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∞ AN AMERICA 250 READER ∞



RABBI MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

A New World for Jews

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God's American Israel

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Adam's Family and the "Adams Family"

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The Almost Chosen People

On the way to his inauguration, Abraham Lincoln described America in a way that no one else had before—as "an almost chosen people." Understanding this marvelous phrase allows us to better understand the nature of Lincoln's relationship with the Jews, and his philosophical and religious understanding of America itself.



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The Christian-Jewish Alliance and Its Enemies

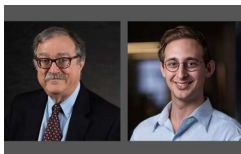
For Hashem, for country, and for Yale.



YUVAL LEVIN

American Renewal: The Nehemiah Option

Rebuilding our culture with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other.



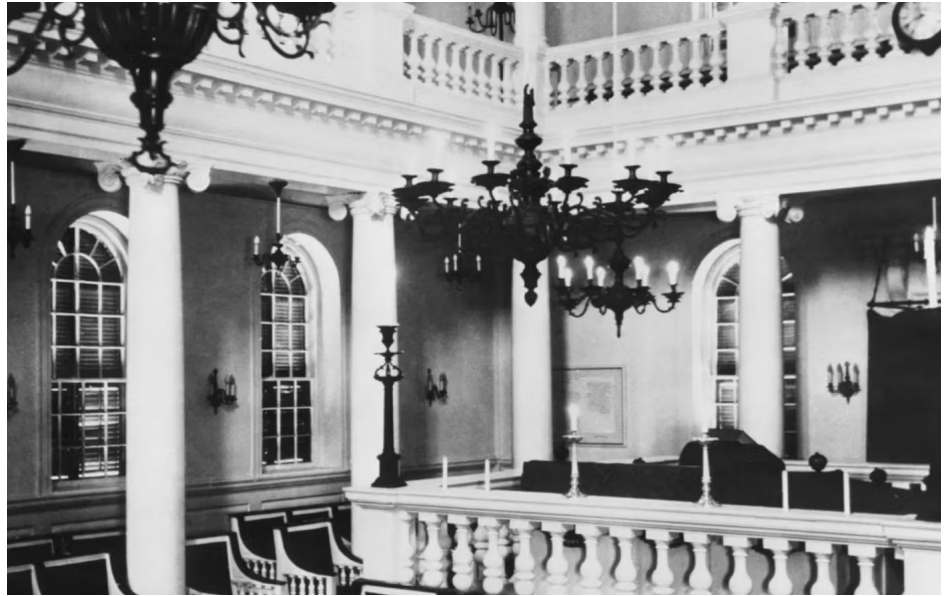
An Interview with Wilfred McClay & Daniel Kane

What makes America a Jewish land of hope?



An America 250 Study Guide

Primary sources from Deuteronomy and Maimonides to Winthrop and Washington, plus discussion questions for classrooms, communities, and families.



The Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, built in 1763

RABBI MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

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About the author

Meir Soloveichik is a senior fellow and contributor at Tikvah, the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University. His many podcasts, video series, media appearances, and writings can be found at Ideas.Tikvah.org.

A New World for Jews

Why George Washington's letter to the Jews of Newport speaks to all.

When President George Washington visited Newport, R.I., in the summer of 1790, he could scarcely have imagined that he would end up penning, in the midst of his trip, one of the enduring expressions of American equality. Yet his letter to the Jews of Newport is still celebrated, and it appears in debates about America to this day. Justice Antonin Scalia, for whom it was a favorite citation, quoted it in his Supreme Court opinions. Justice Elena Kagan also cited the letter to Newport's Jews in a dissent, though she had to issue a correction when she referred to that community as the oldest Jewish congregation in America. That distinction is held by Congregation Shearith Israel of New York; it is the house of worship in Newport that is the oldest synagogue structure in the United States. But as famous as the often-quoted letter is, few know its background; and as we celebrate America's 250th birthday, the letter's story is worth rediscovering.

Perhaps the least-known interesting fact about the Newport letter is why Washington came to Rhode Island in the first place. Until that summer, Rhode Island was not really part of the United States. In 1788, Rhode Islanders had refused to ratify the Constitution and therefore also refused in 1789 to participate in the first national election. Washington became the president of the United States in April of that year, but only twelve of the 13 states were truly united. Because of its civic recalcitrance, the state was known to much of the country as "Rogue Island." One might say that Rhode Island was the progenitor of the hashtag #NotMyPresident.

But things changed on June 1, 1790. Washington sent a letter to Congress, excitedly announcing that the Constitution had just been ratified by Rhode Island, two years after the other states had ratified it. The president jour-

neyed to Rhode Island essentially as a reward for its finally embracing the nascent system of government. That Washington went to Newport that summer is a sign of his greatness: He was willing to overlook any insult and would go out of his way to embrace a small state so he could be president of everyone. It was in this spirit, while there, that he interacted with the Jewish community in Newport.

This Jewish community was on its last legs. It had never recovered since the years leading up to the Revolutionary War; most Jews were patriots and would have fled Newport when it was occupied by the British. By 1790, Newport's synagogue had no clerical figure overseeing services. Its lay leader, Moses Seixas, could find no one qualified to read from the Torah on the Sabbath. With Jews not returning for many decades, the Newport synagogue was on the cusp of shutting down. Nevertheless, Seixas felt it was his responsibility to represent his community when the president arrived, and he therefore delivered to Washington written words of greeting on behalf of Newport's Jews and, indeed, on behalf of Jews in America in general: "Permit the children of the Stock of Abraham to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person & merits — and to join with our fellow Citizens in welcoming you to New Port."

Washington may have been surprised to receive this letter, as he had already heard from America's Jews. Soon after his election, minority faith communities reached out to the new president, ostensibly to extend their congratulations, but implicitly to also ensure their equality in the American republic. Washington received letters from the leaders of American Catholics, Baptists, and Quakers. The Jews of America, meanwhile, reflecting the lack of organizational leadership that would mark their early history in this country, failed to unify in writing to the president. In the end, Washington would receive three separate letters from American Jewry. In June 1790, he had already corresponded with Savannah's Jews. Then, in August, he received Seixas's letter, which celebrated the new Constitution. (The third letter arrived in December 1790; when the capital was moved to Philadelphia, the leaders of Jewish congregations in Charleston, S.C., Richmond, Va., New York, and Philadelphia presented a letter to Washington.) Seixas's August letter reads:

Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events) behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People — a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance — but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship.

The ringing words "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance" are often ascribed to Washington himself, but the president was echoing Seixas's original phrasing. It is also misunderstood why Seixas described the new government in this way. This was not a reference to the First Amendment, which would not be ratified for another year and a half. Rather, Seixas was referring to the clause in the new Constitution that banned any religious test for federal office. When America was born in 1776, many states still restrict-

ed their legislatures to Christians alone, as they did after the Revolution came to a close, when the Articles of Confederation were in effect.

To Jews in America, this legislative restriction was, in the simplest sense, un-American, and they had frequently and publicly inveighed against it. In 1787, a prominent Jew in Philadelphia named Jonas Phillips had written to Washington, who was presiding over the Constitutional Convention in that city. Phillips had invested great hopes in the American future. Those visiting the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia today can see an early copy of the Declaration of Independence — a printed paper that is older than the parchment in the National Archives — that Phillips had excitedly sent to a fellow Jew across the Atlantic, along with a letter describing the war with England that had broken out. To Jews such as Phillips, who had served in the militia during the Revolution, the civic inequality maintained by the states was a violation of the creed for which they had fought, and he told Washington how he felt:

It is well Known among all the Citizens of the 13 united states that the Jews have been true and faithfull whigs; and during the late contest with England they have been foremost in aiding and assisting the states with their lifes and fortunes, they have supported the cause, have bravely fought and bleed for Liberty which they can not Enjoy.

Washington did not respond to this letter, but the convention produced a Constitution that made good, in Jewish eyes, on the promise of equality that the Declaration of Independence had originally voiced. While the constitutional clause was operative only for federal offices, the standard of equality had been set, and state restrictions would soon disappear. It was in this Constitution that Seixas saw, finally, a system of government that “to bigotry gives no sanction.”

Washington immediately understood what Seixas meant by this phrase. In his response, he chose to echo Seixas’s language and to add several phrases of his own:

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 was by the indulgence of one class 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 demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support. [Emphasis added.]

Here Washington is building on the entire history of Anglo-American political thought. A century before, John Locke had written his “Letter Concerning Toleration,” in which he argued that because we cannot control an individual’s thoughts, we should not persecute anyone for his beliefs. Though Locke explicitly sought to exclude Catholics from his capacious approach,

his doctrine of toleration was nevertheless an important step forward in the intellectual story of religious liberty.

Yet for Washington, mere toleration was insufficient. In Europe, Washington was implying to American Jewry, you were *tolerated*, but the watchword of America is not religious toleration. We are going much further than that; we are embracing *equality*. You are not here because we are *allowing* you to be; you deserve to be here just as much as we do.

The correspondence between Seixas and Washington allows us to better understand the uniqueness of the American Jewish experience. America is often described as a “land of opportunity,” and it is indeed that. But it is not economic opportunity that Jews uniquely found in the United States. Until the Gilded Age, no American Jew would approach the economic success achieved by certain Jews in Western Europe. It is *political equality* that Jews found in America, unlike anywhere else. In the United Kingdom, Parliament would refuse to seat Jews until the second half of the 19th century, and only after a vituperative debate. And if Jews in America never experienced the horrors that Jews encountered on the European continent, it was, in part, because this country’s founders embraced its Jews from the beginning and decried Jew-hatred as un-American. Thus did Washington draw on his favorite biblical verse, from the book of Micah, in concluding his letter:

May 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 figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

Of course, many *have* made American Jews afraid today. The antisemitism that has been manifest for some years on the progressive left has now been joined by the rabid voices of the “woke right.” It is therefore all the more inspiring when non-Jewish figures turn to Washington’s letter as a promissory note to American Jewry. The most eloquent example of this phenomenon has been Senator Ted Cruz, who, in a recent speech to the Republican Jewish Coalition, cited Washington’s words to Newport’s Jews in declaring antisemitism “an existential crisis in our party and our country.”

Yet Washington’s correspondence with Seixas is worth quoting not only because of what it means to American Jewry but also because of what it teaches all Americans. If there is a truly “only in America” citation of the Newport letter, it is to be found in the writings of Scalia, not in a judicial decision but in a speech delivered to the National Italian American Foundation, one month after he became the first American of Italian descent to sit on the Supreme Court. For Scalia, Washington’s letter to the Jews ought to be read by Italians — and all Americans — because it teaches us the truth about American identity itself:

While taking pride in what we have brought to America, we should not fail to be grateful for what America has given to us. . . . What makes an

American, it has told us, is not the name or the blood or even the place of birth, but the belief in the principles of freedom and equality that this country stands for. . . . If you do not believe that, you need look no further than the actions of the greatest American of them all, the Father of our Country, George Washington. During his first term in office as president, Washington wrote a letter that is a model of Americanism, addressed to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island. This blue-blooded, aristocratic Virginian assured that small community that his administration, his country, would brook no discrimination against that small and politically impotent community. And that the children of Abraham, as he put it, were welcome in this country, to live in peace and never to have fear.

Scalia was right. Perhaps a thousand Jews lived in the United States in Washington's time, and he received letters from three separate Jewish communities. "Small and politically impotent" they certainly were. Washington could so easily have ignored them. Instead, he produced a reflection that teaches us all about the meaning of America and what it means to celebrate its 250th birthday this year.

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From *Hudson River Waterfront, N.Y.C.* by Colin Campbell Cooper, ca. 1913-21. New-York Historical Society

DANIEL L. DREISBACH

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About the author

Daniel L. Dreisbach is a professor at American University in Washington, D.C. His research interests include the intersection of religion, politics, and law in the American founding era. His most recent book is *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers* (Oxford, 2017).

God's American Israel

As two new books show, the influence of the Hebrew Bible (and of biblical models) on the founding generations of Americans was as vast as the new country they were trying to create.

The American political experiment has been shaped by diverse intellectual traditions; among them are British constitutionalism, Enlightenment liberalism, and classical republicanism. Americans have also drawn deeply from Hebraic and Christian sources. The influence of the latter sources was especially evident in colonial New England, where Puritans sought to establish commonwealths in conformity with biblical laws and principles; but it can also be found, more generally, throughout American culture and political thought. Yet these Hebraic and Christian influences have often been discounted or ignored by leading scholars and standard histories alike, thereby undermining a faithful telling of the nation's story.

Two books published this year are welcome correctives. First, Wilfred M. McClay's *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story*, a grand, sweeping chronicle of five centuries of history, gives attention to the role of religion in shaping the American character. Second, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: The Hebrew Bible in the United States* brings into sharp focus religion's contributions to the American political order. Compiled and edited by Meir Y. Soloveichik, Matthew Holbreich, Jonathan Silver, and Stuart W. Halpern, this rich sourcebook of primary documents, from the Mayflower Compact to Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, shows vividly how the Hebrew Bible in particular deserves to be known as "a foundational text" in the American political tradition.

Let's consider how each book enriches the understanding of America's story.

A distinguished professor of intellectual history at the University of Oklahoma and a master storyteller, Wilfred McClay recalls being inspired to undertake his monumental project upon realizing there was no single high-school or college-level textbook on American history that he could comfortably recommend to others. The result of his efforts is a learned, elegantly written, and wholly accessible history largely devoid of the partisan axe-grinding that has diminished or tainted so many others. It not only presents American readers with a credible and coherent narrative account of their own country but also succeeds brilliantly in its stated goal to "equip them for the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship."

No ordinary history book, *Land of Hope* is one of the best single-volume histories of the United States available anywhere. Few pages fail to offer a new insight or excite reflection on the country's people, places, and political and social developments, as well as, more generally, overarching ideas like the importance of stories to the human experience, the nature of national memory, the workings of the public imagination, the love of country, and other topics.

Several themes emerge from McClay's coverage of the major events in American political history along with his occasional excursions into less familiar territory. As the book's title suggests, this story brims with optimism. America was, indeed, a land of hope for countless immigrants drawn to its shores in pursuit of happiness and such fundamental ideals of the American experiment as liberty, equality, and self-government. The political and social forces that breathed life and content into these ideals feature prominently in McClay's narrative. The pursuit of religious liberty, for example, that attracted many settlers to the New World and the religious culture that flourished on American soil informed the nation's most basic values and nurtured the civic virtues that facilitated self-government.

To his credit, McClay also unflinchingly confronts the "dashed hopes" and sorrows of so many Americans, especially those brought to America's shores in chains. "A nation that professes high ideals," he writes, "makes itself vulnerable to searing criticism when it falls short of them—sometimes far short indeed, as America often has done."

The land itself—a place on the map, a piece of real estate—emerges as a distinct, vibrant "character" in McClay's narrative. It was the land, rich with resources, that drew settlers to the expansive American continent and then prodded them ever westward. It was the land that inspired them to embrace challenges and aspire to something greater than the past they had left behind. The forbidding terrain, the vast, uncharted territory, both tested and tempered the American character. Insulated by the wide-open ocean from many of the intrusions and depredations they had left behind in the Old World, the settlers had the space to develop habits of self-rule.

Religion, too, has been an essential "character" in America's story. From the time of the Pilgrims, to the founding fathers, and even to later gener-

ations, many Americans saw themselves as a chosen people—as God’s new Israel—reliving the Exodus story. The precise contours of the comparison with ancient Israel differed depending on who invoked it and when, but the parallels were often quite elaborate (and sometimes more than a bit forced).

Thus, the political repression and religious persecution so many early settlers had endured in England, from which they fled, was their Egyptian bondage; the Stuart monarchs (and, later in the revolutionary era, George III) were their intransigent Pharaohs; the treacherous waters of the Atlantic Ocean, which they traversed in search of a promised land, were their Red Sea (or, in some versions, their Jordan River). In the new Canaan, they had to contend, like the ancient Israelites, with a forbidding terrain and hostile inhabitants.

Not a few Americans in the founding era came to regard George Washington as their Moses, who led them out of bondage and into freedom. For these Americans, the providential history of the Hebrew people and the biblical record of Moses’ instructions for creating the political and legal infrastructure needed to govern that people held special meaning and played a key role in directing their own ambitious errand into the new promised land.

Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land picks up this part of the story, assembling compelling documentary evidence of the specifically Hebraic influences on the American political experiment, especially during the period of the founding and its aftermath.

Like *Land of Hope*, *Proclaim Liberty* makes indispensable reading for anyone interested in religion’s contributions to American political thought and culture. Unlike *Land of Hope*, it’s less a sweeping narrative than an introduction to selected episodes and texts that cast light on its subject. It is, in short, an anthology, serving up expertly chosen and edited primary sources from American history along with brief illuminating commentaries and notes, plus, for ease of reference, the original biblical texts. A book not only for students of history but also for students of the sacred works themselves, *Proclaim Liberty* invites meditation on the enduring political, legal, and spiritual impact of these texts that traveled from Sinai’s deserts to America’s shores.

As is amply illustrated in the state papers, political debates, pamphlets, sermons, and private correspondence gathered in this anthology, America’s founding generation appealed frequently to the Hebrew experience for principles, precedents, normative standards, and cultural motifs with which to define a community-in-formation and to order its political experiments. The discourse of the age was replete with quotations from and allusions to the sacred text. Indeed, the Bible—and the Hebrew Bible in particular—was the single most cited work in the political literature of the founding era, with the book of Deuteronomy, which recapitulates Mosaic law and recounts the providential progress of God’s “chosen nation,” taking special pride of place, referred to more frequently than the works of influential thinkers like John Locke or Baron de Montesquieu.

The notion that America was God's *new* Israel was embraced by both pious and skeptical citizens, woven into the national mythology, and manifested in diverse national expressions and symbols. In the summer of 1776, both Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, two sons of the Enlightenment who were otherwise skeptical of the miracles recorded in Hebrew Scripture, drew on the familiar biblical story of the Israelite people's miraculous liberation from Egyptian bondage for their proposed design of "a seal for the United States of America." Israel's providential deliverance through the parted waters of the Red Sea, they thought, was a fitting portrayal of the new nation's plight at its moment of greatest peril.

Americans continued to see comparisons between ancient Israel and America in the years that followed. In 1783, Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale College, delivered a sermon before Connecticut's highest public officials based on Deuteronomy 26:19: a passage describing God's promise to exalt the nation Israel on the condition that it remain a "holy people." This, Stiles declared, was "allusively prophetic of the future prosperity and splendor of the United States"—of "God's American Israel."

The ancient "Republic of the Israelites," declared Samuel Langdon, the Congregationalist minister and politically active president of Harvard College, in 1788, was "an Example to the American States." (To underscore the point in a way with which his audience could relate, he added: "instead of the twelve tribes of Israel, we may substitute the thirteen states of the American union.") Indeed, for Langdon, "the Israelites may be considered as a pattern to the world in all ages; and from them we may learn what will exalt our character, and what will depress and bring us to ruin."

Some Americans also saw in Hebrew Scripture certain political *models* that, having enjoyed divine favor, were worthy of emulation. Langdon opined in 1775: "The Jewish government, according to the original constitution which was divinely established, . . . was a perfect Republic" and "an excellent general model" for the nation now aborning.

