



Conceived in Liberty

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(Delivered December 13, 2017, as “Conceived in liberty” keynote address at The Jewish Futures Conference)

We were conceived in liberty. Over 200 years ago, our country’s founders made an audacious claim. We would not be ruled from afar by a sole monarch. We would establish our independence from political servitude and declare that all men are created equal and have an inalienable right to liberty. We would advance the radical notion that government can be, and should be, by the people and for the people.

This grand moment of political imagination and moral bravery would be called upon again and again to redeem this country from its most vile and horrific compromises. 76 years after the Declaration of Independence, the public luminary and former slave Frederick Douglass would call us to demolish the institution of slavery with these words, “Would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty? That he is the rightful owner of his own body? You have already declared it.” Freedom is America’s foundation, America’s aspiration, and America’s mechanism for change.

Before there were kings and monarchs and tyrants, and masters, there was pharaoh. Before there were puritans, and colonists, and Americans, there were Israelites. When America’s founders struggled to understand what this free country would be like, what the sign of freedom should be, they turned to Exodus. Benjamin Franklin believed our nascent country was best depicted by an image of Moses raising his staff to part

the Red Sea, a prophet opposing a tyrant on behalf of collective and individual freedom.

We too were conceived in liberty. Jewish freedom was born in slavery, bestowed at Sinai, and refined throughout our history as a people. We know intimately the dehumanizing challenges of trying to be a free people in an unfree land. Since the first Jews arrived in Rhode Island, New Amsterdam, and Charleston, we have had the incredible fortune of being a people conceived in liberty dwelling in a country conceived in liberty.

It is because of our profound and long history with freedom, we the Jewish people have an urgent responsibility to use our texts, our rituals, and our sensibilities to continue helping this country stand by its noble aspirations.

This is not a new obligation. It has always been with us, as the prophet Yermiyahu wrote to the surviving exiles in Babylon: “And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.”

It is not a new obligation but it is an urgent one because today we are in a time of national and global democratic fragility. 2016 was the 11th consecutive year, according to Freedom House, an organization that measures democracy and freedom, where there was a global decline in civil liberties and political rights. While traditionally declines have come in autocracies and dictatorships, in 2016 established democracies suffered significant setbacks.

Freedom, we understand as a Jewish people and as an American people, has never been a simply natural occurrence. Freedom is secured or denied by laws, institutions, and nations.

How we secure freedom today, how we teach for the demands of free citizenship, is one of the most important tasks ahead of us. To begin, we must first pause and try to understand the kind of freedom that we are securing.

Every July, I spend three weeks teaching NYC public high school students about the history of [Freedom and Citizenship](#) at Columbia University. And every summer, I begin with a question: How would you define freedom? And every summer, without fail, they all say freedom means choice. And then I push them. What kind of choice? The examples they give range from the profound to the quotidian. The ability to choose to go to a good school. The ability to choose to live with my mother. The ability to choose french fries over peas. The freedom to do whatever I want. I hear them.

But there is something missing when we reduce liberty to license and freedom to choice. We start to lose the history of a word that has long been connected to what it means not to feel free personally but to be a free citizen. When they dig into the text, into Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Douglas, Dubois, their definition thickens. They start to uncover that freedom has another history, it can mean the freedom to enter political life, the freedom to serve your polity, to participate in the noble act of self-governance for the common good. This is the origins and depth of political freedom.

This formulation has many resonances with the Jewish conception of freedom. Our freedom was not secured when we left slavery, it was not

secured when we wandered in the desert, it was secured at Sinai. It was secured when we entered into a covenant that endowed us with the framework to live well together, to govern ourselves through self-restraint and communal obligation. Sinai gave us the aspirational value, if not always the actual value, that we could be a nation of priests. At Sinai, God explained, “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

This kind of political freedom requires an extraordinary amount of discipline. It means taking responsibility for yourself, for your community, and for the future.

How do we educate for this kind of political freedom? First, we must understand how to define freedom for our place and for our time. The philosopher and educational innovator, John Dewey explains that because oppression changes for every generation, so does liberty. Liberty, he writes in 1935, “is always relative to forces that at a given time and place are increasingly felt to be oppressive....At one time, liberty signified liberation from chattel slavery: at another time, release of a class from serfdom. During the late seventeenth century...it meant liberation from despotic dynastic rule...[Today] it signifies liberation from material insecurity.....”

Political freedom, Dewey explains, should always be seen within the context of what is most restricting it. It is not enough to understand what it once meant to be free, to continually define political freedom as liberation from a monarch or a pharaoh or a master, each generation has an obligation to define freedom in context and in response to particular challenges.

To education for political freedom, we must locate the forces that are restricting political freedom, restricting our capacity to take responsibility over ourselves and our community, and then commit to restoring this freedom. The particular challenge to protect liberty changes for every generation.

As Jewish parents, educators, and leaders, who take Dewey's insight seriously, we must wrestle with two questions. What are the greatest threats to political freedom in America today? What Jewish texts, rituals, values, and sensibilities can help address these threats?

