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# American Brethren: Hebrews and Puritans

[Jim Sleeper](http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/users/jim-sleeper)

For most of us, the Old Testament names given to scores of American towns (Canaan, Bethlehem, Sharon, Lebanon, even Jerusalem) and the Hebrew phrases on the seals of Yale, Dartmouth, and Columbia are the only visible remnants of the Puritans’ all but forgotten attempt to Hebraize their Calvinist Christianity in the seventeenth century. The Puritans lost their juridical and ecclesiastical grip on the country centuries ago; and most American Jews, legatees though they are of the Hebrew covenant, arrived here too late (and often too lapsed) to seed in any notably religious way the republican society they have otherwise so vigorously engaged.

Yet now is surely a moment to take a closer look at the American republic’s Hebrew and Christian origins, and not only because eruptions in the third Abrahamic religion, Islam, have given us a new reason to revisit our own. The political idioms of George W. Bush and his neoconservative allies, on the one hand, and Barack Obama and custodians of the civil rights movement, on the other, are both staked in Hebraic and Puritan sub-soils that have nourished distinctively American dimensions in civic-republican life: think of early-nineteenth-century Whig and Methodist linkages of public works to civil society’s “internal,” spiritual, and moral improvements. Recall Abraham Lincoln’s prosecution of the Civil War in what he came to see as Calvinist terms. Then there are the social gospel crusaders for economic justice later in that century and, in the twentieth, the latter-day puritan Woodrow Wilson’s “War to End All Wars.” And there are also, on the one hand, the McCarthyite witch hunts of “un-American” activists and, on the other hand, the almost religious enthusiasm in many liberals’ (and many others’) responses to Barack Obama’s biblically resonant speeches during the 2008 campaign.

Puritanism was, after all, the chief framer and arbiter of a New England way of life that spread westward across the northern tier of the United States. Even its infamous repressions and hypocrisies provoked a republicanism that was gestating within Puritanism itself, much as the conceits of ancient Hebrew kings and priests had prompted prophecies and movements that renewed the Jewish covenant. The American roots of this dialectic draw from Hebraic wellsprings in Puritanism that still nourish Americans’ enduring sense of their own exceptionalism and missionary obligations, as well as of their commitment to peaceful democracy against antinomian, materialist, and authoritarian temptations.

If much of our civic balance seems up for grabs these days, all the more reason to resurface some submerged continuities between the Puritan planters and ourselves, employing what Hannah Arendt called “fragmentary historiography.” She invoked the image of a pearl diver, who plunges into the submerged origins of present arrangements, bringing to light remnants of those origins that have crystallized in obscurity with the passage of time. When these “pearls” are turned over in the light by wise interpreters, they show us forgotten truths about ourselves that can unsettle the present conventional wisdom about who we are and what we can do.

Edmund Morgan, Sacvan Bercovitch, and many others have examined how American Puritans struggled to ground their Christianity in Hebraic communal discipline as a shield against what they considered the idolatrous corruptions of Rome and the Church of England, and against lapses in Calvinism itself.

William Bradford, first governor of the Plymouth Colony, and Cotton Mather, the sage of Massachusetts Bay and elegist of New England Puritanism, learned Hebrew because they were determined to “purify” their Christianity of Romish, Latinate encrustations. Even in 1787, long after they were gone, John Adams, a descendant of Boston Puritans and a principal architect and future president of the republic, wrote, “I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation.” He elaborated the proposition at some length, averring that he’d insist on its historical truth even were he an atheist.

Adams understood what the scholar John Schaar would show tellingly in our time—that the Puritans developed a dark genius for balancing Christian spiritual self-absorption with Hebraic social obligation, and personal liberty of conscience and action with public authority. Alexis de Tocqueville thought that “the foundation of New England was something new in the world” because “Puritanism was almost as much a political theory as a religious doctrine.” But it was new partly because it was old, yoking Old Testament understandings of communalism and nationalism to religious proofs of inner sincerity. Doing so sometimes spurred repression, inquisitions, and sectarian hatred. But today’s liberal free-for-all has become an equally dangerous “free-for-none,” because its commitment to untrammeled personal autonomy hobbles its ability to distinguish free spirits from free riders and strong civic tribunes from those intent on compromising them.

