

The Declaration of Independence helps lead the way back to Gan Eden

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“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.”

- U.S. Declaration of Independence

But why was it self-evident to the founders that all men are created equal? The founders were breaking away from a mother country dominated by a hierarchical order known as the Great Chain of Being. The answer is quite simple. The founders were students of the Bible, and the Bible champions human dignity. The Torah deliberately opens by making it clear there is only one God and all of humanity is created *Betzelem Elokim* (in God's image). The conviction that all humanity descended from Adam and Eve sets a tone of equality. One cannot claim that the God who created oneself is superior to the God who created one's neighbor, for we all share the same heavenly parentage.

By celebrating human dignity through the concept of *Betzelem Elokim*, the Torah provides us with an ideal to strive for in everyday life, for humanity was not fated to remain in an Eden-like paradise but to toil in the real world. In other words, though we do not live in *Gan Eden* (the Garden of Eden), the Torah opens with *Gan Eden* to model the ideal, so that we can strive to reach it.

The two great empires of the biblical world, Mesopotamia and Egypt, failed to live up to the biblical ideal of *Betzelem Elokim*, as witnessed by the Tower of Babel and Exodus stories. In fact, the biblical accounts of these two great empires read as polemical invectives against them. By tasking the Israelites with creating a society based on the concept of *Betzelem Elokim* between these two oppressive empires, the Torah teaches us that it is possible to work towards the biblical ideal of equality even within the confines of a highly imperfect world.

The inspirational power of the biblical ideal was demonstrated by the Pilgrims, who saw themselves as a new Israel, fleeing from their own Pharaoh by crossing a new Red Sea to arrive in a Promised Land. Therefore, it is not surprising that our founders declared independence by echoing the language of the Bible.

Just as the Torah presented us with the ideal of *Betzelem Elokim*, the founders presented us with the idea, “all men are created equal.” Just as the Jewish people are challenged to champion the

ideal of *Betzelem Elokim* outside of the Garden, it is America's challenge to champion the ideal of "all men are created equal" outside of the lines of the Declaration.

Challenges in living up to these lofty ideals espoused in the Declaration became evident immediately, as, even as they proclaimed their own freedom, the Continental Congress of 1776 chose not to deal with the issue of slavery, kicking the can down the road. Viewed through the long lens of history, it is easy to fault the founders for failing to live up to their lofty ideals, but that would not be productive. We as "People of the Book" should praise the founders for creating a society based on the concept of *Betzelem Elokim*, with the clear understanding that their work is not yet done. Frederick Douglass understood this nuance. In his "What to the slave is the 4th of July" speech, he argues that the Declaration of Independence contained saving principles, but they "are not enjoyed in common"; we need to endeavor that the principles embodied in the Declaration are applied to all. In his "We the people speech" in 2008 at the Constitution Center, Presidential candidate Obama in essence declared that, across the street at Independence Hall, [the founders] got us started; it is our job to finish their work by endeavoring to bring those lofty ideas to fruition.

The American experience has demonstrated that freedom from foreign rule does not automatically usher in a utopian era. The Torah indirectly makes this point too.

Our sages point out that the language used to describe the construction of the *Mishkan* (tabernacle) mirrors the language used in the creation story. In other words, the building of the *Mishkan* is supposed to be akin to the creation of the world. God is asking Israel to recreate the world by building a society centered around his values, symbolized by the position of the *Mishkan* in the center of this community. Likewise, it is the job of this newly freed nation to share these teachings with the world, to be an *Or Lagoyim* (Light unto the Nations) as Isaiah would later declare.

However, all does not go according to plan. The celebration of the inauguration of the *Mishkan* is marred by the death of the two eldest sons of Aaron, the *Kohen Hagadol* (High Priest). Our sages remark that Aaron's sons died because they cut ahead of Aaron, bringing their offering before he could bring his. As the *Kohen Hagadol*, their father's offering should have preceded theirs. Though the death of Aaron's sons for such an offense seems unduly harsh, we are being taught a lesson: rules need to be applied fairly to all, even to those on the top such as the sons of the *Kohen Hagadol*. To bring the Torah's lofty goals to life, equality before the law is essential. This realization brings us back to Frederick Douglass's point in his "What to the slave is the 4th of July" speech. He understood that the necessary ideas for achieving the declaration's lofty goals were in place, but those goals needed to be applied to all.

Bringing lofty ideals to life can be challenging. Sir Thomas More alludes to this by naming his perfect imaginary world "utopia." Utopia, which means "nowhere," is a play on the Greek word *eu-topos* meaning "a good place." If we will only be satisfied with a perfect world, we will go nowhere, for until the messianic era perfection is out of reach. But if we are willing to continue the work of the Torah and of our founders to improve society, humanity will certainly experience an upward trajectory and draw closer to Eden.