

Dear Rabbi Fried,

The 4th of July is obviously an American holiday and not a Jewish one. What is the Jewish perspective on celebrating a holiday such as the 4th, being part of school functions, etc. Should we go because that's the school rule, or should we really want to go and be a part of it? Thanks for your thoughts.

Alexandra L.

Dear Alexandra,

Although the 4th of July is not a Jewish holiday per se, to observe it is to fulfill very important Jewish ideals. One of the most core Jewish concepts is that of appreciation. Throughout the Torah we find examples of expressing appreciation, even to inanimate objects. Moses was not allowed to strike the water to initiate the plague of blood, because as a baby he was protected by the water. Although the water would never know the difference, from Moses's perspective he needed to express appreciation. One classical Jewish philosopher writes that the fulfillment of all the mitzvos is an expression of appreciation to G-d for life itself, making appreciation the foundation of the entire Jewish religion.

We, as Jews, need to have tremendous appreciation for the lives we have in the United States of America. More than any country in the world, for generations, we have had the complete and total freedom to live respectfully as Jews. We have the opportunity here to live full Jewish lives without looking over our shoulders out of fear. We are full participants in the American process of commerce and government, holding some of the highest offices in the country. This makes us partners in the most important and powerful free country in the world, the country that performs and bestows the most good and kindness throughout the world.

On the 4th of July, we have an opportunity to express our appreciation for the affluence and freedom we have received and achieved in this great country. A leading American Torah authority, who set a lot of the direction as to the attitudes of Torah Jewry in this country, was Rabbi Avigdor Miller ob"m. Rabbi Miller was well known for carrying an American flag as he marched in the 4th of July parades of New York with great pride and joy. I do the same at our local neighborhood parade.

We need not live in a bubble and pretend that everything has always been perfect for the Jews in America. There have, indeed, been dark times in American history fraught with anti-Semitism, from the Klan in Mississippi to the turning back of a ship of Jewish refugee children to Nazi Germany to their deaths, rather than allow them onto these shores. The ADL receives many reports of anti-Semitic incidents even today, (albeit that these incidents pale in comparison to that of Europe today). These episodes serve to remind us that we still are Jews in Diaspora, and America is not the Messiah. This, however, does not daunt us in our feelings of appreciation, and the joy we have for the opportunity to do so publicly on the 4th of July.

The Torah leaders of America have coined a phrase for the United States: "Malchus Shel Chesed", "A Kingdom of Kindness". We have enjoyed an almost unprecedented thriving of Torah and Jewish life in America. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, one of the leading sages and Kabbalists of Europe over 200 years ago once made a famous statement. The Torah, in its sojourn throughout the Diaspora, will have made many "stops". The Torah, and the Jewish people's final "stop" before the Messianic redemption, will be America. America is a big part of the unfolding of the Divine plan, and of our journey down the road of Jewish destiny.

You should join your school's functions with much joy and pride that you are an American Jew.