Puritans drew that distinction, and while they didn’t always strike the right balance, they failed instructively, even inspiringly, for our purposes. Their Hebraized Christianity cannot and should not be restored as a governing paradigm, and no true civic republican should have to be “religious” in any organized way. But sustaining a republic does require a faith deep enough to stand up to huge concentrations of power. The operative principle, which Puritans got half right, is that while religion is dangerous in rulers, it’s vital to civil society, especially to citizen insurgencies. When faith overreaches, republics falter; if it disappears completely, they’re lost.

I first learned that it’s possible to value these old traditions even without believing in them in 1988, when I became by happenstance the first editor to publish a scholar’s discovery that George W. Bush had had a great-uncle five generations removed, the Rev. George Bush, a Calvinist Presbyterian who was the first teacher of Hebrew at New York University. The Rev. Bush wrote the first American book on Islam, A Life of Mohammed, pronouncing the prophet an imposter, and in 1844 he wrote The Valley of the Vision, or The Dry Bones Revived, interpreting the Old Testament book of Ezekiel to prophesy the return of the Jews to Palestine in a time fast approaching.

I don’t know whether our recent president has read his ancestor’s exegesis, or knows Ezekiel. But Barack Obama does, and in his speech on race in Philadelphia last year, he recalled that at his church in Chicago (a black branch of the Congregational Church, the original church of the New England Puritans), “Ezekiel’s field of dry bones” was one of the “stories—of survival, and freedom, and hope” that “became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears.”

Obama, like so many others before him, seems to believe that the republic must keep weaving into its liberal tapestry the tough old threads of Abrahamic faith that figured in its beginnings. And should he fail as president, Americans may be looking harder, through new and gaping holes in the neoliberal consensus, for old touchstones to help them meet challenges that are religiously deep, even if not doctrinally resolved. The republic remains tied fatefully, and I think inextricably, to the Puritan claim that the legitimacy of politics depends on the authenticity of its practitioners’ inner beliefs. It’s also tethered to the Puritans’ world-historical “errand into the wilderness,” which they considered a literal continuation of the Hebrews’ journeys out of Egypt to the Promised Land and, later, of their return from Babylonian exile.

Why dawdle, a liberal reader might wonder, with religious traditions that weren’t friendly to republicanism even when they were gestating it and that are now completely alien to the republican tradition?

One answer is that the republic is in trouble for reasons Puritans could have parsed with sophistication even though they bear some responsibility for its travails. They’d have understood that liberalism depends on virtues and beliefs which the liberal state and “free” markets themselves cannot nourish or defend. They’d have understood that, somehow, good liberal leaders have to be nourished and trained all the more intensively, in ways that harness collective responsibility and personal obligation for ever higher common purposes.

Puritanism did that. It made ordinary individuals the bearers of a proudly representative republican identity that wealth can’t buy and armies alone can’t defend. Even while cracking beneath the weight of its contradictions in the eighteenth century, it generated a national myth that inspired generations of Americans to integrate personal salvation with social progress and, failing that, to confront glaring but more distant evils such as slavery in the South or terrorism from abroad.

When Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement reenacted the Exodus myth in the 1960s, they opened the hearts of astonished northern Jews and Protestants whose ancestors had made history of that same myth in ages past. When, the night before he was assassinated in April 1968, King cried out a line from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!” that wasn’t just poetry; it was power. Like the Hebrew prophet, who “lives out a myth that may be dead in us and for us, whose fruitfulness cannot be known except by exposing it (and himself) to possible failure,” as political theorist George Shulman puts it, King used speech acts to reintroduce an ancient, sacred past, to make us do a double take on our own emptiness and brutality. In so doing, he helped to reenact and shift authority as decisively as Congress did in enacting new civil rights laws.

