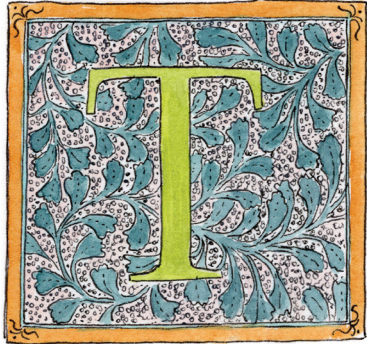


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Jewish Identity vs. Identity Politics

*How can we be supportive of one
and not the other?*



THE EIGHT MOST audacious words in American Jewish history were written by a German immigrant to Charleston, and yet they do not form a single sentence, nor do they proclaim a proposition. The words form a date set atop of a piece of correspondence written by Jonas Phillips, one of the most remarkable men in the story of American Jewry. Phillips had arrived in Charleston in 1756, penniless and an indentured servant to another Jew. By 1776, he had earned his freedom and married a member of the Jewish community in New York. Entirely dedicated to the revolutionary cause, he fled the city before the British landed, served in the American militia, and created a successful life for himself, his spouse, and — this is not a typo — their 21 children.

He emerged from the Revolution financially successful but civically

unequal. In Pennsylvania, the state that was his new chosen home, individuals could not serve in the legislature unless they affirmed, under oath, that both the Old Testament and New Testament were divinely inspired. Phillips was aware that no Jew could take such an oath, and in 1787 he decided to write to the Constitutional Convention, then meeting in his city, and to its president, George Washington, in order to air his grievances.

In this letter, Phillips referenced not only the claims of religious doctrine, but of Jewish peoplehood. He described himself “as being one of the people called Jews of the City of Philadelphia, a people scattered and dispersed among all nations” and sternly informed the Constitutional Convention that “to Swear and believe that the new testament was given by devine inspiration is absolutly against the Religious principle of a Jew.” Noting that the Jews of America had embraced the patriot cause, he argued that the nascent country was not making good on the principles for which the Jewish community had fought:

It is well Known among all the Citizens of the 13 united states that the Jews have been true and faithfull whigs; and during the late contest with England they have been foremost in aiding and assisting the states with their lifes and fortunes, they have supported the cause, have bravely fought and bleed for Liberty which they can not Enjoy.

Atop the letter intended for the men who would create the Constitution, Phillips described the day on which he composed his letter:

Philadelphia 24th Ellul 5547 or Sepr 7th 1787

“24th Ellul,” of course, is the day of the Hebrew month, and the appended year is that in the traditional Jewish count. For whom was

this date designated? There was not a single Jew attending the Constitutional Convention, and whoever read the letter must have been bewildered by its opening appendage.

But in opening his correspondence this way, Phillips made a profound statement about his own identity. He sought the right to serve society not only as an American but also as a Jew, insisting that in entering the legislature, he would not check his Jewishness at the door or amputate his faith from the way he saw himself. In referencing the Jewish marking of time, the letter shows that Phillips saw himself as rooted in not only 1787 but also the sequence of Jewish time. “Time, for the Jew,” Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik once wrote, “does not simply consist of fleeting, imperceptible moments. The Jew walks alongside Maimonides, listens to R. Akiva, senses the presence of [the Talmudic sages] Abaye and Raba. He rejoices with them, and shares in their sorrow. . . . Both past and future become, in such circumstances, ever present realities.” Biblical Hebrew grammar itself flips verbs from future tense to past, giving the sense of an omnipresent unfolding.

By juxtaposing the Jewish date with the Gregorian one, Phillips emphasized Jews who “fought and bled for liberty which they cannot enjoy,” and he placed America, its ideals, and its Declaration of Independence into the sequence of Jewish time. As both a Jew and an American, he demanded that his country make good on its promise of liberty and equality.



Jonas Phillips’s plea, not to mention his forging of a great Jewish family in colonial America, recalls one of the early stories of the Bible. Seeking a burial site for his wife Sarah, Abraham goes to the Canaanites among whom he lives. “I am a stranger and a neighbor among you,” he says. “Give me a family plot from among you.”

These two terms, *stranger* and *neighbor*, seem in tension with each other, and for Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, that is precisely the point. To be a Jew in the world is to be both stranger and neighbor. The Jew seeks to contribute to the body politic as a neighbor, while at the same time recognizing how Jewish history and faith sets him or her apart. Abraham proclaims his dedication to society while at the same time seeking the first separate “Jewish grave” in Hebraic history, a sign of his family’s covenantal distinctiveness.

