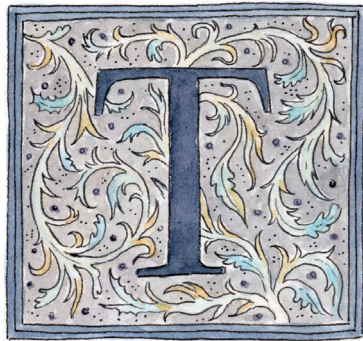


ROBERT NICHOLSON

Religious Christians

*Imagine an America in which we invested
in the biblical roots of our cultural heritage*



THE GROUNDSWELL of support for Hamas in cities across Europe and North America since October 7 is a wake-up call for anyone who cares about the future of the West. The problem isn't just an emerging alliance between Islamists and progressives who seek the downfall of America and Israel. It's the inability of Christians and Jews to muster a serious response. The solution isn't more pro-Israel advocacy or better politics; it is a conscious return to our joint heritage in Jerusalem.

The most important reason the United States supports Israel's response to the Hamas massacre of October 7 — and has supported it for much longer than countries such as Canada and France — is that American Protestants and Evangelicals have a longstanding affinity for Israel and the Jewish people, an affinity that has long since spread to other Christian and non-Christian Americans. This is a matter not

of apocalyptic longing but of shared values that must be reanimated in a moment of global crisis.



America's commitment to Israel, unique among Western countries, emerged from the worldview of Pilgrim fathers who saw themselves as a chosen people, called to settle a promised land. Unlike Europeans, whose political leaders were loyal to a state church, the early pioneers held the Bible above human institutions; indeed, many of them studied the Bible in the original Greek and Hebrew. The result was a national culture that can only be called "evangelical"—a culture in which the Old Testament and its covenantal promises to the Jews were taken seriously.

Some have called this culture "Judeo-Christian," ignoring an ugly history of Christian animosity toward Jews. The Harvard historian Eric Nelson hits closer to the mark when he calls America a self-conscious "Hebrew republic." Whether it's the regular and accepted use of Bible verses in public speeches, the ancient custom of swearing oaths for political office with one's hand on the Bible, the prolific use of biblical images in public spaces (the deist Benjamin Franklin even suggested the image of Moses leading the Israelites through the Red Sea for our national seal), or the massive Museum of the Bible lying at the heart of our nation's capital, American culture is in many ways a Hebraic culture. It should be no surprise that Americans' special reverence for the Hebrew Bible, a Jewish book, translated into a special affinity for the Jewish state.

Yet times have changed. The peak moment for Jewish-Christian collaboration was 50 or 60 years ago, when the vast majority of Americans were united around the core assumptions of the biblical tradition. Today, that unity has disappeared. A 2022 poll by the Marist Institute

for Public Opinion found that only 54 percent of American adults believe in “God as described in the Bible.” A flood of postmodern and intersectional ideology, coupled with aggressive anti-American activism, has left the U.S. a shadow of its former self. Our most urgent need is salvaging and protecting what’s left to stave off a total collapse of our founding culture.

Until now, the response of traditional Americans has been the so-called culture wars, a series of largely legal and political battles that aim to destroy the enemy before it destroys them first. Ironically, culture wars have raged for decades everywhere but in the realm of culture. Law and politics are important fronts, but the real battle is taking place in America’s soul. The crisis we face is ultimately one of the spirit. Only a spiritual response will do.

Note I said spiritual—not religious. In other words, the response must go beyond the four walls of churches, synagogues, and seminaries, transcending narrow questions of doctrine and liturgy. The deepest work must be done upstream of religion in the common realm of culture, led by intellectuals, educators, and artists who rally around and draw from the core mythology of the Hebrew Bible in a way that resonates with and inspires regular Americans.

There is no greater sign of America’s cultural unraveling than the resurgence of antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment across the country. This revival is driven by two sources: first, by people of faith who nonetheless reject Jewish and Christian revelation as a suitable intellectual foundation for the country; second, and more dangerously, by a rising camp of religious “nones” who hitch their wagons to a variety of progressive causes that require the dismantling of biblical morality and the institutions upholding it. The upshot is that more and more Americans see traditional Jews and Christians as cultural and also political foes, and consequently they see the State of Israel less as a country than a symbol of the moral order they want to destroy.

