MESSINGER OF HOPE

A portrait of
Ruth W. Messinger
Champion of dignity, justice and equality
I have been blessed with many teachers and friends on my journey with AJWS. And I am deeply grateful that, together, we have built a community that strives to create a more just and compassionate world.

—Ruth W. Messinger
A portrait of

RUTH W. MESSINGER

Champion of dignity, justice and equality
Ruth in Chad in 2007 visiting refugees from Darfur. Photograph by Mia Farrow
DEAR FRIENDS,

We all have heroes—individuals whose words and deeds stir and inspire us. Many of them are icons from the past or larger-than-life figures we only get to know from afar. Occasionally, we’re lucky enough to have one who walks among us.

At American Jewish World Service (AJWS), that hero is Ruth.

She is a visionary leader whose energy, passion and commitment to justice know no bounds. For 18 years, she has been at the helm of AJWS, furthering the pursuit of global justice, honoring the inherent dignity of all people and leading American Jews to repair the world. Prior to joining AJWS, she was a luminary of New York City government, leading her school board, serving on the City Council and eventually serving as the Borough President of Manhattan—always with an unshakable conviction that all of New York City’s diverse citizens must be heard and respected.

At every stage of her career, Ruth has confronted injustice fearlessly and ferociously—and instilled hope in all she encountered with a smile, an open hand and a compassionate heart. Her indefatigable drive and irrepressible smile are beloved by residents of New York City, American Jews, global leaders and countless men and women in communities thousands of miles away. Presidents and villagers alike think of her as their ally and friend.

This volume pays tribute to this truly extraordinary leader, AJWS’s former President and its first Global Ambassador. Inside, you will find the Ruth you know and love; and, perhaps, a side of her you’ve never seen. Through her own words and images and testimonials from her admirers, family and friends, we celebrate Ruth—our very own Messinger of Hope.

With deep admiration,

Robert Bank
AJWS President and CEO

Kathleen Levin
AJWS Board Chair
CONTENTS

RUTH’S STORY .........................................................................................................................7
A biography

RUTH’S VOICE ......................................................................................................................43
Compiled speeches, articles and published works

TRIBUTES ............................................................................................................................... All
Reflections from colleagues, friends and supporters

About the photography: Many of the images in this volume are from the personal collection of Ruth Messinger. All others are credited individually to the photographers.

Ruth at age 3; Senator Ted Kennedy announcing Ruth as a candidate for Manhattan Borough President in 1989; Ruth in Kenya (photograph by Ava Shapiro); Ruth and her mother, Marjorie Wyler (photograph by Jill Krementz); Ruth on a Study Tour to Senegal with AJWS grantees and donors (photograph by Shana Dollinger).
Ruth on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in the 1960s.
Ruth Messinger’s dedication to social justice runs deep.

“I feel like I’ve been an activist my whole life,” she said. “I was raised to care about social justice and to believe that problems existed, that change was possible and that we all had to do our part to help heal the world. My parents suggested that it was a fundamental Jewish obligation—and our main purpose for being on this earth.”

Ruth’s commitment to this obligation propelled her life’s work—from her early years as a social worker, to two decades in New York City public service, to her legendary 18 years at the helm of American Jewish World Service. Under her leadership, AJWS has granted more than $300 million to more than 1,000 grassroots organizations in dozens of developing countries and has launched campaigns to end the Darfur genocide, reform international food aid, stop violence against women, respond to natural disasters worldwide and defend land rights for indigenous farmers.

A tireless and visionary advocate for social change, Ruth mobilizes American Jews and others to speak out about injustice, give generously, and advocate for poor, oppressed and persecuted communities around the globe.
Born Ruth Wyler in 1940 in New York City, Ruth was deeply influenced by her family and her surroundings. Living on Manhattan’s Upper West Side—at the time a middle-class neighborhood—her parents taught their children liberal democratic values and fostered in Ruth an early concern for national and international issues.

Her mother, the late Marjorie G. Wyler, served for five decades as the Public Relations Director of the Jewish Theological Seminary—promoting Conservative Judaism and working alongside luminaries like Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, whom she joined on the historic 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery.

“My parents nurtured in me a sense of a responsibility to give something back; to be good to the country that had been good to our family; to be good to the city that had been good to our family; and to be good to the Jewish community,” Ruth said.

By her early teens, she had distinguished herself at Manhattan’s prestigious Brearley School as an intellectual and politically active young person. She wore buttons for social justice causes, passed out literature and attended rallies to
Historic Events Sharpen Ruth’s Moral Compass

When Ruth was 13, her mother kept her home from school to watch part of the Army-McCarthy hearings, the nationally-televised spectacle that ended Senator Joseph McCarthy’s infamous witch hunt against liberal public figures he accused of being Communist. The event was formative for Ruth. “I’d like to believe I actually heard the most famous line that silenced McCarthy: ‘Have you no sense of decency, sir?’” she said. “I remember talking to my mother about the importance of allowing for diversity of opinions and standing with those who are persecuted because of their beliefs or identity.”

A few years later, Ruth met folk singer and activist Pete Seeger, who regularly performed at a University Settlement House camp, where she worked. Ruth saw Seeger on the day in 1955 when he testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee—which, like McCarthy, sought to intimidate and destroy American liberals and progressives. Seeger, like many others called to testify, had at one time been associated with the Communist Party USA and had been involved in organizing labor unions, protesting poverty and fighting racism.

“Pete was at the camp that morning asking people if he looked OK to go to Washington,” she recalled. “He was wearing the only fancy clothes he had: a tweed jacket, a checked shirt and a tie. The truth is, he looked a little funny. But we were proud that he was going to stand up to our government to defend the progressive values he stood for and that his music inspired.”
show support for Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson’s two presidential runs against Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956.

At 15, Ruth worked at a camp for Lower East Side children run by the University Settlement House and subsequently volunteered at the settlement house. And at 17, she got involved in anti-war work around the city—joining other young people who sought to stem early U.S. military engagement in Southeast Asia as tensions rose prior to the Vietnam War.

“I was passionate about stopping the spread of war and loved being a part of the movement,” she said. “It eventually led me to take part in more anti-war work and in the civil rights movement supporting Dr. King and working with organizations that were exposing issues of racism in New York City. My life’s work has been, in many ways, an extension of this early activism.”

**AN EDUCATION IN EQUALITY, COMPASSION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF HELPING OTHERS**

After graduating from Brearley, whose yearbook dubbed Ruth “Class Brain,” she went to Radcliffe College, the women’s undergraduate school within Harvard University. While studying government, she began to promote issues of gender equality—born partly from her acute awareness of the “strange restrictions” on Radcliffe students in Harvard’s male-centric culture.

“All of our classes were entirely integrated with Harvard’s,” she recalled, “but our dormitories were nearly a mile away. We commuted on foot and by bike, but could only wear pants if it was snowing. And there was one Harvard library that women weren’t allowed into. We accepted all of these rules, which is astounding when I think about it, but it never sat well with me.”

Ruth served on an advisory board of students convened by Radcliffe’s president to propose ways to enhance the quality of social and academic life
for women at Harvard. She also found several hours a week to volunteer at a psychiatric hospital, increasing her growing interest in social work.

“[Ruth] was the first person I ever met whose life was so organized she had lists,” her Radcliffe roommate, Sharon Levisohn, told *The New York Times* in 1997 during Ruth’s bid for mayor of New York City.

One summer, Ruth interned at Jewish Family Services (JFS), a New York City agency that served many communities, including the South Bronx. Ruth managed a playroom for mothers with counseling appointments, and remembers the women’s tremendous gratitude for this resource provided by the Jewish community. “JFS taught poor families in the South Bronx that Jewish people care about them,” she recalled.

This experience showed Ruth that “the way we act in the world, as Jews, informs the way the world sees us”—a lesson that later inspired her at American Jewish World Service. “Today, AJWS lets people in Cambodia and Guatemala discover that there are Jews in the world, and that an organization run by Jews helps them with full respect for them and their values.”

**SHIFTS IN GEOGRAPHY AND PERSPECTIVE**

When she graduated from Radcliffe in 1962, Ruth pursued a master’s in social work from Columbia University and did field work in the South Bronx. She married a young physician—her first husband, Eli Messinger—and in 1963 moved with him to Oklahoma after he joined the federal Public Health Service Commissioned Corps. This move, to a place socially and culturally unlike all she had known, changed Ruth’s perspective on society, further deepened her connection to her Jewish identity, and eventually turned her toward a career in community organizing, public service and politics.

She completed her M.S.W. at the University of Oklahoma, where all but one of her fellow students were the first generation in their family to attend college. And it was in her small, rural, economically-depressed town that she heard others express openly anti-Semitic opinions for the first time, providing her first sense of “otherness.”

