FIRST THINGS

LINCOLN'S ALMOST CHOSEN PEOPLE

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK DELIVERS THE 2020 ERASMUS LECTURE.

by
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In his wonderful book *Land of Lincoln*, Andrew Ferguson recalls meeting an immigrant family from Thailand who ran a restaurant in Chicago just a few blocks from the Orthodox Jewish neighborhood where I grew up. This couple, Oscar Esche and his wife, had developed a passionate devotion to Abraham Lincoln, and they explain to Ferguson how it began. Esche says, "My wife sees the license plate on all the cars after we move here to Chicago. 'Land of Lincoln,' they say. She wonders, 'Who is this Lincoln?' So she gets a book from a friend to read about Lincoln. . . . My wife reads the book, and we realize, we must go pay respects to this man. He is a very great man. He helps the poor. He tells everyone that they are equal. . . . This is very important."

Esche points to a small statue in his restaurant, a reproduction of the Lincoln memorial. "We bought a statue," he says, "to show our respect . . . and ever since that time we have statue, our business never go down. Always the business goes up. . . . Lincoln does this." Esche explains that in gratitude to Lincoln, every morning he sets out a sacrifice before the statue: "It's full meal—everything, entrée, dessert, appetizer. . . . We change the meal every day. . . . We serve him everything." At this point Mrs. Esche interrupts, correcting him in Thai. "Yes," Mr. Esche says. "Everything but no pork. . . . We do not want to be disrespectful." To a puzzled Ferguson, Esche clarifies his meaning: "He is *Abraham* Lincoln, yes? . . . Jewish people, they don't eat pork."

It is an amusing story: a couple thoughtfully offering kosher sacrifices to a "Jewish statue," overlooking that Judaism is not terribly excited about sacrifices to statues, and that Abraham Lincoln was not actually

Jewish. But Ferguson's tale is also entrancing, as it illustrates how large Lincoln's legacy looms, how it cuts across cultures, how it is bound up with the promise of the American idea. And though Abraham Lincoln may not have been Jewish, his legacy is indeed bound up with the children of Abraham. For the covenantal imagery of the Hebrew Bible, so essential to the birth of the American republic, found its fullest expression in Lincoln during the Civil War. He ultimately emerged as the theologian of the American idea.

In February of 1861, President-elect Abraham Lincoln, still in Springfield, Illinois, received a gift from a Jew named Abraham Kohn. A fierce abolitionist, Kohn was convinced, as his daughter later wrote, that Lincoln "was the destined Moses of the slaves and the saviour of his country." The gift was a framed painting of an American flag, and on the stripes of that flag, Kohn had inscribed Hebrew verses from Joshua: "As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee; . . . the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest." An apt Jewish gift to a president-elect; but one might not have expected it to speak to this *particular* president-elect.

For the man named Abraham had given no indication that he believed in the providential God of Abraham. He was known as an agnostic in his youth; his law partner, William Herndon, records that as late as 1854, Lincoln "asked me to erase the word God from a speech which I had written and read to him for criticism because my language indicated a personal God, whereas he insisted no such personality ever existed." One might therefore have expected Lincoln to ignore Kohn's gift; but it seemed to make a mark. Almost immediately after, Lincoln embarked on his journey to Washington. As his train pulled away, Lincoln, who had not intended to speak, burst forth: "I now leave," he said, "not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of the Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail." Historian Harold Holzer writes that these words were "clearly inspired by Kohn's present," and notes that Lincoln hung the gift in the White House.

It seems a sea change came over Lincoln, who sensed that as Joshua was bequeathed the enormous obligation of carrying on Moses's covenantal calling, so had providence placed upon *him* the terrifying task of preserving the Founding. As he journeyed, Lincoln began, like Kohn, to merge allusions to Israel and America. On February 21, 1861, he arrived in Trenton, New Jersey. Lincoln had grown up reading Weems's

biography of Washington, and he associated the site with the Christmas crossing of the Delaware. Asked to speak, Lincoln described what these tales had taught him as a child:

> I remember all the accounts there given of the battle fields and struggles for the liberties of the country, and none fixed themselves upon my imagination so deeply as the struggle here at Trenton, New Jersey. . . . I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for; that something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come; I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.

