

Reflections on This Fourth of July

As we anticipate the Fourth of July weekend and the celebration of American independence, I am filled with a mix of emotions: disappointment and pride, frustration and gratitude, discouragement and hope.

In many ways, we are struggling. Americans harbor a tremendous amount of anger, fear, and doubt, leading at times to racism, antisemitism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia, among other expressions of power.

Worst of all, I think, is the complete abdication of personal responsibility for society's ills expressed by – well – everyone: from our nation's leaders down to the average person on the street. We have become a nation of blamers.

By contrast, our Jewish tradition challenges us to recognize the ways in which we contribute to life's ills, even if we ourselves are not the direct cause. As Rabbi Donniel Hartman of the Shalom Hartman Institute recently showed me, the great Jewish philosopher and legal codifier, Maimonides, tells us, "Should the people fail to cry out [to God] and sound the trumpets [when an evil exists], and instead say, 'What has happened to us is merely a natural phenomenon and this difficulty is merely a chance occurrence,' [then] this is a cruel conception of things, which causes them to remain attached to their wicked deeds. Thus, this time of distress will lead to further distresses" [Mishneh Torah, Laws of Fasts 1:3].

As such, even when, 2,000 years ago, the Romans defeated us; burned our Holy Temple; tortured, enslaved, and murdered us; and then exiled us from our land, our ancestors asked: what could we have done differently? What factors did we create that opened the door to such loss?

We may not have caused the problem, but there were certainly ways in which we contributed to it.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman's father, Rabbi David Hartman (z'l), taught that God chose Abraham rather than Noah as the patriarch for the Chosen People because Noah was a righteous man of faithful submission, but Abraham was a righteous man of faithful pursuit of justice. When God told Noah that God was going to destroy the earth with a flood, Noah accepted God's decree. When God told Abraham that God was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone, Abraham protested against the almighty: "Far be it from You to do such a thing," Abraham yelled to God, "to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Genesis 18:25).

God empowered human beings with agency and free will: with the knowledge, wisdom, and skills to pursue justice and righteousness. We Jews are the children of Abraham and

inheritors of that legacy. In some ways, the United States is founded upon that very same message.

We live in an imperfect country conceived by imperfect humans who created a nation with perhaps the greatest promise of any in world history. Moreover, we dwell in the land of the free and the home of the brave because hard-working men and women sacrificed for their children, for their fellow citizens, and for human beings around the world in the name of freedom. They were, like Abraham and Sarah, righteous individuals in the faithful pursuit of justice.

Despite our country's travails, we maintain hope in this great experiment called liberty because so many of the men and women in uniform today – military and police, fire and rescue, medical professionals and grocery store workers, to name just some – continue, however imperfectly, to sacrifice for their families, for their country, and for us. We maintain hope because our neighbors similarly, however imperfect, likewise sacrifice for their families, for their country, and for us. This is the country that, at times despite itself, welcomed our ancestors in because they were tired, poor, hungry and yearning to breathe free.

In many ways, we are today struggling as a country. As we well know, Americans harbor a tremendous amount of anger, fear, and doubt, leading at times to racism, antisemitism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia, among other expressions of power. But this is the country whose founders did not claim perfection but rather possibility, and who established a system whereby we today can improve upon their work for the sake of all who call America home. The system may indeed be broken at points, but it is not beyond repair. And we must do the work of repair.

It's not easy to be American, but it is a blessing and a gift. It demands of us hard work, self-sacrifice, and the recognition that when something is wrong with our country, then we are contributors to that problem even if we ourselves are not the cause of it. But if we part of the problem, then we can also be part of the solution.

As we approach this Fourth of July weekend, let us pray: May God bless America and, perhaps just as important, may God bless Americans. May our fear and anger give way to gratitude and to hope. May the hands tightened into a fist open instead into an arm outstretched to those in need. Perhaps most of all, may our instinct to place blame transition instead to a profound sense of self-responsibility and the knowledge that God has given us the power to improve our own situation and that of others as well.

As Rabbi Israel Salanter wrote,

When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. But I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my country. When I found I couldn't change my country, I began to focus on my town. However, I discovered that I couldn't change the town, and so as I grew older, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, but

I've come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that, in turn, could have changed the country and we could all indeed have changed the world.

Rebecca, Caleb and Ayal join me in wishing you Shabbat shalom, and a very happy Fourth of July.

Rabbi Aaron Starr
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