

# American Exodus: Franklin, Jefferson, and the Seal of the United States

Parashat Beshalach, Exodus, Chapters 13-16 | January 13, 2021

On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1776, the Continental Congress approved the resolution of Richard Henry Lee declaring the 13 colonies to be “free and independent states.” John Adams, the man who had done more than anyone to make that vote a reality, was ecstatic, and wrote to his wife Abigail as follows:

The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty.

Adams then added a reflection on all that freedom would require:

You will think me transported with Enthusiasm but I am not.—I am well aware of the Toil and Blood and Treasure, that it will cost Us to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these States.—Yet through all the Gloom I can see the Rays of ravishing Light and Glory. I can see that the End is more than worth all the Means. And that Posterity will triumph in that Days Transaction, even altho We should rue it, which I trust in God We shall not.

Adams would ultimately learn that it would be not July 2<sup>nd</sup>, but rather July 4<sup>th</sup>—the day boldly emblazoned on Jefferson’s declaration—that would be celebrated as Independence Day. And it would be on July 4<sup>th</sup> that he would join a little-known committee that would embody the biblical impact on America, and the very nature of freedom itself.

Immediately after approving the Declaration of Independence, that the Continental Congress advanced this resolution:

That Dr. Franklin, Mr. J. Adams and Mr. Jefferson, be a committee, to bring in a device for a seal for the United States of America.

These founders were asked, in other words, to conceive of an image that would capture their nascent nation. Of these three founders, two put forward suggested seals that incorporated profoundly biblical images, both from our Torah reading, to which we now turn.

Pharaoh, his heart hardened by Divine intervention, assembles his army and chases after Israel. As they bear down and all appears lost for the newly-freed slaves, a command to Moses introduces one of the most famous miracles in the Bible:

*And thou lift up thy staff, and stretch out thy hand over the sea, and divide it; and the children of Israel shall go into the midst of the sea on dry ground.*

*And I, behold, I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, and they shall go in after them; and I shall be honored through Pharaoh, and all his host, and his chariots, and his horsemen.*

*And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord... (Exodus 14:16-18)*

So it was. Israel enters the midst of the sea, crosses safely, and Pharaoh’s forces follow and are drowned. It is this very scene that Benjamin Franklin selected as inspiration for his image embodying the United States.

According to his own notes, Franklin suggested as the national seal an image of the following:

Moses standing on the Shore, and extending his Hand over the Sea, thereby causing the same to overwhelm Pharaoh who is sitting in an open Chariot, a Crown on his Head and a Sword in his hand. Rays from a Pillar of Fire in the Clouds reaching to Moses, to express that he acts by Command of the Deity.

Alongside the image, Franklin added, would appear the following motto: "Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God."

Jefferson, in contrast, proposed a different image, one which appears in the Bible just a little bit earlier, describing Israel's initial journey into the desert, immediately after departing Egypt:

*And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them on the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; that they might go by day and by night.*

*The pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night, departed not from before the people. (Exodus 13:21-22)*

Something about this scene captured Jefferson's imagination. Thus, on August 14<sup>th</sup>, John Adams reported to Abigail that:

Mr. Jefferson proposed. The Children of Israel in the Wilderness, led by a Cloud by day, and a Pillar of Fire by night...

As I once wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, those who have written on the suggestions of this congressional committee tend to equate the proposals of Franklin and Jefferson, as both are taken from the Bible. In fact, the messages behind these two images are very different. With the biblical tale of the splitting of the sea, Franklin is selecting a story from Scripture in which God himself miraculously intervenes into the natural order and

thereby grants salvation to his people. Franklin chose to emphasize the Divine might that is made manifest against the tyranny of Pharaoh, and this of course is the central theme of Moses and Israel's exultant song after the splitting of the sea, which takes up Chapter 15:

*Then sang Moses and the Children of Israel this song unto the Lord, and spoke, saying: I will sing unto the Lord, for He is highly exalted; the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea! (Exodus 15:1)*

Jefferson, in contrast, is arguing that the seal of this new country should celebrate freedom as a journey, as a process. Even more fascinating is the fact that we have two different themes from Exodus that are embodied in the two different names of the festival of our liberation. The first is *Pesach*, commonly translated as Passover. This name seeks to capture the miraculous wonders of the Almighty during the plague of the firstborn.

But then there is another name: *Chag Hamatzot*, the Festival of Unleavened Bread, which makes reference to the Israelites rushing out of Egypt into the wilderness:

*And the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneadingtroughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders...*

*And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought forth out of Egypt, for it was not leavened; because they were thrust out of Egypt, and could not tarry... (Exodus 12:34,39)*

This is Jefferson's image, the journey of a people into the wilderness. At the moment of American freedom, Jefferson selected not an image of triumph, but of a sojourn. The meaning is perhaps that freedom is not one moment; it is a long voyage. The image reflects, in the felicitous phrase of Yuval Levin, "the long road to liberty."

And here, the unleavened bread that has already allowed us to learn so much offers perhaps another rich lode of interpretation.

Matzah, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun argues, is bread at the beginning of the process of its production—flour baked immediately after water has been added to it—whereas leavened bread is dough that has been allowed to rise before it is baked and achieves thereby its ultimate end. Matzah, writes Rabbi Bin-Nun, is affiliated with the festival of freedom. It reminds us that the Exodus from Egypt is only the beginning of the redemption process. Matzah serves as a symbol that the Exodus is just the beginning of a journey, a long hard road through the desert and through the entire story of our people, with the final chapter yet to come.

