

Reflections on Rwanda
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These days, whenever I travel to Israel, when landing at the Ben Gurion airport, my heart lightens and it feels as though I am visiting my second home. When I leave Israel there is sadness, but there is also a comfort in knowing that I will return.

When leaving Rwanda I felt a different type of sadness. I could not discern whether it was because I was leaving the incredible people I had spent 10 days with or because I felt that I was leaving a heartbreaking Rwanda no better than before I had arrived.

We experienced 9 days of Rwandan history, culture, food, language, struggles and triumphs, and all of it infused with a deep unspoken sadness matched with a deep and unspoken anger.

Upon listening to the survivors and visiting the mass graves and memorial sites, the initial reaction was one of anger, both internally and externally. Hearing that the genocide began in 1959 and only got worse until it ended in 1994, we had to ask the question, "Why was nothing done?"

There is anger at the Germans and the Belgium for creating a class system and superiority within a group of people who were otherwise a unified community, who shared a culture and a language. Colonists divided them based on falsified distinctions and no one stopped them. After creating this class system, they forced hatred throughout Rwanda until the groups took it upon themselves to continue to spread the hatred themselves and then to spread death. There is also anger towards the international community and of course, towards each other.

One million people in 100 days were the numbers we kept hearing, but it was not the numbers that made the situation shocking. It was the way in which the murders were carried out. Some made it into a game and others into a mindless activity, ultimately creating a culture where finding the most horrifying ways to torture a human being led to personal gratification and a sense of identity.

We saw rooms full of skulls with holes in them that one could only assume was from blunt head trauma. We saw rooms filled with skeletons. Witnessing skeletons of women clutching their children and babies has left an indelible rawness in my memory and a sense for the immense human suffering of this genocide.

For the first few days the feeling of helplessness, sadness, and doom for this country was suffocating. Then I thought of Hillel and his quote, "If you save a single life, you have saved the world." This created a slight opening for hope which began to expand when we learned about the variety of projects being done to educate people about the genocide

and provide some comfort for the people of Rwanda who lived through it. This hope continued to grow when the Ministry of Gender said that education was becoming a priority. It is only through education that the survivors and their children will be empowered to make Rwanda a place for positive change.

Although I often heard Hillel's quote throughout my childhood, and often repeated it in my adult life, it held little meaning beyond the colloquial. After my time in Rwanda, this quote is now infused with meaning and consequence. Not having individual means to contribute financially I felt helpless, but then I started thinking about the communities I have been a part of and the power those communities can have.

Maslow identified basic needs of all humans on 5 levels. Those levels include physiological needs, safety needs, the need for love and belonging and esteem. With 60% of the population living under the poverty line and having lived through a recent tragedy, there is a good chance that their basic needs within all of the levels are not being met. The majority of people in Rwanda are not receiving nutritious meals or clean water, safety seems to be on a sliding scale and the feeling in Rwanda was one of pain, sadness and loneliness.

I plan on taking the next few weeks to both process what I have experienced and identify the communities I have been a part of that can help fulfill some of the above mentioned needs. One of the most important communities are the 17 other people that participated on the study mission. Hopefully, we can bring meaning to Hillel's quote and truth to the declaration "Never Again."