

TORAH AND HUMAN RIGHTS

A commentary on *Parashat Haazinu*

By Rabbi Dr. Norman Solomon

Among famous last words the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 must hold pride of place: *“Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter! May my discourse come down as the rain, My speech distil as the dew, Like showers on young growth, Like droplets on the grass ...”*

Beautiful. But If you thought Moses was about to say something nice, you would be disappointed. After giving due glory to G-d, all whose ways are just, *“True and upright is He”*, he addresses the people: *“Children unworthy of him—That crooked, perverse generation—their baseness has played Him false.”* As for the ungrateful mob, despite all His kindness to them, *“Jeshurun grew fat and kicked—you grew fat and gross and coarse—He forsook the G-d who made him ... Vexed Him with abominations”* — and thoroughly deserve all the terrors and troubles He has brought on them. But no comfort either to their enemies, on whom He will exercise due vengeance.

The Song is short on telling us exactly what G-d’s shameful people have done wrong, to deserve *“the sword without ... and the terror within”* (v. 25), beyond biting accusations of serving false G-ds. It looks as if it is more about G-d’s rights than about human rights. But this is to overlook the earlier part of the book, in which what G-d wants is set out in great detail. G-d wants justice among people (*“Justice, justice shalt thou pursue”* — 16:20); He abhors corruption (*“you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just”*); in an anticipation of Magna Carta, even the king is subject to the law (17:18-20); you must look after *“the stranger, the fatherless and the widow”* (16:11); you must act in integrity, shunning wizards, communication with the

dead, and like practices (18:9-14). In brief, in failing to respect human rights you are *“serving other G-ds”*, and thoroughly deserve all the dreadful things that have come upon you.

Let us not deceive ourselves. In calling for respect of human rights Deuteronomy also calls for what we would regard as extreme religious intolerance (no mercy on idolators), intolerance of sexual deviance (put adulterers and homosexuals to death), and the extermination of the local Canaanite population. This is at the opposite pole from what anyone nowadays would regard as compatible with a doctrine of universal human rights.

So we cannot simply turn to Deuteronomy to find support in ancient Jewish tradition for universal human rights as currently understood; it is an ancient document, reflecting world views of more than two thousand (traditionally, more than three thousand) years ago, and only against that background can we begin to learn from it.

What we have to do is to engage critically with the text, to see where it is heading, and to reject those aspects which belong to an earlier stage of civilization. And where it is heading is perfectly clear. Its whole aim is to create an ideal society, that is, one based on justice combined with concern for the needy. It sees that in terms of a nation, Israel, which, in a covenantal relationship with G-d, is true to these ideals, and therefore commands the admiration of the nations round about. Critical engagement means that we nurture this ideal, but in the new, global context which our current world, through knowledge, communication and technology, has made possible.

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