“We were the only Jews most people we met had ever encountered,” she said. “I remember one couple where we lived in Oklahoma describing the sign at the edge of their town in Indiana: ‘No Jews or Negroes after sundown.’ My early weeks in Oklahoma were quite instructive.”
Feeling different deepened Ruth’s engagement with her Jewish identity and the meaning of Judaism. “I had never anticipated what it would mean to live in a community with no other Jews,” she said. “I was, to my surprise, suddenly taken with the internal force of my Judaism. I drove 35 miles to a Friday night service during our first summer to see if there really was a place to go for the holidays. I was constantly trying to define in my head, what do I think about Judaism, how important is it to me, and how do I respond to the anti-Semitic remarks that are part of people’s casual conversation.”

During this time, Ruth was recruited by the local Democratic Party, where she campaigned aggressively for its candidates: Lyndon Johnson, for president; and Fred Harris, a progressive populist, who won his U.S. Senate seat and served for nine years. She played an important role in helping both candidates win in the Republican districts she worked in.
STEPPING INTO LEADERSHIP

The summer before completing her degree, Ruth interned at the state’s Child Welfare Department—an experience that soon led to her first job. Just before graduation, the agency called to ask her to run the departments of child welfare for two counties in Western Oklahoma—a surprising prospect for a newly-minted social worker. The reason? Ruth was the only person who qualified: “The federal Child Welfare Reform Act required that county departments of child welfare be run by someone who held a master’s in social work, and I was the only M.S.W. in the area!”

Ruth initially demurred, as the role was daunting and she was pregnant with Daniel, her first of three children. But after the agency called Washington to secure a waiver so she could work part-time, she agreed. That year, she taught herself to manage an organization, find common ground with people of different backgrounds, and change the way things were done within a system strongly wed to the status quo—all vital skills that would later serve her well in both government and human rights work.

“You know how people say, ‘everything I need to know I learned in kindergarten?’ I would say the same about that job.”

It was truly an education in grit and perseverance.

Mobilizing Clergy for Social Change

One issue Ruth tackled while head of the child welfare departments in two counties in Oklahoma was recruiting foster families to care for orphaned and homeless youth who were ending up in group homes infamous for substandard care.

When one county couldn’t find any foster families, Ruth turned to the faith community. She began speaking at local evangelical Christian churches and asking for volunteers. “After my five-minute speech, the pastor would say, ‘I’m waiting for three families to step forward,’” she recalled. “After two weeks, I had all the families I needed. For me, it was a great early message about the power of faith-based work. When a pastor told people this was a way to do God’s work in the world, they didn’t hesitate to volunteer.”

“I have seen how Ruth Messinger’s ideal of ‘faith in our capacity to make a difference’ has become a reality.”

HANNAH SKVARLA, AJWS donor
“At one point,” she said, “I had to convince a county attorney, a county judge and a county sheriff to change virtually everything they did with regard to the treatment of minors. These three men were disparaging of women, only knew their own town and didn’t like outsiders. And here I was—a young Jewish woman from New York City with a title and a position with authority over them. They weren’t happy about it, and they surely didn’t like how fast I talked, but I had the law on my side, and I controlled federal funds. This was a great organizing and social change opportunity, because we all knew that they didn’t want to make change, but that I was going to make them do it anyway.”

Ruth was pregnant with Miriam, her second child, in 1965 when she and Eli returned to New York to live in the Northeast Bronx. For several years, she continued her social work career, doing case work with families and participating in a major social welfare research study. In her spare time, she volunteered building the anti-war movement in the South Bronx, adeptly setting up a service for counseling young, poor men of color who wanted to resist the draft. Ruth was also active in Women Strike for Peace, the iconic anti-war organization that first protested nuclear proliferation and, later, the war in Vietnam.

In 1966, she joined a movement to fight racism in New York City. Subsequently, in 1968, she and a group of parents helped launch the Children’s
Community Workshop School, a foundation-supported school that would provide racially and economically diverse education on Manhattan’s West Side.

“This work used all of my skills,” she recalled. “It gave me a chance to get to know a different part of the West Side community. I saw the neighborhood where I had grown up in all its diversity and had a chance to work with parents from a full range of backgrounds who were trying to figure out how to improve their kids’ education and were committed to advocating for and negotiating with the government to support their ambitious goals.”

FROM LOCAL LEADER TO ELECTED OFFICIAL

While Ruth helped build the school that her children attended, she got involved with West Side community groups that were fighting for issues like affordable day care and housing, and challenging the city’s efforts to oust poor people in order to gentrify the neighborhood. Ruth soon established herself in the community as a capable and trustworthy leader.

In 1974, local parents asked her to consider running for the school board. Although she was then juggling a new job at a college for low-income adults as well as childrearing—her third child, Adam, was born in 1968—she saw board service as an opportunity to shape public policy. She won her seat and served from 1975 until 1977—a time “full of excitement and political challenges and lots of opportunities to organize,” she said. “We disagreed with the Central Board of Education, and we fought them on many different occasions. I learned a lot about organizing for change.”

The position also made Ruth something of a household name on the Upper West Side. “Our school board was making a lot of trouble and I was one of the lead troublemakers,” she said. “I was a powerful force in demonstrating to people that you can make change; that you can organize and fight for what you believe in. You don’t get everything you started out looking for, but you get something.”

The board appointed her as a liaison to legislators, a post that gave her an insider’s view of the political process—which both frustrated and emboldened her to believe that she could do more on behalf of New York City’s less well-off people than those currently in power.

In 1976, Ruth threw her hat in the ring of city politics by running for State Assembly. As a newcomer, she surprised many established local politicians with her popularity, but lost the election by a hair.
Exhilarated but practical, she was ready to "go back to everything else I was doing in my life," but her supporters insisted that she persevere. “You just ran this astounding campaign,” she recalled them telling her. “‘You’re absolutely obligated to keep running until you win a seat.’ I don’t know what would have happened if people hadn’t said that to me. That was another turning point.”

One year later, in 1977, she ran for City Council—and won. During the 12 years she represented the West Side, she became known for giving a voice to community groups in her district who were seeking social change, and for finding ways to move city money to local youth groups, child welfare, human service and public education programs.

In the council, she got involved in and eventually led the charge to pass New York City’s first anti-discrimination bill to protect the rights of gays and lesbians in housing, employment and public services. To pass the bill, she helped overcome opposition by a powerful coalition backed by the Roman Catholic Church, some Orthodox Jews, and conservative religious leaders. She also became a prominent advocate for HIV-positive New Yorkers at the height of the AIDS crisis in the early ’80s.

An article in *The New York Times* looking back at this period said of her: “Her colleagues—friends and foes alike—said that through the force of her intellect, the thoroughness of her research and her awesome work habits, she became one of the most respected and best-known members of the Council in the ‘80s. Ruth garnered favor and influence by mastering complicated issues and then educating everyone around her.”

“She was a council member extraordinaire in the 1980s when we had the first AIDS case. She can see a problem and figure out how to fix it in a way that nobody else can.

GALE BREWER, Manhattan Borough President, 2013–present

Less Talk, More Action

As a community activist, Ruth had little patience for politicians who failed to act on their promises—and believed early on that she could do better.

Reflecting on what she learned about politics through her advocacy efforts, she said: “You meet with your state senator, and he says, ‘What a great argument you’re making. I’m going to go out and battle for you and try to win you the sun, the moon and the stars.’

And then he comes back and says, ‘You have no idea how hard I fought. I could just get you one point on one star, but that’s the most that was possible to do.’ I would think, ‘This is just lip-service. I can’t believe that you’re fighting half as hard as I would have fought.’”
ATTAINING HIGHER OFFICE

In 1989, Ruth was elected Manhattan Borough President. She served for eight years, earning admiration for continuing to champion social justice causes and make waves on budgets, tax policy, child welfare, housing and urban development issues.

She worked with colleagues to improve accountability in the schools and move more funds to the local level so that the community could have a say in how children are educated. She helped fund critical but neglected cultural and neighborhood institutions—allotting, for example, $1.8 million to remove asbestos and clean the plumbing at the American Museum of Natural History. She helped thousands of constituents get potholes filled and sidewalks fixed. She was a pioneer in encouraging local communities to design their own zoning and redevelopment programs. She was also very involved in limiting city tax abatement programs that were overly generous to developers.
The media in the late ‘90s marveled at Ruth’s work ethic and determination. In *The New York Times*, journalist Frank Bruni said she “succeeded in defining and distilling her political identity as a champion of underdogs more dogged than most others, a true believer in the aggressive ministrations of government and a populist ready to challenge the corporate interests that other politicians were more reluctant to estrange. … Ruth has always made it a point to care, even when she was one of the only ones.”