In his wildly popular revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776), Thomas Paine also turned to the Hebraic republican tradition—in his case, in order to denounce monarchy and hereditary succession. Monarchy, he asserted, had been "first introduced into the world by the Heathens" and could not "be defended on the authority of Scripture; for the will of the Almighty, as declared by Gideon and the prophet Samuel, expressly disapproves of government by kings."

For "[n]ear three-thousand years," Paine continued, the Jewish form of civil government "was a kind of republic administered by a judge and the elders of the tribes. Kings they had none, and it was held sinful to acknowledge any being under that title but the Lord of Hosts." But, in their folly, the Israelites then rejected God's designs and insisted on having a king to reign over them—which, Paine concluded, is exactly why "[m]onarchy is ranked in Scripture as one of the sins of the Jews, for which a curse in reserve is denounced against them."

Americans of the founding generation were well aware that ideas like republicanism found expression in traditions other than those recorded in the Bible, and they studied those traditions both ancient and modern. But in a way that classical models could not do, the republic described in the Hebrew Bible reassured all Americans that republicanism was a political system favored by God.

What, then, of the early American commoner? Ordinary citizens, like intellectual elites, looked to the Bible for insights into human nature, social order, public authority, the rights and duties of citizens, and other concepts essential to establishing a stable polity. The common man would have agreed, for example, that biblical morality, as expressed in the Ten Commandments, was vital for nurturing the civic virtues that gave citizens like himself the capacity for self-government.

Indeed, as the editors of *Proclaim Liberty* point out, the Hebrew Bible, far from being an influence limited to the American elite, was “a source for, and an element of, collective identity and self-identification.” This was especially true of the 17th-century New England Puritans, but it has also been true of those Americans, across the broad sweep of the nation’s history, who have “endowed the people of the United States with an identity set apart from that of the other nations.”

Early Americans also took from Scripture, and especially from the story of man’s fall in the Garden of Eden, a view of humankind as radically sinful—a view that informed the country’s governing design as developed in the national Constitution. The separation of powers and the system of checks and balances embodied in that document reflect an awareness of this fallen, inherently sinful nature and, consequently, the need to guard against the concentration of power vested in human actors.

Over the course of many generations, Americans also wove into their constitutional traditions specific principles and measures said to have been derived from the Hebrew Bible and transmitted to the colonies by way of English common law and customs. Among them eventually would be constitutional provisions ranging from the need for multiple witnesses of malfeasance for purposes of conviction and punishment, to the concepts of double jeopardy and cruel and unusual punishment, to national standards for weights and measures.

Indeed, according to James Madison’s notes, the understanding of human nature contained in Hebrew Scripture contributed substantively to the debates in the Constitutional Convention of 1787. In the Convention’s waning days, for example, during a debate on the qualifications for public office, the venerable Benjamin Franklin spoke in opposition to any proposal that, in his words, “tended to debase the spirit of the common people.” “We should remember the character which the Scripture requires in rulers,” Franklin said, invoking Jethro’s advice to Moses regarding qualifications for prospective Israelite rulers, “that they should be men hating covetousness.”

These episodes and many others serve to remind us of the extent to which Hebrew Scripture informed the American political imagination. In doing so, they challenge the popular narrative that the American founding, sandwiched between two great spiritual awakenings, was the product of an enlightened age when rationalism was in the ascendancy and the Bible was, if not rejected outright, relegated to the sidelines.

For that reminder, and relatedly for edifying us toward a more capacious understanding of the American experiment in general, we owe a special debt of gratitude to Wilfred McClay's *Land of Hope* and to the compilers, editors, and expositors of *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land*.



God accepting the sacrifice of Abel, having rejected the offer of Cain, with Cain killing Abel beyond by Willem van Herp, 1626-1677

RABBI MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

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About the author

Meir Soloveichik is a senior fellow and contributor at Tikvah, the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University. His many podcasts, video series, media appearances, and writings can be found at Ideas.Tikvah.org.

Adam's Family and the "Adams Family"

In the exploration of *Parashat Bereishit*, Rabbi Meir Soloveichik draws a fascinating parallel between the biblical Adam's family and the historical Adams family, particularly John and Abigail Adams.

I.

In 1761, a colonist named John Adams fell in love with Abigail Smith. As he courted her, a new king, George III, ascended the throne. Noting the admiring glances Abigail bestowed on the picture of the monarch, Adams joked to her sister that he was jealous. He wrote in jest: "Altho my Allegiance has been hitherto inviolate I shall endeavour, all in my Power to foment Rebellion."

Some fifteen years after this romantic and prophetic note, on July 3, 1776, Adams wrote a letter to his wife Abigail from Philadelphia, about a document that would change the world:

You will see in a few days a Declaration setting forth the Causes which have impell'd Us to this mighty Revolution, and the Reasons which will justify it, in the Sight of God and Man.

It is a tragic twist of our culture that thanks to a macabre 1960s comedy we have an entirely other association with the phrase "The Addams Family." In truth, reading Genesis through the lens of the lives of these patriots

allows us to see why the ideas originating from the biblical Adam's family are so important to the Declaration, and to our time.

The Bible famously begins:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)

It is a seemingly simple sentence; but as John Adams noted, no other nation had ever said anything like this:

I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize Men than any other Nation. If I were an Atheist and believed in blind eternal Fate, . . . I Should believe that Chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate to all Mankind the Doctrine of a Supreme intelligent, wise, almighty Sovereign of the Universe, which I believe to be the great essential Principle of all Morality and consequently of all Civilization.

Why, for Adams, was this doctrine of creation so essential? The answer is given in the climax of the creation story in chapter 1:

And God said, let Us make man in Our image. . . .

And God made man in His image, in the image of God He made him, male and female He made them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

Not only is God the Creator, but man and woman—all human beings—are equally made in God's image. Thus is born the premise on which the Declaration's concept of equality rests.

I first thought about this when the National Archives Website once charmingly offered the opportunity to print a copy of the Declaration with one's own signature appended to the bottom. We added the "Soloveichik" name alongside that of Adams and Jefferson, and we sent out copies of this "improved" Declaration on the holiday of Purim—along with bottles of Sam Adams beer and the pastry known as Yankee Doodles—as *mishloah manot*, the festival's traditional gifts. The act of signing inspired the question: how many throughout history subscribed to the notion that men are made in the image of their Creator, and that therefore all are created equal? The son of John and Abigail Adams, John Quincy, knew the answer:

Almost all the Greek Philosophers reasoned and meditated upon the Nature of the Gods; but scarcely any of them ever reflected enough even to imagine that there was but one God—and not one of them ever conceived of Him as the Creator of the World. . . . But the first words of the Bible are "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the Earth." This blessed and sublime idea of God, the creator of the Universe, this source of all human virtue and all human happiness, for which all the Sages and philosophers of Greece and Rome groped in darkness and never found, is revealed in the first verse of the book of Genesis.

Two centuries later, the educator Leon Kass similarly reflected on teaching both Greek classics and the Bible:

You don't get out of Plato and Aristotle an account that would sustain the view of the equal dignity of every human being. You would not get the foundation for liberal democracy out of that; . . . it really rests on [what the Bible] first stated: both man and woman are equally made in God's image.

Only creation in the image of God allows for the equality at the heart of America.

II.

But what does it mean to speak of God's image? We turn to Chapter 2, where the creation of humanity is described again:

The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth; and He blew into his nostrils the spirit of life, and man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

Here, unlike with the creation of animals, mention is made of a spirit; this is the way in which we imagine the Almighty. For the medieval sage Moses Nahmanides, the key here is the Almighty's use of the first-person plural hortatory form: "let **Us** make man in **Our** image." God, according to Nahmanides, was speaking to the material world He had created; we are in the image of the Almighty **and** of the earth, we are not only material substance but also soul. To forget this is to render human beings into animals once more.

This is why, for John Adams, Jefferson—who had written the words "all men are created equal"—was wrong to see the atheistic French Revolution as akin to the American. Adams's critique of what was occurring in France was written while serving as vice president, a position he called "the most insignificant office that ever the mind of man contrived or his imagination conceived." With so much time on his hands, he reflected on what would occur when faith was effaced in the name of equality:

Is there a possibility that the government of nations may fall into the hands of men who teach the most disconsolate of all creeds, that men are but fireflies, and that this all is without a father? Is this the way to make man, as man, an object of respect? Or is it to make murder itself as indifferent as shooting a plover?

Abigail wholeheartedly endorsed Adams's biblical views on equality, and the cause against England, which is why it is so striking that as her husband excitedly started serving in the Continental Congress, she criticized his colleagues by expressing, as Lincoln later would, that the American cause was irreconcilable with the widespread enslavement of those created in God's image.

It always appeared a most iniquitous Scheme to me—[to] fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have.

In Abigail, John found an intellectual equal who was willing to challenge him, and who possessed emotional virtues he lacked. As the historian Joseph

Ellis reflects, “he was neurotic and she was uncommonly sane. His inevitable eruptions would not threaten the marriage, because she was the center that would always hold.”

This, in turn, teaches us something essential about the original “Mr. and Mrs. Adam” in Eden: genuine marriage is founded not only in similarity but also difference. When Adam finds no mate in the animal world, the Almighty announces:

It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a **helpmate for him**. (Genesis 2:18)

The Hebrew here, *ezer k'negdo*, literally means “a helpmate **against** him.” A true soulmate, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik reflected, is one who is different:

The *ezer k'negdo*, the helpmate, stands not alongside but opposite Adam. Only in opposition does man find help. Loneliness can only be ameliorated if lonely man meets lonely woman.

Rabbi Soloveitchik seemed to have John and Abigail’s correspondence in mind when he reflected:

To understand himself, man must confide in another. Only woman, who is an independent person with her own I-awareness, can liberate the man from loneliness.

III.

Yet following the first marriage in human history, all is not well in Eden. Man and woman receive the commandment to refrain from partaking of the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad.” But is not knowledge *always* a virtue?

The answer, for Abigail Adams, was decidedly, “no.” To her brilliant boy John Quincy, when he was ten, she wrote:

[G]reat Learning and superior abilities, should you ever possess them, will be of little value and small Estimation, unless Virtue, Honour, Truth, and integrity are added to them. Adhere to those religious Sentiments and principles which were early instilled into your mind and remember that you are accountable to your Maker for all your words and actions.

The 20th century taught us that a culturally and scientifically advanced society can utilize its knowledge for evil ends; and the enticement of the serpent to eat of the tree allows us to understand the danger its fruit represents:

For the day on which you eat it you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. (Genesis 3:4)

To partake of this Tree is to become one’s own arbiter of right and wrong, to seek to cease seeing oneself as made in God’s image, and to make oneself a

god. As Adams understood, the French Revolution reminded us what occurs when the true source of equality is forgotten.

As Eden is lost, another hopeful note is sounded: Adam looks to his wife, and bestows upon her a personal name, seeing her as the mother of humanity, and himself as the future father:

And the man called his wife's name Eve [*Havah*] because she was the mother of all life [*hay*]. (Genesis 3:20)

According to a striking Midrash, it was at this moment that God, amidst a paradise lost, bestowed on Adam and Eve radiant "garments of light." For Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in an incredible speech delivered at the Vatican in 2014, the meaning of this Midrash is that it is through the love with which a family is formed that we reveal that we are more than animals, that we are spiritual beings:

And so it has been ever since, that when a man and woman turn to one another in a bond of faithfulness, God robes them in garments of light, and we come as close as we will ever get to God Himself, bringing new life into being, turning the prose of biology into the poetry of the human spirit, redeeming the darkness of the world by the radiance of love.

IV.

But even the love lavished in family bears with it a danger: that a child might grow self-centered, a danger a parent is obligated to address. When Abigail heard that John Quincy was putting on airs because of the knowledge he had acquired in his young life, she wrote to him with words of moral instruction:

If you are conscious to yourself that you possess more knowledge upon some subjects than others of your standing, reflect that you have had greater opportunities of seeing the world, and obtaining a knowledge of Mankind than any of your contemporaries. . . . How unpardonable would it have been in you, to have been a Blockhead.

Thus does a mother remind her son to see life as one of blessing and duty rather than entitlement. We bear this in mind as we read further in Genesis, of the first child ever born, whom Eve names Cain (in Hebrew, *Kayin*), which means "acquire." For Rabbi Yehuda Ashkenazi, the name reflects the attitude of its bearer:

Kayin is the first to be born. . . . The whole world belongs to him. There is no room in his existence for anyone else: not for a brother, and not for the Creator. He himself is the world.

The point, in the words of Rabbi Uzi Eitam, is that Kayin forgot that

a person is meant to see his existence in the world as a Divine *hesed*, or kindness, and he should exert a moral effort to become worthy of it.

The self-centeredness of Cain leads to fratricide, to Abel's death; and Eve learns, as Abigail understood, of a parent's duty. That lesson informs her naming of her next child: Seth, which means "gift."

And Adam knew his wife again; and she bore a son, and called his name Seth: For God, said she, has given me another son in place of Abel that Cain slew." (Genesis 4:25)

In this name Eve reminds her child to see all of life—beginning with a parent's love—as a sign of grace. It can be no coincidence that for the commentator Ibn Ezra what follows is the invention of prayer itself:

And to Seth was born a son; . . . it was then that men began to call on the Lord. (Genesis 4:26)

Even as Cain-like violence suffuses the world, a remnant shaped by Eve's parenting can be found among the descendants of Seth: Enoch who "walks with God;" Methuselah, remembered by the rabbis as righteous; and ultimately Noah who "found favor in the eyes of the Lord," and who bears in mind what Abigail wrote her son when he was ten years old: "remember that you are accountable to your Maker for all your words and actions."

Thus do the stories of Adam's family and the Adams family go hand in hand. When John Adams was sent as an American envoy to France, a woman at a party cheekily quipped, "Mr. Adams, by your Name I conclude you are descended from the first Man and Woman." Adams replied: "Madame, my family resembles the first couple both in the name and in their frailties so much that I have no doubt we are descended from that of paradise." We *can* learn from John and Abigail about Adam and Eve—but from their successes. Specifically, we can learn how the biblical concept of equality shaped America, and how central the institution of the family is to our future as a nation.

These lessons need relearning. Our culture has forgotten that human life is sacred, a defect that undermines the equality on which our politics is based. Forgotten as well is the godlikeness of parenthood, so that secular Europe has ceased to have children, and a plague of loneliness afflicts society today.

One man who did not walk through life alone was John Adams, who in 1818 stood by Abigail as she lay dying. An eyewitness recalled:

She told him she was going and if it was the will of heaven she was willing—She had no wish to live but for his sake.

Adams reflected: "I wish I could lay down beside her and die too."

But he did not pass away until July 4, 1826, 50 years after the declaration that "all men are created equal." Soon after, the bedroom in which he expired was visited by his bereaved son, who was then the sixth president of the United States. John Quincy Adams wrote:

That moment was inexpressibly painful, and struck me as if it had been an arrow to the heart. My father and my mother have departed. The

charm which has always made this house to me an abode of enchantment is dissolved: and yet my attachment to it, and to the whole region round is stronger than I ever felt it before.

For the only time in American history, a sitting president mourned a president—not as a Founder but as a father, and a husband to his mother, feeling the reflected light of God that he had experienced there from parents who had raised him and taught him how Genesis was the greatest moral gift to mankind.

John Adams's famous last words were "Thomas Jefferson survives." Indeed he does, because the Declaration survives. But its teaching that all men are created equal will only endure if we ensure that the lessons of the lives of John and Abigail Adams—and of Adam and Eve—endure as well.

RABBI MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

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About the author

Meir Soloveichik is a senior fellow and contributor at Tikvah, the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University. His many podcasts, video series, media appearances, and writings can be found at Ideas.Tikvah.org.



Portrait of Abraham Lincoln by Alexander Gardner, February 1865

The Almost Chosen People

On the way to his inauguration, Abraham Lincoln described America in a way that no one else had before—as “an almost chosen people.” Understanding this marvelous phrase allows us to better understand the nature of Lincoln’s relationship with the Jews, and his philosophical and religious understanding of America itself.

On February 11th, 1861, Abraham Lincoln prepared to say goodbye to his friends and neighbors in Springfield, Illinois, and embark on his journey to Washington and his inauguration. Several states had already seceded; more would follow. Lincoln had no prepared remarks for the occasion, but upon saying farewell, he was suddenly overcome with emotion and said the following words:

My friends, no one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of the Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.

With these words he set forth, and ten days later he arrived in Trenton, New Jersey. America was about to mark Washington's birthday, and Lincoln, addressing the state legislature, reflected on how powerfully reading about the father of our country had affected him as a child.

In this little-known speech, Lincoln uses a remarkable phrase — one which is significant for all Americans, but even more striking for American Jews:

I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for; that something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come; I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be a humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost-chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.

Almost chosen people. This phrase is entirely of Lincoln's own invention. No such description of the American experience existed until this moment. We are, Lincoln says, almost chosen.

It is interesting because he is clearly connecting the American story to that of the ancient Israelites, but he does not equate the two. Biblical Israel is chosen. America is not Biblical Israel — it is almost chosen. What does this mean?

Jane Leavy, in her wonderful biography of Sandy Koufax, describes Koufax's famous refusal to pitch for the Dodgers in the first game of the World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur:

Coach Walt Alston chose the great Don Drysdale to pitch in Koufax's stead, but the Dodgers got hammered. The score was seven to one when Alston came to the mound to relieve Drysdale. "Hey skip," Drysdale joked, "bet you wish I was Jewish today too." For Jews, Leavy writes, the loss was a win. If Big D could joke about being one of the chosen people, that was already something — a tacit acknowledgment of their acceptance into the mainstream. Shtetl farewell.

That's Drysdale. But Lincoln does not identify as a member of the chosen people. What he does is different. He establishes a connection, a parallel, between the American story and that of Biblical Israel.

Lest one think this is a one-off, Lincoln's forthcoming remarks revealed that he had the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish people very much on his mind. From Trenton, Lincoln traveled to Philadelphia, and there on February 22nd, on Washington's birthday, he visited Independence Hall — site of the birth of the Declaration of Independence as well as the Constitution. Upon bidding an assembled crowd of Philadelphians good night, Lincoln said the following:

"I assure you and your mayor that I had hoped on this occasion, and upon all

occasions during my life, that I shall do nothing inconsistent with the teachings of those holy and most sacred walls” — meaning the walls of Independence Hall.

I have never asked anything that does not breathe from those walls. All my political warfare has been in favor of the teachings coming forth from that sacred hall. May my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if ever I prove false to those teachings.

Those are Lincoln’s words. Here, then, another parallel is established — not only between America and the Jews, but between Philadelphia and Jerusalem, or if you will, between Independence Hall and the locus of holiness in Jerusalem, the Temple. In the Psalms, Israel pledges, “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning.” And here Lincoln pledges may his right hand forget its cunning if ever he proves false to the teachings of what the founders wrought in Philadelphia.

So what are we to make of these remarks? What does it mean to be almost chosen? What is “almost”? Is America an elected nation or is it not? The comparison to the story of the Jews is obvious, but what exactly is Lincoln attempting to express? And what inspired this sudden comparison between America and the Jews, Philadelphia and Jerusalem, Independence Hall and the Temple?

