

## REMEMBERING THE ROHINGYA

## HOW DO WE REMAIN CONSCIOUS OF SUFFERING IN THE WORLD?

## TORAH BLESSING

## DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

This sermon considers the moment in the Joseph saga when Joseph finds himself imprisoned in Pharaoh's palace. Rabbi Salth highlights the following section of the story, when Joseph's dream reveals that the royal cupbearer is about to be released. After telling the cupbearer of his dream, Joseph entreats him:

**Genesis 40**

<sup>14</sup> But think of me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place.

יד כי אם-זכרתני אתה, כְּאֲשֶׁר יִטֵּב לְךָ,  
וְעָשִׂיתָ-נָא עִמָּדִי, חֶסֶד; וְהִזְכַּרְתָּנִי, אֶל-  
פַּרְעֹה, וְהוֹצֵאתָנִי, מִן-הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה.

<sup>15</sup> For in truth, I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews; nor have I done anything here that they should have put me in the dungeon."

טו כי-גָּנַב גָּנַבְתִּי, מֵאֶרֶץ הָעִבְרִים; וְגַם-פֹּה  
לֹא-עָשִׂיתִי מְאוּמָה, כִּי-שָׂמוּ אֹתִי בַּבּוֹר.

Yet despite this, the text goes on to say:

**Genesis 40**

<sup>23</sup> Yet the chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him.

כג, וְלֹא-זָכַר שָׂר-הַמְּשָׁקִים אֶת-יֹוסֵף,  
וַיִּשְׁכַּחְהוּ.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- The text does not indicate how the cupbearer responded to Joseph's request. How do you think the cupbearer felt hearing it, after learning the change in his fortune that was approaching?
- Why do you think the chief cupbearer forgot Joseph?

- (c) The text does not indicate how Joseph felt in the two years until the cupbearer remembered him. What thoughts might have crossed his mind?
- (d) Think about a time you were meant to remember something and failed to do so. What happened because you forgot? How did you feel when you realized you had forgotten, and what did you do when you remembered?

Rabbi Salth connects the cupbearer's forgetting of Joseph (and his suffering) to Rabbi Salth's own experience of "forgetting" (or turning a blind eye to) the plight of the Rohingya people in Myanmar (Burma), despite the Jewish promise that "never again" should a people suffer genocide as ours had:

Rabbinic commentary has a variety of thoughts on why the cupbearer did not speak up about Joseph. Rabbi Jacob ben Asher summarized the thoughts of many when he wrote that the cupbearer simply went back to his regular life in the palace and forgot about Joseph.

Recently a congregant asked me to share my recommendations on how to initially teach her pre-teen child about the Holocaust. Among my suggestions was to include, eventually, the mantra that many of us have heard – that as Jews we should never forget what happened. And we should do whatever we can to prevent genocide from occurring ever again to any group, of any kind.

I remember when I was young deeply committing myself to this tenet while also believing, naively, that the world could never again commit such an atrocity. Oh, how wrong I was.

I was wrong about the brutality of humanity and I was also wrong in believing I would be deeply devoted to preventing another genocide. Like the cup bearer in this week's story, I have gone on with my regular life and forgotten this cause I'd committed myself to.

The news the plight of the Rohingya people in recent weeks has slapped me out of my forgetful state.

Like the cupbearer and Joseph, the connection between us as Jews and the Rohingya people is circumstantial. The cupbearer and Joseph shared an experience of incarceration. The Jewish community and Rohingya people share an experience of persecution and genocide. Rabbi Salth identifies with the cupbearer when he speaks about his own difficulty "remembering" the suffering of the Rohingya.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) The unspoken assumption underlying Rabbi Salth's understanding of the cupbearer's relationship with Joseph and the Jewish community's with the Rohingya is that shared experience -- of incarceration or genocide -- creates a bond between fellow sufferers, and a corresponding responsibility towards those with whom that experience is shared. What do you think about this?
1. Does this imply that those who have not shared the experience of suffering do not have a responsibility to act?
  2. Do you feel a sense of responsibility to act on the issue of genocide around the world because of the Holocaust? Why or why not?
  3. As the Holocaust recedes into more distant memory, will people still feel the kind of connection to the Holocaust Rabbi Salth expressed, and will the Holocaust still motivate Jews to act?
- (b) Reflect on the issues or causes about which you are the most active or philanthropic. What role, if any, does shared experience play in determining what you "remember"?

Reflecting on the nature of the impact that Joseph and the cupbearer have on each other, Rabbi Salth goes on to note:

Just as Joseph's dream interpretation predicted, the cup holder is released and this week's portion concludes with these ominous words: "yet the cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him" (Genesis 40: 14-15 and 23).

This closing verse reflects a timeless truth found throughout the portion and in fact our tradition. That we human beings influence each other's lives and occasionally make all the difference in another person's future. Sometimes these individuals are family members, friends and colleagues and other times they are complete strangers.

Jewish tradition repeatedly emphasizes the interconnected nature of life and our ability to affect the fate of others. To be sure, our tradition emphasizes the idea that we are obligated to our families and our immediate community; but it also impels us to help those we do not know. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes: "The Bible commands us in one place to love our neighbor, but in thirty-six places to love the stranger." Why? "Our neighbour is one we love because he is like ourselves," he says. "The stranger is one we are taught to love precisely because he is not like ourselves."

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Rabbi Sacks notes the Torah reminds us to love the stranger 36 times. Where else in life do you see these reminders, and how do you respond to them?
- (b) In reflecting on this, are you more or less inclined than you would have been previously to become involved in a cause with which you have little to no connection?

*Rabbi Salth wrote about the actions he took when he was “slapped... out of my forgetful state” to donate financially and contact political leaders and encourage their support of S.2060 - The Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act of 2017. He has since posted links so that others at Central Synagogue can do the same. If you are moved to do the same, check out <http://www.centralsynagogue.org/news/detail/preventing-genocide-and-protecting-the-rohingya-people> for links.*