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Parashat Korach
Juneteenth

What to a Jew is the Nineteenth of June?

My first Juneteenth celebration was six years ago. Like many white Americans, I never heard about the holiday as a kid. After all, in Virginia, even Martin Luther King's birthday was celebrated alongside Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee in the combined Lee-Jackson-King Day. Not much room to celebrate the end of slavery.

But 2020 was a summer appropriately focused on the Movement for Black Lives. My quiet block in northeast Oak Park would come to host a giant Black Lives Matter mural, and our COVID-cautious walks through our neighborhood reinforced my community's embrace of antiracist activism.



That summer, our family learned about the Juneteenth tradition of eating red foods, and we celebrated the holiday with sprinklers in the front yard and strawberry pop on the porch.



The next year, the first of Joe Biden's presidency, Juneteenth became a national holiday, prompting reflection on how we might mark the day not only as individual families but as national and local communities as well.

And so we might ask: What to a Jew is the Nineteenth of June?

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Juneteenth is dedicated distinctly to African American history. While Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, it took over two years for that message of freedom to reach the last enslaved Americans. On June 19, 1865, Union General Gordon Granger issued an order in Galveston, Texas declaring: "...all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves..."¹ This occasion has been celebrated ever since as an alternative Independence Day for Black Americans. In fact, the first Congressional attempt to establish Juneteenth as a federal holiday referred to it as Juneteenth Independence Day, which remains one of its official names.²

This is because African Americans rightly have a tense history with July 4. The Declaration of Independence famously declared "unalienable rights" for all people even while slavery was legal in every one of the 13 seceding colonies. Though Thomas Jefferson's first draft condemned slavery, inveighing against King George's "cruel war against human nature itself,"³ this paragraph was deleted in favor of compromise with the slaveholding south.

¹ <https://www.archives.gov/news/articles/juneteenth-original-document>

² https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R44865/R44865.31.pdf

³ <https://jeffersonpapers.princeton.edu/declaration-of-independence/original-rough-draught/>

he has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain, determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold. he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this ~~determining to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold:~~ execrable commerce; and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms against us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by ~~committing~~ travailing the same upon whom he also obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.

Having been excluded from the promise of American liberty, African Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries fought to expose American hypocrisy while honoring its national value of freedom. The prime example of this struggle was Frederick Douglass, who delivered in 1852 his famous address, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” In it, Douglass emphasized

your fathers, the fathers of this republic, [who] did, most deliberately, under the inspiration of a glorious patriotism, and with a sublime faith in the great principles of justice and freedom, lay deep the corner-stone of the national superstructure, which has risen and still rises in grandeur around you. ...

Friends and citizens, I need not enter further into the causes which led to this anniversary. Many of you understand them better than I do. ... They have all been taught in your common schools, narrated at your firesides, unfolded from your pulpits, and thundered from your legislative halls, and are as familiar to you as household words. They form the staple of your national poetry and eloquence.

I leave, therefore, the great deeds of your fathers to other gentlemen whose claim to have been regularly descended will be less likely to be disputed than mine!⁴

Laying bare the chasm between his white audience and the enslaved African Americans unaddressed by the Declaration of Independence, he provocatively asked, “What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration

⁴ <https://loveman.sdsu.edu/docs/1852FrederickDouglass.pdf>

of Independence, extended to us?"⁵ The short answer was no. But they should be. Frederick Douglass, like countless other activists and advocates throughout the centuries, believed in the American dream. It just needs to be extended to all who call this country home.

In this context, Juneteenth as an African American Independence Day makes sense. It sidesteps the complications of the Declaration of Independence and celebrates a major victory in the centuries-long campaign for Black Americans' equal rights. So I ask again: If Juneteenth is deeply and significantly about African American history and culture, then what is this holiday to white Jews like me?

