



Yeshiva University
THE RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS-HERENSTEIN
CENTER FOR VALUES AND LEADERSHIP

YESHIVA UNIVERSITY CELEBRATES
AMERICA



A Jewish Commemoration of an American Milestone





TABLE OF CONTENTS

An American Future of Truth Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman	PAGE 4
The Surest Means of Enlightenment Dr. Rebecca Cypess	PAGE 6
America as an Educational Promise Dr. Selma Botman	PAGE 8
A 250 th Anniversary Thank You to Horace Kallen Dr. Jeffrey S. Gurock	PAGE 9
Psalms and the American Founding Dr. Shaina Trapedo	PAGE 10
What Holds America Together? Dr. Erica Brown	PAGE 12
‘Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land’ Rabbi Dr. Meir Y. Soloveichik	PAGE 15
Unparalleled Opportunities Dr. Sharon Poczter	PAGE 18
Esther in America Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern	PAGE 19
The American Jew’s Dual Confrontation Dr. Shira Weiss	PAGE 21
Four Questions on Freedom & Independence Rabbi Shalom Carmy	PAGE 23
Reflections on Jewish Life in America Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter	PAGE 24
Henrietta Szold: Leadership Through Service Aliza Abrams Konig	PAGE 26
An American, Sailor, & Jew: Uriah Phillips Levy Sara Cohen	PAGE 27

Dear Friends,

I was recently looking at a copy of my mother's DP registration card; her details were recorded when her Polish parents landed in a German transit camp following their tragic years in Auschwitz. They had lost everything. There was nowhere to go and no one to turn to from their past lives. The three of them were among the only ones from their small village south of Lublin to survive. Her card is marked "Stateless".

Imagine their excitement and trepidation when, after a long boat journey, they finally saw the Statue of Liberty emerging from the grey Atlantic waters of their new country. Would this be a safe haven, a *goldene medina*, for them or not? Would this be their last stop or would they be forced to leave again? Between their chicken farm and their dry cleaning business, they slowly rebuilt lives free from the weight of Jewish persecution. Later, my Zeide worked as a tailor at the Lakehurst Naval Air Engineering Station, proudly hemming the uniforms of those who served. America had indeed been a refuge for them.

National milestones offer us an opportunity to reflect on where we have been as families and as a country. The 250th year of American independence is an important time to talk about the role that Jews have played in American history and the protections and freedoms America has offered the Jewish community.

The founding values that reflected America's earliest years still need to be fiercely protected and stewarded. As a Jewish community, we care now more than ever about our security and our freedom to contribute and participate in society while maintaining the safety of worship. We can no longer take for granted George Washington's ringing words "to bigotry no sanction." We have to ensure it.

We hope you enjoy the pages of this commemorative issue and that they provoke conversations among family and friends about the American Jewish past, present, and future. This publication was funded in part by a generous ignition grant from A More Perfect Union and The Jewish Partnership for Democracy and through the ongoing support of our founders, Terri and Andrew Herenstein.

Erica Brown

Dr. Erica Brown

Vice Provost for Values and Leadership, Yeshiva University

Director, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership

The image shows a historical document titled "A.E.F. D.P. REGISTRATION RECORD". It is a form for a Displaced Person (DP) named FELA RAJCHER. The form includes fields for registration number (A00595974), date of birth (28.11.1938), birthplace (ZAKRONEK LIUBLIN POLAND), religion (JEWISH), and marital status (Single). It also lists the full names of the father (RAJCHER ABRAHAM) and mother (BOLMER ZESCHA). The desired destination is marked as "U.S.A.". The form is signed by "Bud Reichen" and dated "1.8.45". At the bottom, it is noted as "IN CONCENTR. CAMP".

An American Future of Truth

Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman

Fifth President of Yeshiva University



As I sat in the first row at the President's Inauguration, knowing that after President Trump concluded his remarks I would rise to offer a blessing for America, my mind turned to my grandparents.

My grandparents fled Europe to escape the Holocaust, while so many members of their families were murdered by the Nazis. They came to America with nothing, and here they survived, rebuilt, and raised a family. America gave them the freedom to build their future.

As we mark America's 250th anniversary, we remember the extraordinary gift of sanctuary this country has given the Jewish people. But America has been more than a place of refuge. It has empowered us to live with purpose.

In America, Jews are not merely allowed to survive. We are invited to contribute.

This is the mandate for Jews living in Diaspora dating back to antiquity. After the destruction of the First Temple, when the Jewish people were exiled to Babylonia, the prophet Jeremiah delivered a remarkable charge:

"Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you shall have welfare."

Jeremiah did not tell the Jewish people to disappear into the surrounding culture by abandoning their covenant, identity, and destiny. He told them to remain deeply Jewish — and precisely from that place, to seek the welfare of the society around them.

That has been one of the great stories of Jewish life in America. Jews have helped build this country as teachers and doctors, entrepreneurs and public servants, scholars and soldiers, philanthropists and neighbors. We have built synagogues, schools,

hospitals, charities, businesses, universities, and communal institutions that serve not only our own community, but also the broader society. At our best, we have shown that deep faith and civic contribution are not in conflict. They strengthen one another.

Especially today, when there is so much focus on antisemitism and hate, this message is essential. We must confront hatred wherever it appears. Security is a threshold responsibility. But the Jewish conversation cannot be reduced to security alone. Our purpose is not only to protect Jewish life, but also to express the glory of Jewish life.

We respond to darkness by bringing the light of Torah into the world. We strengthen America when we embody the values of our Masorah — the tradition given to us at Mount Sinai — in our homes, workplaces, and public life.

Looking to the future, our charge of course includes supporting Israel and ensuring the flourishing of the Jewish state. But our charge also includes living our mission here: to seek America's welfare by helping elevate its civic and moral promise.

On that January day, when I rose from my seat and walked to the podium, I looked out at America with the memory of my grandparents in my heart and the words of Jeremiah in my mind.

For me, delivering the Benediction was a symbol of how America invites us all to contribute our own blessings toward the common good.

As we mark 250 years, we do so with gratitude but also with purpose: to live our faith and bring the fullness of our values as a source of beracha to all.

Seek its peace. Shape its promise.

MAAYAN KAHAN

ROHR WRITING SCHOLAR,
STERN COLLEGE, '27
NEWTON, MA

"America has transformed my life and the life of my family, allowing us to prosper and pursue our own independence and achieve a life that my ancestors could have never even imagined."

CHARLI ERNSTEIN

LEADERSHIP SCHOLAR
SSSB, '27
OVERLAND PARK, KS

"I am proud to be an American because my grandfathers fought for our continued freedom here."

BOAZ KAHN

LEADERSHIP SCHOLAR,
YESHIVA COLLEGE, '26
RIVERDALE, NY

"I am proud to be an American because America fights for democracy, cooperation, and truth."

RABBI ALON MELTZER

SACKS RESEARCH
SCHOLAR 2025-26,
AZRIELI DOCTORAL
STUDENT
SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

"On this 250th anniversary I am grateful that democracy has a place in the world and that the ethics of the founding fathers of America have become universal western values."



The American silver artist Meryl Sheetz designed this limited edition Kiddush cup "Proclaim Liberty" in 2004 to mark the 350th year of Jews in America. Sheetz attended The School for American Craftsmen in Rochester, New York and the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia where she studied metalsmithing and printmaking.

The shofar on the cup's stem evokes the verse from Leviticus 25:10 – "Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants thereof..." because it was the plaintive sound of the shofar that indicated the beginning of the jubilee year that heralded freedom. The separate cup and base were produced in Israel and feature the American bald eagle and the Liberty Bell, as well as the stars and stripes of America's flag.

