

Shabbat Sh'lach L'cha 5776**Erev Independence Day: Why I Chose America**

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I became an American for good the same year I had decided to become Israeli, and the same year I decided to become more observant, and the same year I pretty much decided to become a rabbi.

I realize that I am American not originally by choice. I am third-generation on both sides between the U.S. and Canada. But although my family had been here for nearly a century, I was ready *not* to be American – until suddenly again I was.

I had come back from ten months in Jerusalem during college. It was a year I had planned from more or less the minute I returned after eight weeks in Israel as a high school junior – something I'm thinking about as Alex spends his first-ever Shabbat in Jerusalem today! I decided to spend that year at Neve Schechter, the Jewish Theological Seminary's outpost in Israel, to figure out if I would like Talmud enough to study to be a rabbi.

Over the year, I started to picture myself as an Israeli soldier. There was one pretty hilarious training session with our group, which was going to be part of a neighborhood watch program, with me shooting an M1 rifle “at” a bale of hay. I say “at” almost metaphorically. As difficult as it was to envision myself a soldier in *Tzahal**, it was even more difficult to imagine making a living as an Israeli Conservative rabbi, without recognition or funding by the authorities. That year, I spoke Hebrew out of the dorm as much as possible, and became fluent in speech for the first time. I wrote in my journal how at home I felt in Israel on so many levels, and how little at home in America.

My year ended, and I came home to Minnesota one week before the fourth of July. I don't remember that day specifically, but in general that summer I was all primed to feel out of place. Back in my parents' home with a new level of observance, I was walking every Shabbat the couple miles to shul with my father, along with, as it happened, an Israeli couple who were spending an academic year in the Twin Cities. The walks were about as hot as Jerusalem walks to shul but much longer, and it

* *Tzahal* is the Hebrew acronym for *Tz'va Haganah L'Yisrael*, the Israel Defense Forces.

seemed *bashert* [destined] to have the Israelis there to keep me connected, to be an outpost for the future I was planning.

In September I got back to college, where I knew that many of my Hillel peers had spent a year in yeshiva in Israel. But a funny and surprising thing happened, within about two weeks of settling back in. I had this encompassing and pervasive feeling in myself of being *American*. It crept up on me, and really took me by surprise, because I was all prepared to be out of sync. In the words of the medieval poet Yehudah Halevi: to have my heart in the East, and while I was in the farthest West.

It wasn't that I rediscovered my non-Jewish friends in the dorm and gravitated back to them, or that I stepped back from my observance outside the cocoon of the Seminary and the atmosphere of Jerusalem. On the contrary, I was studying Talmud with friends, *gabbai* [organizer] of my minyan, and I felt more connected to the kids at Hillel I didn't know well than to my previous roommates.

It's true that I did meet a girl – Laurie! – who had not been to Israel yet, and *aliya* wasn't on her radar.

But deciding to pursue that relationship was partly the outcome of my reflecting on that surprising American-ness I was experiencing. It was an election year here, and as I got re-immersed in the issues I cared about, and the idiom of my studies and my major, I came to understand that I was an American more than just by birth. I was American as a way of thinking, immersed in American ways of framing dilemmas of society and the world. But this was key: I was an American through my Judaism. The way I wanted to be Jewish and observant, the way I saw myself as a Jewish teacher and a spokesman for Jewish values – all of that was American.

On this weekend when we celebrate Independence Day, I want to tell you more about what that means. It is my story, but I want to analyze it and jump off from it as a way to get you to think about the relationship for *yourself* between being Jewish and being American. We talk often, if not always easily, about the importance of Israel to being Jewish today. But we don't have the same conversation about America. What is America, or what might America be, for Jews and Judaism, for you as a Jew?

We sometimes ask the question this way: “Are you a Jewish American or an American Jew?” In other

words, do you see yourself primarily as an American, one who happens to be Jewish or come from Jewish ancestors? Or do you see yourself as a Jew who happens, by accident of history, to be living in America for a time? Which allegiance matters more to you? Which identity more defines you?

This question – American Jew or Jewish American – is one we especially love to ask as an activity with youth groups and college students. It is set up by two ideas articulated by Jewish thinkers in the early 20th century, who are worth identifying by name.

