AMERICAN CIVIC HOLIDAY RESOURCES

JEWISH AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH
MAY 2024

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This month, we celebrate Jewish American Heritage Month. Jewish Americans have been a central presence in the United States since colonial times. As our nation is experiencing a rise in antisemitism, it is especially essential to educate about the Judeo-Christian values that are embedded in the fabric of the United States and the vibrant history of the American-Jewish experience.

This month's resource highlights speech excerpts from influential Jewish American leaders about the prevailing developments of their times and how uniquely American values address them. The accompanying texts and guiding questions will propel consideration of these profound evolving issues and stimulate your students' critical thinking and thoughtful discussions.

We look forward to building on these ideas and highlighting the pivotal significance of Jewish American Heritage as catalysts to American progress and growth!

Source 1: Brandeis, Louis D. (1915). True Americanism: Fourth of July Oration. Excerpt.

Justice Louis Brandeis was the first Jewish American to serve as a Supreme Court Justice. He was nominated to the High Court by President Woodrow Wilson on January 28th, 1916, and confirmed by the Senate on June 4th, 1916. Prior to serving as Supreme Court Justice, Brandeis was known as the "People's Lawyer."

What are the American ideals? They are the development of the individual for his own and the common good; – the development of the individual through liberty and the attainment of the common good through democracy and social justice.

Our form of government, as well as humanity, compels us to strive for the development of the individual man. Under universal suffrage (soon to be extended to women) every voter is a partner of the State. Unless the rulers have … education and character and are free men, our great experiment in democracy must fail. It devolves upon the State, therefore, to fit its rulers for their task. It must provide not only facilities for development, but the opportunity of using them. It must not only provide opportunity; it must stimulate the desire to avail of it. Thus we are compelled to insist upon observance of what we somewhat vaguely term the American standard of living; we become necessarily our brothers' keepers.

What does this standard imply? In substance, the exercise of those rights which our Constitution guarantees; the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Life, in this connection, means living not existing; liberty, freedom in things industrial as well as political; happiness includes, among other things, that satisfaction which can come only through the full development and utilization of one's faculties. In order that men may live and not merely exist – in order that men may develop their faculties, they must have a reasonable income; they must have health and leisure. High wages will not meet the worker's need unless employment be regular. The best of wages will not compensate for excessively long working hours which undermine health. And working conditions may be so bad as to nullify the good effects of high wages and short hours. The essentials of American citizenship are not satisfied by supplying merely the material needs or even wants of the worker.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does Justice Brandeis' illustration of American ideals converge with the Progressive ideas of the early twentieth century?
2. What does Brandeis highlight as essential for what he refers to as, "we become necessarily our brothers' keepers." Do you agree with citizens serving as "our brothers' keepers"? Why or why not? In what respects should we act in this manner?
3. Brandeis conveys, "In substance, the exercise of those rights which our Constitution guarantees; the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Life, in this connection, means living not existing;". What does he mean when he says, "Living not existing"? Can you think of a modern example of this idea?
4. How do you think Justice Brandeis' Jewish identity may have played a role in his work in advocating for the underprivileged during the Progressive Era?

Source 2: Lieberman, Joseph (2011, October 25). Faith and the Public Square. Speaking at Brigham Young University. Excerpts.

Joseph Lieberman served as a US Senator from Connecticut from 1989 to 2013. In 2000, he was the first Jewish American to run on a national ticket for Vice President of the United States as Al Gore's running mate.

We believe both what the Bible and the Declaration of Independence tell us. The Bible clearly tells us we are not here by accident but because of a divine, godly act of creation. And as the declaration, written by men of faith, tells us, every one of us is a child of God, and, as such, each and every one of us has inalienable rights, by birth, to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." We believe that each of us, with those rights, also has responsibilities that are articulated in our faiths. And we believe that each of us has a destiny and that this great nation of ours has a destiny…. We are now at the start of a presidential campaign in which discussions and debates about the relationship between politics and religion—about the proper place of faith in the public square—have already begun to play a prominent role.

These are not new questions; they are very old. They go back to the founders of our country who wrote the Declaration of Independence and later the Constitution. The words of our founders are relevant because they remind us that from the beginning of America we have been a nation that has defined itself not so much by our geographical borders as by our national values. One of those values was and is a belief shared by most Americans that there is a God. I know that may be controversial to some, because though we have that belief, we respect the rights of those who don't share that belief. The new nation of the United States of America was formed "to secure these rights"—the rights that are mentioned in the second paragraph of our first document, the rights to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," which are the endowment of our Creator. I always like to say that the truth is that America has been from the beginning a faith-based initiative, and anybody who tries to separate faith from America's public square is doing something unnatural and ultimately bad for our country.

Our founders were all men of a particular Christian disposition, mostly Protestant, so you have to give them extraordinary credit, for when it came to religion, the remarkable documents they wrote and embraced guaranteed religious freedom for everyone—not just the people who shared their faith. They prohibited the establishment of any one religion, an official religion. They might have been tempted to have an official religion and still give others freedom of religion, but they didn't—even though Christians were, and are now, a large majority in this country.

The founders were remarkable people. The First Amendment of our constitution prohibits the "establishment" of an official religion and ensures for every American the right to worship (or, as I said, not to worship) as he or she chooses. I was delighted one day with the thought that one of the rights to liberty that our Creator has endowed us with is the right to not believe in the Creator. And though that's not a right many Americans exercise, it's a measure of the breadth of the vision of the founders that it is so.

