



250 Years of Judaism in America And the Next 250

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For millennia, Jews had a story about where they were in history. Tonight, I want to highlight how America changed that story.

Years ago, I remember sitting with an Israeli colleague who was describing her encounter with the children's book *Rivka's First Thanksgiving*. The book, written in 2001, is set in the United States in 1910 and tells the story of a 9-year-old Jewish immigrant persuading her family and her rabbis that she should be allowed to celebrate Thanksgiving. In response to their resistance, the young girl says: "You do not seem to understand that immigrants came to America to escape from mean, wicked people who hurt them and their families. That is why the Pilgrims came and that is why the Jewish people came later. The Pilgrims were thankful and I think that we should be too. Signed by Rivka Rabin."

My colleague said that, upon reading this book, something clicked for her that she had never understood before: For American Jews, the United States *was* the promised land. Not just another Diaspora to ride out, not a Gentile government granting them more favorable terms, but a kind of different end to Jewish history. I felt at the time and still feel that this was an overstatement, especially of this children's book, but the reaction stuck with me, and it captured something deep. Rivka's letter indeed presents herself as a modern day Pilgrim, seamlessly integrated into the story of America. And it made me realize how much I, personally, never thought of myself growing up as a Jew who happened to live in America. I thought of myself as a Jew, and as an American, and I never imagined it any other way.

As we gather tonight to reflect on the upcoming United States Sestercentennial, I want to revisit some obvious truths about Jewish life in this country, ones we take for granted but should not. I want to think about how the Aggadah and Halakhah of American Jews has been upended by our experiences here. And I want to reflect what it will take for us to invest in the next chapter of a robust Jewish life in the next quarter millenium.

A New Story

America upended our aggadah. For millennia, Jews saw the world fairly simply. We were exiled, dethroned, left to the whims of nations that cared more or less about our well being, riding out the storm of history in the ark of the covenant. Eventually, at the end of time, all this would end, balance would be restored, the world made right again. Until then, things would be out of sorts, at times oppressive at times thriving, but always out of sorts. For a long time, this was not only the Jewish understanding of the Jewish story, it was the Jewish narrative of the universe:

בראשית רבה ב:ד

ר"ש בן לקיש פתר קריא בגליות
והארץ היתה תהו זה גלות בבל שנאמר (ירמיה ד) ראיתי את הארץ והנה תהו,
ובהו זה גלות מדי (אסתר ו) ויבהילו להביא את המן,
וחושך זה גלות יון שהחשיכה עיניהם של ישראל בגזירותיה...
על פני תהום זה גלות ממלכת הרשעה שאין להם חקר כמו התהום מה התהום הזה אין לו חקר
אף הרשעים כן,
ורוח אלהים מרחפת זה רוחו של מלך המשיח, היאך מה דאת אמר (ישעיה יא) ונחה עליו רוח ה'

Bereishit Rabbah 2:4

"And the earth was wild and waste / tohu vavohu, and darkness over the face of the abyss, and the spirit of God hovered over the waters"

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish interpreted this verse as referring to the exiles:

"And the earth was tohu" — this is the Babylonian exile, as it says (Jeremiah 4): "*I looked at the earth and behold, it was tohu.*"

"And vohu" — this is the exile of Media (Persia), as it says (Esther 6): "*They hurried / Vayavhilu to bring Haman.*"

"And darkness" — this is the exile of Greece, which darkened the eyes of Israel with its decrees...

"Over the face of the abyss" — this is the exile of the wicked kingdom (Rome), which cannot be fathomed, just as the abyss cannot be fathomed — just as the abyss has no bottom, so too the wicked have none.