In these several sentences a complex form of American nationalism is enunciated. Lincoln's words bespeak a localized love of land and history. He is moved to stand where once Washington walked; he reverentially reflects that in Trenton he feels himself on sacred soil. And yet, as he considers the miraculous nature of the Founding, he joins his love with a recognition that America bears a mission not for itself alone—a mission greater than independence, which makes Americans an "almost chosen people."

In invoking biblical Israel, Lincoln implies that, as Abraham's destiny was linked to a land but formed first and foremost in covenantal dedication to a set of ideas, so something similar could be said of America. In this vein, my much-missed friend Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once reflected on his first visit to the U.S.:

> I was a student, travelling around America on a Greyhound bus. I arrived at dawn on a cloudless day, and for the next three hours I walked around the Mall, awed by the great monuments to Lincoln . . . Jefferson. What fascinated me was that each came with its own texts. The Lincoln Memorial had the Gettysburg Address on one side, and on the other, the Second Inaugural. And so with the others. I suddenly realised that American memorials are not just to be seen but also to be read. It's the exact opposite in London. Go to Parliament Square and you will see that the memorial to David Lloyd George has just

> three words: David Lloyd George. Benjamin Disraeli gets two: Benjamin and Disraeli. As for Churchill, he gets just one: Churchill.

When I heard this from Rabbi Sacks, I began to see the truth of his observation everywhere. I'm always struck how the souvenirs in Washington's Union Station have words on them: ties quoting the Declaration, the Bill of Rights. In Heathrow, no one is selling replicas of the Magna Carta. There are pictures of the Queen, of palaces. I own a coffee mug depicting Henry VIII and his six wives, and when you pour hot coffee in, the six wives disappear. But no words. Why the difference? England, Rabbi Sacks said,

> is a traditional society, where things are there because they're there. Whereas the United States is that rare phenomenon: a covenant society. Covenant societies represent conscious new beginnings. They are founded on an idea, dedicated to a proposition.

This is what Lincoln meant: America is a covenantal nation. But what is the doctrine at the heart of its covenant? If America is "almost chosen," what is it chosen for? Lincoln at Trenton did not say, so we must follow him further. Crossing the Delaware, he went on to Philadelphia, and on Washington's birthday visited Independence Hall. There, Lincoln reflected: "All my political warfare has been in favor of the teachings coming forth from that sacred hall. May my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if ever I prove false to those teachings." The biblically literate audience understood the allusion to the psalmist's avowal, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning." Jerusalem was the site of the ark of the covenant. The phrase "If I forget thee, O Philadelphia" may not have the same ring to it, but Independence Hall was America's sacred Temple; the Declaration's doctrine that "all men are created equal" was its covenant. The next day, Lincoln added:

> I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the Colonies from the motherland; but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but, I hope, to the world, for all future time.

The Declaration of Independence—the statement that all men are created equal—is the heart of the American covenant. But here a problem arises, a dissonance. The Declaration's concept of equality derives

from classical liberalism, by which I mean the Enlightenment focus on human liberty. The language originates in Locke's *Second Treatise* and concerns man in a state of nature. Of course, the concept of equality can be based on the Bible, but Jefferson is presenting us with Enlightenment social contract theory, proclaiming as a self-evident truth something about *the equality of the individual*, endowed with rights, such that government derives its legitimation from the consent of the governed. In contrast, a covenant, as H. Richard Niebuhr wrote, is the binding together in one body politic of persons who assume unlimited responsibility to and for each other under God. For Lincoln, counterintuitively, it is our covenantal dedication to the doctrine of individual equality that *connects* us; our belief in the infinite value of the individual binds us together and calls us to sacrifice for one another. Locke spoke of the equal rights of man; but a shared belief in equality *obligates* Americans on behalf of those heretofore unrecognized as equal.

Thus in 1862, immediately after the battle of Antietam, Lincoln took the longed-for Union victory as a providential sign obligating action. Navy Secretary Gideon Welles recorded how Lincoln reported to a stunned cabinet "that he had made a vow, a *covenant*, that if God gave us the victory in the approaching battle, he would consider it an indication of Divine will, and that it was his duty to move forward in the cause of emancipation." Lincoln believed that God "had decided this question in favor of the slaves."