In analyzing these remarkable speeches, I will begin by suggesting what might have provoked these biblical references from Lincoln at this very time. I will then reflect on what these references to biblical Israel tell us about Lincoln’s attitude toward the Jews of his own age. And in conclusion, we will seek to understand how Lincoln’s description of this country as an almost chosen people tells us a great deal not only about Lincoln’s connection to the chosen people, but also about the essence of America itself.

We begin with the question of what may have inspired these Hebraic reflections from Lincoln. And the answer begins with Lincoln’s fellow Illinoisan — my fellow Chicagoan — Abraham Kohn. One article by Abraham Goodman describes the very American Jewish story of Kohn:

In 1842, Kohn was 23 years of age when he left the Bavarian village of Mohnsroth and sailed to seek his fortune in the new world. Less than two years later, he was already located in Chicago as the proprietor of a store. Kohn had a strong sense of Jewish loyalty, which caused him to be one of the 14 men who in 1847 were founders of Chicago’s first congregation, Kehilath Anshe Ma’ariv.

That is the community of the people of the west. He was one of Chicagoan Jewry’s founding fathers.

Kohn became president in 1853 and, in the words of one historian of Chicago Jewry, placed the congregation on a firm foundation. Kohn took his American citizenship as seriously as his Jewish ties. He was elected city clerk of Chicago in 1860 and showed himself an enthusiastic Republican, an ardent advocate of that party’s presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln of Springfield.

According to another description, the Democratic press attacked Kohn as one of the blackest Republicans and abolitionists. Kohn's popularity and influence had probably been brought to Lincoln's attention, and Lincoln, consummate politician as he was, recognized in Kohn an ally whose acquaintance would prove a valuable asset in the pending election. Lincoln was introduced to Kohn by Congressman Isaac Arnold, and it was this meeting that inspired Kohn with a feeling of admiration for his visitor and a conviction that Lincoln was the destined Moses of the slaves and the savior of this country.

Now, it was upon Lincoln's election as president that Kohn sent an unusual present to his newfound friend — right before Lincoln departed for Washington. This present was a picture of an American flag, but on the stripes of that flag, Kohn had inscribed several sentences in Hebrew. These Hebrew words were from the first chapter of the Book of Joshua:

As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee. I will not fail thee nor forsake thee. Be strong and of good courage, for thou shalt cause this people to inherit the land which I swore unto their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, to observe to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded thee. Turn not from it to the right hand nor to the left, that thou mayest have good success whithersoever thou goest. Be not affrighted, neither be thou dismayed, for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.

This is what Kohn inscribed in Hebrew on this flag. This image was given to Lincoln right before he set out on his travels.

Could this gift have inspired the President-elect to further reflect, as he traveled, on the link between the Hebrew Bible and America? Do we have reason to think that Lincoln saw Kohn's gift as anything other than some sort of tchotchke sent from some *nudnik* to the future President of the United States? Well, we do know that Lincoln immediately wrote to Kohn to thank him for the gift. And my friend, the great Lincoln scholar Harold Holzer, has pointed out that it was almost immediately after receiving Kohn's gift that Lincoln delivered his words of farewell in Springfield — words that declared Lincoln's trust in a God who can "go with me and remain with you and be everywhere for good." These farewell words, for Holzer, were "clearly inspired by Kohn's present." Here, Holzer writes, was an Old Testament inspiration direct from a Jewish friend.

Even more interestingly, as Holzer himself notes, we have the following information about Kohn's gift from Lincoln's private secretary John Hay, who in 1862 wrote:

The flag referred to was a small painting of the American banner inscribed in Hebrew characters with a passage from the first chapter of Joshua, from the fourth to the ninth verse. It was presented to the President in February 1861, before his departure from Illinois, by Abraham Kohn, City Clerk of Chicago, who had himself painted it. It has been in the Executive Mansion ever since the President's inauguration.

This means that Lincoln received the flag right before he traveled to New Jersey and Philadelphia, and cared about the Hebrew gift enough that he took it with him to Washington and hung it in the White House. How could it not have impacted him — to the extent that the Hebrew Bible, with its reference to Joshua’s succession of Moses, may have been on his mind as he faced a challenge of succession of his own, a challenge that he himself described as “a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington.”

The flag, then, may be an appreciated part of Lincoln’s inspiration when he referred to America as “the almost chosen people.” But why almost chosen? Here we must understand two phenomena at the heart of Jewish history: the anti-Semitism experienced from so many nations, and the unique and warm welcome offered to Jews in America.

The essence of anti-Semitism, I believe, is often a jealous hatred of the miracle of Jewish eternity — a miracle that more than anything else is the sign of chosenness. The Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig once candidly put it this way: “The existence of the Jew constantly subjects Christianity to the idea that it is not attaining the goal, the truth, that it ever remains on the way. That is the profoundest reason,” Rosenzweig wrote, “for the Christian hatred of the Jew, which is heir to the pagan hatred of the Jew. In the final analysis, it is only self-hatred directed by his existence. It is hatred of one’s own imperfection, one’s own not-yet.”

Meaning: the Jews throughout history embodied a people that was chosen, miraculous, and for much of Europe this was intolerable. Each country sought to replace Israel and declare itself God’s own chosen nation, declaring that the Jews had been superseded. If America was different, it was because America saw itself not as replacing the Jewish people, but as imitating it, paralleling it.

When George Washington became President of the United States, the Catholics came together and sent him one letter of congratulation. The Quakers sent him one letter of congratulation. The Baptists sent him one letter of congratulation. The Jews could not agree on who would write the letter — so they sent him three letters. Maybe a thousand Jews in America at the time, three letters. And thank God they did, because Washington penned a separate, exquisite response to each one.

The correspondence with Newport is more well-known, but in his letter to the Jews of Savannah, Washington concludes as follows:

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivered the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors, planted them in a promised land — whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in Establishing these United States as an independent nation — still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is God of the Bible.

Washington uses the actual name of God, which traditional Jews do not

pronounce. Here Washington stresses that Jewish chosenness continues to exist, that America's story imitates Israel's, and seeks a blessing from the God who blessed the Jews and blesses them still. Lincoln is similarly stating that America does not replace Israel as the chosen people. America is almost chosen. It seeks to partake in Israel's blessing and to learn from its example.

The phrase "almost chosen," then, is key to understanding Lincoln's utter lack of any scintilla of anti-Semitism. His affection for the Jews never ceases to impress. As Jonathan Sarna and Benjamin Shapell have documented in their book *Lincoln and the Jews*, Lincoln was the first president to have a very close and dear Jewish friend — Abraham Jonas, the man who helped strategize Lincoln's attainment of the Republican nomination. This friendship remained even after Jonas's children fought for the Confederacy. It was under Lincoln that Grant's edict of expulsion of the Jews in Tennessee was immediately revoked, and it was under Lincoln that Jewish chaplains were granted equality in the Union Army. Then there is Lincoln's close, strange, and fascinating relationship with the Jewish chiropodist Isachar Zacharie — a foot doctor who was also sent by Lincoln on diplomatic missions.

All this is impressive, but there is more. As Sarna and Shapell further describe, Lincoln during the war met with Henry Wentworth Monk, a pastor from Canada who was also a proto-Christian Zionist, obsessed with redeeming the Jews of the world and returning them to the Holy Land. In Monk's account, he told the President that after freeing the slaves, Lincoln should focus on freeing the Jews. "Why the Jew?" asked Lincoln. "Are they not free already?" "Certainly, Mr. President," Monk replied, "the American Jew is free, and so is the English Jew, but not the European. There can be no permanent peace in the world until the civilized nations, led I hope by Great Britain and the United States, atone for what they have done to the Jews — for their two thousand years of persecution — by restoring them to their national home in Palestine and making Jerusalem the capital city of a reunited Christendom."

Lincoln replied, in Monk's account:

That is a noble dream, Mr. Monk, and one shared by many Americans. I myself have a high regard for the Jews. My chiropodist is a Jew, and he has so many times put me on my feet that I would have no objection to giving his countrymen a leg up.

How can rabbis not love a man who works puns into all his humor?

"But the United States is, alas," Lincoln continued,

At this moment a house divided against itself. We must first bring this dreadful war to a victorious conclusion, which no compromise can do. And then, Mr. Monk, we may begin again to see visions and dream dreams. Then you will see what leadership America will show to the world.

This is Monk's account. Now, whether Lincoln was entirely sincere here, or thought Monk a *meshuggener*, we cannot be certain. But one sentence was certainly spoken by Lincoln from the heart: "I myself have a high regard for

Jews.” Indeed, it was this regard that I believe was much on his mind when he departed Springfield and, speaking in Trenton and in Philadelphia while facing the greatest challenge in American history, he established a link between the chosen people and the almost chosen people.

We have thus far discovered the Jewish gift of Abraham Kohn that may have inspired Lincoln’s Hebraic references, and we have seen that to be almost chosen is to imitate biblical Israel rather than replace it. Our final question is: what does this phrase “almost chosen” tell us about America? In what way does America imitate Israel? How, for Lincoln, does the almost chosen people parallel the chosen people?

The answer lies in the scriptural tenet which proclaims that biblical Israel is born for a mission much larger than itself. The theologian Michael Wyschogrod has noted that while the Jewish people are indeed a nation, their nationhood is not formed within the boundaries of its land. Israel, according to the Bible, came into being at Sinai before entering the land of Israel. No other country has a story like this.

How is England born as a country? You begin with the land, with an island. Various people come to that island — Saxons, French, wizards I think, and others. At a certain point, a king drew a sword from a stone and united everybody, and they became one people. I’m pretty sure that’s the accurate historical account of how this occurred. But every nation’s story begins with the land. Not biblical Israel. They are formed before they enter the land.

As Wyschogrod writes: “Nowhere else in the memory of peoples is entry into the land remembered. A people is born out of a soil which is its mother. The people does not predate the land.”

Of course the holy land is central to Israel’s destiny. But the people of Israel become a nation first and foremost through the covenant at Sinai. The Israelites’ union to each other takes place only through pledging loyalty to Israel’s covenant, to the God of Israel and to his Torah.

All this is meant to remind Israel that once it enters the land and takes on the trappings of a standard polity, as important as the nation-state is, biblical Israel has a calling higher than the state itself. Israel exists not only for its own observance of the covenant — which is higher than the polity — but also to communicate the central ideas of its covenant to the world. Something that the most philo-Semitic of the American founders appreciated. “I will insist,” John Adams once said,

That the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation. If I were an atheist who believed that all was ordered by chance, I should believe that chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of morality and all civilization.

In a similar sense, to speak of America as existing in parallel to Israel — as almost chosen, not as Israel’s replacement but as its imitator — is to say that America exists also for its own covenant, whose central ideas it is destined to

convey to the world and thereby change the world.

What does it mean to say that America is almost chosen? Lincoln said it in the sentence preceding that phrase, during his remarks in Trenton:

I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for. That something even more than national independence. That something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come.

America, Lincoln is saying, exists not only for itself, but for something higher — a covenant that it will communicate to the world and thereby change the world.

And it is the day after his Trenton address, in Philadelphia, when he makes clear what he believes the American covenant to be — what the essence of the American idea is, which holds out this great promise for the entire world. Visiting Independence Hall, Lincoln recalled not Washington's exploits as he had remembered in Trenton, but rather the courage of the men who signed their own death warrant for treason by putting their names on the Declaration of Independence in that hall — putting their names on what Lincoln declares to be the covenant of the American idea.

"I have often pondered," Lincoln said then in Philadelphia,

Over the dangers which were incurred by the men who assembled here and framed and adopted that Declaration of Independence. I have pondered over the toils that were endured by the officers and soldiers of the army who achieved that Independence. I have often inquired of myself what great principle or idea it was that kept this confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the motherland, but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but I hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weight would be lifted from the shoulders of all men.

The Declaration of Independence — the statement that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — this is for Lincoln the American covenant. It is the essence of the American idea. To speak of American chosenness grounded in the Declaration is to turn the Declaration into what the author Pauline Maier called "American scripture," or as the great Lincoln scholar Harry Jaffa once put it, Lincoln incorporated the truths of the Declaration of Independence into a sacred and ritual canon, making them objects of faith — a canon made sacred to the American people.

This, then, is Lincoln's understanding of America's almost chosenness. But there is a warning in Lincoln's words, in his deliberate description of this country as almost chosen. To be the chosen people is to be an eternal people. God has promised that the Jews will endure no matter what — no matter their failings, no matter what they suffer. This fact of Jewish history was

given succinct and eloquent expression by my hero Menachem Begin, when he was told by Jimmy Carter that he faced Israel's last chance to make peace. Begin replied: "Our people lived thousands of years before Camp David and will live thousands of years after Camp David. There are no last chances in the lives of the Jews." That is what it means to be chosen.

But America is not chosen. It is, as Lincoln said, almost chosen. It can lose its exceptional nature, and it can cease to be what it has always been and become something else entirely. Moreover, to say that America is almost chosen because of the Declaration — to say that the concept of equality is the essence of America — is also to say that just as biblical Israel is punished for failure to keep its covenant, so too can America suffer for its sins. And this indeed is how Lincoln ultimately interpreted the destruction wrought by the Civil War, not only for the South, but for the North as well.

As Jaffa writes,

Lincoln in his speeches describes a lapse of the American people from the faith of their fathers, like that of the people led by Moses. The Jews were led out of Egypt in fulfillment of a promise gained not by their merits, but by those of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So were the American people foreordained to the blessings of a government of equal rights by the merits of the Founding Fathers. Yet, for Lincoln, like the Jews who were still corrupt from their sojourn in Egypt, the American people were not worthy of their mission. By their infidelity they were destined to sufferings.

Biblical Israel did indeed suffer, but biblical Israel is always chosen, always endures. America can suffer for failing to keep its covenant, but it can also, as a result of ignoring its covenant, lose its almost chosenness altogether. America as an idea and as an almost chosen nation can disappear — without repentance, without renewal, without a new birth of freedom, without a rededication to the covenant of the United States, a rededication to the proposition that all men are created equal. Without that, America as America, for Lincoln, will come to an end. And no one else will bear the message of human equality to the world, and government of, for, and by the people will perish from the earth.

All this is what Lincoln meant when he told Trenton's assembly that we Americans are an almost chosen people. And an appreciation of Lincoln's words allows us to also understand his invoking of Jerusalem at Independence Hall in Philadelphia the next day. Jerusalem became sanctified when Solomon's Temple served as the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant. The Holy of Holies contained the two tablets given by God to Moses at Sinai — the declaration of the covenant of the Jewish people. Philadelphia, Lincoln is saying, is America's Jerusalem, because it is there that America's own covenant was born. Independence Hall is the locus of the American covenantal creed. And just as the Jews refused to forget Jerusalem — turning every day to pray toward where the declaration of their covenant was once kept in a sacred ark — so too Americans were meant to never forget and to always strive to uphold the covenantal ideal of human equality.

Interestingly, in a letter to Madison, Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence late in his life once wrote the following:

Some men look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence and deem them like the Ark of the Covenant, too sacred to be touched. They ascribe to the men of the preceding age a wisdom more than human, and suppose what they did to be beyond amendment. I knew that age well — I belonged to it and labored with it. It deserved well of its country. But I know also that laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also and keep pace with the times.

For Lincoln, Jefferson was correct about the Constitution. It was imperfect. It allowed for and implicitly enshrined slavery and, through the three-fifths rule, the disproportionate power of the slaveholding states. The founders anticipated that the Constitution would need to be amended throughout the years. But for Lincoln, the essence of the Declaration — that all men are created equal — is always true. The phrase Jefferson gave to America is always the covenantal ideal toward which America must strive. Jefferson, for all his hypocrisy and flaws, which Lincoln very much recognized, nevertheless wrote the most important words in American history.

“All honor to Jefferson,” Lincoln wrote in 1859,

The man who in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document an abstract truth applicable to all men in all times, and so to embalm it there that today and in all coming days it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.

This was the eternally true American covenant. This is why Philadelphia, where that covenant was born, is America’s Jerusalem. The phrase “if I forget thee, oh Philadelphia” does not have the same ring as the English of the King James Bible. Nevertheless, Lincoln is stressing that if America forgets Philadelphia, forgets Independence Hall, abandons its covenantal ideals, then it loses any claim to chosenness and ceases to have any reason to exist.

This too Lincoln stated explicitly in Philadelphia, on that day at Independence Hall.

I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence. Now, my friends, can this country be saved upon that basis? If it can, I will consider myself one of the happiest men in the world if I can help to save it. If it cannot be saved upon that principle, it will be truly awful. But if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle — I was about to say, I would rather be assassinated on this spot than surrender it.

country based on this principle. And Lincoln was also assassinated for his defense of the principles of the Declaration. But Lincoln's words in Philadelphia are even more eerie than we usually appreciate. The home of the Declaration was for Lincoln the Jerusalem of America. He died defending what he saw as the Jerusalem of America. And it is very possible that he spoke about the biblical Jerusalem right before he died.

As the historian Allen Guelzo reports in his book *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, it was Mary Lincoln who, in a letter written to a clergyman, recounted that Lincoln in the box at Ford's Theatre had been enjoying the evening — laughing heartily and bowing frequently to the gratified people. But even though he laughed at the actors, he could not keep his mind from straying in other directions. He was thinking about the future, about life after the presidency, and presently he told Mary that he would like to visit the Holy Land, and that “there was no city on earth he so much desired to see as Jerusalem.” Tragically, the man who began his presidency implicitly invoking “if I forget thee, O Jerusalem” was never able to conclude his presidency and achieve his dream of actually seeing Jerusalem.

But one of Lincoln's closest political comrades, his Secretary of State William Seward, did fulfill this dream. Seward had also been a target of Booth's plot — he had been attacked, but ultimately survived. And in 1871, William Seward visited the Holy Land. A memoir of this visit describes how entranced Seward was standing on a Friday afternoon at the Wailing Wall, pondering the endurance of the Jews — an endurance rooted in their refusal to forget Jerusalem, the city that was the embodiment of their covenant with God.

The memoir recounts as follows:

The Jewish Sabbath being on Saturday and beginning at sunset on Friday, the weekly wail of the Jews under the wall takes place on Friday and is a preparation for the rest and worship of the day which they are commanded to keep holy. The small rectangular oblong area without roof or canopy serves for the gathering of the whole remnant of the Jewish nation in Jerusalem. Here, whether it rains or shines, they come together at an early hour — old and young, men, women, and little children, the poor and the rich, in their best costumes, discordant as the diverse nations from which they come. They are attended by their rabbis, each bringing the carefully preserved and elaborately bound text of the Book of Lamentations of Jeremiah, either in their respective languages or in the original Hebrew. For many hours they pour forth their complaints, reading and reciting the poetic language of the prophet, beating their hands against the wall and bathing the stones with their kisses and tears. It is no mere formal ceremony. During the several hours while we were spectators of it, there was not one act of irreverence or indifference.

Seward and this memoir bring beautifully to life what Jerusalem was like in the 19th century and allow us to appreciate the miracle of all that has changed in Jerusalem. But then the memoir goes on to describe how certain things have never changed. Standing at the wall, Seward and his party were

approached by a rabbi who invited them to join the evening prayers.

