

DRASH: Pinchas, 7/4/26

Today is the Fourth of July, 2026—250 years since THE Fourth of July. One hundred years ago, a leader of the Jewish Community, Attorney Louis Marshall, gave a long Fourth of July speech stressing how Jews had contributed to the founding of the country.¹ And then Marshall asked, Why am I telling you all this? It was *not*, he answered, in order to challenge antisemitic accusations. No, Marshall told that history in order to “show the Jew as a civic element in the grand composite of American citizenship. He is an American of the Americans—a Jew by faith and religion, [but] an American in all that the term can betoken.”

The anxious pleading that one can, with modern ears, detect in these words, that Jews should be accepted—that we deserve to be accepted—by America, raises many issues about assimilation. Specifically, it highlights the tension between wanting to be fully American *and* wanting to still be fully Jewish.

Assimilation is not a new tension in Jewish history. We see it in today’s *parasha*. God rewards Pinchas for having killed an Israelite man joining with a

¹ *The American Israelite*, July 15, 2026, “The Ascent of American Israel” [via ProQuest]

Midianite woman. Yet Moses himself had married a Midianite woman. More broadly, our tradition, in *Tanach* and in liturgy, repeatedly castigates mixing with non-Jews. And yet it also proclaims a day when the nations will join us in together proclaiming the One God.

Tension about assimilation describes the continuing relationship between the America of the Declaration of Independence and Jewish tradition.

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The Declaration of Independence was, together with the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, a big step from a world—including the Jewish world—of *households* and *hierarchies* ... to today's western world of *individuals* and *equality*. Unlike the Protestantism that undergirds the modern west, today's Judaism remains at least partly rooted in that older world.

Let me explain.

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In the age of the Torah and on through medieval Europe and North Africa societies were organized by lineages and clans—recall Eugene's discussion of clans in this week's *parasha*—and societies were organized at the smallest levels by household. (Indeed, anyone living alone was considered deranged.)

The household was patriarchal, of course: an older male head in charge of many subordinates: wives and servants and slaves and daughters and sons, people who existed only as members of households. And subordinates who can, by Torah rule, be severely punished for any rebelliousness.

Which brings me to the second dimension of change, hierarchies. As the Korach story in this week's *parasha* shows, the tradition brooks no challenge to a God-ordained hierarchy: Moses on top, then Arron and the priests, then Levites, and then Israelites.

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The American Declaration of Independence declared a break with those ancient household-and-hierarchy arrangements, Jewish or otherwise.

“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.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...” Think about these assertions.

These truths are self-evident—that is, truths are *not* revealed to us by God nor by priests, but are obvious by each individual's reasoning.

All men are created equal. The unit here is the *person*. (It says *men*, but the logic inevitably has to include all *persons*.) Thus, society is of made up, not of households with dependent members, says the Declaration, but of *individuals*. And they are created *equal*, none deserving of inherited status by tribe, lineage, caste, class, or *yichus*.

Unalienable rights. Individual rights were somehow “*endowed by the Creator*,” but now having been endowed, the rights are the individual’s forever, presumably not to be abridged, not by kings, not by community pressure, nor by a *bet din*’s excommunication.

The consent of the governed is what makes rulers legitimate—*not* their selection by God or by God’s prophets.

Pursuit of happiness. What? Individual happiness is the end of life, not walking together with one’s God?

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Chaverim, these are, by world historical standards, very odd notions.

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To be sure, the reality of America since July Fourth 1776 was far from the ideals of the Declaration. Patriarchal households and hierarchy persisted for generations. Increasingly, however, American life moved toward those ideals,

toward more individual rights and toward shared authority. This evolution can be seen dramatically in the case of marriage: Generation by generation, women became increasingly empowered to leave the household. Even more striking: young people became increasingly empowered to pick their own spouses—a truly *meshugana* idea.

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Meanwhile, the Jewish world remained for generations organized by patriarchal households. Different members of the household did different observances—*davening*, learning Torah, or *kashering* meat, visiting the *mikva*, for example—but they did them as representatives of the household, not as representing themselves. And as to hierarchy: Authority was local—the rabbi, the *bet din*—but it was definitely hierarchical; and in many places, power was inherited through the family line of the *rebbe*.

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Thus, the traditional Jews who flooded into the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had to face this new kind of society that the Declaration of Independence had helped create. Some Jews handled the tension by ditching much of the tradition, tossing their *tefillin* away or

compromising greatly in the Reform movement. Some resolved the tension by building walled-off communities, much as the Amish had.

This new world/old world tension is not only American, of course. The *Israeli* Declaration of Independence followed the American one in announcing that Israel will “ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.” Now, almost every day we see battles between *that* Israel and the Israel of households and hierarchies.

Meanwhile, back here in America, most of us, especially in the Conservative movement, are trying to reconcile being fully American with being fully Jewish. We, for example, now accept women as rabbis. But: we do *not* decide halachic questions by a congregational vote. Our Bar and Bat Mitzvah *drashot* often display the tension as 13-year-olds try to reconcile tradition with Berkeley in the 21st Century. One example is also in this week’s *parasha*, the story of Zelophehad’s daughters, which some B’nai Mitzvahs interpret as a case of proto-feminism.

This is all a big, difficult balancing act—Judaism... America.... Judaism—and not easily resolved. It is a task we share with the few thousand Jews who

lived in that new nation, that new *type* of nation, 250 years ago. There are no easy answers. May we keep our balancing act going for at least 250 more.