

# Activities

## Activity 2

### *Exploring the Historic Links between Israel and America*

#### **Preparation:**

**Estimated time:** 1-2 class periods • **Materials:** Internet access or printouts of articles by Michael Oren ([www.aipac.org/Publications/Oren-PC-2007.pdf](http://www.aipac.org/Publications/Oren-PC-2007.pdf)) and Rabbi Ken Spiro ([www.simpletoremember.com/vitals/jewsamerica.htm](http://www.simpletoremember.com/vitals/jewsamerica.htm))

**Background:** This activity will give students insights into American and Israeli history. The American Pilgrims were deeply influenced by the Old Testament and its narrative of the Israelites' history (especially about the Exodus and Promised Land). As the selected articles show, in subsequent centuries as well, these Old Testament stories continued to shape Americans' identity, and many prominent Americans were ardent Christian Zionists in the 18th and 19th centuries. Since its modern birth in 1948, Israel has had strong and close ties with the United States. To what extent does this connection reflect America's founding principles and the shared values of the U.S. and Israel?

#### **Activity:**

Have students read the Michael Oren and Rabbi Ken Spiro articles. Either have students write answers to the following questions, or break them into groups of four to analyze some or all of the following questions.

1. Why did the Pilgrims find the Old Testament story of the Jews so similar to their own situation? Which Old Testament stories most influenced them? (Students may also look at the Mayflower Compact for ideas at [www.allabouthistory.org/mayflower-compact.htm](http://www.allabouthistory.org/mayflower-compact.htm).)
2. In what ways did the Pilgrims and later Americans believe that the founding of America was similar to the Exodus story? How did they reflect that connection? (For example, in place names, and in the imagery, language and ideas they wanted to use when the US was founded as a nation and also in their conception of creating a new nation as Moses helped created a new nation and a law for the new nation.)
3. Why would colonial Americans view ancient Israel as a model to follow?
4. What do these articles suggest about the importance of religion, and specifically the Bible, to colonial Americans and to the Founding Fathers?
5. Many early Americans supported the idea of restoring Israel. Why? What did they think the Holy Land was like? (After 1799, more and more Europeans and Americans visited the Holy Land.) Why did they think Jews belonged there?
6. Why did Americans think it was possible to resettle and reestablish Israel? How does this echo the ideas in Unit 4, "Early Settlement of the Land"?
7. How would these founding traditions and ideas in America influence American attitudes toward Israel? How much would it create a sense of shared values?

## *Teacher Answer Sheet, Unit 8, Activity 2*

### *1) What do they have in common?*

- Both documents declare political independence from Britain.
- Both documents assert the existence of universal human rights, and declare their people's right to political independence based on "natural law" or "self-evident" "truths."
- Both documents address how their declarations fit into the grand sweep of history: "When in the course of human events" and "Eretz-Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people."
- Both documents assert the existence of universal human rights and present an argument for why British rule infringes upon those rights. They appeal to the conscience of readers by describing injustices committed against their nation or people.
- Both documents claim those for whom they speak have been denied rights that have been extended to other peoples.
- Both documents mention military actions against them and the threat of imminent war.
- Both documents are essentially secular but also refer to God as a fundamental source. The American Declaration refers to "Nature's God," the "Supreme Judge," and "Divine Providence." The Israeli Declaration of Independence concludes with "placing our trust in the Almighty."

### *What are some differences?*

- The American Declaration of Independence primarily lists political and economic injustices committed by the British government against the American colonists, such as levying unfair taxes and preventing democratic decision making. The Israeli Declaration of Independence, on the other hand, emphasizes social injustices committed throughout history against the Jewish people, namely anti-Semitism.
- The American document does not mention why the colonists have a right to independence in a particular geographical place, while the Israeli document opens by explaining the historical connection between the land of Israel and the Jewish people and the fact that the Jewish people have a national identity tied to a geographic place.
- The American document does not list any international consensus supporting their claims, while the Israeli Declaration of Independence cites the 1917 Balfour Declaration and the 1947 U.N. resolution, which confirm the Jewish people's right to independent nationhood in Israel.
- The injustices listed in the American document have a short history, while the injustices and suffering described by the Israeli document extend over 2,000 years.

- The American Declaration only indirectly sets up principles for the new government that will emerge. (They are in the Constitution.) In contrast, the Israeli Declaration of Independence lays out basic principles for the government it is creating.
- The Israeli Declaration of Independence details Jewish rights to nationhood based on their labor in restoring the land and creating a distinctive nation by reviving Hebrew and creating a unique culture.

**Summary:** While both documents declare political independence from Britain, the American Declaration of Independence justifies its argument based on political and economic injustices, while the Israeli Declaration of Independence emphasizes the social injustice of anti-Semitism, the connection between land and identity, and previous documents that affirm its argument for independence.

### ***3) Does each document relate to human rights, and if so, how?***

- Both documents refer explicitly to human rights. They each assert the existence of such universal rights and argue that political independence from British rule is required for their people to enjoy them. In this way, both documents are based on the concept of human rights.
- However, the American Declaration of Independence argues that independence from Britain is needed to ensure the individual rights of the American colonists, while the Israeli Declaration of Independence, in addition to promoting individual rights, argues for the collective right of the Jewish People to a sovereign, national land.

### ***4) How does an analysis of these two documents shed light on common values that these two countries share?***

- A reading of both documents highlights the extraordinary value that both countries place on human rights. While each document may emphasize different types of human rights (economic vs. social; individual vs. collective) that reflect the unique histories and circumstances of each country, they both represent a commitment to freedom, justice and equality.
- Furthermore, while the arguments in both documents are clearly secular, they both conclude with a reference to a sacred power – “Divine Providence” in the case of the American Declaration of Independence and “The Rock of Israel” in the case of the Israeli Declaration of Independence. This similarity may reflect a shared respect for the loftier sentiments and ambitions of humankind and the Judeo-Christian roots of both peoples.