

## *A Kosher Fourth of July*

Two hundred forty-three years ago, a new nation was inspired by the Old Testament.

By [William McGurn](#)

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Since that fateful July 4 when the Second Continental Congress invoked the unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to declare independence from King George III, an argument has raged over the Christian roots of the American Founding. Now a group of scholars suggest that if we are looking only to the Gospels to understand the new American nation, we may be arguing over the wrong testament.

“The American Republic,” they write, “was born to the music of the Hebrew Bible.”

The book is called “Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: The Hebrew Bible in the United States: A Sourcebook.” The title comes from Leviticus and is inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. The book comes courtesy of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University, where it was pulled together by Meir Soloveichik, Matthew Holbreich, Jonathan Silver, and Stuart Halpern.

These men are not arguing that America was founded as a Jewish nation. Nor is their subject Jews in America, or the role of Jews in the American Founding. Their proposition is more supple and profound: that at key moments in the national story, Americans have looked to the ancient Israelites to understand themselves, their blessings and their challenges.

The evidence, they say, is all around us. The American landscape is dotted with town names that reflect this understanding, from the Zions, Canaans and Shilohs to the Goshens, Salems and Rehoboths. And whether it is John Winthrop invoking a “covenant” to characterize the order the Puritans established with Massachusetts Bay Colony, or Martin Luther King more than three centuries later talking about having been to the mountaintop, Americans have long looked to the biblical Israelites for the “political and cultural vocabulary” to explain the American proposition.

Though this American affinity for the Israelites pre-dates the Revolution, the war for independence intensified the parallels. In their revolt against George III, the men of the 13 colonies saw themselves as modern Israelites escaping a latter-day Pharaoh. So when the Second Continental Congress created a committee to design a seal for the new United States, also on July 4, 1776, it was only natural that two of the committee members—Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin—turned to Exodus.

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Jefferson proposed the seal feature the Israelites in the wilderness, led by a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night. Franklin suggested Moses extending his hand over the Red Sea, causing the waters to overwhelm Pharaoh in his chariot. These days, you could call these examples of cultural appropriation.

As the subtitle indicates, this is a sourcebook and not a sustained argument. But it is no less compelling. As the authors note, all these American allusions to the Israelites didn't come from Jews. They came from Christians, low-church Protestants in particular.

With the possible exception of Martin Luther King, no American leader integrated the imagery and language of the Hebrew bible into his own speech as seamlessly as Abraham Lincoln, who as president-elect in 1861 spoke of his fellow Americans as the Almighty's "almost chosen people."

From the cadence of Psalm 90 in the opening of his Gettysburg Address ("four score and seven years ago") to his letter telling the mayor of Philadelphia "may my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I ever prove false" to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, to his invocation of Psalm 19 in his Second Inaugural (e.g., "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous forever"), when Lincoln spoke the moral language of liberty, his words echoed the Hebrew Bible.

This was a double-edged sword when it came to slavery. Abolitionism found much to embrace: "I have heard their cry" (Exodus 3:7), "Let my people go" (Exodus 5:1), "Break every yoke" (Isaiah 58:6) and so forth. But relying on Scripture for denunciations of slavery had its problems, beginning with Noah's curse against the Canaanites in Genesis 9.

Jews describe Passover as *zman cheiruteinu*, or "the time of our freedom." Independence Day might thus be thought of as America's Passover. And that magnificent second stanza of "America the Beautiful" ends with a line that could have been delivered by Moses: "Thy liberty in law."

Across the land this July 4, American homes will play host to backyard barbecues, the company of family, friends and neighbors, maybe all topped off with fireworks. You might say it is the American version of what the Hebrew prophet Micah had in mind when he wrote that "they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid."

Which also happens to have been George Washington's favorite way to describe the blessings of liberty we celebrate this and every Independence Day.