

The Fourth of July *A Yontif for Us Jews?*

I am a first generation American. My Italian dad came from war-weary Europe to make his way in America. He traveled with all the essentials, which in those days were two suitcases, a shopping bag and a crumpled shred of paper that had on it the address of a distant cousin who lived in Pittsburgh. The family spoke not a word of English but when they arrived by boat in NY harbor, English wasn't yet necessary. Tears were enough, though. My dad recalls that when he saw the Statue of Liberty he broke down in tears of joy for what he believed was his salvation and indeed his only hope.

My father (z"l) He never stopped talking about how much he loved America. Years later he would often say that if it hadn't been for the Americans and what they did during WW II, there wouldn't have been a Jew left in Europe. For that reason in his honor and memory I personally thank every WWII vet that I meet.

I suppose it's obvious; I grew up in a patriotic family. My parents knew first hand what it was like to live in fear for your life. As part of the American army and in the company of Italian partisans, my dad was one of the liberators of the Buchenwald death camp.

Like other Jews, my parents had seen hatred and cruelty and had been on the receiving end of anti-semitism. They were forever grateful to live in America.

I learned growing up that Jews didn't have saints, but in our kitchen we had a picture of President Roosevelt. Later on my mother added a picture of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. My mother had created a shrine to freedom. The only thing missing was the drawing of the "Praying Hands."

Our family took the Fourth of July very seriously. Just like Election Day, in our house The Fourth of July was a Yontif, a real Jewish holiday.

Miniature American flags lined the walkway up to the front door. Later on my dad added a life-size cutout of Uncle Sam. For years, my mom dressed my sister and me in red hats, white shirts and blue shorts so that we would look good when we went to the Fourth of July parade -- which we never missed, even if it was pouring rain and we had to wear clear plastic raincoats over our patriotic outfits!

My parents never ever took being in America for granted.

Even in the sixties when the country was immersed in the civil rights struggle, Watergate and the Vietnam War, I can still remember how offended my father was the time he saw some protesters spelling America with a "k." "That 'k' makes America look like Nazi Germany," my dad said. He believed that anyone had the right to criticize any administration, but no one had the right to mock America itself.

rabbi barbara

Rabbi Barbara Aiello

But something happened and it seemed that somehow patriotism went out of style. Little by little the Fourth of July flags and banners disappeared from my dad's neighborhood. And in 1980, the year that he died, his house was the only one that still had the flags and the Uncle Sam. The celebrations of the holiday that was a yontiff for our family and many others now seemed a little strange, more than a little hokey, to modern Americans.

So, as it is just a few short days before our Nation's birthday, I want to suggest that we Jews reclaim the Fourth of July as a day for thanking God for America. And that we think of it not only as a "holiday" but as a "holy day," as well.

Think about it for a moment. The Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution are sacred documents. Each one of them is a spiritual statement that has its roots in the Torah.

"We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal" is exactly how The Declaration of Independence begins. But, as my rabbinical colleagues of TorahFax, ask, is it really obvious -- really "self-evident" that we are all created equal? Some of us are tall, some are short, some of us are truly wise while others of us are foolish. We are white, black and all shades in between, so, how is it so obvious that we are all created equal?

It seems to me that there is nothing "self-evident" about it at all. And it is really only "self-evident" if we take the time to look through biblical eyes, if we take seriously what it says on the first page of the Bible where we read that G-d created the human being and that all human beings in God's own image.

And given the sacredness of human life, the spark of the divine that's deep inside every single one of us and given the belief that our patriots held that this was true, it was from that specific belief that our country based itself on the principles and freedoms written down in the Bill of Rights and later on in the body and the amendments of the Constitution.

When President Abraham Lincoln established Thanksgiving Day, he continued the tradition by basing this celebration on us, the Jewish people, who observed the biblical holiday of Sukkot where we thanked God each year for the fruits of the earth. The proclamation that makes Thanksgiving Day a national holiday contains words from the Torah that describe the Jewish festival of Sukkot.

American values have their roots in Jewish values. We are steeped in Torah tradition. It was our heritage that helped to form America. It has been and continues to be our belief in freedom, our hatred of slavery ("never forget, you were slaves in the land of Egypt," the Torah tells us), and our Jewish dedication to public service that continues to make America the land of opportunity for anyone who wants a piece of the American pie.

rabbi barbara

Rabbi Barbara Aiello

There is a congregation in the American northeast that takes these traditions and values to heart. Every year the synagogue makes a float for the Fourth of July parade. A float that expresses the Jewish contributions to America. One year it was a model of the Statue of Liberty with Emma Lazarus' poem on it -- our Jewish Emma who was so impressed by the Russian-Jewish immigrants she worked with on Ellis Island that she was moved to write her poem. The one that appears right on the statue itself.

Another year the float was dedicated to "Jews who Rock," -- Jewish men and women whose talents have enriched the entertainment world such as Bob Dylan, Barbara Streisand, Adam Sandler, Lenny Kravits and Iggy Pop!

And just a few years ago the congregation made a simple float which depicted a copy of the Declaration of Independence and the Torah side by side, with a big banner that said "Shabbat is Freedom."

When the rabbi was asked why he devotes so much of the congregation's time and money time every single year to make a float and march in the Fourth of July parade, the rabbi had this to say: "If we Jews want to be a light to the nations, then we have to get involved with the nations. America is our nation. Jews can be its light."

It may be too late for you and your shul to make a float for your local Fourth of July parade, but it's not too late for us to show our pride --to shine our light -- for our country. There's still time so find a little flag (you can buy one at a convenience store) just about anywhere. But buy one only if you promise yourself to actually use it!

This Saturday, on the Fourth of July promise yourself that you will take the little flag and put it in your yard or in a planter, or near a tree or by your front door.

Display your flag in honor of your family -- your mother or father, your bubby or your zayde, your greats, or great-greats, who, like my own mom and dad, left the war torn streets of Prague or Krakow, or Moscow -- ancestors who left the desolation of Berlin or the hopelessness of London, Paris or Rome. Our families who came from the shtetl, the ghetto or the camps -- and came here with hope in their hearts for peace, freedom and a brand new start.

Today we leave you with two wishes; one is for a Shabbat Shalom on Friday and then, on Saturday a wish for a Hag Samach and Gut Yontif. For surely the Fourth of July as America's birthday is also a yontiff -- not just for us, but for all those who believed in the promise of democracy and freedom. For all those who sought a better life may we, American Jews, live as the Torah would have us live -- as a light unto the nations. Happy Fourth to everyone!