



What is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and why do we celebrate it?

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"The UDHR is based on an idea that came into its own during World War II: the idea that there are a few common standards of decency that can and should be accepted by people of all nations and cultures." (Mary Ann Glendon 2004)

The United Nations' Charter was adopted in 1945. It "reaffirmed faith in fundamental human rights, and dignity and worth of the human person" and committed all member states to promote "universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion".

However, when the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany became apparent after the Second World War, the international consensus developed that the Charter did not sufficiently define the rights it referenced. A universal declaration that specified the rights of individuals was necessary to give effect to the Charter's provisions on human rights.

Between January 1947 and December 1948, under the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt, the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations labored to come to a statement of fundamental freedoms and rights that could be accepted by all the nations of the world. Their statement was then presented to the UN General Assembly, which, in turn, scrutinized the document, with the 58 Member States voting a total of 1,400 times on practically every word and every clause of the text. **On December 10, 1948, the General Assembly unanimously adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, with eight abstentions. Since then, December 10 is celebrated every year worldwide as Human Rights Day.

The UDHR calls for universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the principles of non-discrimination and civil and political rights, as well as social, cultural and economic rights. The foundations of these freedoms are laid out in Articles 1 and 2 with their principles of dignity, liberty, equality and brotherhood. Articles 3-11 constitute the rights of the individual, such as the prohibitions on torture and slavery. Articles 12-17 detail the rights of the individual within civil and political society. Articles 18-21 are concerned with collective freedoms such as freedom of religion and articles 22-27 contain social, economic, and cultural rights. The final three articles, 28-30, relate to the duty of the individual to society at large and prohibit the use of rights in contravention of the purposes of the United Nations

Even though not formally legally binding upon UN members, the Declaration has been adopted in or influenced most national constitutions since 1948. It serves as the foundation for a growing number of international treaties and national laws and international, regional, national and sub-national institutions protecting and promoting human rights.



How is the UDHR enforced?

- The UN Human Rights Council is charged by the General Assembly with investigating violations of human rights.
- The Council engages independent rapporteurs to investigate and report on alleged human rights violations.
- The Human Rights Council ranks below the UN Security Council but is authorized to call on the UN Security Council to take action.

The UN Security Council can, in turn,

- Recommend measures for dispute resolution.
- Call upon other member nations to impose sanctions.
- Enforce its decision militarily, but only when there is a threat to international peace and security.

The UDHR provides language for human rights protection in the legal systems of individual countries.

What are some of the Jewish values related to the UDHR?

- Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel teaches in *Pirkei Avot* that the world is founded on Truth, Justice, and Peace, core values of universal human society.
- We uphold the value of *K'vod Habriot*, inherent human dignity, based on the idea found in Genesis that we are all created in God's image. This ensures that no human is worth more than another.
- We read in prophets such as Isaiah that what God wants from us is to feed the hungry and to free the oppressed. We have an obligation to create a just society.
- In Judaism, as in the UDHR, each human being has a unique destiny. The Chassidic teacher the Netivot Shalom teaches that no person is like another. From the day of the creation of Adam and onward, no person can fix in this world what it is the responsibility of another to fix. Everyone has his or her destiny and assignment in life.

Why should we as Jews celebrate the UDHR?

- Because we are human, with rights and obligations as human beings.
- Because as Jews our human rights are sometimes infringed upon by others with power over us; and because at times we are in power over others and must safeguard their rights.
- Because the UDHR emerged as a reaction to the Holocaust and the support for universal human rights is part of our pledge as a community to prevent genocide.