INTRODUCTION

This year, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 75th anniversary, René Cassin is honouring the idea of human rights as belonging to ‘ordinary people, living ordinary lives’.

Co-drafted in 1948 by our namesake, Monsieur René Cassin, the Declaration was written in response to the horrors of the Holocaust so that ‘never again’ would a state perpetuate gross violations on its citizens with impunity. It was the first time that a community of nations had made a declaration of human rights and freedoms; “Whereas 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” and an expression of a global consensus that the rights of every human being were paramount and must be respected.

The main goal of the Declaration was the idea of an ethical vision for a good society and a better world based on social progress and better standards of life. For the first time economic, social and cultural rights were given equal status to civil and political rights, as they are all paramount to ensure a life of dignity and real freedom.

And the Declaration’s significance is later echoed in the words of Eleanor Roosevelt (1958) making the point that the way to enjoy human rights is in how they impact and enable day-to-day freedoms to live a life of dignity, compassion and fairness.
Where after all do human rights begin if not in small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighbourhood [s]he lives in; the school or college [s]he attends; the factory, farm or office where [s]he works. Such as the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination”,

Eleanor Roosevelt, 1958
In ‘**Tales of Human Rights**’ we have drawn on ‘every day’ Jewish experiences by collecting stories from our community, capturing the tails of ‘ordinary people, in everyday situations’ telling their stories through a human rights lens and therefore demonstrating just how ordinary human rights are, and how embedded they are, within our society.

With this resource, we hope to encourage others to reflect on, and share, their own personal anecdotes and accomplishments with family and community. By reflecting on our own enjoyment of human rights, we can become better advocates, friends and allies of ensuring that other individuals, groups and communities are able to enjoy them too. Often what is closest to us is overlooked as ‘making the case for human rights’ through our personal and communal life.

“The **Human rights are an integral part of the faith and tradition of Judaism. The beliefs that man was created in the divine image, that the human family is one, and that every person is obliged to deal justly with every other person are basic sources of the Jewish commitment to human rights.”

Monsieur René Cassin
ABOUT RENÉ CASSIN

René Cassin exists to promote human rights values. We are named after the French-Jewish co-author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As ‘the Jewish voice for human rights’, we work within the Jewish community – building support for human rights as an expression of core Jewish values; in wider society – bringing a Jewish perspective to human rights debates, especially on issues affecting vulnerable minorities.

Our Vision is a world where:
- Everyone fully enjoys their human rights as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- Members of the Jewish community are actively engaged in promoting and protecting these rights.

Our Mission is to promote and protect the universal rights of all people, drawing on Jewish experiences and values, by:
- Making a compelling case for human rights values
- Campaigning for change through a combination of advocacy, policy analysis, public campaigning and education
- Leading and growing tomorrow’s Jewish human rights activists.

Our Values
- Solidarity - human rights belong to us all and we stand for the rights of everyone, everywhere
- Judaism - we are inspired by Jewish values and experiences
- Collaboration - our work is intertwined with the efforts of others
- Empowerment - we turn today’s Jewish activists into tomorrow’s leaders
- Legacy - we are determined to create a legacy worthy of our namesake
“In my home country, it is reported that a woman is killed every three hours. South Africa is not safe for any person but for women, in particular, the risk of assault, rape, abuse and violence is exponential. While the laws and constitutional protections are progressive on paper, in reality, South African women and children face a daily onslaught by men. Having lived in the UK for a year, I loved the freedom of being able to walk home at night not carrying my key as a weapon and not tensing up at every sound I heard, being ready to defend, attack and scream for help.

While no place is completely safe and gender-based violence is a global problem, my time in the UK allowed me to experience a “safer” reality. My right to life must include the right to live without the debilitating fear that my sex and gender will be targeted, and my body rendered a crime scene. The government and civil society must act to create safer spaces.”

ARTICLE 3- RIGHT TO LIFE, LIBERTY, SECURITY OF PERSON
“The best part about living with my sister Alice, two years younger but about five times as mature, is that she is always there. Since she was born, she is the only person I have consistently lived with my entire life, and when I think of home, I think mostly of her. Living with her is simply just really fun.

Obviously over the years we have fought... a lot. We argue about almost everything and steal each other’s clothes and disagree over what to watch on the telly and what to cook for dinner and who washed up last and the list goes on and on. We’ve yelled at each other and fought physically and once there was an incident with a book, and an unintentional knife, but then when we can no longer be bothered to be in a bad mood with each other all is entirely forgotten and we can spend hours just talking about nothing at all and eating all the snacks we can find before going to sleep at an even more ridiculous time than the night before.

No one makes me laugh like she does or knows me better than I know myself and still wants to see me every day (not that she has much of a choice!) She makes the random, mundane things at home exciting and hilarious, pretty impressive considering we’ve been doing them for around twenty years, and living with her is special because neither of us have to pretend to be anything but ourselves.

