

Independence Day

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Yesterday, to celebrate our country's independence, my family and I went to a friend's lake house to swim, go boating, eat barbeque, and watch the fireworks. It could not have been a more lovely day. As the sun was setting over the lake, and we were enjoying fresh-cut watermelon and a glass of sangria, my friend turned to me and, with not a hint of sarcasm on his face, said: "Well, this sure beats taxation without representation."

It was a clever line. But as they say -- it was funny because, on some level, it was true. Like many of our federal holidays, the way we celebrate Independence Day has little to do with what the holiday's actual meaning. Barbecues and boating have little to do with the lofty ideal of independence from tyranny. On the Fourth of July, we are great at the pursuit of happiness -- less good at remembering that all people are created equal.

Fittingly, as if it were trying to remind us of the deeper themes of July 4th, [this week's Torah portion](#) tells the story of a group of revolutionaries who, like the rebels who founded this country, rose up to challenge the political establishment. The leader of the insurrection was a character by the name of Korach.¹ Korach comes from the tribe of Levi -- those Israelites who were tasked with assisting the priestly class in all of their religious functions. On the one hand, it is a position of pride -- an honor to work in the service of God. On the other hand, it is a lowly kind of honor, only ever *assisting* the priests with their service -- not performing the sacrifices, but cleaning up after them.

Korach and followers, it seems, have grown jealous of the priests. They rise up against Aaron, the high priest, and accuse him of wielding outsized power. "Your authority is too great," they say to him. "Don't you know that all of the community of Israel is holy?"² Like the American Revolution, Korach's rebellion challenges the balance between established authority and personal freedom.

In the case of Korach, established authority won the day. But for the American Revolutionaries, personal freedom would prove victorious -- not just in the Revolutionary War, but throughout American history. Observers have noted that from the time of this nation's founding, the spirit of rebellion and revolution seems to have been encoded into our DNA. From Shay's Rebellion to the draft card burners, Americans throughout history have felt it their natural right to rise up against established authority "when, in the course of human events, they felt it necessary" to do so.

¹ For a helpful analysis of Korach's rebellion, and what differentiates it from the concurrent rebellion led by Datan and Abiram, see Richard Elliott Friedman's classic, *Who Wrote the Bible*, p. 172.

² Number 16:3.

This rebellious spirit takes hold not only in the political sphere, but in every sector of American life -- including in our religious lives. The acclaimed scholar of American Jewish history Jonathan Sarna [has argued](#) that Jewish religious life in this country has been animated by the principle of personal freedom and independence. As Sarna puts it: if a ragtag bunch of farmers and merchants can rise up and overthrow the world's greatest colonial superpower, how much the more so in the wake of the Revolution would everyday Jews (and people of other faiths too) feel empowered to rise up and reform their houses of worship.

As proof this revolutionary spirit, Sarna cites several examples from the 1780s and '90s of Jewish laypeople officiating at intermarriages, when their rabbis refused to do so -- or nevertheless burying their dead in the Jewish cemetery, under circumstances when Jewish law would have otherwise forbade it.

Perhaps the most obvious illustration of the revolutionary spirit is the emergence of break-away congregations. In the Colonial Era, every city had one synagogue at its center -- one synagogue in Charleston, one in Philadelphia, one in New York -- each with overarching authority in all areas of local Jewish life. But in the wake of the Revolution, that began to change. In New York, a group of young people who had belonged to Congregation Shearith Israel (which we now often call "the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue") grew tired of the style of worship that was being offered there. In the spirit of the times, they rose up and rebelled -- forming a new congregation called Congregation B'nei Jeshurun (which we now often refer to as "BJ"), that was committed to shorter services, with prayers in English and a weekly sermon. For these early Americans, the Revolution had signaled that established authority can be overturned -- that, as Korach and his biblical band of rebels would have argued, personal freedom and independence are an inherent human right.

Some critics would argue that we in this country have become overly focused on personal freedom -- that we are so independent, we have no one to rely on. Many of us have come to live atomized, disconnected lives -- often unattached from even the people who live next door to us. As the sociologist Robert Putnam has famously described it: the era of crowded Monday night bowling leagues is long since gone. Now, we live in a society that prefers to go [bowling alone](#).

We've come to misinterpret the meaning of independence. Independence was never a goal unto itself. The founders of this country were well versed in Enlightenment philosophy, and they believed that society is best seen as a [social contract](#). This idea originated with John Locke, who argued that free individuals get together and contract with one another to create social order. The Revolutionaries' complaint against King George was not that they should be utterly free to do whatever they wished, but rather that the king had broken their social contract. Take a look at the [Declaration of Independence](#), and you'll see that the majority of that document is devoted to listing the ways in which King George had broken their trust.³ They rebelled not so that they could declare their independence from others, but rather, for the exact opposite reason

³ For more on this insight, take a listen here: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/in-our-time-history/id463700741?i=1000368642177>

-- because they believed in social contract theory, that there is something we human beings owe to one another.

Yes, we as individuals can and should exercise our independence: to act for our own sake, to be self-reliant, and to rebel against established norms. This is a gift of the United States. But equally, this country has provided us with another gift: to realize that we human beings are social creatures, who rely on one another -- at the very least for safety and sustenance, and if we're lucky, for companionship, love, comfort, inspiration, artistry, ideas, laughter and so much more.

This Fourth of July weekend, what we need is not a declaration of independence, but rather, a declaration of interdependence. Then, we might live up to the founding insight of this country -- which is: that to be human is to need one another. Do we not hold this truth to be self-evident?