Board Member Brie Loskota’s Speech at “Urban Seder” Event

I’m a mom of three. I was born in the Philippines, was raised Pentecostal, went to a Jewish seminary for grad school, and founded a Muslim leadership institute. I’m deeply ambivalent about religion. I also work at USC at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

A few years back, I walked over to Exposition Park from my office at USC. It was the day before an exhibit I had been working on about the Rwandan genocide was set to open at the California African American Museum. I gave a tour of it to the Rwandan dance troupe that was scheduled to perform at the opening. I watched as they walked through the exhibit, looking at the historic pictures, and reading the panels. Then they entered the gallery that featured photos of survivors: orphans and widows from the Rwandan genocide. The pictures were taken about a decade after the violence: portraits of despair, of hope, of survival, of struggle.

I watched the dancers closely, silently panicked, afraid that bringing them to the exhibit was a mistake. They were survivors and the family of survivors, hardly distinguishable from young kids that you might find in a hip-hop dance group except that they and their families bore a terrible burden.

One of them started crying as she looked at the familiar faces of people on the museum walls. She came up to me and said, “why did you do this?” My panic below the surface began to boil over- had we messed it up, had we angered her, had we dishonored her suffering? I guess I didn’t respond because she asked me again: “why did you do this?”

“Because people don’t know what happened and they need to know,” I hesitantly replied.

She said, “We thought the world had forgotten”.

A few months ago my fellow board members at Jewish World Watch visited a refugee camp in Chad that houses mostly women and children who fled the Janjaweed militia’s genocide in Darfur nine years earlier. Talking about our work providing solar cookers to the women so that they didn’t have to leave their camp to forage for wood where they risked further violence, the organization’s co-founder Janice noticed that a woman in the back of the room began to stir. The woman was surprised they were there because so much time had passed since their trauma that surely the world had forgotten.

We eat maror to remind us of the bitterness of oppression from ancient times until this very day that persists in the world. Rabbi Shulweis, the visionary who inspired the creation of Jewish World Watch, reflected on his memory of eating maror. His grandfather told him to chew the herb slowly and really taste the bitterness. The ritual is not just about remembering, it is about having an experience that motivates you to act. It is not enough just to “know”: we must compelled ourselves to “do.”

Rabbi Shulweis has said that in every sermon, the most important part is not the knowledge but the action that comes next: u’lechein meaning “and therefore.”

Knowing there is suffering and oppression in the world, what are you compelled to do? U’lechein. And therefore.