We had scarcely left the place when a meek, gentle Jew in a long, plain brown dress, his light glossy hair falling in ringlets on either side of his face, came to us and respectfully accosting Mr. Seward, expressed a desire that we would visit the new synagogue where the Sabbath service was about to open at sunset. Mr. Seward assented. A crowd of the peculiar people attended and showed us the way to the new house of prayer.

This new house of prayer was the Churva — which had just been built, was later destroyed by the Jordanians in 1948, and has only recently come back to life again.

We took seats on one of the benches against the wall. Presently, an elderly person speaking English imperfectly invited Mr. Seward to change his seat. He hesitated — not because Seward was sitting in his seat, but because, on being informed by Mr. Finkelstein, a man in their party, that the person who gave the invitation was the president of the synagogue, Mr. Seward rose, and the whole party accompanying him were conducted up the steps and were comfortably seated on the dais in the chief seat of the synagogue.

After the service concluded, thinking that Mr. Seward might be impatient to leave, the chief men requested that he would remain a few moments until a prayer should be offered for the President of the United States and another for himself. A remarkable rabbi, clad in a long, rich, flowing sacerdotal dress, walked up the aisle. A table was lifted from the floor to the platform, and by a steep ladder held by two assistant priests, the rabbi ascended the platform. A large folio Hebrew manuscript was laid on the table before him, and he recited with marked intonation and clear falsetto a prayer. We were at first uncertain whether this was a psalm or a prayer. At the close of the reading, the rabbi came to Mr. Seward and informed him that it was a prayer for the President of the United States and a thanksgiving for the deliverance of the Union from its rebellious assailants.

Then came a second prayer. It was in Hebrew and intoned, but the rabbi informed us that it was a prayer of gratitude for Mr. Seward's visit to the Jews of Jerusalem, for his health, for a safe return to his native land, and a long, happy life. The rabbi now descended, and it was evident that the service was at an end.

Thus was the man who invoked Jerusalem, who connected it to the Declaration of Independence, and who was assassinated for his loyalty to the Declaration — perhaps while himself thinking of Jerusalem — it was this man's great cause that was revered, remembered, and celebrated by the Jews of Jerusalem.

In 1865, the Seder evening — the first night of Passover — took place on the day after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, the day after the Civil War for all intents and purposes came to a close. For the Jews of the North, this truly was *Zman Cheiruteinu* — the festival of our freedom. Lincoln, of course,

did not attend a Seder in Washington, but he would have understood and shared the Jewish joy at the new birth of freedom during the Jewish festival of freedom. And the man who compared the almost chosen people to the chosen people would also have deeply understood, revered, and appreciated the final words of that Seder — words whose spirit may also have been the last words that America's greatest president uttered in his own life.

Next year in Jerusalem.



USPS Stamp illustration featuring Saul Bellow, by Joe Ciardiello

RUTH R. WISSE

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About the author

Ruth R. Wisse is professor emerita of Yiddish and comparative literatures at Harvard and a distinguished senior fellow at Tikvah. Her memoir *Free as a Jew: a Personal Memoir of National Self-Liberation*, chapters of which appeared in *Mosaic* in somewhat different form, is out from Wicked Son Press.

What Saul Bellow Saw

The Jewish writer who became America's most decorated novelist spent his early years prodding the nation's soul. Then, sensing danger to it, he took up the role of guardian.

In May 1949, a year after the establishment of the state of Israel, the American Jewish literary critic Leslie Fiedler published in *Commentary* an essay about the fundamental challenge facing American Jewish writers: that is, novelists, poets, and intellectuals like Fiedler himself.

Entitled "What Can We Do About Fagin?"—Fagin being the Jewish villain of Charles Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist*—the essay shows that the modern Jew who adopts English as his language is joining a culture riddled with negative stereotypes of . . . himself. These demonic images figure in some of the best works of some of the best writers, and form an indelible part of the English literary tradition—not just in the earlier form of Dickens' Fagin, or still earlier of Shakespeare's Shylock, but in, to mention only two famous modern poets, Ezra Pound's wartime broadcasts inveighing against "Jew slime" or such memorable lines by T.S. Eliot as "The rats are underneath the piles. The jew is underneath the lot" and the same venerated poet's 1933 admonition that, in any well-ordered society, "reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable."

How should Jewish writers proceed on this inhospitable ground?

There was a paradox in the timing of Fiedler's essay, since this was actually the postwar moment when Jews were themselves beginning to move into the forefront of Anglo-American culture. The "New York Intellectuals"—the first European-style intelligentsia on American soil, clustered around several magazines and publishing houses—were beginning to gain prominence as

writers, thinkers, critics, and professors. Fiedler was thus not a petitioner requesting permission to enter American letters but someone already in place and intending to stay. Indeed, by the end of his essay, after laying out the problem, he proposes an answer:

[We] can begin to build rival myths of our meaning for the Western world, other images of the Jew to dispossess the ancient images of terror. Several, of varying dignity and depth, are already in existence: the happy Hebrew peasant of the new Israel; the alienated Jew as artist (Kafka's protagonist Josef K.) or dilettante (Proust's Charles Swann) or citizen (Joyce's Leopold Bloom); the sensitive young victim of the recent crop of American war novels; the ambiguous figure of Saul Bellow's novel [*The Victim*], both victim and oppressor.

According to Fiedler, the response to existing negative stereotypes was to create autonomous new representations. For him, as for others at the time, the modern Jew could possibly even become a literary *archetype*: the new Everyman of a society in which many felt somewhat alienated, or marginal. In charting this proposed new path of Jewish fiction, Fiedler singles out such forerunners as Kafka and Proust and then, as a contemporary exemplar, Saul Bellow, whose second novel, *The Victim*, about a New York Jew who is being stalked by an anti-Semite, had been published two years earlier.

It was an auspicious choice of writer and book.

I. The Right Amount of Victim

Saul Bellow, by now the subject of several biographies including a (thus far) definitive two-volume *Life* by Zachary Leader, was born in a suburb of Montreal in 1915 to a traditional Jewish family recently arrived from Russia. Raised in Chicago, where the family moved when he was nine years old, he became part of a circle of brainy Jewish teenagers who read and debated weighty books and learned much more from each other than from their formal schooling (which in Bellow's case included the University of Chicago and Northwestern University).

The young Bellow decided early on to become a writer, and worked at it so hard and so successfully that by the time of his death in 2005 he had become America's most decorated novelist, recipient of (among many other honors) the 1976 Nobel Prize for Literature, three National Book Awards for Fiction, a Pulitzer Prize, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for the Novel. France made him a Commander of its Legion of Honor, Italy awarded him the Malaparte Prize, and Israel the Agnon Prize for literary achievement.

The young Bellow decided early on to become a writer, and worked at it so hard and so successfully that by the time of his death in 2005 he had become America's most decorated novelist.

But back then in 1947, age thirty-two and just starting out, Bellow must have shared Fiedler's sense of entering a culture that was prejudiced against him,

because *The Victim* shows him tackling the issue head-on. Here is how the novel opens:

On some nights New York is as hot as Bangkok. The whole continent seems to have moved from its place and slid nearer the equator, the bitter gray Atlantic to have become green and tropical, and the people, thronging the streets, barbaric fellahin among the stupendous monuments of their mystery, the lights of which, a dazing profusion, climb endlessly into the heat of the sky.

This description of New Yorkers as “barbaric,” on a par with the peasants of southeast Asia, feels very odd—until you realize that it was in this same image that the great American writer Henry James, returning briefly in 1904-05 from decades as an expatriate in England, captured his own re-encounter of New York, and more particularly his first encounter with immigrant New York Jews, in *The American Scene*:

There is no swarming like that of Israel when once Israel has got a start, and the scene here bristled, at every step, with the signs and sounds, immitigable, unmistakable, of a Jewry that has burst all bounds. . . . [With] the exception of some shy corner of Asia, no district in the world known to the statistician has so many inhabitants to the yard.

James viewed the city as an alien outpost of Asia where he, an Anglo-Saxon descendant of the Puritans, felt totally displaced. For his novel about anti-Semitism, Bellow slyly adapted the view of America’s greatest novelist. And, just as Fiedler would propound, he had also created his own counter-images, in his case of both the Jew and the anti-Jew.

On this steamy summer evening, as our Jewish protagonist Asa Leventhal gets off the Third Avenue train and makes his way home to his apartment, he has the sense that he is being followed. The stalker is Kirby Allbee, a man whom he barely remembers having once met but who blames Leventhal for having ruined his life. That is the main plot in a nutshell.

Leventhal is living on his own while his wife is away taking care of her aging mother; he is trying to hold down a job, take care of the family of his out-of-town brother, and stay in touch with a couple of people he knows. He feels lucky to have attained this modest security—lucky that he is not one of “the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined,” who are all around him in the city. He may be otherwise unconfident, but he is certain that he never wronged his accuser.

Allbee, on the other hand, is a recovering alcoholic, something of a misfit, who fits Leventhal’s stereotype of the anti-Semite. And yet it turns out that he may have a real gripe. Leventhal had once said something that may have prevented Allbee from getting a break just when he was down and out. But Allbee also genuinely doubts that Jews can become the transmitters of American values and culture. He is worried that the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson are now being taught by someone named Lifschitz.

In exploring the mutual distrust between Leventhal and Allbee, Bellow was by no means drawing a moral equivalence between the Jew and his accuser. That possibility is raised in the novel, and rejected. When Leventhal, speaking to a friend of his, tries explaining Allbee's complaint against the Jews, the friend gets really angry: "No! . . . No! . . . And you're trying to do something for him? You're willing, regardless? Boy, do you know what this does to my opinion of you? Are you in your right mind?" Yet, although Leventhal knows he bears no responsibility for Allbee's failures, and refuses to accept any blame for them, he does begin to understand the Gentile in return for being better understood by him.

Bellow later said he had not yet "hit his stride" in writing this novel, but it marked an important step in his thinking about America. Anti-Semitism had been the monstrous destroyer of civilization in Europe—but America had gone to war to defeat fascism in Europe, and he did not want the anti-Jewish bigotry of someone like Allbee to be mistaken for Hitlerism. Here is how Allbee defends his views to Leventhal:

You know, Moses punished the Egyptians with darkness. And that's how I often think of this. When I was born, when I was a boy, everything was different. We thought it would be daylight forever. Do you know, one of my ancestors was Governor [John] Winthrop [of colonial Massachusetts]!" His voice vibrated fiercely; there was a repressed laugh in it. "I'm a fine one to be talking about tradition, you must be saying. But still I was born into it. And try to imagine how New York affects me. Isn't it preposterous? It's really as if the children of Caliban were running everything. You go down in the subway and Caliban gives you two nickels for your dime. You go home and he has a candy store in the street where you were born. The old breeds are out. The streets are named after them. But what are they themselves? Just remnants.

As the novel shows, Leventhal resists this transparent appeal for sympathy. Nevertheless, each of the two antagonists gradually, painfully, and imperfectly overcomes the other's fears. Encouraging trust is no simple matter: both of these Americans have reasons for their paranoia.

Bellow aims very high in this novel. The huge idea at the heart of it takes shape in a cafeteria scene where five Jews, Leventhal among them, are discussing the performance of an actress in a recent film and Schlossberg, the oldest and most learned of the group, criticizes the actress for *underacting*—for responding to the murder of her husband with too little human feeling. Acting (for which, read: writing) should reveal the full worth of the human being. After discussing various portrayals of Queen Victoria, they shift to the baptized Jew Benjamin Disraeli who served as Victoria's prime minister.

But Leventhal isn't comfortable with Disraeli's "acting":

[Disraeli] wanted to lead England in spite of the fact that he was a Jew, not because he cared about empires so much. People laughed at his nose so he took up boxing; they laughed at his poetic silk clothes, so he

put on black; and they laughed at his books, so he showed them. He got into politics and became the prime minister. He did it all on nerve.

Bellow was responding here to the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's argument—detested and contested by the New York intellectuals—that the anti-Semite *creates* the modern Jew, a position whose reductionism is emphatically rejected in the novel. Hence Leventhal's discomfort: he does not want the Jew to have to *prove* himself. This leads Schlossberg into a spontaneous speech on the proper balance between over- and underacting. An actor may not have to prove anything, yet he can still reach for beauty and greatness.

Have dignity, you understand me? Choose dignity. Nobody knows enough to turn it down. Now to whom should this mean something if not to an actor?

For actor in this passage we can again read Jew—or writer. The Jewish novelist and the character who is his fictional stand-in should neither minimize nor overdramatize the hostility they face, but keep reaching for dignity on their own terms. The Jewish writer is not obliged either to present a countermyth or to proceed like Disraeli “on nerve,” but neither should he lower his expectations of man.

Rather than remaining stuck in Sartre's polarized categories of anti-Semite versus Jew, Bellow sounds another possibility that approaches what Ze'ev Jabotinsky called *hadar*, dignity or nobility. In immigrant-driven New York, the Jew does not have to overcompensate for his insecurities by displaying the distortions of his former Diaspora existence. If it is unworthy of the American to import European anti-Semitism into America, it is dishonest of the Jew to pretend that he is at that level of danger.

Bellow valued the novel for its ability to display the human being fully, especially in a fully liberated society. I've lingered over this early novel because its temperate understanding of America explains why he could aspire to become its greatest writer.

II. A New Species of Jewish American

The Victim is often shortchanged in studies of Bellow because it came right before his artistic breakthrough in *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953).

Bellow himself liked to describe that breakthrough: in 1948, after several rejections, he had won a Guggenheim Fellowship and was in Paris trying to write the novel he had proposed for the grant, but the work wasn't going well. Then, in an inspired moment, he heard in his head the voice of a Chicago kid, someone he knew in his adolescence. Probably fused with other influences like Mark Twain's Huck Finn and Sholem Aleichem's *Motl Peysi the Cantor's Son*, which his father had read aloud to the family in Saul's childhood, out came one of the most famous openings in American literature:

I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record

in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man's character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn't any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by the acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles.

One can imagine Bellow's excitement at having hit on the narrative style that would serve him, with variations, for the rest of his life. When *Augie March* appeared in 1953, Jews and Jewish writers, entertainers, and critics were reaching the peak of their popularity in liberal America, as lingering images of the Holocaust still brought American Jews pity while the defenders of Israel gave them pride. This newfound confidence is heralded in Augie's buoyancy.

When *Augie March* appeared in 1953, Jews and Jewish writers, entertainers, and critics were reaching the peak of their popularity in liberal America.

A new species of Jewish American, Augie is free to chart his own path. Though Bellow himself was *not* an American Chicago-born, he grants his hero that advantage while freeing him from parental Jewish supervision by making him the fatherless son of a weak mother. Freedom for Augie means not sex and drugs and irresponsibility but the right to try out the newly available options.

Augie is the antithesis of John Steinbeck's Depression victims (*The Grapes of Wrath*), of F. Scott Fitzgerald's disenchanted tycoon (*The Great Gatsby*), and of Ernest Hemingway's tight-lipped heroes who equate manhood with bullfighting. By contrast, Augie follows to Mexico a girl who is trying to tame a falcon, is schlemiel enough to lose her, ends up a flop at many other things—but is in no way resigned to lead a disappointed life. He leaves us with this thought: "Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America."

III. Everything For the Writing

Biographies and memoirs of Bellow tell us all about his marriages and affairs, his sometime neglect of his children, his finances and quarrels—but what comes through is how he subordinated everything else to his writing, and used the setbacks in his own life to keep probing what the towering 19th-century French novelist Honoré de Balzac called "the human comedy." A trio of examples from the early and middle years of his career:

- In a country that encourages success, and rewards you for achieving it, what does one do with failure? How does a man approaching middle age feel when his marriage fails, when he is out of work, and when he cannot live up to the expectations of his father? Of that personal distress came the character of Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* (1956).
- What about betrayal? The husband who is cuckolded (as Bellow was) by his best friend, is literature's oldest prototype of the fool. What

do all of the genius advice-givers past and present have to offer someone who has been thus humiliated? Of that came the novel *Herzog* (1964).

- Then there is the ever-looming question of mortality, of death. Can it be, say, that when someone dies, someone as vivid as Bellow's contemporary Delmore Schwartz—he has simply passed in and out of life, or must there be some larger encompassing transcendent reality that reconnects the dead and the living? Is it just quackery to consider a spiritual science like anthroposophy? Bellow raises these questions in *Humboldt's Gift* (1975).

Of all of his novels from these decades, the one Bellow called his favorite was *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), probably because it was the most fun to write. Eugene Henderson—note the initials—is an adult Augie March reimagined in the physique of Ernest Hemingway.

Bellow had actually launched his writing career by issuing an open challenge to Hemingway's "code of the athlete, of the tough boy—an American inheritance, I believe, from the English gentleman." Bellow's stand-in Joseph, the narrator of his first published novel *Dangling Man* (1944), grants that such closemouthed straight-shooters project a kind of candor, but dismisses them as "unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring." By contrast, Joseph intends to talk all about his own troubles, "and if I had as many mouths as Siva has arms and kept them going all the time, I still could not do myself justice."

Bellow had launched his writing career by issuing an open challenge to Hemingway's "code of the athlete"; in *Henderson the Rain King*, he twisted that code to his own purposes.

That was 1944. Now, fifteen years later, Bellow went himself one better by assuming the fictional guise of an oversized American WASP with the sensibility of a neurotic Jew, driven by an inner voice that says *I want, I want, I want* and whose *wanting* propels him to Africa on what was once known as a spiritual quest. Bellow himself was the counterpart of this character—an American, super-rich (that is, with imagination), able to go wherever his talent took him, and restless with the wanting, wanting, wanting to get beyond the fictional territory he had already explored.

Here is Henderson at the point of launching his mission:

When I think of my condition at the age of fifty-five when I bought the ticket [to Africa], all is grief. The facts begin to crowd me and soon I get a pressure in the chest. A disorderly rush begins—my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul! I have to cry, "No, no, get back, curse you, let me alone!" But how can they let me alone? They belong to me. They are mine. And they pile into me from all sides. It turns to chaos.

Henderson's foray into Africa, a flight from mid-life crisis, spoofs the Hemingway game hunts, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the discipline of anthropology (which Bellow had studied in college), the dubious form of psychotherapy practiced by Wilhelm Reich (with whose "orgone accumulator" Bellow had experimented), and Bellow's own search for personal fulfillment. Henderson's successive adventures in Africa among the sweet-tempered Arnewi, who cannot bear to kill the frogs that plague them, and the warlike Wariri who put everyone, including their king and their American visitor, on trial for his life, knock some wisdom into Henderson by knocking some of his unformed longing out of him.

I used to have great confidence in understanding. Now take a phrase like "Father forgive them; they know not what they do." This may be interpreted as a promise that in time we would be delivered from blindness and understand. On the other hand, it may also mean that with time we will understand our own enormities and crimes, and that sounds to me like a threat.

As Bellow's friend and fellow novelist Richard Stern observed of Henderson's creator, this real-life American was taking a fantasy crash course on the nature of good and evil. The result was a comic work on the scale of *Don Quixote* that distills the mixed essence of American Jewish masculinity in a manner that, for its African sections alone, would today be accused of cultural misappropriation.

