

This Month in Our Reform Heritage – July 2017

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On this Independence Day...

“Let us rededicate ourselves to continue, with love and devotion, to do our part, as Americans and as Jews, to build a nation true to its noblest and most sacred ideals... “



Since its earliest beginnings, Reform Judaism in the United States has affirmed and celebrated the unique experience and heritage of the Jewish experience in America. Our Torah's principles of liberty, justice, and the equality of all people, have shaped American democracy from its earliest colonial beginnings. Inspired by the promise of the American values of freedom and opportunity, Jews have played a vital role in the founding and building of this nation. Classical Reform Judaism has always cherished this noble heritage and has remained committed to the nurturing of a distinctly American expression of Jewish worship, life, and culture, which reflect the best of our nation's democratic ideals.

Our Reform pioneers perceived a virtually cosmic significance to the meaning of America for our people and faith. They recognized the formative Jewish spiritual influence on the emergence of our Nation that culminated in 1776, with the Declaration of Independence and its ringing affirmation of the inherent natural rights of every individual, a notion so deeply grounded in the Torah's distinctive concept of humanity created in the Divine image. This biblical spirit was perhaps nowhere more dramatically symbolized than by the inscription on the famous Liberty Bell — the stirring words that became the rallying cry of the Revolution, taken from the Book of Leviticus: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof!"

As we celebrate Independence Day this year, we forthrightly recognize that there are yet many unfulfilled dreams and mandates in the continuing unfolding of our country's destiny. There remain great injustices and inequalities in our midst, and a dark strain of extremism, bigotry and violence that are a perversion of all that America authentically stands for. I hope that a deeply personal reminiscence I would share may help us as we face these daunting times.

A few years ago, during one of many visits to our Nation's Capital, Washington, DC, I spent a morning visiting the Holocaust Memorial Museum with its crushing lessons of horror and tragedy. I then walked a few blocks to the National Archives, for one of my periodic pilgrimages to see the original drafts of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. As I stood there, in the quiet awe of that soaring, sanctuary-like space, I could not help but be overwhelmed by the counterpoint – the incredibly stark contrast – between what I was seeing at that moment, and what I had just witnessed at the Holocaust Museum. There, one confronts history's worst desecration of the human spirit... here, we can stand before the precious relics of the noblest heights to which the human mind and heart can aspire...

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

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

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

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

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

Standing there, before the Declaration of Independence, and realizing this truth with such force, was a moment of deep and humble gratitude... for the courage and faith that guided my family and so many others in making that difficult journey to a new world so long ago.

As we mark July 4 in this challenging year of 2017, the rich legacy of this shared heritage, and these two precious identities, can offer us much needed inspiration. May we resolve to rededicate ourselves to the best of this inheritance.

Let each of us resolve anew *to join with all people of faith and good will to “proclaim liberty throughout the land — and to all lands — unto all the inhabitants thereof” ... and to continue, with love and devotion, to do our part, as Americans and as Jews, to build a nation true to its noblest and most sacred ideals... “One nation... but rich in diversity... “under God”... but blessed by many understandings of the Divine... “with liberty...and justice... for all!”*

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