



# Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

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## *From Plymouth to Pennsylvania Avenue: America and the Hebrew Bible.*

### America, Born of the Hebrew Bible

BY LIEL LEIBOVITZ

*This book review of the Straus Center's volume Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: The Hebrew Bible in the United States originally appeared in Tablet Magazine at [tabletmag.com](http://tabletmag.com) and is reprinted with permission.*

**America, G.K. Chesterton once observed, was “a nation with the soul of a church.”** Make that a shul: *As Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land* argues, “the American Republic was born to the music of the Hebrew Bible.”

Its editors—Rabbi Meir Y. Soloveichik, Matthew Holbreich, Jonathan Silver, and Stuart W. Halpern, of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University—make their case, in the fine tradition of our wise forefathers, by laying before us scroll after scroll of source material, showing us the Biblical thread that binds everything from the Mayflower Compact to Lincoln’s second inaugural address.

Clarified by the editors’ illuminating introductions, these historical documents make a strong case for just how firmly our republic was always rooted in the fertile theological soil of the Hebrew bible. Rather than the transactional spirit of John Locke, who they preceded, the pilgrims were moved by a deeper, wilder spirit. Here, we see them speaking not of social contracts—a shaky base, that, for something as unearthly as a nation—but of covenants, the newcomers to America understanding themselves to be the latest in a human chain that began with Noah and Abraham and that owes its existence to its Creator and His will.

Thus thunders John Winthrop, in 1630, that “we are entered into covenant with Him for this work... The Lord will be our

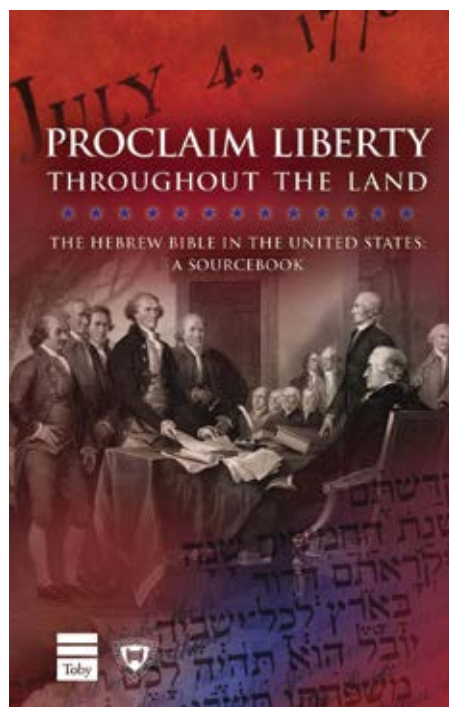
God and delight in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness, and truth than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when He shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations, the Lord make it like that of New England.” It’s a model of a covenantal political community taken straight from the prophet Micah, who reminded us that “it hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.”

Covenant, however, is just one part of the theological trinity that America borrowed from the Jews at the moment of its creation; the other two elements are exodus and chosenness. We see the former at play on that most pregnant July 4th, the one in 1776, when, contemplating the newborn nation’s seal, Thomas Jefferson proposes “The Children of Israel in the Wilderness, led by a Cloud by day, and Pillar of Fire by night,” and Benjamin Franklin, not to be outdone, counters by proposing Moses at the Red Sea, raising his staff. The journey from the house of bondage to the land of liberty spoke loudly to the Founders, who saw in Judaism’s foundational story something stronger than mere metaphor. The same is true of closeness: Winthrop, Cotton Mather said of his Puritan elder, had carried “a colony of chosen people into an American wilderness.”

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This idea—that Americans, like the Israelites of old, have been singled out by God and instructed to erect a city on a hill that would shine its light unto the nations—is far from a historical side note. It is, arguably, the engine that drove America to grow from a string of struggling colonies to something much grander and more consequential. The language of divine election may sound too wild for us these days, too rich with perils and prejudice; but even if we no longer wrestle with this idea as our predecessors once had, this idea still, behind our backs, wrestles with us.

Which, again, makes *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land* such a treasure. Far from a mere compendium of ancient curiosities, it could—and should—be read as a primer on how Americans think, and have always thought, about community and about government, about justice and about faith and about all other topics that move the hearts of women and men. It's only right, then, that the book ends with Lincoln, a president whose understanding of America's soul was, perhaps, peerlessly layered. "I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those



men struggled for," he said in an address to the New Jersey State Senate in 1861, "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."

