

ENDOWED BY OUR CREATOR

Local author explores the origins of religious freedom in the United States

By Ron Snyder

Michael I. Meyerson considers himself a practicing Jew who is a fervent believer in freedom of religion.

The University of Baltimore law professor and member of Beth Shalom Congregation in Columbia said he has become concerned over how heated and divisive the debate over the concept of religious freedom has evolved. It was the belief of the Founding Fathers that religion was something that should unite, not divide, the nation, he said.

To prove that point, Meyerson, a Wilson H. Elkins Professor of Law and Piper & Marbury Faculty Fellow at the University of Baltimore, recently published his book, "Endowed by Our Creator: The Birth of Religious Freedom in America."

He spoke with the JT:

JT: How did the Founding Fathers envision the role of freedom of religion?

Meyerson: They believed that religion could be both good and evil. The question is "How can you use religion to unite but not divide the nation?" They basically struck a balance, where government would not fund religion, would not give land to religious organizations, and government would have a total freedom of liberty of conscious. In other words, no one would be deprived of rights in the national government because of their faith. However, they did not desire to cleanse the public dialogue of all religious references.

Our earliest literature has many religious references.

[The Founding Fathers] were non-sectarian in their works, but they still

used religious references. They were indeed willing to use religious language but in a way so that everybody would feel like they were full Americans. They were aware that any discussion of religion was dangerous, where there could be the tendency for the faith of the majority to dominate. That is why they made sure all their religious references were as non-denominational as possible.

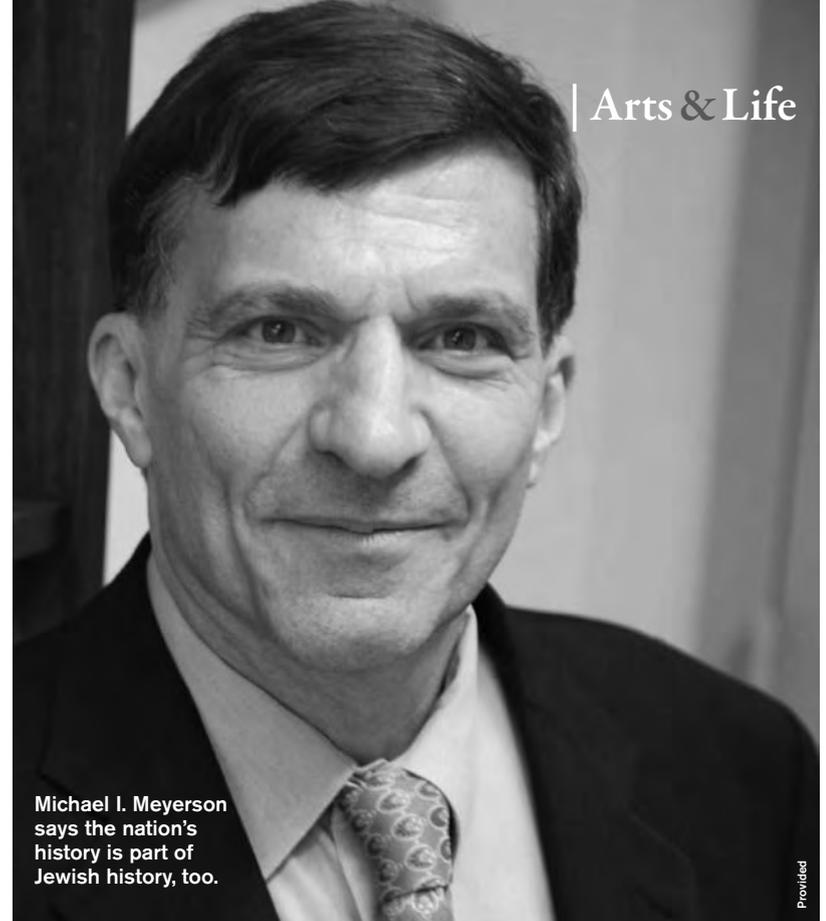
How has the interpretation of the First Amendment evolved since the country's founding?

The reality is the leaders of our nation in its earliest days had a vision of where the balance between religion and government should be struck. But I think the population as a whole never reached that same consensus. Almost from the beginning, you can see there was a battle about what type of country the U.S. should be. Is it a religious country? Is it Christian, or is it secular?

What has happened today is that [religious debate] has become so blended in our partisan political debate that people seem to refuse to acknowledge the strength and wisdom of opposing arguments. The framers really wanted to separate church and state but not necessarily God and state.

Does today's society understand where the Founding Fathers stood in terms of religious freedom?

The political divide has mirrored the divide over the debate of the role of religion in government. Sadly, it doesn't have to be that way. There's no question the framers did not understand racial equality or even equality for women. However, the framers understood religious freedom, religious pluralism and



Michael I. Meyerson says the nation's history is part of Jewish history, too.

Provided

freedom to think as you will better than not only those during their time, but arguably any time, including today. ... To not take advantage of their wisdom from that time is a tremendous mistake.

What do you hope the Jewish community will take from your book?

The leaders of the new nation embraced religious pluralism and viewed Jews as members of the national community. Early in our history, the individual states tended to discriminate against Jews, including in Maryland, where they couldn't serve in the legislature until the 1820s. However, that wasn't the case in the national government. While there were individuals who could easily display anti-Semitism, those that created the country welcomed the Jewish community and the faith and decried any attempt to discriminate. The Jewish community should embrace this part of the nation's history because it's part of the Jewish history as well.

What can everyone learn?

[To] show more respect for those who disagree with them. Just as we respect people of different faiths, we

need to respect people with different ideas and views. ... People need the courage to admit they don't know something and that possibly ... the other side may be right. Jt

"Endowed by Our Creator: The Birth of Religious Freedom in America"

By Michael I. Meyerson
Yale University Press,
2012, 384 pages

The debate over the framers' concept of freedom of religion has become heated and divisive. This scrupulously researched book sets aside the half-truths, omissions and partisan arguments, and instead focuses on the actual writings and actions of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison and others. Legal scholar Michael I. Meyerson investigates how the framers of the Constitution envisioned religious freedom and how they intended it to operate in the new republic.

Source: Yale University Press

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