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AMERICAN JEWS AND AMERICA: FIVE MOMENTS IN OUR SHARED STORY

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Since America's founding 250 years ago, Jews have seen this country as a haven and a home. While America has never been immune to antisemitism, and Jews have battled, and continue to battle, discrimination and hate here, this country offered Jews something they had never had in any diaspora: full citizenship and the promise of equal rights. American Jews never underestimated this gift nor took it for granted. They built flourishing Jewish communities, with vibrant and interwoven Jewish communal organizations, synagogues, community centers, schools, and camps. They produced uniquely American Jewish theater, music, art, literature, and journalism. They nurtured creative innovations in Jewish life, from new rituals to new denominations, and so much more. And, they invested in America in every way they could, raising their voices as loyal citizens to hold America to its promise of being a nation dedicated to liberty, equality, and freedom for all.

Here are five moments in American Jewish history that highlight this special relationship that American Jews have had with their beloved adopted home - and the foundational impact they have had in building a more just, free, and equal America over the past 250 years.

- 1. Laying the bedrock for religious freedom (1790):** In August 1790, Moses Seixas, the warden of the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, wrote George Washington, the recently-elected first president of the United States, a letter of greeting and congratulations on behalf of the synagogue. Far from a simple expression of good wishes, the letter pointedly reminded the new president of the values that he and the other Founding Fathers had espoused and prodded him to embody them in his leadership. As Seixas wrote:



Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events) behold a Government ... which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance -- but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of citizenship: deeming every one, of whatever nation, tongue, or language equal parts of the great governmental machine.

George Washington's reply to Seixas was extraordinary. Quoting Seixas back to him, Washington wrote:

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

Washington's powerful words have since been quoted hundreds of times, including in judicial opinions, and by civil rights advocates, elected officials, and so many others, as the clearest presidential statement on religious freedom in the early republic. Thanks to the advocacy of Moses Seixas and the Touro Synagogue, George Washington made the case for America's protections for minority religious groups, not as a favor, but as a right. Today, people identifying with over 350 faith groups call America home, all equal citizens of this nation and all free to practice their religion as they see fit.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ▶ How have ideas about religious freedom evolved for American Jews and other faith communities since the founding of the United States? What new challenges do we face at this moment?
- ▶ Washington created a moral standard for our nation when he described an America that goes beyond mere toleration of minority groups, standing instead for an inclusive community of engaged citizens. But we know well that America has not always lived up to that standard. As America reaches its 250th, where must it recommit to these values now?



Shabbat Table Talk: In the oft-quoted line from the Talmud, Hillel the Sage teaches “That which is hateful to you, do not do to another; that is the entire Torah. The rest is interpretation.” The Torah has 613 commandments. Why does Hillel elevate



this one above all others? And what can his choice to do that teach us about the building of a healthy Jewish community *and* American society?

- 2. Ensuring religious inclusion (1861-2):** There were only about 150,000 Jews in the entire United States during the Civil War, the vast majority of whom lived in the North. In 1861, Jewish soldiers in the Union army sought to have a Jewish army chaplain to see to their spiritual and emotional needs, but the law stated that only Christians could be army chaplains. Knowing that this prohibition against non-Christian chaplains flew in the face of the American commitment to religious freedom, the Jewish community spoke up and advocated for change. The Board of Delegates of American Israelites organized a petition in 1861-2, reminding lawmakers that Jews were fiercely loyal citizens of the Union, volunteering in large numbers for the army of the United States, and yet the law discriminated against them. Holding a mirror up to lawmakers and forcing them to confront not only their breach of values, but also their breach of law, they stated that the laws prohibiting non-Christian chaplains were “oppressive, inasmuch as they establish a prejudicial discrimination against a particular class of citizens, on account of their religious belief, and further ... are manifestly in contravention of Section 3, Article VI of the Constitution and Article 1 of Amendments thereto.” Knowing the power of personal interactions, the Jewish community also sent Rabbi Arnold Fischel to meet with President Lincoln himself to advocate for changing the law on military chaplains. After the visit, Fischel reported to the Board of Delegates, “I gave him clearly to understand that I came to him not as an office-seeker but to contend for the principle of religious liberty, for the constitutional rights of the Jewish community, and for the welfare of the Jewish volunteers....” The Jewish community was successful in its advocacy. In 1862, Rabbi Jacob Frankel became the first non-Christian chaplain to serve in the United States Army. **Today, there are over 200 religious denominations represented in the military chaplaincy, providing spiritual and emotional care to soldiers of all faiths.**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ▼ The Board of Delegates of American Israelites used universal language about the American commitment to religious freedom to make their argument. Why do you think they made that choice, and why was it so effective?
- ▼ In the fight for Jewish chaplains, American Jews advocated for rights for the Jewish community in a way that resulted in more inclusion for all faith-based communities across American society. As the American Jewish community advocates for itself in 2026, are there ways in which that advocacy will benefit other minority communities? America as a whole? How?



