

Finding Hope

Early one Friday evening I went for *Shabbat* with several other EAs to Kehilat Kol HaNeshama, a progressive synagogue in West Jerusalem. Prior to the service Rabbi Arik Ascherman, the Executive Director of Rabbis for Human Rights, talked to us briefly about the work of RHR and also what the *Shabbat* means for him. A tall man with curly hair and a full beard, it was clear that he had rushed from the strains of work to welcome us for *Shabbat* to his synagogue.

He began by reminding us that Israel is a democracy, and that this is a hopeful fact. The press is free, candidates for public office are given time on radio and television, and the court system has responded to appeals by RHR and other Israeli activist groups. Therefore, he believes, civil disobedience in Israel must be a last resort, rather than a general strategy. He said he had recently been convicted for refusing to move from in front of a bulldozer that was going to destroy a home, but he had taken this action only after months of protesting, court appeals, lobbying Knesset members, etc.

He characterized the work of RHR in three ways: protesting the violation of human rights for Palestinians, working for economic justice within Israeli society, and sponsoring human rights education for young people. He said that RHR is apolitical in the sense that it advocates for human rights, but not for a particular political position or party, or even for a particular solution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

As an example, he described the intervention by RHR when the Israeli government moved Bedouins out of caves in the Negev, where they had lived for generations. The decision as to whether or not the Bedouins should be left alone in the caves or resettled in some other suitable accommodation was, for him, a political decision. Their eviction from the caves out into the cold desert environment, however, was clearly a violation of their human rights.

In this case, the Israeli high court agreed, yet even so the Israeli government continues to make it difficult for the Bedouins to remain in their caves. Clearly, the government has some reason for wanting the Bedouins moved elsewhere, but lacks any legal justification for relocating them.

RHR offers a Jewish voice for human rights. Rabbi Ascherman told us that every small Jewish child knows the *Talmud* passage that says, "If someone is coming to kill you, get up early and kill him first." But, even adult Jews are not familiar with the teachings that follow this passage. The *Talmud* says that, if you can prevent the person from killing you by using non-lethal means, then you have an obligation to do so.

The *Talmud* goes on to say that if someone threatens to kill you unless you kill an innocent person, then you are obliged to let yourself be killed, rather than take the life of the innocent person. Jewish teaching puts a check on the use of violence, even in self-defense, and RHR sees this in our contemporary world as supporting human rights for everyone.

Is RHR succeeding in trying to educate Israelis and protect Palestinians? By going out to be present when Palestinian farmers are plowing and planting their fields, pruning their olive trees, and picking their olives, Rabbi Ascherman believes RHR is helping. RHR has prevented attacks on Palestinians and also pushed the Israeli army to restrain the illegal acts of settlers. Although settlers do continue to attack Palestinian farmers, some of them are now being prosecuted. And RHR works constantly with the Israeli army to try to ensure that soldiers show up and do their job when the farmers go out to work their fields.

As further evidence that Judaism supports human rights, Rabbi Ascherman referred to a Jewish teaching (midrash) about Hagar and Ishmael, her son by Abraham. A question arises for rabbis because in scripture, after Sarah persuades Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness, God takes pity on them and gives them water, so they will not die. In the midrash the angels scold God. "Can't you see the future?" they say. "This child will father the Arab nations, and when they become Muslims they will make life difficult for Jews. If Ishmael dies, it will be best for your people."

In the midrash God replies, “Now the child is innocent, so now he deserves my pity.” Rabbi Ascherman says this ancient teaching reminds Jews that everyone is a child of God, and RHR sees this as meaning everyone deserves to have his or her human rights respected and protected.

Before we went with him into the synagogue to join in the *Shabbat* service Rabbi Ascherman explained that, for Jews, this is what the *Shabbat* is all about. “We pause for a day of rest each week, letting go of our dreams and worries about what we are doing, to find hope in remembering that we are not the masters of our universe, but co-creators in it with God.”

Finally, he told us, “There must be a coalition of hope among Israelis and Palestinians and all those who seek a just peace. We have to break the stereotypes about the other. We cannot teach hate for the other and also seek justice.” Even when others are doing what we know to be wrong, we have to hope for their repentance and also for reconciliation. “It all comes down to hope.”