

From Cantor Alexander

The Whitewashing of our Mythology

In Reading Torah this year, we see so many parallels between the flaws of our ancestors and the struggles of modern times, I wonder why we as Americans seem to find it so hard to hold both pride in our country and the truth of our history at the same time.

In Temple we often teach our children the “clean” bible stories: We make our ancestors more heroic and our love for them more black and white. I can understand this. They are children, reading the book of Genesis with Abraham selling Sarah to other men (twice) and explaining the complications of Jacob’s two (or is it four?) wives. These are difficult topics to raise and certainly ones which are inappropriate at certain ages.

This is one of many reasons we hope studying Judaism will be a lifelong pursuit. There are things we don’t teach you (on purpose) in Sunday School.

Why do we view American history with this same sanitized lens? I don’t mean mythology like George Washington couldn’t tell a lie - he did chop down his father’s cherry tree. But rather whitewashing where pointing out that the White House was built with slave labor is seen by many in the country to be denigrating our history or somehow unpatriotic.

The history of America is complex and filled with much to be proud of and much that is genuinely upsetting. I struggle to understand why we cannot confront both truths without feeling they undermine each other.

The fact that Jefferson was a slaveholder does not take away from the glorious rights he enshrined into the Declaration of Independence. We should, however, always acknowledge that this was true. Jefferson owned human beings and held power in the Commonwealth of Virginia and then as the third President of the United States largely on the backs of slave labor. This makes him an imperfect human being bound to the imperfection of his time. It does not take away from the glory of the ideals this country was founded upon.

Yet as a country we seem unable to see our history in shades of gray and shades of humanity. The best of our founders were extremely flawed human beings. It might be easier to whitewash that and just forget that they were flawed. But doing so negates the history of many Americans still around today.

How can Native Americans grow up wanting to be draped in the American flag when our schools barely teach about their history of being kicked off their land, of having their children ripped from their homes and adopted out to white families? Their contributions have been boiled down to a children’s myth of the first Thanksgiving. Would we lose all our pride in America if we were taught of the atrocities committed taking land from the Natives, outlawing their religions, and Christianizing their children?

Do we lose all our faith in Abraham when we annually read of his attempt to sacrifice Isaac? We read these hardest passages to help us remember, to help us engage in the messy truth of our people.

We as Americans can and should do the same. If we engaged in our messy truth, we might come out more patriotic for knowing it wasn’t swept under the rug. We also might come out more compassionate for those with a different relationship to the state and to the power structures.

If we allow ourselves to see America only as the mythology we learned about in grade school, we fail to understand that life back then was complicated, just like it is today. The choices our founders made were influenced by the culture of the times and by the society they lived in. These influences helped them create the grand experiment we call the United States of America, but they also allowed them to maintain the prejudices of the time.

Let us remember not to view our Torah only through the eyes of children and not to view our country only through the mythology of grade school. Let us be adults capable of honoring and upholding good ideas while fully engaging in the fact they came from flawed human beings.