Puritanism died as a way of life because it became so tyrannical and hypocritical as to thwart republican vigor and trust, much as ancient Jewish covenantal conceits made the kings and priests of Israel and Judah so legalistic and arrogant that they inspired condemnation. Yet the legacy of “inspired condemnation” still matters. So let’s bracket the fierce urgency of now for a moment and look back at what men like King have drawn from Hebraic and Christian traditions.

The constitutive act of Judaism was an unprecedentedly stark separation of spirit from nature that transformed human self-consciousness, turning the enchantments of natural cycles and sacred physical sites into soaring new aspirations, projected into the vast unknown between human beings and God. That prompted restless yearnings to know and do God’s will on earth.

According to Judaism’s many critics and to the Bible itself, the sublimity of its great separation of spirit from nature didn’t last long. Like Blaise Pascal, who exclaimed millennia later that “the eternal silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me,” ancient Hebrews fled that silence quickly, indulging in idol worship and, later, kingly arrogance and priestly legalism. Some say that first the prophets, and then exile, purified the Jews and their transnational mission, but Puritans denied that the Jews of their own time served any purpose. They grounded their project further back, in the ancient Hebrews’ sublimity and inflected nationalism, because they believed that other Christians had succumbed to a hypocritical otherworldliness, one that made earthly life worse and damned them in the world to come. Here, then, is what they drew from Hebraism.

The Making of History. The Hebrew word ivry—which is related to the Hebrew word for Hebrew—means “he crossed over,” denoting Abraham’s response to God’s command to separate himself from all he had loved. Separated from his old tribe’s sacred groves and rites, Abraham smashes its idols and even prepares to sacrifice his son Isaac to God. Such loneliness approaches existential grandeur, but, taking its sublimity straight up, the early Hebrew turns natural beauty into a metaphor of man’s futility. In the words of the Yom Kippur liturgy, “He is as the fragile potsherd, as the grass that withers, as the flower that fades, as a fleeting shadow, as a passing cloud, as a wind that blows, as the floating dust, yea, and even as a dream that vanishes.”

Where Hellenism unites love and nature in timeless cycles and embraces the world as it is, Judaism forces the imagination away from graven images and toward action for ends that haven’t been attained yet on earth. It finds beauty in the arc of the deed that pursues justice across time. As the Israeli philosopher Yirmiyahu Yovel puts it, the human subject begins to identify its own purposes with the transformation of a world that is not indifferent to its efforts. Abraham’s grandson Jacob wrestled with an angel all night, trying to wrest truth from God, and at dawn the angel renamed him Yisrael, which in Hebrew means, “He wrestles with God.” Many of us wrestle that way, seeking teleological significance in our deeds. Puritans did it all the time.

Inflected Nationalism. To cope with the vast unknown it opened between man and God, and present and future, the Hebrew religion harnessed the nationalism of a people selected by a mysterious, irascible interlocutor. “I will make thee a numerous and great nation,” God promises Abraham as he orders him up and out of his past. But Abraham’s nation will be sundered early (and often) from its Promised Land; its territorial claims are contingent on keeping a covenant to pursue spiritual and moral ends. This gives it a strange new orientation on earth: “The Jewish nation is the nation of time, in a sense which cannot be said of any other nation,” observed the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich:

It represents the permanent struggle between time and space. . . . It has a tragic fate when considered as a nation of space like every other nation, but as the nation of time, because it is beyond the circle of life and death it is beyond tragedy. The people of time . . . cannot avoid being persecuted because by their very existence they break the claim of the gods of space, who express themselves in will to power, imperialism, injustice, demonic enthusiasm, and tragic self-destruction. The gods of space, who are strong in every human soul, in every race and nation, are afraid of the Lord of Time, history, and justice, are afraid of his prophets and followers.

