

Breastplate of Judgment
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Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles
2/15/08 Parashat Tezavveh

The homophobia that killed Oxnard teenager Lawrence King this week is a reminder that hatred continues to take a terrible toll in our world. The death this week of Congressman Tom Lantos reminds us of an even bigger hate crime. Born in Hungary in 1928, Lantos was the only Holocaust survivor ever to serve in the U.S. Congress. He was also a supporter of gay marriage, reproductive freedom, environmental protection, and gun control.

In his final years, one of Lantos' priorities was breaking the silence on the biggest genocide of our era: the ongoing massacre of ethnic minorities in the African country of Sudan, in the western Darfur region. At least 200,000 innocent men, women, and children have been killed in the last five years by the Janjaweed militias, condoned by the government of Sudan. Sudan's international supporters and trade partners, notably China, have averted their eyes from this continuing slaughter: although China is sensitive to world opinion at the moment, since it is the host of the upcoming Olympic Games.

This week's parashah talks about the choshen ha-mishpat, the breastplate of judgment: some kind of bling that the high priest was supposed to wear in the sanctuary (Ex. 28:15-30). The breastplate of judgment bore twelve precious stones symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel, and the stones would light up in some mysterious way to convey the message of God. The phrase "breastplate of judgment" may be a little uncomfortable. It sounds so judgmental. It's meant to remind the high priest that God is watching, and exemplary behavior is expected.

Who's the high priest today? Three weeks ago we read what happened at Sinai: God called Israel to be mamlechet kohanim, a dominion of priests (Ex. 19:6). A nation of priests. In the absence of the Biblical temple or tabernacle, all of us are the priesthood, all of us are the high priest. In this sanctuary, and in every place where ethical questions are engaged, all Jews wear a metaphorical breastplate of judgment, inviting moral scrutiny.

You've heard the phrase chosen people. What the heck does it mean? Some modern Jews renounce the label; others defend it; still others imaginatively redefine it. I like the reframing of Martin Buber: he said what's special about the Jews is our habit of turning our chastisers into our heroes. If chosen people means anything, it means rejecting moral complacency. Chosenness means never getting to say "Everybody does it." What everybody does, isn't good enough. Besides, we Jews are uniquely positioned to grasp the enormity of genocide. As victims ourselves of history's most systematic massacre, we must be appalled that the world takes hardly more notice of today's genocide than of yesterday's. If the most shocking thing about the Holocaust was how little the world interfered, what can we say about the inadequate response more recently, to Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia? And as we sit in this sanctuary tonight, our invisible breastplates of judgment are flashing with the genocide going on at this very moment in Darfur. Sometimes it may be puzzling or ambiguous what God wants of us. At the present hour it is no mystery.

In nine weeks we celebrate Passover, a story that begins with plagues and a hardhearted pharaoh. That narrative is our Jewish archetype of oppression and liberation. Three years ago I spent Passover in Ukraine, where I got to visit numerous Holocaust sites. At one killing field the following text was displayed in Hebrew and Ukrainian: Kol d'mei achicha tzo'akim elai min ha-adamah, Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Those words come from Genesis (4:10), the Cain and Abel story.

Some of us saw a presentation tonight by Jewish World Watch on the crisis in Darfur, where "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." After services we will be making picket signs for a March 7 rally at the Chinese consulate in Wilshire Center. We aim to pressure China to change its Sudan policy before this summer's Olympics. China hopes this issue will go away. It's up to us to make sure it doesn't.

Tonight I ask you to uphold our people's belief in confronting tyrants and liberating the oppressed. I ask you to vindicate the martyrs of the crusades and the pogroms and the Holocaust, the murders of Jews, of Oxnard's Lawrence King, of every person victimized by hate. I ask you to honor the legacy of Congressman Tom Lantos. I ask you to wear the breastplate of judgment, the sacred sign that we are conscious of God's test.

We know God is not satisfied with average morality, average compassion. We know we must do all we can to stop genocide, in the place and time where it is actually happening, in the manner actually available to us. Please demonstrate with us on March 7, or contact Jewish World Watch with a contribution of time or money for this important cause. Help us to confront the Chinese pharaoh with the Darfuri plagues. If being Jewish means anything, it means fighting this injustice, and fighting it now.