But then, just as Henderson returns from Africa to everyday America, so does Bellow in the novels, stories, and non-fiction works that followed. I'll come to the most important of them in a moment, but let me first mention two partial exceptions: *The Dean's December* (1982), which takes its characters to Communist Romania before returning them to Chicago for most of the novel, and the memoir *To Jerusalem and Back* (1976), in which Bellow chronicles an extended visit to Israel while making it clear that his experience of and admiration for the Jewish state is that of an *American Jew*.

In private conversation I once asked Bellow how come he and his young Jewish friends (who were then in their twenties) had paid so little attention to what was being done to the Jews in Europe during World War II. He said, "America wasn't a country to us. It was the world." I took this to mean that they were fully absorbed by their immediate challenges and opportunities to the exclusion of everything else.

Over time, however, the once eager youth who had wanted a featured place in American culture began to fear for that culture. Henry James and the fictional Kirby Allbee may once have dreaded the Jewish invasion of New York, but by the late 1960s, the New Englanders had been swept away, and it was the Jewish intellectuals who had assumed the role of America's cultural guardians. Those now afraid for the country's future included Lionel Trilling, Robert Warshow, Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Lionel Abel, Midge Decter, Norman Podhoretz . . . and Bellow, who most notably voiced their apprehensions through the character of Artur Sammler.

IV. The Specter of the Sixties

Mr. Sammler's Planet, written at the end of the 1960s and published in 1970, is about "The Sixties." Until then Bellow's literary focus had been the modern overstimulated individual, bombarded and discombobulated by myriad impressions. Novels, he hoped, could offset the entropy by featuring the relatively still-coherent human being at its center.

As its title suggested, however, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* shifted the emphasis from the main character to the society he was navigating and asked: if America is that exceptional place in our universe, what happens if it should disintegrate, as great societies have done before? To pose this question, Bellow needed a character with greater moral authority and tougher experience than his. So, though he habitually wrote from the perspective of someone close to him in age, he created for Artur Sammler the counter-biography of a man in his seventies, almost two decades older than he then was, and a foreigner to America.

Born into an assimilated Jewish family in Poland, educated in England and a journalist there in the 1930s, Sammler is then trapped back in wartime Poland as a Jew. Left for dead, he digs his way out of the mass grave where his wife remains buried, lives to fight among partisans, loses an eye but after the war recovers his daughter from the convent where he and his wife had been able to hide her, and then has the good fortune to be brought with her to America by a relative of his wife. There we meet him, two decades later, living alone in the late 1960s on New York's Upper West Side, transformed by life's experience from spoiled little boy into a "survivor." The entire action of the novel takes place over the course of two days in New York.

It took Bellow many drafts and revisions to craft this Jewish product of some of the worst havoc wreaked by the 20th century: a professional observer, scarred, unsentimental, yet free of cynicism.

Like many people who had seen the world collapse once, Mr. Sammler entertained the possibility it might collapse twice. He did not agree with refugee friends that this doom was inevitable, but liberal beliefs did not seem capable of self-defense, and you could smell decay. You see the suicidal impulses of civilization pushing strongly.

An erudite man, Sammler realizes that in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. Yet even as he observes and analyzes the collapse of society, he is unable to correct it. For instance: uncommonly aware of his surroundings thanks to having learned the skills of survival, he sees on the bus a black pickpocket plying his trade but, after a vain attempt to alert the police, discovers that he has no protection against the man. His daughter Shula steals a manuscript she thinks will be valuable to her father; herself a casualty of the war, she is morally careless and perpetually frazzled. Even lower down the moral continuum are the American-born children of Dr. Elya Gruner, the relative who sponsored and who continues to support Sammler. Elya's daughter Angela is a promiscuous casualty of the sexual revolution, with what her father calls "fucked-out eyes"; his son Wallace flits from one enthusiasm to another, resisting all responsibility.

The breakdown in private and public behavior is made more dangerous by the absence of any effective authority to resist it. Living near Columbia University, Sammler is invited by a student to lecture on “The British Scene in the Thirties.” As he speaks about H.G. Wells, the Bloomsbury group, and George Orwell, someone in the audience interrupts: “Why do you listen to this effete old shit? What has he got to tell you? His balls are dry. He’s dead. He can’t come.” Sammler is driven from the auditorium, “not so much personally offended by the event as struck by the unbridled will of a young American student simply to offend”:

What a passion to be *real*. But *real* was also brutal. And the acceptance of excrement as a standard? How extraordinary! Youth? Together with the idea of sexual potency? All this confused sex-excrement-militancy, explosiveness, abusiveness, tooth-showing, Barbary ape howling. Or like the spider monkeys in the trees, as Sammler once had read, defecating into their hands, and shrieking, pelting the explorers below.

In fact, something like this had happened to Bellow himself when he spoke at San Francisco State University; in this fictional scene, he was able to get in the last word about that incident. But the wisdom of elders is without power, and the youngsters who wield the power are at the level of monkeys.

Bellow crams the 48 hours of this book with enough incident and ideas to constitute a course on Western civilization. Because Sammler is so well educated and so experienced (he has even managed two trips to Israel, once during the Six-Day War), he can take on many of the subjects that bothered Bellow, too, one of them being Hannah Arendt’s theory about Adolf Eichmann, the Holocaust, and the “banality of evil”:

The idea of making the century’s great crime look dull is not banal. Politically, psychologically, the Germans had an idea of genius. The banality was only camouflage. What better way to get the curse out of murder than to make it look ordinary, boring, or trite?

Sammler accuses Arendt of “[making] use of a tragic history to promote the foolish ideas of Weimar intellectuals.” Far from looking up to Europe’s thinkers as the more cultured branch of Western civilization, he knows one cannot and must never look back there for guidance—which makes it all the more important that America straighten itself out.

Sammler knows one cannot look back to Europe’s “cultured thinkers” for guidance—which makes it all the more important that America straighten itself out.

Of all the valuable byways in the novel, I return to the earlier question of what it means to be fully human. Despite Sammler’s amply illustrated fears for the “planet,” he finds a kind of moral model in what is generally the most vilified, derided, and caricatured figure in modern fiction: the middle-class white male. This is Elya Gruner, the relative who has brought Sammler to America, a husband and father who emerges as heroic not in any absolute

terms but in relation to the utter degeneracy that Sammler has witnessed in Europe and now in America.

But that is enough for Sammler, just as it is in the talmudic teaching, “Where there are no men, try to be a man.” Over the course of the novel’s 48 hours, Dr. Gruner lies in a hospital bed suffering from an aneurysm. We learn his virtues and flaws. As a loyal Jew he contributes to Israel and has visited there regularly, exhibiting the strong family feeling that makes him not only rescue the Sammlers but keep supporting them. Yet he has indulged his children rather than raising them responsibly. Otherwise conscientious and generous in all of his dealings, he has performed illegal abortions for some of his shadier patients and hidden the money from the IRS. And so forth.

When Gruner dies, in the book’s final pages, Sammler’s closing private prayer for the dead man adapts the traditional *kaddish* to the Jew who has dutifully performed his mission on earth. It asks to be read aloud:

“Remember, God, the soul of Elya Gruner, who, [a] as willingly as possible and [b] as well as he was able, and [c] even to an intolerable point, and [d] even in suffocation and [e] even as death was coming was eager, [f] even childish perhaps (may I be forgiven for this), [g] even with a certain servility, to do what was required of him.”

Bellow’s repetition and seeming overuse of seemingly redundant words to enrich the thought—which I have emphasized by listing the phrases alphabetically—echo the cadences of *yisbarakh*, *v’yishtabakh*, *v’yispo’ar*, *v’yisromam*, *v’yisnaseh*, *v’yis’hadar*, *v’yis’aleh*, *v’yis’hallal*, וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח וְיִשְׁמַח וְיִתְרַומֵם וְיִתְנַשֵּׂא וְיִתְהַדָּר וְיִתְקַדָּשׁ וְיִתְעַלֶּה וְיִתְהַלָּל, the praises due God and in this case also the dutiful man made in His image. Sammler continues:

At his best this man was much kinder than at my very best I have ever been or could ever be. He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet—through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding—he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms, which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it—that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know.

Meeting the terms of one’s contract evokes the covenantal arrangement between God and the Jews, a contract so deeply ingrained in earlier generations of American Jews that Elya followed its strictures without the reinforcement of religious observance. By repeating five times that we *know* this, are Bellow and Sammler trying to persuade themselves that we still share those moral instincts?

Some critics, like Benjamin DeMott, have accused Bellow of “gratuitous optimism” here, asking whether the evidence provided in the novel really warrants the conviction of the final prayer. I rather think that Sammler channels the deepest sources of a faith, Bellow’s faith, without which he could not have issued this warning against everything that now threatens

America. Just as the traditional *kaddish* is insistent in its praise of the Creator, so, between the collapse of civilization in Europe and the escalating crisis in America, author and character conjoin in reminding us of the need to appreciate the decency of the imperfect Jewish bourgeois gentleman, the citizen who performs (most of) his duty.

V. The Penitent Bellow

As Saul Bellow aged, his characters aged with him, and his later works came to showcase penitent men desirous of atoning for sins of commission (*Him with His Foot in His Mouth*, 1984) or omission (*The Bellarosa Connection*, 1989). Then, in late autumn 1994, approaching his eightieth year, he came down with a near-fatal case of ciguatera poisoning that consigned him for a month to the intensive-care unit of Boston Medical Center, followed by lengthy recuperation. His biographer Zachary Leader details the efforts by the medical community and Bellow's wife Janis that were needed to pull him through.

When I visited him in the hospital in early January 1995, he had already been moved to a regular room and was regaining his strength. Rather than engaging in our usual topics of conversation, he wanted to tell me about the harrowing dreams he was having—one situated in a bank vault resembling a crypt and another involving cannibalism. Knowing how Bellow reprocessed the events of his life, I wondered whether he was already testing how these intimations of mortality could be recast into fiction.

Knowing how Bellow reprocessed the events of his life, I wondered whether he was already testing how his recent intimations of mortality could be recast into fiction.

So I was not surprised to find whole swaths of this frightening experience, including the nightmares, reconfigured in his last completed novel, about two men approaching the end of life.

The eponymous hero of *Ravelstein* (2000) is recognizably Allan Bloom, Bellow's friend and distinguished colleague at the University of Chicago, and the novel's narrator-amanuensis is a no less obvious version of the author himself. Such a novel, in which real-life events and people are written about under the disguise of fiction is known as a roman à clef—a term Norman Podhoretz thought in this case “verged on understatement.” For her part, Cynthia Ozick, who has often been accused of similar license, advised that when it came to novels, the author's life and friends were nobody's business: “Ravelstein is not Bloom.”

But this, too, is not quite right. Abe Ravelstein was both more and less than Allan Bloom, just as Bellow was both more and less than Chick, the book's narrator who has promised his friend that he will write his biography. Bellow's amalgam of fact and fiction is a shared ethical will, or a Plato's *Symposium*, reconfigured as a colloquy between two American Jewish thinkers. Bellow and Bloom were a unique combination who had also taught courses together and whose joint legacy was to be represented in part by this book.

Bellow begins, as he often does, by signaling the scope of the book before us:

Odd that mankind's benefactors should be amusing people. In America at least this is often the case. Anyone who wants to govern the country has to entertain it. During the Civil War people complained about Lincoln's funny stories. Perhaps he sensed that strict seriousness was far more dangerous than any joke. But critics said that he was frivolous and his own secretary of war referred to him as an ape.

Americans and Jews both want their heroes with a touch of humor, and the more serious the situation, the lighter the touch.

Before Abe Ravelstein, then, there was Abe Lincoln, and we should not be surprised by the likeness, because both of these very tall men were trying to win a civil war. That a Jewish (homosexual) conservative should have gone into battle against what, in a bestselling book of that name, he called "The Closing of the American Mind" seems as natural as that a boy born in a one-room cabin in Kentucky to uneducated parents should have become the greatest president of the country. Americans and Jews both want their heroes with a touch of humor, and the more serious the situation, the lighter the touch.

[Ravelstein] had gone public with his ideas. He had written a book—difficult but popular—a spirited, intelligent, warlike book, and it had sold and was still selling in both hemispheres and on both sides of the equator. The thing had been done quickly but in real earnest: no cheap concessions, no popularizing, no mental monkey business, no *apologetics*, no patrician airs. . . . His intellect had made a millionaire of him. It's no small matter to become rich and famous by saying exactly what you think—to say it in your own words, without compromise.

Not coincidentally, this was also pretty much how America had allowed Saul Bellow to become rich and famous.

The novel begins in Paris where Janis and Saul Bellow had joined Bloom in celebrating his literary success. Ravelstein, the intellectual authority, is coaching the younger Chick in the writing of political biography, while Chick, the tutee whose consciousness controls the narrative, undertakes the messier project of capturing all of life in the round. Chick's young wife Rosamund, his former assistant and Ravelstein's former student at the University of Chicago, is something of an ingénue at the festive start of the book but, as the mood darkens, becomes its anchoring strength.

Although neither of the two men has had Sammler's exposure to the Shoah, they are Jews only a generation removed from Europe who fully share Sammler's concern for what has been happening in America. As Ravelstein lies dying, and as Chick then almost follows suit, they have only their thinking to help stanch the deterioration. Although Ravelstein has entrusted Chick to be the Plato to his Socrates, the two men differ on a number of points.

Ravelstein, for instance, thinks Chick too soft, too prone to account for human frailties:

“Read any good book about Abe Lincoln,” he advised me, “and see how people bugged him during the Civil War about jobs, about war contracts, franchises, consular appointments, and mad military ideas. As president of all the people he thought he was obliged to talk to all these parasites, creeps, and promoters. All the while he was standing in a river of blood. War measures made him a tyrant—he had to cancel the habeas-corpus writ, you know. There was a higher thee-ah thee-ah need. He had to keep Maryland from joining the Confederacy.”

Of course my needs were different from Ravelstein’s. In my trade [as a writer] you have to make more allowances, taking all sorts of ambiguities into account—to avoid hard-edged judgments. All this refraining may resemble naiveté. But it isn’t quite that. In art you become familiar with due process. You can’t simply write people off or send them to hell.

While Bloom the political philosopher had a war to win, Saul Bellow the novelist had his richest opportunity, in the figure of Bloom-as-Ravelstein, to convey the “full worth of the human being.” This meant including his subject’s “thee-ah thee-ah” peculiarities of speech and details of his personal life that Bloom’s friends would not forgive Bellow for making public. Chick in the passage above calls this becoming “familiar with due process.” In law, due process means that government must respect all of a person’s legal rights; in art, it means respect for the human being in his actuality. Though Bellow considered Bloom a better thinker than himself, he defended the novel’s higher calling—which (although Chick never invokes this comparison) is more like the Bible’s inextricable blend of narrative and commandment than like Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*. If great, the novel must hold its own as truth.

And here we return in advanced form to Leslie Fiedler’s vexing question of Jewish writing in a tainted Anglo-American tongue. In preparing Chick for the task of writing his biography, Ravelstein recommends the memoirs of the economist-statesman John Maynard Keynes. In those memoirs Keynes describes the moment during the post-World War I Paris Peace Conference, which he attended, when the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George lost his temper and lit into the French Finance Minister Louis-Lucien Klotz, who happened to be a Jew. In Ravelstein’s heightened and revolted summary:

Lloyd George did an astonishing kike number on him, crouching, hunching, limping, spitting, zizzing his esses, sticking out his backside, doing a splayfoot parody of a Jew-walk. All this was described by Keynes to his Bloomsbury friends. Ravelstein didn’t think well of the Bloomsbury intellectuals. He disliked their high camp, he disapproved of queer antics and of what he called “faggot behavior.” He couldn’t and didn’t fault them for gossiping. He himself loved gossip too well to do that. But he said they were not thinkers but snobs, and their influence was pernicious. The spies later recruited in England by the GPU or the NKVD in the 1930s were nurtured by Bloomsbury.

Ravelstein is unambiguously disgusted by the kind of culture that tolerates Jew-baiting. Klotz had to swallow the insults, but American Jewish intellec-

tuals do not. Chick rereads those passages in Keynes (himself an anti-Semite who had delighted in this performance by Lloyd George, a figure for whom he otherwise had little use) and wonders why he is “drawn back to this again and again.” At the start of his career, Bellow had tried to “understand” the anti-Semite; in this book, he has Ravelstein warning Chick that condemnation of anti-Semitism takes precedence over understanding it.

At the start of his career, Bellow had tried to “understand” anti-Semitism; in *Ravelstein*, he warns that condemnation of it takes precedence over understanding it.

Along the same lines, Ravelstein disapproves of Chick’s socializing at the University of Chicago with their colleague Radu Griescu—modeled on the real-life historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade, whose membership in the fascist Romanian Iron Guard was a matter of record. Chick admits to Rosamund that he finds the Romanian interesting:

[At] dinner he lectured about archaic history, he stuffed his pipe, and lit lots of matches. You grip your pipe to keep it from shaking, and then the fingers with the match tremble twice as hard. He kept stuffing the pipe with the rebellious tobacco. When it didn’t stay stuffed, he didn’t have enough thumb-power to pack it down. How could such a person be politically dangerous? His jacket cuffs come down over his knuckles.

To which Rosamund, who loves Chick but is also Ravelstein’s student, says, “This is how you do things, Chick: the observations you make crowd out the main point.” Just as decent people paid little attention to the mass murders of the 20th century, Chick is distracted by the superficial and even charming features of a man implicated in those mass murders. Chick must be made to realize that in maintaining the social grace demanded by the occasion rather than confronting a man who had once been complicit in Jew-murder, he had taken the easy way out. Through Chick, Bellow implies that as a novelist in thrall to art, he has been in danger of being too accepting of evil.

But Jewishness here is by no means limited to concern over anti-Semitism. As Ravelstein knowingly nears death, Chick observes him following “a trail of Jewish ideas or Jewish essences”:

It was unusual for him these days, in any conversation, to mention even Plato or Thucydides. He was full of Scripture now. He talked about religion and the difficult project of being man in the fullest sense, of becoming man and nothing but man.

Jewish experience has become the touchstone of the human condition. This Ravelstein has learned from *his* teacher, Professor Davaar, modeled on Bloom’s actual teacher, Leo Strauss, whom he quotes verbatim: “*The Jews are historical witnesses to the absence of redemption.*” Jews are witnesses to what human beings are capable of. This is the opposite of nihilism, which pretends that nothing makes any difference. There may be incongruity, by all means, because the absence of redemption requires a continuing reach for redemption, but such consciousness rules out liberal fantasies about innate good-

ness or pretending that enemies are friends. It confronts the truth about human behavior without self-delusion, allowing no escape from reality, no happy diversions into superficiality.

Chick, then, has much to learn from the tough mettle of Ravelstein, as from Rosamund's bracing love. Yet he also has something to impart. The highly rational Ravelstein has no use for the metaphysical dimension of Judaism and does not recognize the "afterlife." Chick, by contrast, believes in the soul's immortality and is persuaded that his friend Abe somehow shares that faith.

Chick's concluding words in the novel, "You don't easily give up a creature like Ravelstein to death," sign off on what may be the truest-to-life portrait in literature. Like *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, the book ends in homage to the human being, but unlike Elya Gruner who is a generic type, Ravelstein is an intellectual hero, a supreme modern Jewish teacher. In portraying his friend, Bellow wanted to get at what made him vital, the quality of his being.

