

America at 250
Shabbat Pinchas 5786

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Happy semiquincentennial, America! American Jews certainly have cause for celebration. Chased across the millennia, dogged by discrimination and antisemitism, often violent, our people found a home here. Only fourteen years after the Declaration of Independence, America's first president, in his first year in office, echoed words written to him by Moses Seixas, a Jewish community leader in Newport, Rhode Island, proclaiming: "The Citizens of the United States of American have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support."ⁱ

"All," of course, did not mean "all," as neither President Washington's wife nor his enslaved laborers, not to speak of the Indians who had once lived here freely, "enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights." Washington was speaking to the Jewish community, though, and his words applied to them in ways that history never had: Even without a land of their own, Jews would be full citizens of the nation in which we live.

That promise has been kept across a quarter millennium. Generations now have taken for granted that we can be both fully American and fully Jewish. It has not always been easy, and in significant ways, Jewish life in America is particularly challenging now. Still, whatever a person's level of Jewish observance or integration into wider society, each of us get to define what being an American Jew means for us.

Most people, including most contemporary American Jews, struggle to grasp the nature of the life left behind by those who found refuge on these shores. Most Jewish immigrants to America were not previously German Jews or Russian Jews or Persian Jews. Instead, they were Jews who **lived** in Germany, Jews who **lived** in Poland, or Jews who **lived** in France. They did not consider themselves to be part of the people among whom they lived—above all, because they typically were not

citizens there. They came, mostly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, seeking a better future. They could not assume it would be permanent.

I have an unusual American Jewish background. All my known ancestors were Jewish, which is no longer the case for millions of American Jews today or for a substantial portion of our congregation. Moreover, my first ancestors to reach this land came before the United States was born.

Eight generations ago, Private Isaac Marks served in the New York militia during the American Revolution. While he was far from the only Jewish soldier in that war, few Jews lived in America then. Isaac spelled his last name m-a-r-k-s, but his parents and grandparents spelled it m-a-r-q-u-e-s, presumably pronounced Marques. They came to New York from Curacao, having gone there from Portugal, escaping the Inquisition. They were likely among the many Jews who left Portugal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had first left Spain for Portugal, as the Inquisition came to Spain first, and my forbears almost certainly went to the Netherlands before Curacao. They doubtless had memories or at least knowledge of the “Golden Age” of Spanish Jewry under Muslim rule, but the Catholic *Reconquista* brought that to an end. Curacao was and still is Dutch, and therefore safe for the Jews, so I’m not sure why they left for America, but perhaps the island’s proximity to expanding Spanish and Portuguese colonies made it seem vulnerable to the Inquisition.

Private Marks, at least the third generation on American soil, apparently thought this American experiment was worth fighting for. His anglicized spelling and pronunciation of the family name doubtless helped him fit in. What he shed in the process was not Jewishness so much as Spanishness.

Still, I wonder if Private Marks thought his descendants would likely be here a quarter millennium later. Whether this land would be safe for Jews long-term certainly would have seemed uncertain to his parents and grandparents if not to him. After all, they knew their origins were not in Iberia, but ancient Israel. They ended up in southwestern Europe seeking whatever freedom and opportunity looked like for a displaced and despised people in late antiquity or the Middle Ages. Now, they had migrated several times to find a new home. What would make them think **this** would stick?

Six generations later, my maternal grandparents, Bertha Alyce and Irvin Shlenker, didn’t make so long a trek. They left their childhood home of Monroe, Louisiana for Houston, Texas. Whatever they were leaving wasn’t poverty or persecution. In Houston, they were welcomed into a social group of well-to-do Reform Jews who were patriotic Americans.

During World War II, their congregation's assistant rabbi was among the hundreds of thousands of American Jews serving our country overseas. The senior rabbi was reaching retirement age, and Temple leaders, including my grandparents, did not want the assistant rabbi to become their next leader. They knew he was a Zionist, and that would just not do. When their daughter, my mother, explored that era in a film that was part of the congregation's celebration of the American Bicentennial in 1976, she was told, "We were convinced that, if there was a Jewish state, our neighbors would turn to us and say, 'Now you have your own country. Go there.'"ⁱⁱ Despite my grandmother's being at least the eighth generation of her family in this country and being born into a prosperous family, my grandparents and their friends were no more certain than their immigrant ancestors that America would be a permanent home for the Jewish people.

Moses and the Children of Israel, as depicted in this week's Torah portion, have a different take on their longevity in the land they are approaching after forty years of desert wandering. Among Moses's last acts as their leader, before the people enter the Land without him, he apportions real estate to each family, intended as an everlasting ancestral holding. Israel is the place of our people's origin and the only land we will ever be able to call our people's own. Yesterday, though, was a day of fasting for traditional Jews, because it is the anniversary of the day on which the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem, ending weeks later in the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile.

Today, American Jews face antisemitism at levels most have not known in our lifetimes. What we confront, though, difficult and disheartening as it is, would be child's play for generations past. Antisemitism has followed our people wherever we have gone, and America is no exception. Perhaps America also won't be exceptional in a larger sense: Who's to say that, ten generations from now, Jewish people will be at home in America? We must do our part, and demand that our leaders do theirs, to assure that the Washington's vision continues to be fulfilled. Let us take faith from our people's history, secure in the knowledge that the Jewish people's greatest gift is the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. God willing, America will continue to be home for another two hundred fifty years and more. Let us pray that, at long last, our people in America and in Israel are finally at home, once and for all.

Amen.

ⁱ George Washington, *Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island*, August 21, 1790.

ⁱⁱ Gay Block and Linda May, "A Tribute to Spirit: The Beth Israel Experience," 1976.