

# God and the Fourth of July

**Asked to propose a national seal in 1776, Adams and Jefferson chose religious themes.**



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On July 4, 1776, after voting to approve the Declaration of Independence, the Continental Congress advanced the following resolution: “That Dr. Franklin, Mr. J. Adams and Mr. Jefferson, be a committee, to bring in a device for a seal for the United States of America.”

Of these three founders, two suggested seals that incorporated profoundly biblical images. Franklin, according to his own notes, proposed the following as the national seal: a picture of “Moses standing on the Shore, and extending his Hand over the Sea, thereby causing the same to overwhelm Pharaoh who is sitting in an open Chariot, a Crown on his Head and a Sword in his Hand. Rays from a Pillar of Fire in the Clouds reaching to Moses, to express that he acts by Command of the Deity.” Underneath the image, Franklin added, would appear the following motto: “Rebellion to Tyrants is obedience to God.”

Jefferson, as described by John Adams in his correspondence, suggested a seal that bore a different image, but also from the Hebrew Bible: “the Children of Israel in the Wilderness, led by a Cloud by day, and a Pillar of Fire by night.”



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While the Declaration's approval on the Fourth of July is still celebrated throughout the land, the tale of the seal that began on the same day in 1776 has been all but forgotten. Bruce Feiler, author of "America's Prophet: Moses and the American Story" (2009), reflected that when he first encountered the story, it "stunned me. Why hadn't I heard about this before?" The legal historian Michael I. Meyerson, in his 2012 book "Endowed by Our Creator," reported that he had used Google Books to search more than 200 Thomas Jefferson biographies published since 1950 and had found only 12 describing Jefferson's national-seal proposal.

### **More Houses Of Worship**

The messages behind the two Founders' proposed images are quite different. In the biblical tale of the splitting of the sea, Franklin chose a scriptural story in which God himself miraculously intervenes into the natural order and redeems his people. The book of Exodus emphasizes that, in this event, only the Almighty was actively engaged: "And the Lord saved Israel from the hands of Egypt, and Israel saw Egypt dead on the shores of the sea."

Jefferson's symbol, by contrast, focused on the courage of the people of Israel in journeying into the desert; it celebrated not so much the miracle performed by God as much as the human spirit. This, too, is lauded by the Bible, in the book of Jeremiah: "I remember thee, the loyalty of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown."

Religious Jews to this day observe two separate holidays that commemorate these disparate themes. In the spring, they observe Passover. It is a remembrance of God's miraculous intervention against a tyrannical Pharaoh, when Jews emphasize at the Seder that the Exodus occurred through the Almighty's hand alone, "not by angel nor any other intermediary."

Then, six months later, Jews celebrate Sukkot, or Tabernacles, and build huts to commemorate, according to one opinion in the Talmud, the ramshackle shelters in which Israelites dwelled as they followed God through the desert.

As Britain's former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written, Sukkot can thus be seen less as a celebration of divinely wrought miracles than of Israel, of a people's courage to begin a journey "with no certainty other than faith itself that they would reach their destination."

Taken together, these two national-seal proposals uncannily presaged what the young nation would experience during the Revolutionary War that following the Declaration's adoption.

The American victory against the most powerful empire on earth was seen by many patriots as a miracle, a re-enactment of the Exodus itself. This sentiment was expressed by George Washington, who, in his 1789 letter to the Jewish community in Savannah, Ga., concluded his correspondence by invoking the "wonder-working Deity, who long since delivered the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors . . . whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation."

At the same time, as miraculous as the American victory may have been, Washington himself, and the soldiers he led, remind us that the Revolution is also a tale of human endurance. "These are the times that try men's souls," Thomas Paine famously reflected in 1776, and his next words ring true today: "The summer soldier and

the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.”

Ultimately, the Continental Congress adopted the Great Seal familiar today. The front shows a bald eagle clutching an olive branch and 13 arrows (for the original states), and the back bears an unfinished pyramid of 13 layers—with the Eye of Providence overhead.

As we observe the Fourth of July, it is entirely apt for Americans to thank God for the miracle of the nation’s founding—and to express gratitude as well for the courage of the men and women who helped bring it about.

*Mr. Soloveichik is the rabbi and minister of Congregation Shearith Israel in Manhattan and director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought of Yeshiva University.*