



MILLSTONE  
SCHOLARS



LAND OF LIBERTY  
AND HOPE:  
**THE JEWISH  
EXPERIENCE  
IN AMERICA**





DEEDWELL 1620

1620 | “A City Upon a Hill”:  
The Hebraic  
Spirit of America

John Winthrop | William Bradford

**Part A**

Dateline  
1620

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# Dateline: Plymouth Colony, 1620

*Off the coast of Plymouth, Massachusetts, waves lap near a famous boulder marked “1620.” Plymouth Rock is the spot where the passengers of the Mayflower took their first steps in the New World. Not far away, another stone bears a unique Hebrew inscription: “The Lord is the help of my life.” It marks the grave of the Pilgrim leader William Bradford, the longtime governor of Plymouth Colony and the man often credited with “bringing Hebrew to America.”*

*Why was Bradford willing to risk everything to journey to the New World? What was his mission? Why did the historian and religious leader Cotton Mather call him “a Moses of Plymouth colony”?*

*Bradford was born around 1590, at a time when every English subject was expected to belong to the Church of England or be punished by the state. As a young man, Bradford rejected the Church of England and joined a group of like-minded Christians—known as Puritans. In 1608, fearing religious persecution, he fled to Amsterdam with a Puritan congregation. In 1620, he led a group of Puritans to the New World in search of a more permanent home where they could practice their faith in peace.*

*During the perilous journey across the Atlantic Ocean, Bradford led the signing of the famous Mayflower Compact, through which he and his companions—whom he*



Statue of William Bradford in Plymouth, Massachusetts



Puritans led by John Winthrop arriving in Massachusetts.

called “Pilgrims”—entered into a sacred “covenant” to form a just and holy society. Bradford wanted to break away from the powerful churches of Europe, which he believed had corrupted the Christian religion. Rather than study Latin or Greek translations, he wanted to read the Tanach in its original Hebrew. He aimed to establish a religious community in an uncorrupted land. He called America a “new Jerusalem.”

In 1629, a man named John Winthrop embarked on a similarly ambitious project. Winthrop was a successful and well-respected lawyer in England. Unlike Bradford, he wasn’t fleeing persecution, but he nevertheless sought out a new home where he could worship freely according to his Puritan faith. Like Bradford, Winthrop believed America offered Christians like himself an opportunity to create a more faithful, righteous, and just society than those of 17th-century Europe.

While sailing aboard the *Arbella*, Winthrop delivered a famous sermon entitled a “A Model of Christian Charity.” In his speech, Winthrop acknowledged the many hardships that he and his followers would face in the New World. He nevertheless urged the Puritans to trust in one another and in G-d, reminding them that they were on a holy mission to establish a new political community infused with holiness and rooted in Biblical faith.

In our opening session, we will explore how the Hebraic spirit shaped the moral imagination of these American Pilgrims.

## Historical Spotlights

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- **1620** | The first Pilgrims arrive in New England.
- **1629** | Massachusetts Bay Colony is officially founded.
- **1630** | John Winthrop arrives at the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Significant Jewish settlement begins in Brazil under Dutch rule.
- **1654** | 23 Jews arrive in New Amsterdam (now known as New York City).
- **1678** | The first Jewish cemetery is established in Newport, Rhode Island.
- **1730** | New York Jews build North America’s first synagogue, Shearith Israel.
- **1763** | Touro Synagogue is dedicated in Newport, Rhode Island.



## Source 2: Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630)

In 1630, the English lawyer, gentleman, and scholar John Winthrop established the Massachusetts Bay Colony. While sailing to America, Winthrop wrote and delivered one of the most famous sermons in American history: "A Model of Christian Charity." He asked for G-d's "favor and blessing" in founding a new "covenantal" community in the New World. He pledged to "follow the counsel of Micah," the Hebrew prophet, "to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our G-d." Quoting from Devarim, he called upon his people to "choose life, that we and our seed may live." Winthrop believed that G-d had summoned him to create "a city on a hill" in America, an idea that would shape the American imagination throughout its history. Just as G-d chose the Israelites to be a "light unto the nations" and a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation," Winthrop believed that the "eyes of all people" were watching him and his flock.

**T**hus stands the cause between G-d and us. We are entered into covenant with Him for this work. We have taken out a commission. The Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles. We have professed to enterprise these and those accounts, upon these and those [goals]. We have hereupon besought Him of favor and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath He ratified this covenant and sealed our commission, and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it; but if we shall neglect [to fulfill our stated goals], and, dissembling with our G-d, shall...embrace this present world and [pursue coarse] intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, and be revenged of such a people, and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our G-d.

### Discussion Questions



1. What is a *covenant*? What are some examples of covenants in Tanach?
2. Why does Winthrop emphasize the importance of G-d's "favor and blessing?" How, according to Winthrop, can these gifts from G-d be gained or lost?

For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man...We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our G-d, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the G-d of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "may the Lord make it like that of New England."