The Surest Means of Enlightenment

Dr. Rebecca Cypess

Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, and

Mordecai D. Katz and Dr. Monique C. Katz Dean, Undergraduate Faculty of Arts and Sciences



In 1796, in a letter to Alexander Hamilton, George Washington expressed his hope that the government of the still-new United States would establish a national university in Washington, D.C. At this university, the youth of the country would gain the benefit of education in the “Arts, Sciences, and Belle Letters,” and the next generation of leaders-in-training would learn about the workings of government.

Most importantly, however, Washington hoped that a national university would become a place where young people “from different parts of the United States would be assembled together, & would by degrees discover that there was not that cause for those jealousies & prejudices which one part of the union had imbibed against[t] another part: of course, sentiments of more liberality in the general policy of the country would result from it.” In Washington’s view, by coming together

to seek understanding, young people from different backgrounds would inevitably develop respect for one another, abandoning their parochialism and prejudices.

As a dean and vice provost at Yeshiva University, I see our undergraduate students striving to fulfill Washington’s vision. They learn about the richness and variety not only within our own community, but within the wider world. At first blush, it may seem implausible that Yeshiva University, as a Jewish institution, would be a heterogeneous environment, yet it is: students come from all over the world, from different Jewish traditions and backgrounds, looking, speaking, and acting differently from one another.

Gradually, over the course of years, they learn about one another—over meals, at social events, through religious observances and joyful celebrations, through shared interests and activities. In the classroom and

“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.”

George Washington



laboratory, around the seminar table and in the Beit Midrash, the study hall, they learn to hear one another's viewpoints, to think analytically and critically, to articulate their viewpoints with a mix of strength and humility, to know when it is time to listen. They learn how richly diverse Judaism is, and they also gain maturity and mutual respect through that realization.

Moreover, through life in New York City, Yeshiva University students gain experience with a full microcosm of humanity, and they engage with it deeply. Nearly 150 students participate in START Science, volunteering in the Washington Heights public schools as science teachers of young children, most of them non-native English speakers, many of them from underprivileged backgrounds. Others volunteer as tutors for students in local high schools. YU students collect leftover food from Shabbat meals to donate to local food pantries, conduct blood drives, volunteer in health clinics, and participate in the local political process. Simply living in and exploring New York City is an education in the vast complexity and richness of humanity. I have heard many students talk about these various experiences as both formative and transformative.

After October 7, 2023, many universities found it challenging to maintain norms of respect in the face of

AHARON COHEN

LEADERSHIP SCHOLAR

SSSB '28

NORTH WOODMERE, NY

"I am proud to be an American because our Constitution gives us the freedom to live the way we see fit."

differing experiences and viewpoints, and Jews on those campuses paid a price. Still, it would be a mistake for Jews to cede their place in institutions of higher learning nationwide. In troubled times, Yeshiva University can serve as a beacon and a model for others, shining the light of Torah, elevating the other academic disciplines by finding and promoting the holiness in them, and perpetuating this legacy of service and *kiddush Hashem*.

In the infancy of the United States, George Washington understood that the future of the country depended on education. It represented "the surest means of enlightening & giv[ing] just ways of think[ing] to our Citizens." Now, as the country celebrates its 250th anniversary, we can honor this country, which has given us so much, by recommitting to education as a foundational good and by cultivating the mutual respect and understanding that emanates from it.

"In all our rejoicing let us neither express, nor cherish, any harsh feeling towards any citizen who, by his vote, has differed with us. Let us at all times remember that all American citizens are brothers of a common country, and should dwell together in the bonds of fraternal feeling."

Abraham Lincoln



America as an Educational Promise

Dr. Selma Botman

Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs



America has always been less a finished achievement than an enduring promise—one that finds some of its clearest expression in education. Universities, at their best, are where the ideals of this country are not simply celebrated, but tested, refined, and renewed.

The American experiment rests on a belief that individuals, given freedom and opportunity, can contribute meaningfully to a shared civic life. Higher education is one of the principal engines through which that belief is realized. In classrooms, laboratories, and seminar rooms, students encounter difference—of perspective, background, and conviction—and are challenged to think critically, speak responsibly, and listen carefully. These are not merely academic exercises; they are habits essential to sustaining a democratic society.

For the Jewish community, this educational promise has had particular resonance. America offered not only refuge, but also the ability to build institutions of learning that reflect both intellectual rigor and enduring values. The flourishing of Jewish scholarship, leadership, and communal life in this country is inseparable from the freedoms that American education has made possible.

Yet a promise is not a guarantee. At 250 years, the question before us is not only what America has been, but what it asks us to become. Institutions of higher learning must help prepare students for a world marked by rapid technological change, deep social divisions, and complex global challenges. That preparation requires more than technical knowledge; it demands ethical clarity, historical awareness, and a renewed commitment to the common good.

If America is an ongoing experiment, then education is one of its most vital proving grounds. The work of universities is to ensure that the promise endures—not as abstraction, but as lived reality for each new generation.



ARLETTE ANTEBY

ROHR WRITING SCHOLAR,
STERN COLLEGE, '27
BROOKLYN, NY

“I am proud to be an American because I identify with the founding ideals of this country.”

URIEL SUSSMAN

SACKS RESEARCH SCHOLAR
2025-26, RIETS, REVEL,
AZRIELI
VALLEY STREAM, NY

“On this 250th anniversary I am grateful that America guarantees freedom of speech for all.”

A 250th Anniversary Thank You to Horace Kallen

Dr. Jeffrey S. Gurock

Professor of Jewish History at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies



When at its best, America has espoused a doctrine that has permitted me to live harmoniously in two cultures, feel comfortable with American forms of Zionism, and maintain fidelity to my ancestral religion. During the long debates over immigration of a century and a half ago, angry restrictionists contended that this country should be home only to those with the right racial pedigrees. Determined assimilationists argued that newcomers could be granted half-hearted welcomes so long as they abandoned the totality of their prior heritages.

It remained for the tolerant and forward thinking to recognize the value new Americans could bring to this country under the teaching of cultural pluralism. Jews and others were instructed to embrace this country's lifestyles but not at the total expense of their respective backgrounds. It ultimately has been left to the acculturated to what their residual identities should be. Jews have argued among themselves as to what pieces of our group legacies have had to be maintained. The American-born Jew and philosopher Horace Kallen (1882-1974) was the prime exponent of this phenomenon. He believed that diversity of commitments did not diminish American life but strengthened it.

Kallen's cultural pluralism offered an approach that has enabled me to take part in almost all aspects of American culture, including a great interest in the world of sports, without giving up my religion even as I have made personal decisions about how to integrate the Jewish traditional past with present day situations.

And as a Zionist, Kallen's teaching makes me feel that it is worthy for me as a loyal American to support the Jewish State. Louis Brandeis, the first great American Zionist - a student of Kallen's - would have agreed with me. Bernard Revel would also have concurred. Upon the founding of Yeshiva College in the late 1920s, he asserted that "the true exponents of American culture agree that the enrichment of America would not be fostered by the submerging of all the cultural and spiritual phases and heritages." It remained for him, and his successors, to nuance repeatedly how the synthesis of American ideals and traditional values might live harmoniously as Yeshiva University's mission.

As we bless the United States for our freedoms at this auspicious moment, we should pause to thank Horace Kallen for what he did for us and for all Americans.



Horace Kallen

Psalms and the American Founding

Dr. Shaina Trapedo

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The world record price for a printed book sold at auction was set by the Bay Psalm Book, the first book printed in British North America, produced in 1640, which Sotheby's sold for \$14.2 million in 2013. While the story of that Psalter—one of only eleven remaining of the 1,700 originally produced—is fascinating, the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible are not only of inestimable value to Western literature and culture, but to America's founding in particular.

