



**Remarks by Rabbi Meir Soloveichik**

**2026 Bradley Prize Winner**

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AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY:

Sitting in Newark airport, I received a call from Rick Graber informing me that I had been awarded the Bradley Prize. Rick had, in that moment, achieved a miracle: he had rendered a rabbi speechless. Tonight, Rick has charged me with seeking something even more miraculous: a rabbi speaking for only ten minutes. There's an old anecdote about a rabbi giving a lengthy sermon, and at long last he looks, apologizes to the synagogue for his lack of brevity, explaining that he does not have a watch. And someone yells out, "there's a calendar behind you!"

Facing this daunting task, I seek inspiration from the calendar.

This year we mark the 250th anniversary of our Founding, but also, on the same day, the bicentennial of July 4, 1826. That morning, John Adams lay on his deathbed. As historian David McCullough describes, told it was the Fourth, Adams answered, "it is a great day. It is a good day." He lay peacefully for hours, as a thunderstorm drenched Quincy Massachusetts. Then, he stirred and whispered three words: "Thomas Jefferson survives."

Jefferson, in truth, had died earlier that day, two founders passing exactly fifty years after the anniversary of Independence. Adams apparently was wrong when he asserted, in his dying breath, that Thomas Jefferson survives.

Or was he? This evening is the anniversary, in the Hebrew calendar, of the day in 1967 that Jews first returned to the ancient city of Jerusalem, after years of being banned from it. Millennia

before, in the same city, King David lay at death's door, with no designated heir. One son, Adonijah, had claimed the throne, but he had no sense of David's dream, of what Jerusalem could become. As described in the book of Kings, David's wife Bathsheba tells her husband that he is about to die, and asks him to guarantee that their son Solomon will succeed him: Solomon, who would build the Temple, making Jerusalem forever a dwelling place of the divine. When David agrees, Bathsheba exultantly exclaims, "May King David live forever!"

The story is ostensibly odd; having assured David that his death was imminent, Bathsheba suddenly asserts that he will forever live. But her reference is to David's posterity; she is saying that now David's vision of Jerusalem will live on - and therefore so will he. For Jews, and so many others, to still bestow love upon Jerusalem, still recite Psalms about Jerusalem, still sense the presence of God in Jerusalem, is to say that that King David lives. Bathsheba's point is that individuals can transcend death if the perpetuation of their most cherished beliefs is safeguarded by the next generation.

Thus, Adams uttered no untruth. The Founders do survive, so long as the vision of the Founding is embraced by posterity. I am not the first rabbi to be honored with the Bradley Prize; that distinction goes to my very much missed friend Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. But there is another accolade I can claim. In the audience tonight is my wife, our children, my parents, and also our recently-born granddaughter, which means that I am the first Bradley Prize winner to be represented by four generations at this ceremony. And this is so meaningful because for Layaliza and myself, ensuring that the story of America is perpetuated to the next generation is central to our parenting. We have taken our children to almost every American site of significance: Independence Hall, Valley Forge, Ticonderoga, Antietam, Bull Run, Gettysburg. In fact, one of our children and I took a Segway tour of Gettysburg, and I crashed into a tree branch, flew off, and skinned my arm. Now I can say I was injured at Gettysburg; the world will little remember what I said there, but it can never forget what I did there.

In truth, what is important for Layaliza and myself is that our children never forget what was done there for America; because we understand as Jews the bond between education, transmission, and freedom. On the eve of the Exodus, Moses spoke to the Israelites about what would become the Passover Seder, in which yearly the tale of the redemption from Egypt is retold. "On this day tell your son, I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt". Moses, Rabbi Sacks reflected, "fixed his vision not on the immediate but on the distant future, and not on adults but children. In so doing he was making a fundamental point. It may be hard to escape from tyranny, but it is harder still to build and sustain a free society."

Every year, on the anniversary of the Exodus, Jews sit around the table with our children speaking of history and posterity. "In every generation," we read to them from the liturgy, "there are those that rise up against us to destroy us, and God saves us from their hands." These

words have taken on an eerie significance in our own time. But we also recite the following: “in every generation, you must see yourself as if you experienced the Exodus.” Or as Rabbi Sacks put it in his Bradley Prize address, we retell and relive the story because memory is the guardian of liberty.