The “primarily American” perspective has its roots in the idea of the melting pot. The term was made popular by a Jew from Great Britain, actually, named Israel Zangwill. It is the name of a play he wrote that opened in New York in 1909.* The main character, David, emigrates to America from Russia after all his family are killed in the Kishinev pogrom. David, a composer, writes a symphony expressing the idea that all ethnicity should fade away in America, and he falls in love with Vera, the daughter of Russian Christian immigrants. They believe that in America, “Jew and Gentile... Rome and Jerusalem” will blend together. Vera's father turns out to be a Russian officer who is responsible for the death of David's family. But they are now in America – Vera's father admits his guilt, and David and Vera agree to get married as the curtain falls.

In this picture, Jewish as something distinctive gives way entirely to a sense of belonging to something new – America.

The “primarily Jewish” perspective is not just a religious position. It was articulated by an intellectual who should be much better known than he is, named Horace Kallen. In 1915, he wrote an influential essay in *The Nation* magazine. Kallen argued that the melting pot was not actually happening and shouldn't be the ideal. The hyphenated Americans, whether Jewish-Americans or Polish-American or Irish-Americans, weren't actually struggling with two identities, one old and one new. Each group had a culture, and a way of belonging. Each group developed ways of looking out for one another, taking care of each other, educating each other. Kallen argued that America shouldn't be an identity. America is just the system, the way we get by with each other – fairness and freedom.

* You can read the play here: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23893/23893-h/23893-h.htm>. I haven't, and I relied on Wikipedia for a summary.

America would work best, Kallen said, if each group could continue to develop in its own way, rather than fight about who was acting or thinking like or becoming a real American. There was no already-defined American culture to assimilate to, and no new melting-pot culture to create. In Kallen's picture, being distinctively and separately Jewish in a communal way – or distinctively Irish or Italian – is the best way to be an American.

For anyone who is in a synagogue on the Fourth of July weekend, I think it's clear that Zangwill's ideal of the melting pot doesn't describe us. But for me, and maybe for some of you, Kallen's view doesn't quite capture what it means to be Jewish or to be American.

So let me bring in one more thinker. His name is Michael Walzer – he is a contemporary political philosopher, and he's Jewish and American. In a lecture in 1989 called “What Does It Mean To Be An 'American'?” Walzer argued that the hyphen in the term Jewish-American can be a kind of plus sign, that adds in both directions. For some Jewish-Americans, Judaism is enhanced, religiously and culturally, because we are in America. And for them America *is* in fact a culture and a set of values, but only visible through Jewish eyes.

This is how I experience Judaism and how I experience America. I am inspired by big American themes: individualism, a land of immigrants, radical free choice. I wouldn't know about them without America – but I see them with Jewish eyes. Individualism for me doesn't resonate as the frontier and the lone pioneer, but as the sage or activist articulating an unpopular position. Immigration is not just a fact of how we all got here, but tied up with the Jewish experience in this country. Self-help and mutual aid, through Hebrew free loan societies and schools and Jewish hospitals and nursing homes, but also the founding of the ADL to fight both anti-semitism and racism simultaneously. When I vote, I think not just of self-evident truths, but the Song of the Sea; not just of Jefferson and King George, but Moshe and Pharaoh.

This is how I taught American history and literature, for three years, at the Solomon Schechter High School of Long Island. America, from the perspective of the Jewish-American hyphen.

At the same time, America has drawn out Judaism in a way no other society ever has or could. It is

because we are in America that Jewish thinkers and leaders have had to take a stand on whether Torah mandates justice and concern for non-Jews as well as Jews. Whether we have responsibilities for the whole earth and not just the place where our community lives. It is because of America that totalitarianism, the nuclear age, and technology forced Jewish thinkers to ask questions about the ethics of power, not just for the sake of our group's survival, but as an ethical issue about the limits of human potential.

It is here that we have had not just the opportunity to sit with leaders of other faiths, but the necessity to answer whether other faiths are also authentic searches for truth and for God. And if so, how we should collaborate with leaders of other faiths as moral voices for this society and the world.

Only America could call forth a Heschel – so rooted in uniquely Jewish idioms and styles and practices, yet also an America public intellectual and a political activist, speaking authentically to Jews and to Christians about racism, war, and economics.

