

Parashat Chukkat
Chag Sameach – Happy Fourth of July
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Every year about this time, when the Fourth of July holiday rolls around, I think about my father. Antonio, of blessed memory, was a freedom fighter who fought the Fascists and the Nazis in the Italian Underground. My mother was a starry-eyed idealist who saw the devastation of Europe after the World War II, a woman who believed that the only opportunity for a good life was to come to America.

They came with two suitcases, a shopping bag and a crumpled shred of paper with the smudged address of a distant cousin who lived in Pittsburgh. They spoke not a word of English but after several years of night school language and citizenship courses, they found jobs, saved money and even bought a little house. One of the first things my dad did after he passed his citizenship test was to enlist in the Army. As a language and intelligence specialist he was sent right back to Europe where he worked alongside his “paesani” rehabilitating Milan with the Marshall Plan.

As you can imagine, I grew up in a patriotic family. My parents knew first hand what it was like to live in fear for your life. My father was part of the group of partisans and American servicemen that liberated the Buchenwald death camp. Like other Jews, my parents had seen hatred and cruelty and had been on the receiving end of anti-semitism. They were forever grateful to live in America.

I learned growing up that Jews didn't have saints but in our kitchen we had a picture of President Roosevelt. Later on my mother added a picture of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. My parents had created a shrine to freedom. The only thing missing was "Praying Hands." Which brings me to the US holiday that falls this year on Shabbat. As I think back our family took the Fourth of July very seriously. Just like Election Day, in our house The Fourth of July was sacred. It was a Yontif for all of us.

Miniature American flags lined the walkway up to the front door. Later on my dad added a life size cutout of Uncle Sam. For years, my mom dressed my sister and me in red hats, white shirts and blue shorts which we'd wear to the Fourth of July parade – something we never ever missed, even if it was pouring rain and we had to wear clear plastic raincoats over our patriotic duds.

My parents never ever took being in America for granted. Even in the sixties when the country was immersed in the Civil Rights struggle, Watergate and the Vietnam War, even when they sometimes disagreed with their friends or with each other my parents never lost respect for the country that had opened its door and its heart and saved their lives. I can still remember how offended my father was the time he saw some protesters spelling America with a "k." With tears in his eyes my dad said, "That 'k' makes America look like Nazi Germany." He believed that anyone had the right to criticize any administration, but no one had the right to mock America itself.

But something happened and it seemed that somehow patriotism went out of style. Little by little the Fourth of July flags and banners disappeared from my dad's neighborhood. And in 1980, the year that he died, his house was the only one that still had the flags and the Uncle Sam. The celebrations of the holiday that was a yontif for our family and many others now seemed a little corny and hokey to modern Americans.

So on this Shabbat I want to suggest that we Jews reclaim the Fourth of July as a day for thanking G-d for America, remembering that it is not only a "holiday" but as a "holy day," as well. Consider this. The Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution are sacred documents, each one of which is a spiritual statement that has its roots in the Torah. "We hold these truths to be self-evident ... that all men are created equal" is how the Declaration of Independence begins. Yet a rabbi colleague wonders if it is really all that obvious. He says, "Is it really "self-evident" that we are all created equal? Some of us are tall, some short, some of us are truly wise while others of us are foolish. We are white, black and all shades in between, so how is it so obvious that we are all created equal?"

It seems to me that there is nothing "self-evident" about it at all. And it is really only "self-evident" if we take the time to look through biblical eyes, if we take seriously what it says on the first page of the Bible, in "Bereshit" where we read that G-d created the human being – every single one of us in G-d's own image. Our country believes in the sacredness of human life and the spark of the divine that's deep inside each one of us. Our patriots knew this and wrote it all down in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution.

Later on when Abraham Lincoln established Thanksgiving Day, he continued the tradition by basing this celebration on the Jewish people. For thousands of years we Jews observed the biblical holiday of Sukkot where we thanked G-d each year for the fruits of the earth. The proclamation that makes Thanksgiving Day a national holiday contains words from the Torah that describe Sukkot.

American values have their roots in Torah tradition. Our heritage helped to form America. It has been and continues to be our belief in freedom, our hatred of slavery ("never forget, you were slaves in the land of Egypt," the Torah tells us), and our Jewish dedication to public service that makes America the land of opportunity for anyone who wants a piece of the pie.

Another rabbi colleague told me about a congregation, in the northeast that takes the Fourth of July traditions to heart. Every year they make a float for the Fourth of July parade and theme it around Jewish contributions to America. One year it was a model of the Statue of Liberty with Emma Lazarus' words on it -- Jewish Emma who was so impressed by the Russian-Jewish immigrants she worked with on Ellis Island that she was moved to write her poem. Another year the float was dedicated to "Jews who Rock," like Bob Dylan, Barbara Streisand, Adam Sandler, Kinky Friedman, Lenny Kravits and Iggy Pop! Several years ago the design was a simple one. The float featured a copy of the Declaration of Independence and the Torah side by side with a large banner that said it all – Shabbat is Freedom."

When the rabbi was asked why he devotes so much of the congregation's time and money time every single year to make a float and march in the Fourth of July parade, the rabbi had this to

say: "If we Jews want to be a light to the nations, then we have to get involved with the nations. America is our nation. Jews can be its light."

It may be too late for your shul to make an Independence Day float but it's never too late to be proud of what the Fourth of July means to us. Find some little flags. Give them to your family, distribute them to your congregation, put one to the front porch. Display your flag in honor of your own family -- your mother or father, your bubby or your zayde, your great great greats who, like my own mom and dad left the war torn streets of Prague or Krakow or Vienna, who escaped the desolation of Berlin or the hopelessness of London, Paris or Rome. Our families who came from the shtetls, the quarters, the ghettos or the camps and came to America with hope in their hearts for peace, freedom and a brand new start.

This Shabbat my prayer is for Shabbat Shalom and for Hag Sameach, for surely the Fourth of July, America's birthday, is a yontiff. May we remember where we came from and welcome the stranger into our midst. May we American Jews live as the Torah would have us live -- as a light to the nations, most of all our own.