Rabbi Soloveitchik further noted that much of modern Jewish history was made manifest in the Jewish fleeing from this dual identity: “The emancipated modern Jew, however, has been trying, for a long time, to do away with this twofold responsibility which weighs heavily upon him.” Phillips, in contrast, made the emancipatory case for himself as a Jew *and* as an American. As the civil rights movement would do about 180 years later, the letter sought to hold America to its founding principles.

It is therefore fitting that in that very same city, one year later, a parade to celebrate the ratification of the Constitution—which banned religious tests for federal office—was held in Philadelphia. The civic celebration featured a parade in which Jewish and Christian clergy, as in the civil rights era, walked arm-in-arm. The parade concluded with food provided for all the participants, and in the words of Jonas Phillips’s son, who took part in the festivities, “a number of long tables loaded with all kinds of provisions, with a separate table for the Jews, who could not partake of the meals from the other tables.”

Here we see the uniqueness of America. It is impossible to imagine a separate kosher table provided at a civic event anywhere in Europe in 1788. When Moses Montefiore was made sheriff of London in 1837, he famously brought his own chicken for the banquet attended by the archbishop of Canterbury. Moses Mendelssohn, who died in Germany the year before Phillips penned his letter, was pressured

to convert to Christianity. For the French, who would launch their own revolution two years after the composition of the U.S. Constitution, the only way to ensure a commonality of citizens was to insist on a common religion-less culture in the public square. But the American founders sought to unify citizens of diverse backgrounds and beliefs such that they could be both “stranger and neighbor.” How? Through a constitutional covenant of ideas and responsibilities that neither forced nor outlawed particular religious beliefs.

If ever there was a theologian of the American idea, it was Abraham Lincoln. While the biblically named 16th president was *not* Jewish (rumors to the contrary notwithstanding), the American Abraham did advance an understanding of his country that was Hebraic in nature. A couple of weeks before assuming the Oval Office, he reflected on his childhood understanding of America:

I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for; that something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come; I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.

That “more than common” thing was the self-evident truth “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.” It was for America’s commitment to this principle that Lincoln described his country in Hebraic terms as the “almost chosen people.” Almost chosen because, like the Jews of the Bible, America was charged with representing this ideal of fundamental equality, within its own borders, and “to all the people of the world to all time to come.” Its initial failure to do so, enabling slavery as it did, was exactly what Lincoln endeavored to reverse.



It is frighteningly easy to misconstrue the nature of the American ideal, to reduce it from something covenantal to something entirely contractual, particularly in the realm of politics. A politics rooted in contract rather than covenant is a transactional politics. Incidentally, the opening video of the 2012 Democratic National Convention did just that, proclaiming that “government is the one thing that we all have in common.” To believe this is to believe that we have nothing in common besides manmade constructs. It is to believe the exact opposite of America’s founding idea, that what we have most fundamentally in common is just circumstantial. This is not so. What we have in common, for the Founders, exists prior to government. It is our source of being, our humanity, and our human rights. The goal of government is to protect these rights, to assume responsibility for them, and to delegate that responsibility among the citizenry.

In Lincoln’s view, a covenantal commitment to that fundamental principle is what made someone an American, including immigrants who arrived long after America’s founding. On July 4, 1858, speaking of America’s post-Independence immigrants, he said,

When they look through that old Declaration of Independence

they find that those old men say that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration.

To “hold these truths” — this endeavor, above all, is what we Americans “have in common.”

In this respect, a profound distinction emerges between Lincoln’s covenantal understanding of politics on the one hand, and the purely contractual understanding of politics on the other. For Lincoln, politics was the mechanism for bringing disparate groups of people together. For social contract absolutists, politics is a matter of circumstance. If the only thing we have in common is government, then what we share is merely instrumental rather than of intrinsic value.



The identity politics we see playing out in liberal democracies today is a non-covenantal politics, and one of its most prescient observers was Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. “A covenant,” Sacks wrote in the year 2000, “is not held in place by power but by an internalized sense of identity, kinship and loyalty.” Seven years later, he lamented that this sense of covenant was failing to take hold in Europe. The term *identity politics* was not yet in use, but what he blamed can be seen as its precursor: multiculturalism. “Multiculturalism has led not to integration but to segregation,” he wrote. “It has allowed groups to live separately, with no incentive to integrate and every incentive not to.”

Sacks was no reactionary extremist. He celebrated what he saw as the positive facets of 21st-century Britain, particularly that it was “a more open, diverse, multicolored, energizing, cosmopolitan environment” than it had been in his childhood. The problem was that these increasingly proud and visible communities existed independently from one another and the only thing they had in common was government.