Whereas the Hebrew Bible predominately conveys God's desire for a relationship with creation, the psalms give us insight into the earth-bound efforts of seeking a relationship with God. It "contains words of human search and concern," writes Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, most notably in the collected compositions of *Tehillim*, Psalms, in which "the spontaneity of the Biblical man found its expression." One midrash declares, "Everything that David said in his book, he said corresponding to himself, to all of Israel, and to all times." As such, its 150 chapters have been recited for centuries by Jews seeking protection, healing, prosperity, penance, consolation, companionship, direction, favor, fortitude, an expansion of wisdom, and an ending of exile.

Yet the particularism of Israel's experience encapsulated in the Psalms has found universal appeal in various communities and contexts, especially in Early Modern England, when new translations and adaptations flourished. In addition to the Psalters

formally commissioned by monarchs as Head of the Church of England during the sixteenth century, the Psalms were translated and printed more than any other book and thoroughly embedded in the lives of English citizens, from personal diary entries to the public theater. As poet and Anglican cleric John Donne averred, the Psalms were "the manna of the Church. As manna tasted to every man like that he liked best, so do the Psalms minister instruction, and satisfaction, to every man, in every emergency and occasion."

This attachment to Psalms traveled to the New World with the Pilgrims, followed by the Puritans who



Bay Psalm Book



arrived in Massachusetts in the late 1620s. Not long after, as Sotheby's specialist Selby Kiefer notes, they "realized in the New World they didn't have one of the great objects of education and learning—a printing press," which was essential in making the Bible available for study, which was "key to their mission. . . of living a Godly life and setting an example for other people." The first step to solving their intertwined religious and pedagogical problem was to send for a press and printer from England. Although printer and minister Jose Glover died en route to Cambridge, Massachusetts, his widow Elizabeth, and his assistant Stephen Daye, managed to set up America's first printing press in 1639.

The next question, of course, was what to print first. The colony's committee of thirty elders, including John Cotton and Richard Mather, knew they needed a book that was both utilitarian and theologically significant. It didn't take long for a work of singular import to emerge. As a sacred text, the Psalms were central to religious practice. Every family in Massachusetts Bay Colony would have taken a Psalter to church for singing as part of the liturgy and used it at home for Bible study. While a practical choice, printing a new Book of Psalms also offered a political opportunity.

The Bay Psalm Book (which fetched such a high sum at auction in 2013) was designed to be functional

rather than beautiful. For twentieth-century American musicologist Irving Lowens, the Bay Psalm Book was the predictable result of "a committee of thirty New England divines, more distinguished for their piety and learning than for their poetic gifts." Beyond its religious significance, however, reprinting the Psalms was a material act of nonconformity. No doubt, the text's spiritual and intellectual influence reached well beyond Puritan pulpits. It remained the leading Psalter for the next century as it was read and sung by the country's Founders, though, of course, its Biblical source stretches back millennia.

The copy that Sotheby's auctioned in 2013 had belonged to Boston's storied Old South Church, established in 1669, and was one of many originally used by the church's prayer-goers and patrons over time, including Samuel Adams, young Benjamin Franklin, and William Dawes, who, like Paul Revere, was dispatched from Boston to warn the patriots the British were coming. It was from the Bay Psalm Book, drawn from the priceless wisdom of ancient Israel, that some of the country's earliest thinkers first encountered the ideas that would inspire a nation.

This essay was excerpted from "Psalms and the American Founding," in Jewish Roots of American Liberty: The Impact of Hebraic Ideas on the American Story, edited by Wilfred M. McClay and Stuart Halpern (NY: Encounter, 2025), 75-84.

YITZY TANNER

SACKS RESEARCH SCHOLAR
2025-26, RIETS
LOWER MERION, PA

"I am proud to be an American because multiculturalism allows me to interact and be part of the lives of many different types of people."

DAHLIA BERNSTEIN

ROHR WRITING SCHOLAR,
STERN COLLEGE, '27
RIVERDALE, NY

"I am proud to be an American because it is still the home of the free and the brave, and it has allowed my family to stop wandering for the last century."

What Holds America Together?

Dr. Erica Brown

Vice Provost for Values and Leadership, Yeshiva University
Director, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership



The 250th year of American Independence is a good time to mine the biblical roots of this country and to seek in them a platform for restoration. Although it may seem odd, I'd like to turn to a British intellectual, Life Peer in the House of Lords, and faith leader for thoughts on this American milestone. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (1948–2020) had an almost mythic view of America and its place in the world that might prove curative in this time of great fracture.

On Oct. 24, 2017, Rabbi Sacks gave an address to the American Enterprise Institute. He praised the bonds of belonging and responsibility that are enshrined in the sacred concept of covenant, which he regarded as part and parcel of America's origin story. He then made a plea: "Don't lose the American covenant. It's the most precious thing you have. Renew it now before it's too late."

Rabbi Sacks referenced the social contract of America that still holds but warned that the social covenant of America—the dream of strong families, communities, and a shared narrative of human dignity—was at risk of eroding in a culture of grievance, victimhood, and self-centered politics. For Rabbi Sacks, America was not only a country; it was also a concept. America on paper represents a storybook notion of human parity and autonomy under the shelter of God. How ironic it must have been to hear a British rabbi tell those who long ago broke free of British shackles that they needed to do a better job safeguarding the essential foundations that built their independence.

To understand the significance of America through this lens, we will travel through some of Rabbi Sacks's major works and essays on the idea of covenant, since

it appeared often in his writing and teachings.

He defined the term in several places, compared it to the word "contract," and then explained why covenants were foundational to the Hebrew Bible and to all relationships of meaning and responsibility. In *The Home We Build Together* (2009), he explained: "Covenant is a binding commitment, entered into by two or more parties, to work and care for one another while respecting the freedom, integrity and difference of each." He then expanded it to describe "politics without power, economics without self-interest."

The Hebrew Bible presents any number of covenants. Abraham and God make a covenant between the pieces (Gen. 15:17-18) and then, two chapters later, Abraham accepted upon himself and his household the covenant represented by circumcision (Gen. 17:2-14), while God blessed him with land and the promise of a nation.

Mount Sinai presented the Israelites with a covenantal opportunity likened to marriage, with idolatry and adultery both identified in the Ten Commandments as extreme breaches of the fidelity that a true covenant demands (Ex. 20:2-14). This was unlike a typical treaty in the ancient Near East that was made between a strong power and a weak dependent. Those who were vulnerable would pay the price of protection: loyalty.

God at Sinai, according to Rabbi Sacks in *The Home We Build Together*, offered divine protection, but not by forcing the exchange, as such treaties often did. Israel was free to choose: "The supreme power makes space for human freedom." The inability to enter a covenant freely negates its validity. He believed that this



covenantal arrangement between God and a people was absolutely revolutionary in its time and in its promise.

The distinctive feature of covenants was that they were free of power, whether economic, political, or military. Something higher and more transcendent prevailed, as he writes again in *The Dignity of Difference* (2003): “The use of power is ruled out by the requirement of human dignity. If you and I are linked because, one way or another, I can force you to do what I want, then I have secured my freedom at the cost of yours. I have asserted my humanity by denying yours. Covenant is the attempt to create partnership without dominance or submission ...”

While a covenant is often a formal relationship, it is decidedly not a contract. Rabbi Sacks identified three key differences between the two in *The Dignity of Difference*. A covenant “is not limited to specific conditions and circumstances. It is open-ended and long-lasting. And it is not based on the idea of two individuals, otherwise unconnected, pursuing personal advantage.” Instead, for Rabbi Sacks, it was about the “we” that gives identity to the “I.” That is not to say that contracts do not matter. Contracts establish the accountability that parties have to each other that are usually negotiated to protect individual interests. But as a way for bonds to form between people and within communities, contracts prove too transactional and impersonal. They are neither intense nor holy enough to sustain a relationship of shared values while negotiating differences.