Lincoln's religious imagery further flowered in the Gettysburg Address, though this fact is often missed. Garry Wills's book *Lincoln at Gettysburg* advances the thesis that Lincoln's remarks were inspired primarily by the rhetoric of classical Greece. The book is celebrated, it is famous, it won the Pulitzer—but Wills misses the true inspiration of the Address. The opening word of Lincoln's address—"fourscore"—evokes the King James Bible, sounding a scriptural note. As Adam Gopnik observes, it was actually Edward Everett, who preceded Lincoln at Gettysburg, who was classical in style; by contrast, "Lincoln had mastered the sound of the King James Bible so completely that he could recast abstract issues of constitutional law in biblical terms, making the proposition that Texas and New Hampshire should be forever bound by a single post office sound like something right out of Genesis."

The Address was a call to covenantal renewal, to rededication to the proposition that "all men are created equal," to a "new birth of freedom" sanctified by the sacramental blood of the soldiers who had died. Whereas a contract binds only contemporaneous parties, a covenant in the Bible spans generations,

linking, as Moses said, those here and those not here. Thus, Lincoln cites our covenantal connection to our fathers who brought forth a great nation. A covenant can do this because it invokes the Almighty, who is timeless, and so Lincoln, in delivering the speech, stressed that "under God" America would have a new birth of freedom, though that invocation had not been in the prepared text.

The Founding to which Lincoln refers occurred in 1776 ("fourscore and seven years ago"): The Declaration of Independence. He adorns that largely Lockean document with covenantal significance. In Lincoln's theology, Locke and the Bible, Enlightenment and covenantal language, are joined. Harry Jaffa reminds us that America was formed from the conjunction of two currents of conviction: Puritan religious tradition and the Enlightenment. Lincoln, he argues, achieved a synthesis, incorporating "the truths of the Declaration of Independence into a sacred and ritual canon, making them objects of faith as well as cognition." As I would put it, the DNA of the nation conceived in liberty can be seen as a double helix of biblical covenantal theology and Enlightenment thought.

Jaffa thought these two traditions were in a state of antagonism from the Founding, until they were melded by Lincoln's magnificent mind. I disagree. Gordon Wood has rightly written that in the rhetoric of the revolution "the traditional covenant theology of Puritanism combined with the political science of the eighteenth century." Some of the same Founders who invoked the language of liberalism simultaneously turned to the biblical concept of covenant. A committee formed on July 4 to design the Seal of the United States—made up of Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin—proposed an image of Moses leading Israel at the splitting of the sea. Jefferson himself suggested Israel in the wilderness, following a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. These are images of covenantal connection, not Lockean liberty. Tragically, the Congress passed over these excellent suggestions, but the committee's ideas indicate the ethos of the era.

It has been noted that one of the greatest miracles of the Founding is that the Declaration of Independence is the only document in history that a brilliant man composed and a committee then improved. The Continental Congress, while keeping Jefferson's Lockean concepts, joined them with biblical ones. Not only are our individual rights endowed by our Creator, but in advancing these universal truths, the Congress relied on the biblical God of history: "We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions . . ." The Declaration's signers bound themselves together in covenant

under God: “With a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”

America blended Lockean pronouncements with a covenantal culture. Tocqueville recognized the second element. He saw that the primary accomplishments in America came about through associations—civic and especially religious—that filled the gap between the individual and the state. The Madisonian vision of constitutional liberty is not intended to leave us atomistic individuals, but to provide scope for these diverse associations. As Rabbi Sacks has argued, the joining of social contract theory *and* covenantal thought in America allows, at its best, for both freedom and collective purpose, what Sacks calls integration without assimilation. In the double helix of the American idea, biblical covenant and American enlightenment, Lockean liberty and scriptural symbolism, are always intertwined. At times they are in tension, and at times they sustain each other.

Lincoln built on the past, but he added his own brilliant hue in his understanding of the devastation of the Civil War, and this set him apart from other nationalist theologians of his time. Historians have pointed out that whereas northern Protestant nationalism engaged in a triumphalist understanding of the Union victory, Lincoln eschewed arrogant certainty of divine favor and interpreted the war as a sign of collective punishment. This is the thesis of the greatest speech in American history, the Second Inaugural, which is less a speech than a sermon. For Lincoln, slavery had existed before the Founding, and in the Founding it was allowed to endure so that America could be born. As such, *all* America was complicit.

