

THE STRUGGLE FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN
AMERICA- The Jewish Contribution

Rabbi Dr. Herbert M. Baumgard, Temple Beth Am, (Anti-defamation League), Miami, Florida

It is sometimes difficult for us to understand, we who live in a free America, that for long centuries, indeed for thousands of years, revolt against the ruler of a nation was an unthinkable sin punishable by death. One of the reasons that a revolt against the king was outside the realm of possibility was that in ancient times the king was considered to be the god incarnate, as in ancient Egypt or Babylonis and, sometimes, in Rome. The blending of political and religious power continued even until modern times. The Catholic Church in medieval Europe placed its power of damnation against those who revolted against a king who had the Church's blessing. The Church quoted scripture to support its stand that against the king an individual had no political rights. It quoted the Book of Romans, Chapter 13:15, which reads, "...the powers that be (the rulers) are ordained of God...Whosoever, therefore, who resisteth the power (ruler) resisteth the ordinance of God, and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation...(The King)...is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil, therefore, ye must needs be subject not only for wrath, but also for conscience's sake. * We must bear in mind that this is not the teaching of Jesus but from the author of the Book of Romans.

Indeed, many of the early pilgrims who came to America did so because the Church in England was so inextricably bound to the government. King Henry VIII had the courage to revolt against the Church in Rome but his aim was to set up an independent Church/completely controlled by himself, so that the people would owe him a double loyalty. The Church of England was therefore very clearly a king's church, and it was hardly free of political control.

The founders of America came to these new shores not only because they wanted to worship as they wished. They wanted to establish their own political government. To what models did they turn in their experimentation and in their search for something different from the European models? We have a clue to the mind of early America in a speech delivered by the Rev. Dr. Samuel Langdon, President of Harvard College, on May 31, 1775. The talk was the election sermon before the Massachusetts Congress. Here is an excerpt from that talk: "The Jewish government, according to the original constitution which was divinely established, if considered merely in a civil view, was a perfect republic, and let those who cry up the divine right of kings consider that the form of government which had a proper claim to a divine establishment was so far from including the idea of a king, that it was a high crime for Israel to ask to be in this respect like other nations, and when they were thus gratified, it was rather as a just punishment for their folly". The Rev. Langdon was referring, in the last part of his statement to the Prophet Samuel's warning to the people of Israel (1 Samuel, Ch. 12). Samuel had indicated to the people that in demanding a king, they were rejecting God Himself.

We note that it was a Christian minister, a Protestant, who

* So reads the "The Scofield Reference Bible", Oxford University Press, London, 1917. The "Revised Standard Version" published in New York, 1952, begins in modern English, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, he who resists the authorities, resists what God has appointed...etc.

delivered this message to the Massachusetts Congress, but the message he delivered was from the Old Testament concerning the life experience of the Jewish People.

From the Old Testament the founders of America borrowed again and again in building their foundation for revolt against the King of England. When a committee consisting of Samuel Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin was asked to draw up an official seal for the new government, the seal they suggested showed a picture of Pharaoh and his Egyptian chariots being overwhelmed by the waters of the Red Sea. Included was an inscription which read, "Rebellion against tyrants is obedience to God". How did this eminent committee know that rebellion against tyrants was obedience to God? Surely not from European history for thousands of years before. They knew it from the Old Testament. They knew it from Samuel and from Gideon who had refused the kingship of Israel when it was offered to him. We are told in the Book of Judges, that when Gideon, a mighty warrior, had performed the seemingly impossible feat of defeating the Midianites, the people said to him (RSV Judges, 8:22-23), "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us... Gideon said to them, I will not rule over you and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you". You can imagine how often this passage was quoted in early America, and we have the records of how they used this Israelite episode.

Some of the colonies went so far as to try to copy the government of Moses in its entirety. Others took over certain features of the Mosaic government. Roger Williams tells us in his memoirs that after he and others left Massachusetts, they attempted to set up parts of their government following the Jews. Let me read a note from Williams*, "In imitation of the form of government which existed for a time among the Jews, the inhabitants chose Mr. Coddington to be their magistrate, with title of Judge; and a few months afterward they elected three elders to assist him".

The great men who developed the American government learned much from a book written by Algernon Sidney. Mr. Sidney wrote at length on the ideal democracy of the early Israelites. They had, he said, a Chief Magistrate or Judge, a Council of seventy or Senate, and the General Assembly of the people. ** But no one summarized the reliance of early Americans on the Old Testament better than the Rev. Dr. Ezra Stiles, president of Yale College, speaking before the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut on May 8, 1783. Stiles called America, "God's American Israel". He called George Washington "our American Joshua". Stiles went so far as to note that just as the Bible records that three million Hebrews stood at Mt. Sinai to fashion the original democracy, so precisely three million early Americans established the new democracy in America. Stiles went on to say that the settling of America was God's fulfillment of His promise to gather the dispersed faithful from the four corners of the earth after the exile. Stiles all but said, "We are those Jews", so closely did he identify with the struggles of the early Hebrews.

It is not generally known that in the vote to determine the official language of the United States, the language which was a

* "Memoir of Roger Williams", by Prof. Knowles, p. 145, quoted "Origin of Republican Form of Government", Oscar S. Straus, G.P. Putnam Sons, 1926

** "Discourses Concerning Government," Chap. 11, Sec. 9

distant second to English, was not even a spoken language in America, it was Hebrew, the original language of the Bible. So important was Hebrew in early America that you could not graduate from Harvard unless you could open the Jewish Torah Scroll and read at random. Large numbers of colonists took up Hebrew names like Jeremiah and Zechariah and Abraham and Samuel and the tombstones of such as Gov. Bradford of Rhode Island had Hebrew inscriptions on them.

