

Parashat Behar

Basic Human Rights

And proclaim liberty throughout the land (Leviticus 25:10)

וקראתם דרור בארץ (ויקרא כה:י)

Of the myriad mitzvot in Parashat Behar, one forms the basis for many of our basic human rights and freedoms: “And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” (verse 10) Every fifty years, all slaves were automatically freed from bondage. Commenting on this commandment, Rabbi Gil Nativ writes, “Human society is never static: the enslaved of yesterday will be tomorrow’s master and we have to pay again and again the price of liberty, which is a painful price for the master and the enslaved.” Freedom is a value that must be earned, fought for and cherished.

These words of Torah (verse 10), inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, have been a clarion call for justice, equality, and basic human rights to Americans for generations; rights are that are denied to the Iranian people by Iran’s radical Islamic leadership.

As the United States conducts negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, Tehran continues to publicly hang, arbitrarily detain and unfairly try its citizens. A special U.N. report on Iranian human rights abuses released last month found no improvement under President Rouhani and blasted Tehran for “amputations, flogging, increased application of the death penalty, arbitrary detention and unfair trials.” The report criticized the “surge” of executions in Iran last year. According to Ahmed Shaheed, the U.N. special rapporteur for human rights in Iran, at least 176 people have already been executed in 2014, including two gay men executed for the crime of “perversion.”

The recently released 2014 U.S. State Department Human Rights Report also found no diminution under President Rouhani of the pervasive denial of basic human liberties that has consistently characterized the Islamic Republic of Iran. Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Ura Zeya said, “overall the situation [in Iran] remains poor... we’ve seen little meaningful improvement in human rights in Iran under the new government, including torture, political imprisonment, harassment of religious and ethnic minorities.” A recent [Wall Street Journal editorial](#) chronicled the mass beating perpetrated by Iranian security forces against some of Iran’s most prominent dissidents, including human-rights lawyers, labor leaders and opposition bloggers.

The commandment to free all slaves in the Jubilee year sets a moral and ethical tone establishing basic rights and freedoms. Nonetheless, Iran continues to deny many of its citizens basic freedoms Americans take for granted. ■

Harmful Words

And you shall not wrong one another (Leviticus 25:17)

ולא תונו איש את עמיתו (ויקרא כה:יז)

Maimonides (Laws of Sales 14:10) writes, “Just as there is the concept of abusive behavior (*ona'ah*) in the realm of business, the concept applies similarly in the area of speech, as it is written, ‘And you shall not wrong one another... for I am the Lord your God.’” (verse 17) We are prohibited not only from highlighting the negative attributes of another, but also from giving bad advice, or even from asking a layperson his opinion on a professional matter about

which he has no expertise as it may cause embarrassment. Because our speech has the power to harm, we must guard and utilize that power with great care. Maimonides concludes that, “Verbal damage is greater than monetary damage, for [monetary] damages can be returned, [whereas verbal damages] cannot be undone.”

Like the feathers of a pillow scattered to the wind, damaging words, once uttered can't be retracted. The leadership of Fatah, as it moves towards reconciliation with Hamas, would be wise to remember this.

Since its founding in 1987 as an off-shoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Iranian backed terrorist organization Hamas' leadership has constantly and consistently called for the destruction of Israel. As the [Hamas charter](#) states, “Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it.” [Speaking](#) recently, Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal said, “Our path is resistance and the rifle, and our choice is jihad.” Hamas, through the use of cartoons and children's television shows, inculcates these words in their youth.

Fatah, under the leadership of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, would like the world to believe that all the past rhetoric from Hamas is just that – rhetoric, while it moves towards reconciliation. It's not, as the over 10,000 rockets fired from Hamas controlled Gaza into Israel attest. Hamas' words, backed by their actions are incompatible with bringing about peace.

It is hard to accept President Abbas' [assertion](#) that a unity government “would renounce violence and recognize the state of Israel.” Because, as Rambam reminds us, harmful speech – which cannot be rescinded – can be even more damaging than harmful acts. ■

Support before a Fall

Then you shall uphold him (Leviticus 25:35)

והחזקת בו (ויקרא כה:לה)

“And if your brother grows poor and his means fail with you, then you shall uphold him.” (verse 35) Rashi notes that despite the fact that the verse describes an individual who seems to have already fallen upon hard times and descended into poverty, nonetheless we are commanded to “uphold him”. Rashi (on verse 35) explains that this means, “Do not let him descend until he falls, for then it will be difficult to raise him... To what is this compared? To a burden which is upon a donkey: while it is still on the donkey one person can hold it and set it in place. If it falls to the ground, even five people cannot set it back.”

We must assist an individual in need by giving him the stability to ensure that he never falls in the first place. Israeli colleges have taken this lesson to heart, creating programs to help Ethiopian immigrants succeed and prosper.

Some 130,000 immigrants from Ethiopia began arriving in Israel from a simple agrarian society in 1984. Sadly, thirty years later, the community still suffers from high poverty, dropout and unemployment rates. The website [Israel21c](#) reports that to address these challenges, a number of Israeli institutions have created innovative educational opportunities. “Education for Ethiopians,” a program at the Jerusalem College of Technology, prepares participants – most of whom come from non-academic backgrounds – for careers in fields such as engineering, computer science, biotech and nursing. “JCT provides them free tuition and board, free tutoring, bus fare to go home on weekends (few live in Jerusalem) and twice monthly get-togethers. A dedicated counselor helps them navigate the unfamiliar academic and social landscape.” The program has enjoyed great success, boasting a low dropout rate and a 100% placement record for graduates. A similar program at Ono Academic College in the Tel Aviv suburb of Kiryat Ono averages 150 students per year, including an MBA program. Two of the earliest graduates, Shlomo Molla and Pnina Tamano-Shata, have served in the Knesset. In addition, Kibbutzim College offers an Ethiopian-Israeli Teacher & Kindergarten Teacher Training Program and Yezreel Valley College offers an Ethiopian Nursing Program.

The best way to help people in need is by giving them the strength to succeed before they fall. Today, Israeli colleges have made this lesson a reality, offering critical assistance that has strengthened the Israeli-Ethiopian community. ■

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