

GENERAL

Oh, Say Can You EAT...?

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Throughout our history there have been individual people and individual events that changed the course of history.

One of the great Jewish leaders of the eighteenth century was Rabbi Moshe Sofer, of Hungary, also known by the name of his books, the Chasam Sofer. The Chasam Sofer was a fighter for the primacy of genuine, unadulterated Torah Judaism, and he battled courageously against those who attempted to water it down. Another great leader of that era was Rabbi Elijah of Vilna, the Vilna Gaon. He too, worked very hard to emphasize the importance of Torah observance and Torah study, and he fought his own battles against influences that he felt were not fully in concert with Torah values.

These two great sages established followings that exist to this day. Their teachings are studied and put into practice. Each one of them, in his own way, revolutionized Torah Judaism.

During the lifetime of these two great sages, another revolution was going on in another part of the world. A meeting was going on in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania that was destined to alter the course of human history.

The signing of the Declaration of Independence was, I believe, one of the great moments in post-Talmudic Jewish history. The concept of religious freedom is truly an anomaly in Jewish (and world) history. Imagine a country where the law of the land gives us the right to take off from work on Saturday. If your boss insists that you show up for work on Saturday, you can take him to court – a far cry from other lands, such as America's "ally" Saudi Arabia where the practice of any religion other than Islam is banned.

I was pondering the 4th of July in the context of the Jewish calendar. I was curious as to the Hebrew date of July 4, 1776. What, I wondered, was going on in the Jewish world while Thomas Jefferson sat in Philadelphia penning the immortal words of the Declaration of Independence?

What were the Chasam Sofer (14 years old) and the Vilna Gaon (56 years old) doing “by the dawn's early light” on that first Fourth of July? You may be surprised by the answer; I certainly was. They were fasting. You see, our Founding Fathers created the miracle of democracy and religious freedom on 17 Tammuz, 5536.

The Seventeenth of Tammuz? Could it be that the Founding Fathers gave the gift of America to the world on a day that Jews were fasting? On the 17th of Tammuz we commemorate several sad events. Among the misfortunes that occurred on that date were the shattering of the first tablets of the Ten Commandments and the cessation of the Daily Offering in the first Temple 3 weeks prior to its destruction by the Babylonians. It is a day that saw the burning of a Torah scroll and the erection of an idol in the Temple. It is a day that saw the Romans breach the walls of Jerusalem before destroying the second Temple

I couldn't believe it. The United States of America is a bastion of freedom where Torah has grown exponentially. There are yeshivas all over the country. Kosher food is available everywhere. A religious Jew has opportunities that are denied to him elsewhere. A Sabbath- and kashruth-observing Jew came within a few hundred chads of the vice presidency! How could it be that the United States was founded on one of the saddest days on the Jewish calendar?

On further reflection, I think I may have found the answer.

Freedom is a double-edged sword. Yes, in America, we Jews (and others) have the right to observe the faith of our ancestors. We are entitled to be accommodated in our needs to follow the dictates of our religion. However, we also have the right to throw it away. To be sure, we are seeing a renaissance of Jewish observance in America. Unfortunately, we are seeing tremendous levels of assimilation here as well.

How many Jews from religious homes in Europe sailed to America, and dumped their religion overboard together with their Tefillin and their shaitels? How many Jews decided that being a good American meant relegating one's Judaism to an occasional synagogue visit on the High Holidays?

The breakdown is not just one of Jewish values. Free speech has been interpreted as the right to burn American flags. Freedom of religion is understood as the banning of public religious expression. Potential terrorists' rights are being understood as overriding the need for security for the masses.

The Founding Fathers wrote about being "*endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions...with a firm reliance on the protection of **divine** Providence**...*"

How could anyone think that the men who wrote those words would be opposed to the words "under G-d" in the Pledge of Allegiance?

Have you followed the Supreme Court hearings? Many Jews take great pride in the fact that one of "our own" is being considered for the position. It is not a sentiment that I share.

We were subjected to the spectacle of someone who ironically has the same last name as one of the Torah giants of the previous century, joking about “like most Jews,” spending December 25 in a Chinese restaurant. And people thought that was funny. Personally, I found it offensive.

We don’t believe in forcing Torah observance upon our fellow Jews. But isn’t it sad when non-observance is **celebrated**? Isn’t it pathetic when groups of Jews actually endorse the “freedom” to choose to kill pre-born babies as a “Jewish value”?

(A friend of mine who is not happy with the conservative leanings of Justice Thomas commented to me that there are no blacks on the Supreme Court. I responded that based on that logic, there are no Jews either!)

Can you see how it could be that the great United States of America was born on a fast day? Could it be, perhaps, that the Chasam Sofer and the Vilna Gaon and the rest of world Jewry were fasting and praying that this new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, would be a place where Torah would have the freedom to **flourish**, rather than having the freedom to **perish**!!?

I live in an area that has many Chassidic neighborhoods. You walk down the street on Shabbos and see the shiny black robes and round fur hats. It looks like nineteenth century Poland – but nothing could be more American!

Liberty is a precious – and dangerous – gift. Caution: Handle with Care!

Have a happy and meaningful Independence Day. May G-d Bless America.

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