In short, the Bible was to early American not only their guide in religion, but their text book in politics. The influence of the Old Testament and the ancient Israelite experience was brought to the American revolution, not so much by living Jews as by living Christians who turned to this section of their Bible for example and inspiration, and as they did so, they brought the energizing Jewish spirit to these shores. No wonder then that the Liberty Bell which hangs in Independence Hall in Philadelphia bears an inscription from the Torah. The inscription is "Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land To All The Inhabitants Thereof". Perhaps it would be fair to say that by preserving the Old Testament as part of their Bible, early Christians in America enabled the Jews to bring their eternal message to the new world, namely, that man's first allegiance is to God and not to any political power.

We have said that the earliest influence of the Jewish people in America was through the Bible. Have there been no contributions to America by Jews in the flesh? Of course, there have been such contributions. Jews came to America as early as 1653. Jews like Haym Solomon were major heroes during the Revolutionary War and Uriah Levy, a commander in the U.S. Navy, was responsible for the abolishment of whipping as a standard practice for punishing sailors. During the Civil War, many Jews fought on both sides and a Jew, Judah Benjamin, held several Cabinet positions in the Confederacy.

But Jews are most proud of a contribution more distinctively Jewish. In the person of the Statue of Liberty which stands in New York Harbor facing Europe, America addresses itself to Europe with these famous words;

"Give me your tired your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these the homeless, tempest tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

The statue was erected at a time when millions of Europeans were fleeing famine, dictatorships, and persecution in Ireland, in Germany, and in Eastern Europe. Among the new immigrants were a large number of Jews, and one of them, Emma Lazarus, composed the words placed on the Statue of Liberty. Emma Lazarus spoke for America, the America which had become a haven for the persecuted. She spoke for the best part of America as one who had profited from its generosity, and because she had the experience of a recent immigrant, she knew more deeply than many what America really meant.

Emma Lazarus is symbolic of many Jews who have helped to give America direction in its maturing years. The Jews who suffered in the sweat shops of New York's garment industry, working day and night for pennies, organized labor unions to protect themselves. The unions they established, The Ladies Garment Worker Union and others, became the first unions in America to seek more for their members than wage and hour improvements. They established health insurance and retirement benefits, and

compensation for injury on the job, as well as credit banks and vacation guarantees. In time, the other unions in the country were to follow the pattern of humane treatment established by these Jewish developed unions. It is not by accident that the first president of the American Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers, was a Jew. Since the Jews were primarily poor immigrants, they linked their cause to the many poor in America and helped establish patterns that eventually helped all groups in America who had the immigrant experience. The Ladies Garment Workers Union in New York doesn't have too many Jews today. Indeed, its membership became almost all Italian, at one time, and now its membership consists of blacks and Puerto Ricans. Each of these groups has profited in turn from the progressive policies established first by the Jews who created that union and other similar unions on the East Coast.

In the 1920s, American industry was becoming increasingly centralized, and there were some who feared that democracy could not long survive in a land where just a few companies owned the bulk of the wealth. During this period a lawyer in Boston became most active in supporting small business against the monopolies. He became in time a U.S. Supreme Court Justice. His name was Louis Brandeis, trust-buster, friend of the small man. President Roosevelt called him Isaiah. Brandeis is symbolic of many Jews who were drawn to the Law to protect human rights.

Because he was part of a minority, the Jew in America was always concerned with civil rights. Discrimination against the Jew was much prevalent in America. In some of the early colonies, he couldn't vote. In many of the states, no Jew could be elected to office. In many major industries, the Jew was not admitted. Colleges developed quotas for Jews who wished to enter. Social clubs excluded him. As the Jew had opposed Pharaoh in Egypt and Torquemada in Spain, they now went to work establishing civil rights groups. There has always been a high number of Jews in the American Civil Liberties Union, but besides participating heavily in this group which includes people of all faiths, Jews have organized on their own, three outstanding civil rights groups. The Anti-Defamation League being but one of them, (The American Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Committee are other extremely active and important groups). To be sure, the Jew has been fighting for his own rights as a human being and citizen, but in fighting for his rights, he has fought for all other human beings.

It is not by accident that Jews were amongst the chief organizers of the Urban League for black citizens. Nor is it an accident that Jews have been amongst the main supporters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Indeed, the Chairman of the NAACP for many years until his recent death, was Kivvie Kaplan, a white man and a Jew. Recently a black man who had held a high position in the government of the City of Chicago, said to me that he went to college on a scholarship paid for by Lessing Rosenwald, one of the founders of Sears Roebuck. Long before there was any Negro College Fund or any movement by blacks to send their own to college, Lessing Rosenwald had established a nation-wide college fund for blacks. Rosenwald is not atypical of some Jews who have wanted to share the good things they have acquired in our wonderful land.

It is a great source of pride to Jews to know that they contributed the slogan on the Liberty Bell and the words on the Statue of Liberty. It is with pride that we study the early history of America and review how our life experience recorded in the Old Testament influenced the Christian founders of America. But the contribution of the Jew to America is not confined to the past. Jews stand ready at any moment to defend the cause of liberty and human rights in America today. Our institutions which we have developed are participating daily in this task, but beyond that, there is a bell within the soul of every living Jew which rings out this message, "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God."