True healing comes not by knowing something you do not know now, but by believing something you do not believe now. It is not facts but beliefs that have the power to heal and change both ourselves and the world. If this is true, and I believe it to be true with all my soul, then the great challenge of moving forward the promise of civil rights is to be found not in some compelling facts that have yet to be quoted, but in some deep beliefs that have yet to be affirmed. Chief among them, I would suggest, is the belief that the core values of our culture are sacred, that they are rooted not in the largesse of the state, or the political expediency of the moment, but that they are sacred, holy, God-given, spiritual, religious—that they were not created by us but given to us as a blessing and a commanding sacred challenge. We must see the core values of our culture not as that which we constitute but rather that within which we ourselves are constituted.

Thomas Jefferson was the first and by far the most eloquent American to make the case that at the heart of this country are sacred beliefs. Jefferson’s first draft of the Declaration of Independence written using “neither book nor pamphlet” remains as close as we have ever come to an American Decalogue. Like the Ten Commandments, the draft is the very framework of how we understand ourselves as a nation formed out of not merely political but also religious necessity.

It is highly probable that Moses did not edit God’s words, but it is absolutely certain that Jefferson’s first draft of the Declaration of Independence was edited by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston, who made a number of important changes to Jefferson’s draft before submitting it to Congress, which, after meddling with it still further, passed it unanimously on July 4, 1776.

In Jefferson’s version of the Declaration of Independence a forceful passage condemning black slavery was deleted immediately by Richard Henry Lee of Virginia. Since Lee was the man who introduced the resolution to declare independence from England, and since Jefferson was himself a reluctant and agonized slave owner, he agreed to the deletion. By far the most important change in Jefferson’s first draft of the Declaration of Independence was the change Benjamin Franklin and other atheists introduced which produced this famous phrase that began after the preamble, “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created
equal...." Those were not Jefferson’s words. These were his words:

“We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable; that all men are created equal and independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Now there is a world of difference between “We hold these truths to be sacred” and “We hold these truths to be self evident.” Self-evident truths derive from our own unaided reason. Sacred truths derive from God, and from the revelation of God’s will in sacred scripture. Jefferson had no problem believing that the foundations of America were religious. He fully acknowledged the wall of separation between church and state (indeed he is the author of that phrase and of its representation in the First Amendment to the Constitution). This separation, however, was never meant to eradicate religion from the lives of Americans, nor deny or hide the importance of religious beliefs in forming our national character and national purpose. Its only purpose was to avoid the establishment of a national religion and to guarantee the free exercise of all religious traditions on our shores. Jefferson’s first version of the Declaration of Independence makes all that perfectly clear while the Franklin/Adams/Sherman/Livingston/Lee version makes everything fuzzy because it states that these truths are self evident, while leaving in the now contradictory Jeffersonian phrase “and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.” The committee editing of one of the great works of political philosophy has given us the contradictory attitude toward religious beliefs in the public square that we possess to this day. We reverence religion but we are afraid of its appearance in the public square. We want it in church but when it tries to make its legitimate presence felt in the streets and the law, in commerce and in the media we are skittish and fearful.

Now you may say, “I’m glad Franklin won. It’s better to rely on reason than revelation in establishing a government. A self-evident truth is more universally accepted, more accessible than a sacred truth.” But I say, you never taught philosophy as I have. Identifying a truly self-evident truth that is not merely analytic (a bachelor is an unmarried male) is nearly impossible. Take Jefferson’s very point, that all people are created equal. What makes this statement self evident? We are not equal in the marketplace unless we have the same amount of money. We are not equal in social standing unless we have the same ancestors and went to the same schools and belong to the same clubs. We are not even truly equal before the courts of this land unless we have the same money for representation, and unless we are white. We are not equal in intelligence, temperament, literacy, discipline, nor virtue.

