

RABBIS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS – NORTH AMERICA

רבנים למען זכויות האדם – צפון אמריקה

PASSOVER, GAZA AND HUMAN RIGHTS A READING FOR THE PASSOVER SEDER

On February 2, Israeli soldiers who participated in the war in Gaza leaked a copy of the Israeli Army's Chief Rabbi's educational booklet entitled *Go Fight My War*, in which soldiers in the Gaza operation are urged to “show no mercy.” Rabbi Edward Feld wrote an article in response to the booklet on behalf of Rabbis for Human Rights.

We invite you to:

- ▶ Read Rabbi Feld's article at some time during your seder: after the recitation of the ten plagues, during the maggid/narrative section of the seder or at any other time that is appropriate at your seder.
- ▶ The reading could be followed by discussion or by a ritual that we have suggested (below) focused on repairing the relationship between the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples.

PASSOVER, GAZA AND HUMAN RIGHTS

by Rabbi Edward Feld

“When you have mercy on a cruel enemy you are thereby showing cruelty to innocent and honest soldiers. It is a terrible immorality... This is a war against murderers.”

The above excerpt is from *Go Fight My War*, a booklet published by the Jewish Awareness Department of the Chief Military Rabbinate in Israel and distributed to soldiers in the fighting units before they entered Gaza as part of Operation Cast Lead.

One of the most memorable moments of the Passover Seder is the point at which we pour out some wine from our cups as we mention the ten plagues brought on the Egyptians, the plagues which achieved our liberation. Though we rejoice in our victory and sing songs of praise, the ritual asks us to remember that our freedom was gained at the cost of the suffering of others and therefore our joy must be mitigated.

The symbolic act we engage in is based on a remarkable midrash. We are told that as the children of Israel crossed the Sea of Reeds and sang the Song at the Sea, the angels in heaven began to join in singing God’s praise. God responded, “My children are drowning in the Sea and you want to sing?” Every nation celebrates its victory in war, but there is a religious perspective that understands that we are all children of God and that even the slaughter of the enemy is a diminution of the image of God. Though war may be justified, killing is tragic.

Among the activities I participated in during a year of study in Israel in 1966–67, was a visit to an army camp where we witnessed the swearing in of soldiers who had completed basic training. Each received a Bible and a rifle. The army chaplain spoke and said, “Do not call the people you fight ‘Arabs,’ for these people are not your eternal enemy; simply call them ‘opponents.’ Today you may have to fight against them, but know that ultimately you will make peace with them and live side by side.”

Armies must train their soldiers to fight and kill. Training officers say that it is actually hard to teach people to kill—soldiers must be taught to overcome feelings of conscience that are deeply engrained in all of us. Yet the armies of democratic nations are also trained in ethical behavior: aid must be given to the enemy’s wounded, prisoners are not to be mistreated, civilian populations need to be protected, and no one may exercise cruelty or use the chaos of wartime to engage in thievery, rape or wanton destruction. The Israeli army calls these values *tohar haneshek*—purity of arms. Wars are tragic, but they must not become free-for-alls in which no limits are placed on behavior.

How shocking then to learn that the Israeli army’s rabbinate has disseminated educational materials that preach against any feelings of empathy. “He who has mercy on the cruel is thereby being cruel to the merciful. When you have mercy on a cruel enemy you are thereby showing cruelty to innocent and honest soldiers. It is a terrible immorality,” reads the booklet distributed by the army’s chaplaincy to the soldiers in the field who were

preparing to march into Gaza. Against the notion of taking into account civilian casualties when engaged in firefights, the rabbinate urged, "...As far as possible we must act from a distance in order to spare the lives of our soldiers."

What is the role of religious leaders? Is it to spur hatred, to urge nationalist pride, and to cut off the wellsprings of empathy? Or is it to remind us of the worth of every human being and make us realize the tragedy of war? The Talmud refers to Jews as empathic people, descended from a long line of empathic people. "This is my God whom I would glorify," reads a central passage of the Song at the Sea, and the ancient rabbis comment, "How do you glorify God? Just as God is merciful and kind, so you should be merciful and kind." Are we now called upon to put an end to empathy?

Ethical values have to be fought for. "Be among the students of Aaron," says the ancient Rabbi Hillel, "loving peace, pursuing peace, loving all human beings, and bringing them closer to God's teaching." The Hebrew emphasizes the work needed in pursuing peace—it literally should be translated "run towards peace." Peace is not simply a value to which we passively pay lip service; rather it must be actively sought, engaged, pursued with vigor.

And peace necessarily involves compromise. There can be no peace unless each side realizes the pain that has been inflicted on the other. So long as each insists on the rightness of its cause and insists on the 'evil' nature of the enemy, there will never be agreement between the two sides. It is only through the expression of empathy that real peace is achieved. So once again it is shocking to find that the army's chaplaincy has included in the booklet distributed to soldiers the message that Jews are "...forbidden by the Torah to give up even one millimeter of it [the Land of Israel] to the Gentiles, in the form of any kind of impure and foolish distortions about autonomy, enclave or any other national weaknesses. We shall not leave it under the control of another people, not even one finger of it, not even a piece of a fingernail." Thus the rabbinate expresses its absolute opposition to any plausible peaceful negotiation. Only the absolute capitulation of the enemy will do.

We live in a time when the great religions of the world find themselves at a moment of choice. Are democratic principles and advocacy of universal human rights critical to our enterprise or are we to be triumphalist and exclusive? Are we tied to ethnic nationalism or are we open to the world around us? Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems, Christians, Jews, and others all face forces in their camps that respond to either side of these questions. People of faith must take their stand, for the fate of nations, the fate of the world, is being decided.

The reading of Jewish tradition taken by members of Rabbis for Human Rights is that Jews, who have so often been victims, must not lose the power of empathy; Jews, who have so often suffered through war, must actively pursue peace, "run toward peace," for as the ancient rabbis taught, "Peace" is one of the names of God.

- ▶ *Invite discussion by seder participants. This might include addressing the following question: How do you respond to Rabbi Feld's view of the role of religion and of Judaism?*

TEN DROPS OF REDEMPTION

A RITUAL

- ▶ At a point in the seder when you are pouring a cup of wine (second, third or fourth cup), pass the cup around and ask each participant to share what they will do to help bring about reconciliation. This may include: giving *tzedakah* for rebuilding efforts or for humanitarian aid, donating to an organization that works for peace between Palestinians and Israelis, or learning more about the human rights organizations that work for peace. After sharing a commitment, each person adds a little wine to the cup.

As I add wine to this cup, I yearn for our mutual redemption that will lead to our living in peace. May the wine that was spilled when we recounted the plagues remind me of the pain each person carries with them. May this full cup of wine inspire us to do all we can to heal the conflict. May it open us to the following attributes:

Reconciliation

Rebuilding

Kindness

Empathy

Compassion

Loving-kindness

Tzedakah

Justice

Learning

Peace

- ▶ Invite those at your seder to share examples of inspiring actions taken by individuals or organizations over the past years.

Closing Prayer

May I recognize my failure to understand those who oppose me.

May I be able to look at the face of my enemy and see the face of God.

May we all be instruments of peace.

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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