

THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY OF JUDAISM IN AMERICA: THE CHALLENGES OF A MILESTONE

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Throughout the long history of the Jewish people, this sacred night of Rosh Hashanah has always been celebrated as a unique blending of both memory and hope...*commemoration* and *anticipation*... A time to reflect upon the *past* and to contemplate the possibilities of the *future*.

There is one major issue that is most certainly on our minds on this threshold of a New Year — particularly this very week — which not only marks the High Holy Days, but also encompasses both *memory* — the anniversary of September 11 — as well as *anticipation* — the heightening intensity of the current Presidential election. There is no question that any reflection on the past and the future, inspired by this particular Rosh Hashanah Eve, embraces many complex issues of our identities both as Jews — and as Americans.

It is that confluence of shared identity and heritage that I want to focus on tonight. Because this New Year, 5765, not only finds us preoccupied with the intersection our consciousness as both Jews and as Americans, but also happens to mark an important historic milestone that links these two identities together... for this very night is the exact 350th anniversary of the birth of the American Jewish community! It was in the summer of 1654 — a mere 34 years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, that the first boatload of Jewish settlers arrived on these shores — Sephardic Jews from Holland, who came to settle in New Amsterdam. And it was on the eve of Rosh Hashanah that year that these 24 men, women and children gathered to organize the first Jewish congregation in the colonies, and observe the High Holy Days for the very first time on this continent. Tonight inaugurates a nationwide observance of this anniversary, as American Jews celebrate the profound significance of that milestone event in the context of the 5000 year history of our faith.

The utterly unique unfolding of the Jewish experience in this land, has shaped each of our consciousness in profound and complex ways. The fundamental perspectives from which we think about being Jews in contemporary America, are unprecedented in the long history of our people. Indeed, the affirmation of this uniqueness of our encounter with this country, has long been a distinguishing principle of Reform Judaism in the United States. From the earliest colonial beginnings, the Jews of this nation perceived a virtually cosmic significance to the meaning of America for our people and faith. A new, dynamic, progressive expression of our tradition was

inspired and shaped by this free, open, pluralistic society. The United States represented the rejection of the prejudices and tyrannies of traditional authority in European culture — and there emerged on these shores a spirit of freedom and liberty of conscience, that threw off the shackles of entrenched authority, whether religious or political. This was a reforming spirit that influenced every religious community that settled here. Out of this dynamic emerged America's characteristic liberal faith traditions — Congregationalism, Unitarian Universalism and Reform Judaism... and unfolding now before our very eyes, albeit two centuries later, a uniquely American Catholicism as well!

And yet, just as significantly, not only did America shape Judaism on these shores... the Jewish tradition, in turn, profoundly influenced the evolution of American democracy! In early America, beginning with the Pilgrim ideals of religious freedom and the rights of citizens, this spirit was consciously rooted in the ideals of the Hebrew Bible. The image of the Exodus — of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery, and their journey to the Promised Land, became a primary theme in American history — inspiring generations of settlers and slaves, immigrants and refugees, seeking their own liberation. The models of civil legislation in our Torah, and the principles of justice and human rights championed by our Jewish Prophets, pervaded the culture and political philosophy of the colonies. Whether it was the Biblical and Talmudic echoes in the legal codes of old New England, or the importance of the Hebrew language in the early intellectual life of the Pilgrims and Puritans, the influence of Jewish tradition on the early evolution of American culture was indeed profound.

This formative Jewish spiritual influence on the emergence of American democracy, culminated in 1776, with the Declaration of Independence and the beginning of the American Revolution... with its ringing affirmation of the inherent natural rights of every individual, a notion so deeply grounded in the Torah's distinctive concept of humanity created in the Divine image. This biblical spirit was perhaps no where more dramatically symbolized than by the inscription on the famous Liberty Bell — the stirring words that became the rallying cry of the struggle for independence, taken from the Book of Leviticus: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof!" And while we are deeply conscious that these noble ideals were not fully realized at first — and remain unfulfilled for too many American citizens even today, nevertheless they heralded the birth of a new age of freedom and opportunity for the oppressed and downtrodden of the world — providing hope and promise for millions of people... none more so than the Jews.

Indeed with that arrival of those first Jewish settlers on American soil, 350 years ago, an unprecedented new chapter opened in the annals of our people's history. In every other nation on the face of the earth, Jews had been considered aliens — despised outsiders — persecuted heretics. But here, from virtually the very beginning

of American history, Jews have been an integral part of the founding and building of this nation — its earliest settlement... its colonial development ... the struggles of the Revolution ... and the building of the new democratic society. And in turn, America was the first — and for a long time — the only place in the world — where Jews were able to exercise the rights and freedom of full citizens. For the first time in 2000 years, since the destruction of ancient Israel by the Roman legions, there was a place where Jews could be fully at home... with the same civil and religious rights as all others... in a nation made up not of one dominant native ethnic or religious majority, in which we were the conspicuous outsiders, but rather a pluralistic society composed of many different religions, races and cultures.

The unprecedented, indeed revolutionary experience of Jews in this new nation, was most dramatically reflected in the words of none other than George Washington himself. Following the War for Independence, in 1790, our first President visited the seaside town of Newport, Rhode Island, to win support for the ratification of the new federal Constitution. During his visit, he was invited to attend a service at Newport's famous Touro Synagogue. This congregation was then already over a century old. Its beautiful sanctuary, built in 1763, stands to this day as a national historic shrine. Washington wanted to visit the synagogue to express his gratitude to the Jewish community for its unswerving support for the Revolutionary cause during the war. When he returned to Philadelphia, he wrote a letter of appreciation to the congregation, for the warm welcome he had received. This letter is one of the great documents of American history... and the virtual charter of American Jewry...