For Aristotle it was self-evidently true that women, children, non-Greeks, slaves, and disabled people were not homo sapiens in the full and complete sense. They had souls but they were underdeveloped souls and were therefore not equal to the male citizens of Athens. (If he had merely said that teenagers were not real human beings we certainly could agree that this is indeed self evidently true!) Freidrich Nietzsche taught that the very idea of human equality was merely a Jewish and ultimately Christian corruption of the idea of true virtue, the virtue of the ubermensch (superior man), the natural virtue of the strong over the weak.

There are simply no facts I know of that make the proposition “all people are created equal” self-evidently true. But there are beliefs that make this proposition true and those beliefs are religious beliefs. What makes us equal is the belief that God created us in God’s image. It is the belief we learn from Genesis, zachar u’nekevah bara otam, b’zelem elohim bara otam, “Male and female he created them. In the image of God he created them.” It is that precise belief, not some self-evident rational truth that moved Jefferson to write, “We hold these truths to be sacred.” That belief lies at the heart of America’s self understanding. That belief has led to America’s greatness in the world. And the denial of this belief is the reason that we cannot yet defeat racism and discrimination. It is the reason we trade with oppressors and curry favor with dictators. It is the reason that people go to bed hungry and sick and those who sleep in the dust have no outstretched arm to lift them up into the light of a new and kinder day.

We are now at a moment in American history where self-evident truths are coming into conflict with sacred truths, and what we decide as a nation will shape our future and our children’s future. The choices are stark.

It is a self-evident truth that government must function efficiently and economically, but it is a sacred truth that children should have lunch. It is a self-evident truth that goods should be produced as cheaply as possible, but it is a sacred truth that slaves should not make our paper clips. It is a self-evident truth that we should husband our natural resources economically, but it is a sacred truth the world God has created was not given to us to use at our whim and will. It is a self-evident truth that people should be free, but it is a sacred truth that such freedom must respect the sanctity of all life regardless of
its vulnerability, its expense, or its suffering. It is a self-evident truth that people should be compensated according to their worth in the marketplace, but it is a sacred truth read in Isaiah that we must be "a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in distress, a shelter from the storm."

We must restore the language of sacred truths to our public discourse if we are to prevent the language of self-evident rational, economically viable, politically expedient rights to destroy not our economy but our national character, and with that destruction our economy will collapse as well. Remember well that the verse on the Liberty bell, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof," is not from some deductive syllogism or political pamphleteer. It is from Leviticus.

It is not just cultural conservatives who are raising this clarion call for a spiritual revival in America. Pundits from the left and the right are joining a growing consensus of sensitive, concerned Americans who believe that what is wrong with America now is something that neither politics nor economics can address or correct. New York Times writer Anna Quindlen, finds, "There is a yawning hole in the psyche of America and Americans where our sense of common purpose, of community and connection, of hope and a spiritual satisfaction should be." Television producer and civil libertarian Norman Lear, in a lecture, agrees, "A culture that becomes a stranger to its own inner needs, is a culture that has lost touch with the best of its humanity. One can call it the spirit-led, or spiritual, life of our species. And we have long recognized its presence and accepted that it sets us apart. And yet, as a student of the American psyche, at no time in my life can I remember our culture being so estranged from this essential part of itself."

As Elie Cohen says in his book "Human Behavior in the Concentration Camp," "Those prisoners that had some spiritual life had the best chances for survival. They are the spiritual values in their widest sense: morality, knowledge, emotion, intellect and religion." We are living in the midst of plenty and yet we too need the same values if we are to survive the world of greed and glitz that we have allowed to be created after first exiling God to the decorous prison cell of our houses of worship. It is the street and the television studio, the press and the record store that need to hear another voice, another vision, another melody in the boisterous chorus of America.

Way, an organization founded to fight the Christian right, now agrees with people like Bill Bennett and others on the right that the decline of religion is at the root of the decline of our culture. Recently Bennett said: "What I humbly submit is that we might all benefit by viewing ourselves not as essentially biological or economic entities who happen to have a spiritual life, but rather as essentially spiritual beings who happen to have a biological and economic life. Once we realize this sacred truth, we can restore religion, not to where it does not belong, in our public schools, but to where it does belong, in our public life."

