

Abraham Lincoln and the *Pintele Yid*
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Shabbat Shalom, and Happy Presidents Day Weekend to all! I'm sure that you all know that Monday is President's Day...and this year, President's Day is extra-special because of the bicentennial celebration of the birth of our 16th President, Abraham Lincoln...who also of course was the first Jewish president! Surely you've considered the evidence for Lincoln being a Jew...Beyond the fact that he had a beard and wore a black hat...he also had a grandfather named Mordechai, worked as an attorney, loved to argue and debate, hated hunting, loved reading, had a tinge of depression, was treated only by Jewish doctors, and had in-laws who didn't think he was good enough for their daughter. Probably because he wasn't a doctor! Sounds *like a Jewish man to me!* Seriously though, Lincoln used to say about Mary Todd's parents that "God made do with one 'd' but the Todds demanded two!" And to top it all off, Lincoln has a street named after him in Jerusalem!

Now you should know that Snopes doesn't totally dismiss the myth of Lincoln's Jewishness. Not so much for the reasons I just listed, but because of other interesting tidbits...Like the fact that the Jews of Lincoln, England, where the President's family hailed from were famously protected by the Sheriff of Lincoln during the Crusader Riots of 1159. St. Hugh, the bishop of Lincoln, regularly preached of loving Jews, and it was considered a haven of sorts when Jews fled from other places of persecution. Surprisingly, Lincoln never publicly claimed a religious affiliation, an unusual detail for the 19th Century. Surely to publicly claim to be a Jew would have hampered his rise to power in that day and age. Isaac Mayer Wise, the father of Reform Judaism in America who was among several of Lincoln's eulogizers said: "Bretheren, the lamented Abraham Lincoln believed himself to be bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh. He supposed himself to be a descendent of Hebrew parentage. He said so in my presence." How about that for a testimonial! The problem is that we cannot corroborate that Lincoln said that to Rabbi Wise, nor any other suspicions about his ancestry. But there was one detail that Lincoln often mentioned publicly that piqued my interest. Since Lincoln was always so coy about

his religious beliefs of affiliation, he was often asked about it by reporters, biographers, and colleagues. His answer was always: ‘There is one piece of Scripture that sums up my theology...the 20th Chapter of the Book of Exodus.’

Friends, as we all know certainly this morning, the 20th chapter of the book of Exodus is none other than the thrilling scene at Mt. Sinai, where Moses receives the 10 Commandments. I find it fascinating that Lincoln did not say John 3:16, Matthew 7:3, Mark 10:27, or Luke 18:27 (I didn’t make those up, they’re all famous, important Christian scriptural citations)...No Lincoln chose the most significant, identifiable, transformative moment in Jewish history as the crux of his own theology. Now that’s something! The Midrash Tanchuma teaches that all souls of Jews who were living at that time, as well as all the souls of Jews who would ever live in the future were present at Mt. Sinai. People who would be born Jewish, and people who would choose to become Jewish...some part of their inanimate life, something of their spiritual matter was present along with the 600,000 Jews who stood together at the base of that Mountain when we went from a band of slaves to a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Where did the Midrash get this idea? In Deuteronomy 29:14, God says to Moses, I am not making this covenant with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God *V’et asher eineinu po imanu hayom*...and also with those who are not with us here this day! The covenant, the mitzvot, Jewish destiny is encoded, not so much in our DNA as deep within in our souls. Heschel taught us that “every person moves in two domains: in the domain of nature and in the domain of the spirit.” Part of us is flesh and bones, and part of us, the nefesh, the neshama, is the intangible yet animating substance that fills our physicality with life. In fact this idea has crystallized into a beautiful, powerful mystical concept known often by its Yiddish name: *dos pintele yid*, or for you Hebraists out there: *Netzotz ha’Yehudi*...but I’m sorry it sounds better to me in Yiddish. A *pintele yid*, according to Jewish mysticism is a spark, a little point of light, the innermost quintessence of Jewish identity. “The idea is that all Jews, even if they are unaware of it or have been raised so un-Jewishly that they do not even know they are Jewish, have within them a Jewish essence that can be activated under certain circumstances. To some, this may sound like psychological nonsense. To others, this is

a deep spiritual truth (I reckon you know which opinion I subscribe to). If every Jewish soul was at Mt. Sinai, then there is a certain memory of that event imprinted upon our souls. And that imprint is indestructible, and always has the potential—regardless of assimilation or lack of Jewish education—to emerge, and make its presence felt.”¹

Chevrei—I see this all the time. Jews who had little Jewish education as children but something they can’t put their finger on draws them back to Jewish life. Jews who spent most of their days unaffiliated, but wake up one day yearning for a connection. People who are not born as Jews, but feel in their soul a growing realization that their lot, their destiny is with the Jewish people. Kids whose parents aren’t particularly interested in Judaism but who nevertheless become passionately involved in their own Jewish life (often inspired by Jewish youth groups or summer camps). That mysterious gravitational pull, says the tradition, is the *pintele yid*. I have felt it working in my own life, and I imagine many of you here today—if I asked for a show of hands—could give testimony to it as well.

In 1831, a young Abraham Lincoln was hired along with some other young men to navigate a flat boat down the Mississippi River to New Orleans where the cargo was to be dropped off. It was then that Lincoln encountered his first blush with the cruelty and brutality of slavery. Witnessing a slave auction, Lincoln was horrified by the dehumanization of what he saw. He said to his friends, if I ever have a chance to take on slavery I will do so with a vengeance. I would love to imagine that this disdain for a widespread and globally accepted institution came from a certain *pintele yid*, a spark of Sinai that emerged in his soul and made him revile what he saw. Whether that is true or not, and whether Lincoln was Jewish or not, we are reminded by all the speculation that sometimes someone’s Jewishness is not worn on their sleeve or particular obvious or second nature. Sometimes it is buried deep beneath a lot of family, historical, and circumstantial baggage. Wherever it is, let us never forget that this holy spark is the indestructible, ever burning ember of Jewish life. If you feel something deep inside of you, pulling you to learn, to explore, to deepen your Jewish life...perhaps that’s your

¹ Philologos. “An Essential Point.” The Forward, November 24, 2006.

pintele yid yearning to be unleashed. Don't repress it dear friends...let it shine. Let it shine!