What we need is a Hebraic revolution — and the sooner the better. The only question is how traditional Jews and Christians can work together to spark such a movement.



What will this revolution look like?

It must begin with a basic recognition of the Hebraic heritage itself, the cultural foundation that Jews and Christians share. And what is that heritage but the story of revelation at the core of the Hebrew Bible? The story of an encounter between mankind and the God of Israel, a supernatural being beyond space and time, who cares about His creation and acts in history through a chosen people to reconcile heaven and earth. Reframing, restating, and reinforcing that tradition as the key storyline undergirding our disparate religious systems is the starting point for any Hebraic renaissance.

Practically speaking, the best way to do that is through voluntary and nonsectarian biblical education — and, specifically, outside of churches and synagogues. The Bible has for too long been seen as a book of rules or prayers, when in fact it's a book of stories that expands the imagination and forges a civilizational identity.

We need deeper study of biblical texts and a better methodology for studying them in community. With public-school education in shambles, and private-school tuition beyond the reach of most families, why couldn't Jews and Christians work together to create a chain of affordable after-school programs teaching modern Hebrew through the study of biblical texts (immersively, ideally with Israeli teachers on *shlichut* duty), quite possibly in the style of *chavruta*? The Tikvah Fund's recent announcement of the Emet Classical Academy in Manhattan could be a model.

For years, Christian homeschool movements have consciously

turned to the “classical” approach, steeping children in Latin and Greek. Yet the moral and intellectual basis for Western civilization was laid in the Hebrew language. Imagine the power of an emerging, Hebrew-speaking Christian subculture in conversation with Hebrew-speaking Jews the world over. What better way to build lasting friendships between Christians and Jews than by synching their minds in a shared language? *Kadima!*

At the same time, Bible study alone—even when conducted in Hebrew—isn’t enough. We also need a new industry of Hebraic media that goes beyond the mere retelling of Bible stories, one that explores creative ways to embed the biblical imagination in books, music, television, and film. Why isn’t there a Marvel- or *Star Wars*-like expanded universe based on the Hebraic tradition? Based on the success of family-friendly films and streaming series in recent years, there is every reason to believe that such endeavors would be profitable.

But the revolution will fail unless it bridges the gap between thought and practice. The biblical tradition diverges from the Greco-Roman tradition nowhere more clearly than in its preference for deed over word, for practice over theory. In that sense, a Hebraic revolution in the United States will almost certainly include a renewed commitment to Sabbath observance—not through coercion but from organic observance as young men and women rediscover the joys of rest as the best-kept secret of their tradition. In an age of technological fatigue, there are plenty of arguments for a day off the grid. Some more conservative pundits who sense the importance of Sabbath observance are calling for the reimposition of blue laws. A far better solution is to inspire young Jews and Christians with the spiritual and practical benefits of the Fourth Commandment in a postmodern world, and let their collective example surprise us.

Last, the revolution must include a framework for sustained cross-fertilization between America and Israel, the living repository

of the Hebraic tradition. Only in Israel does that tradition come alive. This means many things. First: It means more trips, especially for young people, to see the land where concepts such as justice and equality were invented. Second: It means more medium- to long-term opportunities for young Christians and Jews to put their shoulder to the plow, side by side, to build up the land for the benefit of its burgeoning population. Here, too, opportunities abound.



Coupled with stateside efforts at biblical literacy and Hebrew language instruction, such projects, taken to scale, will bind Americans and Israelis at the level of heart and mind. And, over time, they will gradually build a worldwide community that includes the burgeoning Evangelical populations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The result will be a de facto “commonwealth of Israel” whose cultural and political ramifications might be greater than we imagine.

More activism on Israel’s behalf is warranted after October 7. But activism without a comprehensive vision will fail. America was founded on a unique reverence for the Bible and the God depicted within it—and, by extension, the nation that brought those things to the world—and will survive only if we the people rediscover both. *