Shabbat Table Talk: The Book of Esther, which Jews traditionally read each year on the holiday of Purim, tells the story of how the initially reluctant Jewish advocate, Queen Esther, ends up saving the Jewish people. When Esther's uncle, Mordechai, exhorts Esther to speak up for her people, he says to her, "And who knows, perhaps you have attained a royal position for just such a crisis." What does that line mean to you? What positions of trust and influence might each of us hold that allow us to advocate more effectively for the Jewish people today?

- 3. Keeping American doors open to refugees (1883):** Emma Lazarus, a young Sephardic Jew from a storied American Jewish family, was not herself an immigrant, but in the waning decades of the nineteenth century, she watched warily as America became more and more xenophobic. She understood the danger of rising anti-immigrant sentiment that coincided with the moment that her coreligionists most needed to escape from Eastern Europe. She wrote a poem reminding America of its history as a refuge for those seeking freedom from the tyranny of the Old World. Words from that poem, "The New Colossus," now adorn the Statue of Liberty, casting it as one of the great symbols of American freedom and promise:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

And Emma Lazarus was not alone; the American Jewish community as a whole played an outsized role in advocating for refugees and immigrants in America. AJC, for example, fought anti-immigrant laws such as those that required new immigrants to be literate in English in order to enter America. **Refugees and descendants of refugees who found safe harbor here in America have contributed in extraordinary ways to our republic by serving in government, as university presidents, scientists, medical professionals, business leaders, artists, authors, civil rights leaders, and so much more. Our nation continues to be so enriched by their contributions.**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- When did your family first come to the United States, and what challenges and hopes shaped their immigration story? In what ways did American Jewish communities help welcome them and support their beginning here? (If you don't know the answers to these questions, this is a wonderful opportunity to reach out to a member of your family who might know, and ask to record your

conversation for generations to come!)

- ▼ Do you see Jewish themes or underlying ideas reflected in Emma Lazarus's famous words? If so, which ones stand out to you?



Shabbat Table Talk: The Torah teaches us in many places to welcome the stranger. In Leviticus 19:33, for example, we are commanded “*The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love them as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*” What does that biblical call mean for us today as a Jewish community in America? And what does it mean for us as members of broader American society?

- 4. Advancing Workers' Rights (Early 20th century):** Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Jewish immigrant labor activists played an enormous role in shaping the American labor movement. Drawing on their lived experience as workers, Jewish ethical traditions emphasizing human dignity, and deep commitments to democratic participation, Jewish Americans helped advance labor rights that remain central to U.S. working life today. Using the language of basic human rights, Jewish unions built coalitions with other groups to fight for workplace safety, fair wages, and shorter workdays. As labor activist Rose Schneiderman declared, “What the woman who labors wants is the right to live, not simply exist.” Jewish labor leaders like Samuel Gompers, founding president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and Sidney Hillman, leader of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, helped to institutionalize key strategies like collective bargaining and New Deal policies that helped secure greater rights and safer workplaces for workers. **Today, while there is always more to be improved, minimum wage, set hours, and safe working conditions are an expectation of legal workplaces in our nation.**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ▼ Jewish labor leaders often framed their advocacy in terms of universal human rights while drawing on Jewish values about dignity and justice. Why do you think that combination—particular identity and universal language—was so powerful in advancing workers' rights? Does that approach still resonate today?
- ▼ Many of the labor protections we take for granted today—minimum wage, safe working conditions, limits on hours—were hard-won through collective action. At a time when work is changing rapidly (through technology, gig work, and remote labor), what responsibilities do we have to continue advocating for fairness in the workplace and across society? How does that look different more than a century later?