From its biblical beginnings, this tribe coheres through its unprecedented negation of what is usually tribal and through its imaginative, sometimes brilliant defiance of what Tillich’s lords of space and power demand. This isn’t the defiance of the world shown by John Bunyan’s pilgrim Christian, who sets out from the City of Destruction in The Pilgrim’s Progress to seek the Celestial City in Heaven. He leaves the world vertically, as it were, abandoning its space for life after death. The Jew remains in earthly space but traverses it collectively, on God’s time, thinking not of his own ascent but horizontally, across generations: “In every generation let each man look upon himself as if he came forth out of Egypt,” says the Haggadah of the Passover seder, which celebrates the Exodus. Puritans yoked this earthbound myth to Bunyan’s.

Collective Punishment and Mutual Obligation. The Hebrew narrative portrays its chosen people as servile and stiff-necked. They fall on their faces before God when thunder sounds or miraculous deliverance comes, but they grumble moments later and worship that golden calf at the very foot of Mount Sinai. They don’t want to serve the Lord of Time as much as they wish to return to the pagan unity of love and nature.

When the people break the covenant, they are punished collectively, not individually: Wicked individuals may prosper as righteous ones suffer, but Jewish tradition (and, later, the Jews’ experience as a vulnerable minority) reinforce an obligation not to get the whole community into trouble by sinning. Personal responsibility is socialized: The Jew “repents not only of his actions, but for the ‘root’ of his actions,” observes the French Protestant philosopher Paul Ricoeur. “Thus the spirit of repentance discovers something beyond our acts, an evil root that is both individual and collective, such as the choice that each would make for all and all for each.” Under certain circumstances, that could be a strong spur to what we now call “social action.”

But this fear of collective punishment relies less on personal introspection than on the individual internalizing a common destiny. When Moses presents the law at Sinai, the people respond, “We will do and we will listen,” and later commentators interpreted that vow as evidence of Hebraism’s emphasis on fulfilling one’s obligations before indulging any doubts about their provenance.

Hebraism abjures not only the Christian pilgrim’s lonely departure from the world but also Hellenism’s inclination to know the world rather than change it. Hellenism imparts to life an “aerial ease,” a “sweetness and light,” according to Matthew Arnold, who contrasted that felicity with Hebraism’s scourging demand for “conduct and obedience, mediated by strictness of conscience” in the fulfillment of its historic mission:

To walk staunchly by the best light one has, to be strict and sincere with oneself, not to be of the number . . . who say and do not, to be in earnest—this is the discipline by which alone man is enabled to rescue his life from the thralldom of the passing moment. And this discipline has been nowhere so effectively taught as in the school of Hebraism. . . . [T]he intense and convinced energy with which the Hebrew, both of the Old and of the New Testament, threw himself upon his ideal, and which inspired the incomparable definition of the great Christian virtue, Faith—the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen—this energy of faith in its ideal has belonged to Hebraism alone.

Prophetic Dissent. Covenantal commitment can curdle into priestly conceit and soul-suffocating legalism. That, in turn, can prompt individuals who’ve kept the “true” spirit of Israel’s pact with God to challenge the afflicted society to recover its original purpose. The yearning for such renewal is a wellspring for both Hebraic prophecy and the Puritan jeremiad—not to mention a lever for change.

Most of Christianity treats the biblical prophets only as prefigurations of Christ, who turned the prophetic impulse from this world toward reconciliation with our father in Heaven. Judaism holds out for tikkun olam, the repair of this world. Yovel adds that Jews tend to think that Christians, fearful of earthly separation from Spirit, have anthropomorphized God by giving him a son who came down to earth, thereby turning human yearning into a theological principle that ends in illusion: For two millennia, Christians intoned, “My kingdom is not of this world” and “Baptized in Christ, there is no Jew or Greek,” yet they sat on golden thrones over well-armed states and sacralized national identities even more rooted in “blood and soil” than the ancient Hebrews.