If it weren't Shabbat, at this point I would pull down a screen and show you one of the most remarkable episodes of television rooted in “Jewish-American.” It is an episode of the West Wing, co-written by a secular Jew named Aaron Sorkin, the creator of the show. In it, a religious Catholic president from New Hampshire is trying to decide whether to commute a death sentence. Somewhere off camera the president consults the pope, but the most arresting scenes in the episode are Jewish.

One takes place a synagogue, where Toby Ziegler, a Jew who is the president's communications director, is being lobbied by his rabbi. Another is when Toby comes to the Oval Office, to explain to the president what the Talmud says about capital punishment, and why that might be relevant to his decision. (My favorite line in the episode: when Toby leaves, the president explains what just happened to his chief of staff, “Toby went to shul.”)

And when the president's own priest comes to teach him what it means to pray for religious wisdom, the parable the priest tells is essentially Jewish. The episode fades out on the scene with the president

and the priest, with the melody of the Jewish prayer *Hashkiveinu*[^] being chanted by a cantor.*

It is not only that Judaism has stretched out for Jews. But also that in America, Judaism has learned how to be a wisdom for others in the world as well.

And our Judaism flourishes uniquely because we are here. In America, we have more freedom than anywhere else, including Israel, to develop new forms of religious expression and observance. Yes, individualism leads to consumerism and opting out of Jewish life. But it also forces rabbis to answer philosophical questions, without the whip of communal pressure to back us up. And we export our experiments back to Israel – not just Conservative and Reform, but what turned into the secular yeshiva, where Talmud and Jewish stories are studied without pressure of religious conformity. The rabbis and thinkers in Israel who are building relationships with Christian and Muslim leaders, who are calling for the dismantling of the state-run rabbinate and for religious pluralism – they come from here, or studied here, or are influenced from here.

When Moshe sent out the twelve scouts to see the new land, the majority said in their report: “We were like grasshoppers in their eyes, and so we were in our own eyes.” Often American Jews see ourselves as grasshoppers in comparison with Israelis, who do their secular, everyday business in the Hebrew language, and who put their life and the life of their children on the line for the Jewish people.

Sometimes even I feel this way. I have no quarrel with anyone whose Zionism sees Israel in this way, and being Jewish anywhere else as a not-yet. But for those of us who are here by choice, by affirmation, we can stand up for our place in the Jewish world and Jewish history. Our experiences add to Judaism in the world, and serve the Jewish state. The Zionism of a Jewish-America, living in the hyphen, appreciates both what is unique and can't be equalled about Israeli Jews, and what is unique and not equalled about us.

[^] Some of the words of the *Hashkiveinu* prayer are: “Lay us down in peace, and stand us up again to life.... Defend us... repair/guide us with the good counsel from before You, and help/save us for the sake of Your name.” I have no idea how many connections between these words and the plot were intended.

* The whole episode is available on Network. The specific scenes are also on YouTube: Toby and his rabbi <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdtoMbbmVUk>, Toby and the president <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYHJiaZ8tGE>, the president and his priest <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06dQaOZlch0>

I chose once, and continue to choose, to be a Jewish American. And because of that, I can sometimes find myself on that Puritan ship sailing toward Boston in 1631. Though my Jewish ancestors were far from New England, I still find myself in the sermon John Winthrop preached, from Deuteronomy and Micah – our Bible. I can't picture myself, but I can find myself, in his words about building community among those who had not known before in Europe, who were sailing like the scouts of our *parasha*, to build a new society and create their own covenant among themselves. Who believed, in Winthrop's words, that they might be a city on a hill – or as we would say, a light to other nations. I can see myself, as a Jewish-American, ready to be a creator of this nation.

This weekend, as we get ready to celebrate America's independence, we have much to be thankful for, and proud of. Freedom here is not simply a gift granted to us by others, but something we have forged for this country. The achievements we have made here, in law and culture, in justice and government, have been Jewish achievements and American ones. I hope this weekend you will reflect on what makes you an American Jew or a Jewish American. As we lift up our eyes, and watch the fireworks, may we see, among the many colors and patterns, our own story in all its brightness.

Shabbat Shalom!