A *New York* magazine journalist wrote, “All major politicians keep long hours, but her schedule verges on punishing. She probably knows more about the city budget than the last three budget directors combined. She is constantly showing up … clutching vast sheaves of papers, and even when she sits, it’s to work some more: While everyone else is giving attention to [the Schools’ chancellor], there sits Ruth, scribbling on her note pad, reading memos, writing reminders, but listening closely enough with one ear to smile to herself when [the chancellor] says something she suspects won’t sit too well with [the teachers’ union chief]. … She’s a terrific public servant.”

As the Council’s resident firebrand from 1978 through 1989, Ms. Messinger was as rarely at a loss for causes as she was for words.

*FRANK BRUNI, op-ed columnist, The New York Times*

Ruth (in rear) with City Councilwoman C. Virginia Fields, philanthropist Brooke Astor, and Mayor David Dinkins in 1992.
Ruth says simply that she “loved local government,” where she learned “how to challenge the powers that be, put forward significant proposals for change, and recognize that progress comes slowly.”

As Borough President, Ruth was one of just a few white politicians to stand firmly with Mayor David Dinkins—the first and (as of this writing in 2016) only black mayor of New York City—whose tenure from 1990 to 1994 was marked by significant racial animosity in the city, particularly in parts of the outer boroughs. Ruth’s commitment to equality for African Americans made her a strong ally of Mayor Dinkins, who was often a target of attack.
Ruth became the first woman ever to receive the Democratic nomination for mayor in New York City.
A HISTORIC BID FOR MAYOR

In 1997, she launched a bid for mayor herself, boldly confronting popular incumbent Rudolph Giuliani and winning a primary against the Rev. Al Sharpton, an influential civil rights leader, and Fernando “Freddy” Ferrer, the Bronx Borough President, to become the first woman ever to receive the Democratic nomination in New York City.

Although Ruth was considered the underdog, she was an icon in her borough and ran a campaign driven by her hallmark passion for social justice and community engagement. With strong momentum for her campaign mounting, “Some people thought we might be able to pull off an upset,” she said.

She had powerful allies on her side—most notably President Bill Clinton, Ted Kennedy, Al Gore and other leaders of the Democratic Party.

Despite strong support from her constituents in Manhattan, Ruth lost her bid for mayor. But the closing of this chapter soon led to the opening of another. Within the year, Ruth began a deep new engagement with global issues and assumed a new form of leadership for social change at American Jewish World Service.

Clinton in Her Court

Ruth had a powerful backer in her mayoral race—President Bill Clinton, who was returning the favor after she helped him score a very significant victory in the 1992 Democratic presidential primary in New York. Clinton remained a close ally in the years that followed, collaborating with Ruth from the White House and through the Clinton Global Initiative.

At an AJWS benefit in 2007, Clinton said: “I’ve never forgotten that Ruth’s endorsement came with her constant commitment to social justice and equal opportunity, pushing me always to do more ... She has always been a voice for the most marginalized, whether they lived down the street or around the world.”
In 1998, after she had begun teaching and consulting, Ruth was contacted by Martin Horwitz, the director of the Jewish Community Development Fund in Russia and Ukraine. Horwitz’s organization operated out of the offices of American Jewish World Service—an international development and humanitarian organization founded in 1985 that had made a name for itself by supporting community-based responses to poverty and disasters in developing countries.

Thirteen years into its history, AJWS, like Ruth, was at a crossroads—searching for a new president to replace its outgoing leader, Andrew Griffel. Horwitz consulted with his wife, Madeline Lee, head of the New York Foundation, who thought Ruth would be an unorthodox—but stellar—choice.

Although Ruth had never worked in the field of international development and the organization was unfamiliar to her, she was intrigued. In August of 1998, she took on the job, inheriting a staff of 13 people and a budget of $2.4 million. She soon launched AJWS on a trajectory of dramatic growth: In less than two decades, she came to lead a staff of 130 with a $38 million budget working to promote human rights around the world.

Ruth’s first task as AJWS’s president was to give herself a rapid education in international development and the human rights challenges the organization was tackling. Conversations with staff and visits to AJWS’s grantees taught her that investing in local organizations was the key to creating sustainable solutions to poverty and injustice.

“Very quickly, I came to love the notion that AJWS supports smaller grassroots and community-based organizations and lets them set their own agendas,” she said. “I was inspired by how much change it was possible for these individuals and their communities to make, how many people were fighting to improve their own situations, how many of these people really had started their work when they had no funding. They were doing it because they believed it was time for a change, taking on fights and battles for human rights.”
Ruth quickly learned the importance of listening to these leaders: “They know best what their communities need, and AJWS listens to those needs before we respond. That resonated with me and was very connected to the work I had done in city government.”

During an early trip to Zimbabwe, Ruth saw this approach in action. She learned from a local school teacher that the greatest barrier to educating the local children wasn’t a lack of books or classrooms; it was the pervasive hunger that distracted them from learning.

During her early trips, Ruth also began to savor the way AJWS’s work was spreading the message that there are Jews in the world who support the aspirations of people of all backgrounds. On her very first trip, to El Salvador, she visited a small grassroots group called La Coordinadora del Bajo Lempa,
which helped indigenous people conserve their land and overcome poverty. The group greeted the AJWS contingent with a sign welcoming ‘the American Jewish community.’ “That was wonderful,” Ruth said. “We were hardly the American Jewish community, but to this group of Salvadoran activists, we were, and we shaped their understanding of who Jews are in the world.”

Indeed, AJWS’s Jewish identity spoke to Ruth. “This model of Judaism—the idea that Jews are responsible for building a better world—was the type of Judaism I was raised with. This was a chance for me to be in Jewish circles and say, ‘Here’s something new, different and important that Jews are doing and should be doing more of in the world.’”
ON THE FRONTLINES OF DISASTERS

Ruth’s early years at AJWS coincided with an intense period of frequent world disasters, and she took steps to ensure that AJWS responded nimbly.

“Disasters snap people’s attention to parts of the world that are typically not on their radar,” she told her staff. “We’re going to use our unique approach to local, grassroots development to provide emergency aid and build local aid efforts, and that’s how we’re going to make a much larger difference in the world and get our name out in the Jewish community.”

Under Ruth’s direction, AJWS responded to Hurricane Mitch, which devastated large swaths of Central America in 1998; aided survivors of earthquakes in El Salvador and Turkey; and aided victims of fierce ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

In 2004, AJWS took its disaster expertise to the next level when a massive tsunami struck the coast of Southeast Asia. “Our response showed our capacity to very nimbly and thoughtfully respond to a large-scale disaster,” Ruth said. “I believe it truly set the model for how we work in emergencies. Most international aid groups focused on relief, but we were doing relief plus development and human rights work. We didn’t run in with food and blankets. We made it possible for our local grantees, the people who know these places best, to provide what survivors needed and to help people change their circumstances.”

AJWS became a long-term presence in communities that lost everything in the tsunami—granting nearly $11 million in disaster aid to 82 grassroots organizations in five countries over several years. According to Ruth, “when AJWS responds to disasters, we stay for the long haul so people can recover, change their circumstances and realize their rights.”


This model of Judaism—the idea that Jews are responsible for building a better world—was the type of Judaism I was raised with.

—Ruth
Earlier that same year, news of the Darfur genocide broke—and AJWS’s response “put us dramatically on the map in a way we hadn’t been before,” Ruth said. Thanks to the visibility raised by Ruth and her team, Jews around the United States chose AJWS as their vehicle to respond.

With more than $5 million contributed during the years the genocide raged, AJWS funded grantees in Darfur and Chad working to save lives and end the atrocities.

Ruth was determined to respond as soon as she learned of the horrors happening in Darfur. She told AJWS’s staff and board: “Our own people have suffered what the Darfuri people are now suffering. We were raised to promise ‘never again,’ and this is our chance to act on that promise.”
A Rallying Cry Against Genocide

In 2006, Ruth and other leaders addressed a crowd of 60,000 people at a powerful rally for Darfur on Washington’s National Mall. Nearly a dozen leading members of Congress—including then-House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and then-Senator Barack Obama—joined Ruth, George Clooney, Elie Wiesel and Darfuri activists calling for immediate action to counter the genocide.

American Jews made up a significant percentage of the crowd because they were motivated to speak out and AJWS had mobilized communities across the country and organized hundreds of buses carrying more than 25,000 people.

AJWS soon launched a massive advocacy campaign uniting Jewish organizations and other faith-based groups across the U.S. behind the cause. In the summer of 2004, right after Congress and the White House declared the crisis a “genocide,” AJWS convened a meeting to call other Jewish organizations to action—enlisting Elie Wiesel to speak. “So many groups came, including many outside the Jewish community, that the fire marshal threatened to shut the first meeting down,” Ruth recalled.

