America needs Moses to deliver

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Sunday, November 29, 2009
11/29/2009 9:17:00 AM

On Aug. 20, 1776, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson recommended that the Continental Congress establish as the seal for the United States of America a two-sided wax pendant.

One side depicted a shield surrounded by the initials of the 13 states, flanked by the goddesses of liberty and peace, the eye of Providence in a pyramid, and the slogan *E Pluribus Unum* above the crest.

The other side showed Pharaoh sitting in a chariot, with a crown on his head and a sword in his hand, as rays from a pillar of fire in a cloud beamed on Moses, who extended his hand over the Sea, causing it to drown the Egyptians.

Faced with the imminent invasion of New York by the British, Congress tabled the proposal. When the legislators returned to it in 1782, they ditched Moses in favor of a bald eagle, holding an olive branch in one talon and a bundle of arrows in the other.

Nonetheless, according to Bruce Feiler, the author of several engaging and insightful books on the influence of the Bible, for more than two centuries Americans have turned to Moses for "direction, inspiration, and hope." Feiler makes a compelling case for Moses' influence and attributes it to the "elasticity" of the story of Exodus as a trope that has reflected and shaped American identity.

The narrative, he argues, provides a language of chosenness for oppressed people; an example of resistance to tyranny; and a model of restraint, through God-given law, to help newly covenanted communities rein in tendencies toward excess. Little wonder, then, that about two-thirds of funeral orations eulogized George Washington as "the Moses of America"; more than twice as many sermons compared the martyred Abraham Lincoln to Moses than to Jesus.

Just about everyone noted that Martin Luther King Jr., like Moses, didn't get to the Promised Land; and Cecil B. DeMille's "Ten Commandments," which united America, God, and anti-communism, was the most popular film produced in the 1950s.

Is Moses still relevant in 21st-century America? At first glance, Feiler acknowledges, he seems to be a missing person. Following the reforms of the 1960s, he explains, millions of men, women, and children came to the United States, many of them Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs. Moreover, although 93 percent of American homes have at least one Bible, only 20 percent of Americans can name a single prophet. We have become a nation of Biblical illiterates.

And yet, Feiler insists, not all that persuasively, that Moses continues to resonate. The prophet, he suggests, has become a symbol of personal fulfillment, who teaches young Americans to leave the confinement of parents, upbringing, hometown, and expectations, define their own promised land, and summon the will to make it across the desert to get there.

Feiler believes that Moses remains the patron saint of what "America will be." The journey does not always end on a mountain top or get completed in a year. At its best, Feiler concludes, Moses' gift and legacy are the twinned convictions that there is "something better than the mundane, the enslaved, the second-best, the compromised" — and that whatever we do must be part of a communal enterprise. It's a noble dream, isn't it — and, as Jews often say, one can only hope that it will make its way from his lips to God's ears.

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Associate Images:
AMERICA'S PROPHET
Moses and the American Story
By Bruce Feiler
William Morrow, $26.99
PROPHET
Bruce Feiler: The author makes a case for Moses.

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