

THE PATRIOTIC CASE FOR ISRAEL

A speech by Don Feder to the Friends of Israel

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In his First Inaugural address Abraham Lincoln spoke of the union he was trying to preserve being bound by, “The mystic chords of memory stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave, to every heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land.”

In describing the special connection of America and Israel, we could speak of the same “mystic chords of memory” – in this case stretching from the Patriarchs to Sinai to the Prophets to Plymouth, to Philadelphia and down to the present day.

There’s a Christian case for Israel and a Jewish case for Israel. I would like to speak to you this evening of something different and yet related – the patriotic case for Israel.

Israel and America are bound by ties transcending the temporal. Israel speaks to our essence as a people. For America not to keep faith with Israel would be like not keeping faith with ourselves – to stop being what we were, who we are and who we could become.

America was founded on those values – liberty, justice and righteousness – first articulated in the Torah.

The earliest settlers on these shores and the Founding Fathers alike were inspired by a Jewish worldview. Like the Israelites, they believed that they too had “fled the house of bondage” and, beset by hardship at every turn, had come into a land flowing with milk and honey to create a new covenantal society.

Consider the words of John Winthrop, the leader of the Plymouth Plantation, who wrote: “We are entered into covenant with Him (*God*) for this work.” And, if they kept His commandments, “We shall find that the God of Israel is among us.”

This formulation appears throughout Puritan writings – That they were a “new chosen people” who had come to a “new promised land” and entered into a “new covenant” with God.

Fast-forward to 1776. For the Great Seal of the United States, a committee of the Continental Congress (composed of Adams, Jefferson and Franklin) proposed a depiction of Israel crossing the Red Sea, lit by divine pillars of fire, with the motto “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.”

During the Revolution, Americans again looked to the Hebrew Bible to justify their cause. As one prominent colonial cleric put it in 1777, “The British tyrant is only acting over the same wicked and cruel part that Pharaoh King of Egypt acted towards the children of Israel some 3,000 years ago.”

When it came to devising a government for the newly independent states, they consulted the same source. In 1783, Ezra Stiles, then president of Yale, delivered a sermon called “Upon the Political Welfare of God’s American Israel.” Five years later, Samuel Langdon, the president of Harvard, preached on, “The Republic of the Israelites as an Example to the American States.”

The 19th. century historian William Lecky summed it up neatly when he observed, “Hebraic mortar cemented the foundations of American democracy.”

I would not go so far as to call the Founding Fathers philo-Semites. But some were well-disposed toward the descendants of those ancient Israelites they so admired.

Daniel Webster, who was born during the Revolution, and was close to the Founding Fathers (intellectually, as well as chronologically) said of the Jews: “I feel, and have ever felt, respect and sympathy for all that remains of that extraordinary people who preserved through the darkness of so many centuries, the knowledge of one supreme spiritual Being The Hebrew Scriptures I regard as the fountain from which we draw all we know of the world around us, and of our own character and destiny as intelligent, moral and responsible beings.”

Webster echoed the sentiments of John Adams, who earlier declared, “I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation.”

That appreciation for the people who introduced mankind to what’s come to be known as the Judeo-Christian ethic is reflected in the institutions the Founders established on these shores.

As my friend Rabbi Daniel Lapin of Toward Tradition explains, over the course of history, only two nations were founded on a vision – ancient Israel and the United States of America.

Every president from George Washington to George W. Bush, has taken the oath of office on a book that includes the story of the Exodus, the encounter at Sinai and the possession of the Promised Land.

The rights and duties set forth in the United States Constitution are echoes of a far older covenant. It’s no coincidence that the first amendments to the Constitution (designated The Bill of Rights) are ten in number, like the first commandments given at Sinai.

Throughout our nation’s capital, testaments to America’s Jewish heritage are chiseled in stone.

A representation of The Ten Commandments is engraved on each of the oak doors leading to the Supreme Court’s courtroom. A frieze of Moses adorns the Chamber of the U.S. House of Representatives. In the National Archives Building, near the Declaration of Independence, the Roman numerals one through 10 are set in the floor.

More than Rome or Athens, London or Paris, the light that guided our republic, well into the 20th century, shone forth from Jerusalem.

In his excellent new book, “Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion,” Yale Professor David Gelernter writes:

“America is not only a nation; America is a religious idea. America is a biblical (not a secular) republic ... America and Americanism were shaped by Christianity, especially Puritan Christianity. Puritan Christianity was shaped by the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible.”

Throughout our history we find that Americans had the Bible – and often the Hebrew Bible – on their minds.

