

REMARKS

VICE PRESIDENT HUBERT HUMPHREY

HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

ADAS ISRAEL SYNAGOGUE

WASHINGTON, D. C.

DECEMBER 10, 1966

Rabbi Rabinowitz

*Mr Chief Justice
 your colleagues*

*Shalom
 Shalom*

Eighteen years ago today the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- based squarely upon the premise that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world."

Set forth, in its own words, as "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations," it is a comprehensive affirmation of basic political and economic rights. They include the right to life, liberty, and property, fair trial, freedom of speech, assembly, and religion, ^{and} the right to participate in government.

↳ The Declaration specifically states that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth (herein) without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."

1 ↳ Obviously, these rights are very far from being assured and respected in every part of the world.

↳ It would be all too easy to see in the Declaration a collective indulgence in the kind of hypocrisy which has been called "the homage that vice offers to virtue."

↳ Yes, it would be easy to be cynical. But it would also be profoundly wrong. For the rights set forth in the Declaration are deeply rooted in the history, the beliefs, and the aspirations of mankind.

↳ They are rooted -- it is appropriate to recall in this holy place -- in the sacred texts which Jews and Christians alike share.

↳ In the Book of Genesis we are told: "When God created man, in the image of God he created him."

↳ The inherent worth of every human being was repeatedly proclaimed by the Prophets. It was reaffirmed by Pope John XXIII in his great encyclical, Pacem in Terris: "All men are equal in their natural dignity."

↳ They are rooted, also, in our own Bill of Rights, whose 175th anniversary we celebrate this coming Thursday, and in the Four Freedoms which President Roosevelt so eloquently spelled out a quarter of a century ago.

↳ In citing these particular sources, I do not mean to infer that they are the only ones.

↳ Indeed, the Declaration draws deeply upon the best traditions and teachings of all races, all cultures, and all faiths.

↳ It was adopted, after two years ~~of~~ searching debate and careful drafting, by men and women from all parts of the world.

↳ It is not, therefore, a set of standards which any one nation or group of nations seeks to impose upon others, even for their own good. ↳ It is, rather, a set of goals to which all have subscribed, and to whose achievement all can aspire.

↳ As you know, a number of conventions implementing the Declaration have been adopted by the UN or its specialized agencies -- including the Human Rights Covenants, which are just now being completed. ↳ Other conventions are in process of preparation, in particular a very important one on the elimination of all forms of religious intolerance.

↳ Some of these conventions are before the ^{U.S.} Senate for ratification, in accordance with our constitutional processes.

Today, I reaffirm the support of our government for these conventions. It remains our position that they should be ratified.

∟ Our record of performance has been, I am happy to say, much better than our record of ratification. The United States is a good deal nearer living up to the high standards set by the declaration now than it was 18 years ago.

∟ But merely to be nearer is not enough -- any more than one can climb Mount Everest by stopping halfway. I say this because I sense a disturbing loss of momentum in our progress towards human rights.

∟ Some people -- a minority -- complain that we have gone too far already. Others -- a good many more, in fact -- say that we have gone far enough, that we should stop where we are.

∟ I say that it is not moral, it is not even prudent, to mark time. ∟ I say that we must press forward until we have reached the summit we seek, ^{the goal of} full equality of rights and opportunities for all Americans.

↳ I know that the going is slippery and steep. There is prejudice, there are vested interests, there are fears -- some with a semblance of reason, others figments of some nightmare.

↳ There is also the tendency -- to which ~~we~~ ^{all} Americans are prone -- to think that it is sufficient to put laws in the statute books. ^{But} It is not. ~~observed~~

Laws must be enforced. But even more, they must be observed. (That means changing people's minds, opening them up to the wrongs which, consciously or unconsciously, they have done their fellow-Americans.) The synagogues and the churches have worked nobly to this purpose, and I appeal to them to redouble their efforts.

↳ This is a responsibility for every individual American, ~~as well~~. In the prophetic tradition, each of us must be able to look to himself and say, in the words of the Prophet Nathan:

"Thou art the man!"

↳ I know of no better way of celebrating the Declaration of Human Rights than to re-dedicate ourselves here and now to the struggle to make it fully effective here in America -- in law, in everyday life -- and, may I add, in our own neighborhoods.

↳ So far I have addressed myself only to the imperatives of our own country. But there are lessons from our experience which, I believe, may have wider significance. ~~And the most important one is this.~~

↳ We have found that the assurance to individuals -- and to racial or religious minorities -- of full human rights does not detract from the well-being of the majority. Rather, it enhances it -- for only then are ^{all} ~~they~~ free to make their full contribution to the community. I know of no more decisive proof of this than the range and the quality of the Jewish contribution to American civilization.

↳ We have learned the same lesson as we have opened ~~the~~ closed doors of opportunity to Negro Americans and to the poor. ↳ We have ~~gone far enough~~ already to reap very substantial dividends from the fuller exercise of their talents, abilities, and energies -- hitherto denied them by the accident of color or economic status. ↳ And who can predict which one of the 7 million under-privileged children now benefitting from the new programs made possible by federal aid to education may turn out to be another Einstein?

↳ The same is true at the very peak of our political life. It was long a shibboleth that no one of the Catholic faith could aspire to the White House. ↳ We finally rose above that prejudice with what enormous benefit to ourselves and the world we all know! ↳ And, such is the progress of enlightenment that I believe it will not be long until any American child can indeed fulfill the limit of this ability.

↳ There is something in this experience of ours worth pondering. For there have been -- and there still are -- governments which have acted upon different assumptions.

↳ There have been people in power who have felt that any activity which they did not themselves initiate or control was potentially perilous -- as if putting a Bill of Rights into effect were like lifting the lid of Pandora's box.

↳ There have been men who have claimed that they were acting in the best interests of their people by protecting them against heretical ideas. ↳ Nothing could be more insulting to a mature and self-respecting people. Besides, it is ultimately futile, for even so hardened a cynic as Metternich had to acknowledge:

"It is useless to close the gates against ideas. They overleap them."

↳ There are others -- perhaps more nowadays -- who regard human rights a luxuries, to be postponed while they get on with what seem to be more urgent tasks, like economic development or the achievement of political stability.

↳ In fact, human rights are not a danger or even a luxury. They are essential to the dignity of every human being -- and to the well-being and progress of nations as well. They are not burdens to be reluctantly shouldered, but opportunities to be confidently and gladly grasped.

↳ I predict that, as governments move towards assuring their citizens their full human rights, they will reap -- as we have here in America -- a rich reward. They will set off a veritable ferment of initiative and creativity. For there are incalculable resources in the human spirit, once it has been set free.

All of us, as we grew up, had to learn not to be
afraid of the dark. / As peoples and as governments mature,
they must learn not to be afraid of the light.

On this Sabbath of the Festival of Lights, let us
hope that the light of liberty -- the light shed by the
Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- will illumine
every corner of our nation and of the world.

OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT
WASHINGTON, D.C.

A single candle can light a
thousand candles without itself
being diminished.

The Midrash



Minnesota Historical Society

Copyright in this digital version belongs to the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, link to, or email content, however, for individual use.

To request permission for commercial or educational use, please contact the Minnesota Historical Society.



www.mnhs.org