In *The Home We Build Together*, Rabbi Sacks suggested that covenants are not only formal in nature but

characteristic of those who choose voluntarily to share a fate and destiny. He regarded this mutual acceptance of responsibility as one of the few ways to redeem the solitude of the lonely crowd without any certainty or guarantees of what is to come: “To enter into a covenant, like deciding to marry or have a child, is to take a risk, an act of faith in an unknown, unknowable future.” Such hope binds together Jews who do not share the same practices or beliefs, and citizens and immigrants who are drawn to a sense of collective concern and obligation with “love, dignity, and respect,” even if imperfect, as he wrote in *One People: Tradition, Modernity and Jewish Unity*.

And this brings us to America. Rabbi Sacks, in several places, talks about America and its origins as an expression of a covenant tied by the cords of faith. He remarked in “The Idea that Changed the World,” an essay collected in *Covenant and Conversation* (2009), that every American president has cited the Bible in his inauguration address as an expression of personal faith and national destiny: “To this day American politics is based on the biblical idea of covenant.” He even wrote in that essay that, in many ways, the political language and culture of the United States reference the Hebrew Bible more in politics “than the Jewish state.” Political liberty and religious liberty, he stated, could exist hand-in-hand in America because of its founding ideals and the commitments of its founding fathers. “The unity of God is to be found in the diversity of creation,” wrote Rabbi Sacks in *The Dignity of Difference*. Unity and diversity together not only reflect the divine mandate to fill the earth from the earliest pages of Genesis, they also undergird what

BAT-TZION ATIK
LEADERSHIP SCHOLAR,
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QUEENS, NY

“On this 250th anniversary I am grateful that I’m in a country that protects my rights and my dignity.”

LEORA MUSKAT
SACKS RESEARCH SCHOLAR
2025-26, GPATS
OCEANSIDE, NY

“On this 250th anniversary I am grateful that I was raised with the freedom to think and share ideas freely.”



it means to live as a covenantal Jew in America in the twenty-first century.

I do not make it a habit of speculating about what Rabbi Sacks would have said had he been alive to witness current political trends across the globe, although I appreciate the temptation. There is something disingenuous and dishonest about putting words into the mouth of a scholar and sage who shared millions of his own words before his untimely death. Nevertheless, I wonder. Almost ten years after warning a rapt American audience that we were in danger of losing the cohesion that comes with his covenantal understanding of history, would Rabbi Sacks have seen an uptick in American patriotism or an embarrassing ingratitude for all, that America stands for in the eyes of angry people ready to blame America for all their ills? Would he have still held fast to the idea of America's freedoms or capitulated to a darker view shaped by the antisemitism that has raged in some American elite universities and beyond?

I like to think that he would have spoken eloquently on this milestone and applauded the attempts to resurface and revivify not only a love of country but a love of concept. I think he would have reminded us that we were created as a country with a mission of liberty for all and that we must return to the higher

political ideals that shaped this country and bend the rugged individualism that can and has soured a once great collective consciousness. He might have cited his own work, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (2020), where he was clear about his vision:

Covenantal politics ... is about "We, the people," bound by a sense of shared belonging and collective responsibility; about strong local communities, active citizens and the devolution of responsibility. It is about reminding those who have more than they need of their responsibilities to those who have less than they need. It is about ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to make the most of their capacities and their lives.

I can imagine Rabbi Sacks at a podium, with his elegant oratory style and distinctive British accent, reading the words of the prophet Hosea: "And I will betroth you to me forever and I will betroth you to me with justice and judgment, with kindness and compassion that you will know the Lord" (Hos. 2:19-20). It is these qualities of justice and mercy that bound us then and that, 250 years later, bind us still.

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"True patriotism springs from a belief in the dignity of the individual, freedom and equality not only for Americans but for all people on earth, universal brotherhood and good will, and a constant striving toward the principles and ideals on which this country was founded."

Eleanor Roosevelt



‘Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land’

Rabbi Dr. Meir Y. Soloveichik

Director of the Zahava and Moshael Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University and the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel.



On July 4, 1976, in honor of the bicentennial and during Queen Elizabeth’s visit to Philadelphia, the government of Great Britain decided to present a special gift to the American people. What has become known as the “Liberty Bell” had originally been commissioned by Pennsylvania from the Whitechapel bell foundry in London; but when the bell arrived in America, it immediately cracked and had to be recast by the American craftsmen Pass and Stowe. The British therefore decided to have the Whitechapel foundry create a new bell in honor of the 200th anniversary of American independence, making up for the lemon that had originally been sent. This further allowed a visiting Elizabeth, a descendant of George III, to show that there were no hard feelings.

It was a lovely gesture, highlighting how profoundly the bell has become associated with the Fourth of July. This association stems from a tale published in the 1840s by George Lippard, which portrayed

an elderly man in 1776 who had been charged with ringing the State House Bell when independence was announced—with the man waiting, waiting, for a young boy to bring him the news of the Continental Congress’s declaration on the Fourth of July.

Unfortunately, the entire tale was fiction, a fabrication of the author. While the bell would have been rung to celebrate American independence, it would have been one of many sounded in the city, and only on July 8, several days after Congress’s fateful decision. The true tale of the bell—and the family that brought it into being—is interesting enough; and it is indeed bound up with the unique story of American freedom, containing a profound lesson for our time.

The story begins in 1701, when William Penn enshrined in Pennsylvania a Charter of Liberties guaranteeing freedom of conscience. For Penn, a Quaker, true friendship with God and man could not be coerced: “There can be no friendship where there is no freedom.” Penn’s agent in the region was James Logan, later mayor of Pennsylvania. The historian Edwin Wolf describes how Logan “bought himself Hebrew Bibles and Hebrew prayer-books, and read them and made notes in them. When he was more fluent, he added a *Shulhan Arukh* and the great six-volume edition of the *Mishna* with the Maimonides and Bertinoro commentaries. In fact, Logan gathered together in Philadelphia in the first half of the eighteenth century one of the largest collections of Hebraica which existed in frontier America.”



Logan, Wolf explains, then taught Hebrew to his daughter Sally, whom he described as a child “reading the 34th Psalm in Hebrew, the letters of which she learned very perfectly in less than 2 hour’s time, an experiment I made of her capacity only for my Diversion.” Sally, in turn, married Isaac Norris, speaker of the State Assembly. Norris was a Hebraist in his own right, though his father-in-law, amusingly, seemed unimpressed, saying of the man who married his gifted daughter, “If he had as much skill in ye Greek as he has in Hebrew he would merit the general reputation of a Learned man.”

It was from this Hebraic household that the bell emerged. In 1751, Isaac Norris commissioned it from Whitechapel to mark the 50th anniversary of the Charter of Liberties. He chose to emblazon the bell with words from Leviticus, describing how every 50 years, indentured servants are freed: “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof... It is a jubilee, and each man shall return to his heritage, each man to his family.”

As Gary B. Nash notes in his history of the Liberty Bell, the chosen verse reflected a deep knowledge of the Hebrew text; and it was after America’s second great awakening that others truly came to appreciate its biblical context as well. Known until the 1830s as the “State House Bell,” anti-slavery advocates chose the bell because of its verse, renaming it the “Liberty Bell” as a symbol of the abolitionist cause.

