

Rabbi Peter W. Stein
Shabbat Chukat-Balak
July 3, 2020/12 Tammuz 5780

Rabbi and Patriot: My Vision for America

Many years ago, when I was a staff member at a Boy Scout camp in the Catskills, the camp director was a big man with a booming and resonant voice. He had a flair for the dramatic and a gift for holding a group in the palm of his hand.

He would often tell stories and then close with a song: *America, America. Let me tell you how I feel. You have given me many treasures. I love you so. I love you so. America, America. Land of hope and liberty. Freedom rings from every mountain. From sea to sea. From sea to sea.*

It is simple, beautiful, and aspirational. We were singing it in the years after Vietnam and in the later years of the Cold War, when there was an urge to restore confidence and patriotism.

I've been reflecting a lot in recent weeks...not just on this song, but on what it means to a patriot. What does it mean to envision our country as a land of hope and liberty?

Especially on this Independence Day weekend, we can each hold this aspiration in our own way: to think about what we can do to make freedom ring from every mountain, from sea to sea.

The word for patriotism in Hebrew is *ahavat hamoledet*...literally love for [one's] birthplace. It captures a bit of theology, that our Jewish identity is grounded in God's call to Abram, to go to the Promised Land and make it his own...so, the subsequent generations after Abram and Sarai will be born in the land of Israel.

But, of course, the path of our history has meant that we have lived all around the globe. One branch of my family has been in America since before the Revolutionary War, including an ancestor who served as a drummer boy in the army fighting for Independence. Another branch was twentieth century immigrants, the remnant of those who were lost in the Holocaust. So many of our families, regardless of the specific timelines, have immigrant roots but have flourished here. We are thoroughly American.

So, patriotism doesn't just mean *ahavat hamoledet* but faithfulness to the place we call home. Patriotism reflects a belief that we can give back and we can make a difference in strengthening our country.

In 1852, on July 5, Rochester's own Frederick Douglass delivered one of his most well-known addresses, entitled *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* At one point, he includes this contention, "Pride and patriotism, not less than gratitude, prompt you to celebrate...I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ring-bolt to the chain of your nation's destiny; so indeed, I regard it."

The notion of a chain is familiar to us: we talk often about a *shalsholet hakabalah*, the chain of tradition...and how we need to work to add links to the chain and how the chain is only as strong as the weakest link. The same is true for the chain of our American destiny...we have the ability and the responsibility to add links to the chain and to ensure that the chain remains unbroken and strong.

Of course, when we examine the chain of American history, as Douglass did from the vantage point of 1852, we know that there have been many moments when freedom and equality and justice did not ring from every mountain. In 1852, Douglass was writing in a time when slavery was still legal...in a national census of 23 million+, there were over 3 million slaves...somewhere around 13 percent of the population.

In the last US census, the black population was somewhere around 14%-- just about the same percentage of the population. In this setting tonight, I won't take time to break down that number and attempt to quantify and compare the number who lack security and equal opportunity.

Rather, as we come together tonight, at the start of this Independence Day weekend, and as a patriot, I will simply offer a few more of Douglass's words: "I [speak] with a sad sense of the disparity between us...the blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence...is shared by you, not by me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine..."

I believe that it is our patriotic duty and our duty as faithful members of the Jewish community to respond to the disparities in our country. The "inheritance of justice" is really the inheritance of the opportunity and obligation to pursue justice. Justice won't exist until we create it.

On our Jewish calendar, this coming week (on Thursday, to be precise) includes the 17th of Tammuz...a minor holy day, one of several fast days in the year that commemorates the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. It was on the 17th of Tammuz that the city wall in Jerusalem was breached, leading up to the destruction on the 9th of Av 3 weeks later.

Early Reform Judaism had a strong philosophical stance that we should not be observing these fast days...we should not be mourning for the destruction. Certainly, we were to remember these tragedies as an important part of our history. But, as proud Americans, our Reform founders believed that we should not be grieving in a formal sense for the loss of national life in Israel. Rather, we should celebrate the beauty and importance of life in America and around the globe.

Today, Reform Judaism has renewed an intense and central commitment to Israel, but still retains a focus on our Americanness. We are a uniquely awesome blend of Jewish and American—and we have an important outward focus on making a difference in the broader community.

This universal mindset means that we should engage eagerly in civic life. Our organizing principle is not to remain by ourselves observing ritual, but rather it is to be a light unto the nations...to do what we can to create light in the dark places in our country.

This ideal will mean different things for different people. I celebrate those who are veterans and who have held public office. I salute those who have volunteered with different community organizations. I have tremendous admiration for those who are philanthropists and whose tzedakah is a transformative force in the community. I am grateful for those who volunteer to feed and house vulnerable Rochesterians. And, I am proud of those who have brought TBK into relationship with other faith organizations and community groups.

Right now, so many of us are wrestling with how we can increase our impact, in particular to respond to the violence and hatred that is so pervasive. In the coming days and weeks, I will continue to share the discussions and strategies and action plans of our Social Action committee. For now, I share one more image from Douglass. In a brilliant reworking of a biblical image, he wrote, "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.'"

This was originally a verse from Psalm 137...if I forget thee, O Jerusalem..." As we were cast out into the world, as we ended up a world away both in miles and in life from Jerusalem, the psalmist urged us to never forget where we came from.

Douglass now urges us to always hear the cry of those who are suffering. That is our patriotic duty. Let us never forget and never turn away from those who are in need. As our hearts beat with patriot pride, let the words of our mouths and the work of our hands combine to create freedom from sea to shining sea, liberty and justice from the mountains to the prairie, and equality in every city and town across these United States of America.

God Bless America and Shabbat Shalom!