

FOR THE ZOOM PASSOVER FAMILY CELEBRATION ON MARCH 28, 2021

When we hear about people who face extreme hardships in their home countries we are most likely to think of an escape, an exodus. We observe Passover to celebrate the Jewish exodus from Egypt. Theodor Hertzl led an exodus from Europe to the Middle East because he wanted to form a Jewish state—Israel. The United States was settled by an exodus of people who were persecuted, or poor, or at war, from perhaps every country in the world.

But there is a particularly moving exception: Frederick Douglass and other 19th century Black leaders in the United States fought for their people to stay in their native land. Douglass was an escaped slave—and slavery had not yet been abolished—but he could see the potential good in a country that had treated him and other African Americans so badly.

This is how the issue came up. Lincoln was strongly against slavery but also believed that Blacks and Whites could never live together as equals. He was an advocate of colonization and during the Civil War he met with Black leaders and asked them to help lead African Americans to Central America to calm the fears of the White population as they realized that slavery might end. He told the Black leaders, “But for your race among us there would not be war, and it would be “extremely selfish” not to leave. ...And then he assured them that they could thrive in a “similarity of climate with your native land.”

But the most interesting part is Douglass’s reaction. Douglass compared Lincoln’s logic to “a horse thief pleading that the existence of the horse is the apology for his theft.” And he argued that if those supporting colonization thought the goal should be to distribute the races based on climate then all Whites around the world should go back to Europe.

And then Douglass turned to Biblical language: “This is our native country, we have as strong attachment naturally to our native hills, valleys, plains, luxuriant forests ... mighty rivers, and lofty mountains as any other people”If men may not live peaceably together ... in the same land, they cannot so live on the same continent, and ultimately in the same world.”

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, when Frederick Douglass spoke these words in 1862 in the midst of the Civil War he had faith that the United States —and, as he described it—the Constitution and Jeffersonian principles—would ultimately lead to justice.

An aside—although the relationship was ambivalent, Douglass still considered Lincoln a friend both personally and to African Americans generally.

Quotations are from the Frederick Douglass biography, Chapter 18.