

Commemoration 2020 – Noam Schimmel
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To the survivors, I want to begin by saying Turi Kumwe. And nothing and no one will ever separate us.

You, the survivors, are the Tutsi fighters of Bisesero and they are your proud heritage of heroism, dignity, and resistance. You are the resilient and extraordinary Tutsi widows of Nyamata and Kibuye and Cyangugu, you are the Tutsi of Butare and the unbowed Bagogwe, you are the heroic Tutsi women of Taba who shared their testimony in the Akayesu trial of their experience of rape and sexual violence and in so doing advanced justice and truth, you are the Tutsi who were made to live in the Bugesera by a racist regime in a place selected and calculated so that you would starve and suffer and die in its unfertile land of marshes and flies and snakes.

But you did not die.

And today that land is not barren.

It is fertile, it blossoms and blooms with life.

You – the Tutsi targeted for genocide between April and July of 1994 and living within Rwanda's borders at that time – you were and are invincible and incredible in your resilience, your strength, and in your survival – in who and what you had to face during the genocide and what you face everyday as survivors and what you experienced through decades of discrimination, persecution, hostility and humiliation.

You had no country in which to find refuge – temporarily or permanently - you had no place to escape to. You lived as a persecuted minority within Rwanda never knowing when the next massacre would take place. You only knew that there would be no justice for Tutsis, no equality, and no freedom and that your safety was never assured, your rights never respected.

Your bravery is beyond description.

You fought during the genocide and you fight today without arms and without conventional forms of power but with the weapons, the wisdom, the courage and the strength of the spirit.

And you are no less invincible for the wisdom of your spirit being the source of your strength.

As Churchill thundered in British Parliament during World War 2, 'We will never surrender.'

And you don't surrender and you never will.

I salute the way you stand tall, proud of who you are, your heritage, and your hopes and dreams – always in generosity and never in malice, but also demanding justice – including reparative justice - as is your fundamental human right protected by international human rights law.

Anyone who asks survivors to forfeit this right or who violates it betrays survivors, discriminates against them and against Tutsis as a whole, and undermines the unity of Rwanda and your ability and the country's ability to heal, rebuild, and flourish.

It is long overdue that aid agencies such as USAID, the US Agency for International Development, respect and enable the fulfillment of the human rights of survivors - as a small exceptional minority of aid agencies have rightly and honorably done – such as Britain's Department for International Development. Other NGOs working in Rwanda such as World Vision, CARE, Save the Children, Oxfam, Women for Women International, and the Clinton Foundation should all be regularly assessed by the extent to which they respect and fulfill the human rights of genocide survivors and be held accountable when they fail to address their vulnerability and disadvantage and when they marginalize them, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Currently, they are failing, and in failing they are unconscionably sustaining and exacerbating the impact of genocide on its survivors. The same is true for many of the European national aid agencies working in Rwanda and for UN aid agencies who shamefully show little consciousness, compassion and responsibility by being indifferent to the fate and welfare of survivors and neglecting to respect and fulfill their human rights.

Despite the horrors of the malice and cruelty you have faced – you, the survivors, are resolute and defiant and you stand unintimidated, and we stand with you.

The West African symbol of the Sankofa bird that looks backwards in order to look forward poignantly reminds us that we must always honor the memory of the past in order to build a new, healthier, more peaceful and prosperous future. We must know who we are, what we have experienced, where we come from to know where we are going, how and why.

For without this consciousness and intentional memory we will lose our roots, our balance, and our capacity to sustain momentum, forge ahead, and fly into the future.

Today your ancestors, your mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, cousins and friends are with us in spirit. They give us strength as we remember. We promise them that not only do we remember them and honor their dignity and infinite worth, but we remind those who want to forget them of their humanity, of their will and right to live, and how this was so brutally assaulted and destroyed during the genocide because they were Tutsi. We honor them as individual human beings and we honor them for the very reason they were murdered, for being Tutsi.

To those who wish to forget and deny let me quote from the head of the Red Cross mission in Rwanda during the genocide, Phillipe Gaillard, who saved tens of thousands of individuals during the genocide, speaking about those killed during the genocide.

“You cannot kill their memory. The memory is the most invisible and resistant material you can find on the earth. You cannot cut it like diamond, you cannot shoot at it because you cannot see it, nevertheless it is everywhere, all around you.”