What happens when someone dies? What happens to that person's personality, to the soul of the deceased? People have agonized over this question, built tombs of preservation, made plaster casts of heads and hands. Blessed are they who believe that the souls of the righteous experience eternal life in the presence of God, but we, for our own sake as much as theirs, want to retain the dead among us. Bellow opposes human finitude because he believes in the deathless soul, and because he believes in fiction.

Every age deals with mortality in its own way. *Ravelstein*—both the novel and the Jewish intellectual who is its subject—tries to prevent the closing of the American mind. In the novel, and hardly in this novel alone, the Jewish author tries to breathe life into the American soul.



Ezra Stiles by Samuel King, 1771 (Yale Art Gallery)

RABBI MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

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About the author

Meir Soloveichik is a senior fellow and contributor at Tikvah, the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University. His many podcasts, video series, media appearances, and writings can be found at Ideas.Tikvah.org.

The Christian-Jewish Alliance and Its Enemies

For Hashem, for country, and for Yale.

It was around 25 years ago that I made the unusual academic decision to enroll in Yale University’s divinity school. I arrived at Yale in early September a little nervous, aware that I was very possibly the first Orthodox rabbi to attend Yale Divinity School to study Christian philosophy. My own sense of standing out was not assuaged at student orientation, when we sat in a circle on the quad and a sincere Christian from one of the Dakotas (I forget which) said, “You know, I feel like I really stick out around here, being a Presbyterian among so many Episcopalians.” On the other side of the circle, I—the guy with the *yarmulke*—was thinking, “Yeah, I hate when that happens. You’re Presbyterian and everyone else is Episcopalian. That’s the worst.”

But soon after, I found interfaith friendship. That academic year Orthodox Jews were forced to contend with a most inconvenient Jewish calendar, as many of the fall holidays fell on weekdays. I sent an email to my classmates asking if any of them would be willing to tape the classes I would miss for me. This was before the age of the smartphone, when recording was an effort that required an actual recording device. I received an immediate response: “Dear Meir, my name is Jim. . . . I am in Professor Adams’s class with you and would be happy to tape the classes you’ll miss.” I was delighted.

Soon, however, another email from Jim arrived. “Dear Meir,” it began. “On second thought, are you allowed to ask me to tape the class for you? Perhaps I should say: if I happen to be taping the class (assuming I could find a tape recorder), would you like to listen to the tapes? Yours in fun, Jim.”

I arranged to meet Jim at the local coffee shop, and there arrived a man in a clerical collar, who turned out to be an Anglican priest. “A rabbi and a priest

go into a coffee shop,” sounds like the beginning of a joke, but from then on we met at the coffee shop after class week after week, and discussed theology and other serious matters—and sometimes joked as well.

Although we have since lost touch, those meetings remain memorable to me. I have realized only recently how apt the location was where they occurred. For Yale University has an interfaith friendship in its history, featuring a Christian clergyman and a rabbi—one that began in the period preceding the birth of the American republic.

In the 1760s, the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island, built a synagogue and a community that engaged in a famous correspondence with George Washington. This synagogue also communally welcomed one non-Jewish individual: Ezra Stiles, the local Congregationalist minister and an ardent Hebraist. After a rabbi from the Holy Land named Hayyim Carregal visited the synagogue, the two clergymen became fast friends. And when Stiles later became the president of Yale, their correspondence continued, conducted in both in English and Hebrew. This past week, a librarian at Yale’s Beinecke Library sent me a PDF of Stiles’s original handwritten 1775 letter proudly informing Carregal, then in Barbados, that his son, also named Ezra Stiles, had come to study at Yale. Or as he put it, “my son Ezra has gone to the university in Connecticut to study Wisdom among the sons of the prophets in the *beit midrash*.” Then he added,

I should take it as a favor if you will write to Ezra a short letter in Hebrew, for though he cannot answer it yet in Hebrew, it may ignite his ambition and engage him more attentively to study that most excellent and divine language.

Suffice it to say that this friendship, begun in Newport and continued at Yale, is incomparable to anything in the history of European Jewry. It captures the formative way in which the Hebrew Bible shaped the meaning of America. The nation’s founders were not shy about their belief that the American idea was grounded in the Jewish texts. As John Adams proclaimed, “the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation.” It is an idea recently given voice by Secretary of State Marco Rubio in a remarkable speech in Jerusalem’s City of David a little more than a month ago:

It was here that the lessons that formed the base rock and the foundations of our laws, of the principles upon which we decide what is right and what is wrong, were built upon. If you think about the things that today we, in civilized societies, use as rules to govern us, these things did not come because good people wrote them. They came because they were rooted in ancient teachings.

But this connection to the Hebrew Bible and to the Jewish people has formed America in another way: from the revolution onward, Americans saw their story as a parallel to that of biblical Israel, the unfolding story of what Lincoln called an “almost chosen people”—a covenantal people. Ezra Stiles, in that very same 1775 letter, described the American Revolution that had just broken out, and included his own hand-drawn map of a recent

battlefield at a place called Bunker Hill. Stiles’s final words in the letter were: “The Americans have made their appeal to Heaven—and the event is with the Lord of Hosts. . . . Hebrew is the divine language; the revolution is from the Lord of Hosts.”

It is no surprise, therefore, that so many Americans celebrated, and sought to sustain, the return of the Jews to the promised land, rightly seeing it as the fulfillment of God’s promises in the Hebrew Bible.

So many American Christians have drawn on their biblical faith in seeing the unfolding story of America, and its relationship with the Jewish people—and the Jewish state—as a providential wonder. In doing so, they inspire all of us as Americans to see it the same way. I myself pondered this on the seventh day of the past Sukkot. After spending the week in a holiday hut that memorialized the Jewish journey through the wilderness to the promised land, I found myself in synagogue celebrating the return home of the hostages, two years to the day after they were cruelly taken captive. Just then I received a text from a congregant, with a photo he had taken of the president’s plane about to land in Israel. My congregant captioned the photo something to effect of, “Air Force One from the sukkah at Sheraton Tel Aviv.” And I thought to myself that, if you had shown this sentence to someone in the year 1900, there’s not a single word in it that would have made sense—except for *sukkah*. I resumed my prayers, saying, at that very moment, the celebratory psalm said on Sukkot: “This is the day the Lord has made, let us celebrate and rejoice in it,” or as Ezra Stiles put it, “the event is with the Lord of Hosts.”

This bond between America and Israel, the way in which Israel’s story is an inspiration for Americans of faith, was captured by Secretary Rubio, in the very same speech:

To stand here today on the very road, where, not 2,000 years ago, so many from everywhere ventured to fulfill that desire to be closer to the Creator, is a humbling and honoring experience. As you go through the layers of history, you realize that all the civilizations that conquered this city, all the ones who tore it down and built on top, are gone. The Roman empire is no more, nor any of the others that sought to conquer and rule this land. But one people remain. They have returned. For God’s promise is eternal, and it is perfect, and his word is always true.

As I wrote in *Commentary*, it must be stressed how blessed we are to live in a time when the secretary of state of the most powerful nation on earth, a devout Christian, can deliver a speech in Jerusalem that not only recognizes the sublimity of that place, but also America’s spiritual indebtedness to it.

It is fitting, therefore, that in the past few decades, as traditional Judaism has flourished in America, while contemporary culture has simultaneously grown more hostile to traditional faith, Jews and Christians have found each other and begun to form a new fellowship. They have sought to work together to protect religion in America, to preserve the American idea of the founders, and to defend America’s exceptional understanding of itself.

In a certain sense this alliance is new, but in another it is very old, for it is an imitation of the friendship born in Newport, Rhode Island, between Ezra Stiles and Hayyim Carregal, a friendship that tells us so much about America and explains why Washington, in writing a letter to Newport's Jews, drew on his favorite verse in Scripture, Micah 4:4: "May 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 him afraid.'"

But the hard truth is that today the children of the stock of Abraham are afraid, and not only because of those affiliated with the woke left, but also because of a group, whom some have dubbed the "woke right," that has chosen as its primary target this very fellowship between Christians and Jews.

Thus one of America's most prominent online commentators has argued that Christian Zionists—a group that would clearly include the secretary of state—are heretics, combining derision of the Hebrew Bible with a blood libel, saying, in his own words: "We must correct the false notion of so-called God's chosen people. This is an unacceptable heresy. God does not choose a people who kill children and innocents." These are the words of the "theologian" Tucker Carlson, who has also informed us that he just read the Bible for the first time in his life.

Carlson's reference to heresy is itself ironic, because what Christians consider one of the earliest heresies is that of Marcion, who lived in the 2nd century CE and argued that there was no connection between Jewish and Christian Scripture, and that the Hebrew Bible was authored by a wrathful demigod, distinct from the merciful God of the New Testament.

Carlson and his fellow travelers are not merely spreading Jew-hate, and reviving the terrible slanders of the Middle Ages; they are acting as modern-day Marcions, targeting the Jewish-Christian friendship that is so profoundly American. In their attempt to destroy that friendship, they seek to undo the unique nature of America itself.

It is no coincidence that Carlson's ravings about Jews have gone hand in hand with rhetorical assaults on American history. If the progressive left has the 1619 Project, arguing that the American Founding was evil, Carlson and his fellow travelers have adopted what Rebecca Heinrichs has rightly described as "the 1939 project," insisting that America's conduct in World War II was also evil. Thus Carlson has showcased a pseudo-historian who argued that America's ally Winston Churchill, rather than Hitler, was the chief villain of the Second World War—and that, by implication, the U.S. fought on the side of the bad guys. Heinrich's point is that for Carlson, it seems, the American defeat of the Nazis, and the liberation of camps, is part of where America went wrong.

It is tempting to dismiss these views as marginal, to say that they exist only online and that social media is not the real world. But while precise num-

bers are difficult to gauge, these rantings *are* infecting many Americans, and especially the young, and this should terrify all of us.

Antonin Scalia, in a speech on Holocaust Memorial Day, argued that the purpose of commemoration is not only to remember those murdered in the Shoah, but also “to prevent its happening again. The latter can be achieved only by acknowledging, and passing on to our children, the existence of absolute, uncompromisable standards of human conduct.” Mankind, Scalia concluded, “has traditionally derived such standards from religion; and the West has derived them from and through the Jews.”

If an influential broadcaster affiliated with the right can fulminate against the Jews while embracing another online influencer who announces that he likes Hitler and admires Stalin and still be welcomed by some in the conservative movement, then all is not well with American conservatism. If a leader of a celebrated institution on the American right such as the Heritage Foundation can respond by proudly highlighting his friendship with Carlson, and decide to defend Carlson’s showcasing of a contemporary Nazi by denouncing Carlson’s critics; if it is considered insubordination for Heritage staffers to respond by posting online the three simple words “Nazis are bad”; if a meeting of the entire Heritage staff includes not only older members horrified by the course their beloved institution has taken, but also a young staffer who defended Carlson with the claim that Christian Zionists are heretics—then we have reached a dark place that I did not think I would see in my lifetime. It is this darkness that must be opposed, and Jews and Christians must do it together, for the goal of these pernicious podcasters is to undermine the providential way in which we have found each other.

If we seek inspiration, we can do what I did 25 years ago, and visit Yale. Not because it, or one of the other elite universities is a repository of the Christian faith or love of the Jewish people. But rather because at the Yale Art Museum you will find a portrait of Yale’s past president, Ezra Stiles, with a library behind him that contains Hebrew books. And there is another portrait worth seeing as well. After Carregal’s death, Stiles, missing his dear friend, wrote his own letter to the Jews of Newport with a request: that they hire an artist to make a copy of the rabbi’s likeness, based on a previous drawing. “The affectionate respect I bear to the memory of that great and eminent hocham, the rabbi Karigal,” wrote Stiles, “has made me to wish that his picture might be deposited in the library of this college.”

These paintings, along with John Trumbull’s original depiction of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, hang at Yale today, telling the story of an America that is seldom taught at universities, reminding us why early Americans were so inspired by the Hebrew Bible, and why Americans have embraced that text with such passion. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has put it, “America and Israel, ancient and modern, are the two supreme examples of societies constructed in conscious pursuit of an idea.”

Two-and-half centuries after Ezra Stiles wrote of Hebrew and Bunker Hill to his beloved rabbi, there are countless Christians across many denominations who know this, who think just as the secretary of state does. I have met many of them over the past few years, speaking to Christians audiences and universities. And I hear from them when I write about faith in the *Wall Street Journal*.

My favorite letter is the first such missive I received, one I return to again and again at this time of year. I had written in advance of my installation as rabbi at Shearith Israel, America's oldest Jewish congregation, describing how it had marked the first national Thanksgiving. The piece was published the Friday before Thanksgiving, and, immediately after Shabbat, I found an email from a man named Dennis:

Good Morning Mr. Soloveichik,

Your wonderful essay on Thanksgiving Day in yesterday's *WSJ* made me day!! As a devout Irish Catholic in Denver, Colorado, I am firm believer in religious freedom for all, a huge fan of the Jewish people and the state of Israel. Your essay is historically instructive, emotionally moving, and a pleasant reminder of how gratitude and Thanksgiving should be an active part of our daily lives. I count my many blessings daily and give thanks to God for all he has done for me. Your writing underscores how fortunate we are to live in such a welcoming country.

Today is my wife and my 29th wedding anniversary, so my thoughts of thankfulness and being blessed are many. I'll be thinking about your essay on Thanksgiving itself. . . . I'm sure people around the world have enjoyed it. Best of luck to your new position at Shearith Israel. You'll be an instrument of God's peace and wisdom, compassion and hope. I think He picked the right man for the job. Happy Thanksgiving and Hanukkah to you and your family.

And then Dennis added, in a PS: "Time to bring my wife coffee in bed."

There has always been, and there is still, profound reason to be thankful for America. And for me, one of the great blessings in this country is the countless Christians who link their love for the Jewish people with the way America has been, and please God will be, exceptional. I, in turn, am grateful to these Christians, and above all grateful to God for them, and for the fact that they are my fellow Americans. The ties that bind us are worth defending and sustaining, worth celebrating and strengthening. From an interfaith friendship founded in Newport, to Washington's welcome from that very same place, this relationship has marked the uniqueness of America. In the cultural and societal crisis we now face, it is this alliance that will revitalize our republic.

This essay has been adapted from a speech given on November 16, 2025 at the Jewish Leadership Conference in New York City.



Building in Ma'ale Adumim (Shutterstock)

YUVAL LEVIN

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About the author

Yuval Levin is director of social, cultural, and constitutional studies at the American Enterprise Institute and the editor of *National Affairs*.

American Renewal: The Nehemiah Option

Rebuilding our culture with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other.

“They who built up the wall, and they who carried the materials, every one of them with one of his hands worked at building, and with the other hand held a weapon.”

—Nehemiah 4:17

We are living in an era beset by decadence and institutional decay, when many of the forms and practices of our society feel like they are outliving their usefulness. Their growing disrepair, and the ensuing crises of legitimacy that now plague us on many fronts, constantly confront Americans with an implicit choice between revolution and renewal.

The impulse to revolution is relatively easy to describe. It begins from the premise that our institutions were oppressive burdens to begin with, so that their degradation merely reveals the underlying truth about them and offers us the opportunity to overthrow and replace them at last. This view exhibits a mix of arrogance and ingratitude that has been a fixture of the politics of the West since the Enlightenment. It's easy to point out its naïveté, and its long record of failure and ruin. But the power of this impulse is undeniable, and it will always exercise a pull upon some elite portion of every free society, especially among the young.

The other general category of response to the decay of core institutions is more mysterious and complicated. If our culture and traditions were not rotten from the start but have grown stale or decayed, then they require not overthrowing but revitalization. They must be made new again so that they can serve their proper purposes. But how?

Renewal doesn't mean starting over, and it doesn't mean standing still. It means neither overthrowing what we have nor being satisfied with the status quo. Renewal means bringing our longstanding traditions to bear on new challenges, and so reinvigorating those traditions and better meeting those challenges. It means approaching what is distinct about this moment with what is always true about this world, and so allowing our culture to be new and old at the same time, and to get the best of both.

To be devoted to renewal is to recognize that there is always a generation rising behind us that is only beginning, and that it is up to us to make sure that the world is as inviting and exciting for our successors as it has been for us. They cannot be expected to take ownership of a society that is decadent and in decline, or hopelessly nostalgic for a time they never knew. They deserve a society that is excited to welcome them and ready to offer itself to them as a source of opportunity and promise.

For this reason, the mere passage of generations is not sufficient to make renewal possible. For tradition-minded people, the fact of our natality—the fact that everyone is born into a world that already exists when we get here—is both the problem and the solution. It is the reason why renewal is needed, since without renewal the old world would strike the new generation as someone else's home. But it is also why renewal is possible, since the world is always filling with new human beings whose needs, aspirations, and longings are the same ones that our traditional institutions have been built and adapted to serve. These new arrivals have not yet been miseducated out of their yearning to flourish, and so it is still possible to educate them in light of that yearning. The coming of the young calls our traditions back to their foundations and their purposes. And the work of renewal is therefore the work of treating our traditions as foundations for further construction, and so repairing what we have inherited and building upon it.

That means that cultural renewal is above all necessary for continuity in this dynamic world. It lets the future build on the past and make it new again, rather than breaking with the past and rejecting all we have learned.

It is important to see things this way, because the work of cultural renewal involves especially answering two kinds of threats to continuity. One is from those who oppose cultural continuity and want a sharp break from tradition, often in the name of the impulse to revolution. And the other is from the cultural decay and disintegration that always threaten to bring down what has been built up through our traditions. These are related problems, but they are distinct.

Answering the first threat requires fighting for our traditions in the public square, and defending them from people who attack them. Answering the second requires constant building and rebuilding upon the foundations of those traditions—in our own lives, in our communities, and in the larger society. Fighting and building are two very different kinds of work, but they are inexorably connected and we have to take them on together. The need to do both at once is what makes renewal so difficult.

Today's traditionalists are most used to thinking about the first of these two challenges. It comes from people in our society who are hostile to the cause of cultural continuity for what they take to be powerful moral reasons. They think that our civilization is a patchwork of evil and greed that should be overthrown, not built upon. They are our neighbors, and they believe they are working for a moral cause. We should not forget that. But they put themselves outside of our inherited moral and cultural order and in opposition to it.

They do that because they tend to begin from different premises than traditionalists do about the nature of the human person and the good society. Rather than seeing our inherited institutions as long-evolved means of forming flawed yet dignified human beings toward moral improvement, they see those institutions as built to keep some people down for the benefit of others. They therefore look at what we have inherited and see only oppression and injustice. The purpose of their political and cultural work is to reject that inheritance and to liberate its victims. They don't think about progress in terms of renewal, but in terms of radical transformation.

And they are very aggressive in that cause. They work to radicalize the content of our children's education and of the cultural products that we all consume, to transform them into tools to alienate us from the society into which we have been born. They work to inject into the work of institutions like universities, the media, and major corporations an ideology of hostility to the American political tradition and to the Western religious tradition.