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One place to start is the experiences of African American Jews. Jews of Color, including Black Jews, enrich all communities through their intersectional identities and their experiences as doubly-marginalized people. Resources such as the Juneteenth Hagaddah⁶ provide keen insight into the role of Juneteenth in today's Jewish landscape. As Rabbi Sandra Lawson writes:

Today the American Jewish community is more racially and ethnically diverse than any other time in history and reflecting the makeup of the larger American society. We are also at a time in our history where black people and white people are in many ways more segregated. ... There is still work to be done. Juneteenth is an important reminder to all of us of why we fight: The struggle for freedom for all must continue because until we are all free, none of us is free.⁷

I appreciate Rabbi Lawson's commitment to expanding freedom for all. I also appreciate that she speaks from her distinct perspective as a Black, queer, woman military veteran. Her experience is meaningful for us all not because it is universally relatable but rather because it is precious and unique.

Indeed, this is a frame through which to view Juneteenth as a whole. We might be tempted to think of Independence Day as the holiday for "everyone" while Juneteenth is just the holiday for African Americans. Instead, we should recognize the value and significance to all of the particular history of African Americans.

This approach cuts across the grain of the common understanding of the so-called "Melting Pot." Coined in Israel Zangwill's play of the same name, the term "melting pot" is often understood as a metaphor for American society. Each cultural

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ See: <https://uscj.org/a-conservative-juneteenth-haggadah/>

⁷ <https://forward.com/opinion/426055/juneteenth-offers-us-a-day-for-celebration-reflection-and-healing/>

group adds its flavor to the gestalt the way each ingredient of a stew affects its overall taste. The result is a rich, vibrant dish that can be enjoyed by all with a consistent flavor throughout, drawn from its component parts.

In contrast to the “melting pot,” the American Jewish scholar Horace Kallen offered a different view of American society. He believed America was a menagerie of cultures, not a blend. He wrote in his 1916 essay “The Meaning of Americanism”:

Democracy involves, not the elimination of differences, but the perfection and conservation of differences. It aims, through Union, not at uniformity, but at variety, at a one out of many, as the dollars say in Latin, and a many in one. It involves a give and take between radically different types, and a mutual respect and mutual cooperation based on mutual understanding.⁸

In other words, we celebrate difference and honor the integrity of distinct voices and views. Instead of a melting pot, Kallen suggests thinking of America as an orchestra where “the harmony and dissonances and discords of [all ethnic groups] make the symphony of civilization.”⁹

In this way, we accept as part of our American story, and our Jewish story, the stories of others with whom we are in common community. Every voice is heard and every group has a place. Juneteenth can be a model of this kind of multicultural acceptance, an opportunity to celebrate distinctiveness without appropriation and to see ourselves in the eyes of the other. African American history is *our* history, whether or not we are Black, and celebrating Juneteenth is a national tradition available to us all.

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And how fitting that our neighbors, Michelle and Barack Obama, chose Juneteenth as the opening day of the Obama Presidential Center. For many, Obama’s presidency symbolized precisely this dynamic between the unique, minority perspective and the grand, all-encompassing national narrative. So in honor of this local historic occasion, and in commemoration of Juneteenth as a holiday shared by us all, I’d like to give the last words to Barack Obama. They are etched into the side of the Presidential Center – spoken first in a speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the marches from Selma to Montgomery – and they represent the hopeful transcendence of the fiercest injustices of the past, turning Frederick Douglass’s painful and distancing “you” into a powerful and transformative “we.”

⁸ <https://pluralism.org/the-right-to-be-different>

⁹ “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot,” *The Nation* 100, no. 2590 (18-25 February 1915), 220. *Ibid.*

You are America. Unconstrained by habit and convention. Unencumbered by what is, ready to seize what ought to be. For everywhere in this country, there are first steps to be taken, there is new ground to cover, there are more bridges to be crossed. America is not the project of any one person. The single most powerful word in our democracy is the word 'We.' 'We The People.' 'We Shall Overcome.' 'Yes We Can.' That word is owned by no one. It belongs to everyone. Oh, what a glorious task we are given to continually try to improve this great nation of ours.¹⁰

¹⁰ <https://www.obama.org/stories/exterior/>