That memory is also you, it is a living, breathing, memory and you and your people and the memory of your people are our most priceless, most beautiful diamonds. That memory has survived and will survive eternally, it is the survivors and your children, and it will be your children’s children,

Some now speak of the genocide against the Tutsi using euphemisms and a subtle form of what is all too charitably called revisionism but which amounts to a form of genocide denial – they speak as though they are unwilling to acknowledge the difference between victim and perpetrator, violator and violated, abuser and abuse.

We must vigorously reject such obfuscation and willful suppression of the truth whatever its purposes, whoever adopts it for whatever ends, and wherever it is found whether in Rwanda or abroad. Nothing justifies it.

It is essential that we acknowledge with specificity, honesty, and historical integrity who pursued genocide against whom and in what ideological, political, cultural, and historical context. We must never conflate the victims and the survivors with the killers and torturers and we must never downplay the responsibility of the genocidaires – morally and legally – for their actions.

When we discuss the Armenian genocide we make clear that the Ottoman Turkish government perpetrated genocide against the Armenian Christian population of the Ottoman Empire. When we discuss the Holocaust of European Jewry we make clear that the German Nazi regime and its active accomplices across Europe including hundreds of thousands of European civilians and millions more of indifferent, complicit Europeans targeted the Jews of Europe and North Africa for genocide.

And when we discuss the Rwandan genocide we make clear that Hutu Power, a Hutu Supremacist racist and genocidal government with the massive widespread participation of Hutu militias and hundreds of thousands of Hutu civilians dehumanized, denigrated, and set about the destruction of the Tutsis in the genocide. Simultaneously, they killed tens of thousands of Hutus in the crime against humanity of extermination for their refusing to submit to genocide against the Tutsi.

The Rwandan genocidal regime had the full support of the French government before, during, and after the genocide. The French government is both legally and morally responsible for its active complicity with the genocidal government and through that complicity, its participation in the genocide. The French government sold it arms, trained its militias, gave them a safe route to Congo from which they attacked Rwandans and Congolese for years on end never ceasing in their genocidal intent, and provided them with diplomatic cover.

The Belgian government – which has a long and vicious racist history in Rwanda prior to Rwanda’s independence and once Rwanda won its independence and became a Hutu supremacist regime - and the United Nations left more than two thousands Tutsis at the ETO school to be marched to their deaths and slaughtered in Nyanza in 1994, as the genocide began. Shortly thereafter, the United Nations withdrew the vast majority of its peacekeepers in Rwanda, signaling to the genocidal regime that the United Nations and the world’s nations would do nothing to stop them from pursuing genocide.

The world’s great powers – Britain, Germany, the United States, China and Russia joined France and Belgium in their betrayal and abandonment of Rwanda’s Tutsis. Their inaction and indifference was essential for the genocide to take place and they were each and all complicit in it.

We must also acknowledge that Rwandan citizens chose as individuals to join militia groups like the Interahamwe and to participate in the genocide. They did not merely succumb to the government’s genocidal ideology and leadership. They were not passive. They participated in it extensively, and in the vast majority of cases willingly and enthusiastically. They had the capacity to reason, to empathize, and to resist and reject genocide. But they overwhelmingly chose murder, torture, rape, looting, and genocide.

The killers killed and raped and tortured during the genocide against the Tutsi because they shared a racist ideology of hatred, dehumanization and devaluation, a sociopathic philosophy of domination and cruelty and destruction, a violent and vicious jealousy and resentment, an ideology of killing and misogyny and a worshipping of their own power and capacity for staggering cruelty and sexual violence. They acted in full awareness of what they were doing. Genocide is not a mitigating

circumstance for murder and anyone who kills in a genocide should face at least the same accountability and punishment as someone who murders in peacetime.

Churches of every type - with the exception of the Jehovah's Witnesses - participated in the genocide, with priests and ministers organizing and often leading killing and directing Tutsis to churches where they were then slaughtered. All of them – Catholic, Protestant, Anglican were involved at the highest levels in organizing and implementing the genocide. Many, including the Catholic Church, have given safe haven to genocidaires in an act of extreme and ongoing evil revealing the falseness of their apologies and hollowness of their purported repentance. How can anyone in Rwanda have any trust in the Church when it provides shelter to genocidaires in France and elsewhere in Europe and around the world? Furthermore, Rwanda's churches were overwhelmingly complicit with the discriminatory Hutu supremacist ideology of the regime ruling Rwanda from 1959 – 1994 and its persecution of Tutsis that lay the groundwork for the genocide against the Tutsi. For that they have yet to face justice.