To the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island
August 21, 1790

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past, is rendered the more sweet from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security.

If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good government, to become a great and a happy people.

The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy — a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike, liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.

It is now no more that 'toleration' is spoken of — as if it were by the indulgence of one group of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no

sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should conduct themselves as good citizens — in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

May you, the Children of the stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants — while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make them afraid.

May the Father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths... and make us all, in our several vocations, useful here, and then — in His own due time and way, everlastingly happy.

Your Servant,
George Washington

Now... just think about it... In every other country in the world in 1790, Jews were still disenfranchised and persecuted outsiders... locked behind ghetto walls in the capitals of Europe, or isolated in remote, impoverished shtetl villages. In no place did they have even the most basic civil rights. But here in the infant United States, the President of the new nation became the first head of state to ever visit a synagogue! And in the name of the government, he pledged this remarkable commitment of liberty far beyond mere tolerance! In the broad sweep of Jewish history, this was nothing short of a miracle... indeed... this could have happened "only in America"! And in response to this miracle, on these shores there emerged the greatest, freest, most influential Jewish community the world has ever known... an integral part of American culture that has made major contributions to every aspect of our country's life.

Now in our celebration of this milestone anniversary year, and our grateful and proud expressions of our love and commitment to this nation, we are, of course compelled to emphasize that we affirm the very noblest and highest ideals of America. We forthrightly recognize that there are yet many unfulfilled dreams and mandates in the continuing unfolding of our country's destiny. There remain great injustices and inequalities in our midst, and a dark strain of extremism, bigotry and violence that are a perversion of all that America authentically stands for. The challenges that our nation faces at this particular moment in our history, and indeed in this Presidential election, are stark reminders that the American dream of liberty and justice for all is still far from reality. But if we Jews have characteristically been recognized as the "perennial liberals" in American society and politics, both by our friends and foes alike, our love and devotion to this country must not be undermined by these daunting realities. And as proud, forthright liberals, we dare not surrender our claims to love of country and authentic patriotism — handing them over to the dangerous mischief of extremists and fundamentalists. Rather, we must continue to labor

tirelessly, as responsible citizens, in the ongoing struggle for justice and peace — in our midst and in the world... the role which has been our Jewish mission throughout the ages... and is the mission of America at its truest and best.

Friends, there are indeed many complex issues that we face as Americans and Jews at this critical moment in history. However, beyond the various political or philosophical debates, there is for me, a very vivid, very personal symbolism that brings the deeper questions here into ultimate clarity. A few years ago, I lived for a brief time in Washington D.C. I'd like to share with you one particular memory of an experience that occurred shortly after I moved there... one which for me, powerfully symbolizes why this particular 350th anniversary Rosh Hashanah is so very meaningful...

My parents were visiting my new home in D.C. for the first time, and I was playing tour guide of the historic landmarks in the nation's Capital. We spent the morning at the Holocaust Memorial Museum — with its crushing lessons of horror and tragedy. We walked through the exhibits, with their painfully vivid depictions of the death camps, gas chambers and crematoria. We saw the heartbreaking piles of shoes taken from the storerooms at Auschwitz, and the haunting photographs of hundreds and hundreds of faces — so many of them children — so very devastating in the realization that they represent only a tiny fraction of those who were slaughtered...

Emotionally drained, as everyone who visits the Memorial inevitably is, we then walked a few blocks, and decided to stop into the National Archives building, to see the original drafts of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. As we stood there, in the quiet awe of that soaring, sanctuary-like space, I could not help but be overwhelmed by the counterpoint " the incredibly stark contrast " between what we were seeing at that moment, and what we had just witnessed at the Holocaust Museum. There, we were reminded of history's worst desecration of the human spirit... And here, we were standing before the precious relics of the noblest heights to which the human mind and heart can aspire...

I read those familiar words... here, in their original, handwritten form... that we, as human beings, were "all created equal, and endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights... that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness..." and I was so struck, as perhaps never before, why July 4, 1776 must be considered one of the most sacred dates in Jewish history as well!

At that moment, with the impressions of the Holocaust Museum so fresh in my mind, I realized something that I had often intellectually pondered, but perhaps never so emotionally comprehended before...

That had that faded piece of parchment before me never been written... Had my great-grandparents not left their small villages in eastern Europe over a century ago, to come to this place of freedom and hope... created by that very document... I would — by definition — be dead... indeed, I never would have been born...

Friends, beyond all of the political controversies and debates of any given moment, this must be the inescapable realization of every American Jew....

Had not our grandparents, or great-grandparents, left all of their hundreds of towns and villages and shtetls in Europe, in the last three centuries, and found new life here in America, we would... every one of us... by definition... be dead.

Standing there, before the Declaration of Independence, and realizing this truth with such force, was a moment of deep and humble gratitude... for the courage and faith that guided my family and so many others in making that difficult journey to a new world so long ago... and deep and humble gratitude as well, that of all the long ages and far places of human history and of Jewish suffering, that I was granted the blessing... and the privilege... of having been born in this time... and in this place...

And so, as we usher in this New Year, our precious heritage and identity, as Jews and Americans, is deeply in our consciousness. Now, more than ever, the rich legacy of this shared heritage, and these two precious identities, present us with powerful spiritual challenges and moral mandates. May we resolve, at the dawn of this New Year, to rededicate ourselves to the best of this inheritance...

to join with all people of faith and good will to "proclaim liberty throughout the land — and to all lands — unto all the inhabitants thereof"... to pursue justice... and healing.. and peace... in our nation, and throughout the world... and to continue, with love and devotion, courage and dedication, to do our part, as Americans and as Jews, to build a nation true to its noblest and most sacred ideals... "One nation"... but rich in diversity... "under God"... but blessed by many understandings of the Divine... and always... "with liberty— and justice... for all!"

Amen