

# Cry for Zimbabwe

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Pesach, when we think about freedom, has coincided this year with further atrocities from a latter day tyrant, the nasty, evil little man, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe.

In 1966 I was a student in Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem when I was dispatched on a mission to Bulawayo, in what was then Southern Rhodesia, to stand in as a temporary rabbi for a few months. I found a wonderful small community of some 7,000 Jewish souls living in a sort of African Garden of Eden. The countryside was open and lush. Well-cultivated and managed farmlands spread out into the bush. African villages contrasted with comfortable, spacious, colonial housing. One level of society enjoyed excessive benefits precisely because another part of society did not. But still it was idyllic.

I arrived just after Ian Smith had declared Unilateral Independence to ensure that whites remained in control rather than cede power to the African majority. While proclaiming undying loyalty to the Queen, Smith and his followers reviled Prime Minister Harold Wilson, and the British political classes. I still have a roll of toilet paper with Harold Wilson's face on it that was popular there at the time.

The Jews of Bulawayo were amongst the most welcoming, caring, and nice people I have encountered, and some friendships have lasted to this day. The community covered the spectrum of wealth and background. It included greenhorns, relatively recent European refugees, and older established colonial families, relaxed in their privileged lives, secure in the national hierarchy, and in some cases in the most senior of positions. On warm summer evenings in the elegant suburb of Kumalo (the anti-Semites, who existed in deepest Africa as malodorously as in the rest of the world, called it Jewmalo) the custom was to take leisurely "Sundowner" cocktails around the swimming pools and tennis courts that were set elegant imperial gardens.

There some Orthodox, very modest, families who struggled to keep their Judaism alive under difficult conditions, far from the major centers of Jewish life. The main Orthodox synagogue of Bulawayo was in the Anglo Jewish style in that it included a spectrum from very Orthodox to merely occasionally traditional. Two youth groups, right wing Betar and left wing Habonim, vied for the attention of the younger generation, and I still remember a safari I took with a group of youngsters to the Wankie Game Reserve where we spent the nights in mud-and-thatch huts listening to the lions roar around us and the hyenas scratch at our doors and knock over the refuse cans in search of an easier meal.

The Jewish school, Carmel School, actually welcomed all races and religions. It was a model of multicultural and religious education, until Ian Smith effectively forbade the races to intermingle with his Land Apportionment Act.

Black resistance began to emerge, gently at first but during the late sixties and seventies pressure and violence increased. Most of the black politicians were impressive. But Robert Mugabe, the London University graduate with a PhD, reserved and dignified, seemed so honest and idealistic that his Marxist tendencies were overlooked and there was almost universal support of him. His party, ZANU, won a majority in the first free and fair elections over Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU and Abel Muzorewa's UANC. Things looked hopeful.

Over the years Mugabe has cruelly disappointed everyone except his cronies. He has turned from saint to sinner. First, he systematically hounded the Ndebele leadership and physically attacked other opposing politicians. Then he slowly destroyed economy and attacked the successful white farmers, giving their lands to ill equipped supporters who simply allowed all the good agricultural systems to wither and decay. He proved to be corrupt and incompetent. And his scapegoat (there always has to be one) was Britain, the colonial power, long after it had ceased to have any influence whatsoever.

Slowly, Mugabe transformed a Garden of Eden into Hell, not just for the white settlers but also for his own people. Those few concerned whites who stayed to help eventually gave up or were murdered and most of the talent simply left. Violence, murder of opponents, gangs modeled on Nazi thugs with Nazi named leaders inevitably led to despoliation of all Zimbabwe's riches. Mugabe destroyed the country and drove hundreds of thousands of all races into exile. He simply showed that Marxist fanaticism (in truth any ideological egalitarianism), whether white or black, contains the seeds of its own destruction.

What was more depressing was the refusal of black South Africa to do anything to rein in the increasingly despotic Mugabe. It seemed from Mbeki to Zuma, that black politicians would tolerate any sin so long as a black was responsible. Zimbabwe has been allowed by its supposed allies to suffer under the yoke of the Wicked Pharaoh and none rose to deliver (let us hope this will not last for four hundred years). There is a current African joke that a doll with missing limbs, no hair, teeth, or clothes is called a Zimbarbie Doll!

Recently there was an election in Zimbabwe. It is patently clear that the majority of citizens want change and a break from an inflation rate of 200% a year. They want Mugabe out and it seems equally clear they voted that way. But he has refused to accept the results and arranging re-counts! Meanwhile his thugs are rampaging through the country terrorizing, exiling, and killing opposition. He and his cronies will hang on until either death or assassination.

Intervention from a friendly, neighboring state could help, but, sadly, black Africa stands by washing its hands and pocketing its profits. It is so sad to see yet another example of what destruction humans can wreak on each other and sadder still to see that none is prepared to act.

The unsavory hypocrites of the United Nations Human Rights Council sit idly by, as always. The delegates may grandstand and applaud each other, but continue to turn a blind eye to one horror after another all over the world.

They are all Pharaohs, pretending to listen, to be reasonable, but in truth possessing hardened, selfish hearts. So long as they have one scapegoat—the Jews—to blame for every ill in the world, why care about the rest? They continue to be selective about which refugees they support. Rarely those who need help most. It's politics, not morality that decides.

If Africa, let alone the rest of the world, cannot or will not deal with this evil, what lessons can other oppressed people take? What hope for Tibetans? I don't know whom to cry for the most. Our religion is often criticized for being out of touch. But it seems to me the whole issue of people oppressing their own is indeed a human problem. Ideology of any sort is irrelevant if humans won't act fairly and honestly!