The Hebrew Bible tells us that for a covenantal nation, God *poked avon avot al banim, al bnei banim*—he remembers the sins of the father on the children and the children’s children. These words are revealed after the worship of the golden calf, a sin that immediately followed the Sinai covenant. Citing Psalms, Lincoln argues in a similar fashion that

> 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.”

We are covenantally joined, thus collectively punished. The same covenantal bond means that, in our sinfulness and imperfection, we are obligated toward one another: "with malice toward none, with charity for all." Lincoln's Second Inaugural remains the most biblical presidential address ever delivered; Frederick Douglass, who was there, reflected: "There seemed at the time to be in the man's soul the united souls of all the Hebrew prophets."

Humility pervades Lincoln's theology. He speaks of providence's profound presence, but also of the Almighty's unknowable omniscience. Lincoln's humility allows us to understand his mysterious modifier: *almost* chosen people. America's chosen status is not guaranteed. Biblical Israel *is* chosen; despite its many and manifold failings, its election is assured even when it sins. This was a point made by the great Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod when he met the Protestant theologian Karl Barth in Switzerland. Barth said to him, "You Jews have the promise but not the fulfillment; we Christians have both promise and fulfillment." Wyschogrod replied: "With human promises, one can have the promise but not the fulfillment. . . . But a promise of God is like money in the bank. If we have his promise, we have its fulfillment, and if we do not have the fulfillment we do not have the promise." There was a period of silence, and then Barth said, "You know, I never thought of it that way." Lincoln's point is that America has no guarantee, no money in the bank. Its covenant was self-initiated, and it can lose its exceptional nature, cease to be what it has been, become something else entirely. Without a rededication to the covenant of the United States, America as America will come to an end.

From Lincoln, we learn that there is no Declaration of Independence without Locke, but to reduce America to an experiment in Lockean liberalism is to ignore the intricacy of the American story, the double helix of the American idea. Today, this complexity is often missed. The American right finds itself in the midst of an intellectual battle over classical liberalism and the Founding. Much of this debate has lacked Lincoln's subtlety: "Locke is good!" or "Locke is terrible!"

This debate at times reminds me of certain wonderful videos on YouTube, a series of American-style political attack ads against Continental philosophers. A grainy picture of Kant appears on the screen, and an eerie voice intones: "Mr. Kant would have you believe that reality is purely noumenal. . . . Mr. Kant claims that a true deontological ethics is based on a universal maxim that can never consider specificities of circumstance. . . ." Then, the screen reads: "Immanuel Kant: Wrong on metaphysics, wrong on ethics,

wrong on aesthetics, wrong for America." And a new, heavily accented voice suddenly says: "I'm Friedrich Nietzsche, und I approve of zis message." To my mind, many of the recent descriptions of the Founding have been informed less by history than by reactions to our current politics. They would be enriched by reengaging Lincoln's thought.

Three recent, much-discussed books of political thought adopt only one strand of the double-helixed American idea. Though we can learn a great deal from these authors, each fails to fully engage with the vision of America that Lincoln bequeathed us.

George Will's best-selling *The Conservative Sensibility* contains a chapter titled "Welcoming Whirl: Conservatism Without Theism." Will has always been an atheist, but in this book he argues something new: "A secular understanding of cosmology and of humanity's place in the cosmos accords with a distinctively conservative sensibility." *Atheism*, he insists, is most conducive to conservatism. This is a stunning suggestion. In an interview he explains what he means. American conservativism, for Will, seeks to conserve the American Founding. With this, we can agree. But for Will, the Founding vision amounts to classical liberalism alone. Moreover, the Founders, he tells us, were, "to a remarkable stint, Deists," who believed in a God who resembled a "distant wealthy aunt in Australia." This is not at all what most of the Founders believed; references to providence pervade the writings of Adams, Washington, Hamilton, and others.

Most strikingly, Will then says: "There is a conservative sensibility that rejoices in the whirl of things, the unpredictable, unplanned nature of things. . . . Someone with a conservative sensibility loves the fact that events are out of control." A true conservative, for Will, can and perhaps even should accept that all is chance and nothing providential.