“May not the emancipationists in Philadelphia,” one abolitionist paper reflected, “hope to live to hear the same bell rung, when liberty shall in fact be proclaimed to all the inhabitants of this favored land? Hitherto, the bell has not obeyed the inscription; and its peals have been a mockery, while one sixth of ‘all inhabitants’ are in abject slavery.”

Thus the bell and the verse upon it embody how biblical imagery inspired the assault on slavery



In 1986, artist Manfred Anson designed a Statue of Liberty menorah to mark the 100 years of the Statue’s presence as a beacon to the “huddled masses” who came to America’s shores. Anson left Nazi Germany as a refugee when he was still a teenager. His menorah sought to blend a more conventional Polish design of the base with souvenir-like statuettes topped by an American eagle. But the candle holders are not the same.

Each of the nine Statue of Liberty figurines bear the name of a transformative event in Jewish history: the founding of the State of Israel (1948), the Holocaust (1939-1945), Theodore Herzl’s Zionist Congress (1897), exile; the First and Second Jewish Revolts against the Romans; Judah Maccabees revolt (188 BCE); the Babylonian exile, and the Exodus from Egypt.

The top of the page features a decorative header with the American flag on the left and the French flag on the right, both waving. The American flag's stars are prominent in the upper left corner.

and the advancement of the American idea. By the 1840s the bell had cracked and gone mute, but it was still used, a century later, to illustrate, as Abraham Lincoln once reflected, that America stood for more than independence, “something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come.” On D-Day, in 1944, Philadelphia mayor Bernard Samuel struck the bell with a mallet, and the tones broadcast around the world. Speaking at Pointe du Hoc in 1984, Ronald Reagan reflected what that meant to those who landed in France:

The Americans who fought here that morning knew word of the invasion was spreading through the darkness back home. They fought—or felt in their hearts, though they couldn’t know in fact, that in Georgia they were filling the churches at 4 A.M., in Kansas they were kneeling on their porches and praying, and in Philadelphia they were ringing the Liberty Bell.

Something else helped the men of D-day: their rock-hard belief that Providence would have a great hand in the events that would unfold here; that God was an ally in this great cause. ... That night, General Matthew Ridgeway on his cot, listened in the darkness for the promise God made to Joshua: “I will not fail thee nor forsake thee.” These are the things that impelled them; these are the things that shaped the unity of the Allies.

Strikingly, the bell recast by Whitechapel in 1976, boldly emblazoned by Britain with the words “let freedom ring,” lacked the Levitical verse, the extraordinary link between the American conception of liberty and the heritage of the Jewish people. It is therefore all the more striking that when July 4, 1976, actually dawned in America, something unexpected occurred in Jewish history that truly embodied the Liberty Bell.

On that July 4, Americans woke up expecting the headlines to be about the bicentennial of America,

and discovered that after midnight, Israel had engaged in a miraculous mission to rescue over 100 hostages in Entebbe, Uganda. Speaking at the United Nations, Israeli ambassador Chaim Herzog argued that this had been a victory for the entire free world: “We are proud not only because we have saved the lives of over 100 innocent people—men, women, and children—but because of the significance of our act for the cause of human freedom.” The Israelis had, on the American bicentennial, proclaimed liberty throughout the land and fulfilled, for the hostages, the very same biblical verse: “Each man shall return to his heritage, each man to his family.”

The Bell’s biblical story is worth rediscovering today. We are experiencing what *Commentary* has called “the great unraveling,” in which many on the left assail the greatness of America, describing its story as a series of unmitigated sins. Meanwhile, even on some segments of the right today, we hear dismissal of the universality of the American idea, and of a foreign policy that seeks to support liberty around the world. The bell embodies a people who, ever imperfect, ever exceptional, were inspired by the Bible to advance the cause of liberty on its own soil and throughout the world.

In 2004, on the 60th anniversary of D-Day, the people of Normandy dedicated a near-exact replica of the bell and rung it over the cliffs of Normandy, with the original sound of the bell echoing over the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc. We cannot fail to see in this a reminder of our obligation to preserve the true tone of the bell, the Hebraic grammar of American liberty, until more Americans are willing to hear it again.

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<https://www.commentary.org/articles/meir-soloveichik/liberty-bell-america/>

Unparalleled Opportunities

Dr. Sharon Poczter

*Associate Professor, Sy Syms School of Business and director of its Business Honors Program
Founding Director, The Lieberman-Mitzner Center for Public Service and Advocacy*



As America approaches its 250th anniversary, we are presented with a remarkable opportunity to reflect on what it means to be both an American and a patriot in the twenty-first century. For Jewish Americans, this anniversary holds particular significance—and arrives at a particularly consequential moment.

The United States has provided unparalleled opportunities for Jewish life to flourish. The freedoms guaranteed by our Constitution have enabled generations of Jews to practice their faith openly, contribute to civic life, and participate fully in shaping the nation's future. Yet as we approach this milestone, many American Jews find themselves confronting a troubling reality: rising antisemitism, growing social polarization, and increasing efforts to marginalize Jewish voices in civic, academic, and public life.

Too often, support for Israel or identification with Zionism is treated not as a legitimate expression of Jewish identity, but as a litmus test used to exclude or stigmatize Jews in spaces that should remain open to all Americans. Such efforts challenge a foundational American principle—that every citizen is entitled to equal rights, equal dignity, and equal participation regardless of religion or identity.

Precisely because this moment is fraught, Jewish Americans should not retreat from patriotism but embrace it more fully. The American ideals of religious liberty, equal protection under the law, free expression, and civic pluralism remain among the strongest safeguards our community possesses. The answer to prejudice is not disengagement from the American project; it is renewed commitment to it.

At the same time, the very meaning of patriotism has

become contested. Many young people have come to believe that patriotism requires unquestioning acceptance of every action taken by government leaders or public institutions. Faced with that false choice, some reject patriotism altogether.

But that is not the American tradition. Patriotism is not blind loyalty. It is a love of country rooted in a commitment to its highest ideals. It is possible—and often necessary—to criticize policies, acknowledge shortcomings, and advocate for change while remaining deeply patriotic. Indeed, some of the most patriotic Americans in our history were those who worked tirelessly to help the nation better fulfill its promises of liberty, equality, and justice.

This understanding of patriotism was exemplified by Senator Joe Lieberman, whose legacy continues to guide the work of the Senator Joseph I. Lieberman-Mitzner Center for Public Service and Advocacy. Senator Lieberman demonstrated that one could hold strong convictions, engage in principled debate, and disagree with others without losing faith in the institutions of American democracy. He believed that citizenship carries both rights and responsibilities and that faith and public service can strengthen one another.

As we commemorate 250 years of the American experiment, Senator Lieberman's example reminds us that patriotism is not about perfection—it is about stewardship. It is about believing that our nation is worth investing in, worth improving, and worth serving. For Jewish Americans, especially at this moment in our history, patriotism remains not merely a source of pride, but a source of resilience and hope for the future.

Esther in America

Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern

Senior Advisor to the Provost and Senior Program Officer of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.

