

## WHAT'S JEWISH ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS?

A commentary on *Parashat Vayechi*  
By Anthony Silkoff

*Parashat Vayechi*, in its most basic reading, tells the story of Jacob's final years in Egypt, and how his son Joseph fulfils Jacob's wish to be buried in the Holy Land. But there is so much more to discover, and much in this *Parasha*, which reflects the Jewish role – and the legacy of Jewish values – in the development of human rights.

There is a strong Jewish connection to human rights and social activism, which runs deep. Jewish thinkers, biblical ethics and the experiences of the Jewish people have been crucial to the development of human rights. Anne Frank beautifully articulated the Jewish commitment to *tikkun olam* – healing the world – when she wrote: “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

But the Jewish connection to human rights goes back further than that, it goes right back to the ethics of the Torah. Indeed, it has often been said that the core tenets of Jewish belief, as set out in the Torah – which recognise the sanctity of the individual and the equality of everyone in the eyes of G-d – serve as the foundation for the Jewish commitment to human rights, a legacy we can all be proud of. Which leads me to where I found the most meaning in *Parashat Vayechi*: the importance of articulating a transformative vision, and leaving an ethical legacy to the next generation.

As Jacob prepares to die, he makes the time to deliver some vital final words to each of his sons and their offspring. Some of his sons are blessed – like Joseph, who is blessed with beauty and fertility. In blessing his son in this way, Jacob is imparting his dreams for the next generation to flourish.



\*A picture of Jewish girls from 1905 protesting to abolish slavery

However, some other sons are rebuked. Simeon and Levi are disavowed for their unmitigated violence in the slaughter of the citizens of *Shechem*. To be clear, this is not a rebuke which leaves any chance of redemption for the brothers. Jacob makes the ultimate decision to disassociate himself from his own sons – “*let not my person be included in their council*”. In doing so, Jacob draws a clear line between the values he wants to pass on, and the murderous violence of Simeon and Levi.

We can learn a lesson here about leadership. A true leader is a visionary, and one who successfully articulates that vision to pass it on. Jacob was a transformational leader, unwavering in his commitment to Jewish values, and determined to ensure they lived on as a legacy to future generations.

Perhaps we cannot all be famous leaders, but we can all be visionary, and if there is one thing we can all take from *Parashat Vayechi* it is this: Judaism compels us to be steadfast in our values. We must be just as determined as Jacob that these values – in particular the Jewish commitment to human rights – endure beyond our time.

In the interfaith and social action work I am leading at the Board of Deputies, I am determined to do some justice to this rich legacy of Jewish activism. By uniting with other communities to challenge hatred and catalyse positive change, the British Jewish community is signalling that it is a committed partner in the task of *tikkun olam*.

Anthony Silkoff is the Interfaith and Social Action Officer  
at the Board of Deputies of British Jews