That is precisely what Puritans meant to correct. While Bunyan’s Christian fled his city, the Puritan minister engaged it in the name of its past and its earthly mission. And Jews would learn much from this, including new ways to make history within a civic-republican faith that sometimes pits personal honor against the state, as in the American Revolution. Not only has the emphasis on inner renewal and personal witness sustained the republic at times when nationalism and legalism couldn’t; unarmed, civil society movements have brought down armed regimes, including in the American South, by joining “Christian” personal renewal to “Hebraic” solidarity in nonviolent collective strategies that the Hebrews themselves never imagined.

Yet Puritans took more than enough martial inspiration from the Hebrew conquest of Canaan, slaughtering Connecticut Indians as “Amalekites,” whom God enjoined the Israelites to “utterly destroy” in the Promised Land. The prophet Isaiah’s vision of the lion lying down with the lamb doesn’t establish that Hebrews or Puritans offered credible alternatives to bellicosity. What, then, did the Puritans really add?

Because the Puritan settlement considered itself a compact based in individuals’ voluntary commitments to a sacred covenant—a brotherhood of equals in Christ turning its back on Europe’s princes of church and state—it attempted a clean and relatively democratic break with feudalism and obscurantism. Accepting neither aristocracy nor beggary, it mandated universal schooling and yeoman self-sufficiency. Puritan church members chose civil magistrates and ministers from amongst themselves but then submitted to their authority until the next prayerful election. (Magistrates were not always reelected.)

Where biblical Hebrews vowed, “We will do and we will listen,” Puritanism prompted intensely personal dramas of religious conversion, linking individual conscience to social obligation in ways the Hebrews had not, producing a character type often tormented in privacy but liberated and indomitable in its service to others: John Jay Chapman, a late-nineteenth-century descendant of Puritans, described “a bright, cheery courage despite some dryness and gravity, a practical, insuppressible, active temperament with the force of ten men, ready with a word for every emergency.” Schoolteachers and civic leaders in my western Massachusetts hometown in the 1950s taught us plain living and high thinking that way. “Insufferable in small doses, for purposes of yeast there was never such a leaven as the Puritan stock,” as Chapman put it gently.

Richard Henry Dana Jr.’s memoir, Two Years Before the Mast, portrays an archetype of the inward-yet-outward-driving young American Puritan character of the early nineteenth century, venturing abroad on a secularized pilgrimage that was also a sacralized commercial venture. But in Moby Dick, Puritanism’s dark side turns the Christian pilgrim to pursuits as maniacal as that of Ahab, whose tormented creator, Herman Melville, wrote that “we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time, we bear the ark of the liberties of the world.”

Puritanism didn’t want liberalism or very much prophecy, but it made both more likely. Its demand that each individual internalize its doctrines and strictures empowered the individual to speak in the name of a higher authority. While the Puritan community could shelter and guide the individual flame, it never believed that it had created it. That came from God, and that conviction could hearten dissenters. While a Puritan community could go so far in judging others as to conduct witch hunts, the depth of Puritan convictions also inspired death-defying dissents, as when Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams accused Puritan elders of valuing power more than faith. (It even inspired fasting and repentance for the Salem witch hunts, one of whose judges, Samuel Sewall, confessed his guilt publicly.)

Think, too, of the early abolitionists, many of them Puritan to the core. As a girl growing up early in the nineteenth century in Litchfield, Connecticut, Harriet Beecher Stowe read her father Lyman Beecher’s copy of Magnalia Christi Americana, Cotton Mather’s magnum opus on New England Puritanism. That deepened her sense of duty and destiny and later animated her as she wrote Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Lincoln, who told Stowe that her book had started the Civil War, rediscovered Calvinism—or felt that Calvinism had discovered and was directing him. Almost a century later, Martin Luther King Jr., a divinity student in Boston, absorbed elements of a conservative, Calvinist theology that sustained him and many other civil society rebels against police dogs and even death.