They are at war with precisely what we are trying to renew, and so there is no alternative to conflict. That conflict is political and cultural. Our society's institutions are usually strong enough to prevent it from descending into actual violent conflict, and so they let us contest and struggle, persuade and defend in the public square. But there is no denying that these opponents of cultural continuity are sometimes also opponents of these very institutions of the free society—of the freedom of speech and the rule of law, of the ways by which the competition of ideas can happen safely and honestly. Our struggle for renewal therefore must be a fight to sustain these institutions. It is a fight that will be unavoidably intense.

Now some of these adversaries of cultural continuity increasingly do us the favor of clarifying that being at war with the traditions of the West means they are at war with Jews. They are anti-Semites, all too often, so the stakes of the fight should be especially clear to us American Jews.

These opponents of continuity are a radical fringe of the left. But while they are relatively few in number, they are prominent in American life, and the struggle against them clearly defines one essential facet of any project of cultural renewal in America. There is no alternative to opposing and resisting them. To think there is a path to renewal without engaging in this fight is to slip into self-delusion.

Yet at the same time, we have to remember that this facet of our challenge—fighting for renewal against those who would openly oppose it—is not all

that is required. For there is another threat to cultural continuity that is at least as great, and therefore another facet of the work of renewal that matters at least as much.

This second threat involves the danger not of hostile assault from without but of decay and degradation from within. It is the danger of forgetting and being distracted from the good; the danger of losing sight of what we're fighting for, and what we're trying to defend. It is the danger of corruption and decadence, rooted in a variety of political, cultural, and economic idolatries that arise in every generation.

This is the bigger challenge, because it is in fact the reason why renewal is always necessary in the first place. It is simply not the case that the American way of life, or the Jewish way of life, was always on firm ground until the modern left came to attack it. Our way of life requires constant tending and renewal, now and always, because it is not what comes naturally to men and women. It is a social achievement, which demands unending effort. This is an unavoidable function of what we are as human beings.

That fact itself is an essential teaching of our highest traditions: human beings are prone to sin and vice yet we possess the capacity for righteousness and virtue. Genesis tells us that "the imagination of man is evil from his youth," yet Genesis also tells us that men and women were created in the image of God and possess the potential to live up to that image.

This gap between what we are to begin with and what we could become means that every human person requires moral formation to reach his potential. We need to be made into something that we do not start out being. And that work of making us into human beings more fully capable of flourishing is the work of our society's core institutions. It is the work of the family, first and foremost, and of religion, school, work, and even politics at its best.

The institutions that do this work well are vital to our society's ability to sustain itself—to shape the rising generation to be capable of continuing its work. The work of these institutions is therefore precisely the work of renewal and continuity.

That means that the substance of the work of renewal is especially and above all educational. It is the work of formation—particularly of the young, but also of the rest of us. It is vital to continuity, and therefore also to progress, since we cannot make progress by throwing off all that has gotten us here. Hannah Arendt captured this character of education beautifully:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unfore-

seen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.

In this sense, education is deeply constructive. It involves building upon the edifice of our civilizational traditions. It builds us, and our children, by giving us the habits of building and rebuilding: building relationships and connections, knowledge, practice, and belief, traditions and institutions. That building is made necessary by the nature of the human person and made possible by our traditions. And then in turn it makes it possible for us to sustain and renew those traditions.

This is what the culture war is all about. But it is also why fighting that war is not enough. The work of building and rebuilding our culture would always be necessary, even if we were not locked in a struggle with a hostile left. And it is necessary even though we are locked in such a struggle. Thus the two facets of the work of renewal—the fighting and the building—have to happen at the same time. There are some serious tensions between these two kinds of work, and yet somehow we have to engage in them simultaneously.

Our tradition offers us a powerful image of this kind of twofold work of renewal. The book of Nehemiah, near the close of the Hebrew Bible, is a tale of national rebirth that continues to resonate through the millennia. At its center is the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem upon their old foundations.

Nehemiah was a Jewish official in the Persian court in the 5th century BCE. As the exiled Jews returned to Zion from Persia, he was assigned to manage the work of rebuilding the city walls. And the book is his own recounting of that work, in the first person.

The work was threatened. The surrounding nations—which the book of Nehemiah, about 1,000 years before the birth of Islam, lists as “the Arabs, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites”—saw the return of the Jews to their historical home as a threat. So they sought to disrupt the work of rebuilding a Jewish Jerusalem.

Nehemiah understood that accomplishing this work of renewing the Jewish presence in the holy city required precisely the challenging combination of fighting and building. He tells of sending his men up to the walls to work at rebuilding with a trowel in one hand and a spear in the other. They would need to build and fight simultaneously. Their fight was a defensive fight; they were protecting themselves. But it was an assertive and offensive fight too, because they were protecting the freedom to rebuild and renew their home in a hostile environment. The task of building was, by definition, constructive. But it was also a struggle.

And it is worth considering a crucial detail that Nehemiah notes but does not stress. He didn't create a simple division of labor between the builders and the fighters; instead, each of his men was sent to the wall with both a tool of construction and a weapon of war. Working at renewal doesn't mean that some of us get to be fighters without needing to build and some of us get to be builders without needing to fight. Each person must do both.

This ambidextrous work of renewal is essential to the proper formation of the people involved. To fight without building can deform our soul and make us forget why we fight. It can focus us too sharply on what we oppose, what we hate and hates us, while forgetting what we affirm and what we love in the world. And yet, to see only the work of cultural construction is to forget what it requires, and to lose sight of the need to be practical, realistic, courageous, and strategic in a hostile world. To let others handle the fighting while pretending you're too good for it yourself is to mistake cowardice for high-mindedness, and to ignore the moral and intellectual substance of the culture we are working to renew.

These two risks—the danger of becoming too hard and the danger of becoming too soft—are two sides of the same coin. They both involve moral deformation that can result from ignoring the real character of our situation. To address them both requires us to be truly well-rounded, at once cold-eyed and warm-hearted, intellectual and practical, courageous and sagacious.

Is that combination really possible? Here I think there are some contemporary reasons for confidence, both in Jewish culture and in American culture.

One model is the example of modern Israel. The ethos I'm describing, the ethos of the fighting scholar and the thinker with dirt under his fingernails, is very much the ethos of Israel. It is the notion that everybody fights, and everybody works, and everybody reads, and everybody thinks.

The early Zionists who embraced that ethos understood themselves to be offering it up as a hard-headed alternative to the stereotypical soft and insulated traditional Jewish scholar. Perhaps unwittingly, they were gesturing toward precisely the model of Nehemiah. They were thoroughly Jewish, as modern Israel increasingly demonstrates. And they were wholeheartedly engaged in a project of Jewish renewal—of a return to the holy city. They were rebuilding the walls on their old foundations, sometimes literally with a trowel in one hand and a rifle in the other. Israel continues to engage in that work now.

The American situation is, thankfully, less existentially dire and precarious than that. Our lives are not on the line, most of the time. But the work of renewal surely is. And here, too, if less literally, effective models of renewal are often examples of simultaneously fighting and building.

One example is evident in higher education. In Florida, Texas, North Carolina, Tennessee, Ohio, and other states, legislators have empowered tradition-minded academics to launch new schools of civic thought within large public universities. That work is only beginning, but it already offers examples of the reconstruction of some genuinely academic spaces within an otherwise hostile university. The people involved are rebuilding walls on old foundations while fighting for the space to teach and learn. We can see much the same in the classical-schools movement, and in a variety of cultural and educational enterprises that focus on the highest kinds of intellectual aspirations while also engaging effectively in the practical political and bureaucratic work of beating back hostile opposition.

Neither end of this work can be neglected. Neither the building nor the fighting, neither the cultural nor the political, can succeed without the other. They must always be allowed to shape each other. Some people are of course more suited to one than to the other, and should invest their energies accordingly. And yet to be genuinely serious and effective, these must only be differences of emphasis. None of us can wholly neglect either facet of the work.

This means we must not seek ephemeral political victory at the expense of the enduring moral substance of what we need to teach our children. We only undermine our most important goals when we glorify contemptible and unworthy leaders, abandon essential moral norms, or assault the very rule of law that makes it possible for us to live as free people—even if doing so promises some tactical benefit in the near term. To fight with no conception of the good is to destroy ourselves.

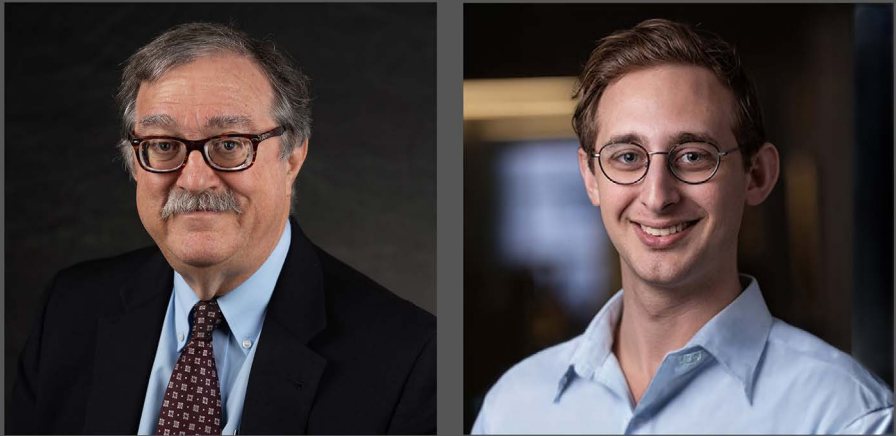
But it also means we cannot engage in intellectual and cultural construction at the expense of an honest and clear-eyed understanding of the nature of the human person and the realities of an often-hostile world. We shouldn't imagine that isolating ourselves will keep us safe, or that we can avoid the fight for the culture by pretending there is no disagreement. Whistling can be lovely, but whistling past graveyards can be a dangerous failure of responsibility.

To avoid both risks, we have to grasp that politics isn't everything, and that there must be standards that guide and constrain even what we will do for the sake of winning. At the same time we have to grasp that there is no avoiding politics, and that sometimes you can only win by making sure your adversary loses good and hard.

This is difficult work, because it means that we limit ourselves in both facets of renewal. Holding a trowel in one hand and a spear in the other means that we both fight and build with just one hand. But it also means that we never forget why we are fighting or why we are building.

This combination, this dual conception of our communal and national situation, is actually the substance of what we are working to renew—of what we have to teach our children so that they don't become too hard or too soft, and so that they can build on the foundations they're inheriting. It is the only answer to the decadence and decay that now confront us in so many arenas of American life. The future requires the renewal of our highest traditions. It requires that we grasp that our society is worth fighting for, and worth building up.

This essay has been adapted from a speech given on December 8, 2024 at the Jewish Leadership Conference in New York.



Wilfred McClay (l) and Daniel Kane (r)

WILFRED MCCLAY AND DANIEL KANE

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About the authors

Wilfred M. McClay holds the Victor Davis Hanson Chair in Classical History and Western Civilization at Hillsdale College. He was previously the G.T. and Libby Blankenship Chair in the History of Liberty at the University of Oklahoma, and is the author of *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story*.

Daniel Kane is senior editor of Tikvah educational initiatives.

Interview with Wilfred McClay and Daniel Kane

What makes America a Jewish land of hope?

W*ilfred McClay wrote *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* because he believed that America had lost the thread of its own history, that students were being taught either nothing coherent about the American past or a narrative organized around repudiation. The book, which has sold nearly 200,000 copies since its publication in 2019, was an attempt to restore what he calls a community of memory through a shared story that gives citizens something to which they can return and belong.*

*The Tikvah edition of *Land of Hope*, developed in partnership with Tikvah's Daniel Kane, asks what it means for Jewish day school students specifically to find themselves inside that story. The answer required more than a new preface. Kane adapted the text for Jewish students, added primary sources and discussion questions, and built parallel chapters tracing the American Jewish experience alongside the larger American one. This conversation with Professor McClay and Kane explores what was at stake in that effort, and why it matters that Jewish students understand themselves as heirs to both the American and Jewish traditions.*

JONATHAN SILVER: The story here is *Land of Hope* and the way it was transformed into Tikvah's Jewish *Land of Hope* edition through your joint work. Professor McClay, you wrote *Land of Hope*. Why did you feel that the American story needed to be retold?

WILFRED MCCLAY: I can date the impetus to 2014. That year the College Board decided to revise its standards for U.S. History, and they revised them in a very bad direction. They de-emphasized, and in some cases completely omitted, mention of the founders, the Constitutional Convention, and the

debates over ratification of the Constitution. Those aspects of American history were pushed to the back burner in favor of analysis rooted in a kind of neo-Marxist interpretation of the economic history of the United States, with a great deal of emphasis on the slave trade.

I read this framework and was appalled. Some like-minded colleagues and I wrote an open letter to the College Board saying, “Please don’t do this.” They backed off somewhat and made some improvements. But here’s the problem—though it seemed like the good guys won a victory, the textbooks had already been changed. And the AP exam had become the gold standard of what’s taught.

People began saying to me, “Look what’s happened to the textbooks. Somebody needs to write a new one. Why don’t you do it?” I said, “I think it’s a great idea. I hope you find somebody to do it because I’m not going to.” But eventually Roger Kimball convinced me, and we published the book in 2019.

We’ve sold somewhere between 150,000 and 200,000 copies, but most of those have been to adults. We haven’t penetrated the public-school market yet. I say “yet” because we’re preparing a second edition that’s more tailored to how teachers use textbooks today: more maps, more images, sidebars, and timelines. So we’ll see what happens. But I’m optimistic.

JS: Daniel, you’ve helped turn *Land of Hope* into something Jewish day schools can actually use. Before we get to the Tikvah edition, tell us what drew you to Bill’s book in the first place.

DANIEL KANE: *Land of Hope* is an extraordinary textbook. It’s an epic, narrative-driven history of America. As Professor McClay noted, in some ways it responds to worrying trends in American education, where history is often reduced to shallow binaries—oppressors versus oppressed, and so forth. His account is far richer and more complex, and ultimately far more compelling. That’s what drew us to it.

In the 2022–23 school year we worked with some teachers to pilot the young readers edition in Jewish schools.

JS: For middle-school students?

DK: That’s right. What we discovered, however, was that there were significant obstacles to adopting it in Jewish day schools. The original version of *Land of Hope* was not written as a typical textbook. It didn’t include timelines, discussion questions, comprehension exercises, or primary sources—only the core narrative. And the text itself remained fairly challenging.

So we decided to make this a much larger project: adapting, modifying, and expanding Dr. McClay’s original work so Jewish schools would want to use it. We also added a new dimension by connecting the American narrative to the American Jewish experience and creating parallel chapters on American Jewish history. Every four to six chapters, students pause and consider what American Jews were experiencing during that same historical moment.

JS: Bill, who did you imagine as the audience for the book?

WM: As I wrote, I imagined smart, literate high school juniors.

JS: And for that kind of student encountering the subtitle “The Great American Story,” what greatness do you hope they see?

WM: The greatness lies in the fact that never before in human history had a nation done anything like what the United States did with the Declaration of Independence—declaring that all men are created equal and making that principle the aspirational basis of national life. That is the core of our story, a watershed moment in human history.

One problem with the way we teach U.S. history is that we leave out the centuries of darkness, cruelty, and despair that preceded it, and the centuries through which the Jewish people survived and managed to thrive. I like to think there was a providential place for them in the American story. The Jewish edition of *Land of Hope*, with Daniel and Tikvah, brings that dimension out even more clearly.

JS: Daniel, in the preface to the Tikvah edition you write that Americans have lost the thread of their own history. What do you mean by that?

DK: At the national level—both for America and for the Jewish people—there’s been a move away from narrative-driven history. More recently we’ve seen the rise of a narrative of repudiation. History is taught less as a story that gives people something noble or aspirational to hold on to and more as something to reject.

The result is that we’re unmoored. Without a shared story we lose a sense of who we are, and that makes it much harder to chart a course forward.

JS: Bill, you’ve argued that history is not only a truth-telling science but also a form of memory. Why does that matter for democratic citizens?

WM: In a republic you have to return to your beginnings from time to time. Renewal requires a return to origins.

Those origins aren’t always historically verifiable in every detail. If you focus only on whether, say, the crossing of the Red Sea occurred exactly as described, you miss the point. What matters is the story’s power as a touchstone of identity. That’s why even secular Jewish families celebrate the seder—it’s a way of remembering who they are.

JS: In fact, there’s something about the Jewish experience that instructs the American one. We are who we are because we remember things in common. Americans are Americans because they remember the American story together.

WM: That’s exactly right. A community of memory is something different from a merely constitutional or legal arrangement. There’s no substitute for the sentiment of “this is my land, this is my story.”

JS: That brings us to the Tikvah edition. Bill, tell us about the Jewish adaptation.

WM: In the original *Land of Hope*, there is a philo-Jewish, even philo-Israeli undercurrent. But it's just that, an undercurrent. I mention, for example, Truman's identification with Cyrus.

People at Yeshiva University noticed this and were very interested in it. That led to a series of lectures and conferences, urging teachers and administrators at Jewish day schools to impart to their students the ways that the American tradition is deeply informed by the Jewish tradition. Then came a directly-related book, *The Jewish Roots of American Liberty*, which I co-edited with Rabbi Stuart Halpern, and which highlights the central importance of Jewish antecedents, such as the Exodus story, to American history and to the entire Western tradition.

That all naturally tied back into Tikvah's idea of a Jewish edition of *Land of Hope*, which says to Jewish students and teachers, especially in Jewish day schools (where American history is sometimes neglected) that they need to engage seriously with America's founding documents. They should read George Washington's letter to the congregation at Newport and see that America has had not merely a policy of tolerance toward Jews, but a genuine affinity with them.

That's one of the central messages of Tikvah's *Land of Hope*: Jews are at home in America.

JS: Daniel, what are some concrete ways the Tikvah edition differs from the original?

DK: In volume two, for example, students study Tocqueville. Dr. McClay already writes extensively about him, so we added an extract from *Democracy in America* in which Tocqueville describes the American Sabbath, how widely and intensely it was observed and how beneficial he believed it was. That passage speaks especially to Orthodox Jewish students.

We also added ten chapters on American Jewish history across the four volumes. These chapters aim to do for the American Jewish story what Dr. McClay does for the American story more broadly.

We begin with the Inquisition and trace the path of Portuguese Jews through Holland and eventually to North America. The goal is to show how the institutions and ways of life that define American Judaism emerged, and to help young Jews understand the challenges earlier generations faced.

JS: The Jewish chapters are anchored by particular figures. Tell us about a couple.

DK: One is Menasseh ben Israel, who appealed to Oliver Cromwell to readmit Jews to England. It's a remarkable story of partnership between Calvinist Puritans and Jews, and it ultimately helped pave the way for Jewish settlement in the Americas.

Another is Mordecai Manuel Noah, the most prominent American Jew of the early nineteenth century. He began thinking seriously about what America meant for Jewish life and even launched a project to establish a Jewish settlement on Grand Island. In his words, he hoped that there, “under the influence of perfect freedom, they may study laws—cultivate their mind, acquire liberal principles as to men and measures, and qualify themselves to direct the energies of a just and honorable government in the land of the Patriarchs.” His story illustrates how America could serve as a place of Jewish renewal.

JS: With those aspirations in mind, how should Jewish students understand their place in the American story?

