



Human Rights Shabbat

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Israel

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Preamble

“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world...”

Pirkei Avot 3:14:

Beloved is all humankind for they were made *b'tzelem Elohim* (in the image of God). Doubly beloved are they, for they were told that they were made in the image of God. As it says: "In the image of God was humankind made."
(Genesis 9:6)

Rabbis for Human Rights is an organization dedicated to the protection of the human rights of all people in Israeli territory, Jew and Gentile, Israeli, Palestinian, or visitor. Not only that, as individuals and rabbis our concern for human rights extends beyond our borders. As such, we applaud the sentiments being celebrated on Human Rights Day, December 10, 2010, the 62nd anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

According to the Declaration, “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” When the UN General Assembly approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they called on member states to publicize the text of the Declaration and “to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories.”

But is that enough?

Does awareness of human rights really do much to protect human rights? Just a few examples:

- Article 17 of the UDHR says “No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.” In the West Bank, settlers illegally built an outpost (Amona) on private Palestinian land. The government of Israel recently argued that diplomatic considerations trump law, and they do not need to take action to return the property of the Palestinians at this time.
- Article 3 of the UDHR says “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” How often is this violated? Hamas shoots rockets at Sderot, Hezbollah threatens the north of Israel, Gazans live in fear, and wherever you turn, people are denied personal security.
- Article 26 of the UDHR proclaims “Everyone has the right to education.” Yet Taliban forces do everything they can to prevent women from receiving an education in Afghanistan.
- Article 25 of the UDHR states “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family” yet poor people the world over have inadequate food, shelter, and clothing.
- Article 13 of the UDHR says “Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.” Yet Gaza has been turned into the world’s largest prison with Hamas, the Egyptian government and the Israeli government all sharing blame.

Article 23 of the UDHR tells us “Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.” Yet women the world over earn less money than men for similar work.

The problem with focusing on “rights” is that as long as I personally am not violating someone else’s rights, it would appear that I am fulfilling my duties. If someone else is violating another person’s human rights, what concern is that to me?

The Jewish tradition wisely addresses this problem by focusing on responsibilities, not on rights.

In order to get people to recognize that it is not enough that they themselves don’t personally trample the rights of others, what we need is a “Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities.” The Jewish tradition provides a wealth of sources that could be used to create such a document.

The most fundamental text guiding a Jewish approach to human rights is found in the opening chapter of the Torah: “So God created the human in God’s own image; in the image of God, God created him; male and female God created them.”

The story of the creation of humankind, the story of Adam and Eve, brings us a message of universal equality: we are all cousins. Yet the idea of being created in the image of God raises our vision of our fellow person to an even higher level. When you look at another person, you are looking at a reflection of the Divine. The way you treat other people is the way you treat God’s representative in this world. With over half of the people in the world claiming to follow and honor the One God, this should be a powerful message calling on us to respect our fellow person.

Having acknowledged our familial ties and the Divine within us, we turn to some of the general principles. We are not allowed to sit by idly while others suffer. We are not allowed to be quiet and not speak up when members of our “extended family” cheat and steal.

The Torah commands us *lo ta’amod al dam re’acha* (Leviticus 19:16), “do not stand idly by your neighbor’s blood.” The Talmud makes clear that is referring to helping people in trouble: “From where do we know that if a person sees his fellow drowning, mauled by beasts, or attacked by robbers, he is bound to save him? From the verse, do not stand idly by your neighbor’s blood! (Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 73a).” If we see someone in trouble – if we see someone whose human rights are being violated – we are commanded by God not to ignore the situation.

We are commanded to intervene.

The Talmud also tells us that “All who can protest against [something wrong that] one of their family [is doing] and does not protest, is held accountable for their family. [All who can protest against something wrong that] a citizen of their city [is doing and does not protest], is held accountable for all citizens of the city. [All who can protest against something wrong that is being done] in the whole world, is accountable together with all citizens of the world. (B Shabbat 54b)

We live in an age when mass protests can be organized in minutes on twitter and Facebook, and mass protests have been effective in getting governments to change their behaviors, or even to collapse. Are any of us exempt from at least attempting to protest the sins of others?

The Jewish tradition does not talk about a right to an adequate standard of living. Instead, it imposes on the community a responsibility to provide for people who are having economic hard times, and it imposes on each individual an obligation to give to charity. When taking care of poor people, or people who have run into economic hard times, we are cautioned to take into account the dignity of the poor person.

There is a remarkable series of stories in the Talmud (Bavli Ketubot 67b) that illustrate this principle. For example, “It was related about Hillel the Elder that he bought for a certain poor man who was of a good family a horse to ride upon and a slave to run before him. On one occasion he could not find a slave to run before him, so he himself ran before him for three miles.”

Where does this requirement come from? From the Torah itself, Deuteronomy 15:8 which reads “But you shall open your hand wide to him, and shall surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he lacks.” By focusing on what “he” lacks, the rabbis are telling us that not all poor people are treated the same. We might not deem it feasible (or desirable!) to provide an oligarch who fell on hard times a private jet, but we can still learn from these teachings the principle of treating the poor with respect.

And the Jewish tradition makes it clear that everyone is obligated to participate. In the Talmud (Bavli Gittin 7b) the rabbi Mar Zutra teaches “Even a poor man who himself subsists on charity should give charity.” Why should a poor person be obligated to share some of his meager handouts? I think it’s both so that the poor person has a reminder that there are other people who are worse off, and to make clear that EVERYONE is responsible to attend to the well-being of others, not just himself.

The UHDR declares that “All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.” The Jewish tradition instead charges us with creating such a legal system: “You shall have one kind of law, as well for the stranger, as for one of your own country; for I am Adonai your God (Leviticus 24:22).” The difference may be subtle, but it’s still there. The focus in the Jewish tradition is the responsibility, not the right.

The UDHR says “Everyone has the right to education.” The Jewish tradition, instead, focuses on the responsibility to provide an education for our children. The Torah teaches “And you shall teach them to your children (Deuteronomy 11:19).” At first this was understood to simply mean parents had to teach their own children; later rabbis interpreted that as meaning the community had a responsibility to establish schools for all children. The first system of universal education is found in the Talmud (see Bavli Kiddushin 66a and Yerushalmi Ketubot chapter 8).

Creating a “Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities” would make it clear that each and every one of us is responsible for the welfare of all of us. We would not even need to state the “rights;” the rights are obviously easily inferred from the responsibilities. When Cain slays Abel in the opening chapters of the Bible, God confronts Cain, forces Cain to confront his actions by asking “Where is your brother Abel?” Cain answers, famously, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” From all the teachings of our tradition we know that God’s answer (unspoken) is “yes, as a matter of fact you ARE your brother or sister’s keeper!

The most powerful role model we have for protesting injustice is, of course, Abraham. Abraham teaches us that it is incredibly important to “speak truth to power,” even when it might be scary or dangerous to do so. In one of the most compelling speeches in the Torah, Abraham challenges God: “Will you also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are only fifty righteous inside the city; will you also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous who are in it? Be it far from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked; and that the righteous should be as the wicked, be it far from you; Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Genesis 18:23-25)”

If Abraham can challenge the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient God to act justly, surely we can challenge our governments and leaders to act justly.

I encourage you to support Rabbis for Human Rights in their important work of “speaking truth to power.” And to speak up yourself.

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