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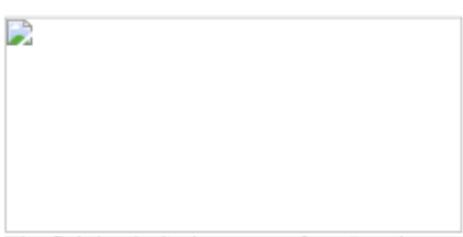
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Subject: Rabbi Shmuley Boteach

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Rabbi Shmuley Boteach on Rwanda and Syria (INTERVIEW)
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The fighting in Syria, as seen from Israel. Photo: Tsuri Cohen-Arazi/ Tazpit News Agency.

JNS.org—Known as “America’s rabbi,” Shmuley Boteach has lived an unconventional life for an Orthodox rabbi—from running for the U.S. Congress, to authoring several bestselling books, to hosting TV shows, to serving as a spiritual guide to Michael Jackson. Through it all, Boteach has been outspoken about the issues he is passionate about.

The latest issue Boteach has prioritized is raising awareness about genocide. As the 20th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda approaches next spring, and while the world grapples with its response to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons, Boteach organized and will moderate a Sept. 29 panel in New York City featuring high-profile guests and experts on genocide, including Rwandan President Paul Kagame, noted Holocaust survivor and human rights activist Elie Wiesel, and Jewish philanthropists Sheldon Adelson and Michael Steinhardt.

Boteach spoke to *JNS.org* about his upcoming event, Judaism’s teachings on genocide, the Rwandan genocide, the situation in Syria, and how the international community can prevent genocide in the future.

[JNS.org: What does Judaism have to say about genocide?](#)

Rabbi Shmuley Boteach: “The responsibility to protect (an international concept that became a United Nations initiative which says that nations have a responsibility in preventing human rights crimes such as genocide) is something I have worked on with U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Samantha Power, and it also has biblical origins. In Leviticus 19:16 it says: ‘Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds.’ This gives us [Jews] a moral responsibility to act. It obligates us to intervene when we see the rights of the oppressed or the downtrodden, violated.”

What did you experience on your two trips to Rwanda, and how did the experience shape your views?

“Profoundly, first of all, to see a country come back from the brink like that is amazing. Just twenty years ago people were hacking each other to death in the streets with machetes. Now they have one of the fastest growing economies in the world. They no longer speak in terms of whether you are Hutu or Tutsi, they say they are all Rwandans now. It is amazing.

“Visiting the areas where genocide took place such as the Ntarama church, where 5,000 people were massacred inside, made me, I apologize for this, vomit. It was the most gruesome and horrible thing I have ever seen.

“See the Rwandans have a different way of commemorating the dead [than the Jewish people]. For example if you visit Auschwitz, you don’t really see bodies or ashes anywhere, because in Judaism, we must bury the remains as quickly as possible. In Rwanda, you can see still the skulls and bones from the massacres everywhere.”

How does the situation in Syria compare, from a Jewish perspective, to the former genocides in Rwanda and Darfur, and ultimately, to the Holocaust? Do you consider the situation in Syria to be genocide?

“Whenever poison gas is used, it is a trigger for genocide. We saw its use in World War I that led to mass casualties that triggered the Geneva protocols (which made it illegal to use chemical

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weapons). Again, in World War II, it was used by the Nazis during the Holocaust, and by Saddam Hussein in Iraq. I find it very personally difficult to convey how disappointed I am that [Syrian President Bashar] al-Assad will not be punished for gassing children. Once you gas children, you no longer deserve to be a leader; you deserve to be in jail."

Does the fact that Syria is in a civil war, between sides that are both perceived as enemies of Israel, change the Jewish thought-process or moral compass on getting involved?

"This is a very good question, one that was asked by many of my congregants during Yom Kippur. While they are valid concerns, I cannot accept any scenario where Jewish or Israeli interests can be fundamentally at odds with basic human rights. We describe ourselves as a light unto nations. How can we as a light unto nations, say it doesn't care about the gassing of children? Every Arab child is God's child; indeed, every child is god's child. We cannot turn a blind eye to that. I believe that Israel's security interests will always be served by its moral interests first."

What practical steps can be taken to prevent future genocide?

"What is lacking is a United Nations that is moral. It was founded during World War II to prevent these types of wars. Why hasn't Assad been condemned as a war criminal?"

"Two answers: Russia and China. They have veto power on the Security Council and can subvert the whole process. The U.N. has become a joke, because dictators can control the whole organization."

What messages do you hope will come out of your upcoming panel discussion on genocide?

"My objective to fill the glaring whole concerning genocide discussion and awareness, I want to show that the world does give a damn about genocide. We want to demonstrate that genocide prevention is vital of interest of people. We are bringing together the two biggest names on the subject: Rwandan President Paul Kagame, who instrumental in ending the Rwandan genocide and Elie Wiesel, who is the living embodiment of the six million lost in the Holocaust. It is a very historic event that I hope will raise awareness of genocide.

"Genocide: Do the Strong Have a Responsibility to Protect the Weak?" is scheduled for Sunday, Sept. 29, 6:30 p.m., at the Great Hall at Cooper Union in New York City.

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