



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY



A Personal Reflection on America

By: **Rabbi Elliot Dorff**

**Rector and Distinguished Professor of Philosophy
American Jewish University**

Presidents' Day evokes thoughts not only about our current and past Presidents, but also about our ties to the United States itself. We do that also, of course, on Independence Day, but the celebrations on that day are totally upbeat, and maybe rightly so: after all, we are then marking the birth of our nation, and birthdays are a time for celebration, not an evaluation of the life of the person or nation whose birthday is being commemorated. It is precisely because Presidents' Day, although a national holiday, lacks all the hoopla of July Fourth that it asks us to be more reflective on what being an American means and what our current and past Presidents have done, or failed to do, to advance that agenda.

Like everyone else, I suppose, my own thoughts and feelings about the United States were strongly shaped by my upbringing. My father was born in Poland and came to the United States at the age of twelve. Like many immigrants to this country, he saw America as nothing less than a promised land, one that enabled people to have amazing liberties, including the possibility of pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps, as it were, in advancing one's economic status. My mother, who was born and raised in Milwaukee, had similar feelings, especially as she was able to graduate from college and do some graduate work in the 1930s, which was unusual for anyone at that time, especially for women. Jews experienced a lot of anti-Semitism at that time, even in America, and so they still had a strong sense of limitations under which we, as Jews lived, even in America; but that did not diminish one iota my parents' appreciation for the luck of living here.

I was born in Milwaukee in 1943 and educated in public schools, for my parents and most Jews of their generation thought that enrolling your children in public schools was one way that you expressed your identity as Americans and enabled your children to do the same. Only about 15% of the students in the schools I attended were Jewish, and so I came to know and befriend many varieties of Christians. (Muslims and adherents of Asian religions were not represented in the schools I attended, at least as far as I knew.) In courses on United States history in eighth and again in twelfth grades, the Founding Fathers were painted with halos around their heads: their motives were purely moral, espousing all the liberties they eventually articulated in the Bill of Rights. It was only in college that I learned that their primary motive may have been economic. This was the 1950s, when Americans were the new world power and interested in spreading the righteousness of our form of living and of government to the rest of the world. It was also, though, the time of the McCarthy hearings, organized, I am embarrassed to say, by a senator from my home state, and a time of many worries about Russia and China spreading their communist ideology to other countries and also the increasing capability of other nations to use the atomic bomb and to beat us into space. Anti-Semitism, though, was on the wane, as the horrors of the Holocaust became apparent and the State of Israel was seen as a bastion of democracy in a neighborhood hostile to it. None of my classmates, as far as I knew, and only one of my teachers was blatantly anti-Semitic. So my view of America was very positive and proud: we stood for liberty and everything that was good.

In some ways, that idealistic impression of the United States was augmented in the early 1960s, when I was in college. President Kennedy had proclaimed in his inaugural speech, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." So I spent my Thursday afternoons in college teaching seventh graders in a Harlem junior high school who were reading on a second-grade reading level. The Civil Rights movement was gathering steam, culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But the '60s also included the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy, and those years brought us the war in Vietnam. So the ideal bubble that was my impression of the United States in my childhood and teenage years was being severely challenged. That may just have been the process of aging and seeing more of life, but it was also the recognition that the realities of life here were much worse for many Americans than they had been for me, growing up in a loving, middle-class home and living in what was *de facto* a segregated, white part of the city.

So where do I stand now, many decades later? I am much more aware of, and troubled by, the failure of the United States to live up to its ideals to value each person and to provide access for all its inhabitants to good education, health care, housing, and jobs. The inequities between the richest and poorest among us in these areas and in the justice system are all more stark now than they were when I was growing up. We now also have to return to the campaign to assure voting rights to every citizen, and we have the new and critically important challenge of climate change. So we have a lot to do to realize my parents' vision of America and my own during my youth.

That said, I am still immensely proud to live in what is by far the most pluralistic country that has ever existed on the face of the earth. (I just learned that the Los Angeles Archdiocese offer Mass in 80 different languages!) Yes, we are by no means perfect in our interactions across racial, cultural, and gender lines, but we are doing better at that than most other nations, even democratic ones. (Think of all the problems Western European countries are now having with its new Muslim residents.) Furthermore, I deeply treasure the rights and creativity that are the cornerstone of America. So yes, we need to do better – much better, in some aspects of life – but we are also lucky to live here, and we have much to justify pride in being Americans. Happy Presidents' Day!



Rabbi Elliot Dorff is Rector and Anne and Sol Dorff Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the American Jewish University, Visiting Professor at UCLA School of Law, and Chair of the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. Author of over 200 articles and 14 books on Jewish thought, law, and ethics, and editor of 14 more books on those topics, his most recent books are *For the Love of God and People: A Philosophy of Jewish Law* and *Modern Conservative Judaism: Evolving Thought and Practice*.



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Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies
American Jewish University
15600 Mulholland Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90077
310-476-9777
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