As sisters we will always have someone to rely on and someone to reply honestly when you suggest something crazy or need to know if the stain on your top is particularly obvious. Living with her makes every day unique and she is undoubtably the best person I have ever met, and I can’t wait to know her for the rest of our lives.”
“This year I will be celebrating my 20th wedding anniversary. I remember my wedding day as if it were yesterday. We chose a date that fell on the fifth candle of Hanukkah and until this day we still use the Hanukkiya my parents bought us so we could light the Hanukkah candles together with our guests.

What I especially remember is standing under our beautiful chupa with our parents, and my beloved grandmother and great aunt – I could feel their love and excitement for us. But what I remember most is how lucky I felt – I got to marry my best friend, surrounded by family and friends, in a beautiful winter garden with a great party and good food to look forward to.

It was the wedding I wanted – there was a lot of laughter and even more dancing, and it seems like everyone genuinely had a good time; I know I did!

I have since retold our wedding day story to our children endless times and we all know the wedding video by heart - who was there, what music we danced to, and the gifts we received.

And now, all the is left is to dream about the days when we will be standing under the chupa as parents of the bride or groom at our children’s weddings.”

ARTICLE 16- RIGHT TO MARRY
“Our commandment to place a Mezuza on the outside of each doorway is something so special to me.

Inside is a small scroll with a prayer to keep us safe and to protect us from harm.

During this terrible time in history and the significant rise in antisemitism- discussions have arisen within the community about the fear of showing your Judaism with some wanting to remove the mezzuzot outside our front doors, so that families won't be targeted.

Although I understand fear, I feel I would never take it down.....too many ancestors have been murdered for us to live in hiding....in fact I feel it requires courage and faith to stand up and be counted.“

ARTICLE 18- RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION
“We were living in Russia throughout my pregnancy and we went to the US for the birth. We knew we were having a boy and I was actually dreading the idea of a brit. I hated the thought of anything causing him pain. My husband and I discussed the ritual at length. I found lots of information online about people who had been permanently damaged by the physical / emotional process. My husband found plenty of similar information from men who had felt the desire for a circumcision as adults. All the stories were terrible and in the end it was more important to my husband to have it done than it was for me not to have it done.

We were in the state of Vermont and could not find a Moyle to do the procedure. We eventually settled on a Jewish pediatrician alongside a Rabbi. My husband’s entire family made the journey from New York City to Vermont. My son was surrounded by his aunts, uncles, cousins, grandmother and grandfather. It was a really nice atmosphere filled with tradition and love. His grandfather held him while the pediatrician performed the brit, as his father had done before him. I was not present during the ceremony but it was brief and I joined in the meal afterwards. We flew in bagels and lox from our favourite deli in New York, Murrays.

23 years later, I am pleased that we went ahead with the ceremony. Our son says he is pleased with our decision and if he has a son, he plans to hold a brit.”
“One of my closest friends is a convert to Judaism. She is so firmly and securely integrated into her mainly Jewish-South African circle that I never think about her conversion. She is a Londoner, born of well-educated, non-Jewish parents. Her late husband was a South African Jewish doctor.

Thinking about her conversion, I realised that it required not only a religious conversion, as do other religions, but also a naturalisation, a joining of an ethno-religious community, which is an aspect of conversion not necessarily required nor demanded by other religions. She had to study Jewish theology, history, rituals, culture and customs, aspects which we, born Jewish, never needed to study. Unless we attended Jewish schools, which I did not. As I came from a fairly assimilated family which was not very observant, I grew up not particularly well-informed about these aspects of my religion. We did not explore and/or examine our ‘Jewishness’...it was a fact, but not necessarily a characteristic of our identity.

Perhaps her conversion to Judaism gave her a greater belief, a sense of security, even confidence, in her assumed religion than I have?”
“Creation: a wonderous thing in everyday life”

“Fifty- four years ago, I gave birth to my only son, a healthy boy weighing eight pounds. As was customary amongst people of the Jewish faith, a circumcision (Brit Milah) was performed by a doctor (mohel) eight days later.

At the time of the brit i was still in the hospital ward; having my baby being taken from me, even for a moment, was emotionally upsetting. It was the first time, since being pregnant with him, where we were separated. However, it was a tradition upheld from one generation to another until today.

For me it was a time to be joyful, despite of the fear of pain that my child may experience. I needed to overcome this...

Later in life I became a grandmother, then a great grandmother to six baby boys. I observed how times and attitudes were changing and some parents grappled with the rituals of the past. Remembering the celebrations of the Brit Milah and the specific roles taken by women and men, I have a fuller understanding now of the ceremony and its roots- the importance of belonging.

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ARTICLE 18- RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION
“My inspirational teacher was Professor Michael Katz who taught me while I undertook a part time post graduate law degree in South Africa.

What was it about him that I remember? I can recall that he had a great passion for his subject and that was infectious. He was at pains to emphasise ethics and the importance of understanding one’s responsibility in the wider world. He encouraged me to challenge and to be inquisitive.

I can also remember that he liked me and that made a difference! Now that I teach myself I try to emulate him, to inspire and educate so that my students go into the world and do good things.”
“My favourite place I visited was Yosemite National Park. I was deeply moved by the awe inspiring natural beauty. Although I was quite young, I vividly remember a huge waterfall against a bright blue sky, with the sun shining, that I often picture in my meditations. I think this was the first time I realised how much I love the natural world.

