

My friends, on this Shabbat preceding America's highest holiday, I decided to collect some references to God by American Presidents. For example:

President Obama, in his Inaugural Address, referred to *“that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.”*

Or President Kennedy's Inaugural, which said, *“...let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.”*

President Lincoln's second Inaugural Address invoked God frequently, including this memorable description of the pro-slavery and abolitionist camps: *“Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been*

answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.""

Perhaps you know that the Constitution requires that an incoming President swear the following oath: *I do solemnly*

swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. Where are the words “so help me God?” They are not in the Constitution. They were spontaneously added by George Washington when he took the oath, and to my knowledge, they have been repeated by every President from then on.

Finally, my favorite line from my favorite Inaugural Address, which is a return to the address of President Kennedy, who, in my opinion, captured the very essence of America when he said, “...*the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe--the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.*”

As I typed the words “the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God,” I had a flash of insight. I went to my briefcase and pulled out a small copy of the Constitution that I keep there, and read the Bill of Rights with a fresh eye. I realized that eight of the ten amendments

comprising the Bill of Rights do not bestow any rights upon Americans at all. The only exceptions are the Sixth Amendment, which grants certain rights to a citizen accused of a crime, and the Seventh Amendment, which preserves the right to a jury trial in any dispute in which the value in controversy exceeds twenty dollars. The other eight amendments give us no rights whatsoever.

If that is so, then what is the purpose of the other eight amendments? They prevent the federal government from taking rights away from us. What is the source of the rights we have, upon which Congress may not infringe? The question leads us directly to the quote from President Kennedy: “the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.” Of course! How could I not have paid more attention to this until now, I who speaks so frequently about this concept being uniquely American, I who believes that banning God and religion from the public square is contrary to the wishes of our Founding Fathers?

It is now so clear to me, and makes so much sense. Why did our forbears sever ties with the English crown? Because, they explained, they believed certain *truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal*—in other words, that King George did not rule as a Divinely appointed sovereign, and further, *that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.*

In other words, my friends, the Founding Fathers were magnificently consistent. They declared that human rights are God-given, not granted by the government. Later, in the Bill of Rights, they did not presume to grant human rights, but instead to insure that unlike the Crown, their new government would be

based on the idea that government cannot revoke the rights bestowed on the human race by God Himself.

With this fresh in our minds, look what happens to the religion clause of the First Amendment: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...*

It becomes so clear that it is not the role of government to say what we cannot do with regard to religious expression any more than it is the role of government to legislate what we must do. It is we the people who hold that right, a right given us by God.

Perhaps it is the will of the American people that God have no place in our schools. But for the most part, Americans do not object to the Pledge of Allegiance in schools, despite addition of the words “under God” to the pledge. Perhaps it is the will of the American people that the Ten Commandments not be displayed in schools nor in courts, despite the fact that the words “so help me God” were, and perhaps in some jurisdictions still are part of the oath sworn by those giving testimony. **If it is the will of the**

people, then so be it. But if it is merely the opinion of a majority of Supreme Court justices, then it is not enough. The government cannot remove God from the public square. Has the government done so anyway? I believe that the answer is that to a great extent, yes they have. So it is we the people who must restore God to His place in American society—a place governed not by the government, but by the governed themselves.

My friends, on this Independence Day weekend, let us remember the beautiful words of Irving Berlin: God bless America, land that I love. Stand beside her, and guide her through the night with a light from above. From the mountains, to the prairies, to the oceans white with foam, God bless America, my home, sweet home. My hope and prayer tonight is that these words be true whether they are read from left to right, or from right to left. Indeed, may God bless America. But just as importantly, may America bless God.