One of my favorite seder stories is about a Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, commander of the United States Fifth Army, who addressed Jewish soldiers attending a seder in Naples, Italy, in April 1944. Clark said:

Tonight you are eating unleavened bread just as your forebears ate unleavened bread because the Exodus came so quickly the dough had no time to rise. There was a time of unleavened bread in this war. The time when it looked as though we might not have time to rise—time to raise an army and equip it, time to stop the onrush of a Germany that was already risen. But the bread has begun to rise. It started at Alamein. It was rising higher when the Fifth Army invaded Italy. It is reaching the top of the pan and soon the time will come when it will spread out and into a finished final product.

The bread of freedom is the bread that has not yet begun to rise. The matzah reminds us that the political freedom achieved from Egypt is a beginning, not an end, that it was the start of the Jewish journey that is our history, but that the journey is not yet complete. It communicates to us that the liberation from physical fetters is only the beginning of the process of genuine freedom.

One moment in the film *The Ten Commandments* that I particularly enjoy is when all of Israel gathers at the gates of Egypt as deliverance has dawned. Joshua says, “Moses, the people are assembled.” And Charlton Heston replies:

Then let us go forth to the mountain of God: that he may write his commandments in our minds and upon our hearts forever.

True freedom has a purpose, an end goal. Truly becoming free involves utilizing our liberty to become who God has called us to be. And as Israel journeys toward its destination at Sinai, this point is made ever more clear. When the Israelites seek water and a bitter well is wondrously made sweet, we are suddenly informed in Exodus of the Almighty’s instruction:

*And He said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God and wilt do that which is right in his eyes, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all His statutes, all of the illnesses that I have placed upon Egypt I will not place on thee: for I am the Lord thy healer. (Exodus 15:26)*

And then, as Israel cries out for food and the miraculous manna descends from the sky, Israel is ordered not to gather this sustenance on the seventh day, and to trust that sufficient food will be granted the day before:

*See that the Lord hath given you the Sabbath; therefore He giveth you on the sixth day the bread of two days; abide ye every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day. (Exodus 16:29)*

Thus, as they journey toward Sinai, Israel learns about commandments, statutes, and the Sabbath. This is the path to freedom. The counterintuitive message of the Exodus tale is that through law, through the teachings of Sinai, true freedom is acquired.

One of the best explanations I have seen for why this is comes from an interpreter of Thomas Aquinas, Servais Pinckaers, as summarized by the Catholic theologian George Weigel, who writes as follows:

It’s a bit, Pinckaers says, like learning to play a musical instrument. Anyone can bang away on a piano; but that is to make noise, not music, and it’s a barbaric,

not humanistic, expression of freedom. At first, learning to play the piano is a matter of some drudgery as we master exercises that seem like a constraint, a burden. But as our mastery grows, we discover a new, richer dimension of freedom: We can play the music we like, we can even create new music on our own. Freedom, in other words, is a matter of gradually acquiring the capacity to choose the good and to do what we choose with perfection.

Law is thus intertwined with freedom. Law can educate us in freedom. Law is not a work of heteronomous (external) imposition but a work of wisdom, and good law facilitates our achievement of the human goods that we instinctively seek because of who we are and what we are meant to be as human beings.

This is the import of Jefferson's suggested image—the journey from Egypt, the journey through the wilderness, the journey guided by God, the journey that is not only freedom from tyranny, but also a freedom that grows as Israel reaches Sinai itself. This is captured by how Jews celebrate our festival of freedom; by gathering as a family and performing the yearly rituals in which we have been commanded. For it is these institutions—the obligations and responsibilities involved in the law and in the family—that are truly part and parcel of Levin's "long road to liberty."

As I also noted in the *Journal*, while the Declaration's approval on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July is celebrated throughout the land, the tale of the seal, which is a 4<sup>th</sup> of July story all its own, has been largely forgotten. The historian Michael Meyerson utilized Google Books to search every biography of Thomas Jefferson to see how many made mention of this story. He writes that, "Of the more than 200 Jefferson biographies, only 12 described his Great Seal proposal."

Though in the end the Congress adopted a different seal for the United States, July 4<sup>th</sup> deserves to be

affiliated with the tale of the biblical images put forward by the founders. That it is not reflects perhaps how distant much of American culture has become from the Bible. For all my jokes about *The Ten Commandments* movie being "actual video footage of the Exodus," one of the reasons for my deep affection for the film is that it highlights how the culture was once so bound up with Hebrew Scripture that the Book of Exodus could inspire a blockbuster.

DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, as I have described in *Commentary*, was actually a remake, because in 1923, Cecil B. DeMille had made a silent version of the Exodus story. Among his extras to play the departing Israelites, DeMille hired 250 Orthodox Jewish immigrants. One witness from 1923 described how, when the actual liberation scene was filmed, "these Jews streamed out of the great gates with tears running down their cheeks." Another remembered an elderly woman who was suddenly overcome with emotion and fell to her knees and shook a fist at the gates of Pharaoh.

The writer Marshall Weiss, to whom I am indebted for assembling all of these accounts, notes in his article about them that many of these extras did not even speak English; but for them the moment was very real, or as he puts it, "During those moments, the American dream and their heritage converged."

The story of the proposed seals of the United States is a reminder of how the Bible inspired America, how the founders' original notion of freedom has been to a great extent forgotten, and why it is so important for us as Americans to discover the wisdom of the Bible once again.

---

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Of the Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were not known as especially devout. Yet, they still turned to Scripture in proposing ideas for a U.S. seal. Why might this have been?
2. Rabbi Soloveichik describes the Jewish idea of freedom as more than the mere absence of constraint, but as something that needs to be cultivated over time through the discipline of Divine law. Why then do we celebrate Passover as the festival of freedom rather than *Shavuot*, when the Jewish people received the Law at Sinai?