In this message there is also a warning; the bond between generations is contingent, it is not guaranteed. I was struck, several months ago, by an announcement made by Royal Bank of Britain that it was removing from British banknotes the images of the great figures of the country’s past: Churchill, Jane Austen, JMW Turner. Why? Is Churchill being replaced by Palmerston, Austen by George Elliot, Turner by Constable? No. Churchill and Austen are making way for wildlife, for squirrels and hedgehogs. A representative of the Bank called the change “overdue.” This is not because everyone knows Churchill’s story; my friend Andrew Roberts concludes his biography of Churchill by noting how in a survey of 3000 British teenagers, 20 percent believed Churchill was a fictional character, and 58 percent thought Sherlock Holmes was real. (Andrew also informs me that a similar amount believed the American Revolution was won by Denzell Washington.). Churchill famously reflected that history would be kind to him for he would write it; but history will only be kind to the heroes of the past if history is transmuted into memory. Churchill led the fight for freedom for the West; but freedom can only be preserved if the future is bound to the past.

John Adams understood this. If you visit Jefferson’s grave, you will see the epitaph he composed for himself: “Here Was Buried THOMAS JEFFERSON Author of the Declaration of Independence, Of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, And Father of the University of Virginia.” Jefferson roots his immortality not in the power of the presidency but the endurance of his ideas. Adams, meanwhile, inscribed a stone on his family burial plot with these words: “This stone and several others have been placed in this yard by a great, great grandson from a veneration of the piety, humility, simplicity, prudence, frugality, industry and perseverance of his ancestors in hopes of recommending an affirmation of their virtues to their posterity.” Adams, wrote McCullough, “had chosen to say nothing of his own attainments, but rather to place himself as part of a continuum, and to evoke those qualities of character that he had been raised on and that he had strived for so long to uphold.”

Both epitaphs must be taken in tandem. The vision of equality and liberty at the heart of Jefferson’s declaration will only endure if, like Adams, we see ourselves as part of a continuum and evoke to our children the qualities of those who have preceded us. The former cannot be attained without the latter, especially in our moment, when the spirit of the Founding is endangered. Endangered by an ahistorical assault on the Founding; and then, there is the specter of festering anti-Semitism, a poisonous sentiment that has destroyed so many societies in the past, and which is so contrary to the story of America itself. But the story of America is

ever about hope and renewal; it is therefore fitting that as Adams uttered his last words suddenly, in the words of his daughter, “at the moment, as if to render the scene more and fully impressive, a clap of thunder shook the house, and a few moments after the weary spirit was at rest, a splendid rainbow arched immediately over the heavens... when the whole Country was celebrating their great-Jubilee, the spirit of the Patriot ascended to God who gave it.”

America’s 250th anniversary is a summons to renewal, to recommending the virtues of our past to our posterity. Thus, in this year of the American semiquincentennial, I am so moved to receive the Bradley prize: not only because Bradley seeks to preserve the exceptional nature of America; but also it has done so much to sustain the future of education in America about America. The former depends on the latter. Memory is indeed the guardian of liberty.

Crashing my Segway at Gettysburg may have been injurious, to spirit more than body, but the Soloveichik family’s visits there were sublime. Our favorite site on the battlefield was Little Round Top, the hill on which the entire battle turned. Decades after the war, the hero of that moment, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, visited that spot, and spoke of those, like the Soloveichiks, that would visit in the future. He said:

*In great deeds, something abides. On great fields, something stays. Forms change and pass; bodies disappear; but spirits linger, to consecrate ground for the vision-place of souls. And reverent men and women from afar, and generations that know us not and that we know not of, heart-drawn to see where and by whom great things were suffered and done for them, shall come to this deathless field, to ponder and dream; and lo! the shadow of a mighty presence shall wrap them in its bosom, and the power of the vision pass into their souls.*

That is indeed what occurs, but only if we are willing to ensure that the tales of these deeds are cherished by our children. Only then will we be worthy of the moment with which the calendar presents us this Fourth of July; only then can we truly say that Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration survives - and that John Adams lives as well. Thank you so much.