

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Chukat / Balak – July 4th 2009

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Independence Day Weekend!

This weekend America celebrates her 233rd year of freedom. Since 1776, we have been blessed in this wonderful country to enjoy a life where there is no ceiling or restriction on opportunities.

While most of the nation will usher in the holiday with beautiful and exciting fireworks, Jews around the country will usher it in by lighting their Shabbat candles, also beautiful and exciting, and many of us will be able to enjoy the fireworks booming above us in a fantastic display of patriotism and fanfare.

The colorful and noisy excitement got me wondering about the connection between the American Founding Fathers on the one hand, whose primary basis for building this strong and independent country centered around the ethics of freedom, and *Pirkei Avot*, the *Ethics of the Fathers*, from the writings of the Mishnah, on the other. Can we draw parallels between the two? I think so.

The *Ethics of the Fathers* offers great advice for living a clean, moral, and fulfilling life, just like the one guaranteed by our Declaration of Independence: the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I noticed that the Declaration of Independence refers to God, the Creator, and to Divine Providence. The Declaration takes the Almighty to be its ultimate Source of truth and validity.

Similarly, the history of this country has also provided us with many wise and virtuous leaders who formed a country and established a government based on the same moral and ethical grounds. By studying this period of time, we can learn much about our own Jewish history and the history we share with our neighbors.

Rabbi Weisblum is spiritual leader of Kneseth Israel Congregation, Annapolis, MD, and the author of Table Talk: Biblical Questions and Answers, Ruth Talk: Questions and Answers on the Book of Ruth, and Classical Hermeneutics of Medieval Jewish Thought.

The Union for Traditional Judaism is a trans-denominational organization dedicated to bringing the message of open-minded Halakhic Judaism to the widest possible audience.

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While doing a bit of historical research, both at the library and on the computer, I came across some interesting connections between the Founding Fathers and the Jewish people.

The first American President, George Washington, depended greatly on a Jewish man named Haym Salomon for financial advice and assistance.

John Adams, the second American president, wrote a letter in 1808 criticizing the depiction of Jews by the French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire. Adams expressed his respect for ancient Jewry, stating: "How is it possible [that he] should represent the Hebrews in such a contemptible light? They are the most glorious nation that ever inhabited this Earth." He continued: "They have given religion to three quarters of the Globe and have influenced the affairs of Mankind more than any other Nation, ancient or modern."

The third American president and drafter of the Declaration of Independence was Thomas Jefferson. Some scholars ask whether Thomas Jefferson was the first Jewish president. Researchers studying Jefferson's Y chromosome have found that it belongs to a lineage that is rare in Europe but common in the Middle East, raising the possibility that the third president of the United States may have had a Jewish ancestor many generations ago.

Michael Hammer, a geneticist at the University of Arizona, said he had compared the Jefferson Y chromosome with the Y chromosomes in his database and found close matches with four other individuals. There was a perfect match to the Y chromosome of a Moroccan Jew, and matches that differed by two mutations from another Moroccan Jew, a Kurdish Jew, and an Egyptian.

James Madison, the fourth American president, is known as the Father of the Constitution. As one of the authors of the Federalist Papers, he helped persuade the states to ratify the new Constitution and was instrumental in making the Bill of Rights part of the Constitution. Madison worked with his mentor Thomas Jefferson to ensure freedom of religion in the state of Virginia in the years between the Revolutionary War and the ratification of the Constitution. Some say that the Bill of Rights was modeled after the Biblical Ten Commandments. The first of those amendments guarantees the separation of church and state. Madison was the first president to appoint a Jew to a U.S. diplomatic post.

Founding Father Benjamin Franklin once pledged five pounds (worth approximately \$800 in today's dollars) in support of a synagogue for "the people of the Hebrew society in the city of Philadelphia." The building was the first home of what is now known as historic Congregation Mikveh Israel.

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Alexander Hamilton, the first secretary of the Treasury, was born on the British island of Nevis, in the British West Indies, on January 11, 1755. His mother Rachel, who was possibly Jewish, was married to Michael Lavine, a Jew most probably of German or Danish extraction. On the island of St. Croix, as a teenager, Alexander even learned Hebrew. One of Hamilton's grandsons acknowledged his Jewish roots in a biography of his grandfather.

Another interesting Jewish patriot was Francis Salvador, originally from London and of Sephardic heritage. He was the first Jew to hold elective office in the colonies, and was the first Jew to be killed in the Revolution, when, as head of a force of frontiersmen, he was captured and scalped.

Some other Jewish Revolutionary War notables were Abraham Levy, Joseph Simon and Phillip Russell, from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. At Valley Forge, they supplied the army with the famous Henry Rifles. In addition, Jewish trading merchants became privateers and fought the British at sea.

Time and again, we see the Jewish contribution to American society – to its very existence. We should feel proud to be connected to these great Americans and patriots.

Enjoy your holiday weekend.

Shabbat Shalom!

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