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Are there fundamental human rights according to Judaism?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

It is relatively easy to identify fundamental human rights in Judaism, but, regrettably, it is also easy to identify contradictory messages.

On the one hand, we have teachings that extol a basic reverence for life and require that humans be granted a basic dignity. All humans, we are taught, are "minted" alike and one may not claim that "one's blood is redder than another's." In practice this means caring for the poor and the disenfranchised and making no distinction between men and women, straight and gay, rich and poor alike. But we also have teachings – and certainly practices – that do not treat men and women equally, that shun if not condemn those who are homosexual, that provides for the institution of slavery even if it builds in a method for manumission.

On the one hand, we have teachings that extol equality between Jews and non-Jews alike and oblige us, according to Maimonides, to "maintain the poor of idolaters, attend to their sick and bury their dead, as we do with those of our own community," but in practice, how caring and welcoming are we to the stranger and the outsider?

Or consider the concept of religious freedom. We extol the Maccabees as champions of this basic right yet once they came to power they were no less despotic than the ones they overthrew. In fact, Jewish history is rife with intolerance of alternative movements of Judaism.

Basic human rights depend on more than rhetoric and selectively chosen proof texts. What really matters is how we put these ideals into practice.