No doubt people without faith can live admirably moral lives. But it is undeniable that many of the Founders were horrified at the prospect of making atheism a governing philosophy. Adams, whom Will has previously called the most conservative of the Founders, inveighed against atheism in his reflections on the French revolution: "Is there a possibility that the government of nations may fall into the hands of men who teach the most disconsolate of all creeds, that men are but fireflies, and that this *all* is without a father? Is this the way to make man, as man, an object of respect? Or is it to make murder itself as indifferent as shooting a plover, and the extermination of the Rohilla nation as innocent as the swallowing of mites on a

morsel of cheese?" Adams saw "the whirl of things" as a recipe for inhumanity. Adams's insight, a truly conservative one, was echoed centuries later by Rabbi Sacks, who said that if the American Revolution succeeded where the French failed, it did so because "when human beings arrogate supreme power to themselves, politics loses its sole secure defense of freedom. . . . Societies that exile God lead to the eclipse of man."

Will's book is an over six-hundred-page love letter to Lincoln, which strangely never mentions the Second Inaugural. Will correctly argues that Lincoln's life's mission was to "reconnect the nation to the Founders." But Will does not acknowledge the role providence plays in Lincoln's vision. No one reading the Second Inaugural could imagine that Lincoln regarded God's role in the Civil War as like that of a distant wealthy aunt in Australia. One cannot separate faith in a personal God from Lincoln's understanding of America, and therefore from an understanding of America itself. Writing of Lincoln without attending to his religious rhetoric is akin to learning from Washington based on his career in the French and Indian War. It is instructive, but painfully incomplete. So too is the vision of the Founding that Will gives us.

Patrick Deneen's much-discussed *Why Liberalism Failed* is often seen as the opposite of Will's book. But they share a commonality: Both identify the Founding strictly with classical liberalism. For Deneen, the Founding so construed is the source of our problems today. Lockean thought, writes Deneen, conceives the individual "primarily [as] a free chooser, of place as of all relationships, institutions, and beliefs." This unencumbered individualism, according to Deneen, wrecks the very associations that Tocqueville admires and undoes the bonds to family, memory, religion, and community. In the end, atomized and alone, many turn to government to run their lives, and thus lose their liberty. As Deneen puts it, liberalism has failed because it has succeeded.

Deneen offers valuable insights into our current ills. But he wrongly sees the Founding as a purely Lockean event and defines liberalism as "a political philosophy conceived some 500 years ago, and put into effect at the birth of the United States nearly 250 years later." This view ignores the covenantal strand of the double helix of the American idea.

One of my favorite scenes in the musical *1776* has John Adams complaining to Franklin (the sentiment is recorded in an actual letter of Adams): "I won't be in the history books anyway, only you. Franklin did this

and Franklin did that and Franklin did some other damn thing. Franklin smote the ground and out sprang George Washington, fully grown and on his horse. Franklin then electrified him with his miraculous lightning rod and the three of them—Franklin, Washington, and the horse—conducted the entire revolution by themselves." There is a pause, then Franklin says to Adams, "I like it!"

Deneen's Founding is likewise one-sided. Eric Cohen writes:

> Deneen treats American society as if it is simply a Lockean (or Madisonian) abstraction. For a book that celebrates the importance of particular peoples—with histories and heroes, stories and songs, rituals and traditions—it is remarkable how little attention Deneen pays to the real American story. Yes, liberal ideas informed the American founding; and yes, modern American culture evinces many of the degradations of advanced liberal society that Deneen so ably observes. But . . . we are a nation that remembers (or could be reminded of) the cracked bell in Philadelphia emblazoned with a passage from Leviticus; Washington's heroic crossing of the Delaware . . . Lincoln's log-cabin origins and soul-shaping rhetoric; the huddled masses entering through Ellis Island.

Deneen's own admirable aim, Cohen notes, is to elevate our memories and attachments—but that means we must not reduce America to Locke.

Why Liberalism Failed contains no mention of Lincoln's understanding of the Founding. Yet Deneen wrote beautifully on the Second Inaugural in an earlier book, arguing that Lincoln's thought joins democratic equality to faith, so that we are equally endowed with rights and equally subordinate to God. Lincoln's high estimation of America, Deneen argues, did not mean that America was "superior" to other nations thanks to its greater approximation to God's will, but rather that American democracy presupposes that man is not, nor can become, God: "Even at his most patriotic and triumphal moments, Lincoln was cognizant that the 'superiority' of democracy rested most fundamentally upon the humble recognition of human imperfection." Lincoln, Deneen continues, acknowledges America's subordination to "the only greater institution," the rule of God: "American democracy is superior to the world's monarchies and tyrannies because of its basis in equality, and that basis in equality is based upon a shared understanding of our common subordination and the concomitant call for charity born of a humble acknowledgement of our

shared lack of self-sufficiency." In this exposition of Lincoln's views, Deneen exquisitely captures how the Declaration's concept of equality, joined with faith, overcomes atomistic individualism. Yet this Lincolnian vision of America is not to be found in *Why Liberalism Failed*.