King and Stowe were believers, and in Shulman’s sense, prophets; but for many of us, they were pearl divers, too, and that was partly because they were also very much still Puritans. Sometimes almost despite itself, then, early Protestant Christianity as it unfolded in America gave to conscientious dissent a legitimacy and strength that Hebraism had not. But Hebraism offset Christian tendencies toward monkish or airy otherworldliness with a moral order grounded concretely in law.

For complex reasons, the Puritan creative tension would snap or dissipate, especially after Woodrow Wilson’s war-making left a generation of Americans disillusioned and racing toward a City of Destruction, which spawned the Great Depression and yet another world war. In the 1920s, the writer Van Wyck Brooks observed that as the old jug of Puritan wine finally cracked, its liquid ran to earth as rank commercialism, and its vapors floated up into airy transcendentalism. Unlike the Hebrews, earnest legatees of the Puritans even through the 1940s remained obsessed with justifying every political act by the authenticity of the actor’s inner belief. “Sincerity is all in all,” the Puritan John Davenport had said, defending justification by faith alone; centuries later, Henry James reproached “the hard glitter of Israel” he saw in Jewish immigrants to New York. These Jews were too pushy, not introspective enough. They had merit in performing duties; but did they have inner integrity? The hypocrisy in such scrutiny was captured by George Santayana:

The old Calvinists . . . had flattered themselves that at least the Lord, if no one else, particularly loved them, that God had sent down Moses and Christ to warn them of the dangers ahead, so that they might run in time out of the burning house, and take all the front seats in the new theater. [They] wanted . . . to find, in some underhanded way, what was the will of God, so as to conform to it and be always on the winning side.

Puritans also couldn’t reconcile their belief in inscrutable, godly grace with their temptation to regard rewards of material striving as signs of grace. Like Hebrews worshiping a golden calf even while receiving the covenant, Puritans in America forgot John Winthrop’s warnings against “carnal lures,” by which he meant ostentatious consumption as well as sexual temptations. To justify their growing prosperity as proof of their otherwise inscrutable grace, they staged prodigious shows of prayerful self-scrutiny, subtly bending faith into a blessing of ill-gotten gains.

A way of life that didn’t deign to justify or explain itself soon found that it couldn’t justify or explain itself to people who in good conscience had stopped deferring to it. Puritanism had moved mountains with faith while it was insurgent against greater powers. But its reliance on justification by faith more than by works was always vulnerable, particularly to the demands of an open continent and a dynamic liberalism.

Fortunately, between the rank commercialism and empty transcendentalism of the 1920s, there came a civic-republican condensation in the middle, a synthesis to which Jewish immigrants brought the skills and aspirations of modernity and their old covenant’s moral rigor. This was staunchly resisted by some latter-day Puritans, who, like John Adams and the Rev. George Bush, admired ancient Hebrews but hoped that restoring the Jews of their own respective times to “Judea” (as “an independent nation”) would help them shed “the asperities and peculiarities of their character.”

Yet Jews would outlast real Puritans, or at least outnumber them, in the twentieth-century republic. There, Jews played pivotal if conflicting roles as carriers of both the ancient Hebraic and modern Enlightenment strains. The best of this vitality was badly needed by a still-Calvinist but faltering and hypocritical American public culture. Ironically, most American Jews—arriving long after Adams and Bush had directed their forebears to Palestine—proved only too ready to exchange their covenantal baggage for the offerings of a liberal, individualist civil society, even one that, at the time, retained strong Puritan-Hebraic foundations.

But history has presented Jews with an arresting irony: Even when they have abjured their ancient, revolutionary, and cosmopolitan faith, it still has driven their historical fate. They are passionate about America not only because they’re relieved to have escaped a long nightmare in Europe but also because the old Hebrew faith has figured so decisively in the building of the republic itself. Free of Christian preoccupations with personal salvation—free also, largely, of specific rabbinic constraints—yet still driven by elements of the ancient faith as well as by their more recent historic fate, many Jews embraced a new civic covenant that entwined personal renewal with public progress. While a minority of these new Americans let historical scars do the work of fresh wounds—driving them to militarism of one stripe or another—most Jews have become poster children for the older civic-republican balance of public obligation and inner integrity.

