

## **Who's Human? Who's Right?**

A sermon written by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz

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I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day is not a hymn one that we sing very often, because it's such a downer. No fa-la-las and Gloria's for Longfellow. No, he wrote this poem from a place of deep sadness. Two years prior, his beloved second wife was fatally burned in an accidental fire. Then, in 1863, during the American Civil War, his oldest son decided to join the Union Army, without his father's knowledge or blessing. Longfellow's personal grief about the death of his wife and potential loss of his son are felt keenly in this hymn. I imagine Longfellow sitting at his desk, hearing the bells tolling for all the young men lost in the war – and his grief becomes ours. It is our grief everyday as we watch the news of what continues to unfold in Israel and Gaza; with seemingly no end in sight. And yet, at the end of this hymn, Longfellow raises his head believing that “wrong shall fail and right prevail, with peace on earth, good will to all.”

This is the hope of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was signed on this day, in 1948, exactly seventy-five years ago. When it was drafted, it set out for the first time fundamental human rights to be universally protected. In twenty-nine concise articles, the declaration articulates and affirms what is fundamental to our obligations as human beings in mutual relationship beyond the dictates of any national code of law or religious doctrine.

It was, and is, one of the most important political and spiritual achievements in the history of humanity. The preamble begins with language that is very familiar to Unitarian Universalists:

*“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...”* This sounds very much like the first principle adopted by Unitarian Universalists in 1985 as we made a covenant “to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is worthy of your time to read it all the way through, and I commend it to you after hearing this sermon. Like so many of our founding documents -- the United States Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and yes, even our Unitarian Universalist principles – these are aspirational documents, meant to lift our eyes up from the ground to see what’s possible for humankind. Yet, as T.S. Eliot once said “between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act, falls the shadow...” The gap between our vaunted ideals and the ways in which we succeed or fail in living up to those ideals, is the task which we – as people of faith – are asked to consider.

Just after the Hamas attack on Israel happened, the postings on Facebook were full of truly righteous outrage. One post called the Hamas terrorists “animals.” Another called them “worse than vermin.”

It is tempting to use such language, because there can be no excuse for the atrocities committed by Hamas. And yet, even in our own fear and rage, even during a time of war when there is carnage inflicted by and upon all those involved, there are lines which should never be crossed. The usual first step in dehumanizing others and justify killing them is to call them animals. Are animals not creatures also worthy of dignity and respect? Carnivorous animals kill to eat; most do not kill for revenge or to wage war. Only humans do that. There are so many examples of this strategy, whether spontaneous or calculated, successfully dehumanizing entire groups of people. The campaign that was successfully waged in Rwanda by the Hutus against the Tutsi's began by calling them cockroaches or snakes that must be exterminated.

At a recent rally, former President Donald Trump compared his political opponents to vermin. *"We pledge to you that we will root out the communists, Marxists, fascists and the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country,"* he said. This is not only inflammatory but also dangerous and inexcusable language. The Declaration of Human Rights was intended as a document to which we should return over and over again, to remind us of how to conduct ourselves and our nations – both in times of peace and in times of war.

It reminds us of what is involved in being and that all humans have rights because they are human beings. Inherently. Essentially. All have rights.

But what happens to these rights during times of war? Since October 7<sup>th</sup> we have witnessed slaughter, bombings, killings, murder, likely rape, the scale of which is beyond devastating. The suffering of the Israeli people, fearful for those still taken as hostages is excruciating. The daily images of the Palestinian people, especially those in Gaza, but in the West Bank and in other cities as well, experiencing bombing, dislocation, forced removal from their homes and the deaths of thousands of Palestinians is beyond heart-breaking. Article 15 in the Declaration of Human Rights says “everyone has the right to a nationality. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of their nationality...” Doesn’t that include the Palestinian people? Article 5 states ‘no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.’ Doesn’t that apply to those taken as hostages on October 7<sup>th</sup>? What makes this conflict so difficult, especially for religious liberals is the fact that there is an overwhelming tendency to make a conflict of this magnitude either “for” or “against.” I am either pro-Israel and therefore, against Palestine. I am pro-Palestinian, which, in some minds, would make me anti-Jewish. Is it possible to see beyond the good/bad binary and to hold more than one truth at a time?

Many of us have read Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg’s book on Repair, which has led some to follow her blog entitled “Life as Sacred Text.”

In her most recent posting, she describes in some detail the history of Hanukkah – a history I am presuming today you know- but goes beyond the nicely packaged version that we see showing in Target Stores and on greeting cards! Yes, the miracle of the menorah – of having only enough lamp oil for one night and having it last for all eight - is still a part of the story. And yes, the Temple was cleaned of Zeus worship and pig sacrifice, and rededicated as a Jewish Temple, which strengthened Jewish identity. The Hanukkah story is indeed about bravery, will and the determination to reject tyranny.

But the other part of the story that Rabbi Ruttenberg tells is that Judas Maccabeus was as brutal in exterminating his fellow Jews who had become Hellenized, that is, those who attempted to live within the confines of their Greek oppressors, as he was to non-Jews. Ruttenberg’s point is twofold: first, that we love to tell a heroic story from only one vantage point. She writes; “If we do not look closely at our historical heroes, if we do not tell the whole truth about them, we risk – consciously or unconsciously – replicating their harms.”