In Article VI of the Constitution of the United States, the founders did something else quite specific to guarantee this vision: They protected every American from religious discrimination in politics by prohibiting what they called religious tests for public office. The truth is that in many of the original colonies of the United States there were laws saying that you had to be of a particular Christian denomination to run for public office. But, quite remarkably, the founders wanted to rise above that.

Succeeding generations have been inspired by this founding vision and have endeavored to make real its promise—the promise of what I call freedom of religion, not freedom from religion.

Our unique constitutional history created in turn a unique American public square in which there is no establishment of one religion but freedom for all religions. There is the presence of religion in our public life. The greatest laws that are written, including our constitution, are the ones that are so broadly accepted by the people of a nation such as ours that they become not just laws that one feels compelled to follow, because they are in the law, but part of the fiber of the country; they become part of our national system of ethics. So, too, is it with freedom of religion.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does Senator Lieberman find common ground with the Declaration of Independence and The Bible?
2. What do you think he meant by "We believe that each of us, with those rights, also has responsibilities that are articulated in our faiths."? What is a possible connection between rights and responsibilities?
3. What does Lieberman believe is the unique gift the American Founders have cemented in our Constitutional framework regarding freedom of religion? Do you agree with his assertion?
4. What do you think Lieberman meant by "the promise of what I call freedom *of* religion, not freedom *from* religion"?

Source 3: Ginsburg, Ruth Bader. (2018, April 10). Remarks at the New-York Historical Society. New York, NY.

Ruth Bader Ginsberg was the first Jewish American woman to join the Supreme Court. She was nominated by President Bill Clinton in 1993. She served on the High Court for 27 years. In the following speech, she addresses candidates for US citizenship at a Naturalization ceremony.

My fellow Americans, it is my great privilege to welcome you to citizenship in the democracy that is the U.S.A. Today you join more than 20 million current citizens who were born in other lands; and who chose, as you have, to make the United States of America their home. We are a nation made strong by people like you — people who have traveled long distances, overcome great obstacles, and made tremendous sacrifices all to provide a better life for themselves and their families.

My own father arrived in this land at age 13 with no fortune and speaking no English. My mother was born four months after her parents, with several children in tow, came by ship to Ellis Island. My father and grandparents reached as you do for the American dream. As testament to our nation's promise, the daughter and granddaughter of these immigrants sits on the highest court in the land and will proudly administer the oath of citizenship to you.

You have studied our system of government and you know of its twin pillars. First, our government has limited power. It can exercise only the authority expressly given to it by the Constitution; and, second, citizens of this country enjoy certain fundamental rights. Those rights are our nation's hallmark and pride. They are set forth in the Bill of Rights and other amendments to the Constitution. They are inalienable, yielding to no government decree. And our constitution opens with the words, "We the people of the United States." By limiting government, specifying rights, and empowering the people, the founders of the United States of America proclaimed that the heart of America would be its citizens not its rulers. After the words, "We the people of the United States," the Constitution sets out the aspiration to form a more perfect union. At the start it is true the union was very much in need of perfection. The original constitution permitted slavery and severely limited who counted among "We the People." When the nation was new only white property-owning men had the right to vote — the most basic right of citizenship. But over the course of our history people left out at the start, people held in human bondage, Native Americans, and women — 50 percent of the population — came to be embraced as full citizens.

A French observer of early America, Alexis de Tocqueville, wrote, "The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults." Through amendments to our constitution, and court decisions applying those amendments, we abolished slavery, prohibited racial discrimination, and made men and women people of equal citizenship stature. In the vanguard of those perfections were citizens just like you, of every race and creed, making ever more vibrant our national creed: E Pluribus Unum (out of many, one). We have made huge progress but the work of perfection is scarcely done. Many stains remain. In this rich land nearly a quarter of our children live in deep poverty, nearly half of our citizens do not vote. And we still struggle to achieve greater understanding of each other across racial, religious, and socio-economic lines. Yet we strive to realize the ideal to make a more perfect union. As new, well-informed citizens, you will play a vital part in that endeavor by first and foremost voting in elections, serving on juries, and engaging in civic discourse. We sing of America sweet land of liberty. Newcomers to our shore, people like you, came here from the earliest days of our nation to today, seeking liberty, freedom from oppression, freedom from want, freedom to be you and me. I would like to convey to you finally how a great American jurist, Judge Learned Hand, understood the word Liberty. He explained in 1944 what liberty meant to him when he greeted a large assemblage of new Americans gathered in Central Park to swear allegiance to the United States. These are Judge Hand's words:

Just what is this sacred liberty that must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the unbridled will; it is not freedom to do as one likes. What then is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the mind of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias.

May the spirit of liberty, as Judge Hand explained, be your beacon. May you have the conscience and the courage to act in accord with that ideal as you play your part in helping to achieve a more perfect union.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does Justice Ginsberg aim to connect her Jewish family's story to that of the candidates for citizenship? Do you find her story powerful and inspiring to this audience?
2. Which of the foundational pillars of America that Justice Ginsberg shares features, in your view, the most exceptional aspect of the American fabric? How?
3. Justice Ginsberg invokes Judge Hand, who in 1944 said:
   "What then is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the mind of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias."
   Do you think Judge Hand's assessment of the essence of the Spirit of Liberty is apt? How does he characterize it? How would you define the spirit of Liberty?