

# Questions for *What America Owes the Jews, What Jews Owe America*

based on speeches at a conference held in May 2015

*I hope to make our discussion productive as possible and so I've developed questions about the essays. I'm sending them out in advance so we can have time to think about them. In the tradition of The Great Books, they attempt to have us look closely at the text.*

*As we discuss each essay, I'd like to consider this central question: **What does each author have to say (or not have to say) about the title of the book -- What does America owe the Jews, what do Jews owe America? How apt is the title for this collection of essays?***

*Obviously, there are too many questions for us to discuss them all. Please find the ones that particularly interest you and let me know which they are so we can be sure to address them. If you have developed any questions that arose from your reading, please do share them with the group.*

## **1) Meir Soloveichik, "Adams, Jefferson, and the Jews"**

Soloveichik poses this question at the beginning of the essay: To what extent was the American Revolution an achievement of Judaism? How does the essay answer that question?

Is America a nation founded under the inspiration of the Jewish God or the inspiration of human reasoning, which some might call the Greek ideal? Another way to ask that question might be this: In the Declaration of Independence, was Jefferson more true to the Jewish Bible or to a human-made government?

At the end of the essay Meir Soloveichik says, "Facing us is the question of whether religious communities can remain true to their traditions, or whether our resurgent secular culture will succeed in forcibly imposing its own values on those communities. That question is unresolved, but, at least for the moment, there are places within the United States that remain John Adams's America, and I for one, thank God for that." According to Soloveichik, what is "John Adams's America"? How does it differ from Jefferson's? What reasons might Soloveichik have for feeling grateful for that?

Is it possible for religious communities to remain true to their traditions without isolating themselves?

**Does Soloveichik answer our central question?**

## 2) Rick Richman, “Zionism and Americanism: What Brandeis Saw and Why It Matters”

What specifically do you think Brandeis was referring to when he said that “the Jewish spirit . . . is essentially modern and essentially American”? How would a Jewish homeland further American ideals? Brandeis said, “To be good Americans, we must be better Jews, and to be better Jews, we must become Zionists.” What implications, if any, would that have for the vast majority of Americans who are not Jews? How were they to be “good Americans”?

What is Richman referring to when he says that the story of Brandeis’ emergence as a proponent for the establishment of Israel “commands our special attention today because of its relevance to the current controversies surrounding both Zionism and Americanism more than a century after Brandeis’s landmark speech”?

Do you agree with Richman that Brandeis would more likely be concerned, in the sense of troubled, about contemporary liberal thought? Is the idea of a “rigid Torah of liberalism” new to you? If so, how do you feel about it?

[Helpful links to understand “Torah of Liberalism”: <https://wng.org/articles/torah-of-liberalism-1617334606>; [Challenging the Torah of Liberalism \(americanthinker.com\)](https://www.americanthinker.com/article/2017/07/challenging-the-torah-of-liberalism)]

Do you agree with Richman that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Zionism and Americanism formed “the preeminent alliance of home and freedom in the world”?

Brandeis’ personal journey and Jewish education as an adult took him from being totally unidentified with Judaism and Zionism to becoming a dedicated proponent of the Jewish people and Zionism. Could it be that today’s Jewish critics of Israel are similar to Brandeis in his early days and would change, were they educated?

**Does Richman address our central question?**

### 3) Dara Horn: “Toward a new American Jewish Language”

Here are a few examples of terms or concepts in English that originate in Jewish literature and history: “skin of my teeth” (Psalm 107: 23-27); “Eat, drink, and be merry” (Ecclesiastes); altar; antediluvian; atonement. Can you give others?

According to Dara Horn, what makes Jewish literature “Jewish”? How do you understand her “archaeology of belief”?

Horn poses the question of whether there can be an American Jewish language for now and the future since the former archaeologies refer to the past, a vanished world. What do you understand her answer to be?

In her final paragraph, Horn says, “So here, at last, is the real beauty and power and possibility of a new American Jewish language, the gift that I have inherited from both American and Jewish literature: I never need to convince anyone that I am an American writer, and I never need to deny that I am a Jewish writer -- because all of my readers, no matter who they are, know the terms of the contract.” What are the “terms of the contract”?

To paraphrase Horn, grasping Jewish resonance from literature produced by Jews depends on our common legacy and shared linguistic archaeology. Is that different from reading the literature produced by any distinctive culture, or indeed from a literature produced in a particular time like Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets?

**Does Horn answer our central question?**

### 4) Norman Podhoretz, “What Do Jews Owe America?”

According to Podhoretz, what did America give the Jews that they hadn’t had previously, constituting in his mind, an enormous debt? In other words, how does Podhoretz explain the exceptionality of America as a golden land for the Jews? What was “the gold”?

According to Podhoretz, why were the Puritans so important to life for Jews in this country? Was this a new idea to you? What is the consequence of having other parts of the country not be founded by the Puritans?

Do you agree with Podhoretz that American Jews have been “in default” in repaying the spiritual debt to America which gave them so much?

**What is Podhoretz’s answer to our central question?**

5) **Jonathan Sarna in conversation with Meir Soloveichik: “Abraham Lincoln and the Jews”**

According to Sarna, what do Jews see in Lincoln that resonates with them so deeply?

What were some of the pieces of information in this essay that you found particularly interesting or surprising?

According to Sarna, what is the deep significance of Lincoln and, in particular, the Second Inaugural?

I found this essay rather straight-forward. Did it raise any questions for you?

**Does Sarna address our central question?**

6) **Jeffrey S. Gurock: “The Price of Ownership for America’s Jews”**

What were the most significant steps that led to American Jews being accepted as equal participants in American life?

According to Gurock, what was the “price of ownership” for full participation and acceptance in American society?

How do you feel about the “price” American Jews have paid? How do your children feel about it?

Do you find a connection between this essay and Soloveichik’s (last question under Soloveichik)?

What do you see as the prospect for Jewish continuity?

**Does Gurock address our central question?**

7) **Tevi Troy: “Jewish Artists and the American Way”**

How does Troy account for the great success of American Jewish artists and entertainers?

**Does Troy answer our central question?**

*Looking forward to a lively discussion!*

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