

What is it to be a Jew on the Fourth of July?

Text study for Shabbat Chukat/Balak

July 4, 2020 | 12 Tamuz 5780

1. "The Citizens of the United States of America 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."

"May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.¹ May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy."²

2. "Next to the Passover feast the fourth of July is the greatest, because it is a memorial of triumph of liberty, Israel's redemption, God's direct interposition in behalf of liberty and justice, the first successful declaration of independence, the first birth day of the first free nation, free in truth and justice, which ultimately revolutionized the whole civilized world by the laws and institutions of the nation liberated on that day, to adopt right instead of might, law for despotism, justice for the arbitrary will of one or more men, and personal liberty in a place of servitude"

"Hence we say, the fourth of July is the day of second redemption of mankind, the spirit of God as revealed through Moses and the prophets as far as this earth is concerned, was incarnated in a modern and suitable form and destined to conquer the nations, to break the chains of servitude, dispel the clouds of despotism...that every eye may behold the sacred sun of truth and be delighted with its glorious rays...Hallelujah! For the day, when man was restored to his rights, when conscience resumed it's rightful throne and the dwarf of superstition was slain. Hallelujah! For the birth day of liberty to all nations!"³

¹ Micah 4:3-4- "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again learn war. But every man shall sit under his grapevine or fig tree and none shall make him afraid"

² Excerpts from the letter written by George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, RI- August 18, 1790

³ Excerpts from the essay "The Fourth of July, 1858" written by Isaac Mayer Wise

3. “This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day.”

“I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common...This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.”

“Fellow citizens; above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions! Whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more in by the jubilee shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, ‘may my right hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!’⁴ To forget them, to pass lightly over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be treason most scandalous and shocking, and would make me a reproach before God and the world.”

“Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery—the great sin and shame of America!”

“At the very moment that they are thanking God for the enjoyment of civil and religious liberty, and for the right to worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences, they are utterly silent in respect to a law which robs religion of its chief significance, and makes it utterly worthless to a world lying in wickedness.”

“God speed the year of jubilee
The wide world o’er
When from their galling chains set free,
Th’ oppress’d shall vilely bend the knee,
And wear the yoke of tyranny
Like brutes no more.
That year will come, and freedom’s reign,
To man his plundered rights again
Restore.”⁵

⁴ Psalm 137- “If I forget you, Oh Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, If I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour”

⁵ Excerpts from the speech ‘What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?’ given by Frederick Douglass on July 5, 1852

4. “The letters of Thomas Jefferson to several clergymen in opposition to a state church, were frequently mentioned in this journal. That sage succeeded in proving to the American, than an entire separation of state of church are necessary for the benefit of either...It was not tolerated, that the preacher meddle in politics, or that politics interfere with the affairs of the church. We lived in peace and concord, ‘Every man under his vine and every man under his fig tree,’ precisely as long as this fundamental doctrine of liberty was scrupulously regarded.”

“The slavery question being purely political we can not discuss it here, so we must limit our remarks to the religious tenets of the paper under consideration.”

“After the right of a man to his life and limbs, the one to his beliefs is the most sacred and inviolable. If there is any form of slavery worse than another, it is the slavery of opinion...The law of God teaches religious liberty and you teach slavery in its worst form. You want to free the black and enslave the white man.”⁶

⁶ Editorial by Isaac Mayer Wise entitled “The Revolutionary Object of Extremists” published in *The Israelite* (an historic Jewish publication in Cincinnati) on February 27, 1863