

HAFTARAH: Comfort, oh Comfort My People

BY JEANY HELLER

Nachamu, Nachamu anni (“comfort, oh comfort My people”) begins the haftarah portion that is read on the Shabbat following Tisha B’av, which commemorates the destruction of the first and second temples as well as other historical oppressions of the Jewish people associated with that date. It is the first of seven specially selected haftarot that are read on the seven Shabbatot between Tisha B’av and Rosh Hashanah because they deal with consolation. Some say that the first use of the word *nachamu* refers to the destruction of the first temple (and the murder of 100,000 Jews) and it is repeated to acknowledge the destruction of the second temple (and the murder of 2.5 million Jews).

Last year, Kolot’s Tisha B’av observance included reading aloud a list of about 25 genocides that have occurred not only to the Jewish people but to other ethnicities and nationalities in world history. I compiled the list (from <http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/>). Included was the genocide that occurred in Guatemala of 200,000 indigenous peoples (Mayans) in 1981-1983, which I pretty much randomly selected it for the list.

About six weeks later, I was part of a small group organized by the Rainbow World Fund (a queer humanitarian aid organization) that traveled to Guatemala bringing donated medical and school supplies that were personally delivered to health clinics, schools, and orphanages. We met with many community-based organizations that work to better the lives of the impoverished indigenous Guatemalans and learned about their work and the modern history of the country.

It’s a scenario that’s all too familiar. In the 1950s, the democratically elected president supported many popular socio-economic reforms that were threatening to US corporate interests. Under the guise of a communist threat in its backyard, the

CIA sponsored a successful overthrow of the Guatemalan government, thus putting an end to any kind of reform and eventually resulting in a 36-year civil war which saw a succession of increasingly repressive, brutal, and murderous military dictatorships. The most deadly years of the civil war were from 1981 to 1983, mainly due to the fact President Ronald Reagan actively supported the brutal rightist militaristic regimes through arms sales and with the promise of US military intervention if necessary (a reversal of US policy from previous administrations, when the human rights violations in Guatemala by the government were deemed very grave offenses).

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It was obvious that although the civil war officially ended in the mid-90s, the wounds had not yet healed. We met with a founding member of GAM (Mothers of the Disappeared), a gentle elderly lady whose son vanished in the early ‘80s when he was a university student. She has not to this day been able to discover what happened to him. Her sadness was palpable. We visited a church that had been taken over by the military to be used as a base for torture and murder and got a tour of a room on the grounds where torture had been routinely practiced—bloody hand prints on the wall remained as testament to what occurred there. We visited another church where an American priest was murdered in the rectory as retribution for his advocacy on behalf of the Mayan people.

As we talked with these individuals whose lives and worlds had been so scarred as a direct result of the actions of my government, I so much wanted to

provide words of comfort and consolation. I was mortified to know that my government had a direct role in this genocide and that I didn’t know more about this recent history. Since I was the only Jew in my group, I spoke of the holocaust my people endured and the swift justice that ensued and assured them that justice and worldwide consolation must surely be coming one day soon to them. Then, much to my horror, I was to learn that Israel routinely sold arms to the military regimes in Guatemala (even in the years when the US refused to do so due to human rights violations). The government of Israel also provided military training and helped to build munitions factories. When villagers weren’t sure if the armed men that appeared in their villages were military or rebels, they could tell by the Israeli Galil rifles when it was the Guatemalan army. The sad irony of this is that when the United Nations was considering Israeli statehood, Guatemala was the first country to vote in favor of it. It was devastating to me that, though I had been speaking words of comfort specifically as a Jew, I was completely ignorant of what the Jewish State had wrought.

And what had I wrought? I was in my teens and early 20’s during that time and paid little to no attention to the actions of government leaders. Others my age did and made efforts to intervene but I was too wrapped up in my own self. Also, since I had no relationship with religion or spirituality at that time, I was unaware of the moral imperatives I was obligated to pursue. Perhaps if the Internet had been around then I would have paid more attention, but that’s not really an excuse.

I focus three times on these words from the haftarah – Comfort Oh Comfort My People – for the Mayans of Guatemala. Once for the role played by my own government, once for the role of the Israeli government and once for my previous lack of attention to their suffering. May the Guatemalan government and military leaders who perpetrated the genocide be brought to justice one day soon. And lets us remember another doubly worded commandment we are obliged to carry out – Justice Justice Shall you Pursue. ■