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America, Jews, and a Dream in Progress

excerpts of a sermon delivered by Rabbi Marc D. Angel, September 12, 2004

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” These words from the American Declaration of Independence reflect the deepest ideals and aspirations of the American people. America is not merely a country, vast and powerful; America is an idea, a vision of life as it could be.

When these words were first proclaimed on July 4, 1776, Congregation Shearith Israel was almost 122 years old. It was a venerable community, with an impressive history--a bastion of Jewish faith and tradition,and an integral part of the American experience.

When the British invaded New York in 1776, a large group of congregants, including our Hazan Rev. Gershom Mendes Seixas,left the city rather than live under British rule. Many joined the Revolutionary army and fought for American independence.

Some remained in New York, and conducted services in our synagogue building on Mill Street. Early in the war, British soldiers broke into the synagogue and desecrated two Torah scrolls. This was not just an attack on scrolls, but was a symbolic assault on the spiritual foundations of Judaism, the self-same foundations upon which the American republic has been built.

In our service today, we read from one of these Torah scrolls as a symbolic response to those soldiers, and to all those who would seek to undermine the eternal teachings of Torah and the principles of American democracy: we are not

intimidated, we are not afraid. Generation by generation, we will continue to live by our ideals and by our faith. Generation by generation, we will lend our strength to the great American enterprise that promises hope and freedom, one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all.

Our story in America is not built on historical abstractions, but on generations of Jews who have played their roles in the unfolding of this nation. It is a very personal history, ingrained in our collective memory.

We have just read from the Revolutionary Period Torah scroll, from the section known as “Kedoshim”, only a few columns from where the British soldiers damaged the scroll. Kedoshim opens with a challenge to the people of Israel to be a holy nation, to live according to the commandments of God, to have the courage and inner strength to maintain Torah ideals in a world that is not always receptive to such lofty teachings. The portion goes on to specify how we are to manifest holiness: through charity; honesty; commitment to truth and justice; through the avoidance of gossip and hatred. It culminates with the words: ve-ahavta le-re-aha kamokha, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The very principles enjoined by this passage are the spiritual foundations of the United States of America. These teachings are constant reminders of how to live a good life and build a righteous society; they also are prods to make us realize how far short we fall from these ideals, how much more work remains to be done.

On this 350th anniversary of the American Jewish community, we reflect on the courage and heroic efforts of our forebears who have maintained Judaism as a vibrant and living force in our lives. We express gratitude to America for having given us—and all citizens—the freedom to practice our faith. This very freedom has energized and strengthened America.

Within Congregation Shearith Israel, we have been blessed with men and women who have helped articulate Jewish ideals and American ideals. Their voices have blended in with the voices of fellow Americans of various religions and races, to help shape the dream and reality of America.

The American Declaration of Independence pronounced that all men are created equal. In his famous letter to the Jewish community of Newport, in August 1790, President George Washington hailed the United States for allowing its citizens freedom—not as a favor bestowed by one group on another—but in recognition of the inherent natural rights of all human beings. This country, wrote President Washington, “gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”

And yet, if equality and human dignity are at the core of American ideals, the fulfillment of these ideals have required—and still require—sacrifice and devotion. Reality has not always kept up with the ideals. In 1855, Shearith Israel member Uriah Phillips Levy—who rose to the rank of Commodore in the U.S. Navy—was dropped from the Navy's active duty list. He was convinced that anti-Semitism was at the root of this demotion. He appealed the ruling and demanded justice. He asked: are people "now to learn to their sorrow and dismay that we too have sunk into the mire of religious intolerance and bigotry?... What is my case today, if you yield to this injustice, may tomorrow be that of the Roman Catholic or the Unitarian, the Presbyterian or the Methodist, the Episcopalian or the Baptist. There is but one safeguard: that is to be found in an honest, whole-hearted, inflexible support of the wise, the just, the impartial guarantee of the Constitution." Levy won his case. He helped the United States remain true to its principles.

Shearith Israel member Moses Judah (1735-1822) believed that all men were created equal—including black men. In 1799, he was elected to the New York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves. During his tenure on the standing committee between 1806 and 1809, about fifty slaves were freed. Through his efforts, many other slaves achieved freedom. He exerted himself to fight injustice, to expand the American ideals of freedom and equality regardless of race or religion.

Another of our members, Maud Nathan, believed that all men were created equal—but so were all women created equal. She was a fiery, internationally renowned suffragette, who worked tirelessly to advance a vision of America that indeed recognized the equality of all its citizens—men and women. As President of the Consumers' League of New York from 1897-1917, Maud Nathan was a pioneer in social activism, working for the improvement of working conditions of employees in New York's department stores. Equality and human dignity were the rights of all Americans, rich and poor, men and women.