AJWS and other participants in the meeting founded the Save Darfur Coalition to respond to the genocide. Ruth served on its board and became one of its leading voices, helping bring the genocide into the spotlight in the Jewish community and on the global stage.
In recognition of AJWS’s role in responding to the genocide in Darfur, Pulitzer-winning journalist Nicholas Kristof, a columnist for The New York Times, said in 2012: “There are hundreds of thousands of people who are alive today in camps in Darfur who would not be alive if Ruth and the people she works with had not led that quite extraordinary campaign. She was one of the first people to really appreciate that this was a genocide and that it was very important for the Jewish community—and for everybody—to address what was going on.”

In 2009, Ruth was called on, with other leaders of the Darfur movement, to advise President Obama on human rights strategies and peace-building efforts to shape Darfur’s future. She later advised Obama’s Special Envoy for Sudan, General J. Scott Gration, and joined a delegation of international leaders convened by Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, to participate in the second Sudanese Women’s Forum on Darfur (SWOFOD) in Addis Ababa to strengthen the role of Sudanese women in the peacemaking process and to deepen relationships between the African and global women’s movements.

To this day, Ruth continues to collaborate with faith-based, humanitarian and advocacy organizations to bring an end to the conflict that still plagues the region. She has also met with President Obama and with Samantha Power—now the U.S. Ambassador to the UN—about the continuing violence and the challenges of creating a sustainable path toward peace.

Ruth is still devastated by the number of lives lost and continues to advocate for those who suffer from the ongoing brutality in the region. “That’s why I still have my Darfur bracelet on,” she said in 2016.

“

I know I was only one of a legion of activists who were inspired by Ruth’s tireless leadership and dedication to ending the genocide in Darfur. She did more than any other single person to rouse the national conscience to respond to that horror. Her passion for change impelled all of us to do more and try harder. She was, quite simply, the mother of the movement.

JERRY FOWLER, Senior Policy Analyst at the Open Society Foundations (OSF) and former President of the Save Darfur Coalition
We need more people like Ruth. She’s in my pantheon, my very small pantheon, of iconic women.

MIA FARROW, actress and activist

Mia Farrow walking with a child into a dust storm in Chad. Photograph by Ruth W. Messinger
Ruth has, more than anybody I know, taught Jews that we are a small tribe, but the small tribe lives in a big world. Ruth really opened my eyes to this world, and it’s thanks to her—her wisdom, her strength and the example she has always led by—that donors like me feel confident today that we are doing something real and lasting to help make it a more just and equitable world for everyone.

BARBARA DOBKin, Board Member and past Chair, AJWS

In the 2016 NYC Pride Parade, Ruth marches alongside AJWS’s then-Executive Vice President (now President) Robert Bank, board members, staff and supporters. Photograph by Jeff Zorabedian
With Ruth leading the way, AJWS has become a powerful advocate for human rights in Washington. Early in her tenure, it opened an advocacy office to lobby Congress and the White House. Today, AJWS is sought out to lead and join coalitions and collaborate with policymakers to draft and advance legislation on key issues—including curbing HIV/AIDS, reducing global hunger, securing debt relief for struggling nations, stopping violence against women and LGBT people, and helping indigenous farmers hold on to their land.

Ruth and her team have mobilized American Jews to add their voices to many of these campaigns, and she takes great pride in “the capacity that we’ve demonstrated to mobilize people very quickly and to achieve results.”

In 2014, after collecting thousands of signatures and sending supporters to lobby Congress, AJWS and its allies helped secure a new program in the U.S. Farm Bill that provides up to $400 million in funding to buy food aid from local farmers in the developing world. The program enables life-sustaining food assistance to reach more people faster while also supporting local farmers, who are the key to creating long-term food security for vulnerable communities and countries. And in 2015, AJWS led the advocacy effort resulting in the

“Fasting is kind of a weekly reset of the system,” she said. “Although it doesn’t make a direct difference to people living with hunger every day, it’s a message to myself; mostly, to do more than just talk about the issue. By living a small piece of it, it’s with me in a personal and powerful way and I’m reminded to take action.”

Fasting for Justice

In solidarity with people suffering from hunger, Ruth fasts one day each week, a practice that sprang in 2008 from collaborating with actress Mia Farrow and traveling with her to Darfur. Ruth was influenced deeply by Farrow, who staged hunger strikes to raise awareness.

“Fasting is one of the most formidable leaders on human rights I’ve ever met. [She] has made an extraordinary difference in the lives and safety of countless people around the world. Her dedication to say what needs to be said and do what needs to be done to ensure progress is an example I keep close to my own heart and mind.

RANDY BERRY, U.S. Special Envoy for the Human Rights of LGBTI Persons

RAISING AJWS’S PROFILE AND CAPACITY TO SUCCEED
appointment of the State Department’s first Special Envoy for the Human Rights of LGBTI Persons, who will strive to ensure that U.S. foreign policy protects and defends the dignity and security of LGBTI people worldwide.

“On these issues and others,” Ruth said, “our Washington staff is viewed by members of Congress and the Obama administration as valuable partners in pushing policy change through our government.”

Ruth, herself, has spoken around the world to represent AJWS and amplify its message. She has represented AJWS in a variety of world forums, including the Clinton Global Initiative, the International AIDS Conference, Women Deliver Global Conference, Nexus Global Youth Summit and Global Philanthropy Forum. She served on the Obama administration’s Task Force on Global Poverty and Development and currently serves on the State Department’s Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group. In 2015, she was invited to represent the American Jewish community on a faith-based taskforce put together by the World Bank Group to argue for a moral imperative to end extreme poverty by 2030.

“People see us as the Jewish voice for global justice,” Ruth said.

**ORCHESTRATING GROWTH AND SUSTAINABLE CHANGE**

Ruth’s greatest challenge—and accomplishment—at AJWS has been to steer the organization through a meteoric rise and manage its growth in a sustainable way. In recent years, she and Robert Bank, whom she brought on in 2009 as AJWS’s first Executive Vice President, led the organization through a rigorous process of board development and strategic planning. The plan, adopted in 2011, focused and deepened AJWS’s work, aligned its international grantmaking with its domestic advocacy, and reinforced AJWS’s ability to measure and communicate its impact.

Through all of this change, Ruth has led AJWS in a very hands-on way. “I’ve loved watching AJWS grow, but it’s also a constant adjustment—how you act when you have a staff of 13 to how you act when you have a staff of more than 100. I think I may occasionally be too hands-on, but it’s the way I like to be. I want to know what’s going on, I want to be there, I want people to know that I care about the small things in people’s work and lives.”
TRANSITION TO A NEW ERA OF LEADERSHIP

A major testament to Ruth’s dedication to AJWS’s future is the fact that the board of trustees chose Robert—who had led the organization by her side for the previous seven years—as the next president of AJWS. When Robert became president on July 1st, 2016, Ruth assumed the new role of Global Ambassador, continuing her crucial work of engaging rabbis and interfaith leaders in efforts to end poverty and promote human rights in the developing world.

“I am humbled to follow in Ruth’s footsteps and am committed to building on her extraordinary legacy,” Robert said. “Like Ruth, I am motivated by a deeply felt devotion as a Jew to fight for the basic human dignity of every person.”

“Ruth teaches by example, and I think one of the greatest things she has taught me is not to give up in the face of adversity. That there’s always another chance, there’s always another opportunity, and there’s always the readiness to go forward if you believe strongly in your convictions.”

ROBERT BANK,
President and CEO, AJWS
When the transition plan was announced, AJWS Board Chair Kathleen Levin said: “Ruth’s contributions to AJWS and her unwavering dedication, passion and leadership cannot be overstated. She leaves a legacy of accomplishments for human rights and dignity around the world.”

For Ruth, this transition marks a new era: “For nearly 20 years, AJWS has afforded me the opportunity to live my values and to work every day to stand up as a Jewish leader for some of the most vulnerable and oppressed communities in the world,” she said. “Serving as president of AJWS could not have been more rewarding, and I look forward to continuing to serve AJWS as its Global Ambassador. I am deeply gratified that our board chose the incredibly competent, strategic and passionate Robert Bank to take the helm at AJWS. Robert will provide the vision and leadership the organization needs for years to come.”

**TRANSLATING VALUES INTO ACTION**

Ruth has always put her values into action—particularly those derived from her Jewish heritage and from the principles of equality enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. From her early activism to her years in local government to her leadership at AJWS, the same principles have served as her compass.