"And the spirit of God hovered" — this is the spirit of the Messianic King, as it says (Isaiah 11): "*And the spirit of God shall rest upon him.*"

Four kingdoms, four eras of time. The narrative of the world was one in which Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel was followed by Babylonian exile, Persian anti-Semitism, Greek erasure of Jewish identity and finally Roman subjugation, rendering the Jews a disfavored minority in a sprawling and seemingly unending empire that eventually became defined by the worst dynamics of supersessionism the Jews could have imagined. As

Christianity and Islam came to dominate the world in which Jews lived, we saw our new hosts as nothing but the continuation of this fourth foreign kingdom of Jewish history. We remained firmly ensconced as second-class citizens—with periods of greater and lesser privilege—and would remain so until the Messianic age. We were not of and alienated from the systems that ruled us. The Mishnah in Avot instructs us to pray for the welfare of the government simply because without it, the Leviathan of the state of nature would eat us alive. And we dutifully prayed in our synagogues: מלך מלכי המלכים ברחמיו יתן בלבם ובלב כל יועציהם, ושריהם לעשות טובה עמנו ועם כל ישראל, we asked *God* to imbue the hearts of the sovereign to deal kindly with the Jews. All we could do was to ask for kindness, and to wait for the fourth kingdom to fall.

Then came the European Enlightenment, which offered a new look at old conventions. Religion began to be dethroned, as science took its place as the way to make sense of the universe. A notion of human equality began to spread, monarchies began to yield to republics, and revolutions swept governments away. In all of this, the Jews saw great promise and began to realize great benefits.

But European emancipation was often encumbered. In France, to take one example, the Jews were admitted to the new Republic as full and equal citizens, but provided that they renounced any notion of being a separate people. They could be Frenchmen of the Mosaic persuasion, but not an עם of their own. Jews could transcend their history of oppression only by transcending their own historical understanding of themselves. In other countries, Jews only fully experienced Emancipation through baptism, described by Heinrich Heine as his ticket of admission to European culture.

Ultimately, no amount of Enlightened thinking was enough to flush the supersessionist toxin out of the body of Europe. Bundist Jews who sought refuge and prosperity via solidarity with other working class Europeans were ultimately overwhelmed by blood and soil nationalism that always relegated the Jews to being foreigners on another's soil. The Holocaust was the final act in this play, a culmination, if you will, of the fourth kingdom's cruelty. Zionism's insight was to realize that this is where it was all heading. That Jewish movement retained—and in many ways retains—the world view of the four kingdoms, asserting that the only Jewish refuge from history is an end to history, a messianic age that undoes what came before.

But America was different.

The founders of the United States were interested not only in reforming their old nations, but creating a new one. When in the course of human events, it became necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which had connected them with another, they did not simply splinter into new kingdoms and duchies perpetuating old patterns. They played with new ideas in a New World. They held certain truths to be self-evident, among them that all men were created equal. That governments derived their just powers from the consent of the governed. They asserted that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it. Particular governments were now seen as means rather than ends, tools of history rather than one of its inevitable features.

Even more important and more dramatic, the Constitution of the United States was free of any particular religious character. For the first time, Jews lived in a society that did not tolerate them, it included them as true equals. Article VI miraculously states that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” The First Amendment miraculously states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The 14th Amendment later incorporated these guidelines and applied them equally to all of the states.

This new reality for Jews was summed up in the powerful exchange between Moses Seixas and George Washington on the occasion of the latter’s visit in 1790 to the Newport Synagogue, where Seixas served as a sexton. Seixas reflected on the Jews’ experience of their four-kingdom history, and just how different America was:

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...which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance...deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue or language, equal parts of the great governmental machine...

Washington answered him, echoing back Seixas’s language, and underscoring that Jews were not tolerated by Americans, they *were* Americans, just like any other faithful citizens:

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were 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.

But perhaps even more significantly, because America was fundamentally founded on an idea, as a set of principles, as opposed to the notion of a reformed government for an ethnic group living on its land, it never demanded that the Jews purchase their equality at the price of their collective identity. Jews, and other immigrant groups, were assumed to be able to hold fast to the ideals of America while also supporting aspirations for their respective homelands and by building pockets of culture with the fellow members of their minority group. No oath of fealty to the Fatherland was required; we were not expected to be simply Americans of the Mosaic faith. As George Washington himself blessed the community in that same 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 fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.” The stock of Abraham could live on in America as the stock of Abraham, the price was simply to be good citizens and to show fealty to the Constitution—just like everyone else.