DK: Jews have occupied a remarkable position in America. They have been a minority but have generally been accepted as fully American.

Our goal is to cultivate both gratitude and agency. Students should feel gratitude for the extraordinary opportunities America has provided, and they should also recognize the responsibility that comes with those opportunities—to become stewards of both the American Jewish story and the American story more broadly.

JS: What does American Jewish history reveal about America itself?

DK: Jews have often been the quintessential American “other” outside the dominant Protestant consensus. In that sense, they served as a test of the American creed from the beginning.

JS: If you’re a middle-school student encountering the Tikvah edition today, is America still a land of Jewish hope?

DK: There is real anti-Semitism in America today. But it isn’t “unprecedented,” as people often say. It has never been dominant. It remains a threat that Jews have faced, and successfully confronted, before.

One goal of this textbook is to equip young Jews with that historical knowledge and to introduce them to the heroes who faced those challenges in the past.

JS: Is there anything else you’d like to add about the project?

DK: Much of the anti-Semitism we see today is tied to debates about Zionism. We didn’t want to avoid those debates in the textbook.

Louis Brandeis gave an extraordinary speech on American Zionism addressing the charge of “dual loyalty.” He argued that mutually reinforcing loyalties—to faith, to friends, and to country—are not a problem but a strength. That perspective helps students see that these debates are not new, and that our tradition offers powerful answers.

JS: Bill, a final question. As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary, what should young Americans, especially young Jewish Americans, understand about the country they will inherit?

WM: They should understand that diversity is not only about the identity categories we hear so much about today. It also includes traditional Judaism, which happens to be one of the foundations upon which Christianity itself rests.

And so they should remember that it is possible to be Jewish and unashamed, observant, and fully part of American life.

COVENANT, NATIONAL PURPOSE, AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

SECTION 1

Excerpt from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

An Introduction to the Book of Exodus | Covenant & Conversation

Introduction & Framing

Before turning to the American story, it is worth considering the ideas behind it. The framework John Winthrop reached for on the *Arbella* and President Washington extended at Newport began at Sinai.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l argued that Sinai was the founding political act of Western freedom—the first time an entire people, not a king, entered a binding covenant governing their relationship with God and each other. Its structure—divine partnership, popular consent, shared moral code—became a template that later political thinkers drew upon, including the architects of the American Founding.

The Puritans studied *Tanakh* intensely and modeled their communities on the values that emanated from Sinai. By 1776, when Jefferson and Franklin proposed Exodus imagery for the Great Seal, the richness of inspiration from Sinai in the American civic mind was already centuries deep. Rabbi Sacks shows us why they reached for it.

Excerpts

The passage below comes from Rabbi Sacks' introduction to *Sefer Shemot*. He has just finished arguing that the Sinai covenant was unique among ancient covenants—and is about to explain why that uniqueness changed the course of human political history.

Excerpt 1: The Three Features That Made Sinai Unique

“Three things made the Sinai covenant unique. First was that one of the parties was G-d Himself. In any other context this would sound absurd. The gods of the ancient world ruled by power, not by the agreement of the people. Second was that the entire nation—not just a king or an elite—were party to this decision. The text twice emphasizes that the agreement to accept the covenant was made by

‘all the people’ (Exodus 19:8; 24:3). The third is that the covenant itself was not confined, as were all others in the ancient world, to external relations. It was to govern the internal life of the people as well. It would become their moral and spiritual code, their constitution of liberty.”

Excerpt 2: Sinai as the First Statement of a Free Society

“We have in the Sinai covenant nothing less than the first-ever statement of a free society. The first two points establish the principle that, in the words of the American Declaration of Independence, governments derive ‘their just powers from the consent of the governed,’ even when the Governor is creator of heaven and earth. G-d, in the rabbis' phrase, is not a tyrant. He does not impose His will by force. He does not enslave. On the contrary, He is the G-d who liberates slaves. He becomes Israel's sovereign only when they willingly declare, ‘All that G-d has said, we will do and heed’ (Ex. 24:7). The free G-d seeks the free worship of free human beings.”

Excerpt 3: A Free Society as a Moral Achievement

“The third point tells us that a free society is a moral achievement. It is not a mere transaction of power. The ‘ten commandments’ with their emphasis on the sanctity of life, the integrity of the family, respect for truth and for the property of others, summarize the essentials of a decent society in so short and simple a way as to be memorized by—engraved on the hearts of—an entire people. They remain the world's most famous moral code.”

Discussion Questions

1. Rabbi Sacks names three features that made Sinai unique: divine partnership, popular consent, and a shared moral code. How do we see each of these reflected in the American story?
2. Rabbi Sacks calls the free society a “moral achievement.” What does it take to sustain that achievement across generations?
3. As America marks 250 years of independence, what does it mean to think of the country in covenantal terms rather than exclusively political ones?
4. Even with these shared references, and with the understanding that the experience of Sinai influenced and inspired the American Founding, in what critical ways was the giving of the Torah a particular experience for the Jewish people, rather than a universal one?

John Winthrop's Massachusetts Bay Colony Sermon (1630)

Introduction & Framing

In the early seventeenth century, English Puritans crossed the Atlantic to build what Europe could not sustain: a society ordered by biblical faith.

William Bradford led a group to the New World in 1620 and became governor of Plymouth Colony. He called his companions “Pilgrims,” taught himself to read *Tanakh* in Hebrew, and called America a “new Jerusalem.” Cotton Mather dubbed him “a Moses of Plymouth colony.” His Massachusetts gravestone reads, in Hebrew: “*Hashem Ezer Chayai*—The Lord is the help of my life.”

A decade later, John Winthrop—an English lawyer seeking a place to build a more righteous society—organized the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1630, aboard the *Arbella*, the flagship of a fleet bringing Puritan settlers across the Atlantic to Massachusetts Bay, he delivered one of the most famous sermons in American history.

Its framework is what makes it striking. Winthrop spoke not of opportunity or escape but of *berit*, of covenant. He told his passengers they had “entered into covenant” with God, that God had “given us leave to draw our own articles,” and that failure would bring consequences. He quoted the prophet Micah—“to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God”—and closed by paraphrasing Moses: “Choose life, that we and our seed may live.”

A new nation was not merely founded. In their thinking, it was being modeled—even consecrated—on the covenant at Sinai.

Excerpts from John Winthrop's Massachusetts Bay Colony Sermon (1630)

Below are four passages from the sermon Winthrop delivered aboard the *Arbella* as it sailed toward the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Each highlights a different dimension of the covenant he believed his community was entering into with God.

Excerpt 1: The Language of Covenant

“Thus stands the cause between G-d and us. We are entered into covenant with Him for this work. We have taken out a commission. The Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles. We have professed to enterprise these and those accounts, upon these and those [goals]. We have hereupon besought Him of favor and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath He ratified this covenant and sealed our commission, and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it..”

Excerpt 2: The Price of Breaking the Covenant

“...but if we shall neglect [to fulfill our stated goals], and, dissembling with our G-d, shall...embrace this present world and [pursue coarse] intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, and be revenged of such a people, and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant. Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our G-d.”

Excerpt 3: A Community Knit Together

“For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man....We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our G-d, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people...We shall find that the G-d of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies...”

Excerpt 4: A City Upon a Hill

“For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our G-d in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world...”

Excerpt 5: Closing with Moshe's Final Charge

“And to shut this discourse with that exhortation of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel, Deut. 30. ‘Beloved, there is now set before us life and death, good and evil,’ in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our G-d, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments...that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our G-d may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it....Therefore let us choose life, that we and our seed may live, by obeying His voice and cleaving [staying faithful] to Him, for He is our life and our prosperity.”

Discussion Questions

1. Winthrop framed the colonists' venture as a covenant with mutual obligations. What stands out about beginning a society that way?

2. “A city upon a hill” has been quoted often, but Winthrop meant it as both inspiration and responsibility. How do we hold both sides of that image today?
3. Winthrop closed with Moses's words “choose life.” What does that charge offer a country reflecting on 250 years? Can you hear other reverberations of the *Tanakh* in his words?

SECTION 3

Seixas's Letter and President Washington's Reply (1790)

Introduction & Framing

By the summer of 1790, the American experiment had reached a critical threshold. The Constitution was ratified and President Washington inaugurated, but the document did not yet guarantee freedom of speech, press, or religion. The Bill of Rights was before the states, its fate uncertain. Rhode Island was a holdout.

For Newport's small Jewish community, this was not abstract. Many had come from Lisbon and other ports under the long shadow of the Inquisition. They knew what it meant to live where religious identity determined whether a person had rights at all.

On August 17, 1790, Washington traveled to Newport to secure Rhode Island's support. The next day, he visited the Touro Synagogue. Its president, Moses Seixas—a first-generation American, son of Portuguese immigrants—read aloud a welcome letter. It was warm and grateful but contained a pointed hope: that Washington would preside over “a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”

Washington's reply, written the next day, became one of the most important documents in the history of religious liberty. He did not merely accept Seixas's phrasing—he returned it, almost word for word, and pushed further. Jews in America were not to be “tolerated,” as if religious freedom were a privilege granted by the majority. They were full citizens, equal in standing, possessed of the same “inherent natural rights” as anyone else. He blessed them with Micah's verse: may every one sit in safety “under his own vine and fig tree, and none shall make him afraid.”

Where Winthrop framed the American project as a covenant, Washington framed its ripened fruit: a nation in which the “stock of Abraham” would not merely survive but belong.

Excerpts from Seixas's Letter and President Washington's Reply (1790)

Below are key excerpts from the two letters exchanged in Newport in August of 1790. The first was read aloud in the Touro Synagogue by Moses Seixas in the presence of the president. The second was Washington's response, written the following day.

From Moses Seixas to President Washington — August 17, 1790

Excerpt 1: Greeting as “The Stock of Abraham”

“Permit the children of the stock of Abraham to approach you with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person and merits—and to join with our fellow citizens in welcoming you to Newport.”

Excerpt 2: Washington Through the Lens of *Tanakh*

“With pleasure we reflect on those days—those days of difficulty, and danger, when the G-d of Israel, who delivered David from the peril of the sword—shielded Your head in the day of battle—and we rejoice to think, that the same Spirit, who rested in the Bosom of the greatly beloved Daniel enabling him to preside over the Provinces of the Babylonish Empire, rests and ever will rest, upon you, enabling you to discharge the arduous [difficult] duties of Chief Magistrate [President] in these States.”

Excerpt 3: A Government “To Bigotry Gives No Sanction”

“Deprived as we heretofore [so far] have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People—a Government, that to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance—but generously affording to all Liberty of conscience, and immunities [protections] of Citizenship:—deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language equal parts of the great governmental Machine...”

Excerpt 4: Washington as Joshua, America as a Wilderness Still Being Crossed

“For all these Blessings of civil and religious liberty which we enjoy under an equal benign administration, we desire to send up our thanks to the Ancient of Days, the great preserver of Men—beseeching him, that the Angel who conducted [guided] our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised Land, may graciously conduct [guide] you through all the difficulties and dangers of this mortal life:—And, when, like Joshua full of days and full of honor, you are gathered to your Fathers, may you be admitted into the Heavenly Paradise...”

From President Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport – August 18, 1790

Excerpt 5: Beyond Toleration

“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 was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights.”

Excerpt 6: The Echo of Seixas's Own Phrase

“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 demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.”

Excerpt 7: The Blessing from the Prophet Micah

“May 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 him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths...”

Discussion Questions

1. Seixas and Washington each reached naturally for the language of *Tanakh*. What does it mean that the founding generation spoke this way, and how does it shape our sense of America's story?
2. Washington moved beyond "toleration" to speak of inherent rights. Why is that distinction worth remembering as America marks 250 years?

Mitzvot Ahavat Hashem (Loving God) and Kiddush Hashem (Sanctifying God's Name)

Talmud – Yoma 86a

Abaye said: As it was taught in a *baraita* that it is stated: “And you shall love the Lord your G-d” (Deuteronomy 6:5), which means that you shall make the name of Heaven beloved. How should one do so? One should do so in that he should read Torah, and learn Mishna, and serve Torah scholars, and he should be pleasant with people in his business transactions. What do people say about such a person? Fortunate is his father who taught him Torah, fortunate is his teacher who taught him Torah, woe to the people who have not studied Torah. So-and-so, who taught him Torah, see how pleasant are his ways, how proper are his deeds. The verse states about him and others like him: “You are My servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified” (Isaiah 49:3).

אבוי אמר כדתנאי {דברים ו':ה'} וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שְׂיִהְיֶה שֵׁם שְׁמַיִם מְתַאֲהָב עַל יְדֶךָ שְׂיִהְיֶה קוֹרָא וְשׁוֹנֶה וּמְשַׁמֵּשׁ תִּלְמִידֵי חֲכָמִים וְיִהְיֶה מְשֻׁאָּו וּמְתַנָּו בְּנִחַת עִם הַבְּרִיּוֹת מֵהַ בְּרִיּוֹת אוֹמְרוֹת עֲלֵיו אֲשֶׁרִי אָבִיו שֶׁלְמָדוֹ תוֹרָה אֲשֶׁרִי רַבּוֹ שֶׁלְמָדוֹ תוֹרָה אוֹי לָהֶם לְבְרִיּוֹת שֶׁלֹּא לְמַדּוֹ תוֹרָה פְּלוֹנִי שֶׁלְמַד תוֹרָה רָאוּ כִּמְהוּ נְאִים דְרַכְיוֹ כִּמְהוּ מְתוֹקְנִים מַעֲשָׂיו עֲלָיו הַכְּתוּב אוֹמֵר נִישְׁעִיהוּ מ"ט:ג'} וַיֹּאמֶר לִי עַבְדִּי אֶתְהוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר בְּךָ אֶתְפָּאֵר

Rambam – Maimonides, *Sefer HaMitzvot* (#3)

That is that He commanded us about loving Him, may He be exalted. And that is that we think about and contemplate His commandments, His statements and His actions until we comprehend Him and derive the greatest pleasure from that comprehension. And that is the love that is obligated. And the language of the Sifrei (Sifrei Devarim 33:1) is, “Since it is stated, ‘And you shall love,’ I would not know how a man is to love the Omnipresent. [Hence] we learn to say, ‘And these things that I command you today shall be upon your heart’ (Deuteronomy 6:6) - that through this, you will recognize the One that spoke and the world [came into being].” Behold we have explained to you that comprehension will come to you through contemplation and you will [then] come to pleasure, and perforce the love will come. And we have already clarified that this commandment also includes that we call all people to His service, may He be exalted, and to believe in Him. And that is since when you love a person, you will recount his praises and magnify him, and call on other people to love him. And this is, by way of analogy, the same with true love of Him, may He be exalted: When comprehension of His truth comes to you, you without a doubt call out to the fools and silly ones to know the true knowledge that you know. **And the language of the Sifrei (Sifrei Devarim 32:2) is, “And you shall love the Lord, your G-d” - cause Him to be loved by all humanity, like your father Avraham (did); as it is stated (Genesis 12:5), ‘and the souls that they had made in Charan.’” And it means to say: Like Avraham who loved [G-d] -**

loves me” (Isaiah 41:8), and this was from his great comprehension - to the point that he called people to Him.

היא שצונו באהבתו יתעלה. וזה שנחשב ונתבונן במצותיו ומאמריו ופעולותיו, עד שנשיגהו ונהנה בהשגתו בתכלית ההנאה, וזאת היא האהבה המחייבת. ולשון ספרי: לפי שנאמר: "ואהבת את ה' אלקיך," איני יודע כיצד אוהב את המקום; תלמוד לומר: "והיו הדברים האלה אשר אנכי מצוה היום על לבבך," שמתוך כך אתה מפיר את מי שאמר והיה העולם.

הנה בארנו לך שבהתבוננות תעלה בידך ההשגה, ותגיע ההנאה, ותבוא האהבה בהכרח.

וכבר בארנו שזאת המצוה גם כן כוללת שנהיה קוראים לבני האדם כלם לעבודתו יתעלה ולהאמין בו. וזה, שאתה כשתאהב איש אחד, תספור בשבחיו ותרבה בהם, ותקרא בני האדם לאהב אותו. וזה על דרך משל כן: כשתאהב אותו יתעלה באמת, כפאשר הגיע לך מהשגת אמתתו, אתה קורא בלי ספק הסכלים והפתיים לדעת ידיעת האמת אשר ידעתה.

ולשון ספרי: "ואהבת את ה'" - אהבהו על הבריות כאברהם אביה, שנאמר: "ואת הנפש אשר עשו בחרן." ורוצה לומר: כמו שאברהם, מפני שהיה אוהב, כמו שהעיד הכתוב "אברהם אהבי," וזה בעצם השגתו, קרא בני האדם להאמין בשם מרב אהבתו - כן אתה אוהב אותו, עד שתקרא אליו בני האדם

Rambam — Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Yesodei haTorah* 5:11

... When a sage is stringent with himself, speaks pleasantly with others, his social conduct is attractive to others, he receives them pleasantly, he is humbled by them and does not humble them in return, he honors them—even though they act disrespectfully to him—he does business faithfully, and does not frequently accept the hospitality of the common people or sit with them, and at all times is seen only studying Torah, wrapped in tzitzit, crowned with tefillin, and carrying out all his deeds beyond the measure of the law—provided he does not separate too far from normal living and thus become forlorn—to the extent that all praise him, love him, and find his deeds attractive—such a person sanctifies G-d's name. The verse Isaiah 49:3: "And He said to me: 'Israel, you are My servant, in whom I will be glorified'" refers to him.

וכן אם דקדק החכם על עצמו והיה דבורו בנחת עם הבריות, ודעתו מערבת עמיהם ומקבלם בסבר פנים יפות, ונעלב מהם ואינו עולבם, מכבד להם ואפילו למקליו לו, ונושא ונותן באמונה; ולא ירבה באריות עמי הארץ וישיבתו, ולא יראה תמיד אלא עוסק בתורה עטוף בציצית ומקליו ועושה בכל מעשיו לפנים משורת הדין - והוא שלא יתרחק הרבה ולא ישתומם - עד שימצאו הכל מקלסין אותו ואוהבים אותו ומתאיים למעשיו - הרי זה קדש את השם, ועליו הכתוב אומר: "ויאמר לי עבדי אתה ישראל אשר בך אתפאר".

Discussion Questions

1. Although the *mitzvot* of "Ahavat Hashem" and "Kiddush Hashem" are part of the Covenant of Sinai, and thus incumbent upon Jews, how do their essential ideas apply to all God-fearing people who aspire to build a good society and comport themselves as model citizens?
2. Even for Jews, does Maimonides posit that these *mitzvot* are only fulfilled on the basis of Jewish impressions, or even those of non-Jews?

-
3. While Jews are enjoined to be ‘a light unto the nations’ (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6), is it fair to say that the Founding Fathers of America aspired to be something similar?” How would Rabbi Sacks answer this question? Return to Rabbi Sacks’ teaching above that “a free society is a moral achievement.”

About Tikvah

Tikvah advances Jewish excellence and Western civilization through education and ideas. Through its educational programs and institutions, Tikvah shapes the rising generation of Jewish, Zionist, and American leaders. Through its media ventures, publications, and conferences, Tikvah advances serious thinking about the great challenges facing the Jewish people.

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