Save Our Children: Their Wounds Are Not Always Visible"

By Dr. Brenda M. Greene

It is clearly understood that the Gaza Israel War is a catastrophe. More than half of the people in the Gaza Strip are children, and it is estimated that thousands are displaced and witnesses or victims of violence and death. Many will experience trauma as a result of this devastating war for decades and their wounds will not always be visible. They have been tortured, starved, maimed, and killed and in some cases subjected to sexual violence. According to a UNICEF report, after 80 days of fighting, nearly 1.9 million people were displaced, approximately 85% of the population, and half of them were children.

How do we move forward? How do we save our children. At the 17th National Black Writers Conference, *All That We Carried, Where Do We Go from Here*? we explored how we move forward in the midst of crucial issues such as a rise in voter suppression, escalating white supremacy, racial health disparities, climate disasters, book bans, and the censorship of curriculum. Writers, scholars, artists, and creatives came together to discuss how they have used poetry, fiction, and essays to highlight these issues and to explore them more deeply. They offered a way forward in their prose and poetry. This is a blueprint for what we do as academics, writers, and leaders in the university and in our respective professions. This blueprint is the essence of **advocacy** and a way forward

I took advantage of this model of advocacy when the City University of New York issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) to address the rise of Anti-Hate crimes in our community, city, and nation. I made a deliberate decision to write a proposal that would bring together students, faculty, staff, and the community to determine what actions we could collectively take to

address this devastating war and its consequences on Palestinians, Jews, our health care workers, our armed forces, and ultimately on the future generation, our children. I thought that **if we could not** determine a course of action in a space (a college campus) designed to encourage debate, to interrogate, and to discuss plans for action, then we had chosen the wrong vocation.

I contacted my colleague who led a major consulting firm focused on anti-racism work and she referred me to a consultant who was Black and Jewish and who had done extensive work in this area. After meeting with her, I decided to host a "Coffee Talk" with my Jewish colleague on "Unpacking Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia." Approximately 60 faculty, staff, students, and community members came together for three hours and participated in a series of activities that included writing and sharing individual experiences of what it felt like to be the "other", reading essays on the Crown Heights riots between Orthodox Jews and African Americans and Caribbeans, viewing excerpts from the videos: "A Town Called Victoria," and "Repairing the World: Tree of Life," reading Tony Medina's (2012) poem, "The Onion" in *An Onion of Wars* and listening to an excerpt from *Searching for Zion: The Quest for Home in the African Diaspora* Emily Raboteau (2013). These activities established a community and a safe space for raising consciousness and deepening participants' knowledge regarding the experiences of Blacks, Jews, and people in the Islamic community.

As I thought about how I could discuss saving our children for this book chapter, I reflected on the "Coffee Talk" and on how writing, reading, and talking about these issues, which could be volatile, were beginning points for examining how we move forward. I reflected on the disturbing video clip of children from the Gaza who said " "Life is bad here. We found a

car full of garbage and we rode on it," and the video clip describing 13-year old Mohammad Al Yazji who had lost his mother in an Israeli airstrike, and who as the eldest, was left alone to care for his seven siblings in Gaza (the youngest is only six months old). #IsraelHamasWar #Gaza #Palestine.

I thought about how nine-year-old Elaf and her family witnessed an Israeli strike on the house next door in Deir Al Balah. They had already escaped their home in the Bureij refugee camp after days of Israeli bombardment. When their dreams of a truce turned into reality, Elaf returned home to discover childhood treasures and the fate of her friends amidst the rubble. But as the truce ended and the bombardment restarted, Elaf and her family were forced to relocate once again." #Aljazeeraenglish #Gaza #Palestine

We have witnessed the psychological effects of war and displacement in numerous countries including Nigeria, Rwanda, the Congo, the Sudan, Germany, Poland, the Ukraine, Palestine, Yemen, and Somalia among others. Children, displaced from their homes, are barely surviving and face death, destruction, and trauma on a daily basis. Ishmael Beah (2008) in his memoir *Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* describes his fear as he anticipates death.

> He waited a few minutes, but the three of us didn't say anything. He continued: "Every time people come at us with the intention of killing us, I close my eyes and wait for death. Even though I am still alive, I feel like each time I accept death, part of me dies. Very soon I will completely die and all that will be left is my empty body walking with you. It will be quieter than I am.

Beah, who is from Sierre Leone, fought for almost three years against the rebels before he was rescued by UNICEF in 1997.