The apologies that some of the churches have offered in Rwanda are utterly incomplete, unacceptable, and fail to take sufficient responsibility for their actions and to provide survivors with reparations from the churches themselves. If a survivor is hungry than a priest and a minister must give them food, if a survivor lacks shelter, then it is the responsibility of the church to find housing for them, if a survivor is tormented in sadness and suffering then it is the church that must show them love after so many decades of showing them hate.

Genuine Houses of God are not large, expensive church buildings that convey power and might where pomp and ceremony seek to invoke God. Houses of God are the small, humble houses of survivors. It is in the voices of survivors that you will find the voice of God as expressed in the Bible, 'A still, soft, quiet voice.' The greatest house of God is a home of a survivor built in solidarity for his or her safety, well-being and peace. One home like that has more divinity imbued in its walls and sheltered within it than one thousand churches built and sustained while survivors remain without adequate shelter.

That the Catholic Church in Rwanda and in Rome sees it fitting to raise 70 million francs to build a new church in Kibeho and another church in the heart of Kigali in Nyarugenge, before it repairs the lives of the survivors it harmed so profoundly and before it finances adequate memorials in the very churches where its priests murdered Tutsis speaks to its divisionism, its shameful contempt for genocide survivors, and its failure to advance peace, justice, and unity in Rwanda.

There are some within the Catholic community – largely outside its corridors of power and hierarchy but closest to fulfilling its true promise - such as the organizations Catholic Relief Services and Caritas, who historically have reached out to survivors and worked in partnership with survivors to advance their rights, welfare and dignity with care and compassion. They set the standard which the Church should emulate and their work with survivors needs to be restored, deepened, and expanded dramatically.

The Church's endless clamor for forgiveness for its sins reflects an unconscionable and inhumane narcissism that is as Godless as it is immoral. Those who have committed grave crimes should not be concerned with feeling forgiven and with placing such selfish and onerous demands on survivors,

but with the sincerity and depth of their own remorse, apology, repentance, and repair. Forgiveness may or may not follow and that is a private matter for each individual survivor. Demanding it as if by right is arrogant, morally corrupt and morally degrading. Moreover, the dead cannot forgive and those who murdered – including priests and ministers - murdered the very possibility of forgiveness.

To those who look for the presence of God in our world you will find his spirit and his presence in conversation with a survivor because that is where God is, that is who God loves, and that's where Imana is standing and with whom we must stand. Remember what the Bible says, imploring us to care for the widow and the orphan – over and over again it repeats itself, perhaps because so often we fail to listen and follow that imperative.

There was a very small number of individuals within Rwanda who resisted and rejected the genocide and who rescued and protected Tutsis. They made their own very different choices, despite the enormous pressures upon them from the genocidal government and from the Hutu Power movement. Some paid the ultimate price with their lives for such resistance. Many were able to both resist genocide and to protect their own families while doing so. They faced the same brutal genocidal government but they chose to exercise their consciences. They are the minority that chose goodness when the majority chose evil and we salute their memory and honor them today as a part of our community of conscience.

It is they who are the keepers of Rwanda's flame together with you, it is they who honor Rwanda and Rwandans together with you. They are the individuals who rose to the challenge of morality

and humanity. They remind us of the human capacity for goodness and justice in the face of evil and cruelty. Some of you are alive and with us today because of the humanity and conscience of those brave Hutus who defended your human rights and honored your humanity. Not only did they reject genocide, they actively intervened to rescue and protect Tutsis and defend their rights and their very lives. Today we honor their extraordinary humanity; they are the guardians of Rwanda and are our eternal light. They give us strength and hope and show Rwanda the way forward.

Thousands of Tutsis were rescued because of them – babies and children, men and women, the young and the elderly. These are the names of some of the Hutu rescuers who chose life and defended freedom, equality, and justice: Joseph Habineza, Zita Karuhimbi, Hakizimana Celestin, Alexis Habarugira, Nyitegeka Sosthene, Damas Mutezintare, and Helene Nayituriki. Our gratitude to them is boundless and cannot be expressed in mere words. They are Rwanda's highest and truest priests and pastors and ministers of unimpeachable conduct and purity of spirit. They are the emissaries of Gihanga and the love of Imana who gave you shelter underneath the wings of their love and their compassion.

They need no special clothing, nor ornaments, nor incense and vessels, nor prayers to be God's messengers. They have no hierarchy or central authority, neither in Rwanda nor abroad. They provide no absolution of sins. But they are the truest conduits of God, unmediated by the trappings of hierarchy, of wealth, and of Abazungu colonial power.

