

RABBIS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS – NORTH AMERICA

רבנים למען זכויות האדם – צפון אמריקה

PASSOVER AND HUMAN RIGHTS: INTERFAITH PERSPECTIVES

December 10, 2008, marked 60 years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This remarkable document, which was a direct response to the barbarism of the Holocaust and the Second World War, affirms the inherent rights of each human being.

At the Rabbis for Human Rights – North America Conference in December,* we looked at the origins of these rights from the shared, and yet divergent, perspectives of the Abrahamic Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For Passover, we invite you to continue this conversation at your seder table.

We asked Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars to reflect on how our faiths relate to the values of Passover and its imperative for tikkun olam, the repair of the world. Each of their statements is followed by a series of questions. We invite you to read one or more of the statements, and then discuss the questions.

Our overall questions are: How do our particular religious values inspire our participation in the quest for universal human rights? In what ways have the religious teachings or the history of our community enhanced the protection of human rights of all? In what ways have our religious teachings or the history of our religious community been a source of prejudice and caused suffering to those we have seen as “other”?

*To see additional educational materials and photos from the Second North American Conference on Judaism and Human Rights, please visit our website at www.rhr-na.org.

THE POWER OF PASSOVER: A CALL TO ACTION FROM THE JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer

Celebrating the new year of the trees in wintry Philadelphia always seemed counter intuitive to me. When our children were small we aspired to mark the occasion by planting parsley in paper cups. Some years we did not get organized in time to buy the seeds, and some years we forgot about the plants and they went missing, but more often than we had any right to expect, the seeds germinated and by Pesach we had a small, improbable harvest of curly, green vegetables to put on the Seder plate.

The table is so laden with symbols that night, one wonders if it is possible to squeeze in yet another metaphor. But tasting that parsley was always one of my favorite moments. A child, some dirt, a few seeds in a Dixie cup... a living, edible plant! Each year, someone at the table would ask, "Why do we eat potatoes while pointing to the green parsley?" And someone else would say, "Because where our grandparents came from in Russia, the only "greens" that were available in April were potatoes. It was the best they could do; now it is a tradition." Then we would eat wet, salty potatoes flecked with home-grown parsley and think about hardship and tears and about our ancestors who made their exodus out of Europe so that we could have children who farmed in paper cups—just for the wonder of it.

We wanted our children to grow up knowing that they were once slaves in Egypt (and poor enough to eat potatoes till summer), that it was upon them to remember that legacy, so they would know the heart of the slave, the immigrant, the prisoner, the hungry. Now our children are young adults, joining their efforts to redeem our sorry world. Is it too much to imagine that all those Seders gave them not only obligation but also a promise? Perhaps, during long winter slogs in the struggle for justice, they remember the taste of freshly picked parsley that sprouted against the odds, the taste of hope.

- ▶ Reflecting on the experience of her own family, Fuchs-Kreimer's focus is on the inspiration and hope that the celebration of Passover offers us. How does the Passover story or the memories of your family seders inspire you to repair the world?

PASSOVER AND HUMAN RIGHTS: A MEDITATION FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Professor David Gushee

The Passover story communicates the fearsome commitment of God to the human rights of suffering people. Because Pharaoh would not let God's people go, God finally inflicted that grievous last recompense on Pharaoh's people, while passing over the households of the Jews whose liberation had been so long in coming.

This story reveals God as one who not only hears the cries of the oppressed, but delivers them from bondage into freedom. It shows a God who confronts injustice, including leaders who believe themselves to be so powerful as to be beyond critique or correction. It suggests that a nation that commits injustice and violates human rights (or passively allows its leaders to do so) ultimately will pay a price for it, even if for a long time it seems that such wickedness will last forever. That is true even if its injustices are inflicted in the name of national security, as were Pharaoh's evil deeds; as are so many of our world's greatest human rights violations.

In the Passover story, Egypt's firstborn end up paying the price for Pharaoh's sins. In the New Testament narrative, God takes the accumulated weight of injustice and human sin onto his own shoulders at the Cross. The community formed in response is then responsible for serving as a force for justice and healing so that there need be no more victims either of injustice or as collateral damage of the confrontation with injustice.

Together we await the healing of the world. Together we do our part to contribute to such a world.

As a Christian, Gushee understands Passover as a form of imitatio dei, imitating God's demand for freedom from oppression. He connects Pharaoh's actions, done in the name of protecting Egyptian security, to similar justifications for human rights violations in our own country.

- ▶ Whom do we allow to be enslaved to protect our own interest and safety as Americans or as Jews?
- ▶ Gushee writes: "a nation that commits injustice and violates human rights (or passively allows its leaders to do so) ultimately will pay a price for it, even if for a long time it seems that such wickedness will last forever." In what ways is this true in our own country? In the world?

LIBERATION IN GOD'S IMAGE: PROGRESSIVE ISLAM AS AN ISLAMIC HUMANISM

Professor Omid Safi

At the heart of a progressive Muslim interpretation is a simple yet radical idea: every human individual, female or male, Muslim or non-Muslim, rich or poor, of the “developed” North or “underdeveloped” South, has exactly the same intrinsic worth. The essential value of human life is God-given, and is in no way connected to culture, race, ethnicity, gender, geography, or privilege. A progressive Muslim is one who is committed to the strangely controversial idea that the true measure of a human being's worth is a person's character and not the oil under their soil or their particular flag. A progressive Muslim agenda is concerned with the ramifications of the premise that all members of the human race have this same intrinsic worth because each of us has the breath of God breathed into our being: *lwa nafakhtu fih min ruhil*. (Qur'an 15:29 and 38:72). This identification with the full humanity of all human beings amounts to nothing short of an Islamic Humanism, one that strives for affirming of dignity and sanctity of all human life through—and not outside—a religious context.