She has always been moved by a quote from the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, an influential philosopher, whom she knew and still considers a teacher and mentor: “In a free society, where terrible wrongs exist, some are guilty, but all are responsible.”

“Heschel’s quote speaks about the same ethic that motivated the work I did in the ‘60s, and that motivates me at AJWS today,” she said. “I didn’t cause urban racism or bad schools, I didn’t cause land theft in Guatemala. But I’m still responsible for it. In some cases, the problems that exist in the world were created by the U.S. government; and in other cases, we are responsible purely because we are human and we are citizens of this world. Either way, as a Jew, I have to act, I have to assume responsibility for things that aren’t the way they ought to be, and I have to work to create greater justice. I’d like to think I did that as a young activist—and I know I do it today.”

Acting on these values, Ruth has helped more American Jews view *tikkun olam*—the Jewish responsibility to repair the world—as a central guiding principle of Jewish life in the 21st century. Recognizing Ruth’s influence,
dozens of national Jewish organizations have honored her, and she has received honorary degrees from five major American rabbinical seminaries. She was named to *The Jewish Daily Forward*’s “Forward 50” for nine years and was sixth in *The Jerusalem Post*’s list of the world’s 50 most influential Jews in 2012. *The Huffington Post* included her as one of the “10 most inspiring women religious leaders of 2012.”

Ruth has passed on this passion to act on her values to the next generation. Her granddaughter, Chana Messinger, reflected: “Belonging to a family that treats activism as not necessarily an activity or an extracurricular hobby, but as a genuine part of what it means to be a human, in this day and age, is really beautiful.” Beyond her family, countless activists consider Ruth their inspiration in this regard, and they now live and act on the ethos she taught them.

“In a time of immense brokenness and catastrophic human suffering, it has become too easy to hide behind our privilege or allow ourselves to lose hope. We are all indebted to Ruth and the whole team at AJWS for demonstrating what it means to walk toward a life not only of personal meaning, but also of global purpose.

*RABBI SHARON BROUS, Founder and Rabbi, IKAR, Los Angeles*
Ruth crosses the Manhattan Bridge in the 2016 TD Five Boro Bike Tour. Photograph by MarathonFoto
“A FORCE OF NATURE”

Many people call Ruth, now 76, “a force of nature.”

She is known for getting by on very little sleep and jumping time zones with ease. As AJWS President, she spent about six months a year travelling around the country and the world—usually carrying little more than a backpack and a camera. She also multi-tasks with boundless energy and focus: It is not unusual to find her participating actively in a meeting while reviewing documents and completing *The New York Times* crossword puzzle or working on a Sudoku puzzle. Ruth’s staff joke that all this activity is fueled by her drink of choice, Diet Coke.

When Ruth is not at AJWS or traveling, she lectures widely on social and global justice issues and actively participates in her congregation, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, on the Upper West Side. She serves on the boards of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, Hazon, United to End Genocide, Interaction and Surprise Lake Camp.

Ruth remains active in Democratic Party politics—hosting fundraisers for candidates in her home, advising city officials who solicit her advice and commenting frequently for journalists who cover New York City politics and government.

She is married to Andrew Lachman, who runs a nonprofit organization focused on public education in Connecticut. They support each other’s work, delight in their shared hobbies and manage to find time with each other, even when it isn’t easy. Ruth has three adult children who survived the rigors of growing up with a mother who was an activist and public official—as well as eight grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. She is proud of their individual and family accomplishments and continues to learn from them.

**In Her Spare Time...**

Despite her nonstop work schedule, Ruth has always found time to ski, sail, ride, read, cook and go to the theater. A spry cyclist at 76 years old, she rides twice a week and participates annually in the TD Five Boro Bike Tour—a 40-mile journey through New York City. She devours dozens of books each summer and shares her eclectic reading lists with her staff. She is also famous in her family and at the office for her homemade granola, cakes and eggnog.
When asked what keeps her going despite all of the injustice she sees in the world, she said: “I’m an optimist, in general. There are times when I get as upset or depressed as anyone else. I am human. But, in general, I consider myself very privileged for all the things I’ve been able to do, and I love the work. I approach the world with an optimistic lens, even when it looks as if things are pretty terrible.”

Rabbi Joy Levitt, executive director of JCC Manhattan and one of Ruth’s close friends, called her “tireless,” because she is “constantly balancing her anger at the way the world works and her indomitable optimism at our ability to make things better.” As a result, “she has made us better.”
“No one wears her dedication, enthusiasm or relentless commitments better than Ruth does, and no one shares all of that with more generosity than Ruth does. She has demonstrated that it is possible to lead, to grow an organization in astonishing ways and to always bring freshly baked cookies to Shabbat dinner, while at the same time telling the truth, making hard choices and not cutting corners.”

In another tribute, The Forward once said that she “simply never gives up.”

“That is true,” Messenger confirmed. “The causes we pursue at AJWS—fighting hunger and poverty, ending genocide, empowering women, stopping land grabbing and advancing justice—are too important to our civilization’s future for us to retreat to the convenience of being overwhelmed.”

One of the Cambodian activists [I met while traveling with Ruth] called the head of his group the “conductor” instead of the director, and I thought—what a wonderful analogy. ... You, Ruth, have been the conductor for 30 years of a generation of young people, of middle-aged people, of older people of all denominations that are looking for a way to make their lives meaningful.

MANDY PATINKIN, actor and recording artist
Ruth with former AJWS grantee HIV/AIDS Awareness Project & Youth Development in South Africa on a Study Tour in 2007. Photograph by Mary Kostman
It’s not easy for activists to stretch their arms across gulfs of difference to do the messy and often risky work of building coalitions across lines of race, class, religion and sexual orientation. But they do, and we must open ourselves to their visions of social change and join them in heeding the call to bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice.

– Ruth
Ruth speaking at the first New York City AIDS Walk in 1986. Photograph by Lee Snider
As is true for many in my generation, the civil rights movement was a formative part of my Jewish and American identities. In 1965, my mother Marjorie Wyler participated in the march from Selma to Montgomery, as did her colleague Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel—an iconic Jewish thinker who marched arm-in-arm with Martin Luther King, Jr. and who likened civil rights activism to “praying with my feet.”

Influenced by my mother, by the values of my family, by my social work training and by the events of the 1960s, I worked with an organization that was committed to fighting racism in New York City, particularly in schools and in the criminal justice system, to create greater racial and economic equity. I was working for integrated schools and more affordable housing, and I did the paralegal work on a major defense case protesting the arrest of a group of young men in the Harlem community who were eventually acquitted. In 1968, I participated in the “Poor People’s Campaign” for economic justice on the National Mall in D.C. with my three young children in tow.

Many thought leaders, writers and activists have rightly noted that the struggle for civil rights yielded tremendous progress, but still remains unfinished.

*The writings in this section have been excerpted, condensed and edited slightly for this publication.*
Ruth with civil rights leader Jesse Jackson (center), NYC Mayor David Dinkins (left) and Rev. Herbert Daughtry.
The murder of Trayvon Martin, the Supreme Court’s ruling to strike down the Voting Rights Act—a core achievement of the Civil Rights Movement—and ongoing violations of the human rights of people of color around the globe, all weigh heavily on my mind. As president of American Jewish World Service, I am reminded on a regular basis that we live in a world in which the 500 richest people earn more than the 416 million poorest; a world in which politicians, entrepreneurs and religious leaders are often more concerned with their own reputation than doing what is fair and just; and a world in which women, people of color, girls, LGBT people, and ethnic and religious minorities are engaged in a tireless fight for basic human dignity.

For many Jews—religious and secular alike—our own history of oppression has fortified an ethic of righteousness and justice for all people, no matter who they are or where they come from. The legacy of Jewish participation in the civil rights movement is a testament to this ethic and has anchored my own work to end poverty and realize human rights for marginalized people in the developing world.

Of course, Jewish involvement in civil rights work—and the enduring contributions of Heschel and Prinz—do not reflect the totality of the struggle. Many others were behind-the-scenes architects of the March on Washington and were key players in the civil rights movement at large: activists like march organizer Bayard Rustin and his deputy, Rachelle Horowitz; Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, and Rita Mae Brown; Jewish women like Florence Howe, Annie Stein, Barbara Jacobs Haber, and June Finer. And Stanley Levison, a close aide to Dr. King.

Today’s movers and shakers aren’t always the people we read about in the headlines or see on the nightly news. These lesser-known Jewish actors—and activists from countries around the world who are the life-blood of 21st century activism—are the people from whom I take my cues. People like Rosanna Flamer-Caldera, a Sri Lankan LGBT rights activist working to decriminalize homosexuality in Sri Lanka; Claudia Samayoa, a human rights defender in Guatemala; and Cecelia Danuweli, a peacemaker and women’s rights leader in Liberia.

