

“Red, White, and Jewish”  
Thoughts on America’s 229<sup>th</sup> Birthday

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I don't think there is a happier or freer holiday in the secular year than the Fourth of July. It is the essence of summer and a moment of recognition for all that is best and noblest about our national character. Do you remember the feverish countdown to the Bicentennial of these United States of America? Some of you aren't old enough! It was 29 years ago. It's hard to believe, I know, but I remember that summer of 1976 so well because Jennifer – our bride-to-be – was born in August of that year.

Throughout the entire nation, we marked that long-planned anniversary by burying time capsules; publishing commemorative volumes and essays; watching televised “Bicentennial Moments,” choral concerts, fireworks, harbors filled with tall ships, and the Boston Pops. It went on and on!

Companies marketed “Bicentennial Everything” and happily assumed that we wouldn't dare be without whatever official souvenir keepsake they could think of to “celebrate” (or profit by), our nation's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Of course, each religious community in America scheduled its own take on the Bicentennial. We were living in Macon, Georgia and the city's newspaper – “The Macon Telegraph” – covered the Macon Bicentennial interfaith service, and printed a front-page photo of their “young Rabbi” from Temple Beth Israel sounding the shofar during the ceremonies.

For the American Jewish Community, leading up to this year's Fourth of July celebration 2005 has been a very special year-long milestone of our own: the closing months of the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the first Jews in New Amsterdam – New York, today. That auspicious observance concludes this coming September, for it was then, in 1654, that those 23 Jewish refugees from Brazil stepped upon these shores.

Most every Jewish community and congregation has found its own distinctive and special way of publicly marking this glorious anniversary. Think about that – 350 years! The American Jewish experience is unlike all others in our People's history. The Old World is, to this day, suspicious and begrudging in its welcome and acceptance of our People within its social, religious, and political framework. However, we American Jews have always interrelated with our fellow American citizens as peers. Not that we've always been bosom buddies with our neighbors. But, we Jews have, by virtue of America's Constitution, enjoyed religious freedom equal to that of every other American.

Dr. Gary Zola is a friend to so many of our New Orleans Jewish Community. He notes how this fact alone engendered another remarkably unique feature of the American Jewish experience:

...the distinctive bond of friendship that  
overwhelmingly characterizes the relationship  
between the Jew and the non-Jew.

We American Jews enjoy an unprecedented level of acceptance and a profound attachment to this republic as a direct consequence of this uncommon religious freedom and the outlawing of a state religion. We're only a tiny minority of the population, but we Jews feel at home in the good old US of A.

But, that's not how it is in Europe. To this day, in the minds of their non-Jewish countrymen and women, there are French citizens, and the Jews; there are Italians, and then there are the Jews; Hungarians, and Jews – you get the idea.

Only days ago, the ADL released its latest survey of European attitudes toward their Jewish communities. Clearly, anti-Semitism still flourishes in Europe. Incidents of anti-Semitic violence and hateful expressions – often bundled with anti-Israel rhetoric – are literally and figuratively all the rage. Even the dead are not safe in their graves, as Jewish cemeteries are viciously defaced. The ADL report said:

Historically, the uniqueness of anti-Semitism as compared to other forms of intolerance rests on a matrix of beliefs that see Jews as alien, all-powerful, never loyal to the country or society in which they live.

Centuries-old medieval stereotypes, myths, and accusations all continue to define elements of modern-day anti-Semitism – well-poisoning, excessive power grabbing, and plotting of worldwide conspiracies. You get the picture. I'm surprised they haven't dragged out the blood libel accusation as well. The ADL's report states that 43% of Europeans believe that we Jews are more loyal to Israel than to the respective countries in which we reside.

And get this: according to the ADL European Poll, 42% believe we talk about the Holocaust entirely too much. Talk about blaming the victim! And 20% still have it out for us and our children because we "killed Jesus. "By the way – thanks, Mel, for that film!