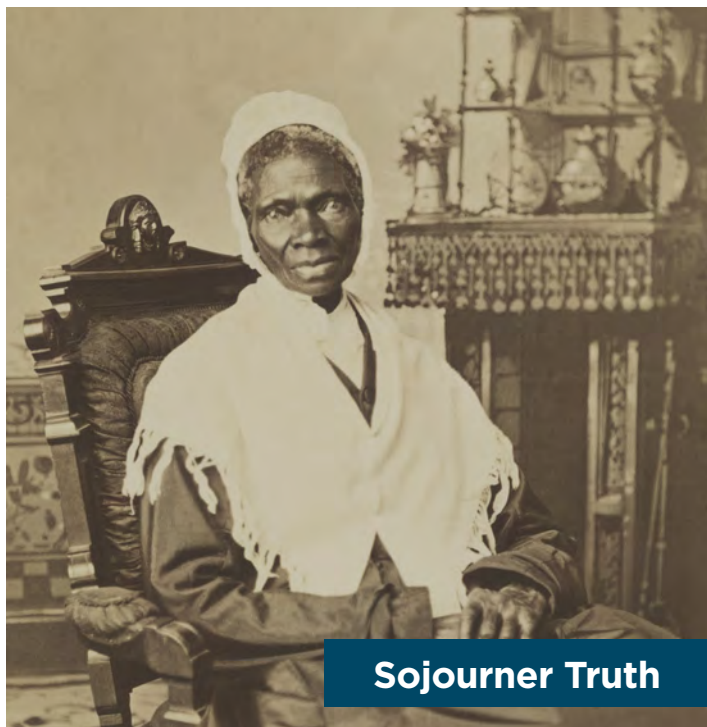


The Book of Esther, read during the Jewish holiday of Purim, has a special place in American history. Though some have argued that the unifying Biblical story for Americans is the account of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, the courage of the eponymous heroine of the Book of Esther has also been a source of succor and moral inspiration in America since the days of the colonies.

In the tale, Esther, after being taken to the palace of King Xerxes to be his queen, heroically risks her life for her people. At the urging of her cousin Mordecai, she acts to save her fellow Jews from the plot of the king's wicked adviser, Haman.

During the decade preceding the American Revolution, as colonists began rebelling against the British, Eran Shalev in *Evil Counselors, Corrupt Traitors, and Bad Kings: The Hebrew Bible and Political Critique in Revolutionary America and Beyond*, demonstrates that newspapers and preachers turned to Esther's story to articulate their own struggle for freedom. Upon the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1765, the *Boston Gazette* declared that whoever had suggested King George III enact such a law was "as great an Enemy . . . as was wicked Haman to the Jews." *The New York Journal*, in 1774, noted that like George III, the Persian

king "reigned over many distant provinces," and was, "by his prime minister, induced to oppress, and take measures to destroy many of his subjects." Lord Bute—and later, Lord North—were British Hamans. In a sermon titled "The Character of Haman," Thomas Reese thundered, "No principles of religion, virtue



Sojourner Truth

EITAN MILSTEIN

LEADERSHIP SCHOLAR
YESHIVA COLLEGE '28
NEW YORK, NY

"I am proud to be an American because we strive to be a more perfect union. We aren't perfect, but we strive to be more perfect."

GITTI JOSEPH

2025–2026 SACKS
IMPACT SCHOLAR
WURZWEILER STUDENT
BRONX, NY

"On this 250th anniversary I am grateful that we're in a protected and free country. And I recognize the military sacrifices of those who fought for this democracy."



or humanity can restrain the wretch, whose ruling passion is the lust for power.” King George III, like Xerxes, was “too ready to believe evil of his subjects, and to comply with the oppressive measures of his prime minister.” After the Revolution, president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) John Witherspoon compared the story of Esther to the story of America in his sermon, “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men,” preaching that “We have also an instance in Esther in which the most mischievous designs of Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite against Mordecai the Jew, and the nation from which he sprung, turned out at last to his own destruction, the honor of Mordecai, and the salvation and peace of his people.”

Americans also turned to Esther in the fight against slavery. In an influential 1836 pamphlet recorded in “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,” Angelina Grimké urged Southern white women to act like the Jewish queen. Arguing that the sin of slavery would lead to the moral destruction of all of American society, she encouraged them to risk their own lives, as Esther had done, to ensure the survival of their people. “Is there no Esther among you?” she asked rhetorically, “Read the history of this Persian queen, it is full of instruction.”

Later, Sojourner Truth also quoted Esther in a pivotal women’s rights rally in New York City, referenced in *History of Woman Suffrage*. “There was a king in the Scriptures,” Truth said, “and then it was the kings of the earth would kill a woman if she come into their

presence; but Queen Esther come forth, for she was oppressed, and felt there was a great wrong, and she said I will die or I will bring my complaint before the king.”

Nine days before Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, pastor William Weston Patton quoted to him Mordecai’s request of Esther that she risk her standing to achieve the salvation of her people. In “President Lincoln and the Chicago Memorial on Emancipation,” Patton asked, “who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” And your memorialists believe that in Divine Providence you have been called to the Presidency to speak the word of justice and authority which shall free the bondman and save the nation.

Americans today are not as biblically literate as their forebears. But Esther’s teachings should continue to resonate. Esther chose covenant over comfort. When Mordecai asked her to risk her life on behalf of her people, Esther sat in the lap of nobility. And yet she chose loyalty—to her family, to her people, and to their traditions.

Since the nation’s inception, Americans have found comfort, inspiration, and courage in Esther’s pages. She continues to teach us that a polity can only truly flourish when ancient traditions and beliefs are not squashed in the name of unity, but celebrated.

This essay originally appeared in Jewish Roots of American Liberty: The Impact of Hebraic Ideas on the American Story, edited by Wilfred M. McClay and Stuart Halpern (NY: Encounter, 2025), 93-96.

RABBI YITZY SPRUNG

SACKS RESEARCH SCHOLAR
2025-26, REVEL
HOUSTON, TX

“I am proud to be an American because... the country aspires to the broadest ideals of a society living by Godly values. It has transformed my life, my family’s story, and the story of the Jewish people.”

HANNAH SCHACHTER

LEADERSHIP SCHOLAR,
STERN COLLEGE, '27
BERGENFIELD, NJ

“America has transformed my perspectives by showing me how diversity, opportunity, and freedom can come together to shape both individual growth and strong communities.”

The American Jew's Dual Confrontation

Dr. Shira Weiss

Assistant Director, Sacks-Herenstein Center, and Assistant Professor of Jewish Philosophy, Revel



Dialectics, tensions between two competing drives, are a pervasive theme in many of the philosophical works of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. In *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Rabbi Soloveitchik distinguishes between the commands given to Adam in Chapter 1 and 2 of Genesis. In chapter one, he is commanded to “fill the world and dominate it” in more physical terms, while in chapter 2, he is commanded to be a servant and a guard in the Garden of Eden, which is interpreted more spiritually. In *Halakhic Man*, Rabbi Soloveitchik writes about the dialectic of cognitive man vs. *homoreligiosus*. In articles like “Majesty and Humility” and “Catharsis,” Rabbi Soloveitchik teaches how halakha demands that at times one advances, but at other times one must retreat and exercise self-restraint.

Marvin Fox, in his article “The Unity and Structure of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Thought” (*Tradition*, 1989), explains the lesson of such dialectics: “What the Rav teaches us is that we arrive at the deepest illumination that Judaism can offer us when we recognize that we must affirm the contradictory elements and learn to live with them in that dialectical tension which gives to each its full effective force.”

While such tension may pose more challenges than a “monochromatic harmony,” we cannot escape our complex reality in order to be at ease with ourselves and our world and should not seek “comfort rather than depth of insight, complacency rather than religious and moral challenge, self-involvement rather than the most significant engagement of which we are capable with God and with the world He created.”

Rabbi Soloveitchik calls for such dialectical engagement with God’s world in his essay, “Confrontation,” (*Tradition*, 1964), and articulates another duality. He describes the double confrontation of Jews, as members of the universal human race, as well as members of the covenantal faith community. He writes, “In this difficult role, we are summoned by God, who revealed himself at both the level of universal creation and that of the private covenant, to undertake a double mission- the universal human and the exclusive covenantal confrontation.” But how is one to strike the appropriate balance between one’s responsibilities to humankind and one’s commitment to an insular religious community? What are the benefits or dangers of prioritizing one over the other?