It’s not easy for any of these activists to stretch their arms across gulfs of difference to do the messy—and often risky—work of building coalitions across lines of race, class, religion, and sexual orientation. And yet, we must open ourselves to their visions for social change and join them in heeding the call to bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice.

For many Jews—religious and secular alike—our own history of oppression has fortified an ethic of righteousness and justice for all people, no matter who they are or where they come from.

—Ruth
Keynote speech at the rally for Darfur
National Mall in Washington, D.C., 2006

As the President of American Jewish World Service, I went to Sudan and Chad. I met a woman there who had fled her home with newborn twins after her uncle and brother were murdered in front of her. I met a teacher who led his students and their families through the desert and across the border, seeking refuge from destruction.

We are committed to helping the people who languish in camps—victims of a genocide the world continues to ignore—and determined to engage with all of you to stop this genocide.

I salute you for your presence, for your activism, for your leadership, for your determination to make a difference. Today is just the beginning. Keep speaking out, keep organizing, continue your commitment to move toward the world that should be—a world without genocide, a world where rape is not a weapon of war, a world where people are not left to starve, a world that makes real the promise: “Never again.”

Word by word, step by step, risk by risk, we can become the leaders we have been waiting for.

Remarks at “Reflections on Hope and Despair”
An AJWS benefit for Darfur, 2008

Failure is out of the question. Every day that the people of Darfur remain displaced from the lives they led before the “devils rode in on horseback,” every day that they continue to survive at great risk of new danger, is yet another day of indignity, of horror and of terror impossible for us to comprehend.

Now, I’d like to talk about why WE are here. We have reached a point where many of the people we know, in and out of the Jewish community, are asking, “What more can I do?” They continue to read about a situation that is too rarely covered, but that is getting worse, not better; they read about attacks on humanitarian aid workers and U.N. peace-keepers; and about new massacres in the camps and the few villages that remain. “I’ve given money,” they say. ”I’ve signed petitions and attended rallies. I’m tired and discouraged. What more can I do?”

As Jews, our own deep pain—from 70 years ago—reminds us what is lost when people and nations remain bystanders to genocide. This is why AJWS has spent six years organizing a community of activists
that now numbers 70,000 strong. This is why we have provided life-saving medical care, critical counseling and essential services to people displaced by the genocide. This is why we have spoken, with a clear and strong voice, to corporations, television networks, municipalities, state governments, Congress, the White House and other countries.

But that is not enough.

With rates of malnutrition and disease rising rapidly in the camps of Darfur and Chad—camps made inaccessible to aid workers by the Sudanese government—we are at a new moment of crisis. Life or death for millions hinges upon our nation’s willingness to lead; an entire people’s fate rests with us. We who are determined to be upstanders must sign the letters, send the emails, lay the framework for action, and go to Barack Obama in 2009 with a clear message: We Must End This Genocide. It is a job we cannot refuse. This is why WE are here today! 📩
Remarks, National Council of Jewish Women Conference, *Dallas, 2011*

In the 1980s and ‘90s, I was in the thick of my political career as a New York City Council member and as Manhattan borough president. Sexism gnawed at the edges and chewed through the center of my work. When I expressed an opinion, I was often dismissed as being “rude,” “pushy” or “hysterical.”

When I requested a public hearing about a piece of legislation I’d drafted, a powerful male colleague responded by saying, “Of course you can have a hearing. I can never say no to a pretty girl.”

And although I was popular within the Hispanic community, I could never win the support of Hispanic women over 40. Why? Because, back then, they felt that women shouldn’t work outside the home.

When I lost the mayoral election and left city politics for a new career in international development, my understanding of gender inequality acquired a global perspective.

There’s a Chinese proverb that says, “women hold up half the sky.” It’s a true statement in that women make up half, actually more than half, of the world’s population—more than half because women live longer than men.

But, unfortunately, wherever we look—in the United States, in the developing world—women aren’t always equipped to do the heavy lifting that’s required to hold up half the sky. Women have far fewer freedoms than men; are often not in control of their own bodies or their own lives; and are victims of subtle and overt gender inequity.

What’s more, the problem of gender-based violence persists. In too many countries—particularly in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo—rape is used as a weapon of war.

And yet, despite these painful realities, women often take matters into their own hands, becoming their community’s most valued agents of change and catalysts for collective action.

Even in dire circumstances, women are organizing. They are fighting back. And I believe that we have much to learn from their organizing efforts.

As AJWS supports healthcare, education, sustainable agriculture and the rights of sexual minorities; as we work to strengthen civil society, we often support women. Why? Because they are the people in greatest need—and because, quite frankly, they are the people working hardest to effect change.
A tireless advocate for women in a country where rape is a common war crime, Congolese activist and AJWS grantee Julienne Lusenge counsels women to protect themselves. Photograph by Jonathan Torgovnik
RUTH ON
THE HOLOCAUST AND HUMAN RIGHTS

National Human Rights Month Lecture
Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, 2014

I do this work—proudly—as a Jew, for Jewish reasons, with a Jewish vision for repairing the world. I do this work because I believe deeply in extending human rights to all, no matter where they live and no matter who they are, and I believe that it is an essential obligation for all of us to pursue.

I root my belief in what I see as a critical insight of my Jewish faith; that all things and people are connected, emanating from one creator. It is the concept of b’tzelem Elohim, that all of us are equally made in the image of the Divine. And we are therefore all equal, all deserving of human dignity and all entitled to the full protection of our rights.

There is a powerful connection between contemporary human rights work and the Holocaust—the genocide of the Jews of Europe in the 1940s; it looms large for me. Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jewish attorney and legal scholar, helped develop the concept of human rights and coined the term “genocide.” Three years after the machinery of the Holocaust was halted, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drafted by Eleanor Roosevelt, which offers a global framework for protecting all people from the kinds of degradation and destruction that European Jews experienced during the genocide.

Elie Wiesel said it best: “Human suffering anywhere concerns men and women everywhere.”

I was lucky enough to be born here in the United States in 1940, while people like me across the Atlantic Ocean were being annihilated. I came of age in post-war America when social movements for and of people of color, women and LGBT people—movements that many American Jews participated in as leaders and followers—changed our society.

So, it is at this complex intersection of history, faith and human responsibility that I have stood, and continue to stand. It remains my stepping-off point for the future.

Given our experience, there must be a Jewish voice to ensure that neither we, nor others, stand idly by. And that is the work of American Jewish World Service, deeply informed by Jewish history and inspired by Jewish values.

I realize the magnitude of the issues we fight for may seem daunting. But we must not retreat to the convenience of being overwhelmed.
We must think about how we can carry on the legacy of Jews like Raphael Lemkin, who understood that the rights and dignity of Jews were tied up with those of others. Or the legacy of the Jewish resistance fighters of the Vilna Ghetto, who proclaimed to the world that they fought “for our freedom and yours.” And let us also remember the heroic men and women—non-Jews—who risked their lives for the survival of Jews during the Holocaust.

I have always been in awe of their courage. How did they stand up for others? What made them different? When asked by researchers about why they did what they did, righteous gentiles often answered, “What else could I have done?” Yet, of course, many did not do what they did.

How do we all become more like them? How do we all learn to step forward and do something for other people who need our help? And how do we see that all of our rights are bound up with one another’s, that our human dignity is part of a greater unified whole?

At the United Nations in 1958, Eleanor Roosevelt said: “Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

Tzvi Weinreb, a rabbi who joined AJWS in battling the genocide in Darfur, expressed this poignantly. He explained that a close friend owed his life to the non-Jews who brought him and his family one potato a day as they hid from the Nazis.

So, when I think of the world we are in today and the world we want to be in tomorrow, I ask you to join me in focusing our smarts and our resources both close to home and far away—on our equivalent of one potato a day—so that all people can live full lives that they shape free of abuse and free of crimes against humanity.

Stand up for human rights—for ourselves; for the people of color whose lives are insufficiently valued in this country; for the sexual minorities under attack in Uganda; for oppressed populations in Burma and Darfur and the Dominican Republic and in so many other places.

Stand up as Americans. Stand up as Jews. Stand up because our faith and our humanity and our history command us to do so.
Ruth visits Darfuri refugees in Chad in 2007 as part of AJWS’s response to the genocide then raging in Darfur.
No matter how you identify as a Jew, you’ve probably heard the words of the Sh’ma. Or perhaps you’ve seen signposts of the prayer’s existence—a mezuzah on a doorpost, tefillin wrapped on an observant person’s arm.

The Sh’ma is a prayer so important, that many Jews recite it twice a day. Children are taught to whisper it before they go to sleep at night. Our sages are explicit that when we recite the Sh’ma, we must do so with focus, with clarity, and with unity of heart and mind.

