

Rights & Responsibilities

One is American, the other Jewish--but they are not in contradiction.


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It is often said that American values and Jewish values are essentially the same—that America drew on the best of the Judeo-Christian tradition in defining the values it cherishes. Actually, the situation is much more complex. Americans speak of rights, Jews of responsibilities. This distinction is critical when we look for the places and ways we infuse one set of values with the other, and especially today as the values we say we believe in are translated into action.



Clashing Ideals

As Americans, one of the strongest components of our identity is our commitment to individual rights—to personal freedom of choice as conferred in the Declaration of Independence and supported by the Constitution. The often-cited “right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” is enshrined in the very founding of our country. It is an ideal that has driven peoples of the world to cross boundaries, violate borders, and flee all forms of persecution. It is integral to the development of international human rights embodied in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights drafted in 1948.

In Judaism there is no explicit concept of rights. There is a system of *mitzvot*, or duties and responsibilities, based on our love for God, where Jewish obedience to law and Jewish fulfillment of obligations are considered a form of divine worship. For example, while the duty to learn and teach is reiterated several times in sacred text (([Deuteronomy 6:7](#) , 20-25)—and is understood as an obligation, a tradition, and a cultural underpinning of our essential Jewishness—there is no right to education articulated anywhere.

Similarly, we can infer from the duty to assist the poor that there is a fundamental human right of every person to a livelihood, and we can extrapolate the fundamental right to life from the prohibition of homicide and from the supremacy of the directive that we must act to save a life and that “one who saves a single life, saves the world” ([Talmud Sanhedrin 37:11](#) ). But we are told what we must do to live in the world and fulfill God’s expectations of us, not what rights we have.

Comparing Texts

If we compare the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) with [Torah](#)  text, we see more of these connections. In Article 3, the UDHR states that everyone has the right to live, to be free, and to feel safe. In Exodus, the Ten Commandments provide us with a moral code to ensure that all can live freely and safely without inflicting harm or injustice on others. Article 7 of the UDHR describes the right to equal protection of the law, and [Leviticus 24:21-22](#)  tells us that there is one standard for stranger and citizen alike. One document is the obverse of the other.

Responsibilities to Ensure Rights

Why is it important to make this distinction? Because, as these values are expressed in America and by Americans, they are rights and liberties to be enjoyed. But this will only be the case if individuals assume responsibility for protecting these rights and enforcing the law against those who trample them.

And we live in a time when too many speak of these rights and seek to enjoy them as entitlements, but do not sufficiently recognize the responsibility to create and protect them. This is where Jews have a particular role to play.

Observing mitzvot—that is, acting on our obligations and responsibilities—means remembering the Exodus from Egypt, respecting the “other,” and treating the stranger as we expect to be treated, with dignity and rights. It means expanding the fields of justice and peace by actively engaging with the poor and the most vulnerable in our American society and in the world. It means interpreting Jewish tradition in the framework of an interconnected world where famine, war, disease, and poverty anywhere on the globe affect us all. It means acting out of our Jewish value framework to set an example for others, acting on our responsibilities, and so enhancing the possibility that others will enjoy their rights.

And it means urging America and Americans to assume responsibility to work for these rights for more people, rather than assume that they will simply happen eventually.

Jews exercising responsibility to help heal the world understand that the maxim, “It is not your responsibility to finish the work (of perfecting the world), but neither are you free to desist from it” (Pirket Avot ★ 2:16), can make a difference in the world for those many people who are also made in God’s image and who deserve greater justice.