TZIRI LAMM
SACKS RESEARCH SCHOLAR
2025-26, AZRIELI
BROOKLYN, NY

“On this 250th anniversary I am grateful that I grew up in a land that encourages the pursuit of happiness.”

RACHEL AMAR
LEADERSHIP SCHOLAR
STERN COLLEGE '26
HOLLYWOOD, FL

“I am proud to be an American because I live in a country that values my voice.”

DAVID SMIGEL

ROHR WRITING SCHOLAR,
YESHIVA COLLEGE, '27
TEANECK, NJ

“I am proud to be an American because this country took in my family in the darkest of times and continues to act as a beacon of hope for those in need.”

JOSHUA SHAPIRO

SACKS RESEARCH SCHOLAR
2025-26, REVEL
WEST ORANGE, NJ

“I am proud to be an American because we lead the world on the global stage and must act as guardians of morality.”

As we reflect upon the Jewish experience in America at its 250th anniversary, grateful for the integration of immigrants who were afforded religious liberties as they pursued the American dream, Jews continue to face the dual confrontation that Rabbi Soloveitchik describes. In an Addendum to the article, Rabbi Soloveitchik cautions Jews not to isolate themselves and care for only their own needs but rather advocates for their concern of problems common to humankind and encourages partnership with those of other faiths to ameliorate them. “We consider ourselves members of the universal community charged with the responsibility of promoting progress in all fields, economic, social, scientific and ethical...” We must remain committed to the general welfare and progress of mankind, and demonstrate “that we are interested in combating disease, in alleviating human suffering, in protecting man’s rights, in helping the needy, etc.”

Soloveitchik encourages Jews to “stand with civilized society shoulder to shoulder...” to use their talents and resources to enrich society as “constructive and useful citizens” within a democratic, pluralistic

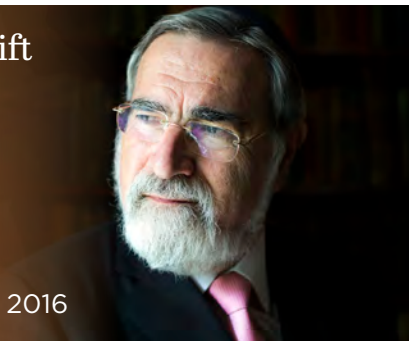
America. Contributions to the collective do not inhibit Jews from membership within their religious community characterized by a unique relationship with God and distinctive traditions, laws, and rituals.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks argues that religion, serving something larger than the self, is usually limited to members of one’s faith community and throughout history, engagement with other faiths has had devastating consequences including crusades wars and jihads. While peace may be pursued through face-to-face dialogue, sharing respective beliefs, it is a slow process that can quickly be undone. Instead of face-to-face talking together, like Rabbi Soloveitchik, Rabbi Sacks advocates for different faith communities to work ‘side by side’ on social action, cognizant of the universal need for food, shelter and security. “Our basic humanity precedes our religious differences” (“We Need Side by Side Dialogue, Not Just Face to Face,” 2012). At a pivotal time in Jewish history, when the American Jewish community plays an integral role on the world stage, Jews’ participation in civic, scientific and political enterprises is more critical than ever.

“The Jewish people are uniquely poised to show the world the gift of hope. When the world is divided, let us be united as Jews. Where there is despair, bring hope. Where there is hurt, bring healing. Where there is division, be united.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America, November 2016



Four Questions on Freedom and Independence

Rabbi Shalom Carmy

Assistant Professor of Jewish Philosophy and Bible, Yeshiva College



The fundamental question, all times and everywhere, is the one posed by the young Kierkegaard in his August 1835 journal: “The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die.”

We in America enjoy a standard of material living that would be unimaginable in any previous age. Our attachment to this lifestyle comes with a heavy price, as work and material values take up our time and attention. **How can we liberate ourselves from overdependence on these supposed advantages and from a culture that expects us to conform to its standards?**

Partly because we are so busy getting and spending, and partly because modern families are often fragile, our middle-class lives witness too many frazzled parents and overscheduled kids. **How can we strengthen family relations for the sake of meaningful transcendent goals, and how can we enable our communities to do the same?**

Our educational system is increasingly fixated on the skills of the workplace and socialization. Our Torah study, our engagement with the liberal arts, and our moments of self-reflection should promote a higher purpose. **How can we accomplish this as individuals and as members of our community?**

Lastly, those who, like me, were born after the Holocaust, have spent our lives in an environment in which hatred of Jews, and hatred of Israel, have been neither omnipresent nor powerful. The moratorium is over. **How shall we develop a realistic conception of our existence in Exile, that expresses American patriotism and Jewish faithfulness?**

These questions will be understood and experienced differently and with a different degree of urgency by those who are consciously committed to traditional religion and by those who are not. In the twenty-first century, 250 years after the Declaration of Independence, we Americans, we human beings, must still find our way to leave the spiritual Egypt and journey to Sinai.

“Happy is the country that will be privileged to be the home of this great sage.”

Rabbi Avraham Duber Kahana Shapiro

Remarks upon the arrival of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik to America



Reflections on Jewish Life in America

Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter

University Professor of Jewish History and Jewish Thought, Yeshiva University



In the last decade of the eighteenth century, Rebecca Samuel, then living in Petersburg, Virginia, wrote a letter to her parents in Hamburg, Germany, in which she explained why she was moving from that city to Charleston, South Carolina. She informed them that although her husband, Hyman, had earned the respect of their Gentile neighbors as a very successful clockmaker and silversmith, and although “one [i.e., a Jew] can live here peacefully,” she and her family were “leaving this place because of [the lack of] *Yehudishkeit*,” or Jewishness, which “is pushed aside here.” She explained that the *shochet* buys non-kosher meat, there is no *sefer Torah* in town, all Jewish-owned shops are open on Shabbat, there are no educational opportunities available for her two children, and almost none of the worshippers on the High Holidays wear a *tallit*, as Jacob Rader Marcus cites her in *American Jewry: Documents, Eighteenth Century*. “You can believe me that I crave to see a synagogue to which I can go. The way we live now is no life at all.”

The desire of Jews in America to be financially successful and respected by members of the community at large without sacrificing Jewish observance and communal cohesiveness has been a hallmark of Jewish life in this country from the very dawn of its existence. But those eighteenth-century Jews living in America were acutely aware that America was different than the countries from which they had emigrated and in which many of

their family members and religious authorities still lived. In a letter written in 1785 to a rabbi in Amsterdam, seeking guidance on a complex religious issue challenging their community, two lay leaders in Philadelphia noted that they were “anxiously awaiting” the rabbi’s reply “because this matter touches the very essence of our faith, especially in this country where everyone does as he pleases [*asher kol ish hayashar bi’enav ya’aseh*].” They wrote that in America, “the Kahal has no authority” over those who live in its midst, unlike the situation in Amsterdam and in many of those countries and communities they had left behind.

In the old country, the community still had a hold, to a greater or lesser extent, on those who lived within its geographical boundaries. In America, by contrast, the ability of the community to exercise any power was severely limited, as its leaders were only too acutely aware. In a note cited by Jonathan D. Sarna in *American Judaism: A History* about a half century later, a couple leaving Bavaria for Cleveland began with the warning, “Friends! You are traveling to a land of freedom where the opportunity will be presented to live without compulsory religious education.”³

For more than a hundred years after America’s founding, Orthodoxy was practiced by dispersed individuals committed to it who acted alone, bereft of any institutional infrastructure or support. It was only

some time in the second half of the nineteenth century that it found a place in a small number of communities that were beginning to be founded and developed.