The essence of the Sh’ma—the imperative to listen, to pay attention to injustice, and to mend the brokenness in our world—grounds my life with purpose.

Sh’ma. Listen. How can the act of listening anchor our lives with compassion, interconnection and a shared commitment to justice? How can we use the framework of the Sh’ma to listen more intently to people who are silenced, disempowered or rendered invisible—to really pay attention to them and what they say?

I want to share three “Sh’ma moments” in my life when the act of listening allowed me to better understand “the stranger”—or “the other.”

Sh’ma moment #1: It’s 1985, the height of the AIDS crisis in New York City. Following 15 years as a social worker and a community organizer, I joined the New York City Council. Thoughtful and steady (I hope) in my views about what was best for the city’s people, I came to my own conclusions and then stuck to my guns. I actually changed my vote on an issue only once. It was during the debate over whether the city should fund needle exchange programs for drug users. My first instinct was that we should not enable drug users to abuse heroin. How could I support that? Why would I support that? After all, weren’t illegal
drugs undermining communities of color and poor neighborhoods?

Then, someone from an HIV organization invited me to visit an illegal needle exchange that he was running on a street corner in a very poor part of the Bronx. I visited the program at night. Person after person told me how gaining access to clean needles was helping them avoid infecting their friends and other drug users. My resistance softened as I listened. All of the opposing arguments that had been so clear to me dissolved as I heard the truth of these people’s lives. My perspective shifted. I now understood why these programs were so important, and I decided to vote in their favor. The decision was a good one because these programs are working and are saving lives every day.

Sh’mo moment #2: It’s 1998, and I am the president of American Jewish World Service. International development was a new world for me, far different from city politics. I had a lot to learn.

Early on, I traveled to Zimbabwe to visit an impoverished rural settlement with no government services. I met a teacher working with 80 children outside under a tree and asked him what he wanted most: Was it desks and chairs, books, pencils or perhaps a chalk board? He replied, “I don’t need any of those things. I just need the children to have breakfast.”

I had come to Zimbabwe thinking that my solutions were the key to helping Zimbabwean children get a better education. I thought I had all of the answers. But it turns out that the people whom I had perceived as powerless—the people I was trying to help—were the ones who knew best what they needed. They were the ones with the answers, and it was up to me to listen.

Sh’mo moment #3: Around 2011, I traveled to Thailand, where I met a sex worker. A 37-year-old mother of three, she very succinctly told me about her life: “These were my options,” she said: “I could be apart from my children for 10 hours each day working in a sweatshop sewing buttons on shirts for $2 a day. Or I could spend the day with my kids and, at night, talk to an interesting western man, lie down with him for 20 minutes in a familiar, safe place, and make a lot of money. Which would you choose?”

Like many Americans in my generation, I was taught that prostitution is immoral and coercive. Selling sex for money has always been loaded with stigma—and it still is today. And as a feminist of a certain age, I could initially only see sex work as oppression.

But in recent years, I’ve heard countless stories from sex workers themselves. When you listen to the story of a sex worker, you begin to understand the difference between a girl or a woman who is forced into trafficking—which is horrific and oppressive to its core—and a woman who sells sex to support her family because she has deemed it her best choice.

I learned in Thailand that these women are much like me: They work hard and they care about their kids. Who am I to tell them that their labor is any less valid than my own? Who am I to believe that this woman is any less deserving of physical safety and the right to earn a living—rights that I fully enjoy and have long taken for granted?

Nearly everywhere in the world, sex workers are detained, arrested, fined and driven out of their homes or places of work. In both developed and developing countries, discriminatory policies enable
police to rape and beat sex workers and confiscate their money and belongings, including condoms, which increases their risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. I would have never known any of this had I not listened—really listened—to these sex workers’ stories.

Listening can be an antidote to judgment. Listening matters.

These three moments, among many others, opened up my heart and mind to human struggles experienced by “the other.” They exposed hidden injustices that were far from my consciousness. And they show the humanity that’s at stake when global problems like hunger, violence and discrimination go unchecked. But these stories are just three of a universe of stories that, too often, fall on deaf ears.

So, why aren’t we listening?

My colleague, Rabbi David Wolpe, of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, once wrote about “the bias of the near.” “Things close to us seem of more importance than things far away,” he explains.

The Torah acknowledges this bias when it says, “love your neighbor as yourself.” But the Torah also seeks to make the stranger as close as one’s neighbor, and to make the far off future vividly present to us.

Much of my work, then, at American Jewish World Service is about bridging “the near” and “the far.” We seek to close this gap for the sake of humanity and for the sake of ourselves and our role in the world. But we can only do this well when we listen, really listen, to the stories and struggles of our fellow human beings.

Listening is a prerequisite for action. Listening is a principle for living Jewishly in a globalized world.

Sh’ma.
“Investing in Haiti’s Future Means Listening Humbly to People on the Ground”  
*The Huffington Post, 2013*

“Who is wise? One who learns from all people.” So teaches a passage in Pirkei Avot, an ancient collection of Jewish texts. I’m reminded of this insight’s relevance today when I see how governments and international organizations are responding to disasters—those that strike thousands of miles away and those that hit close to home in New York City.

More often than not, the people we perceive as victims of disasters are the people from whom we have the most to learn about effective solutions. Yet the resourcefulness of these “victims” is frequently dismissed by people in power.

A study by the Inter-American Development Bank estimates that the total cost of the 2010 Haiti earthquake was between $8 billion and $14 billion. Countless humanitarian aid organizations, celebrities, international governments and the Haitian government have invested in Haiti’s future—often with moral certitude and the best of intentions. Nonetheless, aid has been slow to reach people who need it most. And strategies for long-term solutions have not been fully fleshed out.

That’s partly due to these recovery efforts lacking a critical ingredient for success: the knowledge and “know how” of Haitian people themselves. The ingenuity required for long-term recovery lies within Haitian society and depends on the power of grassroots organizations. But sadly, a mix of bureaucracy, corruption and top-down decision-making has crippled lasting progress.

As governments and international organizations continue to invest in Haiti’s future, we must have the humility to admit that we don’t have all the answers. Let’s heed the advice that knowledge lives with people on the ground—not within the bowels of bureaucracies. We must listen to and learn from Haitian people at the grassroots level.

After all, tradition teaches that one who learns from all people is wise.
As the mother of a lesbian woman, a committed Jew, and a life-long advocate for human rights, I am alarmed that the infamous Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda has resurfaced. This hateful bill is a grave threat to LGBT people and organizations in Uganda. It also undermines all in that country who wish to build a robust civil society based on rights. …

The most tragic chapter of Jewish history teaches all of us that the stripping away of human rights from any minority group can be a precursor to its targeted destruction. To stand idly by is to be complicit with injustice. Our global community must stand in solidarity with LGBT Ugandans and support defenders of human rights who are working to make justice and human rights a reality for everyone.
In the United States, one in eight people is hungry, and the number of hungry people worldwide recently surpassed one billion. While the acceleration of global hunger has created the need for short-term solutions, like soup kitchens, the notion of “feeding people” through charity is merely a Band-Aid.

Long-term food security in the United States and around the world requires that we rethink the global food system and emphasize sustainable agriculture at the local level. The farther our food has to travel to get from the farm into our kitchens, and the more stops it has to make along the way, the more expensive it becomes and the more vulnerable we all are.

Food is a human right, yet we allow those in power to treat it as a commodity to be bought and sold by profiteers interested in a quick buck. We, the consumers, must demand that our policy makers create conditions that allow small-scale farmers around the world to compete with conglomerates and speculators on equal terms and enable local markets to flourish.

When I traveled to Ghana with 17 American rabbis, we spent 12 days constructing the walls of a school compound in partnership with a local Ghanaian community ravaged by hunger, poverty and labor exploitation.

More important than our efforts to mix cement and schlep bricks, we built powerful relationships with Ghanaian human rights activists. We also engaged in rich discussions about what it means to be faith-based leaders and global citizens.

One afternoon, a rabbi was exchanging stories with a young Ghanaian girl. In the middle of their conversation, she suddenly asked the rabbi if he had eaten lunch. When he said that he was planning to eat soon, the girl responded, “I pray to God you will be able to eat tomorrow,” reflecting her own understandable insecurity about food as well as her concern for others.

Most American Jews are among the luckiest people in the world. We have rarely in recent years
known the hardship of being “the hungry” or “the naked”—the very people Jewish tradition demands that we feed and clothe. For the vast majority of American Jews, fasting on Yom Kippur is a voluntary act, not a chronic reality.

