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HUMAN RIGHTS DAY: Some Jewish Reflections Relating
to the Bicentennial Observances

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

There is no word for "religion" in the Hebrew Bible. And there is no Hebrew word in the Bible for "human rights". Yet the Bible is the supreme "religious" expression for hundreds of millions of human beings in that it testifies to a millennial-old search for an order of meaning beyond the ordinary events of daily life. In an analogous way, "human rights" in its deepest spiritual and philosophic sense is a central preoccupation of the Biblical literature and tradition, despite the absence of a technical term or category for this fundamental value-concept.

From a Jewish perspective, our modern understanding of human rights is decisively shaped by the two central events of Biblical - and Jewish - history: the Exodus from Egypt, the Covenant at Sinai.

Contrary to the trivialization that has taken place at the hands of Hollywood spectacles, and even a Sunday-school Bible story-telling, the Exodus experience was an epochal event in the history of ideas. It constituted a radical

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transformation in consciousness in the history of mankind. It altered decisively humankind's orientation toward God, man, society, history - and human rights.

The full significance of that transformation can be understood only when seen against the background of ancient Near Eastern religions and cultures. As the late Prof. Ernest Speiser has documented in his essay, Between Mesopotamia and Egypt,¹ Biblical monotheism was a Divine breakthrough in the mentality of the ancient world which was dominated by cults and belief-systems that were idolatrous, polytheistic, and animal-worshipping. The Pharaoh of ancient Egypt, Speiser reminds us, was a divine emperor who was regarded as the source of all law, never its servant. Human beings, as epitomized by the slaves of Israel, were treated as chattel, work-commodities whose lives could be extinguished by the flick of the royal finger.

The Exodus event was a decisive break with that anti-human mentality. The Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob entered into history and brought about the redemption of a slave people. That redemption was two-fold: it involved a spiritual liberation from the darkness of idolatry, primitive superstition and paganism. It also resulted in redemption from physical oppression and persecution. (That double meaning is expressed in the Hebrew word for the Exodus, Yetziah, which means both "to go forth" and "to go free.")

But the Exodus was not an end in itself. Rather it was a prelude to Sinai. After forty years of trials, temptations, sufferings, and spiritual preparation, the children of Israel were brought to Mount Sinai. Through the gracious initiative and love of God for the children of Israel, He summoned them to enter into a B'rit, an everlasting Covenant, through which they were to become "a kingdom of priests and an holy nation." (Exodus 19:6)

1. Prof. Speiser's essay is to be found in an excellent collection of essays by major Jewish scholars, called Jewish Expressions, edited by Prof. Judah Goldin (Bantam Books).

What an extraordinary Divine-human scenario! The Lord God of history, the Lord of all the nations (Jeremiah 31), out of His free and boundless grace and love, elects a "slave people" to be His "chosen nation" and takes the side of these "untouchable" brick-making slaves in opposition to the imperial power of Pharaoh. Thus, as reenacted by the Jewish people through the annual Passover family seder across the past three-and-a-half millenia until this day, the responsibility to struggle against the injustices suffered by oppressed people everywhere has become a focal attribute of "imitatio dei," the living of one's life in accordance with the Divine attributes. Simply put, to take seriously the Exodus event means that one cannot be a "religious" or "pious God-fearing" person and at the same time remain indifferent to human suffering, persecution, prejudice, and injustice.

The Sinai event registered in human consciousness another powerful conviction. Prior to Sinai, the Israelites were perceived as outcasts, a pariah people. In the Egyptian caste system, the lives of the children of Israel were absolutely expendable and were totally subject to the capricious interests of the tyrannical state. The theophany at Sinai ushered in a revolution in human values. By committing their fate and destiny to the Covenant with the Lord of Israel, by accepting willingly to become the bearers of the Ten Commandments among the family of nations, the slaves of Egypt were transfigured into a state of holiness. "And ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and an holy nation."

Under the Divine aspect, slaves who yesterday were considered objects of exploitation for political or economic purposes suddenly become conscious of the infinite preciousness and ultimate worth of human life, its utter sanctity. Created in the image of God, stamped with the dignity that is appropriate to a messianic people charged with the task of advancing redemption in society until the coming of the Kingdom at the end of history, no individual human being nor any group of people could ever be allowed again to suffer dehumanization without realizing that an assault against any human personality is nothing other than an assault

against the Divine Presence, the Shechinah.

To assure that these singular and supremely important lessons of the Exodus and of Sinai did not become merely "memoriams" of past events, nor frozen in the amber of doctrinal or theological propositions without consequence for the actual life of the people, the Israelites were Divinely instructed to build a model society in the Promised Land (Canaan, then Palestine, then Israel) in which these human and spiritual values of justice, righteousness, equality, caring and compassion would become the daily experience of the people of God. Shortly after they settled in the Holy Land, the Israelites led by their moral exemplar and lawgiver, Moses, established the institutions of the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee Year.

