

## FOCUS: The African Connection

# The Road to Redemption

*In a place where murderers can live side-by-side with the families of their victims, anything is possible. The key is figuring out which interventions can move the most people the fastest.*

BY JOSH RUXIN

I'm sitting with my wife and daughter looking out through a living room window over Kigali, Rwanda, reminiscing about exactly how in the world we ended up here. Passover preparations are underway, and for the fourth year in a row, we'll be sharing this holiday not with family in Ridgefield, Connecticut or San Francisco, but with our friends in this central African republic. We've finally mastered the art of home-baked matzah, and now we're tracking down ingredients for our family's traditional chicken marbella (note: prunes are not easy to find in Kigali). Our guest list balloons every year, particularly among our Rwandan friends, who absolutely adore this holiday.

It's been a long and circuitous road from Ridgefield, an affluent town where I was one of just a handful of Jews in my public school. I still recall the arguments over the crèche in front of the town's community center on Main Street and how anti-Semitism of the most juvenile kind lurked in the school corridors. Still, as a 14-year-old geek (though I'm sure the term nerd was more in fashion at the time) complete with braces and a lanky frame, I was much more obsessed with

the lucrative earnings I foresaw in my home computer installation business, "Computer Catch."



Here I am in Rwanda with my wife Alissa, our baby Maya, and a piece of our homemade matzah.

In 1983, though, my Silicon Valley entrepreneurial ambitions began to change. I was preparing for my bar mitzvah at Temple B'nai Chaim in Georgetown, Connecticut...and questions about social activism started creeping out of the corners of my mind. Contemplating my bar mitzvah speech on Rabbi Harold Kushner's classic, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, I had dozens of conversations with my rabbi, Charles Lippman, of blessed memory. Rabbi

Chuck, as he was called, was a bit of a radical in his day—advocating for gay rights in the Reform Movement and fighting for a slew of social causes. He taught me that the reason bad things happen to good people is because too many of us are indifferent to the suffering of others. He made it clear that my memorization of Torah passages and prayers was secondary to fighting for social justice, and he encouraged me to conduct my social action through a Jewish lens and my Judaism through a humanitarian lens.

My first chance to take real social action happened a year later, when a representative from Operation Moses, the organization that would transport thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, spoke at our synagogue about the dire fate awaiting our poor and hungry brethren in Ethiopia, a situation worsening by the day. Their plight coincided with the Ethiopian famine, which was grabbing headlines, particularly after rock stars launched Live Aid. In response, a group of Ridgefield teachers and students formed Ridgefield Efforts At Crushing Hunger (REACH). At our first event—a walkathon through town—we raised more than \$50,000. By my sophomore year of high school I'd become a REACH student leader, and within a year, we had mobilized hundreds of schools nationwide under the umbrella "Student for Child Survival" to raise awareness and fundraise for global health issues. I was now the de facto

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