The psychological effects of trauma cannot be overemphasized. When an individual experiences shock, an injury, or a wound, he/she/they become overwhelmed. Research on the effect of trauma resulting from war reveals that children are the youngest victims of war-related psychological trauma that can persist for years and in many forms. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/longing-nostalgia/202202/the-invisible-wounds-war-its-youngest-victims#:~:text=Childr

Black people in the United States are still experiencing multigenerational traumas that are a result of the injustices experienced by African Americans from slavery and that persist today in the form of institutional and systemic racism. This legacy of slavery and its psychological effects have been well documented in research on Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) by scholars such as Dr. Joy DeGruy (2017) and Dr. Selena T. Rodger(2021).

Let us remember that the wounds of those who suffer from trauma are not always visible. We are in a crisis and could be on the precipice of a third World War, one that will be different than any war we have experienced. Anti-Semitism has risen. Discrimination against Palestinians and Muslim Americans is also rising. We have a responsibility to "ACT" and we have a history of the ways in which Blacks and Jews have collaborated to address racial inequity. The time is NOW. In short, we have a moral responsibility to engage in behaviors that will facilitate change.

Let us draw upon the history of Blacks and Jewish people working together. Alliances between Blacks and Jewish people date back to the Civil Rights Movement. In 1965 Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched alongside Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King in the five day march from Selma to Montgomery to Alabama; however the "Grand Alliance" between

African Americans and Jews collaborating to ensure social justice and racial equity has weakened and is very fragile in these politically turbulent times. In *Blacks and Jews in America: an Invitation to Dialogue,* co-authors Jacques Berlinerbland and Terrence Johnson (2024) told NPR's *Morning Edition* that “until we properly understand it, we might not be able to make sense of current political developments." In *Jews and Blacks: A Dialogue on Race, Religion, and Culture in America*, Dr. Cornel West and Michael Lerner (1996) explored Black and Jewish relationships. These two public intellectuals, in a transparent and critical dialogue, debated and expounded on subjects that have united and caused tension between Blacks and Jews. These dialogues and between Blacks and Jews should be revisited.

Where do we go from here? How can we build on past and current relationships between Blacks and Jews? How do recover from war? What are the lasting effects of trauma? What happens when we can no longer dream of a world where people from different races, ethnic groups and religions can co-exist? We have been wounded and our children are suffering. What will happen if we do not protect our children? These wounds are deeply embedded in the heart and spirit of the people and if we do not address this crisis, we are complicit in perpetuating multi-general abuse on current and future generations.

We must have a multi-pronged approach. We must quiet our political, religious, and philosophical differences and talk to each other. If we allow intolerance to reign, we will be ruined. We can each act from our own spaces. Like our students, academic scholars, writers, and public intellectuals have to be in the forefront of the movement for change and must take

leadership. As Alice Walker (2021) issues a "Call to Action" in her inspirational book *We are the Ones We are Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*."

The children are our priority. Marian Wright Edelman's (2008) call to think about what we can do to make our world a safer place for our children in her book, *The Sea is So Wide and My Boat is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation* is the path we should use as we forge ahead and change the trajectory of the current struggle.

References

Beah I. (2008). *Long way gone: memoirs of a boy soldier.* Sarah Crichton Books.

Edelman. M. W. (2008). *The sea is so wide and my boat is so small: charting a course for the next generation.* Hatchett.

Gaye, M, (1971). Save our children on *What's going on.* Produced by Marvin Gaye. Written by Renaldo Benson, Marvin Gaye and AI Cleveland. Detroit, Michigan & Los Angeles, California.

Liu. L. (2023). A Town Called Victoria | Documentary About Islamophobia | Independent Lens | PBS

Medina, T. (2012). Onion. *An onion of wars*. Third World Press.

Raboteau, E. (2013). *Searching for zion: The quest for home in the African Diaspora.* Atlantic Monthly Press.

Public TV Premiere of Repairing the World THIS WEEK — Repairing the World: Stories from the Tree of Life (repairingtheworldfilm.org) (2023)

Rodger. S.T. (2021). Next wave of post traumatic slave syndrome survivors: black women resistance in academia. *Advances in social work* 21(2/3): 438 -459.

Walker, A. (2021). *We are the ones we are waiting for: inner light in a time of darkness.* The New Press.

West, C. & M. Lerner (1996). *Jews and Blacks: A dialogue on race, religion, and culture in America.* Penguin Publishing Group.

A Town Called Victoria | Documentary About Islamophobia | Independent Lens | PBS

Dr. Brenda M. Greene is Professor of English and Founder and Executive Director of the Center for Black Literature, and Senior Special Assistant to the Provost at Medgar Evers College, CUNY. She has co-edited books and written extensive essays, grants, book reviews, and presentations in English Studies. www.drbrendamgreene.com