American Jews hold these truths to be self-evident, but they are anything but. America is in many ways a modern-day Rome, and drew inspiration, in its founding, from this ancient empire. A version of the Roman eagle adorns our currency and sits as a finial atop our flags. But this country for the Jews has never been ממלכת הרשעה. It is not even accurately described as a מלכות של חסד, a place that is kind to the Jews. Rather, it has simply been, in a completely unprecedented way, a country in which Jews are full and equal citizens. And it created a culture in which Jews were no longer waiting for the last exile to end. They were no longer waiting for the fourth kingdom to fall. America offered an exit ramp from that highway of history and changed Jewish life and consciousness forever.

A New Type of Halakhah

But America has not only changed the Jewish narrative, it has had a deep impact on our nomos as well. Our halakhah looks different because of our time in America, particularly as we became more integrated into society. Some of the story of normative Judaism in America is a typical modern one. The same questions that played out in post-Emancipation Europe played out here, and the proposed answers were not always particularly interestingly different. There were pressures to make accommodations around observance, and there were pockets of cultural and religious resistance to the same.

Some challenges, however, are more distinctly American. How to pray for the government when you are as much a part of it as anything else? Dozens of prayers have been written for American synagogues that try to capture this new ethos. The halakhic category of קרובי מלכות

entertains leniencies for Jews who needed to walk the corridors of Gentile sovereigns. In a democracy where, as de Tocqueville put it, the people are “the real directing power”, should we be lowering barriers between us and our neighbors in order to promote Jewish interests and a functioning democracy? In a society where we see ourselves and our neighbors as shared citizens in a shared political project, Talmudic laws that distinguish between Jews and Gentiles on matters of safeguarding property and life become not just reputationally embarrassing, but conceptually incoherent. Those who live in a world in which all being created equal is a self-evident truth will need readings of Torah that do not fly in the face of this fundamental commitment.

But more than any given particular, I want to suggest that the most distinctive aspect of an American discourse of religious norms stems from the ease with which Judaism can be modified or abandoned in America. In Europe, Emancipation often presented a stark choice of remaining within the traditional Jewish community or finding ways to assimilate outside of it. American Jewish life, on the other hand, had entirely different dynamics. America offered citizenship to Jews—and to all other immigrant and religious groups—as a pathway into a society that would be defined by its citizens, without any government involvement in promoting dominant forms of religious or cultural expression. This wide-open environment has meant that American Jews have the untrammelled freedom to intensify, attenuate or remix their Jewish commitments as they see fit. Yes, Jews were not always broadly welcomed in all social environments in America. This city and others are full of institutions whose origins lie in the social and professional exclusion of Jews from fields they eventually came to dominate. But the fundamental vectors of American society always pointed towards our inclusion and to an inertial lack of distinction between us and our neighbors.

The sociologist Charles Liebman long ago pointed out that all Jews in America are Jews by choice. Nothing in American society truly binds you to your Jewishness or expects you to maintain it. Yes, family pressures are real. Insular communities can often effectively coerce people to remain within them. But Jewish life in America plays out in an unpressurized cabin, even if many Jews find ways to put on their own oxygen masks.

All this means that Judaism in America has had to cultivate a Judaism that **one would choose**. Or, what we call in rabbinic parlance, עבודה מאהבה. Service that flows from love. Not from יראה, from fear, pressure or a sense of having no alternative. Service that flows from love has always been the gold standard for our tradition, and it is hard to achieve. Here is how Maimonides sums up and codifies that prized disposition:

רמב"ם תשובה י:ב

העובד מאהבה עוסק בתורה ובמצוות והולך בנתיבות החכמה לא מפני דבר בעולם ולא מפני יראת הרעה ולא כדי לירש הטובה אלא עושה האמת מפני שהוא אמת וסוף הטובה לבא בגללה, ומעלה זו היא מעלה גדולה מאד ואין כל חכם זוכה לה, והיא מעלת אברהם אבינו שקראו הקדוש ברוך הוא אוהבו לפי שלא עבד אלא מאהבה והיא המעלה שצונו בה הקדוש ברוך הוא על ידי משה שנאמר ואהבת את ה' אלהיך, ובזמן שיאהוב אדם את ה' אהבה הראויה מיד יעשה כל המצוות מאהבה.