For survivors, survival is not something that happened in 1994 and ended on July 4th of 1994.

Liberation for survivors is a daily and daunting effort, not something that happened on a historical date and is finished. It is a process and a project, a commitment and a struggle, a mountain to climb and many obstacles to surmount – physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological, social, economic, and in other ways each and every day.

Often the summit of the mountain recedes and each day appears further and further away. But many survivors also summit that mountain everyday they get up and live another day, go to work, have children and raise families, form friendships, celebrate milestones, express themselves creatively, and advocate for the rights and welfare of genocide survivors and educate the public about the genocide.

Survivors mourn and grieve not only in April.

Survivors remember their mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, sons and daughter, cousins and nieces and nephews, friends and neighbors every single day. In the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening. Upon waking and upon sleeping. Survivors carry the pain and the loss of genocide with them at all times.

It is a profound grief, longing, an open wound, and loss that aches and that every survivor carries and lives with in his or her own unique way and that echoes within them.

And therefore all of us who are not survivors – it is our responsibility to accompany survivors as compassionate, kind, and humble companions who listen with respect, care, and attention, who help when help is asked for or necessary, and who never turn a survivor away and leave them alone, unaided.

Our solidarity must not be merely of today but of everyday.

It must be an enduring and substantive commitment, of the heart, of the mind, of our energies, and of our efforts.

It must be a true partnership.

Here in the United States we need to join survivors in ensuring that every state has mandatory genocide and human rights education that includes teaching students about the Holocaust of European Jewry, about the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi, and about the Turkish genocide of the Armenians. Less than 12 states have such legislation today 26 years after the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi and this must urgently change. Massachusetts has now initiated legislation for Holocaust and genocide education and let us hope - and more than hope, let us work together - to ensure that every state follows suit and teaches students about the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi.

We must advocate for UNESCO to create resources for genocide education to be used globally – not just within the United States. Knowledge of the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi is poor not just in the United States but also in Canada and Europe and in Africa and around the world.

This must change.

Survivors in Rwanda still need safe housing, they still need legal support, they still need scholarships for education, they still need grants to alleviate poverty, and they require intensive health services to meet their unique needs, including mental health and trauma support services. Mental health provisions for survivors are woefully inadequate and have led to a mental health crisis and suicides because there is not enough support for them.

We must all listen respectfully and with humility to survivors with open hearts and minds. We must trust you, include you, and stand with you.

We must understand the difference between equity and equality. Because the failure to recognize the distinctive inequalities, injustices, and vulnerability survivors face which are social, systemic, and economic fails at equity and ultimately makes a mockery of equality, and while this harms survivors first and foremost it also undermines Rwanda and Rwandans as a whole and the goal of a united Rwanda.

Justice and human rights cannot be built on denial of hard realities, your realities.

You, the survivors, have rights to consultation, compensation, participation, representation, inclusion, rehabilitation and reparation and these must be respected.

You, the survivors, are a sacred remnant.

You, the survivors are the living testimony of your parents and grandparents.

August Wilson, the African-American playwright said about African-Americans and it speaks to survivors too,

“We’re still here, still managing through it all to find a way to live life with dignity and a certain amount of nobility.”

You who were hated for being tall stand tall as ever.

You who were hated with ferocious jealousy and resentment for your beauty are beautiful as ever and always will be. Nothing and no one will ever change that.

You who were hated for your dignity are dignified as ever and no one will ever be able to take that dignity away from you nor to take it away from every Tutsi murdered in the genocide.

It is intrinsic to their and your humanity.

May the Biblical prophecy of all living at peace under the shade of a fruit tree and the vision of the prophet Micah that all should love peace and do justice in a spirit of humility come to define a self-reliant and sovereign Rwanda. A Rwanda in which all its diverse inhabitants whatever their faith, background, and identity live without fear on the basis of freedom, equality, and justice as guaranteed by Rwanda's Constitution.

As we commemorate, let us remember the words of warning and admonition of Primo Levi, a survivor of the genocide of the Jews of Europe whose words to memorialize that genocide cry out to us today and every day and who echo an ancient Jewish prayer, "You who live safe, in your warm homes. You who find, returning home in the evening, hot food and friendly faces, meditate that this came about. I command these words to you. Carve them in your hearts, at home, in the streets, going to bed, rising, repeat them to your children."

Remember the Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

Remember Murambi and Nyanza and Ntarama and the Nyabarongo River.

Remember our Tutsi people who were abandoned to their killers.

Remember.

Turi Kumwe.