



**MORAL INDIFFERENCE AND OBLIGATIONS OF MEMORY:
SEEKING SANCTUARY AND SUPPORT FOR EVERYONE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

IT IS IMPORTANT, EVEN IMPERATIVE, that we always remember who we are, for in times especially like these, the obligation placed on us by our memory is awesome and unavoidable. In spite of the duly authorized and official denials, there is a pervasive and persistent moral indifference to the suffering of others, to the destructive harm heaped in heavy loads on their overburdened lives. And there is for us as a people who have suffered so much and struggled so hard for freedom and justice in the world an obligation not to forget, but to remember; not to remain silent, but to bear witness to truth; and not to be tolerant or indifferent to evil, but to relentlessly resist it. Indeed, it is an ethical imperative of our tradition that resounds and rings true through the ages, i.e., that we are to remember and bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place, especially among those who have no voice.

We are in the midst of a social madness which an arrogant and hateful group of people have brought upon themselves and imposed on the world. And these people bear responsibility for it not only by direct, damaging and destructive action, but also by morally indifferent collaboration in sinister silence and support. The defining feature of this madness is its merciless attack on the vulnerable, both at home and abroad, both the citizen and the immigrant, the familiar and the “foreign,” in a word, the scapegoated other.

And we, as a people, are without a doubt always in the midst of the onslaught whatever new madness is imagined or imposed. For in a racist society, we are not saved by the demands of reason or the moral dictates of religion nor by appeals to common citizenship or shared humanity. On the contrary, racism and religious doctrines that demand the blood sacrifice of others to their idols of race, state, country, wealth, imagined purity and hypocritical claims to civilization must have victims. And

the vulnerable are so available, numerous and easy to indict and sacrifice by a system built on their bent backs, exploited and discarded bodies and savagely plundered minds.

There is much talk about sanctuary in this country and the world, about rightful treatment for the refugee, asylum seeker and the immigrant. And we join in this compelling moral demand and obligation. For how can we Africans not have and demonstrate compassion for the vulnerable at home and abroad and still honor the awesome history, humanity-defending struggles and dignity-affirming values that have defined us and forged and formed our foundational narrative and conception of ourselves? Indeed, it is we, who at the dawn of human conscience, stood up in the Nile Valley and taught first that humans are in the image of the Divine and that they are possessors of dignity, an inherent worthiness which is transcendent of all socio-biological attributes and identities, equal in all and inalienable. And the ancient ethical teachings tell us that given this special status, humans are worthy of the highest respect.

This respect must be demonstrated not only in pronouncements, but also in practice, in the way we relate to and treat others, especially those in need, the vulnerable, voiceless and victimized. Also our ancient ethical teachings inform and repeatedly remind us that we measure the morality of any people or society by how it treats its most vulnerable. Therefore, our *Seba Maat* (moral teachers) teach us that we are to give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, and a boat to those without one.

Moreover, we are to be a father to the orphan, a mother to the timid, a caretaker to the ill, a staff of support for the aged, a servant to the needy, a husband and helper to the widow, a place of peace for the grieving, a raft for the drowning, a ladder for those trapped in the pit

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and a protector and provider of the poor in every place. And our sacred texts speak directly to the concept of sanctuary for those fleeing, pursued, persecuted, exiled, imprisoned and those hiding from the unjust, violent, powerful and oppressive and in need of safety and sustenance. And we are to be a refuge for those in distress and a welcoming hand and heart for the stranger, treating those we don't know with concern, consideration and justice like those we do know.

Certainly, our history in this country has been a history of giving sanctuary to each other and others and finding it among others. Our first allies in struggle and those who first gave us sanctuary were Native Americans. Furthermore, we returned the good deed to them when we could, escaping the death and enslaving blow of the savage pursuer and oppressor, and finding common ground in righteous and relentless struggle. Also during the Holocaust of enslavement, the history of the Underground Railroad is a history of seeking and finding sanctuary within and without our community, in churches, homes, barns and buildings and spaces of all kinds. And during the Sixties, within and outside the country, we sought, gave and received sanctuary as freedom fighters, resisters of imperialist wars and conscientious objectors. So this giving and receiving sanctuary, this welcoming the stranger and sheltering the refugee, asylum-seeker and the immigrant is evidence and affirmation of who we are.

For it is a central tenet and teaching of our African ethical tradition, a principle and practice that defines our history and humanity, to be sensitive to the suffering, misfortune and needs of others. So yes, we are sensitive in the most human and moral way to the suffering of the Latinos, the Syrians, the Yazidi, the Kurds and

of course, the Palestinians, too often unmentioned and ruthlessly erased from the minds and media of America. And we stand in active solidarity with them all.

But we cannot be true to our principles or ourselves, if we forget or fail to include the African immigrant, refugee and asylum-seeker; the continental African, the Haitian and other Africans of the diaspora who deserve no less sensitivity to their suffering; no less rightful attentiveness to their oppression; no less support in their struggles to defend their human rights, keep their families together, and live their lives without fear of raids, arrests, deportation and depraved disregard for their lives and rights from official and unofficial sources.

When Paul Robeson told the artists and writers they could not hide from history and the awesome struggles for human freedom, dignity and well-being, and that "the battlefield is everywhere, there is no sheltered rear," he spoke across time and space, reaching toward eternity. And if we read him rightly, he is talking across time to us now, not only to those with whom we differ and want to win over, but also those with whom we are already allied and in coalition in this difficult, demanding and righteous struggle.

Likewise, Mari Evans speaks across time to us also and to those with whom we are allied and in coalition when she tells us: "Speak truth to the people. Talk sense to the people. Free them with honesty. Free them with Love and Courage for their Being!!" Indeed, they speak to us not only about confronting the external enemy and opponent, but also about confronting ourselves and our allies and those with whom we are in coalition. And this means serious sanctuary and support for everyone. Our moral tradition demands it; justice requires it and our people surely need it.

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