Like Deneen, Yoram Hazony criticizes classical liberalism in *The Virtue of Nationalism*. Unlike Deneen, Hazony argues that the American Founding had almost nothing to do with Locke, and that the Lockean Declaration of Independence, which proclaims a universal truth, is not very important to the American story. Nationalists, Hazony writes, "do not and never will possess a single worldview that they seek to advance. They share no universal doctrine that they offer for the salvation of all mankind." But surely the Jewish people were chosen to offer certain doctrines that are meant for all the families of mankind, a covenantal calling. Lincoln considered America almost chosen because it, too, had a calling. For Hazony, the central lesson of biblical Israel is that independence from empire is a good in itself. We should therefore, he argues, not interfere in measures taken by other nations to define their own identities.

This is a surprising claim, as the Bible says that Israel was liberated from slavery in order to embrace an idea that transcended Israel—through which all the families of the earth would be blessed. Hazony's account seems different: "Israel is said to have rejoiced in its escape from the bondage of Egypt at the Red Sea, and it is this kind of freedom of the nation from Empire that is celebrated every year on independence days in Czechia, Greece, India, Ireland, Israel, Poland, Serbia, South Korea, Switzerland, the United States, and many other countries." But in the Bible, Israel sings at the Red Sea not of political independence but of its monotheistic message to humanity. The freed nation spoke of the Almighty: The Lord will reign forever and ever! I mean no offense when I say that ancient Israel did not achieve independence so that it could be like the Swiss, neutral to all goings on in the world. And neither did America.

In rejecting a larger mission for the United States, Hazony is clearly reacting to the war in Iraq. But one can reject the unrealistic goal of remaking the Middle East and still recognize that America is meant to be a beacon to the world. We ought to stand with Uighurs in China and Christians in Syria and North Korea, just as Reagan invoked both Jefferson and the Bible in standing with Natan Sharansky.

Hazony makes little mention of Lincoln. This is not surprising, for to revere Lincoln's legacy is to understand that though America is not *only* an idea, it does propose certain ideas to the world. One of the most affecting stories in Andrew Ferguson's *Land of Lincoln* concerns Henri Dubin, an elderly man from

Prague who in 2005 journeyed to Springfield, Illinois, and asked a hotel concierge by the name of Frank to take him to Lincoln's grave. When Frank asked why he was making this pilgrimage, Dubin rolled up his sleeve and showed Frank the numbers tattooed on his arm. Frank recounted to Ferguson:

> The man tells me his story. . . . He said he'd been in the concentration camp. . . . He knew about Abraham Lincoln and Washington from when he learned about them in school as a boy. When he was in the concentration camp . . . he didn't think he could go on anymore. And he said Mr. Lincoln came to him. Lincoln stood right in from of him, just like I'm standing here in front of you. And Mr. Lincoln said to him, "You never forget: All men are created equal. This is true for all men for all times. And these men who would do this thing to you, who put you here, they're no better than you. You are their equal, because all men are created equal. You keep remembering this, and you persevere, you'll be all right." And from that time onward, he knew he was going to persevere, and he vowed that if he ever got out of that concentration camp, he would come to Springfield to thank Mr. Lincoln, he was so grateful.

Frank took Henri to the grave, and back to the airport the next day. At the airline check-in, Henri began to cry and said, "Frank, God sent you to me to help me find Lincoln. You are an angel." Frank, who deals with tourists all the time in Springfield, had become skeptical about Lincoln. But now he realized, "Lincoln's bigger than Springfield. . . . He's all over the world. That gentleman was all alone over there . . . but Lincoln was with him. . . . That is some kind of power."

Frank is right. Lincoln has taught us to love our national identity, to sense the sanctity of Gettysburg, and to feel bound to our forefathers. But he looms larger than America. His uniqueness reflects America's uniqueness. There is a reason why Lincoln appeared to Henri, whereas no prisoner has described being visited by the ghost of Gladstone, the spirit of Salisbury, the phantasms of Napoleon or Bismarck. Hazony has written insightfully about the role the Bible played in America—which is why Lincoln's term, "almost chosen," resonates. Embracing nationalism—promoting the love and preservation of one's own culture and country—is important, but it does not require doing away with an American mission that extends beyond the borders of America.