But when nearly a billion people around the world go to bed hungry every night, when drought exacerbates hunger in the United States and around the globe, and when fasting for too many people is not a choice but an endemic condition, we must adopt a food ethic that enables everyone to experience the sweetness of having enough.

It is easy to forget that the potential to effect global change is intimately tied to our local lives. What we consume, which government policies we support, where we work, and how we spend our money and our time have a profound impact on the lives and human rights of people thousands of miles away—earthquake survivors in Haiti, migrant workers in Thailand, young girls in Ghana.

How do we use our power as American Jews to make a difference in the lives of people facing hunger in the developing world? How can we be more effective as advocates and catalysts for change?

Certainly, extreme poverty and hunger are colossal problems. We cannot eliminate these problems on our own. But we can—and must—expand our collective responsibility to support people who are unable to put food on their own tables.

Join me in assuring the young girl I met in Ghana, and so many others like her around the world, that we will live the values of our tradition: We will work for justice so that people around the world have enough to eat tomorrow and for many years to come.
During the Ebola outbreak in Liberia, AJWS grantee BAWODA set up hand-washing stations and taught school children like these to protect themselves from the virus. Photograph by Jonathan Torgovnik
RUTH ON EBOLA


In Liberia, the country hardest hit by Ebola, people are dying outside overcrowded hospitals.

The virus is spreading like wildfire, in part because many people don’t understand how it is transmitted. Some communities view Ebola as something caused by evil spirits; others think it’s a government conspiracy. Neighbors are accusing neighbors of inflicting a curse. Not surprisingly, those who fall ill—and the families they leave behind—are marked with stigma and shunned.

The epidemic has also sparked violence, as the Liberian government has sent armed soldiers to cordon off slums and impose quarantines—often with no warning.

As Jews, these developments are chilling. We know too much about human suffering as a consequence of panic and fear, dating from Medieval times when Jews were blamed for the spread of the plague—and from Nazi Germany, when we were depicted as vermin-like carriers of illness.

Our history and our ethical values—especially our deep belief that every human is created in the image of the creator—command us to act and support those who are struggling with this epidemic and the hysteria it is generating.

That’s why American Jewish World Service is supporting trusted community groups in Liberia who are working to quell the panic and to share important public health information that can help bring the Ebola outbreak to an end. These local groups are now going into communities that trust them, to dispel misinformation about how the virus spreads, calm people’s fears and encourage a rational response.

We cannot stand idly by as others die. Our merits this year are not just measured by how we relate to the creator of this universe, but how we respond when our fellow human beings are in desperate need.
When I reflect on the concept of Chosenness in Jewish tradition, I often think back to my time in New York City government, beginning in 1978 and during the height of the AIDS crisis. Time and again, I was heartbroken as friends and constituents lost their lives to a deadly disease and suffered the effects of ignorance, fear and hate.

On the City Council, in 1986, I was the floor manager for a civil rights bill to protect gays and lesbians in employment, housing and public accommodations. The hearing was not progressing well when, by pre-arrangement, a young police officer named Charlie Cochran stood up and announced to the entire room that he was gay.

Those of us who supported this legislation—particularly straight people—weren’t taking any real risks. But for Officer Charlie Cochran to stand up and publicly come out in the 1980s—that was heroic. And his coming out made all the difference because the bill passed. Cochran’s choice to be vulnerable and visible, at a time when it would have been far safer to remain hidden, is at the core of my understanding of Chosenness in the modern world.

For me, Chosenness is not about superiority or triumphalism. It’s about carrying, internalizing, and claiming difference; being willing to stand up for what matters. It involves figuring out how to negotiate the dynamics of being different and advocating for those who are perceived as different, vulnerable, or on the margins, even when—especially when—the act of doing so renders us vulnerable, too.

There is a dynamic, reflexive relationship between being chosen and the act of choosing. Jews may call ourselves God’s “chosen people,” but what does it mean for us to choose? Today, all Jews are essentially “Jews by choice.” We choose how and to what degree we wish to shape our lives with Jewish values and Jewish tradition. In some contexts, we may decide to amplify our Jewish identity. In other contexts, we may decide to mute it. Ultimately, we determine the impact our Jewishness has on our own lives, our communities, and the broader world.

Embracing Chosenness means accepting a moral mandate to speak for and with those whose dignity has been denied. And choosing Jewish identity means rooting our lives in ethical obligations: to speak out in the face of injustice; to right wrongs; to fight for a better world. At times, like Officer Cochran, we are the ones who must make ourselves seen. At times, we must act for the sake of others. Both contexts present us with the opportunity to choose and to embrace being chosen; to activate our most deeply held values and manifest our truest selves.
Choosing Jewish identity means rooting our lives in ethical obligations: to speak out in the face of injustice; to right wrongs; to fight for a better world.

—Ruth

Ruth in Ethiopia, 2011. Photograph by David Rotbard
Ruth at AJWS’s 30th anniversary gala in New York City in 2015. Photograph by Jeff Zorabedian
For 30 years, AJWS has worked to end suffering from disease, oppression and poverty. Under Ruth Messinger’s leadership, you’ve fought for the inherent dignity of every person. You believe that no one should be treated as a stranger, that all of us are created in God’s image and that all of us deserve compassion and care. ... Jewish tradition teaches that if a person saves one life, it is as if they’ve saved the entire world. By that measure, over these past 30 years, you’ve saved the world many, many times over.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA
in a special message on AJWS’s 30th anniversary
When the Jews needed help, other people did not come to our rescue, so some of us felt that, as Jews, we must also consider ourselves as part of the human family, the large human family, and therefore try to help. That is what the organization now headed by Ruth is trying to do.

ELIE WIESEL, the late Nobel Laureate and Founding Board Member of AJWS, quoted in a video for Ruth’s 70th birthday

The history of the West African women’s peacebuilding movement can never be written without mentioning the name Ruth Messinger. I always look forward to that arm around my shoulder, saying: ‘Now tell me about you.’

LEYMAH GBOWEE, Nobel Peace Prize winner; Director, Women Peace and Security Network Africa

Ruth Messinger continues to be a brilliant force for good exemplifying the most essential Jewish imperative to shape a more just, compassionate and interdependent world. Her moral compass has global coordinates that lend direction to our Jewish world and beyond.

RABBI RICK JACOBS, President of the Union for Reform Judaism

Clockwise, from top left: Ruth on a Study Tour to India, 2012 (photograph by Felicia Horowitz); working alongside AJWS volunteers in Ghana in 2011 (photograph by Will Berkowitz); celebrating a Jewish holiday with her sister and father; campaigning for mayor in 1997.
Ruth believed in my dream, had the courage to give me the first seed grant, and AJWS has been a true friend and enabler of our work for the last 10 years. Today we are reaching hundreds and thousands of girls. A few years back, Ruth travelled to Murewa and visited my birthplace, daring to walk the distance and navigate our rural communities. She is a fearless leader for all times.

NYARADZAYI GUMBONZVANDA, African Union Goodwill Ambassador for the Campaign to End Child Marriage and CEO of Rozaria Memorial Trust

Ruth Messinger has been an amazing leader at AJWS, and I am proud to call her my friend. She has given voice to people around the world who seek social justice and change. Her efforts have truly made a difference.

U.S. CONGRESSMAN ELIOT ENGEL

[Ruth is] one of the good guys, as we say. We will be judged one day, each of us, I say, by how we treat the least among us. And Ruth will be placed high on anyone’s list.

DAVID N. DINKINS, 106th Mayor of New York City

The path that Ruth has set for AJWS for the past 18 years is nothing short of remarkable. She is an inspiration, a friend and an all-around joy to travel with!

GIGI PRITZKER, AJWS donor

I am happy to join in honoring my friend Ruth—JTS’s friend Ruth—for past achievements beyond number and future achievements that I know will be no less remarkable. She continues to do us all proud.

ARNOLD M. EISEN, Chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary

Clockwise from top left: Ruth in Guatemala with a Mayan woman supported by AJWS grantee Comité Campesino del Altiplano (photograph by Lilach Shafir); at the school in New York City she co-founded in 1968 (photograph by Suzanne Szasz); with a young Cambodian activist (photograph by Christine Han).
This book is dedicated to Ruth by her staff, colleagues, admirers and friends.
Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world. AJWS defends civil and political rights; advances sexual health and rights; promotes natural resource rights and climate justice; and aids communities in the aftermath of disasters. We pursue lasting change by supporting grassroots and global human rights organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and by advocating for U.S. and international policies for justice and equality worldwide.

“
It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it.

—ETHICS OF OUR ANCESTORS, 2:16

FRONT COVER: Ruth in Ethiopia, 2011. Photograph by David Rotbard
BACK COVER: Ruth in Cambodia, 2016. Photograph by Christine Han

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