During the Civil War, Union troops marching to the defense of Washington, D.C. chanted “We are coming, Father Abraham.”

To many Americans, our rise to global power seems to validate God’s promise, spoken through the mouth of a gentile prophet, “I will bless those that bless you and curse those that curse you.”

The United States offered shores of refuge to generations of Jewish immigrants, including all four of my grandparents. In the Second World War, America destroyed history’s most depraved anti-Semite (though, admittedly, that wasn’t our reason for going to war) and liberated the death camps.

At the end of the war, America provided crucial support for the re-establishment of the Jewish state and has helped to sustain it for almost six decades.

It’s no coincidence that a president from the Bible Belt was midwife to the modern state of Israel.

Harry Truman, who was born in Lamar, Missouri in 1884, read his family’s Bible cover to cover, three times, by the time he was 14. (He read it again more than a dozen times during his White House years.)

In his autobiography, Truman wrote that he was fascinated by both the Bible and history, which revealed to him “that what came about in Philadelphia in 1776 really had its beginnings in Hebrew times.”

Presidential aide Clark Clifford observed of his boss: “From his reading of the Old Testament he felt the Jews derived a legitimate historical right to Palestine, and he sometimes cited such Biblical lines as Deuteronomy 1:8: ‘Behold, I have given up the land before you, go in and take possession of the land which the Lord hath sworn unto your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.’”

When the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Isaac Halevi Herzog, called at the White House, he told Truman, “God put you in your mother’s womb so you

would be the instrument to bring the rebirth of Israel after two thousand years.”

Truman’s Jewish aide, David Niles, recalled that he thought the rabbi “was overdoing things, but when I looked over at the President, tears were running down his cheeks.””

It’s important to understand what Truman risked in recognizing Israel. Secretary of State George Marshall – the man Truman admired most in his government, the man he felt was indispensable to winning the Cold War – threatened to resign if Truman supported the Jewish State. Truman did it anyway, but latter talked Marshall into remaining in the government.

Throughout our history, our greatest presidents felt kinship with the Jewish people and provided pivotal support to Israel. They included the greatest president in my lifetime – Ronald Reagan.

This loyalty was reciprocated. From Hayim Solomon (financier of the Revolution) to the present, Jewish patriots have played a role in the American saga.

Albert Einstein gave America the theoretical basis for the weapon that ended the war in the Pacific and helped to keep our freedom during the Cold War. A Jew with the improbable name of Berlin gave us what’s called America’s second national anthem – “God Bless America.”

And God did bless America – blessed it greatly -- in part because America blessed His people.

America and Israel are more alike than any two other nations. Each has the same enemies. Each is hated more for its virtues than its flaws. Each believes in democracy, human rights and justice. Each believes it has a responsibility, not just to its own but to humanity. Each is willing to sacrifice and use legitimate force to defend the right.

In a global conflict, with the fate of humanity hanging in the balance, Americans and Israelis confront the same fanatical, hate-filled foe.

It’s no coincidence that the Nazis, the communists and today’s Islamacists had or have a burning hatred for both Americans and the Jewish

people. The rulers of Iran refer to America as “The Great Satan” and Israel as “The Little Satan.”

The same totalitarian ideology masquerading as a religion that killed 242 Americans in the Beirut Marine Barracks bombing in 1983, that slaughtered 3,000 Americans on 9/11 and that’s responsible for the deaths of more than 3,200 of our servicemen in Iraq – inspires Hamas, Hezbollah and Fatah.

Yasser Arafat was the mold from which Osama bin Laden was cast.

His followers are a division of an army bent on world conquest. Five and a half years ago, when America was in mourning for the victims of the World Trade Center, Palestinians did goalpost victory dances in the streets of Gaza City and Ramallah. Later, they named a square in Ramallah after the first suicide bomber to kill American soldiers in Iraq. Hamas contributes fighters to the Iraqi offensive.

The foregoing is not to say that America is bound to always follow Israel’s lead on foreign policy. After all, being composed of mortal men, the government of Israel is as fallible as our own – a reality tragically demonstrated when Jerusalem makes concessions to killers and tries to buy peace with land.

But America does have a responsibility to that nation which was the source of the values on which this country was founded.

In his Farewell Address, George Washington admonished: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.

“In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens” --words deep wisdom from the father of our country.

Similarly, we might say that no man can call himself a patriot who would seek to sever America’s ties to the source of Western religion and morality.

Our history, our heritage, our faith and our national interest all mandate American support for the Jewish state -- the land where (in a very real sense) America began. A patriot who doesn’t understand that is no patriot at all.