

## Let Freedom Ring

It is Independence Day weekend, a time when we celebrate the birthday of our country with fireworks, concerts and parades and cookouts.

Officially, the Continental Congress declared its freedom from Britain on July 2, 1776, when it approved a resolution and delegates from New York were given permission to make it a unanimous vote. John Adams thought July 2 would be marked as a national holiday for generations to come. I think that would have been great since that's my birthday too.

But that wasn't to be... After voting on independence, the Continental Congress needed to finalize a document for the public, explaining the move to separate from Britain. It had been proposed in draft form by the Committee of Five that had been appointed by the continental Congress and included such notables as (**John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson**). Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence and it took two days for the Congress to agree on the edits. Can you imagine how many days it would take today's Congress? Most of the members of the Continental Congress signed a version of the Declaration on August 2, 1776 in Philadelphia. The names of the signers were released publicly in early 1777. Actually only John Hancock as leader of the Continental Congress signed on the fourth. The Declaration and the Constitution which was created in 1787, were hidden away during World War II.

Both documents were packed up about two weeks after Pearl Harbor, given a military escort and taken to Fort Knox in Kentucky, where they remained for several years. They can be viewed today at the National Archives in Washington, DC.

When I thought about the many battles the thirteen original Colonies fought before they declared their freedom and independence from England my mind traveled to the battles the Israelites fought in their quest to reach the Jordan River. After the Israelites were taken out of Egypt, finally gaining their freedom, they were forced to fight to retain their deliverance. With liberty came the necessity to defend that freedom.

With thoughts of freedom, I turn to this week's Torah portion, Balak in which freedom of speech becomes an issue. Philosopher Jacob Needleman spoke about freedom, and more specifically, about rights. He said each right that we enjoy as a society carries with it a specific duty on ourselves individually, if it is to be enjoyed by all. For example, at a very basic level, the right of free speech carries with it the obligation to allow others to speak freely.

As Jews, we are taught, through ritual observance, that freedom is intimately related to responsibility. Freedom, celebrated as the liberation from slavery on Pesah, and responsibility noted by commemorating the receiving of the Law on Shavuot, is ritually tied by the Counting of the Omer for 7 weeks between the two festivals.

Balak, king of the Moabites hired the 'prophet' Bilaam to curse the Jews, believing sincerely that Bilaam's words carried some mystical power. Bilaam accepted the job, albeit with some caveats and requirements. And as stated in a drash from Ohel Avraham, we read that upon hearing the command of God (i.e., compelling truth) and observing the thriving Nation of Israel, Bilaam is incapable of reciting a curse. Instead, he pronounced the now famous words, "Ma Tovv Ohalecha Yaacov, Mishkenotecha Yisrael," - How good are your tents, [children of] Jacob; your dwelling places, [nation of] Israel! And herein lies the beauty of Bilaam's blessing, Ma Tovv. It is not just what he said, but also that he 'listened' to truth (i.e., God), even at the peril of denying King Balak his curse. He allowed the truth of his own observation to dictate his prophesy. And what was the truth that Bilaam observed? That Israel had completed its transformation from a band of slaves to a nation of free people. Unprecedented in history, these United States were founded on an idea, not on a tribe or clan, but a concept: that people choose their government. They felt that the Creator granted the fundamental rights of the individual, and that no earthly institution should be able to deny those rights.

Dick and I grew up in New Rochelle New York. We spent the 60's in St. Louis and arrived in Lexington in 1969. What is interesting is that not only have we always lived in communities with a strong Jewish presence but that these places were also historic communities.

French Huguenots, who as Protestants were persecuted in predominantly Catholic France, settled New Rochelle. They fled their country seeking liberty and independence. Many embarked from the port of La Rochelle for the ocean crossing. In 1688 the French Huguenots began settling in what is now New Rochelle. In 1689 John and Rachel Pell officially deeded the 6,100 acres of the town, for a sum of money along with the extracted promise that they and their descendents would receive a fatted calf each year. While no battles were fought there, at the end of the street I lived on, there was a small monument saying that in 1775 George Washington and his army passed through. I assume that he was on his way to take command of the United Colonies in Cambridge Massachusetts.

New Rochelle was also home to Thomas Paine who wrote Common Sense, a pamphlet first published anonymously on January 10, 1776, during the American Revolution. The Pamphlet presented the American colonists with a powerful argument for independence from British rule at a time when the question of independence was still undecided. Paine said, "It is imperative and urgent that the colonies declare independence." Historian Gordon S. Wood described Common Sense as, "the most incendiary and popular pamphlet of the entire revolutionary era."

When we settled in St. Louis we remembered learning that the city was founded by French fur traders in 1764. It was a French and Spanish

settlement built at a strategically important spot near the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. France regained the rights to St. Louis and the West in 1800 from the Spanish. Napoleon immediately began to negotiate the Louisiana Purchase with President Thomas Jefferson in 1803. Overnight the size of the United States had doubled. Our family was thrilled to watch the construction of St. Louis' signature attraction – the Gateway Arch that opened in 1965 to honor President Thomas Jefferson and his vision of a continental United States. The 630-foot tall Arch, the Museum of Westward Expansion and the historic Old Courthouse make up the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, a National Park Service site that hugs the banks of the Mississippi River. The Old Courthouse was the scene of many rallies, speeches and several important trials, including the suit by Dredd Scott for freedom from slavery. If you have forgotten the Dredd Scott case, a lower court freed him and the Supreme Court annulled the lower court's decision.

In moving to Lexington in 1969 we found ourselves really steeped in history. We visited the Old North Church, the historic houses in Lexington, the Old North Bridge, I gave tours at Buckman Tavern and some of our children were guides on the Green. You name it, we did it and we rarely to this day, miss the Patriots Day Parade. We have even been known to get up early enough to see the reenactment. The thirteen British colonies in North America had to fight for their independence. Like the Israelites of old, freedom came with the price of a war to establish these United States of America.

Tradition is that the Declaration of Independence be read aloud each Fourth of July and even though it is July 5<sup>th</sup>, I will take the liberty of reading the opening section to you.

**The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription**

**IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776**

**The Unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united states of America**

*When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which connected them with one another, and assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.*

*We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.*

But keeping our freedom is a continuing process, a process that takes effort by all of us.

In Martin Luther King Jr's "I Have A Dream" speech he proclaimed –

Let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania! Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California! But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee! Let freedom ring from every hill and every molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring. And when this happens, when we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Having lived through many wars and particularly of WW2, I often think "there but for the Grace of God Go I". This is a day to remember the many blessings that have been given to us as Jews living in America. We thank God for our Freedom.

Barbara Wissoker July 5, 2014