Through these pioneering social structures, four fundamental "human rights" were assured to every man, woman, and child in the first Hebrew Commonwealth.² In cycles of seven years, climaxed by the forty-ninth year of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25), four categories of spiritual and human liberation were sought for among the people of Israel:

Human liberation - All Hebrew slaves were set free on the basis of the Lord's teaching, "For unto Me are the children of Israel slaves; unto Me, and not unto others." The liberty and dignity of every human being, including slaves, were thereby institutionalized as basic religious and societal principles.

Economic liberation - All property was returned to its original owners in order to assure economic justice. "The earth is the Lord's" and therefore human beings are entitled only to the use of its produce. By establishing the institution of shmitat karkaot, literally, "letting go of the land," no one was allowed to accumulate an overabundance of property while others were condemned to indentured poverty forever. The Jubilee Year was intended to provide a new opportunity for children

². See my essay, Holy Year 1975 and Its Origins in the Jewish Jubilee Year, published by the Vatican Commission for the Holy Year, Vatican City, 1975, in Jubilaeum. Copies available in French, German, Spanish, Italian, Portugese and English.

of the poor to break out of the cycle of poverty and to start life with renewed hope and dignity.

Ecological liberation - Both in the seventh and in the forty-ninth years, the land was to lie fallow. Nature was not to be raped by human greed and lust for wealth. Respect for nature required a breathing time during which the soil could be restored to its normal vitality. Out of such respect for creation would develop a restored harmony between human beings and nature. In addition, Leviticus records, all fruits and vegetables that "grew of themselves," wild growth, are to be made available to everyone who is hungry - Hebrew citizen, resident alien, the sojourner, the stranger.

Educational liberation - During the Sabbatical and Jubilee Years, the entire people - men, women, and children - were to be instructed in the teachings of the Torah, God's Word for His people. The revelation was not to become a gnosis, esoteric wisdom preserved solely for the priestly elite, because all Israel was destined to be "a kingdom of priests and an holy nation." The Sabbatical and Jubilee Years thus became one of the first experiments in universal education with Israel determined to become a "spiritual democracy".

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BICENTENNIAL YEAR

During this Bicentennial Year marking the 200th anniversary of the American Revolution, it is both fascinating and instructive to reflect on the formative influences these Biblical ideals, values, and institutions had on the shaping of the democratic ethos of the American way of life. "Modern democracy is the child of the Reformation," G. F. Gooch writes in his study of English Democratic Ideas (p. 7, Harper Torchbooks). And the Reformation, Gooch observes, "largely owed its origin to the enunciation of two intellectual principles, the rightful duty of free inquiry, and the priesthood of all believers. Its justification could be found in no others... Free inquiry (those who invoked it intended that it should mean nothing more than the

right for each to read the Bible for himself...) led straight from theological to political criticism, and the theory of the universal priesthood indicated the general direction of the investigation. The first led to liberty; the second to equality."

Mediated by the Puritans in New England, the Hebrew Scriptures became in many ways the intellectual arsenal of the American Revolution. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Patriots found precedent and inspiration, and the pulpits of the land, where public opinion was molded, resounded with their revolutionary summonses - as Rufus Lears asserts in his volume on The Jews in America (World Publishing Co., 1954).

The Exodus from Egypt was the classic model of liberation from tyranny; the colonies of America should also make their exodus. The ten tribes of Israel defied the arrogant son of Solomon and established their own government; the thirteen colonies should do likewise. The Hebrew Prophets denounced kings and potentates, and God-fearing Americans may do the same. The call engraved on the Liberty Bell - "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" selected from the Book of Leviticus - was symbolic of the attachment of the Founding Fathers to the Hebrew Scriptures. Revolutionary doctrine became crystallized in the slogan, "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God." Indeed, those were the words which Franklin, Jefferson, and John Adams proposed for the seal of the United States; they were to be inscribed around a picture of the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea.

Not less potent was the influence of the Hebrew Scriptures in determining the basic political system of the new society that emerged from the War of Independence. To discredit the monarchy, preachers like the bold and brilliant Jonathan Mayhew of Boston held up the warning of the prophet Samuel against royalty. Samuel Langdon, the president of Harvard, considered the Jewish government "a perfect republic," and Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale, found in the American government the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy. In his classic work, History of the Rise and

Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe, the eminent 19th century historian, William Edward Lecky, declares that "the Hebraic mortar cemented the foundations of American democracy."

There is a real temptation, if not danger, that the observance of the Bicentennial will become an escape into the past, a "trip" into nostalgia, and an orgy of national self-congratulation. Nothing could be more alien to the Biblical and American spirit at their best. Just as the Passover has become an annual event not only for the reenactment of the experience of oppression of the past but much more so an occasion for vital recommitment to the struggle to overcome persecution and injustice in the present, so the Bicentennial ought to become an opportunity for recalling the past in order to help build a better and more just future for the American people and for the whole human family.

In an age of widespread hunger and poverty that exists side by side with overconsumption, at a time when violence, terrorism, and nuclear arms proliferate, when religious-ethnic conflicts pockmark every continent of the inhabited globe, what better starting points are there for rekindling devotion to the cause of human rights, to the sanctity of every human life, and to universal social justice than those of the Exodus and Sinai?