



JEWISH COMMENTARY

The 1620 Project

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

FOUR HUNDRED years ago this month, the *Mayflower* set sail for the New World. On board was William Bradford, who would serve for decades as governor of Plymouth Colony and whose memoir is still the central source of knowledge about the colonists' triumphs and travails. His grave is in Plymouth as well, an obelisk marking the spot and bearing his name. But above the engraved English words three words appear, etched in Hebrew: *Adonai ezer hayai*, the Lord is the help of my life. To most tourists, the Hebrew words are gibberish, but to Jews who come upon them, they are a source of fascination—and a reminder, 400 years after the *Mayflower* set sail, of the remarkable tale of America itself.

The origin of the intriguing epitaph can be found in Nick Bunker's fascinating book on the Pilgrims, *Making Haste from Babylon*. There he reveals Bradford's fascination with Hebrew, and how, at the end of his life, he began to study what he saw as a sacred script. "I have had a longing desire," Bradford reflected, "to see with my own eyes, something of that most ancient language, and holy tongue ... and what names were given to things, from the Creation." With paper scarce, Bradford "copied out his exercises on blank pages at the front of the manuscript of his history of the plantation. He covered the white space with nearly 900 Hebrew words, starting with eight names

for God." Bradford's Pilgrims, like the Puritans who would follow him, "wished to swim back up the stream of learning, and to absorb the wisdom of the Bible from as close to the source as possible." They sought out Christian exegetes with interests similar to theirs, who "read with sympathy the rabbis of the Roman Empire, Egypt, and medieval Spain, authors whose books were preserved by the Jews of Germany or Venice."

Bunker further reveals that Bradford's engagement with Jewish tradition began on the *Mayflower* itself. One book he carried with him was a commentary on the Psalms by the Hebraist Henry Ainsworth. While Ainsworth was interested in the vastness of rabbinic tradition, he was in love with Maimonides, whom he called "the wisest of the Hebrew Rabbins." Ainsworth cites Maimonides in explaining how Psalm 107 serves as the source for Jews to express gratitude to God after successfully crossing a wilderness or a treacherous body of water. Bradford's brethren could certainly identify with this teaching, and his memoir, which references the words of this Psalm, recounts that upon arriving safely at Cape Cod, the Pilgrims expressed their own gratitude to the Almighty. The feast that we annually commemorate today would not come until 1621, but, as Bunker reflects: "If we could ask William Bradford to define the first Thanksgiving in America, he would point to something else. He would say that it took place at the instant of arrival, at the moment on Cape Cod when the Pilgrims fell on their knees to say the Jewish prayer."

Bradford's Hebraism set the stage for what would follow. The Puritans who arrived after the *May-*

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flower were equally obsessed with the people of Israel. This was succinctly and sublimely described by George W. Bush in remarks to Israel's Knesset:

The alliance between our governments is unbreakable, yet the source of our friendship runs deeper than any treaty. It is grounded in the shared spirit of our people, the bonds of the Book, the ties of the soul. When William Bradford stepped off the *Mayflower* in 1620, he quoted the words of Jeremiah: "Come let us declare in Zion the word of God." The founders of my country saw a new promised land and bestowed upon their towns names like Bethlehem and New Canaan. And in time, many Americans became passionate advocates for a Jewish state.

Of course, the Pilgrims and Puritans did not actually embrace the values of liberty and equality that would mark the American Founding. But the seed of the Hebrew Bible they planted would flourish with American freedom, and the story of biblical Israel would become associated with the Revolution itself. Benjamin Franklin would propose Moses's defeat of Pharaoh at the sea as the seal of the nascent United States, and George Washington's letter to the Jews of Savannah, Georgia, captures the warm welcome the Jews received from the Founders:

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors planted them in the promised land—whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation—still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.

The imagery invoked by Washington is remarkable, but it also reminds us of an original sin at the heart of the Founding: Many of those comparing George III to an Egyptian oppressor were themselves drivers of slaves. But soon slavery would be opposed in the very name of the American idea; as the great American historian Gordon Wood puts it, whereas slavery ex-

isted throughout much of the world, "it's the American Revolution that makes it a problem for the world. And the first real anti-slave movement takes place in North America." The second Great Awakening, which began with the birth of the 19th century, inspired abolitionism. Over time, the once agnostic Abraham Lincoln evolved into an eloquent prophet who, as Adam Gopnik put it, "mastered the sound of the King James Bible so completely that he could recast abstract issues of constitutional law in Biblical terms." Lincoln's biblical theology of America reached its full flowering in his Second Inaugural, which describes the Civil War as God's punishment for slavery, and concludes with the Psalmist's declaration that "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." The ancient script on Bradford's grave is just the earliest example

of the remarkable role the Hebrew Bible would play in the unfolding of American equality.

In an excellent reflection in *Jewish Ideas Daily* on the first Thanksgiving of the *Mayflower's* passengers, Moshe Sokolow correctly notes that "this ves-

tige of Jewish influence on the religious mores of the U.S. is worth our acknowledgment and contemplation—and, of course, our thanksgiving." But I would add that it also, rightly understood, obligates American Jews to safeguard the story of America's past and thereby its future. For we find ourselves concluding a summer of discontent, experiencing, as COMMENTARY has rightly put it, a "great unraveling" that travels the greatness of America and its Founders. This follows the "1619 Project" launched by the *New York Times*, which insisted that America itself was created in order to preserve slavery. The project's premise was roundly derided as entirely ahistorical by prominent historians such as Sean Wilentz, James McPherson, and Gordon Wood himself. It was nevertheless awarded the Pulitzer Prize, a reminder of how swiftly and spinelessly the cultural elites have fallen in line.

In the face of these many assaults on the American idea, a number of American scholars have proposed a "1620 Project," linking the Pilgrims to the preservation of American history. The anniversary of the *Mayflower's* sailing reminds us what Jewish ideas have given to America and the obligation that Jews who care about the Bible owe this remarkable country in defending its story. In the face of the great unraveling, we must, like Bradford, look to "the Lord, help of our lives" in seeking to save America itself. 📖

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