

When I was a kid, stories about Jews in American history were very popular in Jewish education.

We learned about Haym Solomon who helped finance the American revolution, Francis Salvador, a Sephardic Jew who was the Paul Revere of the South, and about Uriah Levy who got rid of corporal punishment in the Navy. There were lessons about Jews who had served in the Armed Forces, perhaps because of those who accused Jews of shirking this responsibility, and about Jews who had become highly successful whether in business, sports, science or the arts.

In addition to these history lessons, there were other stories that we were told.

One of my favorites was a Hanukkah story about an unnamed Jewish soldier who light Hanukkah lights at Valley Forge. In the story, the candles are noticed by George Washington who, at the time, was very discouraged by his armies failures.

The soldier tells the General the story of Hanukkah, about the Maccabees struggle for freedom and about their victory, a victory of the few over the many. He predicts that God will be with the colonists and that they will succeed in their struggle with Great Britain. As told in this story, these words and the Hanukkah lights inspire General Washington to continue his fight for freedom. After the war

he finds the soldier and presents him with a medal inscribed with the words: "A token of gratitude for the light of your candle - George Washington".

There's only one problem with this story- it isn't found in writing until 1951. It seems more of a wish than a recording of historical fact. But perhaps we should not be surprised- as one historian wrote:

Now this kind of tampering with the historical truth might seem especially incongruous when it is applied to the great American leader who declared "I cannot tell a lie!"

But then again, historians tell us that the familiar tale of the hatchet and the cherry tree was also a pious fabrication by a later story-teller (a certain Parson Weems) and had no basis in historical fact.

Another of these stories of uncertain origin dating from a later period, was about the Jewish ship owners Nathan Levy and David Franks. They were the ones credited with bringing the liberty bell from Great Britain, where it was cast, to America.

Unfortunately this week I learned from Rabbi Lance Sussman in his article for Ten Minutes of Torah, that this was not actually the case. The bell, it is now proven, came to America on a different ship.

Still the ties between the Jewish people and the Liberty Bell are numerous. They begin in this week's Torah portion where we find the words that are inscribed on the liberty bell. The verse was actually chosen by Isaac Norris, a Quaker, who had

a deep interest in Hebrew. He owned the largest collection of Hebrew books in the colonies and taught his children, both boys and girls, to read Hebrew.

The term used in this verse for liberty, DROR, is usually associated with letting slaves go free, and it is likely that this may have been part of the reason for its being chosen, the Quakers being early anti-slavery activists.

The verse is part of a Torah portion very concerned with issues of inequality and social mobility, particularly worries about those moving down in status. It attempted to set up a system to protect the unfortunate and give them a second chance to start over. It is a reminder of the relationship between the Biblical sense of freedom, DROR, and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's, four freedoms during World War II , not only freedom of **speech**, and freedom of **worship** but also **freedom from want, from poverty**, and **freedom from fear**..

The bell has made its way into synagogue art in many American Temples and is also found in a small replica in Jerusalem's Liberty Bell Park, right near downtown.

May is American Jewish Heritage Month and a good time to share reflections on the Jewish experience in America. Our shared Jewish American values are many and include justice and freedom, equal opportunity and mutual responsibility.