How important these incredible parks are. I felt a deep sense of peace that day that has stayed with me years after the visit. It was also special being there with my family.

Another memory I have is of my Dad filming the enormous redwood trees, saying “and they go up and up and up and up!” It’s footage that always makes us laugh. I’m so grateful to have visited this special place and I hope these precious parks will be protected for many generations to come”.

ARTICLE 24- RIGHT TO REST AND LEISURE
“My earliest memory was probably around three or four years old.

I had split my head open, but my memory is not from the accident itself. Weirdly, I don’t actually remember the accident, but was told by my mother what had happened. She was playing ‘catch’ with me - chasing me up a flight of stairs and I tripped and went flying into the corner of a wall. She said she felt really guilty. Lots of blood, stitches etc.

For me though, the earliest memory was of me, with the whole top of my head bandaged up, standing at the bottom of the drive of my nursery school, screaming hysterically because I didn’t want to go in. I didn’t want my classmates or teachers to see me like that. My mum was forcing me to go in.

I even remember the bright sunny day. But I can’t remember if I actually did go into school! All I remember is that overwhelming feeling of anxiety and desperation not to go in and the intransigence of my mother!”

ARTICLE 25- RIGHT TO MEDICAL CARE
“The day of my first son’s Brit was a day that I think will remain with me forever. It was a time that I really had to question the rituals of my Jewish religion.

As a young mother just 24 years old I just knew, unquestioningly, that my son would have a bris. The maternity nurse I had for my baby heard that we were circumcising my eight-day-old baby with no anaesthetic. She was appalled and stunned it was not being done by a doctor and not in hospital. She packed her bags and left that night. She told me it was barbaric! I was thrown into turmoil. I hadn’t questioned anything. It was a blind faith in adherence to tradition. After tears and confusion and staying up all night reading about what would happen to my baby, I knew I was going to go ahead.

The script inside me was so strong. The fear of breaking with ancient traditions terrified me. I was an anthropologist and had learnt so much about tribal behaviour. Some of it I found disturbing, and here I was, a woman in 1986 in her tribe, obeying the ancient customs without question. The traditions are so strong and sit so heavily engraved somewhere very deep within me.

This probably is barbaric, probably an outdated way to circumcise. Yet I had another son and repeated this tradition. When my son had his son he carried out the tradition, but in a medical environment and with modern medicine to anesthetise his child. Things evolve and this is good”.

ARTICLE 27- RIGHT TO CULTURAL LIFE
“Our house was directly opposite the beach where we spent every day, so that small area became our whole world, with a kaleidoscope of memories attached to every corner.

The walk took us down to past the Putt Putt crazy golf, under the shade of the huge concrete “prom” with its tuck shop and damp public toilets, then out into the sunlight as we stepped onto the burning sand.

The hot expanse of beach behind the pastel-coloured beach huts was where groups of teenagers hung out, and where over time my older sisters would migrate with their friends. Our spot was in front of beach hit Y55, where never-ending days would be spent in the water on tiny orange plastic surfboards and eating yellow cling peaches with sandy hands.

When my brother and me felt adventurous we’d walk down the shore to the left, through the car park to check out the shiny American cars with their hot wheels. Then onto the rugged, emptier part of the beach with its wild sand dunes.

These magical summer weeks have given me memories that are the strongest sense of my childhood; whether my lifelong love of dunes or the feeling of being transported to the Muizenberg seafront whenever I walk into a strong salty wind.

Happy times, visceral memories!”

ARTICLE 27- RIGHT TO CULTURAL LIFE
Get involved

We are a small charity, but we are effective and successful because of the commitment of our supporters. Add your voice to our call for human rights for all by getting involved in our work:

Internships

Interns play a vital part in our work – researching the issues, writing reports and contributing to the day-to-day running of the charity. In return, interns get invaluable practical experience of working in an organisation at the cutting edge of some of the UK’s most pressing human rights issues.

For more information, visit www.renecassin.org/get-involved/internships/

Work experience

for sixth-form students who want to help and get an insight into the workings of a small charity; for more information, visit www.renecassin.org/get-involved/work-experience/

Volunteer

If you have specific skills, such as IT, communications, and design, let us know! please contact us via info@renecassin.org

Support our work

We rely heavily on the commitment of our supporters for the funds to continue this vital work. Please help René Cassin protect and promote the rights of some of our most marginalised and vulnerable neighbours. You can make a one-off or regular donation to René Cassin via our website at www.renecassin.org/donate/

"The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a united, global and revolutionary response to the horrors of the Second World War. For the first time, nations acknowledged limits to their sovereignty, and agreed common standards on the rights of individuals against the tyranny of the state. A lifetime on, we must not forget why the Declaration was needed, as once again we face the dangers of xenophobia, nationalism and intolerance.

Monsieur René Cassin played a huge role in developing this vital text - to support the human rights charity named in his honour is to support the struggle for human rights and the rights of individuals across our globe.” (Philippe Sands KC, human rights lawyer and author)