Rambam, Laws of Repentance 10:2

One who serves out of love engages in Torah and mitzvot and walks in the paths of wisdom not for any worldly reason, not out of fear of harm, and not in order to inherit the good — but does what is true because it is true, and the good will ultimately come on its own account. This level is a very great level, and not every wise person merits it. It is the level of Avraham our father, whom the Holy and Blessed One called Lover—because he served only out of love. And it is the level commanded by the Holy and Blessed One through Moshe, as it says: *"And you shall love the Lord your God"* — and when a person loves God with the proper love, s/he will immediately perform all the mitzvot out of love.

Rambam here emphasizes the unusual nature of religious commitment that is maintained for no reason other than conviction and enthusiasm. Most people—even among the wise!—will not attain this level, but those who do reach the level of Avraham Avinu, who, under no duress other than the longings of his heart and the searchings of his mind, sought out a new path that would bring him purpose and meaning.

Jews in America are often preoccupied with demographic continuity and our checkered attempts to push those indicators in the right direction. This is reasonable, even necessary. But I want to suggest to you that the same America that attenuated commitment, that led to skyrocketing intermarriage rates, that has stagnated natural Jewish population growth, that same America forced us to have **עבודה מאהבה**. So defining of American Jewish life is this simple fact: people only do it because they want to do it! This is maddening for rabbis and educators, it is exhausting when recruiting people to come to events. It is inefficient to the point of insanity when it feels like you have to subsidize, entice, seduce people into participating in Jewish life and when commitment feels unattainable. But for those who do stay, for those who do invest, it produces something remarkable: Jewish life that is embraced for its own sake, because people have determined it is truly better than alternatives.

America has correspondingly forced us to speak about mitzvot less as a yoke and more like a magnet or a compass. It moves us from a discourse of guilt and loyalty to a discourse of

aspiration. We are pushed to call people out less for their deviations from the lines we toe and to call people in more for the opportunity to build something together.

You cannot imagine this beit midrash, this yeshiva, without America. I don't mean just the egalitarian space that reflects the way feminism impacted and shaped 20th century America and left its impact on the workplace, the academy, and the halls of power. I mean its more fundamental character: We are proud and enthusiastic about observance. We see mitzvot as opportunities to build something extraordinary. We believe that halakhah must make sense and must be something you can explain to others. We believe that the discipline of Jewish life is ultimately about manifesting values that we care about. Our normative discourse is one that does not take anything for granted, since we know, as American Jews, that you cannot take anyone for granted. It is a place grounded in עבודה מאהבה, the joy and love of serving God, the Torah and the Jewish people. And for that, we have America to thank.

A Fraught Moment

One can be appropriately grateful and clear-eyed on what America has meant for the Jews without being Pollyannish. This is a tough time. We may approach the 250th anniversary of America with joy, but it is a fraught moment. The country is divided and, in many ways, pessimistic, with recent polling showing that clear majorities have little to no confidence in national news media, Congress and the Federal Government. Pride in being an American has been steadily sliding downward in the last 15 years.

As Jews, we are confronting realities we thought would not manifest again in America. Surges in antisemitism, measurable as separate from anti-Israel activism. A retreat, in certain quarters, from Christianity's 20th century reorientation towards Judaism, which reached their apex with The Second Vatican Council, reverting from those more ecumenical formulations to the supersessionism of old. A resurfacing of socialist ideologies that technically have space for Jews as faith-practitioners but revile their collective efforts to live as a sovereign people. An end to the bipartisan consensus around Israel with a specter of bipartisan support for spurning the Jewish state.

