

Fall 2005

**“The Dirt of Africa” by
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On the last day of kindergarten, my teacher gave me a kiss on the cheek. I loved that gift; it made me feel important and special. That night my mother washed my face and I burst into tears because I was afraid she had washed off that precious kiss. Being the good mom that she is, she calmly explained that kisses never wash off; they are with you always. I thought of this as I prepared to take the shower I had dreamed of for two days.

I spent Yom Kippur of 2005 in Chad where I learned about the lives of the splintered Sudanese families that had survived the ongoing holocaust in Darfur. Now, I could never be as clean as I was before—the gritty dirt of the African high desert accompanied me home along with the stench of garbage on the streets of N’jamena, and the pesticide sprayed on us as we left Chad. With me was a rabbi who led the trip, my travel mates, a Muslim- Lebanese couple who were therapists at one of the refugee camps and a British girl who was a volunteer. We took turns reading passages that were meaningful to us. As I spent that time thinking about ways to atone for crimes committed against these people, I realized that now I had the unbearable weight of bearing witness.

What was the point in going if I was coming home, only to stand idly by? Kids barely existing day-to-day as they tend small herds of goats and sheep they managed to bring across the border, or by making bricks for their huts in the camps. They are painfully thin; hungry all the time. They get diarrhea from a lack of hygiene; night time is very cold as they are no blankets or warm clothing. They’re homeless, stateless, have no education and many have seen their parents slaughtered in front of them. No child should live like this.

It has taken months for me to be able to fully understand my experience. I have to stop myself when talking about the children; telling it is too painful. Once I harness the sadness and turn it into a positive mission, I can tell the stories about the lives that need to be saved and cultures that need to survive. Africa needs healing and as Jews, we need to play a part in that.

Back home in my comfy bathroom, the water reached that delicious temperature of tingly steamy heat and I wondered, What if this shower washed off too much of Africa? At that moment the symbolic history of cleansing oneself became apparent. What would it take to wash away enough of the dirt of Darfur to prepare myself for the stories to be told of my Yom Kippur experience? I remembered my *beit din* when I was eight months pregnant. My big belly and I submerged in the mikveh, reciting prayers and promises for a clean start and a commitment to a new way of life. I knew then, that the dirt I brought home with me is now part of my soul; there is no amount of oatmeal almond scrub that could remove it.

Please join me in doing your part: join our “Dimes for Darfur” campaign, give tzedakah to the Temple’s Darfur Project (to help build water wells), and keep telling others to call, write, and speak out against genocide. The rabbis taught, “It is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” Together, we can make a difference.