Living in America, with its emphasis on freedom, democracy and individualism, was—and continues to be—both a blessing and a challenge to perpetuating Jewish values and practice. It is a blessing because we Jews have here been afforded an unprecedented opportunity to exercise our religion unhindered by external controls and constraints. At the same time, it serves as a real challenge because in a world without any “compulsory” prerogatives, any choices—including those to define and reject Jewish practice and identity—are possible, and even celebrated. And the more traditional the values and practices, the greater the challenge to their perpetuation.

But our focus on this 250th anniversary of America’s founding needs be on American Jewry as a whole, not just American Orthodoxy. With some exceptions, America has famously, and deservedly, been called a “*malchut shel chesed*,” – a county of kindness – a phrase that has been understood in different ways, all of which reflect how Jews think of themselves as Americans, given the religious freedom America has bestowed upon them.

And here I must express my own personal debt of gratitude to America. My father, Rabbi Herschel Schacter, *z”l*, was the first American Army chaplain to enter a concentration camp when he liberated the Buchenwald Concentration Camp on April 11, 1945. He had been serving as a pulpit rabbi in Stamford, Connecticut, when he volunteered to serve in the army in 1942. His parents were absolutely opposed to this move on his part, and, in response, he sent them a letter explaining why he felt compelled to contravene their explicitly stated wishes. Among his arguments,



he wrote (what follows is my English translation of the original Hebrew):

I thought a great deal about your feelings of sorrow concerning my decision to leave my comfortable position here and enlist in the army of our blessed land, the land of freedom and liberty—the only land among all the lands of the earth that has conferred equality and the right to exist to the Children of Israel—to fight for her and to protect all of these rights on our behalf and on behalf of the entire world.

Are we not obligated as faithful Jews to dedicate our lives on behalf of this, our truly blessed country that provided refuge and tranquility to our wretched and oppressed brethren?

And then, turning directly to his father, he wrote, “Please consider, dear father, where would you be had America not opened her compassionate doors and gates to all who knocked, to all those persecuted and downtrodden from all ends of the world?” Like millions of American Jews, all four of my grandparents were immigrants who created wonderful personal and Jewish lives in this country. My gratitude, my *hakarat hatov*, to America is profound. America has been good—very good—to my family, as it has to so many others.

Henrietta Szold: Leadership Through Service

Aliza Abrams Konig

Director of Strategy and Student Leadership, Sacks-Herenstein Center



Few American Jews have left a legacy as profound and enduring as Henrietta Szold (1860-1945). A pioneering educator, social activist, Zionist leader, and founder of Hadassah, Szold transformed the landscape of Jewish communal life in both the United States and the State of Israel. At a time when women were often excluded from positions of influence, she emerged as one of the most consequential Jewish leaders of the twentieth century, demonstrating that vision, determination, and service could change the course of history.

Born in Baltimore in 1860 to immigrant parents, Henrietta devoted her life to strengthening the Jewish people through education, communal responsibility, and institution-building. In 1909, she traveled to Palestine and saw the plight of refugees there. In response, she helped establish Zionist educational initiatives in America and later founded Hadassah in 1912, creating an organization that mobilized thousands of American Jewish women in support of healthcare, education, and social welfare. Under her leadership, Hadassah played a pivotal role in developing hospitals and public health services that would become foundational institutions in the future State of Israel.

Yet Henrietta's greatest contribution may have been her model of leadership itself. She understood that lasting change is achieved not through rhetoric alone, but through sustained commitment to the needs of others. Whether organizing healthcare systems, rescuing

Jewish children fleeing Nazi persecution, or inspiring generations of women to assume communal responsibility, she exemplified a form of leadership rooted in service.

As we commemorate 250 years of American Jewish contribution, Henrietta Szold stands as a powerful reminder that the most enduring legacies are built by those who dedicate their talents to strengthening both their own community and the broader world. Her life reflects the values of responsibility, compassion, and collective purpose that have long defined the American Jewish experience.



Henrietta Szold

An American, Sailor, and Jew: Uriah Phillips Levy

Sara Cohen

Administrative Coordinator, Sacks-Herenstein Center



History has a fondness for the trailblazers of its pages. Uriah Phillips Levy (1792 –1862), the first American Jew to serve as a commodore in the United States Navy, was one such trailblazer. Levy was born in Philadelphia in 1792 to parents of Sephardic descent. From a young age, Levy took to the sea; he became a cabin boy as a child and worked his way up the ranks to achieve a significant leadership role in the Navy. Despite his success plying the seas, Levy’s commitment to Judaism never faltered. In 1809, Levy was kidnapped by British Naval Officers, where he was ordered to take an oath on the Christian Bible, to which he responded: “I am an American, and I cannot swear allegiance to your king. And I am a Hebrew, and do not swear on your testament, or with my head uncovered.”

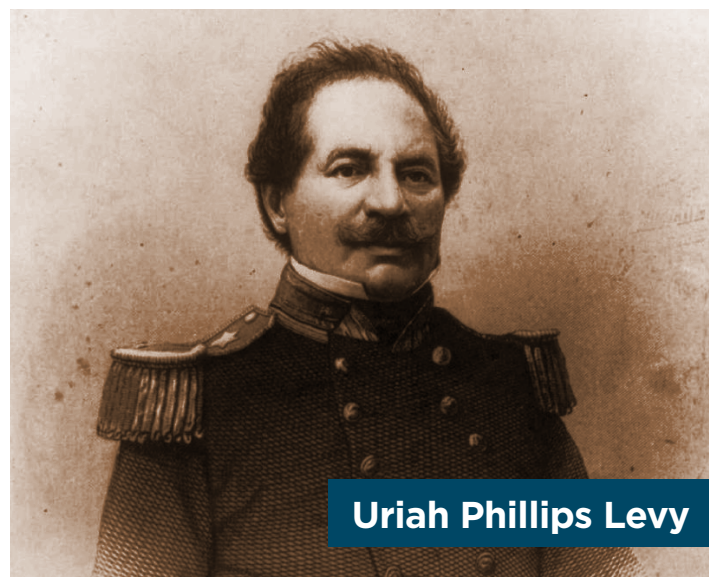
Levy served in the War of 1812, and later, when Civil War broke out, beseeched President Lincoln for the opportunity to serve his country again. Levy was also able to show his love for America in another way. Throughout his lifetime, Levy was avid admirer of Thomas Jefferson. After Jefferson’s death, his home,

Monticello, fell into disarray. When the opportunity presented itself in 1834, Levy jumped at the chance to purchase the property and spent many years restoring the home to its former glory. In 1853, the commodore married his much younger niece, Virginia Lopez, but the two did not have children.

Levy died nine years later.

In 2011, a statue of Levy was erected outside Congregation Mikveh Israel, the same synagogue where he celebrated his Bar Mitzvah over two hundred years before. The plaque below depicts the legacy of Uriah Phillips Levy, in his own words.

They read: “I am an American, sailor, and Jew.”



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“On this 250th anniversary I am grateful that America continues to serve as a bastion for moral good and the leader of the free world. Leading by example, this great nation continues to innovate and pioneer while simultaneously remaining loyal to its traditions and values.”

I Lift My Lamp

Best known for her poem "The New Colossus," Emma Lazarus (1849-1887) used her immortal words "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," to transform the Statue of Liberty into a symbol of hope. Lazarus gave voice to America's highest ideals.

Yet her contribution extended beyond poetry. At a time when Jewish refugees fleeing persecution faced widespread prejudice, she used her public platform to advocate for those who were vulnerable and unheard. As we celebrate 250 years of American Jewish contribution, Emma Lazarus reminds us that some of the most enduring acts of leadership are rooted in moral courage, compassion, and a commitment to helping society live up to its highest ideals.



Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"



Yeshiva University