Rabbi Ruttenberg reminds us that there were many Jews who didn’t agree with the tactics of the Maccabeans. (Mah-kah-be-anns). There were Jews who could be considered collaborators with the enemy because they wanted to live alongside their Greek neighbors and yes – oppressors. The story is told in stark either/or terms.

Those who resist Hellenization will find the kingdom of God, and those who do not will suffer. She doesn't say this, but I wonder if those ancients would have been similar to those in Israel and Palestine who, both living in a climate of fear, are attempting to live alongside one another as neighbors. "There are no perfect stories" Ruttenberg reminds us "Human beings are going to human being and we are often messy and complicated and very infrequently do we live up to the ideals we are supposed to embody...but the spiritual path – the one to which all our holy days point – including Hannukah – is about finding the north star of those ideals...We are all, our Torah teaches, created in the divine image. Every last one of us. Not a single one of us disposable, not a single person replaceable, no collateral damage, not unconscionable." <sup>1</sup>

These are the spiritual truths embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We know this. We long for an Israeli whose son was taken hostage by Hamas to say "I decry what my government is doing in Gaza. Innocent civilians are being murdered." And we can hardly conceive of a Palestinian father denouncing the actions of Hamas and begging for the return of Jewish hostages to their family. While we may celebrate the miracle of oil lasting eight days instead of one, this is the real-life miracle that is almost impossible to imagine.

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And yet – we must. We must never forget what human beings are capable of – great evil yes, and great courage and compassion as well. And we must imagine it on our own soil as well. We have to refrain from demonizing the other, even while we soundly denounce political positions that are hateful and harmful. I’m not saying this is easy. It’s really hard. But pay attention to what happens in your own spirit when denouncing another. Notice how good it feels to be among “like-minded people” who support your position. Notice how easy it is to talk smack about another. Notice that place that falls between the ideals you profess and the reality you are expressing. Notice that shadow place. Progressives and religious liberals are often accused of being wishy-washy; flip-floppy – having no hard-core beliefs, always wanting to take the middle path as a way to avoid having firm convictions. I would argue that the middle path – of seeing both and all sides is a more challenging – more difficult path - than maintaining a self-righteous position of certainty. Instead, the middle path asks: what is the core – what is the essence of what makes us not only human – but enables us to live as humans alongside one another?

As we so often say at Unity Church, “it’s complicated.” At first glance, when you read the Universal Declaration of Human rights, it seems impossible to argue with them, right? “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person.”

Oh, wait a minute, if you are an anti-abortion supporter, you could argue that “everyone” includes the rights of a fetus to be born. Or how about Article 8: “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.” Yet, we know that some Nike shoes are being produced by the forced labors of the Uyghur's (we-gers). By purchasing those shoes, are we participating in a form of the slave trade? Article 9 states: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile, yet 20 years have passed since the establishment of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center – a symbol of torture, rendition and indefinite detention without charge or trial, thirty men still remaining detained who have never been charged with a crime.

Are human rights then, subject to context? Just this past week, at a Congressional Hearing, the Presidents of Harvard, MIT and University of Pennsylvania were grilled on whether free speech included antisemitic rhetoric. Representative Elise Stefanik wanted Harvard President Claudine Gay to give an unequivocal response to her demand that disciplinary action be taken against students or applicants who chant “from the river to the sea.” That phrase is interpreted as a call for a Palestinian state that eliminates the possibility of co-existing with Jews and invites a genocidal interpretation. It’s harmful and deeply offensive to most Jews.



And what Claudine Gay said was “when Antisemitic rhetoric crosses into bullying, harassment, or intimidation that is actionable conduct –we do take action. Elizabeth McGill, President of University of Pennsylvania, said that it is a “context-dependent decision.”

What Rep. Stefanik wanted to hear was an unequivocal “no!” There is no situation imaginable where someone could use such language. And what the representatives of higher education were saying is “we walk a line – between holding out the possibility for free speech, unless it crosses the line to action.” This complicates our understanding of Human Rights even more. Who’s right? Who’s wrong? Who has the right to say whatever they want without consequences?

We can argue about rights, but what we can’t argue about is who is human. And if we really believe in certain inalienable rights – of something inherently right about being human – then we must keep returning to this Universal Declaration as an aspirational document and as a guide that we live out in ways large and small.

The most compelling spiritual argument for me that respect for human rights is in our own best interests is that it influences the kind of country that America is and wants to become. The world will continue to be cynical about America’s pride in our society as long as we tolerate human rights abuses in our prisons, and as long as we abandon concern for human rights abroad when it becomes inconvenient for the ideology of any current administration.

It has often been said that terrorists will win their war not on any battlefield but when they are successful in using fear to turn us away from the fundamental values that built our society. In our own small ways, each of us can make a difference in how respect for human rights remains a cornerstone of American democracy, especially at such a time as this, when so many believe one violation of human rights justifies any others in retaliation.

One of the chief architects of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was Eleanor Roosevelt. She worked tirelessly, often combatting the blatant sexism of her day, to make this declaration a reality. So, I give her the final word as we seek to understand and live out the ideas as embodied in that document, ratified 75 years ago today. Mrs. Roosevelt wrote:

Mrs. Roosevelt, and her belief about where the responsibility lay for making the declaration of human rights real. She said: "Where... do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where (s) he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, [every person] and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination.

Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.  
Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in  
vain for progress in the larger world”.

May our ideals and our efforts not be in vain. May it be so.