## “A City Upon a Hill”

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our G-d in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of G-d...We shall shame the faces of many of G-d's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us [until] we be consumed out of the good land [where] we are going.

And to shut this discourse with that exhortation [persuasive speech] of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel, Deut. 30. "Beloved, there is now set before us life and death, good and evil," in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our G-d, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his ordinances and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our G-d may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not

3. What does Winthrop teach about the nature of a *community*? As he writes: "We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together..." Why is this shared devotion and experience so important for the early American settlers?

4. The book of Isaiah 42:6 seems to have inspired Winthrop's idea of a "city on a hill." It reads: "I the Lord have called unto you righteousness, and have taken hold of your hand, and submitted you as the people's covenant, as a light unto nations." What does it mean to be a "light unto nations"? Can American Jews be a light unto our own nation, America?



obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other G-ds, our pleasure and profits, and serve them; it is [set forth] unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land [when] we pass over this vast sea to possess it.

Therefore let us choose life, that we and our seed may live, by obeying His voice and cleaving [staying faithful] to Him, for He is our life and our prosperity.



Pilgrims Going to Church, *George Henry Boughton (1867)*

5. What did Winthrop mean when he wrote that the “eyes of all people are upon [the Pilgrims]”? The old world of Europe was, at that time, a great civilization with an impressive culture, tremendous wealth, and enormous political power. What would make Winthrop think that European society would care about a few settlers in America? What did he believe made the Pilgrims so important?

## Source 3: Bradford's *On Plymouth Plantation* (1651)

William Bradford became the governor of Plymouth Colony in 1621 and held the position for many years. In 1630, he began to write a history of the colony, and he prefaced the book with eight pages of Hebrew quotations. In the first passage below, Bradford describes his desire to learn Hebrew, comparing it to the yearning of Moses for the Promised Land, which Moses looked upon but could not enter. In the second passage, Bradford recalls the perilous journey across the Atlantic Ocean and the early struggles of the settlers once they arrived. He credits their eventual success to G-d, and he compares their experiences to the Israelites being led forth from Egypt. In telling the story of America's origin and founding days, he invokes verses from the book of Devarim (which careful readers may also recognize from the *Pesach Haggadah*), and he describes his mission as the creation of a "new Jerusalem."

**T**hough I am grown aged, yet I have had a longing desire to see with my own eyes something of that most ancient language and holy tongue in which the Law and oracles of G-d were written; and in which G-d and angels spoke to the holy patriarchs of old time; and what names were given to things from the creation. And though I cannot attain to much herein, yet I am refreshed to have seen some glimpse hereof; (as Moses saw the Land of Canaan afar of). My aim and desire is to see how the words and phrases lay in the holy text; and to discern somewhat of the same for my own content [happiness].

### "When They Wandered in the Desert Wilderness"

[When the Pilgrims] looked behind them, there was [a] mighty ocean which they had passed and [there] was now a [gulf] to separate them from all civilized parts of the world...

What now could sustain them but the spirit of G-d and

#### Discussion Questions



1. Why was Bradford so focused on understanding Hebrew? Why was he "refreshed" by a mere "glimpse" of the language?

2. Bradford compared his yearning for Hebrew to Moses' yearning for the Land of Israel. While Moses saw the Holy Land from afar, he never entered it. What is Bradford teaching his followers about the meaning of the Hebrew texts for the next generation?

his grace? May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say: Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness, but they cried unto the Lord, and he heard their voice, and looked on their adversity. Let them therefore praise the Lord, because he is good, and his mercies endure forever. Yea, let them which have been redeemed of the Lord show how he hath delivered them from the hand of the oppressor. When they wandered in the desert wilderness out of the way and found no city to dwell in, both hungry and thirsty, their soul was overwhelmed in them. Let them confess before the Lord his loving kindness and his wonderful works before the sons of men.



William Bradford's Hebrew translations

3. Why had Bradford lost faith in the “civilized parts of the world”?

4. Despite all the challenges they encountered on their perilous journey, Bradford’s followers took courage by recalling “that they were Pilgrims.” What is a *pilgrim*? What is the difference between a religious pilgrim and a political refugee?

5. Once they completed their journey through the desert and settled into the Holy Land, the Israelites were commanded to remember what befell them in Egypt, beginning with the phrase “My father was a fugitive Aramean....” Bradford echoes this language, imagining that the descendants of the Pilgrims would recount the story of their own forefathers, who left England for a wilderness and cried out for help. Why would it matter to Bradford that future generations would remember the Pilgrims’ story?