Seven score and eighteen years later, we remain God's almost chosen people. Now, at least, we've a marvelous book to help us understand our promises and predicaments, both bequeathed to us by the glory of the Hebrew Bible.

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## Esther in the White House: The Scroll of Esther and Surviving Palace Intrigue at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue

BY DR. TEVI TROY

*The following excerpt, which first appeared in the Algemeiner Journal in November 2020, is from Dr. Troy's chapter in the Straus Center's new volume Esther in America, edited by Rabbi Dr. Stu Halpern.*

The story of Queen Esther has a tremendous cultural resonance. We can see this resonance even today, more than 2,000 years after the events depicted in the Book of Esther, as the Queen Esther comparison is a frequent motif for political commentators assessing presidential politics.

These comparisons go across the political aisle and even across the gender divide. In the Donald Trump presidency, commentators debated Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's suggestion that Trump was a modern Queen Esther, sent to save today's Jewish

people from destruction. As Secretary Pompeo mused, "Could it be that President Trump right now has been sort of raised for such a time as this, just like Queen Esther, to help save the Jewish people from the Iranian menace?"

Pompeo is far from the only one to make such a comparison to a modern political figure. A *New York* magazine profile reported that first daughter Ivanka Trump was nicknamed "Queen Esther" at her synagogue for her ability to steer the ruler in directions helpful to the Jewish people. In an earlier adminis-

tration, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu invoked the Esther story by giving President Barack Obama a copy of the Book of Esther as a gift—as an unobvious reminder that a previous Persian empire had also tried to destroy the Jews. On the campaign trail in 2008, a voter told former first lady and presidential aspirant Hillary Clinton that Queen Esther reminded him of Hillary, prompting Mrs. Clinton to share the tidbit that the Esther story was one of her favorite biblical stories. In 1999, when the Jewish intern Monica Lewinsky was revealed to have been having an affair with President Bill Clinton, the *JTA* reported that some referred to her as a “modern-day Queen Esther.” Another interesting reaction to the Lewinsky scandal came from future Vice President Mike Pence, then a political pundit, who suggested that Clinton’s activities reminded him that “in the Bible story of Esther we are told of a king who was charged to put right his own household because there would be ‘no end of disrespect and discord’ among the families of the kingdom if he failed to do so.”

These comparisons are creative and point to Esther’s continuing hold on our imagination. Still, they do not capture the true essence of the Esther story. Esther was a young woman brought into the fractious environment of the Persian king who had to both survive and get her way with no legal authority beyond a marital relationship to the king. In this, the Esther story is the story of the modern First Lady. The First Lady has no independent power. She is there by virtue of her spouse’s election as president. As Lady Bird Johnson observed of the role, “The First Lady is, and always has been, an unpaid public servant elected by one person, her husband.” In order to be successful, the First Lady must navigate an often-treacherous White House environment with her wiles, her wisdom, and—she hopes—the help of one very powerful ally in the form of the president.



Esther managed to survive and succeed in the court of King Ahasuerus in an impressive way. She did so even though she was burdened by the additional handicap of being Jewish at a time when, prompted by the king’s top adviser Haman, there was a plan to annihilate the Jews. When her cousin and mentor Mordechai first notifies her that the Jews are threatened and she needs to intervene, she explains to him the very real danger she faces. In Esther 4:11, she tells Mordechai via an intermediary that “whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law for him, that he be put to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden scepter, that he may live; but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.” Mordechai recognizes the danger, but does not accept her excuse, famously telling her in 4:14 that

“who knoweth whether thou art not come to royal estate for such a time as this?”

Today, we are also getting closer to the era when the Esther in the White House might be not a woman but a man, something that almost happened with former President Bill Clinton in 2016. Regardless of gender, future First Ladies—and First Husbands—will continue to face challenges in the form of staff tensions for as long as the Republic lasts. Whatever those challenges, presidential spouses would be wise to look to the eternal lessons of Queen Esther for guidance on how to navigate the politics of being spouse to the most powerful person in the country.

*Tevi Troy is a best-selling presidential historian and a former senior government official. His latest book is Fight House: Rivalries in the White House, from Truman to Trump.*

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