The Declaration of Independence proclaimed that human beings have unalienable rights, among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These words express the hope and optimism of America. They are a repudiation of the tyranny and oppression that prevailed—and still prevail—in so many lands. America is a land of opportunity, where people can live in freedom. The pursuit of happiness really signifies the pursuit of self-fulfillment, of a meaningful way of life. America's challenge was—and still is—to create a harmonious society that allows us to fulfill our potentials.

President George Washington declared a day of national Thanksgiving for November 26, 1789. Shearith Israel held a service, at which Hazan Gershom Mendes Seixas called on this congregation “to unite, with cheerfulness and uprightness…to promote that which has a tendency to the public good.” Hazzan Seixas believed that Jews, in being faithful to Jewish tradition, would be constructive and active participants in American society.

Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were not reserved only for those born in America; they are the rights of all human beings everywhere. This notion underlies the idealism of the American dream, calling for a sense of responsibility for all suffering people, whether at home or abroad. American Jews have been particularly sensitive and responsive to this ideal.

On March 8,1847, Hazan Jacques Judah Lyons addressed a gathering at Shearith Israel for the purpose of raising funds for Irish famine relief. The potato crop in Ireland had failed in 1846, resulting in widespread famine. Hazan Lyons well realized that the Jewish community needed charitable dollars for its own internal needs; and yet he insisted that Jews reach out and help the people of Ireland. He said that there was one indestructible and all-powerful link between us and the Irish sufferers: “That link, my brethren, is HUMANITY! Its appeal to the heart surmounts every obstacle. Clime, color, sect are barriers which impede not its progress thither.” In assisting with Irish famine relief, the Jewish community reflected its commitment to the well-being of all suffering human beings. American Jewry grew into—and has continued to be—a great philanthropic community perhaps unmatched in history. Never have so few given so much to so many. In this, we have been true to our Jewish tradition, and true to the spirit of America.

Who articulated the hope and promise of America more eloquently than Emma Lazarus? “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” How appropriate it is that her poem is affixed to the great symbol of American freedom, the Statue of Liberty.

Alice Menken, (for many years President of our Sisterhood) did remarkable work to help immigrants, to assist young women who ran into trouble with the law, to promote reform of the American prison system. She wrote: “We must seek a balanced philosophy of life. We must live to make the world worth living in, with new ideals, less suffering, and more joy.”

Americans see ourselves as one nation, indivisible, under God, with liberty and justice for all. Yet, liberty and justice are not automatically attained. They have required—and still require—wisdom, vigilance, and active participation. America prides itself on being a nation of laws, with no one above the law. The American legal tradition has been enriched by the insights and the work of many American Jews.

In one of his essays, Justice Benjamin Nathan Cardozo—a devoted member of Shearith Israel--referred to a Talmudic passage which has been incorporated into our prayer book. It asks that the Almighty let His mercy prevail over strict justice. Justice Cardozo reminded us that the American system relies not only on justice—but on mercy. Mercy entails not merely an understanding of laws, but an understanding of the human predicament, of human nature, of the circumstances prevailing inhuman society. Another of our members, Federal Judge William Herlands, echoed this sentiment when he stated that Justice without Mercy—is just ice!

Our late rabbis Henry Pereira Mendes, David de Sola Pool and Louis C. Gerstein, were singularly devoted to social welfare, to religious education, to the land of Israel. They distinguished themselves for their devotion to Zionism, and played their parts in the remarkable unfolding of the State of Israel. They, along with so many American Jews, have keenly understood how much unites Israel and the United States—two beacons of democracy and idealism in a very troubled world.

These individuals—along with so many other American Jews—were exponents of the American ideals and the American dream. During the past 350 years, the American Jewish community has accomplished much and contributed valiantly to all aspects of American life. We have cherished our participation in American life. We have been free to practice our faith and teach our Torah. We have worked with Americans of other faiths and traditions to mold a better, stronger, more idealistic nation.

America today is not just a powerful and vast country. It is also an idea, a compelling idea that has a message for all people in all lands. As American Jews, we are committed to the ideals of freedom and equality, human dignity and security, to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the pursuit of harmony among ourselves and throughout the world. We have come far as a nation, but very much remains to be done. May God give us the strength and resolve to carry on, to work proudly as Jews to bring the American dream to many more generations of humanity.

I close with a prayer spoken by Mordecai Manuel Noah at the consecration of our second Mill Street Synagogue on April 17, 1818: “May we prove ever worthy of His blessing; may He look down from His heavenly abode, and send us peace and comfort; may He instill in our minds a love of country, of friends, and of all mankind. Be just, therefore, and fear not. That God who brought us out of the land of Egypt, who walked before us like ‘a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night,’ will never desert his people Israel.”