

Bringing Glory to God's Holy Name – American Jewish Heritage Month

Parashat Emor 5783

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Jury selection began last week for the man responsible for 11 deaths and so many injuries at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue in October 2018. It is ironic that the trial is taking place this month because May is Jewish American Heritage Month. Pittsburgh shattered one of the narratives of American Jewish history. For many of our ancestors, this country was a land of refuge, a place to flee from pogroms and persecution, a land of promise where Jews could live like everyone else. But the Jews praying in that building on October 27, 2018, were targeted because they were Jews. A hateful man didn't like their politics. He thought they were different, inferior.

I remember gathering here a few days later. A lot of people expressed shock. Many of us had begun talking about antisemitism in the past tense. But now, we know of the rise of hateful incidents in our community, in this country, and throughout the world. We are beginning to understand what previous generations meant when they posited that antisemitism will never disappear. As long as there are Jews, there will be antisemitism. America is a land of refuge, but it isn't automatic. We must continually fight, and remind our political leaders of their responsibility in the fight to uproot antisemitism and other forms of hatred.

But there is more to the Jewish experience than mere refuge. On American Jewish Heritage month, we also celebrate how Jews immersed themselves in American life and culture, contributed to American society, and continue the struggle to form a more perfect union – as part of the Jewish imperative to repair the world.

On February 3, 1943, the USS Dorchester – a military ship carrying 902 passengers – was torpedoed off the coast of Greenland. As the ship began to sink, its four military chaplains – Protestant Reverends George L. Fox and Clark A. Poling, Catholic Priest John P. Washington, and Rabbi Alexander Goode – teamed up to save their fellow passengers. They gave up their lifejackets, as well as their seats on the lifeboats, to other soldiers. Survivor Rollie Philips reminisced about how “the chaplains stood together as the ship went down.” Other survivors claimed they saw the four men praying together.

Now, you have to understand the significance of these four chaplains standing together. This was a time of intense antisemitic and anti-Catholic bigotry in America. But in that moment, these clergy members didn't define themselves by religious affiliation. They were Americans first. They were human beings first. They understood that they were serving a Greater Purpose.

And people noticed. In 1945, the Committee of Catholics for Human Rights presented an award in Rabbi Goode's memory, calling him “a man of God who made the superior sacrifice so that others might live to carry on the struggle against the evil forces which menaced the world,” and “a symbol of the greatest heights to which human beings may hope to rise; an inspiring symbol of man's love for his fellow man and God.”

In 1948, the US Postal Service released a commemorative stamp to honor the four chaplains. It was the first time a Jewish person was featured on a postage stamp and the first time a Jewish person – Louis Schwimmer – designed a stamp. If you Google “Four Chaplains” you will find many stained glass representations, which are installed at the Pentagon and in military chapels throughout the United States. Rabbi Alexander Goode – together with his partners in faith – became a symbol of the loftiest American ideals of bravery, courage, and religious pluralism.

Our tradition has a term for stories like this. We call it *kiddush hashem*, sanctification of God’s name. The term comes from today’s *parasha*, where the justification for all the special rules assigned to the *kohanim* is that they shall be holy before their God: “קְדוּשִׁים יִהְיוּ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם.” For the Torah, holiness means distinction. And distinction implies responsibility. All Jews bear that responsibility to be holy, even if the *kohanim* bear more. When people recognize us as Jews, our actions extend beyond the individual. Our actions represent Jews everywhere, and they represent God as well.

On Jewish American Heritage Month, we celebrate people who fought to change America because of their Jewish values. People like Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman – Jews from New York City who met while volunteering to register Black voters in Mississippi. These young Jews were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan – together with Black activist James Cheney – and they became symbols of the Civil Rights Movement.

After the murders, Rita Schwerner, Michael’s wife, commented on these senseless deaths. “I personally suspect,” she said, “that if James Cheney, who is a native Mississippian Negro, had been alone at the time of the disappearance, that this case, like so many others that have come before, would have gone completely unnoticed.” Schwerner and Cheney’s presence was a *kiddush hashem*. Their sacred work shined a light on injustice. Their heroism continues to glorify God and Jewish values. Their commitments made a difference not just for Jews, but for American society *writ large*.

Speaking at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom about a year earlier, in 1963, Rabbi Joachim Prinz of New Jersey challenged all Americans: “The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful, and the most tragic problem,” this Holocaust survivor thundered, “is silence. ... America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent.” Prinz’s Jewish values informed the American conscience and consciousness.

On Jewish American Heritage Month, we celebrate the ways in which Jewish culture continues to influence America. It isn’t just social justice, although that is important. Think about the ubiquity of bagels ... or words like *chutzpah*, or *spiel*, or *mensch* ... or the positive ways Jews are portrayed on television and in movies. I remember as a teenager, watching Paul Pfeifer chant his Maftir on an episode of “The Wonder Years.” I don’t know if actor Josh Saviano was Jewish himself, but I recognized his chanting of Parashat Zachor, and it was good enough to make any *bar mitzvah* tutor proud.

My children enjoy “The Big Bang Theory,” where Simon Holberg plays Howard Wallowitz. Many scenes celebrate the incongruity of Wallowitz enjoying bacon cheeseburgers and otherwise violating traditional Jewish norms, but he is unabashedly Jewish. His childhood home features a *menorah*, a *mezuzah*, and pictures from his *bar mitzvah*.

It isn't always a good thing, but for many Americans, "New Yorker" is synonymous with "Jew." Jewish culture mixes right into American culture, and that is largely something to celebrate.

But it also presents its challenges. Too much assimilation, too much integration, too much "fitting in" could lead to erasure. I receive questions all the time from parents whose children have made it onto elite teams and clubs. Once upon a time, Jews would have been summarily excluded from these things. But today, their inclusion invites other conflicts – with Shabbat, or Hebrew school, or other Jewish commitments.

On Jewish American Heritage Month, we must also celebrate those traditions that mark Jews as distinctive from others. There aren't always easy answers. There are instances when we have to compromise, and we Jewish leaders and educators have to understand, accommodate, and support our children and their choices. But the answers aren't easy the other way either. We can't walk away from the requirements of Jewish observance and belonging, and expect that Jewish identity will magically become ingrained in the consciousness of the next generation. Jewish American Heritage is something to celebrate ... and continually nurture.

The last section of Today's *parasha* reprises the commandment for Aaron and the *kohanim* to kindle the lights of the Menorah every day. Connecting this commandment to the larger theme of holiness, the 3rd-century sage Bar Kappara imagines God telling us:

נֵרְךָ בְיָדִי וְנֵרִי בְיָדְךָ, Your light is in My hand and My light is in your hand. Your light is in My hand, as it says in Proverbs, "The soul of humanity is the light of the Lord." My light is in your hand, as I command you to kindle the *menorah* regularly. "אִם הָאֵרַת נֵרִי הֲרִינִי מֵאֵיר נֵרְךָ," If you kindle My lights," God says, "I promise to kindle your lamp as well." If you shine your light upon Me, I promise to shine My light upon you.

That is what we celebrate on this first Shabbat of Jewish American Heritage Month. We give thanks for the light of freedom in this great country. We express pride in the Jewish people and Jewish values that make America's light shine brighter. And we accept the challenge to keep the sacred lights kindled, that we may continue to illuminate injustice, enlighten humanity, and bring glory to God's holy name. Shabbat shalom.