

Israel and the USA: In God We Trust

When I was growing up in the United States, when someone would try to stop someone from doing something that they didn't think was hurting anyone, the standard response would so often be, "Leave me alone. It's a free country!"

The value of freedom was so ingrained in American culture that the children absorbed it as well. At the same time, the freedom spoken about was never intended to be an unlimited free-for-all hedonism, in which everyone would do as he pleases and whatever feels good at the moment without regard for the common good. It was based on a moral system of values—a system the Founding Fathers of the United States of America always made clear was rooted in the number one all-time bestseller, the Bible:

"I have examined all religions, as well as my narrow sphere, my straightened means, and my busy life, would allow; and the result is that the Bible is the best book in the world. It contains more philosophy than all the libraries I have seen." —John Adams, in a letter to Thomas Jefferson, Dec. 25, 1813

The Bible is the foundation on which the United States of America was established and on which many of its laws are based. This is clear from the writings of the founders of the nation. Even leaders such as Jefferson and Lincoln, who were known to possess some degree of intellectual skepticism about certain elements of the Christian dogma, came to the same conclusion of the supremacy of the biblical narratives as the guide for American life:

"But for this book, we could not know right from wrong. ... Now let us treat the Bible fairly. If we had a witness on the

stand whose general story was true, we would believe him even when he asserted the facts of which we have no other evidence. We ought to treat the Bible with equal fairness. I decided long ago that it was less difficult to believe that the Bible was what it claimed to be than to disbelieve it." –Abraham Lincoln

So, too, was it understood that the Bible provided the embryonic American nation with a moral code, a way to control the negative inclinations of human nature and to channel human passion in the right direction. These were issues that were discussed openly, with the idealistic purpose of creating a model nation:

"We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." –John Adams, Oct. 11, 1798

The second president was expressing the consensus philosophy of the founders. This philosophy provided the foundation on which they built the basic principles that were to be the pillars of the American nation. Those principles came from the Torah, the Bible of Israel.

The scholars in Colonial America wanted to understand the Bible in its original language, which was Hebrew, the language of Israel. Knowledge of Hebrew was a necessary tool for early American scholars, and many universities made it a prerequisite in their core curriculum. Hebrew was compulsory at Harvard until 1787. Harvard president Increase Mather (1685-1701) was an ardent Hebraist (as were his predecessors, Henry Dunster and Charles Chauncey). Mather's writings contain numerous quotations from the Talmud as well as from the works of Saadia Gaon, Rashi, Maimonides and other classic Jewish

Bible commentators.

To this day Yale's insignia, which has been in use since 1736, has the Hebrew words, "Urim V'Tumim" (Light and Perfection) written on it. These words refer to the holy parchment with God's name on it, which was positioned within the breastplate of the high priest in the temple in Jerusalem. Samuel Johnson, the first president of King's College (Columbia University), referred to Hebrew as "essential to a gentleman's education."

So prevalent and so popular was the study of the Hebrew language in the Ivy League schools of the late 16th and early 17th centuries that several students at Yale delivered their commencement addresses in Hebrew. Hebrew was one of the three optional foreign languages for a commencement speech at most of the schools where it was taught, such as Yale, Harvard, Columbia, Dartmouth, Brown, Princeton, Johns Hopkins and the University of Pennsylvania. The other languages allowed were Latin and Greek.

Beyond the educational sphere, the Jewish/biblical influence could be seen as well in the legal system. The 15 Capital Laws of New England included the "Seven Noahide Laws" of the Torah, or what may be termed the seven universal laws of morality, the observance of which are incumbent upon all people. Six prohibit idolatry, blasphemy, murder, robbery, adultery and eating flesh from a living animal, while the seventh requires the establishment of courts of justice. Such courts are obviously essential to any society based on the primacy of reason or persuasion rather than passion or intimidation.

"And proclaim freedom throughout the land for all its inhabitants." –Leviticus 25:10, inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia

In our times, Israel is a bastion of liberty in a sea of Islamic intolerance. It is also a pro-Western island in a region of rabid anti-Americanism. However, the ties between

our two countries can be traced back to those common ties rooted in the values of Judeo-Christian civilization. Those values are under attack in these days by the dual forces of Islamic fundamentalism and moral relativism. Will Israel and the USA stand together to meet that challenge?

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