

Introducing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

By Rabbi Gilah Langner

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is based on the idea that “there are a few common standards of decency that can and should be accepted by people of all nations and cultures”¹, Written in the aftermath of the Shoah and the other atrocities against civilians during World War II, the UDHR was unanimously approved in 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations with eight countries abstaining but no country dissenting.

The UDHR is a remarkable document, affirming the dignity and worth of all human beings, but also specifying what that means in terms of the specific rights that inhere in each person. Among the human rights enumerated are the following:

- Articles 1-3: Fundamental principles of freedom, dignity, and equality, and the right to life, liberty and security.
- Articles 4 -11: Rights of the individual, such as the prohibitions on torture and slavery; equal recognition before the law; no arbitrary arrest, detention or exile; and the presumption of innocence.
- Articles 12-17: Rights of the individual within civil and political society, including the right to freedom of movement, to leave and return to one’s country, to seek asylum, to own property, and to marry and found a family.
- Articles 18-21: Political and personal freedoms, such as freedom of religion and thought, freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, freedom to take part in the government, and equal access to public service.
- Articles 22-27: Social, economic, and cultural rights, including the right to work and to receive equal pay for equal work; the right to join a trade union; the right to a reasonable amount of rest and leisure; the right to food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services; the right to education and to participate freely in the cultural life of the community.
- Articles 28-30: The duty of the individual to society at large and a prohibition on the use of rights in contravention of the purposes of the United Nations.

Since the adoption of the Declaration on December 10, 1948, the anniversary has been observed in worldwide commemorations each year as Human Rights Day. Even though the Declaration is not legally binding upon UN members, it has been adopted by, or is reflected in, numerous national constitutions since 1948. It also serves as the foundation for a growing number of international treaties, national laws, and institutions protecting human rights.

The Jewish Connection

There are a number of reasons why Jews should feel a special connection to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

First, the Declaration was a specific response to the horrors of the Holocaust on the part of the newly emerging United Nations. The UN Charter, adopted in 1945, contained general language reaffirming fundamental human rights and committing all member states to promote “universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.” Nevertheless, when the atrocities

¹Mary Ann Glendon, 2004.

Human Rights Shabbat

committed by Nazi Germany became apparent after the World War II, an international consensus developed that the Charter did not sufficiently define the rights it referenced. Over the next two years, under the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt, the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations labored to draft a more detailed statement that became the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. One of the key drafters was René Cassin, a French Jew and noted jurist, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1968 for his efforts in developing the Declaration.

Secondly, Jewish values are closely related to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and dovetail in important ways. A full comparison of Jewish textual sources with each article of the Declaration is available in T'ruah's *Masechet Zechuyot Ha-Adam*. [<http://bit.ly/TruahMZA>] Some of the highlights include:

- Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel teaches in *Pirkei Avot* that the world is founded on Truth, Justice, and Peace, core values of universal human society.
- The first chapter of the book of Genesis upholds the inherent value of each human being based on the idea that we are all created in God's image. Rabbinic Judaism applied the term *K'vod Ha-briot* to refer to the notion of inherent human dignity and equality.
- Prophets such as Isaiah remind us that what God wants from us is to feed the hungry and free the oppressed. We have an obligation to create a just and compassionate society, a point emphasized throughout the book of Deuteronomy.
- Specific values embodied in the Declaration – such as the right to a hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal – are echoed in Jewish tradition. Exodus 12:49, for example, mandates that there shall be “one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you,” while Deuteronomy 16 underscores the need for an impartial judiciary.

In short, we as Jews should celebrate and promote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a text worthy of study, as a goal for nations to work toward and a marker of where they stand. It is a safeguard of our own rights as Jews which have so often been infringed upon by those with power over us. It is also a monitor for ourselves when we wield power over others and must safeguard their rights. Support for universal human rights is part of our pledge as a community to prevent genocide and to build a world where the rights of all human beings are upheld.

For a more in-depth discussion of the history of Jewish views of human rights, please see Rabbi Jonathan Crane's article, “Why Rights, Why Me?” <http://bit.ly/whyrights>

The 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,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge,

Now, Therefore THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6. Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7. All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8. Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10. Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11.

(1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.

(2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Human Rights Shabbat

Article 12. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13.

(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
(2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14.

(1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
(2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15.

(1) Everyone has the right to a nationality.
(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16.

(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
(3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17.

(1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.
(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19. Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20.

(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
(2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21.

(1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
(2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
(3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 22. Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23.

(1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
(2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
(4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 24. Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25.

(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26.

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27.

(1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
(2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

Article 28. Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29.

(1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.
(2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.
(3) These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 30.

Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

Introduction to Public Reading of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

T'ruah is pleased to share the following custom from Temple Hillel B'nai Torah in West Roxbury, MA:

- For congregations that read a Haftarah on Shabbat morning and are comfortable deviating from the traditional text, the Declaration can substitute for the morning's Haftarah.
- For other congregations, this public reading might be done in place of a sermon, as the beginning of a Torah discussion, or in addition to the prayers for the United States and Israel.

From Rabbi Barbara Penzner of Temple Hillel B'nai Torah and Dr. Susannah Sirkin of Physicians for Human Rights:

We consider the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to be the sacred text for Human Rights Shabbat. Our first encounter with a public reading of the Declaration was at the Reebok Human Rights Awards ceremony in 1993. Media magnate Ted Turner said it was better than giving a speech and that too many people talked about human rights but had never actually read the Declaration or knew what all these rights were. In our congregation, we read it with the haftarah blessings, to place the prophetic writers of this declaration—including Eleanor Roosevelt, French Jewish jurist René Cassin, Hansa Mehta of India, and Charles Malik of Lebanon---into our own prophetic tradition. We've found that the call is most compelling when the 30 articles are read by a multiplicity of voices standing up one by one in our sanctuary and representing diverse fields and interests across our community. This drives home the point from the Mishnah that God stamps all human beings with the mold of Adam--who was himself created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the divine image--yet each is unique, precious, and equal in dignity and rights.

The enclosed copy of the Declaration is abridged by Dr. Sirkin and theatrical director Diane Paulus. The text has been streamlined for a quicker public reading, but no original language has been changed. The document should be cut up, or photocopied and highlighted, ahead of time so that each article can be given to a different person to read.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948

Preamble 1

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,

Preamble 2

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Preamble 3

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men,

Preamble 4

Now, Therefore THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms.

(Read after Preamble 4, which begins with "The General Assembly proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights...")

Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2: Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6: Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7: All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.

Article 8: Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Human Rights Shabbat

Article 9: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10: Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11: Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defense.

Article 12: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation.

Article 13: Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.

Article 14: Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

Article 15: Everyone has the right to a nationality. And the right to change his nationality.

Article 16: Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family.

Article 17: Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20: Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

Article 21: Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage.

Article 22: Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23: Everyone has the right to equal pay for equal work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions, and to protection against unemployment.

Article 24: Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Human Rights Shabbat

Article 25: Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26: Everyone has the right to free education. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Article 27: Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

Article 28: Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29: Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

Article 30: Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.