These are all real, and my children are growing up in a world very different than the one that nurtured me. I know enough about history not to predict the turns it will take. As a grandchild of survivors, I will never assume that any time or place is an impregnable fortress against the forces of hate that can wipe out places of Jewish flourishing. But as an American, and as a student of Judaism in America, I do not, cannot, and will not classify America as

simply the latest manifestation of the fourth kingdom. Americans can be antisemites like anyone else, Americans can be cruel and wicked like anyone else. But America's DNA is different. I was recently reminded of President Clinton's wonderful line in his First Inaugural Address: "There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America." This remains true. It remains true. Even after all we have been through in recent years, even as we live in a country where 44% of people feel they do not share values with other Americans, even as people are increasingly afraid that "the other side" of the political divide not only disagrees with them but is coming to take their country away from them. The ideals on which America was founded, the Constitution that continues to govern it, these remain pathways to achieving human dignity, to respecting human equality, to protecting religious liberty. And, most important for the Jews among us: America's problems are our problems. We are not living under the protection of a sovereign. We are part of the sovereign people by whose consent the government governs. A passive pessimism is not an option for us. As long as we are here, we need to do the work that will make Judaism flourish in the United States, and we need to do what we can, as Americans, to make the United States flourish.

The Task Before Us

What does that entail? As citizens of this country, we have something to offer. We walk through the world with the conviction that the human being was created in goodness and in the image of God — and America needs that conviction right now, when so many of its citizens have lost faith that their neighbors are decent. We know how to disagree without fracturing — Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel fought for generations and never stopped learning from each other — and America needs that model too, when political opponents have become enemies rather than fellow travelers. These are not small contributions. They are what a tradition that has thought seriously about how human beings live together can offer a country that is struggling to remember how.

And for our own community: we need to be honest that Judaism is not simply an Enlightenment religion of universal values dressed in ancient garb. It is a covenant, forged in descent, anchored in a people. The same open America that forced us toward *עבודה מאהבה* can also tempt us to dilute what is particular and demanding about who we are. We must resist that. We must invest in learning, in translation, and in making the full depth of this tradition available — to Jews who are choosing it, and to others who may want to.

But we will do this work mainly by doubling down on עבודה מאהבה, the mode that America taught us how to inhabit on an unprecedented scale. Here, the Talmud offers a reminder of the potency of this mode of service, calling us to both optimism and a heightened sense of responsibility.

בבלי סוטה לא.

מאי איכא בין עושה מאהבה לעושה מיראה? איכא הא דתניא, רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר: גדול העושה מאהבה יותר מן העושה מיראה, שזה תלוי לאלף דור, וזה תלוי לאלפים דור, הכא כתיב: לאלפים לאהבי ולשומרי מצותי, והתם כתיב: ולשומרי מצותיו לאלף דור...

Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 31a

What is the difference between one who performs *mitzvot* out of love and one who does so out of fear? It is as we have learned: Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says — greater is the one who acts out of love than the one who acts out of fear. For the one who acts out of fear — is sustained for a thousand generations, while the one who acts out of love is sustained for two thousand generations. For here it says "to thousands — לאלפים — who love Me and keep My commandments," and it is written there: "and to those who keep God's commandments for a thousand generations..."

Shemirat Mitzvot—simply following the rules of the covenant—will get you 1000 generations of *hesed*, of love manifest as kindness from God. But if you *love* the pathways of the covenant, you will get at least 2000 generations of the same. Put another way: עבודה מאהבה is a bigger lift, but it is much more durable. Train a people to manage to love God and Torah and Judaism in an environment where nothing is expected of you and you will have created a near eternal bond that will last longer than you can imagine.

I am not a politician; and though I am, in a sense, the son of a politician, I still don't pretend to know if America's best days are behind us. But I do know this: it would be best for Jews to hope that they are ahead of us. And as long as there is hope that they are, we must do our part to make it so. The basic value of הכרת הטוב / gratitude ought to be enough to elicit this from us. But our own tradition tells us here that when we build a culture of עבודה מאהבה, we should be building on a scale that thinks in thousands of generations. The idea of America is too precious to see as simply another manifestation of the fourth kingdom. This is our democracy as much as anyone else's, and internalizing that should gear us up for at least the next 250 years of answering Washington's call. May God imbue *our* hearts with the sense of purpose that will make us proud Jews who continue to do our part not to only to benefit from but to contribute to this great experiment of which we have been blessed to take part.