A goal of Passover is the simultaneous remembrance of our bondage in Egypt and God's liberation of the Hebrews. While progressive Muslims honor the spiritual readings of bondage and liberation, they also insist that for billions around the planet, the bondage of Egypt is real in forms of poverty, occupation, exile, and humiliation. All of us deserve to worship a God who is committed to liberating all of God's children. All of us deserve to enjoy this liberation, by the simple virtue of being human and being made in God's image.

An increasing number of those who advocate such a humanistic framework within the context of Islam have self-identified as progressive Muslims. ‘Progressive’ refers to a relentless striving towards a universal notion of justice in which no single community's prosperity, righteousness, and dignity comes at the expense of another's. Adherents of progressive Islam conceive of a way of being Muslim that engages and affirms the humanity of all human beings, that actively holds all of us responsible for a fair and just distribution of our God-given natural resources, and that seeks to live in harmony with the natural world.

Safi introduces the idea of a humanistic framework allowing one to embrace the intrinsic worth of every individual. Such a progressive framework is seen as an inherent expression of an authentic Muslim identity. He concretizes the Passover story into the lived experience of the enslaved today.

- ▶ Professor Safi reminds us that for billions around the planet, the bondage of Egypt is real in forms of poverty, occupation, exile, and humiliation. How do you remember those around the world who are “still in Egypt” during your Passover?
- ▶ How does your religious identity compel you to embrace notions of universality?

SLAVERY TODAY: TAKING ACTION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Passover is not just a metaphor for liberation. There are more people living as slaves today than at any other point in human history, with estimates ranging from 12–27 million men, women, and children who are enslaved. Modern slaves are engaged in prostitution, forced labor, debt bondage, and domestic service.

We are all directly implicated in modern slavery. Israel and the United States are both major destinations for human trafficking. Slave labor, here (as in recent revelations in the Florida tomato industry) and abroad (such as child slavery in the production of cotton), infect the supply chains of many of the products we buy. And in our own communities, there are people held as domestic servants with no freedom and little or no pay.

Today, it is still possible to buy and sell another human being. The price of a slave, adjusted for inflation, has actually dropped compared to the time of the American Civil War. In our time, human life is cheap. It's another commodity, to be bought and consumed. Like our ancestors in Egypt, every day voices cry out to God for freedom. Will we hear them? Will we help them be free? Or will we harden our hearts?

As global citizens, we as Jews are not truly free until everyone is free. Over the next few months, Rabbis for Human Rights – North America and *K'vod Habriot: A Jewish Human Rights Network* will be launching major initiatives related to slavery and trafficking. We invite you to join us in this important mission.

- ▶ What does it mean to you as a Jew to know that goods you consume might be the product of slave labor?
- ▶ What steps do you think we can take to learn about slavery in our communities?
- ▶ Beyond the issue of slavery, what obligations do we have to employees in terms of living wage, health care benefits and other employment practices?

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

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 4

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and God freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. And if God had not taken our ancestors out of Egypt, then we and our children and our children's children would still be enslaved.

Passover Haggadah

ABOUT RABBIS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND RABBIS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS – NORTH AMERICA

Founded in 1988, **Rabbis for Human Rights** (RHR) is the only organization of rabbis in Israel from all the streams of Judaism that gives voice to the Jewish religious traditions of human rights. Dedicated to the physical security and moral vision of the State of Israel as reflected in Israel's Declaration of Independence, RHR develops educational resources on Judaism and human rights and teaches them in Israeli schools and pre-army programs; lobbies for economic justice in Israel; provides support for Palestinian families facing home demolition for administrative reasons; and protects Palestinian farmers' access to their agricultural land. RHR received the Knesset's Award for Quality of Life and the 2006 Niwano Peace Prize. The work of RHR has been endorsed by the North American Rabbinic Associations of the Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist movements.

Founded in 2002, **Rabbis for Human Rights – North America** (RHR-NA) is an organization of rabbis from all the streams of Judaism dedicated to expanding support for the mission and work of RHR in Israel and to education and advocacy on human rights issues in North America. In North America, RHR-NA launched *Honor the Image of God: Stop Torture Now*, a Jewish campaign to end U.S.-sponsored torture. The campaign developed educational resources and programming for rabbis and Jewish communities nationwide and organizing Jews in local communities to participate in interfaith efforts to end torture. In 2007, RHR-NA launched *K'vod Habriot: A Jewish Human Rights Network*, the first Jewish human rights network of rabbis, communities and individuals dedicated to the human rights of all. In 2006 and in 2008, RHR-NA hosted national conferences on Judaism and Human Rights.

PLEASE SUPPORT OUR WORK

We hope you have found this Passover supplement helpful and inspiring. If you would like to give *Tzedakah* for Passover, please consider making a contribution to Rabbis for Human Rights – North America using the form below, or donate online at www.rhr-na.org.

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