to ask: Will I stand up against genocide on April 30<sup>th</sup>? ■