The reason multiculturalism had gone so wrong—had “run its course,” in Sacks’s words—was that it had initially been “a response to racism. Local government officials were trained in anti-racist awareness. Schools were encouraged to drop assimilationist policies.” There was something wise, morally and practically, about not forcing assimilationism. The diversity of cultures could make Britain a more vibrant, compassionate, and innovative society. But when it came to the government’s approach to the newcomers, no overarching connection joining immigrants into the country was sought or declared.

If avoiding racism was the immediate impetus for British multiculturalism, class, Sacks argued, was the deeper social structure the country sought to bury. Originally, in Victorian and Edwardian England, immigrants such as Jews had found a country more racially welcoming than the one they had left in the 13th century; but Jews remained, as Sacks puts it, akin to guests in a country house: welcome but not equals. Now, Sacks further argued, a very different approach was being adopted in the name of equality; the problem, as he put it, was that the “country house” had been replaced with a “hotel,” in which every group lived in the U.K. without genuine connection to the other groups.

For a British rabbi to share such thoughts in the first decade of 21st-century England was, to say the least, bold and courageous. And Sacks acknowledged as much, noting that the people sounding the alarm about multiculturalism—himself, the African Archbishop of York John Sentamu, and Trevor Philips, the former chairman of the

Commission for Racial Equality—would “naturally be thought of as its beneficiaries.” He did so because of the confidence he had not only in Judaism and in Britain, but in himself as a Jew and a Brit. Like Jonas Phillips a couple of centuries before him across the pond, he was self-assured in his identity and in its contribution to the society that he was a part of, rather than apart from. He believed in the covenant and accepted proudly the responsibilities it placed on him to strengthen it. And notably, also like Jonas Phillips, he rooted his argument in that sense of responsibility rather than in grievance.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines “identity politics” this way:

Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination.

Aspiring toward “self-determination” in a shared polity is the mark of a non-covenantal politics, a separatist politics that aspires to segregation. The end result of a non-covenantal politics is a problematic one. For if we have no common bonds, and government exists only to protect our plethora of self-interests, then each group is incentivized to advance self-absorbed claims to government attention. “In multicultural politics, it is an advantage to be injured,” Michael Walzer once reflected. “Every injury, every act of discrimination or disrespect, every heedless, invidious, or malicious word is a kind of political entitlement, if not to reparation then at least to recognition.” It is therefore not hard to see how such a politics leads rather

inevitably to antisemitism. If Western multiculturalism and its political progeny of identity politics are defined primarily by grievance, they will eventually find their way to the West's historical scapegoats of grievance: the Jews.

But as Sacks argued, the solution to the problem of fractured covenantal politics could be found, indeed, in covenantal politics, which was the Jewish contribution to human society. As he wrote in 2000, "Covenantal society is the attempt to put out the flames and to create a society of collective moral beauty and grace, one that honors the image of God in every person and thus becomes a home for the Divine presence." For Sacks, liberal democracies should not be operating as hotels, with their ephemeral or contractual tenants.

The trouble is that a hotel is a place where no one is at home. You cannot feel loyalty to a society that claims to have no identity whatsoever. Loyalty means particularity; this place not that, this language not that, these buildings, this landscape, this history, this culture. Liberalism and multiculturalism privatize identity: one by attributing it to the individual; the other to the ethnic or religious community. But there is, intentionally, no overarching structure of meaning to hold it all together.

Liberal democracies, in Sacks's view, need to be conceived as homes in which all inhabitants have a genuine stake, which is why he titled his best book *The Home We Build Together*.

The current controversy in Britain over the serial grooming and rape of thousands of girls by immigrant gangs over the course of decades is the appalling vindication of Rabbi Sacks's prescient warning. What journalist Dominic Green has called "the biggest peacetime crime—and cover-up—in British history" could occur only in a society more concerned with maintaining its multicultural

structure than with building an integrated home. That every level of law enforcement and prosecution has now been implicated in the cover-up shows the extent of the rot and the urgency of addressing it. Green's words about the nature, extent, and evolution of the problem could have come right out of Sacks's diagnosis nearly 20 years ago.

Social workers were intimidated into silence. Local police ignored, excused, and even abetted pedophile rapists across dozens of cities. Senior police and Home Office officials deliberately avoided action in the name of maintaining what they called "community relations." Local councilors and Members of Parliament rejected pleas for help from the parents of raped children. Charities, NGOs, and Labour MPs accused those who discussed the scandal of racism and Islamophobia. The media mostly ignored or downplayed the biggest story of their lifetimes. Zealous in their incuriosity, much of Britain's media elite remained barnacled to the bubble of Westminster politics and its self-serving priorities.

They did this to defend a failed model of multiculturalism and to avoid asking hard questions about failures of immigration policy and assimilation. They did this because they were afraid of being called racist or Islamophobic. They did this because Britain's traditional class snobbery had fused with the new snobbery of political correctness.