I encountered that balance among some of its “original” American bearers one wintry morning in 1968, my junior year at Yale, when I stopped on my way to class to watch a small, quiet demonstration at which Yale’s theologically Calvinist but politically radical chaplain, William Sloane Coffin Jr., accepted the draft cards of three students who were refusing conscription into the Vietnam War. “The government says we are criminals,” said one of them, a fine-featured scion of the old republic, his voice shaking a little over his fear, “but we say it is the government that is criminal for waging this war.”

“Believe me,” Coffin responded, “I know what it’s like to wake up in the morning feeling like a sensitive grain of wheat, looking at a millstone.” It was a ray of Calvinist humor, a jaunty defiance of established power in the name of a higher power, and we grasped at it because we were scared. For all we knew, these guys were about to be arrested on the spot, and we were awed by their example, carrying our own draft cards in our own wallets.

Coffin was there to bless, in the sense of an American civic idiom that too few liberals understand, a courage that too few national-security-state conservatives understand. Only a few yards away, the names of hundreds of those Yale men who’d perished in wars were inscribed in icy marble under the admonition “Courage disdains fame and wins it.” Now some living Yale men were challenging us to join them in disdaining fame, but with scant prospect of even a memorial’s posthumous regard.

Something in their bearing made them intrepidly “Puritan” in the ways I have sketched, and heroically “American” and free of anything anti-American, as Rosa Parks had been when she’d refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery a dozen years earlier. The dignity in her protest had redeemed a racist civil society instead of trashing it as inherently damned. Now these privileged students were resisting the government in the name of a society that they, too, were reconstituting by pledging their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor. It was as if the civic spirit had risen from a long slumber and was breathing and walking again, re-moralizing the state and the law.

“The great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right,” Martin Luther King Jr. had said. The German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, too, would marvel at what he called the “constitutional patriotism” of Americans who confronted the state not in the name of fantasies of national honor or racial destiny but on behalf of an experiment that would test, as Lincoln put it, whether republics relying on a higher faith and virtue can long endure. I don’t see how “constitutional patriotism” like this can be understood without reference to the Puritan and Hebraic wellsprings from which Coffin, King, and others drew the strength to face dogs, fire hoses, and even murder.

As a theology student in “Puritan” Boston in the late 1940s, King absorbed Reinhold Niebuhr’s admonition that the “paradoxical relation between the possible and the impossible in history proves that the frame of history is wider than the nature and time in which it is grounded. The injunction of Christ: ‘Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul’ neatly indicates the dimension of human existence which transcends the basis which human life and history have in nature.” The civil rights movement lived by this Puritan injunction at critical moments, but it also took up the Hebraic story of the Israelites’ collective exodus from slavery in Egypt, opening the hearts of those astonished Northern WASPs and Jews. That was why Yale’s president at the time of the antiwar demonstration, Kingman Brewster Jr., a direct descendant of the Elder William Brewster, minister on the Mayflower, had presented an honorary doctorate to King immediately upon his release from jail in 1964.

Anyone who understands Puritanism will also understand why Yale’s honoring of King was condemned by some alumni who thought him a criminal and an enemy of the state. That old tension within the New Jerusalem harked to the biblical Jerusalem of the prophets and temple priests. Ironically, though, it was Southern blacks who knew best what many of the rest of us had forgotten: That the exodus could unfold only across years of wandering in the wilderness, of worshipping golden calves, of making brutal conquests, and worse. I can’t imagine neoliberals facing dogs, fire hoses, or prison. I can’t imagine neoconservatives doing it, either.

