



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

Today's Torah

Presidents' Day

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Self-Evident Truth

**By: Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, DHL,
Abner and Roslyn Goldstine Dean's Chair
Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies
American Jewish University**

On this Presidents' Day celebration, can we admit the gap between our professed ideals and the grimy, bloody reality with which we live? Only then, I think, does our observance of the remembrance rise to be worthy of a free and democratic people. Without that recognition of the ideals yet to be achieved, we risk elevated military might and economic wealth to nearly-idolatrous levels of veneration.

Our founders, in 1776 and beyond, articulated a shared vision that exceeded their grasp, and we have been conceiving it anew each generation, battling over its implications again and again. Maybe that's what Jefferson meant when he wrote that "I hold a little rebellion now and then a good thing."

American Ideals

Our nation's aspirations are lofty and elusive; the implications are far-reaching and unprecedented. Even those who articulated them were unaware of the extent of their implications. They channeled a vision that was larger than their own:

- "All ... are created equal ...and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights."
Thomas Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence*
- "Government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed." *Declaration of Independence*
- "Give me liberty or give me death!" Patrick Henry
- "Receive the fugitive and prepare in time an asylum for mankind." Tom Paine

- "God has created the mind free ... No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship whatsoever ... But shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, *Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom*

Less Lofty Reality

Our founders affirmed that all people are equal, but then legislated that they only meant white people. Well, actually only white men. They affirmed Liberty, declaring that they would not be slaves, while maintaining a cruel and deadly slavery over an entire race of people for generations and nearly annihilating the First Peoples who were already living here. They affirmed their role as an asylum for humanity, while opposing and constraining wave after wave of unanticipated (and, to their mind, undesirable) immigrants. They affirmed freedom of conscience in matters of belief and skepticism, while vilifying Catholics, Jews, and others (who they lumped in a make-believe category of pagans!), all the while criminalizing ways of loving outside the range of their toleration.

America was far from ideal, even according to its own ideals. But its founding vision remains unsurpassed and it is that lofty vision which we reaffirm and celebrate:

- Each individual person is properly the locus of rights, liberties, and responsibility.
- Each person has equal rights and equal dignity, regardless of affiliations, gender, race, or other groupings.
- Communities emerge from voluntary associations of individuals, and function through education, inspiration, and persuasion, but not through coercion or privilege.
- Our national social experiment is made better by our diversity and our raucous debates. Imposed ideas and constrained speech are desperate attempts at control that only stoke the destructive smothering of chaos.

Much of our national attention must focus on correcting the historical ways that our reality fell (and falls) short of our most lofty ideals. Specifically, issues of racial bigotry towards African Americans, Native Americans, and other minorities, gender bigotry against women, sexual bigotry against LGBT people, marginalization of people with special needs, of religious minorities (including atheists, Muslims, Jews and others) -- these invidious forms of discrimination and oppression flow through the past and into the present. It is not enough to sit quietly and not make things worse. Neutrality results in perpetuating injustice into a new age, so we are called to act constructively to end the inertial privileges of race, class, gender, orientation, ability, or faith.

Hope & Promise

I hoist an American flag in front of my home each July 4 and other national holidays, and I wear a special American flag yarmulke to accentuate my commitment -- that this nation of promise and hope might yet exemplify its own articulated ideals.

As those who came before us struggled to advance inclusion, diversity and justice in their day, so we affirm the continuing promise of America not when we cling to a stale status quo, but when we engage in a continuing and revolutionary heritage, when we respond to the lure of extending life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that are the rightful inheritance of every person, without exception.



Dean's Chair of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and is Vice President of American Jewish University in Los Angeles. Rabbi Artson has long been a passionate advocate for social justice, human dignity, diversity and inclusion. He wrote a book on Jewish teachings on war, peace and nuclear annihilation in the late 80s, became a leading voice advocating for GLBT marriage and ordination in the 90s, and has published and spoken widely on environmental ethics, special needs inclusion, racial and economic justice, cultural and religious dialogue and cooperation, and working for a just and secure peace for Israel and the Middle East. A member of the Philosophy Department, he is particularly interested in theology, ethics, and the integration of science and religion. He mentors Camp Ramah in California in Ojai and Ramah of Northern California in the Bay Area. He is also dean of the Zacharias Frankel College in Potsdam, Germany, ordaining Conservative rabbis for Europe. A frequent contributor for the Huffington Post, the Times of Israel, and a Contributing Writer for the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles, he has a public figure [Facebook page](#) with over 70,000 likes. Rabbi Artson is the author of 12 books and over 250 articles, most recently *Renewing the Process of Creation: A Jewish Integration of Science and Spirit*. Married to Elana Artson, they are the proud parents of twins, Jacob and Shira.

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Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies
American Jewish University
15600 Mulholland Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90077
310-440-1218
www.aju.edu/ziegler

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