Shabbat Table Talk: The Torah repeatedly commands us to treat workers fairly—for example, “*You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer...you must pay their wages on the same day, before the sun sets*” (Deuteronomy 24:14–15). Why do you think the Torah places such emphasis on the treatment of workers? What might it mean to honor those teachings in our society today, and in our own professional and personal lives?

5. Fighting for Black Civil Rights (mid-20th century): American Jews played a significant, visible, and disproportionately large role in the Civil Rights Movement, contributing legal expertise, organizational leadership, funding, and on-the-ground activism in partnership with Black leaders and institutions. Jewish lawyers such as Jack Greenberg worked alongside Black civil rights attorney (and later Supreme Court justice) Thurgood Marshall to advance landmark legal victories including *Brown v. Board of Education*, while American Jewish Committee (AJC) and other Jewish organizations supported civil rights litigation and legislation through filing amicus (friend of the court) briefs, and in the case of AJC, funding the research that was used to prove that “separate was not equal” in *Brown v. Board*. As AJC President Irving M. Engel declared in 1968, “No American has the right to turn away from these issues. And no Jew *dare* remain indifferent to them. For these are the very values and ideals that have made possible our freedom and our flourishing here in America.” Rabbis and students marched and were arrested in the South, most famously Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel walking arm-in-arm with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, and Jewish activists participated disproportionately in initiatives such as Freedom Summer. Rooted in Jewish ethical traditions emphasizing justice and minority rights, these contributions helped strengthen the moral, legal, and institutional foundations of the movement—while always operating within a broader, Black-led struggle for equality. **Today, while the battle against racism and all forms of discrimination is not yet won, the laws and discourse in our nation reflect the sea change of progress that took place because of the Civil Rights Movement.**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ▶ AJC’s President Engel offers a compelling argument for Jewish participation in the Civil Rights movement: a rising tide raises all ships. Does that argument resonate today? In what ways?
- ▶ What does it mean to be a good ally in American society today? How might Jews be better allies to other groups and how might other groups be better allies to the Jewish community?



Shabbat Table Talk: Judaism is a religion that focuses on both the particular and the universal. We are called upon to live according to Jewish laws, rituals, and customs, and to protect and defend our fellow Jews – and we are also called upon to be voices of morality to all. In a moment when the Jewish community is struggling with high levels of antisemitism, should we be turning inward? Or should we still be focusing on justice for all? How do we balance our responsibilities to our own community with our responsibilities to the greater good?

MEANING FOR TODAY

American Jews continue to see America as a haven and a home, even as our community is facing an alarming increase in antisemitism that cuts across many sectors of our shared society. Antisemitism is not an isolated problem; it reflects broader vulnerabilities in American society. AJC's 2025 State of Antisemitism report found that [two-thirds of Americans – and three-quarters of Jewish Americans – report having less trust in our democracy than they did five years ago](#). Confronting and addressing antisemitism will help ensure full safety and belonging for Jewish Americans and simultaneously strengthen and repair the values of pluralism, trust, accountability, and mutual respect on which a healthy and vibrant democracy depends.

In this year of celebrating America at 250, the Jewish community remains committed to holding America to its promise of inclusion and safety for Jews—and for all Americans. At AJC Global Forum in June, we launched the [Combating Antisemitism Playbook](#), which offers tailored strategies for multiple key sectors in America to do exactly that. The Playbook is the next chapter in 250 years of Jewish commitment to the intertwined thriving of American Jewry and of America as a whole. We hope to make history once again as, together with our good-faith partners, we confront antisemitism and simultaneously help to strengthen our democracy.