



Pesah

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Freedom: American vs. Jewish Concepts

By: Rabbi Elliot Dorff

Rector and Distinguished Professor of Philosophy
American Jewish University

American Jews like to think of the American and Jewish sides of their identity as being congruent, that they not only agree with each other but reenforce each other. This was articulated, for example, in one of my hometown rabbi's favorite readings in the *Sabbath and Festivals Prayer Book*, edited by Rabbi Morris Silverman and used widely in Conservative synagogues from 1946 to the publication of *Siddur Sim Shalom* in 1985. The reading, "America- Founded on Biblical Precepts" (pp. 353-4), quoted eight American texts, each followed by a biblical passage that asserted more or less the same thing.

It is indeed the case that American and Jewish values overlap in some important ways. Both systems of thought, for example, are strongly committed to government by law, such that even society's authorities are limited in their powers by its rules. Both, although for different reasons, respect and protect each individual to a much greater extent than dictatorships or communist nations do.

These similarities, though, should not blind us to important differences between American and Jewish perspectives on life. One such difference is embodied in the origin stories of the American and Jewish nations and then subsequently in their laws. Specifically, the American Declaration of Independence asserts as "self-evident" truth that all people "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." So as an American, I am an individual with rights.

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