So let me begin with the threat: It is my contention that one of the major challenges to political freedom in America today is the erosion of the foundational idea that this is a country by the people and for the people. Across the nation, you hear rhetoric that presumes the government is a conspiratorial entity that seeks to control and abuse.

Only 20% of Americans believe they can trust their own government. Trust has broken down for real reasons, that merit serious discussion, be it large almost tectonic forces, like globalization and war, which dilute a citizen's sense of political control, to a history of policy decisions that have led to the almost universal disappearance of national service and civic education. To finally, an incarceration rate that presents our government as an entity that easily seizes freedom rather than struggles to preserve it.

Our current political system endows degrees of consumer choice but does not promote a national commitment to political participation. The majority of American citizens do not serve and do not vote. We have abandoned governing ourselves, we have abandoned the belief that to be

a free society we must have a nation of citizens educated for the obligations of political freedom.

To me, this is not just a sign of eventual decline, this is evidence of a significant crisis. But it is a crisis that religious communities can be at the forefront of solving.

I want to offer three Jewish technologies, or inventions, that I believe can help us face and overcome this current threat to political freedom.

1. Origin Rituals
2. Sanctity of Language
3. Transformative Forgiveness

1. Origin Rituals

A few weeks ago my daughter, who is 7, was looking outside at the sky and was overcome by the beauty. She had received her first siddur at school and now rushed to find the bracha for natural wonders. She opened her siddur and read. Blessed are you God, King of the Universe, who forms the work of creation.

עושה מעשה בראשית

And when she said the words bereishit, she shook her head and said, “in the beginning.” Oh yes, in the beginning. When God created this world.

My daughter saw something beautiful in this world and our tradition gave her a way to understand how this single moment connects to the original act of creation. To me, this was such an astounding example of the extent to which our tradition respects origins.

This veneration of origins runs through every aspect of Jewish life, from when we light shabbat candles, to our daily commitment to remember the exodus from egypt, to our yearly seders where we commit ourselves to understanding freedom through the experience of slavery and redemption.

The Jewish people understand, and now must share, the truly magnificent and historically refined techniques we have to create collective narratives and ritual experiences of origins.

As Americans, we do not know how to ritualize or return to our founding moments to respect the aspirations and principles embodied in our national creation story. Yes, there are grave tragedies to be reckoned with, but what creation story is without fault, without floods. What would it look like if every family in America, or every public library, church and synagogue, celebrated Constitution day with intimate conventions, where mothers, fathers, grandparents, and children tried to design a government structure to ensure political freedom.

2. Sanctity of Language

Because we have a great respect for siblings and sibling rivalry in our faith, I will now mention my son, age 4, who asked a question that so many children ask, of his teacher. How did God make the world?

His beloved teacher bent down, as really good teachers do, to look my son in the eyes and said, “God spoke the world into existence. The world was created with words.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אֹר וַיְהִי-אֹר:

In our tradition, we revere words. Words are things, *dvarim*, they are objects in the world with extraordinary power. We make and remake the world with how we talk to one another. Aristotle, knew this. When he wrote about mankind as political animals, he meant that in the best sense. That the natural course of our evolution is to live with one another. And the only way to do that and not to descend into chaos is to use language carefully. Our people have created a body of law, of *halacha*, around how we speak to one another, law that treats words as if they can be weapons.

Just talking about the sanctity of language reminds all of us of how far we have descended in this country. Words are not the holy objects of careful attention but rather the quick and rash outputs of volatile emotions. How we think about words and use them in political life requires a robust renaissance, that our people can lead.

3. Transformative Forgiveness

Jewish tradition understands that political freedom is connected to moral freedom. We cannot be free if we are endlessly stuck in cycles of revenge. We need the moral technology for atonement and for forgiveness. In his majestic introduction to the Yom Kippur siddur, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes,

“[Forgiveness] is one of the most radical ideas ever to have been introduced into the moral imagination of humankind. Forgiveness is an action that is not a reaction. It breaks the cycle of stimulus-response, harm and retaliation, wrong and revenge, which has led whole cultures to their destruction and still threatens the future of the world. It frees individuals from the burden of their past, and humanity from the irreversibility of history. It tells us that enemies can become friends.”

As a Jewish people, we are extraordinary at atonement and forgiveness. We have lifted this personal ritual to the level of community and then even to world politics. We have established personal and communal rituals of forgiveness to bind a sundered community together again.

As an American people, we fail at this crucial moral responsibility to atone and to forgive. When you travel through Germany, you are confronted by the sin of the Holocaust. It is deliberately etched into the landscape. Today, you could travel from one side of America to the other and never face the vile realities perpetrated on this soil in the name of national expansion, economic expansion, and even under the false banner of freedom. What would a national day of atonement and forgiveness look like? Could we truly repent for the past without changing aspects of our present? How could we get to a national place of forgiveness?

These rituals give us the tools to break cycles but they also bind us across time and space as a people, allowing us to learn from our past and take responsibility for our future.

It is up to you, the incredible Jewish educators, parents, and leaders in this room, to teach our children that we are uniquely blessed to be a people who were conceived in liberty living in a country conceived in liberty and that it is our civic duty, and perhaps our sacred duty, to take responsibility for this fragile heritage and preserve it before it breaks.