Reading these descriptions of the Founding, written by men whom I admire, reminds me of the opening to Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, which describes a disaster wherein much of scientific knowledge is lost. Thereafter we use words like "neutrino" or "gravity," but they are shorn of their full meaning, fragments of the tradition now lost. Much the same can be said of the double helix that is the American tradition. The past two decades have been disruptive ones. Distressed by the course taken by our culture and politics, intellectuals invoke "the Founding" or "America" without capturing the fullness of our tradition.

I, too, am distraught by the course our culture has taken. All the more reason to return to Lincoln. He reminds us that our travails are not the fault of the Founding, but a reflection of the fact that we have lost the biblical strand of the double helix; we have ceased thinking covenantally, intergenerationally. Our culture's understanding of marriage and the family is unconnected to an Abrahamic approach, which binds one generation to the next. Today, biblical literacy is almost nonexistent among American elites, who are often hostile to the covenantal communities that helped bring America into being. Deneen's teacher, Wilson Carey McWilliams, helps us see what we have lost:

> Our older biblical language—the first grammar of American life—speaks of virtues and righteousness, qualities beyond choosing, bound up with the fundamental order of things. From that teaching, we learned to regard our rights as unalienable, not made by us nor subject to our surrendering. But we also were taught that community is a fact of life.

Restoring biblical language, McWilliams continues, is a "first step toward rearticulating the inner dialogue —the ambiguity and irony—that is the soul of the liberal republic."

A rediscovery of the Bible, the first grammar of American life, may require another Great Awakening. In the meantime, we can see some good signs. A large, multiethnic swath of Americans rejects the "Great Awokening." They dismiss the propaganda of the 1619 Project and see the American experiment as noble. They think our country imperfect but not irredeemable, and they believe they should be allowed to cultivate their own covenantal associations as they participate in the larger American dedication to equality. Put simply, in 2020 there remain Americans who implicitly join covenant and constitutionalism, Moses and Madison, faith and American exceptionalism. This capacious vision of America is to be found in Lincoln's theology. If I have not given up on America, it is because I owe gratitude to a country whose

Founding was bound up with Abrahamic teachings. I owe gratitude to an almost chosen people who gave the Chosen People a home unlike anywhere else in the Diaspora.

This past Thanksgiving morning, I awoke with still further reason for gratitude. Overnight, in the name of Madisonian liberties but also Tocquevellian recognition of the role faith communities play, a Supreme Court majority had decided that religious worship is essential for society—at least as much as buying whiskey or visiting an acupuncturist. Not everyone was as grateful as I was. Twitter was a malicious minefield of blue-checked media elites espousing anti-religious sentiment against Orthodox Jews and Catholics in general, and Justice Amy Coney Barrett in particular. But amid that outpouring of bile, one radiant digital gem stood out, a reminder of the biblical strand once prominent in American life. It was a Thanksgiving reflection from Daniella Greenbaum, daughter of dear friends of mine, describing her great-grandmother's emigration to America from Berlin in 1937.

This woman's birth name was Sara, and upon her arrival at Ellis Island, the immigration official asked Sara about a seeming contradiction in her papers: Some listed her name as "Sara," others as "Zelma." She explained that her birth name had been Sara, a biblical name, matriarch of our people, but her German classmates had mocked her because of its Jewishness, and the teacher, rather than protect her from these bullies, had encouraged her parents to give her a "proper German name." And so, Sara explained, that is how she became "Zelma." The American immigration official looked at her and said: "This is America. Sara is a beautiful name. Our president's mother's name is Sara. Welcome home."

To believe in America, to have faith in America, and to be a person of faith in America, is to hope that even as we have lost the biblical grammar of liberty, nevertheless somewhere the covenantal lessons and legacy of Abraham and Sarah still live. And if we are to rediscover these ideas, we will find them in the vision of a man named Abraham, who may not have been Jewish, but who incorporated the imagery of the children of Abraham in his vision of America. Let us dedicate ourselves that the theology of America to which Lincoln devoted his life, and for which he gave his life, does not soon perish from the earth.

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