



# Department of Justice

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BY

THE HONORABLE EDWARD H. LEVI  
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE

THE CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION  
OF  
HEBREW UNION COLLEGE

7:00 P.M.  
SATURDAY, MARCH 27, 1976  
NETHERLAND HILTON HOTEL  
CINCINNATI, OHIO

I am honored to be present on this occasion as the representative of President Ford, who has asked me to convey to you his personal greetings, his congratulations on the work you have accomplished, and his deep interest in and hopes for the future of your efforts.

The responsibility of representing through my own words the Chief Magistrate of our nation makes the event more poignant for me. It adds to those feelings which naturally arise out of my own remembrance of deep family and institutional ties with both the Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Institute of Religion.

There is, in addition, the propitious circumstance that this celebration of your Centennial comes during the bicentennial year, as we now count it, of our Republic. Gertrude Stein, although her qualifications as an historian may not be fully accepted, thought that periods of notable national effort had a special periodicity, coming at one hundred year intervals, connected to the span of three generations with their linking traditions, and then beginning anew. 1876, whatever the governmental scene then may have appeared to be, was toward the start of an amazing, constructive period in American life, reflecting the energies of diverse groups, building for the future, each confronting in its own way the meaning of the American tradition, and adding to that tradition.

Because of the linkage of these celebrations, it seems appropriate that we recall, although the words are always with us, the letter from George Washington in 1790 to the Hebrew Congregation at Newport, Rhode Island. President Washington spoke of a government which gives to bigotry no sanction and to persecution no assistance; where all possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. He placed his hope in the wisdom to make use of the advantages "with which we are now favored" and in the just administration of a good government--a land where "everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid." These echoing words are in no way disparaged, indeed they are given added meaning, because they have charted a course, and not an easy one, for fulfillment.

The religious impulse in American history is strong indeed. As Professor Sandmel has written: "Our Founding Fathers were influenced by the settlers of our colonial period who believed they were recreating a new version of the Hebrew theocracy." The formal language of the Mayflower Compact converted a church covenant into a civil government. The sense of a divinely guided destiny was ever present. John Adams in 1765 wrote: "I always considered the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth." There was a metaphorical

reliving of the Old Testament--some would say it was more than that--the finding of a new land, a chosen people and a vision for the future. In this conception, to the sovereignty of the people there was joined the ultimate accountability. Madison's Memorial and Remonstrance for religious freedom spoke of the duty to the Creation "precedent, both in order of time and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society." Any man who becomes a member of any particular society does so "with a saving of his allegiance to the Universal sovereign." This metaphorical reliving was part of our religious culture and national history. The study by Professor Tuveson called the "Redeemer Nation" is filled with examples. In the 19th century, Herman Melville's "White Jacket" put it this way: "Escaped from the house of bondage, Israel of old did not follow after the ways of the Egyptians. To her was given an express dispensation; to her was given new things under the sun. And we Americans are the peculiar chosen people--the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world."

The Messianic tradition can be one of exclusivity. Exclusivity can lead to intolerance. But the nature of the American experiment compelled an immediate recognition of the importance of dissent and an awareness of differences. This was so even though Washington in his farewell address said of his countrymen "with slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits and political principles." A later observer in the first third of

the nineteenth century found that "the sects that exist in the United States are innumerable." The diversity then continued to strengthen tolerance but nevertheless, or for that reason, produced agreement on moral principles. "Religion in America," Tocqueville wrote, "takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions. . . I am certain that they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions. This opinion is not peculiar to a class of citizens or to a party, but it belongs to the whole nation and to every rank of society." In part the religious thrust seemed to give a definiteness, certainty and simplicity to natural law and moral principles. Tocqueville noticed this, and so later did Lord Acton when he suggested that the primitive fathers of the United States began by preferring abstract moral principles to the letter of the law and even to the spirit of the Constitution.

Certainly it should not be strange to this group to know the magic of the people of the book. My mentor, Professor Sandmel, has reminded me that the scholars of Judaism have noted that Josephus, who lived in the first century, almost fifteen hundred years after the age of Moses, in describing the array of laws in Scripture spoke of these as the "constitution." The Five Books of Moses contain more than laws. They provide narratives of ancient Hebrew history; they abound in exhortations to spur a responsive obedience to the laws presented. Josephus meant

by constitution that the laws, however individual this or that requirement was, were not meant to be separate or scattered or unrelated. The individual laws were the details which arose out of a central, basic conviction. Professor Sandmel's reminder tells us a great deal of the nature and purpose of education; it is, in fact, at least partially, descriptive of a working system of law, and even in this company--since I should be particularly careful not to speak outside my field to experts--I dare to say it tells us a great deal of the vitality of a living faith. A country, a community--and each one of us--has to seek to understand and to give renewed vitality to the principles in which we believe, to find a priority in values, and to rework and to give immediacy to the order which gives reason and faith to our endeavors.

Our country, because of its belief and faith in education, which is a faith in the human mind and spirit, has always been a people of the book. It is a book which records not only words but the history which gives them meaning. It is a book of many books made harder to share but more rewarding because of our diversity. The books and the history are our possession, not because we view them with respect--which we often but not always do-- but because we know we can understand them only through the criticism of the trained but free mind. They are to be

understood not only for what they were--which is difficult enough--but also for what they mean today. Thus faith is directed to reason, but reason returns to the ultimate values and to the application of these values in accordance with that part of the Messianic tradition which seeks to accomplish the vision in our land and for our posterity.

The celebration of a Centennial, when an educational institution is vital, is always a cause for rejoicing. When that educational institution carries the message of the dignity of the human spirit and the values for which it strives, in action as well as speculation, the celebration carries a special meaning. And in this land of diversity, from this house to many houses, as Martin Buber once described it, will continue to come a message of endeavor and hope and critical understanding which will add to the community of peoples everywhere.