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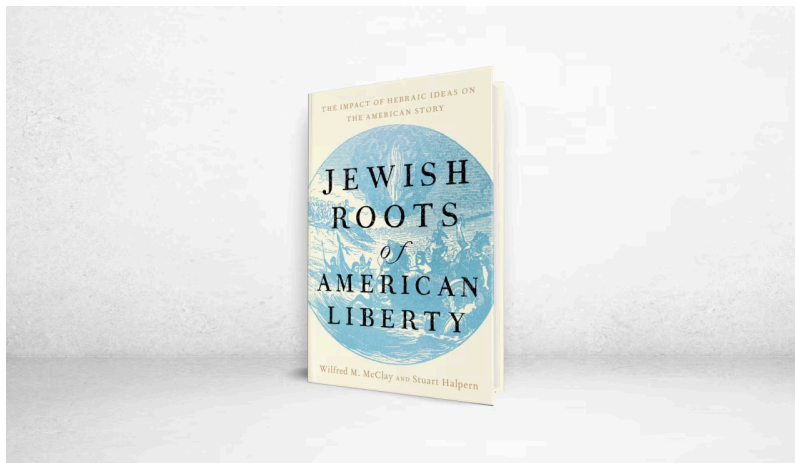
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‘Jewish Roots of American Liberty’ Review: A Hebraic Revolution

The Exodus story was a model of providential liberation and deliverance for Americans rebelling against Britain’s pharaonic royalty.

By Rick Richman

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On May 3, 1925, President Calvin Coolidge delivered a 3,000-word address at the cornerstone-laying ceremony for the Washington, D.C., Jewish Community Center. The New York Times, which printed the entire speech on its front page the next day, noted that Coolidge’s address recognized “the services of the Jews to the United States in war and peace, from the Revolution to the present, and the influence of their Scriptures in the law, culture and morality of the country since early Colonial days.” Coolidge concluded by echoing a historian’s judgment that “Hebraic mortar cemented the foundations of American democracy.”

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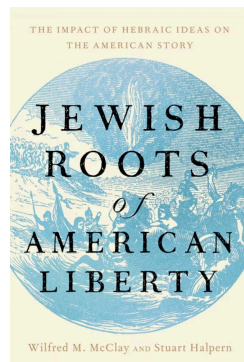
“Jewish Roots of American Liberty: The Impact of Hebraic Ideas on the American Story,” edited by Wilfred M.

Jewish Roots of American Liberty: The Impact of Hebraic Ideas on the American Story

By Wilfred M. McClay
and Stuart Halpern,
editors

Encounter Books

304 pages



McClay, a professor of history at Hillsdale College, and Rabbi Stuart Halpern of Yeshiva University, includes Coolidge's speech in a set of wide-ranging essays on the influence of Jewish thought on American identity. Contributors include Eric Cohen, the chief executive of the Tikvah Fund; Jonathan Sarna of Brandeis University; Rabbi Meir Soloveichik of Congregation Shearith Israel; and Tevi Troy, the presidential historian, among others.

Since the colonial period the Hebrew Bible has shaped American political culture—as Rabbi Dov Lerner of Yeshiva University points out in his essay. Noting that John Milton was the most widely read author in 18th-century America, Rabbi Lerner calls him a “breaker of chains” whose rejection of the doctrine of the divine right of kings, invoked for centuries to support royal absolutism, reverberated in such founding documents as the Declaration of Independence. Milton, who “cited both Scripture and the rabbinic sages,” argued that individuals “need not Kings to make them happy, but are the architects of their own happiness; and . . . are not less than Kings,” an idea embodied in the Declaration's assertion of the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Though such Enlightenment ideas informed the American founding, Mark David Hall, a professor at Regent University, argues that “the main reason Americans embraced religious liberty was the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition.” Religious leaders, from Roger Williams to William Penn, considered that “the Bible and Christian theology require liberty of conscience,” necessary for “true religion to flourish.” Williams drew on the Hebrew prophets to “describe his ideal of a Christian society”; Penn ensured that his colony's statutes protected religious liberty.

The Hebrew Bible maintained an unrivaled authority in early America, says Daniel L. Dreisbach of American University. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries the Bible was the country's “most accessible, authoritative, and venerated book.” Mr. Dreisbach notes the powerful importance of the Exodus story of providential liberation and deliverance as the model for Americans' rebellion against Britain's pharaonic royalty. It was an idea reflected in Lincoln's description, as he assumed office in 1861, of Americans as an “almost chosen people.”

The Exodus wasn't the only rebellion story that resonated with early Americans. Rabbi Halpern writes that the Book of Esther "has a special place in American history": In the decade preceding the Revolution, newspapers and preachers cited the Jewish queen's defiance of her king as support for America's own struggle for freedom. Samson's self-sacrifice in defeating his Philistine enemies was used by Samuel Adams and others to illustrate the "zeal" of the Sons of Liberty.

In a consideration of "what Jews mean to America," Rabbi Soloveichik quotes Jonathan Sacks, the British rabbi: "Israel, ancient and modern, and the United States are the two supreme examples of societies constructed in conscious pursuit of an idea." Every individual is created in the image of God, with inalienable rights protected, not granted, by government. Rabbi Soloveichik cites George Washington's 1790 letter to the Jews of Savannah, Ga., which invoked the hope that "the same wonder-working Deity" who delivered "the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors" and "whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States" would continue to bless all its inhabitants. Mr. Cohen's concluding essay ties these themes together, contending that the "founding proposition of the American experiment was that Biblical morality—our nation's bedrock Judeo-Christian inheritance—could form and sustain a citizenry suited for modern liberty and self-government." The miracle of freedom, he writes, is "an unmerited gift, a hard-won achievement, and a condition in need of defense."

Two-and-a-half centuries after the American founding, it is easy to see its sins: Despite some eloquent rhetoric, it limited suffrage to property-owning white men. Chattel slavery would last nearly a century more. But America's embrace of liberty as its foundational ideal was a history-changing event, and it guided the evolution of the nation as well. As Coolidge noted in his address, "those who claimed the right of individual choice for themselves had to grant it to others."

The New York Times described Coolidge's speech as a call for unity in a time of "factional strife." Coolidge saw in "the marvelous history of the Jewish people" a special lesson in their "capacity for adaptation in detail, without surrender of essentials." Exactly 100 years later the oldest continuous democracy seems immersed in political division even greater than that of Coolidge's time. Prioritization of group rights over individual ones can jeopardize the American experiment, undermining the concept of common citizenship and pitting different categories of Americans against each other.

Coolidge's 1925 address urged Americans to "contemplate that the patriots who laid the foundation of this Republic drew their faith from the Bible." As the nation

prepares to mark the Declaration’s semiquincentennial, this thoughtful book offers timely insights into the ideas that made America great.

—*Mr. Richman is a resident scholar at American Jewish University and author of “And None Shall Make Them Afraid.”*

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