Joseph Campbell had an arresting metaphor to describe the shift that has occurred in the role of religion in public life. In medieval times, he said, as one approached a city, the tallest structure on the skyline was the church and its steeple. Subsequently, as the power and influence of the church gave way to kings and rulers, the castle dominated the skyline. Today, as one approaches the city, the most commanding structures are the skyscrapers, the cathedrals of modern business.

Now, the truths of business are fine as far as they go. The problem is that they do not go far enough. They are limited because they are quantitative. They are limited because they measure everything, and God teaches us to reverence everything and measuring is just not the same thing as reverencing. They are limited, to say it plainly, because they do not claim the soul.

Martin Luther King, Jr. claimed the soul, and he did it not because he was a brilliant political theorist. He did it because he was a brilliant religious leader who understood that a public square devoid of religious values would never truly emancipate Americans whose skin color was not white. King's message was not just made more striking because it was grounded in religion, it was made more universal. How sad that many school textbooks still choose to omit the fact that King was a Baptist minister. He never claimed to be a Moses but he spoke to us like Moses, even with Moses' tragic pre-sciene, "I've been to the mountaintop and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you but I know that we as a people will reach the promised land."

The Rev. King attracted many men and women to his cause not despite the fact that it was spiritual, but because it was spiritual. He spoke of America as being under a religious curse because of the sin of racism—not the mistake of racism, not the error of racism—but the sin of racism. And in all the Rev. King's speaking from all the pulpits of all the churches and synagogues of this land, nobody ever said, "Reverend King, you are violating the separation of church and state." Nobody ever accused him of unfairly trying to impose his religious views on others by pressing for civil rights legislation.

I am not afraid of people who, just like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., are trying today to have their
religious views affect the formulation of public policy, nor should you be. Their religious beliefs surely do not make them right about what they want, but they just as surely do not make them wrong. The last acceptable prejudice in America is the prejudice against those who take their faith seriously.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was walking with King in the march to Selma, was asked by a reporter, “Rabbi what are you doing here?” Heschel replied, “I am praying.” The irritating reporter persisted, “Rabbi, I don’t see your lips moving.” Whereupon Heschel shot back, “I am praying with my feet.” Today, we must teach our feet how to pray again.

The black man who drove his tank through the gates to Buchenwald concentration camp told me that when he got out of the tank the Jewish inmates were shouting and crying in joy “eine shvartze malach” (a black angel!). He saw the gate in the dust and saw that it had a German inscription at the top of the gate. He asked one of the prisoners what it said and was told “jedem das seine” (to each his own). He did not understand why the Germans put those words there, but I understand and I am sure that both King and Jefferson would have understood as well. “To each his own” is the perfect motto for hell. In hell we are all alone. No community, no covenant, no commandments, no charity, no compassion, no God and no grace. In hell we are taught to see our neighbors at home or around the world as the source of our limitations rather than the source of our fulfillment.

So I told him this story and he began to understand and so did I:

A student asked the rabbi, “What is hell like?” The rabbi answered, “In hell the people are sitting around a table filled with fine food. They can see the food and smell the food, but they cannot bring the food to their mouths because their arms are locked straight in front of them.” “That is hell,” said the student, who then asked, “What is Heaven like?” The rabbi answered, “In Heaven the people are sitting around a table filled with fine food. They can see the food and smell the food, but they cannot bring the food to their mouths because their arms are locked straight in front of them.” The confused student asked, “So what’s the difference between Heaven and hell?” And the rabbi said, “In Heaven the people are feeding each other.”

What he understood was not a self-evident truth because nothing about Heaven or hell is self evident. What he understood was a sacred truth. A truth we must hold if America is to reclaim the better angels of our nature. A sacred truth that Jefferson and King held and that we can hold again, if we can only believe again that all people are created equal and independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

God...
Bless America.

Dr. Marc Gellman is the senior rabbi of Temple Beth Torah, Melville, NY. Rabbi Gellman appears regularly with Monsignor Thomas Hartman on television and radio. The HBO special based on their book “How Do You Spell Qod?” won a Peabody award this year.