

The Jewish Concept of Freedom

U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL APPLAUDED

BY RABBI EZRA BOYARSKY

What is the Jewish concept of freedom? While the Exodus from Egypt marked the physical redemption of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, it also served as the initial stage in the attainment of spiritual and intellectual freedom through the Revelation at Mt. Sinai. This, later, in tandem with the Land of Israel, became the bedrock of Judaism.

And it is on the basis of the Torah's pre-emptively progressive concept of freedom that a whole series of human rights enactments pervaded the daily life of Israel's society once it was established in the Promised Land. For example: The Torah vigorously frowns upon any Hebrew slave whose indenture by divine decree was limited to six years, yet chose to remain in servitude when the time arrived for his release. In reference to a case such as this it is stated: "Then his master shall cause him to step unto the door post and pierce his ear through with an awl, and he shall serve him forever." (until the arrival of the jubilee year, Exodus 21:16).

Why of all the organs of the body was the ear chosen and singled out to symbolize the stigma of slavery? Raban Johanan ben Zakai offered the following ingenious explanation: "G-d said: 'Because it was the ear which heard Me proclaim at Mt. Sinai: Unto Me are the Children of Israel servants, but not servants to My servants' (Kidushim 22b). What is here clearly implied is that physical bondage inevitably leads to spiritual slavery and eventually to the total surrender of the individual's G-d given right to function as a self-actualizing human being with an identity all of his own.

If Judaism pursued such a protective regard for the individual's personal liberty, it is no wonder that national independence has always received top priority throughout the course of Jewish history. So deeply embedded was this quest for freedom in the collective Jewish

psyche that the two - thousand - year long, intolerable, fragile, demeaning and debilitating exile existence, impelled them to recoup their national dignity with the establishment of the Jewish state. From a historical perspective this national renaissance may be psychologically linked to the first Passover the Israelites celebrated on the eve of their faith-propelled, swift and bold departure from Egypt.

Contemporary history offers adequate evidence that the dehumanizing treatment endured by the ancient Israelites in Egypt was not lost on future generations; their descendants regarded their ancestors' enslavement in the land of the Pharaohs, a sacred, instructive testament which spoke to them in a loud and clear voice: Negate the Diaspora and return home!...

The Jewish people held this legacy close to their heart throughout two millenia of homelessness and persecution when at the turn of the twentieth century it was translated into Political Zionism, the precursor of Jewish statehood and hopefully the ultimate liquidation of the Galuth (Exile).

A strikingly related event to the Exodus from Egypt and to its legacy was the appropriately timed super heroic Warsaw Ghetto Uprising during the fateful Passover week in 1943. And what more convincing evidence is Jews are always on the cutting edge of freedom than the ongoing relentless dissident movement in the Soviet Union -- and the Refusniks' unabated insistence on their right to exit visas to Israel.

The often quoted Biblical declaration: "And you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" (Lev. 25:16) best expresses the Jewish view on human rights and is the quintessence of Judaism's concept of freedom and democracy as it is practiced in Israel today.

NEW YORK -- The American Jewish Committee has applauded Attorney General William French Smith's decision to institute a full investigation into possible links between Klaus Barbie, the Nazi war criminal, and the United States Government.

"We believe our government has a moral duty to set the record straight on any involvement of Executive Branch agencies in the protection of Nazi war criminals," said Seymour Samet, Director of AJC's Domestic Affairs Department, in a letter to Mr. Smith.

An investigation, Mr. Samet stated, "would serve to confirm our govern-

ment's position on Nazi war crimes and their perpetrators." He added that only by vigorously pursuing the truth could the United States "maintain the confidence of a citizenry that views with horror and disgust the barbarous acts committed by Klaus Barbie and his Nazi collaborators."

Founded in 1906, the American Jewish Committee is this country's pioneer human relations organization. It combats bigotry, protects

the civil and religious rights of Jews at home and abroad, and seeks improved human relations for all people everywhere.

ISRAEL TO PROVIDE U.S. WITH LEBANON WAR MATERIAL

TEL AVIV (WNS) -- Defense Minister Moshe Arens announced here March 21 at a specially convened press conference that Israel has decided to provide the United States with information about war materials obtained in the war in Lebanon without demanding anything concrete in return.

The decision was taken at the Cabinet meeting a day before the announcement by Arens. He did not reveal the nature of the information. Former Defense Minister Ariel Sharon was reported to have been the opposing minority at the Cabinet meeting. He opposed providing the information to the Americans without guarantees that it would be passed on through other channels to the Arabs.

Arens said Sharon had invited U.S. Defense Secretary Cas-

par Weinberger in October, 1982, to join with Israel in studying the lessons of the Lebanon fighting. An American delegation came to Israel last November and initialled an agreement.

"As some time has elapsed and misunderstandings have arisen, we have decided to study the lessons under existing agreements," Arens said.

"The first American delegation, from the U.S. Air Force, will arrive in Israel at the beginning of April, and the process of studying the lessons will begin," he added. Arens said that "Israel is certain that its interests will be honored and that care will be taken that the information does not pass into foreign hands, without consultations with us, within the framework of existing agreements." He said the information would be of value to the U.S. and help strengthen relations between the two countries.

Observers here said that one reason for the change in former policy may have been the knowledge that information might be leaked to the Americans anyway and Israel would gain no moral or political advantages from sharing it officially. Observers said that Israel now hopes to gain good will in the U.S. for providing the information without any quid pro quo.

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3121 MARYLAND PKWY #600
LAS VEGAS, NV 89109

ALBANY, N.Y. (WNS) -- The State Senate has adopted a resolution calling for the United States government to "extend its diplomatic offices" to the Ethiopian Jews who want to leave Ethiopia and other African countries and emigrate to "hospitable shores of their own choosing." The resolution, introduced by Senate Democratic Leader Manfred Ohrenstein, asks the U.S. government to provide "whatever assistance is necessary...in their absorption in this country."

JERUSALEM (WNS) -- The Jewish National Fund will plant a forest in memory of the 200,000 Jewish soldiers in the Red Army who fell in battle against the Nazis during World War II. About half a million Jewish soldiers served with the Red Army during the war. The decision to plant the forest in the mountains around Jerusalem was announced by a public committee consisting of the Association of War Veterans in the USSR, the World Organization of Partisans, Ghetto Fighters and Concentration Camp Survivors and the Organization of Invalids of the war against Nazism.

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