Those first Jewish refugees to these shores fled the Spanish Inquisition. When the Portuguese reclaimed control of Brazil and expelled all non-Catholics, this small group of Dutch Jews sailed north and sought refuge in another Dutch outpost.

The historians have clarified some romantic misconceptions here.

- It was not to America "the land of the free and the home of the brave" to which they came in 1654. A good thing, too, because their official welcome was not all that hospitable!
- Nor was it the promise of America as a Zion, where Jews could observe or not observe their covenantal faith without fear of intimidation or bigotry. That precious notion came later on.

No, they came to New Amsterdam because it was Dutch and those 23 refugees knew full-well that the Dutch, for all their peculiar ways, had a well-deserved reputation for tolerance and pragmatism.

I've heard many of your stories about how your families came to settle in South Louisiana. We enjoy sharing the remarkable accounts of how our great-grandparents and often, our great-great-grandparents, made a beautiful, if hard-won, life for themselves amid a populace totally unacquainted with a living Jew beyond the covers of the Bible.

I remember the great American Jewish historian, Dr. Jacob Marcus. When I first met him in 1966, he told me the story of Joseph Jonas – one of the first Jews to arrive in Cincinnati, Ohio. He lived from 1792 to 1869 and in his memoirs, Jonas wrote of a Quaker woman who traveled a great distance to see a real Jew with her own eyes. She bid him turn all around so she could see him from every angle.

Disappointed, she admitted: “Thou art a Jew, but I see that thou art no different from other men.” Well, Jonas probably differed in one respect, but it wasn't evident through his clothes! But this lack of difference – either in rights or responsibilities – has been a cornerstone of Jewish life in America.

From the outset, in the New Amsterdam colony, both Asser Levy and Jacob Bersimson demanded the right to stand guard in 1655 along with the other gentlemen of the colony. Asser Levy fought one battle after another for Jewish civil rights.

He worked as a butcher in 1660, and his employer permitted him “...to be excused from killing hogs, as his religion does not allow him to do it.”

Afterward, in 1678 he opened his own slaughterhouse and acquired a butcher's license. Meanwhile, the British had taken over and Levy became a juror in the English colony of New York. Lo and behold, guess what? He served as a juror for a case in which Peter Stuyvesant, the anti-Jewish former governor of the Dutch colony, was the defendant! I wonder if that was the first time anyone said, “Only in America!”

Well, 350 years later, we Jews have missed nothing – not the sweet and certainly not the bitter! We have fought in every American war and we have left an indelible mark on America's philanthropic tradition. If Benjamin Franklin, made a small contribution to Philadelphia's Mickve Israel Congregation, Judah Touro more than outdistanced his largess of spirit by bequeathing large sums to a diverse array of Christian charities and organizations, as well as to his own People!

We have certainly experienced episodes of anti-Semitism. Human nature is what it is, for better and often, for worse. But, upon comparing the American Jewish experience at its worst to that of the Old World, it's clear that the fundamental story of American Judaism is one of uncommon religious freedom, civil liberty, and personal dignity.

I remember the week in 1964 when that issue of *Look* magazine arrived at our home in Glen Burnie, Maryland with its cover story, “The Vanishing American Jew.”

The author opened with the observation that by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the state of American Judaism might well be arthritic and close to terminal. Too bad the author didn't attend the Hebrew Union College!

Dr. Marcus told us: "We Jews glory in our survival and refuse to disappear." Marcus also urged us to recognize that studying the past will make us Jews an eternal people – the "proud exponents of the best in our heritage." Oh, that we could realize (he used to tell us) our debt to the past – that great debt we owe to continue the great work of the past 3000 years.

So, raise the flag! Set off the fireworks! Light the grill! Happy 229<sup>th</sup> birthday, beloved America, from your Jewish patriots – we, the grateful sons and daughters of those generations who etched these words of Torah upon their hearts and upon that historic bell enshrined in Philadelphia. – "Proclaim liberty throughout the Land unto all the inhabitants thereof!"

Amen