# Windows into the Jewish Experience

*The Sephardic Jews of early America were a remarkable group—religious wanderers, traveling the New World in search of a place they could live in freedom. Living as a small minority in the American colonies was not easy, yet these Jews preserved their commitment to each other and their faith in G-d. Were the early Jews of American similar in spirit—or different—from the Puritans?*

## Jewish Pilgrims



On a late summer day in 1654, a little French Warship named the *Sainte Catherine* landed in present-day New York City with 23 Jewish immigrants seeking a new life. Fifteen Jewish children peered out to see a remarkable town unlike any other in the world at the time: different Christian sects—Catholics, Calvinists, and more—that might have fought with each other in Europe lived side-by-side. The mere 1,000 people living there babbled to each other in eighteen different languages. The Dutch West India Company, which ran the colony, allowed “every one to have his own belief, as long as he behaved quietly and legally, gave no offense to his neighbor and did not oppose the government.”

To these early Jewish settlers, their new home’s religious and linguistic diversity must have been reassuring. They had been forced to hide their faith during the Spanish Inquisition in 1492, then immigrated to the Netherlands before seeking economic opportunity in present-day Brazil. When they were in turn kicked out of Brazil, a lesser people might have simply given up. But these resilient Jews found refuge in the then-Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, which is now New York City. Later generations of Sephardic Jews in America referred to these first settlers as the “Jewish Pilgrims.”

## Shabbat & Blue Laws



Jews had to navigate colonial “blue laws”—which prohibited work on Sundays—while also keeping Shabbat. It was hard for them to work only five days a week, especially because many of these Jews were merchants and needed to sell their wares. Still, observance of Jewish law usually took precedence. We even have the records of one very wealthy Jew, Aaron Lopez, who would not let his ships leave harbor between Friday night and Monday morning—even though they were staffed by gentiles.

## Sacrificing for Jewish Worship



In the Jewish community, the sequence of the holidays defines the rhythm of the year. They mark the change of the seasons, offer a welcome respite from work, and promote community cohesion, family togetherness, and collective spiritual renewal. Colonial America, of course, operated according to a totally different set of annual rhythms. When Jews abstained from work on their own holidays, they knew that their Christian neighbors, employers, and competitors did not. Nevertheless, the Jewish holidays—especially Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Pesach—were widely observed.

They carried deep religious and social meaning. Colonial Jews who were traveling merchants in outlying areas often visited communities with synagogues at these times in order to renew their Jewish ties and revitalize their faith. One merchant, named Isaac Solomon, traveled by boat and carriage all the way from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Shearith Israel in New York for the High Holidays. Another, named John Franks, paddled in a canoe all the way from Halifax to Montreal.

## To Acclimate But Not Assimilate



Colonial Jews were motivated to make friends with their gentile neighbors while also maintaining customs that caused them to dwell apart. Eating at the home of a gentile friend or business partner was usually impossible. In order to keep *kashrut*, many Jews served as their own ritual slaughterers. Some wealthier Jews welcomed poor Jewish immigrants as personal *shochtim* (ritual slaughterers) that they would take with them on business trips.

Aaron Lopez, the aforementioned wealthy Jewish merchant, wrote of how important circumcision was to preserving Jewish identity, because it continued “the covenant which happily characterize us as a particular flock.” Jews also stood out for their commitment to Jewish burial rites and mourning.

## Mashiach in New York?



Reverend Ezra Stiles was a famous congregationalist minister, president of Yale College, and founder of Brown University, who befriended the twenty-five Jewish families living in Newport, Rhode Island, in the 1760s. He even once visited their synagogue and marveled over the six Torahs, including one with gold bells that had been gifted by a London congregation. He wrote that Jews, during thunderstorms, “threw open doors and windows and employed themselves in singing and repeating prayers... for meeting [the] Messiah.” Stiles wrote about a friend who “tells me that the Jews in New York expected the Messiah in 1768 and are greatly

disappointed.” This messianic expectation had been inspired by a computation of prophetic numbers by New York’s rabbis.

# Final Thoughts

America was founded as a “city on a hill,” inspired by the language, ideas, and prophets of the Tanach. Both the American Puritans and the early American Jews felt the hand of G-d guiding them on their journey to a new land. Why did they believe that G-d wanted them to create a new community, in a new place, with names drawn directly from the Tanach itself? What were they searching for? Why did they look to the ancient Israelites for inspiration? And is this idea—that America is a “light unto the nations”—still important for understanding the soul of America in the modern age?



A 17th-century portrait of John Winthrop

## Going Deeper: Additional Resources

- "Jewish Ideas in Plymouth Colony" by Daniel Slate in *Mosaic* | <https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/history-ideas/2020/11/jewish-ideas-in-plymouth-colony/>
- "Thanksgiving: A Jewish Holiday After All" by Moshe Sokolow in *Jewish Ideas Daily* | <https://www.jewishideasdaily.com/1011/features/thanksgiving-a-jewish-holiday-after-all/>
- "The Pilgrim Leader behind the First Thanksgiving was Hebrew Obsessed" in the *Times of Israel*: | <https://www.timesofisrael.com/back-in-1620-the-pilgrim-leader-behind-the-1st-thanksgiving-was-hebrew-obsessed/>