Reworking the Puritan teachings for our time, Niebuhr reminds well-meaning liberals and Christians, as well as conservatives, that the serpent and his kind—“the children of darkness”—are wise to the fact that selfishness is irrepressible in all humans. But, Niebuhr noted, the children of darkness misuse that wisdom to manipulate and discourage do-gooders who think that all people can be led by example to peace and light. Therefore, Niebuhr added, “The children of light must be armed with the wisdom of the children of darkness but remain free from their malice. They must know the power of self-interest in human society without giving it moral justification.” They must not lose their ability to be guileless as doves whenever conciliatory and trusting behavior is called for. Or, as Jesus put it, “Be ye as deceivers, yet true.”

Perhaps the greatest irony Niebuhr taught is that while the children of light have their own darkness, the children of darkness have some light in them, struggling to get out but blocked or miscarried by their own gnawing fears and compensatory overconfidence.

It’s going to take the descendants of indomitable Hebrews and intrepid Puritans a while to learn, as King, Niebuhr, Gandhi, and others have shown, that a society which consumes itself with preparing for war quite often becomes weak in ways that warriors inherently ignore—that such regimes, armed to the teeth, are quite often the ones that lose the wars they fight. Learning this will require transcending as well as incorporating elements of the old traditions—much as the founders of the republic did. To do that well, rather than recklessly, we need to appreciate how Puritan and Hebraic currents have joined personal dramas to communal strengths, even in our own time, elevating countless ordinary individuals into a single American republican identity. Even though Puritans were limited in ways we can see only too well, they were wise in ways too many of us have forgotten.

Jim Sleeper is a lecturer in political science at Yale University. His books include The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York (Norton, 1990) and Liberal Racism (Viking, 1997). He wishes to thank the Yale Religion and Politics Colloquium, at which an early version of this article was presented last year.

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Shalom Goldman acknowledges Newsday revelation concerning George W. Bush’s ancestor:

Apropos [**today's NY Times account**](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/19/world/middleeast/netanyahu-evangelicals-embassy.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news) of Israel's assiduous courting of evangelical Christians, who want all Jews to be in the Holy Land for Armageddon:  In 1988 I was the first editor to publish (in *New York Newsday*) an op ed by the scholar Shalom Goldman about his discovery that President George W. Bush's great-uncle five generations removed, the Rev. George Bush -- a Calvinist Presbyterian and the first teacher of Hebrew at New York University -- wrote The Valley of the Vision: Or The Dry Bones Revived, an 1844 tract interpreting the Book of Ezekiel to prophesy the return of the Jews to Palestine in a time fast approaching. ([**Goldman describes his discovery**](https://books.google.com/books?id=jP37RacndTgC&pg=PA306&lpg=PA306&dq=%22shalom+goldman%22+and+%22george+bush%22+and+newsday.com&source=bl&ots=E1BpPltH8g&sig=1WMhWx_qzs1oHU3QyK-M3gFLXh4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjKvcCQ15TbAhXB0FMKHXG-ALEQ6AEILTAB#v=onepage&q=%22shalom%20goldman%22%20and%20%22george%20bush%22%20and%20newsday.com&f=false) of the Rev. Bush's writings at greater length in *God's Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American Imagination*.)

I don't know if our former president has ever read his ancestor's tract or if his brief (and quickly retracted) characterization of the Iraq War as a "crusade" was a conscious or subliminal echo of evangelical theology. But the tangled Hebrew-Puritan history may be worth revisiting right now via [**this essay**](http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/american-brethren-hebrews-and-puritans) of 2009:  I've written about it several times since -- in Democracy Journal, The Atlantic, and more.

Ezra Stiles, inaugural address: <https://books.google.com/books?id=1mTqCQAAQBAJ&pg=PA52&lpg=PA52&dq=%22ezra+stiles%22+and+%22inaugural+address%22+and+hebrew&source=bl&ots=IJokuPQUNt&sig=OyOK6gUFm6pf_kmaKq4EF23S-Q0&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi1w4zu78LdAhWJ3VMKHbchAqAQ6AEwAHoECAEQAQ#v=onepage&q=%22ezra%20stiles%22%20and%20%22inaugural%20address%22%20and%20hebrew&f=false>