Rabbi Sacks had argued that multiculturalism was creating a polity that was a hotel; the current moment of identity politics is one wherein those overseeing the hotel have allowed parts of it to be trashed.



What, then, is the proper path to uniting a diverse society? Looking, in Toquevillian fashion, at America through an outsider's eyes, Rabbi Sacks singled out the covenantal approach of the Founding

as the single best model, and it provides the title of his book: not society as melting pot, or as multicultural hotel, but as “the home we build together.” Sacks sought what he called “integration without assimilation,” in which diverse members of society contribute uniquely to society, without denying their differences. What joins parties, in a covenant, is dedication to a set of ideas, and a shared story through which this dedication expresses itself.

When Rabbi Sacks argued for a strong Jewish identity, it was of a very different type than that privileged by identity politics. “Nothing could be more striking,” Sacks reflected, “than the fact that a people whose very reason for being in the past was to be different, chosen, particular, should today define itself in purely universalist terms, forgetting — surely not accidentally — that it is precisely in our particularity that we enter and express the universal human condition.”

Covenantal politics, as Sacks taught us, is not a tool of separation. It is, in a diverse society, a way of celebrating simultaneously the particularity of one’s heritage and the diversity of others’. It is a call for a domestic politics of cooperation. A covenantal politics should root itself in both the truth of human equality and the fact of human difference. “The supreme King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, stamped all people with the seal of Adam the first man, as all of them are his offspring,” the Mishnah reflects, “and not one of them is similar to another” (Sanhedrin 4:5).

Hence, strikingly, the deep admiration that this profoundly British chief rabbi had for American politics, rooted in our obligations to every human being created in the image of God. “It was in America that covenantal politics received its most complete expression,” Sacks said. He cited the political theorist John Schaar’s summary of Lincoln’s worldview:

We are a nation formed by a covenant, by dedication to a set of principles and by an exchange of promises to uphold and advance certain commitments among ourselves and throughout the world...But the other side of the conception contains a warning, very like the warnings spoken by the prophets to Israel: if we fail in our promises to each other, and lost the principle of the covenant, then we lose everything, for they are we.



One of Jonas Phillips's many daughters, amazingly, lies buried in Monticello, the estate of Thomas Jefferson. The grave, like Jonas Phillips's letter, bears both Hebrew and secular dates. Phillips's grandson, the naval war hero Uriah Phillips Levy, purchased Jefferson's home, saved it from ruin, and ultimately buried his mother there. That there is a Jewish grave on that ground is a reminder of Abraham's original words: "I am a stranger and a neighbor among you; give me a family plot among you."

To visit this grave at Jefferson's home, as I have, is to ponder the meaning of America: an imperfect but exceptional country, one whose founders were, of course, fallible and flawed, but who nevertheless fashioned the United States into a covenantal country defined by ideas, a "home we build together."

But another event involving Jonas Phillips's family has largely gone unnoticed. Uriah Phillips Levy had not only salvaged Monticello; he had given a statue of Thomas Jefferson to New York's City Council, in order to celebrate the Founder's dedication to religious liberty.

This statue, which has stood for more than 150 years, was recently removed. Soon after, the council's Cultural Affairs Committee proposed the removal of statues honoring Washington and others on public property across the city, an attempted "cancellation" of the

Founders who did not all live up to their enunciated ideals. The deepest danger of this myopic view is that it utilizes the flaws of the Founders in order to launch an ideological assault on the Founding itself. The greatest threat to American covenantal culture is the worldview that insists that the Founding was essentially evil rather than exceptional but incomplete. It is a rejection of the idea of covenant that is democracy's only hope. The only alternative is a multicultural miasma of victimhood.

The upcoming 250th anniversary of the American founding is an important opportunity to restore the place of the Founding in our national imagination and to assure the future of this country, and for American Jews within it. There is enormous potential for July 4, 2026, to be a day that Americans will long remember, one that will inspire us to embrace all that unites us without denying what makes us different. We need not, and we should not, ignore the failings in our country's history in order to understand the exceptional nature of the American covenant.

But for American Jews, the task is more difficult, for they must learn to retell the Jewish story in America. The status of who is considered a truly significant figure in American Jewish history is determined not by who among Jewry in the United States was awarded the Nobel Prize, or who composed Broadway shows. American Jewry will need to learn about figures who are little known, like Jonas Phillips, who refused to amputate their public Jewishness from themselves, and allowed their Jewishness to fuel the case they made for the meaning of America. Then they must convince themselves to live in the image of that model, in order to produce an American Jewry worthy of the Founding that has been a blessing to the world — and for which Jonas Phillips fought. *